

# BLEAK HOUSE

CHARLES DICKENS



EDITED BY GEORGE FORD  
AND SYLVÈRE MONOD

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

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CHARLES DICKENS  
BLEAK HOUSE

AN AUTHORITATIVE AND  
ANNOTATED TEXT  
ILLUSTRATIONS  
A NOTE ON THE TEXT  
GENESIS AND COMPOSITION  
BACKGROUNDS  
CRITICISM



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# Introduction

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Critical assessments of *Bleak House* have been remarkable in their variety. In 1853, a review in the *Spectator* (included in the Criticism section of the present volume) treated the novel as if it were a kind of clumsy bungle. More than a hundred years later, in his 1964 edition of *Bleak House*, Geoffrey Tillotson described it as “the finest literary work the nineteenth century produced in England.” And in 1970, not quite so hyperbolically, Mrs. Q. D. Leavis concluded her chapter in *Dickens the Novelist* by contending that *Bleak House* is certainly “the most impressive and rewarding of all Dickens’s novels.” Dickens himself ranked it only a little below the novel which preceded it, *David Copperfield*. The strikingly popular success of *Bleak House* from the moment its first monthly installment was published in March, 1852 (for despite the *Spectator* review it began a best seller and remained one), gave him great satisfaction, even though *Copperfield* was to remain, among all his writings, his favorite.

Between the two novels was a gap of thirteen months, a period in which the thirty-eight-year-old author elected to take a rest from novel writing. The final number of *Copperfield* was published in October, 1850, and it was not until November, 1851, that the writing of *Bleak House* commenced. During the rest period between the novels Dickens did not abstain from other kinds of prose. For his highly successful magazine, *Household Words*, he contributed a number of articles and also dictated a book, *A Child’s History of England*, which appeared in installments from January, 1851, to September, 1853. Nevertheless most of his energies during this interval were expended in areas other than literary. In particular he was keenly involved in directing a touring troupe of amateur actors in a play by his friend, Bulwer-Lytton, the proceeds from the performances being donated to a fund in aid of artists. Also public-spirited, and of greater significance in the shaping of *Bleak House*, was the assistance he provided for his wealthy friend, Angela Burdett-Coutts, in her projects for slum clearance and the building of model housing. This activity, together with what he witnessed while preparing articles on the role of the police in London slum areas, reinforced his awareness that behind the impressively solid

front of mid-Victorian prosperity, the urban poor were living in a deplorable state of wretchedness and ignorance.

Pollution was another related problem that engaged Dickens' energies at this time, an issue which since the ravages of cholera in 1848-49 had become of pressing importance. His active interest in the reforms needed for urban sanitation led to his being a speaker at meetings of the Metropolitan Sanitary Association. An extract from one of these speeches, of May, 1851, is included below in the section called Backgrounds. In this section, consisting of a compilation of documents from the period, the topic of pollution is most prominently featured. We have made it prominent partly because it seems to have provided the controlling metaphor for *Bleak House*, but also because of the clear indications of the intensity of Dickens' involvement with the issue, both as a citizen and as a writer. The other two topics, under which we have also grouped some contemporary documents, are less often referred to by Dickens in 1851-53. One is the Court of Chancery, accounts of which he must have read in *The Times* during this period (accounts which confirmed his own earlier formed impressions), and the other is government likewise by newspaper accounts of the rise and fall of political parties, especially the collapse of Lord Russell's government in February, 1852; and his interest may have been further intensified by his having been asked to stand for Parliament in February, 1852, and again in June. In view of his active involvement in contemporary issues, it was almost inevitable that these requests would be made, but despite the attractions of political power for Dickens his response was always to decline. On February 28, 1852, he commented:

In the Parliamentary matter—it is impossible that I could go into it with the new book in hand. . . . And I don't know but I am far more useful (and certainly far more happy) in my own sphere of service than among the bellowers and prozers of St. Stephen's.

His satisfaction in having chosen to make novels rather than legislation must have been reinforced later when what seemed to him the chaos of the Parliamentary scene became intensified. The Doodle-Foodle parliamentary shuffles of 1852-53 as pictured in his novel led on, in the world outside his novel, to the blunders of war in Crimea in 1853-54.

