Disaster and Charity: Dickens and the wreck of the Royal Charter

In this talk I shall first describe a great maritime catastrophe and its consequences, and then look at an article written by Dickens about the event. The article illustrates the novelist's attitude to charity, and his approach to social problems more complex than the aftermath of a shipwreck. These issues are still alive with us today: the response to disaster, sensational reporting by the press, and the part to be played by individual good works in resolving major social ills.

The ship

The *Royal Charter* was an iron-built clipper with auxiliary steam-driven screw propeller. It used its sails for speed, and its engine when the wind failed. It was therefore able to avoid the long and unpredictable delays in the windless zones around the equator, the doldrums. Speed was not only a convenience, but a life-saver, particularly for the passengers in the insanitary steerage class. Its precursors and rivals on the Liverpool to Australia run included the *Great Britain*, the first iron-built, screw-propeller ship, and the clipper *Marco Polo*. Its rival as a marvel of the modern world was the *Great Eastern*, the largest ship built to date, with its six masts and five funnels, its screw-propeller and paddles.

[Show pictures of the *Marco Polo*, *Great Eastern* and *Royal Charter*.]

As well as speed, all these ships set new standards of luxury and hygiene. The advertisements stated that "The accommodations for all classes cannot be excelled, the saloon being furnished with every requisite; the second cabin is most comfortably fitted up; and the third cabin is most spacious, lofty and well ventilated."

[Show slide with details of four ships; add that the *Great Britain* and *Great Eastern* were designed by Brunel. The *Royal Charter* was commissioned by Gibbs, Bright & Co of Liverpool, owners of the *Great Britain*, and built at the Sandyford works on the River Dee in Flintshire by William Patterson, builder of the *Great Britain*.]

For first-class passengers, and for as long as the weather was favourable, these great ships were already on the way to becoming floating hotels, insulating their guests from the sea. We know little about the conditions faced by the second and third-class passengers. A third-class (steerage) passenger on the *Great Britain* left a journal, from which it appears that the basic hygienic problems of earlier times had been solved, and the chief inconvenience (so long as the weather remained fair) was from the cramped quarters and the enforced intimacy with strangers. It was common for impromptu bands to be got up among the steerage passengers, and music may have helped keep people in good humour.

Reading about these early voyages the most striking difference from nowadays is the attitude to safety, and this will be relevant to the disaster that was awaiting the *Royal Charter*. It would be wrong to accuse the owners and officers of being cavalier or careless – these were not 'coffin ships' – but there was clearly not the same caution that we expect nowadays. The widespread belief that we are in the hands of Providence may have had something to do with this, and there was also an almost religious faith in the supreme competence of the British sailor, but the main point was that a man like Brunel knew that he would never get anywhere unless he was prepared to have a go and try things out. He might compensate by hugely over-engineering his ships, but he knew that there remained things he just couldn't prepare for. Nobody really understood even something as basic as how to get the great iron ships into the water, and they all suffered some sort of mishap at their launching.

There were known unknowns. It was known that iron ships affected the compass, and that the precise nature of this effect was not understood. It was not just the quantity of iron in the ship, but the quality and the way the iron-plates were manufactured. In 1854 the iron-hulled clipper *Tayleur* ran aground on Lambay Island off the east coast of Ireland (with a loss of 360 lives), two days into her maiden voyage from Liverpool, and the enquiry into the disaster put part of the blame

on faulty adjustment of the compass – the *Tayleur* was in fact heading west, in thick fog, when its compass showed it to be on a southerly course along the coast. The reason for this compass failure was still being debated when the *Royal Charter* was launched. Nowadays we would expect such a question to have been resolved before passengers were asked to entrust themselves once more to an iron ship, but the owners of the *Royal Charter* were happy to investigate it in the course of the maiden voyage – after all, they must have argued, there were always the stars to navigate by, and sailors had been making rule of thumb adjustments for decades now. They employed Rev Dr William Scoresby, an authority on magnetism and a renowned polar explorer himself, to take readings and investigate the problem. (Scoresby's journal of the maiden voyage was published after his death, just before the ship's final voyage. He gives a vivid account of life on board, describing not only his scientific work, but the everyday events of the voyage, the ships they passed, the weather and the wildlife.)

