

# Dickens centenary dinner is delicious

By MARGERY FEE

*Tureens of soup are emptied with awful rapidity, waiters take plates of turbot away to get lobster sauce and bring back plates of lobster sauce without turbot. The substantial disappears, moulds of jelly vanish like lightning, hearty eaters wipe their foreheads and appear rather overcome by their recent exertions...* (from Sketches by Boz, "The Public Dinner")

The Victorian feast served at the York Dickens Festival probably would have evoked Dickens' scorn with its mere five courses and stingy two wines. No one fell off his chair, too stuffed to move, no one had to leave the room, belching feebly, no one was overcome by the pangs of dyspepsia.

Nonetheless, the food was plentiful by today's standards — and good. In fact some

people refused to believe that Versafood had a hand in it at all.

Groaning boards abound in Dickens, and in those times corpulence was often equated with distinction. For example, Lord Palmerston was reported by a companion at a dinner party in 1865 to have consumed "two plates of turtle soup; he was then served very amply to a plate of cod and oyster sauce; he then took a pate; afterwards he was helped to two very greasy looking entrees; he then dispatched a plate of roast mutton; there then appeared before him the largest, and to my mind the hardest, slice of ham that ever figured at the table of a nobleman; yet it disappeared, just in time to answer the inquiry of his butler, "Snipe, my Lord, or pheasant." He instantly replied, "Pheasant," thus completing his ninth dish of meat at that meal. The Prime

Minister was then 81 and in thriving health.

The Prince Regent, Edward, got so fat he had to wear corsets, (along with all the ladies and not a few of the gentlemen) and people called him "the Prince of Whales" behind his back.

Perhaps part of the problem was that the Victorians did not have sex to occupy their minds.

Anyway, we can thank the Victorians for the more essential rules of etiquette. Here are a few whose application might improve the now somewhat limited aura of gentility in the cafeterias.

— No polite guest will ever fastidiously smell or examine any article of food before tasting it;

— Never allow butter, soup or other food to remain on your whiskers. Use the napkin frequently;

— Never make a display when removing hair, insects or other disagreeable things from your food. Place them quietly under your plate.

After the meal, The Finches of the Grove supplied an "evening of harmonious entertainment." It began, of course, with God Save the Queen. The stars of the evening were Tillie and Jeannette Raine. Their biography revealed that "while still tender in years they won an audition for Wigmore Hall. Horrified parents retrieved them from temptations of life on the wicked stage."

Certainly this was a suitable way to end a celebration of the 100th anniversary of Dickens' death. Like the medieval celebration last year, the addition of the sensuous joys of food and music to the more intellectual one of films and papers makes the spirit of the period come alive.

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