In sketching Dickens' experiences and interests in 1851-53, we have emphasized public issues rather than his private life. The emphasis is appropriate enough, for one of the principal differences between *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* resides in the distinctive preoccupation, in the earlier novel, with the lives of private

individuals and families. In David's life history, public issues are of subordinate importance. *Bleak House*, by contrast, seems predominantly topical. Yet it is misleading to overlook the role of the private worlds in *Bleak House*, the worlds of the mutual interaction of individual characters and of the household (there are at least twenty-four different households pictured in the story). It would be equally misleading to overlook the importance of private family life for Dickens himself at this time. His letters show that he was as much preoccupied with household concerns as with major public issues. In the interval between the two novels, his father died painfully, an event followed two weeks later by the death of his infant daughter, Dora. And more pressing, perhaps, than an awareness of familial mortality was a realization of impending familial responsibilities. As the father of a large number of children, Dickens was confronting the prospect of their eventually having to choose appropriate careers for themselves. His letters refer several times to his eldest son, Charles, who did not flourish on the Latin courses at Eton and who proposed a career in the army before electing to try his hand at business. Richard Carstone in the novel was probably not modeled on Dickens' son, yet the account of his wavering essays into different professions may have been affected by his creator's preoccupation, as a father, with the virtues of energetic decisiveness and the capacity for self-help.

The letters of the period also clearly bring out Dickens' role as a householder. During the course of composing *Bleak House*, he moved his family from a large house in London, Devonshire Terrace, to a larger establishment on Tavistock Square (where the redecorating held up the writing for several weeks). In the summers of 1851 and 1852, he settled in houses on the English seacoast, and in 1853 was at Boulogne in France. At times none of these establishments satisfied him, and he expressed a restless urge to find some other ideal country retreat in which he could write in isolation.

These experiences, like the very title of the novel, can provide a corrective reminder that *Bleak House* is concerned with houses and households, in the countryside as well as in cities, and not exclusively with public issues such as Chancery iniquities, London slums, bungling philanthropy, political ineptitudes, and other such topics, however arresting these may appear to us, especially on a first reading.

As indicated in our note on the text, the present edition of *Bleak House*, like our edition of *Hard Times*, seems to be the first in which the text has been established by a comparative study of all the editions of the novel published during the author's lifetime and explicitly or implicitly sanctioned by him. For making available to us the original manuscript and corrected proofs of *Bleak*

*House*, we wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Keeper of Printed Books at the Victoria and Albert Museum. We are also grateful to Dr. Peter Sharratt for his princely gift of a first edition of *Bleak House* to one of the editors, and to Dr. Michael Slater for helpful advice and in particular for making available to us a copy of *Bleak House* in which the running headlines were inserted in Dickens' own handwriting.

For assistance in annotations, our debts are perhaps more extensive. Some preliminary studies on the allusions in the novel have been made, in particular by T. W. Hill, Tadao Yamamoto, and Stephen C. Gill, and we have appreciated the lead-ins they have offered even when our readings differ from theirs.<sup>1</sup> Our more ambitious objective has been to provide, for the first time so far as we know, a full-scale set of notes to enable today's readers to follow up allusions that have become obscure after 120 years. As a supplement to these footnotes we also include a separate Introductory Note on Law Courts and Colleges, which aims to explain some of the legal procedures referred to in the opening chapter in particular but throughout the novel as well.

In the preparation of these annotations it became evident that *Bleak House* is one of the most richly and diversely allusive of novels, and we have therefore had to call for advice from experts in a variety of fields. Our consultants on legal history included Mr. Justice Foster of the Court of Chancery, Professor Henry Manne, and Mr. Douglas Hamer; on the history of medicine, Mr. Eric Gaskell of the Wellcome Institute; on nineteenth-century technology, Mr. Richard Altick, the late Sir Arthur Elton, and Mr. Robert Patterson of the Castle Museum, York; on law enforcement, Dr. J. J. Tobias of the Police College of London; and on London topography, Mrs. Hazel Shepherd and Mr. Leslie Staples. Other helpful consultants included historians of costume and, most extensively, religion (Dickens' abundant references to the Book of Common Prayer are a significant aspect of his style in *Bleak House*). Perhaps most illuminating has been the identification of songs, such as the one sung by Krook on the night of his drunken death, or Skimpole's song about "The Peasant Boy," and here we were aided by several historians of music including Dr. Lillian Ruff. To all of these consultants, named and unnamed, we wish to express our warm sense of gratitude.