Another issue that was known to be unclear was how exactly the screw and the sails would work together in different kinds of weather. (Scoresby p33)

Still more surprising is the miscalculation over the loading of the *Royal Charter* on her maiden voyage. It was thought that she would need 400 tons of ballast, which was duly put in, but then there was more cargo than expected, so that when she set sail she was very low in the water. This was before the days of the Plimsoll line, and it was decided to take the risk. Fortunately, a storm off Finisterre, which caused flooding in the third and second class accommodation, convinced the captain that the ship was unsafe, and he turned back to port to get rid of much of the ballast.

There was a strong motive for making progress fast. It was no coincidence that the *Marco Polo* and *Great Britain* were transferred to the Australian run in the early fifties, or that the *Tayleur* was rushed into service in 1854: it was the time of the Australian gold rush. Melbourne was developing rapidly. Hopeful emigrants were plentiful, and successful miners were in a hurry to come home with their fortunes. It was said that the *Royal Charter*'s first captain, Francis Boyce, resigned because he thought that under the competitive pressure of those feverish times risks were being taken.

The wreck

There were approximately 500 people on board for the final voyage, just under 400 of them passengers; the exact number is not known because the passenger list was lost. The captain was Thomas Taylor, a tough disciplinarian and determined sailor, known for putting on the maximum sail, and conscious of the prestige of speed. The ship left Melbourne on 27 August 1859, and made good time. On 24 October when she stopped to let off passengers at Queenstown (Cobh, the port of Cork) she was 58 days into the voyage, and there was every chance that she would make Liverpool in the 'under 60 days' promised in the company's advertisements.

[Show slide on the progress of the Royal Charter storm.]

The coast of Wales was sighted shortly after dawn on 25 October. As the ship worked its way northwards through the day the captain had no knowledge of the storm that was also advancing from the south.

Strong south-easterly winds were blowing as the *Royal Charter* steamed northwards past Holyhead (the west of Anglesey) on course for Liverpool Bay. The suggestion was made that the ship should shelter in Holyhead Bay, but with plenty of sea-room to the north-west, Captain Taylor decided to press on. It's possible that the suggestion of putting into Holyhead was motivated less by fear of the coming storm than by a wish on the part of some of the passengers to have a good look at the *Great Eastern* which was moored just outside the harbour.

[show slide on the last twenty-four hours of the Royal Charter.]

At about 10 o'clock, when the ship had passed north of Anglesey the wind rose to hurricane force and, crucially, its direction changed to north-easterly. Soundings showed that the ship was being forced towards the north-east coast of the island. To stop the drift to stern Taylor attempted to stay the ship, that is to turn its head through the wind and run out westwards into the Irish sea, but as

the ship was not answering to the rudder he had to let out the sails. The manoeuvre failed. The sails now only increased the drift to stern, and it proved impossible to take them in again. At about 11 o'clock the anchors were let out, with the engines going fast ahead to reduce the strain on the cables. By 2.30am both anchor cables had broken, and shortly afterwards the captain ordered the masts to be cut away. At 3.30 the ship was aground.

She had run aground on sand, which was a promising sign. Knowing they were close to land and believing that the tide was high and about to turn, the Captain was re-assuring to the passengers, telling them that they would walk ashore in the morning. He was in consultation with two other experienced skippers who happened to be on the voyage, and he may have confided greater doubts to them, but it was important to avoid wild panic among the passengers at large.

Distress flares had been fired repeatedly, but the storm prevented the people of Moelfre from seeing and hearing them, and it was only at dawn, around 5.30 or 6 o'clock, that the islanders realised what was happening. At the same time those on board saw, barely 25 yards away, not a sandy beach but menacing rocks, shelf upon shelf of jagged rock, facing out to sea like a battery of guns. The waves were enormous and the churning sea was already full of timber and rigging from the ship. Getting a line ashore was the only hope. Several of the crew were prepared to risk almost certain death in the attempt, but it was a Maltese sailor, Joie Rodriguez, known as Joseph Rodgers, who was the only one with the presence of mind to put his thought into action. There were men on the shore now, braving the incoming waves, and when the sea threw Rodriguez onto the rocks they pulled him to land before the next wave arrived to batter him and suck him back.

