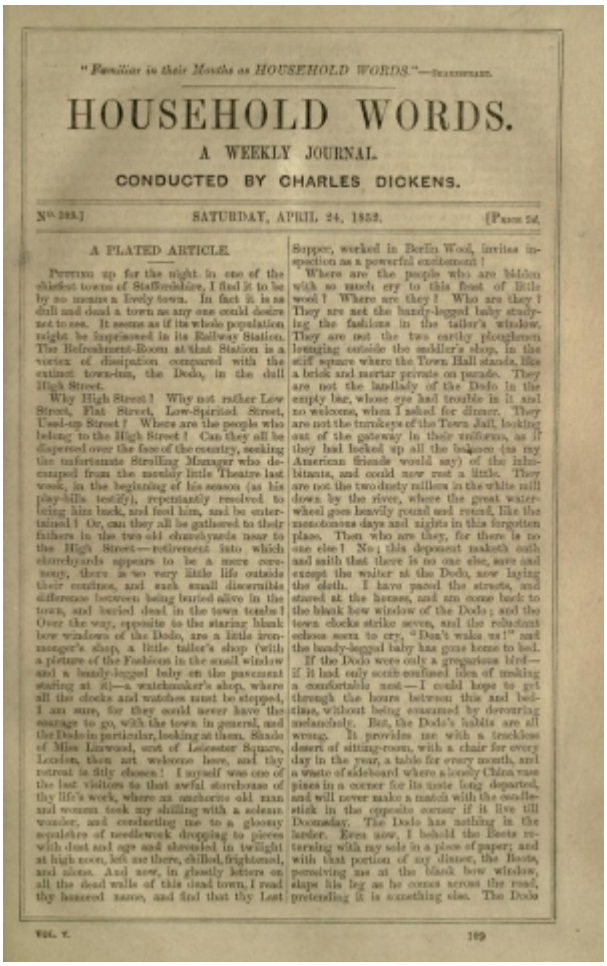
Add to My Gallery | Create an Album
View PDF

Charles Dickens' account of cylinder printing, 1852.

'A Plated Article' by Charles Dickens appeared in *Household Words* in 1852. It was reprinted by W.T. Copeland & Sons in 1930. After a visit to Copeland's, Dickens is having his dinner, and imagines his printed dinner-plate saying:

> 'Didn't you inspect the copper-plate on which my pattern was deeply engraved? Didn't you perceive an impression of it taken in cobalt colour at a cylindrical press, upon a leaf of thin paper, streaming from a plunge-bath of soap and water? Wasn't the paper impression daintily spread by a light-fingered damsel (you know you admired her) over the surface of the plate, and the back of the paper rubbed prodigiously hard - with a long tight roll of flannel, tied up like a round of hung beef – without so much as ruffling the paper, wet as it was? The (says the plate), was not the paper washed away with a sponge, and didn't there appear, set off upon the plate, this identical piece of Pre-Raphaelite blue distemper which you now behold?'



"Familiar in their Mouths as HOUSEHOLD WORDS."—SHAKESPEARE.

HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

A WEEKLY JOURNAL.

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

No. 103.] SATURDAY, APRIL 24, 1852. [PRICE 2d.

A PLATED ARTICLE.

Putting up for the night in one of the chiefest towns of Staffordshire, I find it to be by no means a lively town. In fact it is as dull and dead a town as any one could desire not to see. It seems as if its whole population might be imprisoned in its Railway Station. The Refreshment-Room at that Station is a vortex of dissipation compared with the extinct town-inn, the Dodo, in the dull High Street.

Why High Street? Why not rather Low Street, Flat Street, Low-Spirited Street, Used-up Street? Where are the people who belong to the High Street? Can they all be dispersed over the face of the country, seeking the unfortunate Strolling Manager who decamped from the mouldy little Theatre last week, in the beginning of his season (as his play-bills testify), repentantly resolved to bring him back, and feed him, and be entertained? Or, can they all be gathered to their fathers in the two old churchyards near to the High Street—retirement into which churchyards appears to be a mere conveyancery, there is so very little life outside their confines, and such small discernible difference between being buried alive in the town, and buried dead in the town tombs! Over the way, opposite to the staring blank bow windows of the Dodo, are a little ironmonger's shop, a little tailor's shop (with a picture of the Fashions in the small window and a hardy-legged baby on the pavement staring at it)—a watchmaker's shop, where all the clocks and watches must be stopped, I am sure, for they could never have the courage to go, with the town in general, and the Dodo in particular, looking at them. Shade of Miss Linwood, sent of Leicester Square, London, then art welcome here, and thy retreat is ably chosen! I myself was one of the last visitors to that awful storehouse of thy life's work, where an anchorite old man and woman took my shilling with a solemn wonder, and conducting me to a gloomy sepulchre of needlework dropping to pieces with dust and age and shrouded in twilight at high noon, left me there, chilled, frightened, and alone. And now, in ghostly letters on all the dead walls of this dead town, I read thy buried name, and find that thy Last Supper, worked in Berlin Wool, invites inspection as a powerful excitement!

Where are the people who are hidden with so much cry to this feast of little wool? Where are they? Who are they? They are not the hardy-legged baby studying the fashions in the tailor's window. They are not the two earthy ploughmen lounging outside the saddler's shop, in the stiff square where the Town Hall stands, like a brick and mortar private on parade. They are not the landlady of the Dodo in the empty bar, whose eye had trouble in it and no welcome, when I asked for dinner. They are not the turnkeys of the Town Jail, looking out of the gateway in their uniforms, as if they had locked up all the business (as my American friends would say) of the inhabitants, and could now rest a little. They are not the two dusty millers in the white mill down by the river, where the great waterwheel goes heavily round and round, like the monotonous days and nights in this forgotten place. Then who are they, for there is no one else? No; this deponent naketh oath and saith that there is no one else, save and except the waiter at the Dodo, now laying the cloth. I have paced the streets, and stared at the houses, and am come back to the bleak bow window of the Dodo; and the town clocks strike seven, and the reluctant echoes seem to cry, "Don't wake us!" and the hardy-legged baby has gone home to bed.

If the Dodo were only a gregarious bird—if it had only seen confined idea of making a comfortable nest—I could hope to get through the hours between this and bedtime, without being consumed by devouring melancholy. But, the Dodo's habits are all wrong. It provides me with a trackless desert of sitting-room, with a chair for every day in the year, a table for every month, and a waste of sideboard where a lonely China vase pines in a corner for its mate long departed, and will never make a match with the candlestick in the opposite corner if it live till Doomsday. The Dodo has nothing in the larder. Even now, I behold the Boots returning with my sole in a piece of paper; and with that portion of my dinner, the Boots, perceiving me at the blank bow window, slaps his leg as he comes across the road, pretending it is something else. The Dodo