

A D M I T

TO THE PERFORMANCE

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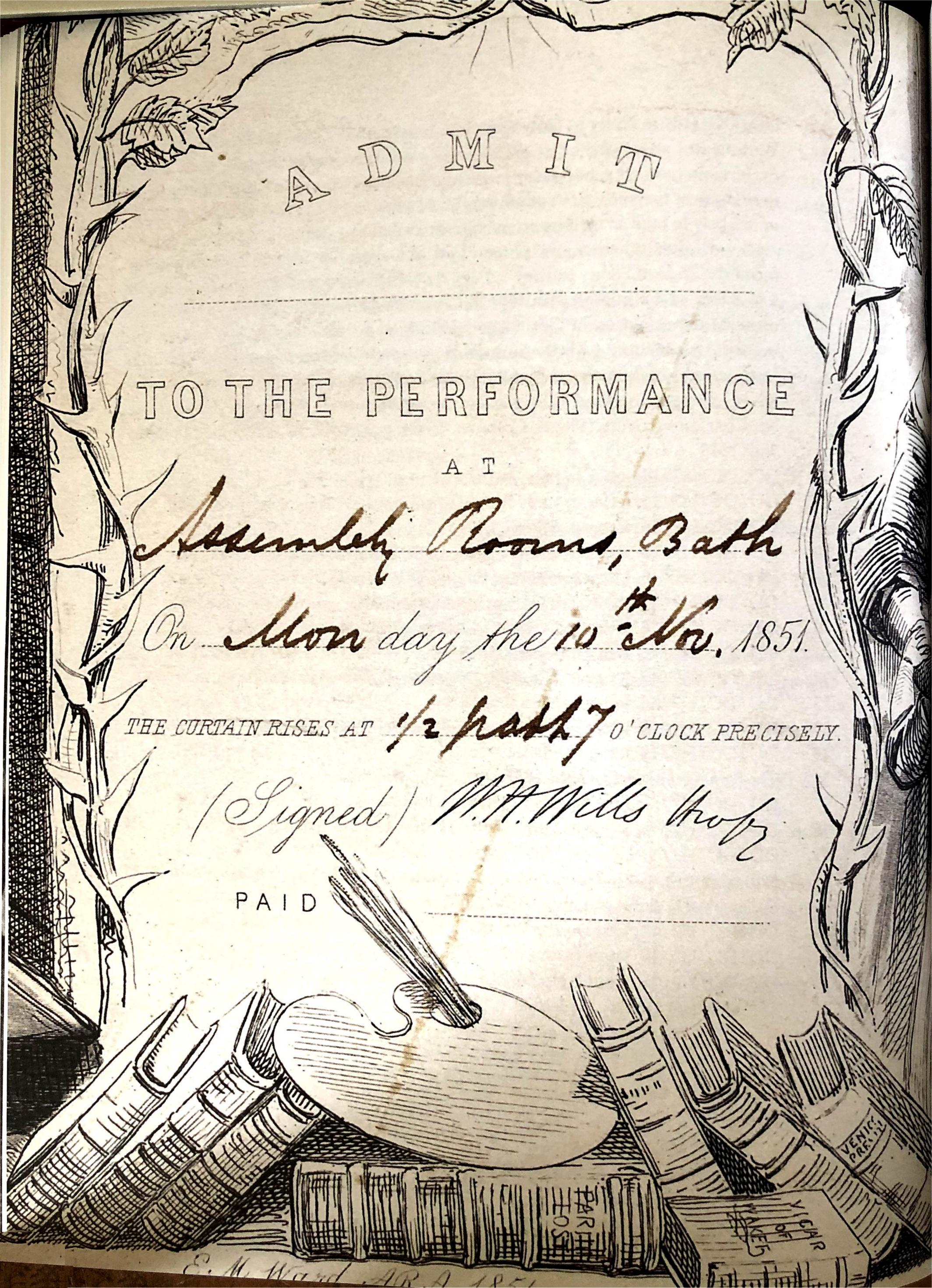
Assembly Rooms, Bath

On Monday the 10th Nov. 1851.

THE CURTAIN RISES AT $\frac{1}{2}$ past 7 O' CLOCK PRECISELY.