More of the crew came ashore on the line and a bosun's chair was rigged up. There was a strange story of the officer supervising the work on board who spent valuable minutes trying to persuade his girl-friend to trust the bosun's chair, but she was too frightened, not unreasonably, because not all who entrusted themselves to the chair would make it to safety. All the other passengers were at the other end of the ship. The crew were just beginning to marshal them in line, women and children first, when the ship broke up, eventually into three sections, leaving only a handful of the crew beside the line to safety. One or two male passengers swam, or more accurately, allowed themselves to be washed ashore. All were injured, some dreadfully, in the attempt. There were, in all, forty survivors, none of them women, none of them officers.

Reactions

[Show slide of headlines from North Wales Chronicle, 29 October, and London Daily News, 28 October]

As the storm abated journalists rushed to the scene, picking up the incoherent tales of the exhausted and terrified survivors, and supplementing them from their stock of received ideas about storms and shipwrecks. Stories of courage, sacrifice and terror caught the imagination of the public, filling the newspapers for weeks afterwards. One of the dead was a Moelfre lad, Isaac Lewis, who was washed away while on the bosun's chair, or perhaps even as he landed on the rocks, within feet of his father. A carefully sifted account, based on the evidence given at the inquest and Board of Trade enquiry, is given in Alexander McKee's book *The Golden Wreck*. McKee notes that things could so easily have gone differently: if the wind and tide had driven the ship just fractionally to the east or west she would have grounded on a flat shingle beach or in a sandy bay, and though the ship would have been lost, the people may well have walked ashore as the captain promised.

The ship was laden with gold from the Australian mines. There was a large sum registered and stored in the strong-room, and many of the passengers were carrying smaller amounts in money-belts, or in one case at least, hidden in their stays. Some commentators tried to draw a moral, claiming that passengers were dragged under by the weight of their gold, and so died from their greed, but this is unlikely, because most of those killed between ship and shore were not drowned by bludgeoned to death by the waves, rocks and debris.

The thought of all this gold gave rise to another story: that the islanders robbed the dead. The first reports from passengers and witnesses reaching Bangor spoke of 'the country people [having]

commenced plundering' (London Daily News, 28 October). The North Wales Chronicle wrote on 29 October: 'We have no doubt that many robberies were perpetrated at this wreck.' The Times used the word *wrecker* to describe a man who picked up a bag containing 100 sovereigns; it was sometimes used for one engaged in legitimate salvage work, but more commonly for someone who plundered a wreck, if not one who actively caused one.

It's not impossible that robberies were committed by some of the men as they carried the bodies up from the rocks. A man (not a local man) was caught carrying off Australian bank-notes, and he and one or two others were successfully prosecuted. But almost all the registered gold from the strong room was recovered, and many reports of bodies washed ashore in the days and weeks after the disaster listed considerable amounts of gold coins and jewellery that were handed over to the Customs, which suggests that whatever may have happened in the chaos of the 26 October, once the authorities established their presence things proceeded in a reasonably law-abiding way. A Liverpool councillor who was on the spot told the reporters: 'I saw a man bringing two sovereigns [to the Custom House agent], and he seemed to part with the money very unwillingly.' (Observer 30 October 1859) The man might have shown an understandable reluctance, but at least he was surrendering his find. On the other hand, it's more than likely that coins and nuggets found in lonely rockpools were considered fair game, not to mention gold dust recovered by panning the sand on the beach. The locals knew where flotsam of different sorts was likely to end up, and were accustomed to regard as theirs by right anything brought to them by the sea. A few island families were thought in later years to have become comparatively wealthy after the wreck. But the tales of large scale plundering were almost certainly exaggerated, as was the suggestion that pilfering had taken precedence over rescuing survivors. The *Morning Post* commented on the good behaviour of the local people (1 November), and there was nothing to justify the *Daily Telegraph*'s demand for the death penalty for 'greedy Cambro-British thieves'. (McKee p127)

There were other recriminations. Survivors and the relatives of the dead wanted explanations. It may be that what we see at about this time is the tipping of the balance away from an acceptance of Providence and towards a greater belief in human, or institutional, responsibility for disasters. Questions were asked, some more reasonable than others. Should Captain Taylor have put into Holyhead and was he influenced by the need to make Liverpool under 60 days? Did he, again for the sake of making good time, take a course too close to the north of the island, giving himself too little leeway? Should he have cut the masts sooner – or later – than he did? Was he right to speak reassuringly to the passengers? Why were none of the women saved? Why was there no response to the distress flares? Why had the anchor cables broken? Were there problems with the ship's design (people recalled that modifications had been necessary after the maiden voyage)? And then, in the days following the disaster, why was more effort made to secure the gold than to recover bodies trapped in the wreck?