Because of the very long period during which we have been intermittently engaged with this project, we must also acknowledge a special debt to fellow editors and scholars who have recently pub-

1. T. W. Hill, "Notes on *Bleak House*," *Dickensian*, 40 (1943-44), 39-44, 65-70, 133-41; Tadao Yamamoto, *Growth and System of the Language of Dickens*

(Osaka, 1952); Stephen C. Gill, "Allusion in *Bleak House*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 22 (1967), 145-54.

lished editions or studies of *Bleak House*. Some five years ago, after compiling some 460 notes, we had overconfidently assumed that no more tracking down of references would be required, but in this seemingly inexhaustible text we ourselves kept turning up new references, and, as other annotators subsequently appeared on the scene, we discovered that there were about a dozen allusions we had overlooked. All of these scholars have generously allowed us to include such overlooked items (which are acknowledged in the notes). We are grateful to Norman Page for two such notes from his 1971 edition of the novel, and to Grahame Smith for three others in his *Bleak House* of 1974. Most especially we appreciate the permission given by Susan Shatto to incorporate six notes from her two articles published in *Dickens Studies Newsletter* in 1975. Our only regret is that we had not known earlier of her fellow labors in the vineyard and of her impressive searchings for elusive allusions.

To an even greater extent than in the case of our edition of *Hard Times*, it may be remarked here that although the principal responsibility for preparing the text of the novel fell to the editor in France, while preparing the annotations and selecting the background documents were the task of the editor in America, the preparation of this edition has been a joint effort involving constant mutual consultation and advice about every aspect of the work.

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# Introductory Note on Law Courts and Colleges

Although not formally qualified as a lawyer, Dickens had acquired an extraordinarily rich knowledge of the world of lawyers and law practice, and *Bleak House* bristles with references to the technicalities of a legal system that may sometimes prove baffling. A professor of the history of law at Oxford, William Holdsworth, hailed Dickens as an outstanding legal historian. The compliment is well deserved, and the novelist's special knowledge is certainly one of the assets of his storytelling, but it is a quality that can also cut in opposite directions. Consider, for example, the opening sentence:

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall.

What, we may ask, is Michaelmas Term? Why is the Court therefore sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall? What sort of inn are we supposed to visualize? And what is a Lord Chancellor?

To answer such questions and to follow out the legal allusions in the opening chapter, it is necessary only to allow the novelist his assumptions that his readers have some rudimentary understanding of how a mid-nineteenth-century court functioned and how the lawyers practicing in that court were trained for their roles.

## *The Court of Chancery*

During the period in which *Bleak House* is set, several different kinds of courts existed in England. To simplify the account, these can be grouped under two categories. The first, the *Courts of Common Law*, were concerned with cases of theft, robbery, murder, and other such crimes or misdemeanors. Thus in *Bleak House*, when a murder is committed, the police detectives arrest a suspect, who is committed to jail and will be tried and sentenced in a common-law court by a judge and jury. Such courts were also responsible for conducting inquests, the *coroner* being an officer of one of these Courts of Common Law. Again, in *Bleak House*, when a suspected suicide occurs, a coroner, assisted by a jury from the locality, conducts an on-the-spot investigation of the incident.

The second type of court, the *Court of Chancery*, existed to settle cases involving such issues as disputes about legacies, trusts, mortgages, in which the remedy sought by the contestants would be decided on the principles of *Equity* rather than on the rules of Common Law. These principles of Equity, as Douglas Hamer explains, are unwritten; each case in a court of Equity is treated as unique and "not determinable by the fixed and universal rules of Common Law." The difference can be nicely illustrated, as Hamer says, by *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Portia pleads her case on the basis of Equity, whereas Shylock pleads his on the basis of Law.<sup>1</sup>

1. Douglas Hamer, "Dickens, The Old Court of Chancery," *Notes and Queries* (Sept. 1970), 342.

Thus, as originally established in earlier centuries, the Court of Chancery served to protect the rights of individuals and to compensate for the rigidities of Law. By Dickens' time, however, what had once been a humane and flexible institution had developed rigidities of its own.

The presiding judge of this Court, which plays such a large role in *Bleak House*, was the *Lord Chancellor*, a member of the Prime Minister's cabinet and President (*ex officio*) of the House of Lords. His office was the highest in the legal profession of England. Assisting him in his duties were other Chancery Court officers, the Master of the Rolls and three Vice Chancellors.

