

DICKENS HOUSE COMES UNDER THE HAMMER

Year by year the stately homes of England are being sold up. Latest to be threatened is Bleak House (perched high on the cliffs above Broadstairs Harbour) and for many years the home of Charles Dickens. This greatest of English novelists, who during his youth at Rochester had grown to love his adopted county of Kent, lived in this Kentish beauty-spot at the peak of his fame. It was here that he wrote David Copperfield - the romantic biography that showed up a new Dickens, a different one from that of Nathaniel Winkle and Sam Weller. For the past 30 years, Bleak House has been owned by Mr. Albert Batchelor. This retired industrialist has left things much as they were 100 years ago, from the caricatures of Fagin, Mr. Micawber and Mr. Pickwick in the novelist's study, to the dining-room, where Dickens entertained his many guests.

At the Albion Hotel in Broadstairs, Bleak House preserved for more than a century comes under the auctioneer's hammer. For weeks before the sale day, rumour had it that American interests would buy up the house and transplant it, stone by stone, to the United States. Mr. Batchelor and his niece watch the auction anxiously.

Happily, Bleak House is withdrawn from the sale. Unless the present owner can conclude a deal soon, he will give the house to his niece, who inted to make it a museum. Lovers of Dickens feel that this is a task for the National Trust who should make Bleak House a national memorial to a man, who by his writing, enriched the lives of countless thousands.