Letters appeared in the papers from self-appointed experts with particular bees in their bonnets: why not use rockets, or kites, to carry lines from ship to shore? why not use Milford Haven instead of Liverpool as the port of destination; and above all, what about the strength and quality of the iron? And Mr Chubb wrote to the Times to suggest that ships should carry stronger safes.

Most damaging of all, a rumour got around that Captain Taylor had been drunk, and a lawyer whose brother and cousin died in the wreck tried to establish this at the inquest, bullying and confusing a second Maltese sailor who was among the survivors. The lawyers for the owners produced strong testimony to the contrary, and the accusation was withdrawn. The first class passengers had, towards the end of the voyage, signed a testimonial praising the captain's management of the ship.

The conclusion of the Board of Trade enquiry, endorsed by Alexander McKee, was that no blame attached to the captain or to the ship's design or the materials from which it was constructed. The enquiry noted the problems experienced in taking in the sails after the failed attempt to turn the ship, questioned the common practice of using steam to ease strain on anchors, and admitted the difficulty of judging when to cut away the masts, but concluded that nothing the captain might have done differently would have increased the chances of survival, and no ship, iron or wood, could have withstood the battering undergone by the *Royal Charter*. The *Manchester Guardian*

concluded after the inquest: ‘The Royal Charter and nine-tenths of her human freight perished in a convulsion of nature leaving no severer moral to be drawn from her loss than the lesson of humility and resignation in which we are all alike concerned.’ (7 November) And nothing in the Board of Inquiry’s report disturbed that conclusion.

One of the observations made by the newspapers was that ocean travel was now becoming almost commonplace; any middle-class family might have members caught up in some such disaster. The victims were not just common sailors and gallant officers, but ordinary newspaper-readers, and their wives and daughters. A good many people with friends and loved ones in Australia might have shared the anxiety recorded by Edward Lear in his diary: he had a sister over there, and he knew she was planning to return. For several days he was in fear and suspense, wondering whether she might have been on the stricken ship. It may not be coincidence that the hymn ‘Eternal Father strong to save, whose arm hath bound the restless wave’ was written in the months following the disaster.

The twenty-eight men

The people of Moelfre not surprisingly resented the attacks made on them. Their village was almost immediately placed under a sort of martial law, with marines brought in to protect the gold. The language barrier may have prevented journalists from picking up the islanders’ side of the story. But the main problem was a clash of cultures, with the incomers failing to understand that for a sea-faring community anything yielded up by the sea was there to be harvested: fish, seaweed, driftwood – and any flotsam and jetsam. It was a subsistence economy; they couldn’t afford to let anything slip through their fingers. Their moral ideas were not designed for the exceptional circumstance of having a ship full of gold washed up on their shore, and perhaps some didn’t respond to the situation in quite the way that townspeople expected.

But in another respect their moral sense was fully equal to the crisis. The other side of the sea-faring tradition was a fearless commitment to saving life whenever possible, and twenty-eight men of Moelfre unhesitatingly risked their own lives down on the rocks to help survivors make it to the land. Frustrated at the lack of recognition, and outraged by the allegations of robbery, the twenty-eight men wrote their own letter to the *North Wales Chronicle* (26 November).

[Show slid listing the 28 men. Names taken from the newspaper, the list differing slightly from that given by McKee.]

They gave a list of those who voluntarily went down to the water’s edge, and included statements from two survivors to the effect that they would have been lost but for the assistance they received from those on the rocks. ‘... most of us were in very dangerous positions,’ they said. ‘There were four or five of us hand in hand in the water, and were in danger of being swept off by the surf and breakers.’ Even the gallant Rodriguez would not have survived, but for their help, as the rope was all entangled round his body and he was ‘on the eve of being carried back.’ They added that they had to date received no reward for ‘what your Paper may call bravery’ – perhaps a reference to the fact that a week or so earlier Rodriquez had been presented with a medal and five pounds.