The traditional procedures of the Court of Chancery differed from those practiced in the Courts of Common Law. There was no jury in this court; all cases were decided by the presiding judge, whose verdict was arrived at after sifting evidence submitted by the contesting parties in the form of lengthy affidavits read aloud in court by lawyers. It should also be noted that in the court itself witnesses never appeared as such; if they had evidence to offer, it would have been gathered, in written form, previous to the court hearings. It is this practice that explains why in Dickens' novel *Miss Flite*, Gridley, and Richard Carstone "all go to court to listen to the proceedings but never give evidence."<sup>2</sup>

Until the Court of Chancery was reformed, in the second half of the nineteenth century, obtaining a decision was likely to be frustratingly slow and also expensive, as Dickens himself had discovered in 1844 when he launched suits against five piratical publishers for breach of copyright. As he complained in a letter: "I was really treated as if I were the robber instead of the robbed." Although the Vice Chancellor's ruling was emphatically in Dickens' favor, the suit cost him more than any damages he was able to collect, and he resolved never again to become involved in dealings with Chancery, remarking bitterly, in 1846, that "it is better to suffer a great wrong than to have recourse to the much greater wrong of the law."

An example can illustrate why there could be such delays and expenses. Let us suppose a wealthy property owner dies and leaves most of his estate to a nephew, with also a few bequests to his servants. Another nephew contends that the will is invalid, and that an earlier will, leaving part of the estate to the second nephew, is the proper one. Employing a solicitor, this second nephew (the plaintiff) has a *bill* drawn up to state his claims against the first nephew (the defendant), and this opening transaction is filed in the Court of Chancery.

Once such procedures were initiated, the heirs could not draw on the estates they had inherited, for all property was taken over by the Court and held until a decision was reached—hence the expression that a house is "*in Chancery*." Such an arrangement assured the Court that expenses involved in the case would be covered. If settlement were long delayed, it also meant that some of the heirs would have a very long wait or would never receive the legacies assigned to them. As *The Times* commented (March 28, 1851): "Butlers, and housekeepers, and gardeners of the kindest master in the world, in spite of ample legacies in his will, are rotting on parish pay [i.e., on welfare payments]."

These proceedings having been launched, the first nephew would be obliged to employ a solicitor and a staff of clerks to gather evidence from

witnesses at a hearing held under the auspices of commissioners appointed by the Court. All the living and travel expenses of these officials and witnesses had to be paid for by the litigants. Copies of all the evidence presented at these proceedings had to be made for the participants in the case and at their expense. These documents made up what Dickens, in his opening scene, calls the "bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, masters' reports, mountains of costly nonsense." The reference here to the "masters' reports" pertains to the second stage of presenting a case in the Court of Chancery. After the solicitors had gathered the written evidence for their cases, court officials (or their deputies) called *Masters* reviewed the assembled evidence and reported on whether it was in satisfactory order to present before the Lord Chancellor. These well-paid Chancery officials seem to have played a large role in delaying the settlement of cases. In an article in *Household Words* (March 19, 1853), Dickens spoke witheringly of a Chancery Master as "a sufficiently absurd monster for human reason to reflect upon."

Another group of court officials who had to be paid to funnel the case into the hands of the Lord Chancellor was known as the *Six Clerks*. Such lawyers had at one time acted as solicitors for contestants in the courtroom, and although no longer functioning in that role, the office of the Six Clerks continued to collect fees.

A further obstacle to arriving at decisions would occur when disagreements developed about which of the two types of courts should have jurisdiction in such a case. As one of the characters in *Bleak House* remarks: "Equity sends questions to Law; Law sends questions back to Equity" (chapter VIII).

That Chancery decisions were often delayed is therefore understandable. Even more conducive to delays, however, was what happened when some party to the suit died before a decision had been arrived at and the whole case had, in effect, to be re-prepared. In the present example, if the first nephew died first, his heir would have to pay expenses for re-preparing what was called a *Bill of Revivor*. No doubt many cases were equitably settled by the Court of Chancery without such extensive delays or expenses, but there were others that dragged on interminably. One of these, the William Jennings case, was initiated in 1798. In 1852, when Dickens began writing his novel, it was still unsettled, and he seems to have made it his model for his Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit. Another Chancery suit which also served as a model was, as he states in his Preface, a case of more recent occurrence. A third case, which he had asked one of his assistants to investigate, was the Day case; it had opened in 1834, and by 1853, after expenditures of more than £70,000, its prospects of settlement were "as far off as ever." In response to his inquiry about how many lawyers participated when the case was to be heard in Court, his informant reported: "Formerly always 17, sometimes 30 or 40; it used to be said the Bar [*i.e.*, all the barristers of England]. The number has been reduced." It was cases such as these that prompted an editorial in Dickens' *Household Words* (December 25, 1852) to describe the High Court of Chancery as "High, as we say also of venison or pheasant, when it gets into very bad odour."