(Signed) W. H. Wills Propy

PAID



E. M. Ward ARD 1851

Charles Dickens and the Guild of Literature and Art Ticket, 1851

Anne Buchanan

This ticket is part of a small group of items in Bath Library's collection of ephemeral material. The ticket – about 20 x 16½ cm – was for entry to a performance by the Guild of Literature and Art at the Assembly Rooms on Monday November 10th 1851. The artwork was commissioned from E.C. Ward by Charles Dickens, and shows artist Richard Wilson entering a pawn shop, and author Daniel Defoe leaving the bookseller Edmund Curll with a rejected manuscript. The Guild was formed in 1850 by Dickens and writer Edward Bulwer Lytton to raise money to help struggling authors and artists through fundraising events. The 1851 performances were of Bulwer Lytton's marathon five-act farce *Not so bad as we seem* and a comedy *Mr Nightingale's Diary* by Dickens and Mark Lemon, editor of *Punch*. The majority of the cast were enthusiastic amateur actors, such as John Tenniel the cartoonist, author Wilkie Collins as well as Dickens and Lemon. Bulwer Lytton's play received a Royal premier in May at Devonshire House in London in front of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, after which there were plans to take the play on tour, starting with Bath and Bristol in November 1851. [fig. 1].

The Bath performance appears to mark the end of Dickens' close relationship with Bath. Since he was a young reporter visiting Bath in 1835 he had used the city and its citizens as inspiration, yet after this performance Dickens returned to the city only twice – in 1867 and 1869 for public readings. It has been suggested that, because of the poor reception of this performance, Dickens never forgave Bath,¹ and thus did not return until encouraged to by his publishers. The reviews in *The Bath Chronicle*² read as if the critic wearied of the performance – which did not end until 1am – as he comments that the 'dialogue is not sparkling', but the actors transformed the 'dull comedy' into a 'delightful entertainment'. The audience took time to warm to Lytton's play, but it 'grew loud and enthusiastic at the end', and they were later kept in a 'roar' by the second comedy. The critic apparently did not think much of the text of the play, nor some of the performances, although he did single out Dickens' efforts as



fig 1: Entry ticket to Dickens performance of *Not so Bad as we Seem*, Nov. 10 1851. Charles Dickens and his companions performed this play by Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton, followed by his own farce, *Mr Nightingale's Diary*, in which he took six different parts.
Bath in Time – Bath Central Library Collection



fig 2: Portrait of Charles Dickens, 1867. Engraved from a photograph by J. Gurney & Son
Bath in Time – Bath Central Library Collection

amongst the best. The audience eventually reacted enthusiastically by their standards, although this seems not to have been apparent to Dickens, who describes them as a 'dull audience', particularly in comparison to the Bristol audience whose 'enthusiasm was prodigious'.³ [fig. 2].

The Bath performance came at a time when Dickens' life was being pulled in other directions, and he was not in the best of health himself. He was in the process of major alterations to his house in London; his tenth child would be born in 1852 despite the ill health of his wife and the tragic death of his ninth child, Dora, in 1851; his father had also died recently. He had also started up, was editing and contributing to the journal *Household Words*, and later *All the Year Round*, whilst maintaining his own writing career and beginning the public readings of his works that would prove so popular round the world. Perhaps the reception of the production at Bath confirmed his view of a city in decline. Certainly by his last visit he viewed the city as a 'mouldy old roosting-place'⁴ and implied that the dead had taken possession of it⁵ – although he also admitted to being 'bilious and uncomfortable' during that visit, so maybe he was just having a bad day.

On the surface this ticket is a simple, if decorative, memento of Dickens' performance in Bath, but, like so many items in the Library collections, it has a hidden history that helps illuminate life in the city at the time.

Notes

1. William Lowndes, *They came to Bath* (Redcliffe, 1982), p.29
2. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, Nina Burgis (eds), *The letters of Charles Dickens Volume 6 : 1850-1852*, (Clarendon, Oxford: 1988), letter to Henry Austin, November 13th 1851.
3. *The Bath Chronicle*, November 13th 1851.
4. Graham Storey (ed), *The letters of Charles Dickens, Volume 12 : 1868-1870*, (Clarendon, Oxford: 2002), letter to Miss Georgina Hogarth, January 29th 1869.
5. *The letters of Charles Dickens Volume 12*, letter to Viscount Torrington, January 29th 1869.