The reference to a reward may have alienated some English readers, and reinforced the prejudice against the greedy Cambro-Britains, but seen from the point of view of the twenty-eight it was a straightforward matter: pitting their skill and bravery against the sea was their daily work, and they couldn’t afford to work for nothing. The same answer can be given to those who were critical of the payments made to islanders for taking bodies from the shore to the Church (ten shillings per body). It was an arduous climb and took time that they could ill afford to spend away from their regular work.

Rev Roose Hughes

For the civil authorities, magistrates, coroner and customs-men, the dead bodies yielded up by the sea over succeeding weeks and months were an inconvenience. They thought, perhaps, that it was their job to consider the business of the living, the salvage operation and the enquiry into the

causes of the disaster, rather than worry about those past help, but they were attacked for thinking more of the gold than of the bodies still trapped in the wreck. It fell to the church to take care of the dead. The church's representatives in this part of the island were two brothers, Stephen Roose Hughes (rector of Llanallgo and Llaneugrad) and Hugh Robert Hughes (perpetual curate of Penrhoslligwy).

The rector in particular devoted himself, his family, his home and his fortune to the task. He paid for the bodies to be delivered to his church, which he converted into a morgue. He undressed the bodies and performed the last offices; he recorded any marks of identification on the bodies, clothes or belongings, before conducting the funerals. Where possible he contacted the families of the dead. Before long he was receiving letters from relatives asking if any of the unidentified bodies might belong to their loved ones. Every letter was answered. Grieving wives, husbands and parents would travel to Llanallgo church to be welcomed and comforted by Hughes and his wife. If he believed he had a body that answered their description he would lead them, blindfolded to hide the horrors all around, to the body of their loved one. At the request of a Jewish family he arranged for the body of their son to be exhumed so that he could be re-buried according to Jewish ritual.

140 victims of the wreck were buried in the graveyard at Llanallgo and 64 at Hughes's other church at Llaneugrad and a further 45 at his brother's church at Penrhoslligwy. (See http://www.royalcharterchurch.org.uk) Those who were unidentified were buried in numbered coffins in shared graves; those whose names were known had their own marked grave. Many bodies from the unnamed graves were exhumed for identification, and subsequently given a second burial in a named grave – with a second funeral service conducted by the rector.

His commitment to the cause of the victims and their families led him into conflict with the authorities, who accused him of interfering with their work. He argued that the divers should try to free the hundreds of bodies trapped in the wreck, rather than looking exclusively for the gold. In the end he was threatened with legal action if he would not stop interfering with the salvage operation. (Mackee) It may be that he was misguided in this respect, because the opinion of salvage and diving experts like McKee is that any such attempt would have been dangerous to those doing the work, and would have led to hideous mutilations of the corpses.

The physical labour and emotional strain (not to mention the drain on his limited fortune – his stipend was said to be £130 per annum [letter to the Times 23 December 1859]) eventually told on Roose Hughes. In 1860 he fell ill, appeared to recover, but died aged 47 in February 1862, an exhausted man, and arguably the last victim of the *Royal Charter*.

Dickens and Charity

The work of the Hughes brothers, in particular the rector of Llanallgo, was noted in the press. In December Roose Hughes travelled to London to conduct a funeral service for a family of victims at Brompton cemetery. He attracted the attention of Dickens.

Dickens's own life had recently undergone a shipwreck of its own, with his very public separation from his wife, the mother of his ten children. He had closed down the successful magazine, *Household Words*, of which he was editor and part owner, and started another of which he was sole proprietor. He launched *All the Year Round* with the weekly instalments of *A Tale of Two Cities* between April and November 1859, but he hoped then to have a rest from weekly serialisation; he was considering a longer novel in monthly parts. His name was an important selling-point for the magazine, and so after the end of *A Tale of Two Cities* he contributed a series of journalistic essays to the paper, under the title *The Uncommercial Traveller*. He opened the series at the end of January 1860 with an account of his visit to Llanallgo just after Christmas 1859.

Dickens was as fascinated as anyone by the sea in its extreme moments. There is a dramatic description of a ship going down within sight of land in *David Copperfield*. The *Royal Charter* wreck, as the main news story of the last few months, was a good topic with which to grab his readers' attention, and get his series off to a resounding start. He had a personal interest too: two cousins of his estranged wife, with the wife and son of one of them, were among the dead; the body of the son was never recovered, but the three adults were buried by Hughes. But in addition to

these extraneous motives he recognised in the aftermath of the wreck, and more particularly in the work of Roose Hughes, a powerful illustration of his own message to the world about how human beings should behave to each other.