Whether Dickens' picture of Chancery cases was historically accurate and representative has been extensively debated. Some of his contemporaries,

such as Lord Denman (a former Chancellor), contended that he was wasting his breath in exposing the shortcomings of Chancery practices, because in the very year in which he began his novel, 1852, Parliament had passed legislation (as recommended by a commission reporting on Chancery in 1850) that markedly reformed the Court. These reforms were to be followed by others later in the century, in 1858, 1862, and 1873. Yet it is hard to imagine that the pains of the law's delay, as Hamlet styled them, were eliminated overnight. And for the period in which the novel appears to be set, it has been demonstrated by the legal historian William Holdsworth that the account of Jarndyce and Jarndyce was historically accurate.<sup>3</sup> The exact time of the action of the novel cannot be readily pinpointed, for, like D. H. Lawrence in *Women in Love*, Dickens preferred not to specify precisely when his story takes place. Most readers agree that the settings correspond to the late 1830's, but in any event, the action certainly occurs well before the reforms established by the Court of Chancery Acts of 1852.

#### *Law Schools and Residences: The Inns*

When we read of *Lincoln's Inn* and conjure up a hostelry that provides lodging and dining facilities, we are not off the track, but we are overlooking some of the many other functions served by this anciently founded sort of Inn. Such an establishment combines some of the functions of a law school and a dining club, with rooms and dining hall for students and other residents, and usually a chapel. Its blocks of buildings, often situated round a square or park, included offices for lawyers such as those occupied by Mr. Wholes in Symond's Inn. An Inn is also a kind of society or fraternity, with officers supervising its endowments and the expenditure of fees paid by student-members, and also regulating the requirements to qualify for admission to the Bar. Such officers, chosen from among the senior members of the society, were called *benchers*. Some Inns were named after their original founders (Thavies Inn and Symond's Inn); others for their locality, in particular Middle Temple and Inner Temple, whose buildings are located on property once held by the Knights Templars in the early medieval period, property which was leased to the students of law in 1326.

Four of these Inns were classified as *Inns of Court* (Lincoln's Inn, Inner Temple, Middle Temple, and Gray's Inn). These four Inns of Court had the exclusive right to admit candidates to practice law as barristers. Most of the other Inns were classified as Inns of Chancery and were attached to one of the Inns of Court in a kind of "satellite" relationship. The Inns of Chancery, unlike the Inns of Court, have not survived in the twentieth century. Some of the buildings, such as Staple Inn, still stand but have been taken over for offices.

As a map of central London can show, most of the law colleges, offices, and residences were within easy walking distance of each other, and the same area also included facilities for storing legal records, such as the *Rolls Office*, and courtrooms, such as Lincoln's Inn Hall. Also at hand were, of course, dealers in legal supplies, stationers such as Mr. Snagsby, as well as

3. See William S. Holdsworth, *Charles Dickens as Legal Historian* (New Haven, 1928). See also Trevor Blount, "The

Documentary Symbolism of Chancery in *Bleak House*," *Dickensian* (1966), 47-52, 106-11, 167-74.

the copyists employed by them for transcribing documents. A potential barrister preparing to practice in the courtrooms, or a law-office clerk preparing to become a solicitor, would have all the facilities for training and practice conveniently clustered for him in a small area, less than a square mile in size—a city within a city.

