

## Charles Dickens

The Prince of Wales has paid tribute to Charles Dickens as "one of the greatest writers of the English language" on the 200th anniversary of his birth.

He was joined by the Duchess of Cornwall, the Archbishop of Canterbury and luminaries from the worlds of literature and theatre for a service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey, where wreaths were laid at Dickens's grave in Poets' Corner.

An event was held simultaneously at Dickens's birthplace in Portsmouth, Hampshire, where a message from Charles was read out.

In it, he said: "My wife and I would like to send our special greetings from Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey to the Lord Mayor and all the assembled guests at St Mary's Church in Portsmouth as we simultaneously celebrate the bicentenary of the birth of your most famous son, who was born 200 years ago at Mile End Terrace and later baptised in St Mary's Church.

"Despite the many years that have passed, Charles Dickens remains one of the greatest writers of the English language, who used his creative genius to campaign passionately for social justice. The word Dickensian instantly conjures up a vivid picture of Victorian life with all its contrasts and intrigue, and his characterisation is as fresh today as it was on the day it was written.

"It is fitting that in Portsmouth the emphasis of the celebrations is on Dickens's youth, and I am delighted to learn of your plans to use the bicentenary as a focus to encourage literacy, creative writing and performance in schools across the city."

He laid a wreath of white roses and snowdrops on Dickens's grave before two of the writer's descendants, great-great-great-grandson Bob Dickens and great-great-great-great-granddaughter Rachel Dickens Green, made their own tribute on behalf of the family by laying two posies.

The congregation at the Abbey, where Dickens was buried in 1870, contained the largest-ever gathering of descendants of the Victorian novelist, with nearly 200 of them present.



Ralph Fiennes, who is to star as Magwitch in a new film adaptation of *Great Expectations*, read an extract from *Bleak House* during the moving ceremony at the Abbey, with other readings made by biographer Claire Tomalin and Mark Dickens, the writer's great-great-grandson, who is head of the Dickens family.

Other guests at the ceremony included writers David Nicholls and Armando Iannucci, film director Mike Newell and actress Gillian Anderson.

Claire Tomalin