This is the aspect of the matter that I shall consider from now on, and it will require a brief description of Dickens's views on the wider social problems of his time.

Dickens's interests as a social critic and his work as champion of the poor are reflected in his novels. Early in his career he seems to have had a simple view of how great social evils might be alleviated. He thought in terms of wealthy benefactors intervening in the lives of poor individuals, or groups of individuals, and transforming their lives. One reason for this preference for the individual benefactor was that the alternative, state intervention, had a bad name as a result of the poor law reform of 1834, when rational and well-intentioned reformers introduced a system that was at once harsh and ineffective. This is, of course, the background to Dickens's early novel *Oliver Twist*. In another early novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he describes a poor boy, Kit Nubbles, standing in the street wondering if some rich man would give him sixpence for holding his horse, while simultaneously a wealthy man is driving along looking for a poor child to whom he might give a helping hand.

Later novels chart a growing realisation that things don't fall out so conveniently, and in *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens acknowledges powerfully that the rich cannot simply pluck favoured paupers out of their poverty and hope that this will resolve their problems. Far less can the ills of society be resolved by this kind of individual benefaction, on however large a scale. On the other hand, Dickens had a lifelong distrust of all the organs of the state. Royalty, aristocracy, parliament, civil service, the established church, all come under his lash. He also saw that much that passed as non-government charity was really intended to glorify the givers, or to further some pet ideology. So how were the great evils of poverty, ignorance and disease to be eradicated? What model for social and charitable action does he propose?

The novel in which he explores most fully the nature of charitable work is *Bleak House*. He satirises charity which deals in a confused way with distant problems while ignoring what is happening at home; he attacks still more sharply the sort of charity which treats the poor 'wholesale', without looking at their individual needs and natures; he explores the difficulty and contradictions involved in being a benefactor; and he comes up with a picture of how the charitable impulse can be made to work for the good of both the giver and the recipient. The central character of the novel, Esther Summerson, is represented as first of all a clever housekeeper, who sustains, through hard work and a sunny disposition, the little family of Bleak House. But her domestic interests don't make her indifferent to what happens beyond the home. On the contrary they give her a basis from which to launch her charitable forays into the world of suffering outside. The good and happy home is, as it were, the engine that will drive social improvement.

That's the vision that we get in the novels. Of course, Dickens was realistic enough to know that, however many happy and benevolent Esthers there were acting on their own, their efforts would never be enough to eradicate the ills of society. Organization was required, organization by churches and local and national government. Almost every issue of *All the Year Round* contains an account of some new project for social amelioration, whether it is new laws governing working conditions or new technology (what he calls Yankee inventiveness) or new charitable initiatives. Over the years, Dickens as the Uncommercial Traveller visits a number of institutions, such as a children's hospital in the East End of London, missions to sailors, police stations, and a 'Half-time' school where boys were prepared for the army or navy. At the children's hospital he notes all the home-like features, and celebrates the devoted young couple who are at the heart of the enterprise. Their public work, he seems to suggest, is like Esther Summerson's charitable work, an extension of their private housekeeping. But they are not amateurs. Quite apart from their medical skill, they collect statistics and keep records of the economic and social conditions in which their patients live. This kind of social research is something that Dickens the novelist often criticises (for example in the satire on the number-crunching Gradgrind in *Hard Times*), but Dickens the journalist sees the need for it. He also recognises that the diseased and ignorant poor are not, like Kit in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, standing in the street waiting to be taken up by a benefactor. He describes the

experience of being clawed at by a horde of feral children, and was haunted by the sound of bare feet pattering on the pavements, and says that the state must seize these children, and save them.

One striking example of Dickens's belief in the virtues of *home* is found in his 1853 article in *Household Words*, 'Home for Homeless Women'. By homeless women he means women who are, or are in danger of being, prostitutes, and the article describes the work of an institution, Urania Cottage in Shepherds Bush, where women were given board and lodging, and were taught housekeeping skills, and prepared for a life as a servant or perhaps eventually a wife in the colonies. The scheme was financed by Angela Burdett-Coutts, the Coutts bank heiress, who relied on Dickens for advice on her extensive charitable work. Dickens emphasises that Urania Cottage was a home for these women, and like Esther Summerson's home, it is a base for the launch of a good and useful life. 'Nothing is allowed to be wasted or thrown away in the Home,' he writes in an aside. 'From the bones, and remnants of food, the girls are taught to make soup for the poor and sick. This at once extends their domestic knowledge, and preserves their sympathy for the distressed.'