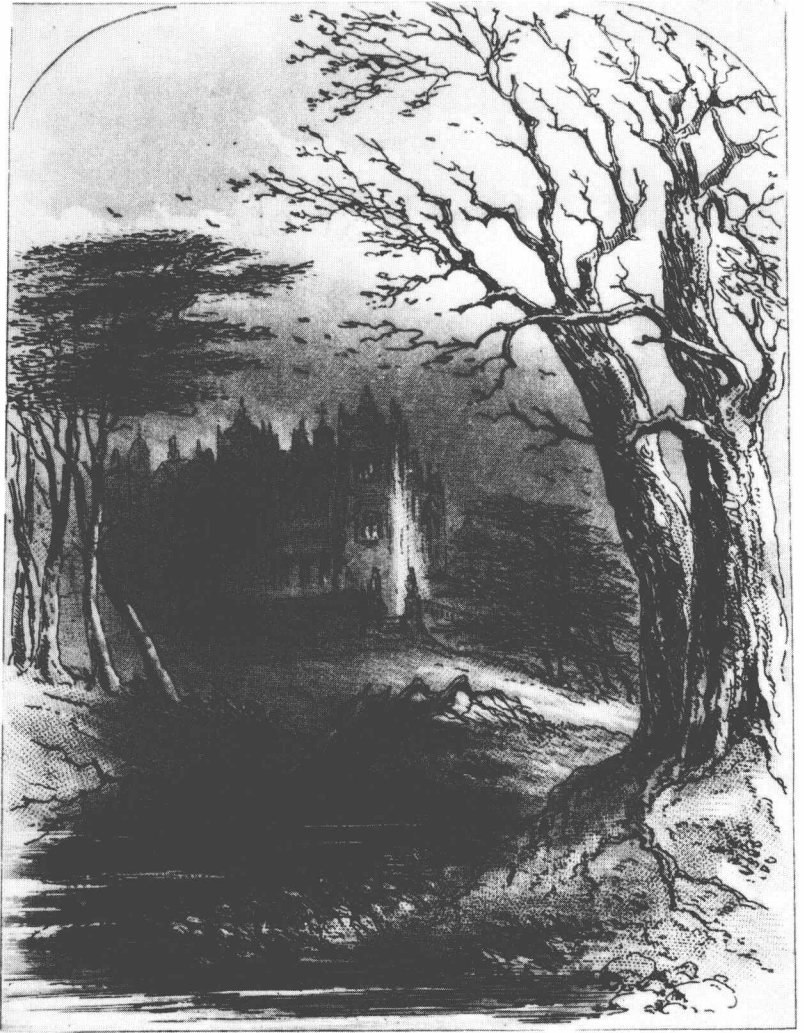
To speak of barristers and solicitors is to touch on one of the distinctive features of the English legal system: the division of functions performed by lawyers. A *solicitor*, such as Mr. Kenge or Mr. Tulkinghorn in Dickens' novel, would have been trained by working in a lawyer's office. Having bound himself to his employer by articles (the contract for his apprenticeship), he was called an *articled clerk*. After qualifying as a solicitor, he would advise clients on legal matters and prepare cases on their behalf, but he would not ordinarily plead his client's case in court. For this function he would employ a *barrister*, a member of the Bar who had graduated, in effect, from one of the Inns of Court, to present the case before the judge. As the opening chapter of *Bleak House* indicates, the barristers were of several ranks. A senior barrister, appointed to the rank of Queen's Counsellor, sat in a special row of benches in the court and wore a black silk gown (Mr. Blowers, in the opening chapter, is described as "the eminent silk gown"). Such counsellors also wore, like the judges, wigs of goat hair (junior lawyers wore wigs of coarser horse hair). The highest order of barrister was called *Serjeant*. Until the rank was abolished in the late nineteenth century, the Serjeants had an Inn of their own, to which Dickens refers in Chapter XIX.

#### *The Terms and Vacation*

The amount of activity in this law pocket of London varied with the seasons. During the long four-month summer vacation (July through October), this section of London was considerably depopulated, with only a few of the junior clerks (such as Mr. Guppy in *Bleak House*) continuing to work at their offices. Dickens makes fun of the fact that the country managed to continue functioning during this *Long Vacation*, even though the law courts have virtually suspended their activities. During the rest of the year, there were four "terms" in which the courts were in session, during which those preparing to become barristers were required to eat dinner in the halls of their Inns. These four terms were: Hilary Term (January 11–31); Easter Term (April 15–May 8); Trinity Term (May 22–June 12); Michaelmas Term (November 2–25). Between these terms, courts might continue in session. For the Court of Chancery, it was customary, at such times, to change the place of meeting from Westminster Hall to Lincoln's Inn Hall, as in the late November scene, following Michaelmas Term, with which *Bleak House* opens.

The Text of  
Bleak House





FRONTISPIECE.