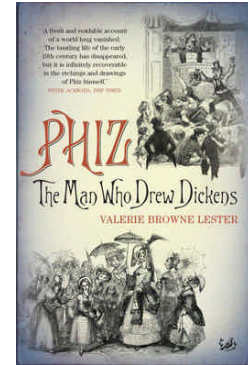




# Phiz - the Man who drew Dickens

Of the many colourful characters in the Bicknell ancestry, Phiz is possibly the most appealing. His story is also more credibly documented than the pre-Victorians whose courage in battle or other achievements seem now to have been embellished by the now-notorious Sydney Algernon Bicknell, our Victorian family archivist.

Phiz, or Hablot Knight Browne to give him his proper name, is the subject of a wonderful book published in late 2004 by his great-great-granddaughter Valerie Browne Lester. For over 23 years he worked with Charles Dickens and Phiz's drawings brought to life a galaxy of much-loved characters, from Mr Pickwick, Nicholas Nickleby and Mr Micawber to Little Nell and David Copperfield. Phiz lived a life as rich as any novel and Valerie's rendition of life in Victorian London is enchanting.



Of great interest to his family, which includes the Bicknells, is the mystery of his birth, which Valerie has researched in great detail for the first time. Phiz came from an old Huguenot Spitalfields family, ostensibly the fourteenth child of debt-ridden parents, William Loder Browne and Katherine Hunter. Now it turns out that the eldest daughter Kate had an affair in France with Captain Nicholas Hablot of Napoleon's Imperial Guard; a month before Hablot's birth the true father was killed at the battle of Waterloo. Kate's parents "adopted" Kate's illegitimate son and falsified the birth papers of both Hablot and their own son Decimus born embarrassingly close.

Lucinda, Kate's younger sister was 14 at the time. When her father then disappeared to America as a bankrupt it was Lucinda with Kate and Emma who kept the huge family going by teaching music. The graceful and socialite Lucinda went on, another 14 years later, to marry Elhanan Bicknell, our great-great-grandfather, ship-owner, candle-maker and patron of great artists of the time. "If Elhanan was Lucinda's great coup, the lovely, musically talented Lucinda was certainly Elhanan's" writes Valerie. Their children include some of our favourite uncles - Herman (first westerner to enter Mecca undisguised), Sydney Algernon (saint or sinner historian) and Clarence (author, botanist and archaeologist in the Franco-Italian Alps).

Phiz loved visiting Lucinda at Elhanan's Herne Hill residence where he would have rubbed shoulders with Turner, Ruskin and others from the art world. Elhanan's disagreements with Phiz and Lucinda's brother Edgar Browne, and Elhanan's decision to move Phiz from school to an apprenticeship with a commercial engraver may have alienated him from everyone in the Browne family but it may also have paved the way for Phiz's early foray into book illustration and his career with Dickens and others.

Most striking in the core narrative of this story is the talent found in so many of the Browne family. 3 senior generations had lived off the product and skill of their hands (watch-makers, calligraphers, artists). Phiz's brothers (or natural uncles as we now know) had such talents, in particular Charles Alfred and Edgar. Given that the Bicknells immediately before Elhanan were clerics, teachers and tradesmen, the Bicknells clearly have Lucinda and the Brownes to thank for a large part of the genes which have produced talents for draughtsmanship, drawing, painting and architecture in many generations.

Phiz - The Man who drew Dickens. Valerie Browne Lester (photo, right) Chatto & Windus, London, 2004-12-21 ISBN 0-7011-7742-x [www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk) £20 SRP - Available on Amazon