But there were some very un-homelike aspects to their life. There were strict rules, confining them to the grounds and forbidding contact with the outside world, cutting them off from their old associates. They were expected to spy on each other – making each other's beds, for example, to make it impossible to conceal letters from outside. Their clothes were locked away, to make it more difficult for them to abscond. Infringement of the rules could result in expulsion, and Dickens's letters to Angela Burdett-Coutts reveal his role in the project, exercising judicial powers and deciding who could stay and who must leave. Urania Cottage was clearly only a home in inverted commas. Dickens the journalist and social reformer knew that life was more complicated than was apparent in the idealised homes in his novels. But the journalist and social reformer should not be given the last word. It's easy to imagine the angry satire that Dickens might have directed against the oppressiveness of Urania Cottage's regime and its suppression of individuality. There is a tension in the way he describes the inmates in his article: on the one hand they are numbered cases, but on the other hand he tries to say something about them. 'A pretty girl', 'a homely clumsy girl', 'a good looking young woman'. In letters to Angela Burdett-Coutts he describes the demeanour of some of the girls he has sentenced to be dismissed. They are often jaunty and defiant as they walk away, and it's clear that his novelist's eye is fascinated and mystified; one feels that part of him applauds their rebelliousness.

Though largely up-beat, this article (like much of Dickens's writing on social problems) leaves us with troubling doubts about the rights and wrongs of charitable intervention in people's lives. The social reformer wants to sweep away poverty, disease and ignorance; the novelist forces us to look at the individuals involved, which immediately clouds and complicates the issue.

In his account of the *Royal Charter* we once again see the importance Dickens attaches to the ideal home. It is to the rector's house that the grieving families go for comfort rather than the church, which was reduced to a morgue, having at the height of the crisis upwards of forty bodies laid out, and remaining at the time of Dickens's visit still cluttered up with old boots and with its floor stained with salt-water. It is the house that symbolises the Resurrection, Dickens finds.

> If I had lost any one dear to me in this unfortunate ship, if I made a voyage from Australia to look at the grave in the churchyard, I should go away, thankful to God that that house was so close to it, and that its shadow by day and its domestic lights by night fell upon the earth in which its Master had so tenderly laid my dear one's head.

[Show slide with passages from BH and DC.]

This is elevated language, recalling two remarkable passages in the novels: a scene in *Bleak House* where Esther describes the consoling shadow of an old abbey church; and David Copperfield's recollection of looking out on the graveyard from his bedroom window, and feeling sorry for his father's grave-stone, shut out in all weather. Note also the word *Master* to refer to Hughes, the word commonly used to refer to Christ, which is used in that sense by Dickens only a few paragraphs later. But Dickens never gets carried too far; he retains his sharp eye for homely facts.

Just as he noticed the boots and the stains in the church, the first thing he sees on entering the rector's house is his surplice hanging up near the door, ready to be slipped on for a funeral service.

I suggested that for Dickens this catastrophe and its aftermath provided a paradigm of charitable activity, and it's easy to see why. It is, for all magnitude of the disaster, a limited and self-contained undertaking. The difficult questions surrounding so much charitable effort don't arise here. There can be no doubt about who was in need of Roose Hughes's charity: they are the dead and the families of the dead. They are not going to be corrupted by being given too much, nor tempted to tell lies to get more. The need and the response are straightforward. Furthermore, Hughes has none of the humbug with which, in Dickens's view, so much charitable activity is surrounded. He doesn't try to make anything out of the situation, he doesn't draw morals or teach lessons. He finds suffering and grieving people and he offers practical help and comfort, not homilies. He stands for the Christianity of the Good Samaritan, not of organized religion with its hierarchies and theological disputes.

There are, nonetheless, some questions thrown up by the account. One small point is that Roose Hughes's work involves him in accumulating piles of documents, a 'shipwreck of papers'. Dickens tells us admiringly that Hughes has, in two months since the wreck, sent 1,075 letters. Readers of *Bleak House* might be reminded of the caricature of Mrs Jellyby, with her piles of papers and her self-congratulation over the large number of letters she has to write. There is a crucial difference, of course: Mrs Jellyby was wasting her efforts on a futile mission to Africa, whereas Hughes was engaged in dealing with an urgent crisis on his own door-step. But still, we can't escape the fact that what seemed self-evidently absurd in Mrs Jellyby, turns out in Roose Hughes's case to be an essential part of his charitable activity.

A more important point is that Roose Hughes, for all his selfless energy and his benevolent instincts, is not, in the end, equal to the task. It is too great for one man. Already, after two months, Dickens can see that his health has been undermined. And then, of course, the physical labour of recovering the bodies has to be done not by him but by the fishermen and quarrymen, and there are too many bodies to be left to merely voluntary effort: the men have to be paid for their time. Dickens scotches a rumour that the payment was necessary in order to overcome a superstitious dread of the drowned; the plain fact is that the islanders are poor and can't afford to work for nothing. [It may be that he brought up the rumour about superstition interfering with the rescue as an alternative to mentioning the more inflammatory claims about robbery. The claim about superstition is made in the letter to the Times praising Hughes's work. I have speculated that this letter, which is anonymous, may have been written by Dickens. He may have picked up the story from others, but when he went to Moelfre he found it to be untrue and so took particular care to deny it.] Contributions came from the British public, and much of the cost was borne by the county rates, but still the undertaking ate away at Hughes's personal fortune. The circumstances clearly called for a personal and human, not an impersonal, institutional response, but the scale of the disaster made it too much for one man, or one family, or indeed one county, to cope with.

There is a final point: which is that Hughes remains an enthusiastic and dedicated amateur. This is apparent in his running battle (described by McKee) with the authorities over recovery of the bodies from inside the wreck. The professional experts (quoted approvingly by Dickens) knew that nothing could be done; Hughes, in constant contact with distraught relatives, knew that something had to be done.

So even here, in what is on the surface a straightforward case calling for individual charitable action, the individual benefactor is unable to provide an adequate response. When we consider the great social ills of poverty, disease and ignorance, therefore, it is plainer still that individual charitable action will be inadequate. These problems need co-ordination (Mrs Jellyby's thousands of letters), they need institutions, huge resources. Deeply attached though Dickens was to the idea of individual charity, and suspicious though he was of large-scale undertakings, whether by the state (for example the police and the Poor Law) or by churches or groups with an ideological axe to grind (what he calls 'missions' or 'izations'), he was in no doubt that something needed to be done on a national level to eradicate the evils of poverty, disease and ignorance. His three great 'social' novels of the 1850s and 60s (*Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*) are full of

denunciations of the do-nothing state: out-dated laws, corrupt and idle officials and monstrous national complacency.

As so often with Dickens we bump up against a contradiction. With one voice he calls for action by the state, bold, broad-brush centralized measures to do away with the evils of poverty, disease and ignorance. With another voice he says, no, act like the Rev Roose Hughes, do the work that comes to you, deal with the individual needs of individual sufferers. The answer is that we need both, and Dickens is realistic enough to see this. But his instinct is on the side of the individual sufferer and individual benefactor. The Uncommercial Traveller puts it neatly in an entirely different context, where he is discussing the palatial new railway hotels of the age:

> We all know this hotel [he writes] where we have no individuality, but put ourselves into the general post, as it were, and are sorted and disposed of according to our division. We all know that we can get on very well at such a place, but still not perfectly well; and this may be because the place is largely wholesale, and there is a lingering personal retail interest within us that asks to be satisfied. ('Refreshments for Travellers')

I've wandered a long way from the shipwreck on 26 October 1859. The last word should be from one of the hundreds of letters of gratitude addressed to Roose Hughes. This is quoted in Dickens's article, and comes from the Chief Rabbi:

> Reverend Sir,
>
> I cannot refrain from expressing to you my heartfelt thanks on behalf of those of my flock whose relatives have unfortunately been among those who perished at the late wreck of the Royal Charter. You have, indeed, like Boaz, 'not left off your kindness to the living and the dead.' [Ruth 2.20]
>
> You have not alone acted kindly towards the living by receiving them hospitably in your house, and energetically assisting them in their mournful duty, but also towards the dead, by exerting yourself to have our co-religionists buried in our ground, and according to our rites. May our heavenly Father reward you for your acts of humanity and true philanthropy!

[Show final slide, with this letter.]