

What the Dickens!

London has not seen the like for more than 150 years. But last night the great and good were out in force to show that good old Dickensian values hadn't gone out of fashion. And no, we don't mean workhouse wages and waifs picking pockets. This glamorous affair over-looking the River Thames was about those famed philanthropic gatherings where rich Victorians met to eat, dance and raise money for a good cause.

And in their modern counterparts they don't come much more 21st century 'A' list than the Clintons, the Costas and the Camerons. Or Richard Branson, Stuart Rose, Philip Green and Fizzy Barclay, for that matter.

But the Somerset House gala on the Strand more than lived up to its legendary predecessor of 1858, where in one evening Charles Dickens raised the equivalent of £2.2 million for Great Ormond Street Hospital. That night, the celebrated author read extracts from his work as he set about saving the hospital from extinction and it formed the inspiration to this colourful new event on the capital's calendar.

The 300 select guests arrived by limousine and taxi, both old and new, and Ken Costa, president of the Great Ormond Street Hospital Dickens' Society, even made his own



special entrance in a spectacular 19th century horse-drawn carriage.

As the paparazzi snapped away, elegantly dressed ladies in full length ball gowns and gents in white tie and tails made their way into the Edmon J Safra Fountain Court where a mock Victorian market place, complete with flower girls, match sellers, stalls with chilled champagne and even a swift-moving pickpocket or two, welcomed them into the world of *Oliver Twist*.

After being formally announced into the regal ballroom, all attending could have been forgiven for forgetting it was 2009. Music and dance – polka, waltz and mazurka – were strictly pre-rock 'n' roll, as was the sumptuous feast prepared by Heston Blumenthal. In fact, the three Michelin-star chef cooked up a modern take on the original menu from that 1858 event with Mock Turtle, Salmon of Perth and small chicken Macedonia style among the Victorian flavours.

Meanwhile, leading thespians with a pedigree in Dickens adaptations stepped into the shoes of the 19th-century chronicler by reading extracts from his novels. Bob Hoskins, star of this year's film adaptation, imitated Dickens' original reading of *A Christmas Carol*, whilst Gwyneth Paltrow, Dame Judi Dench and Ian McKellan were among the other stars bringing the novelist's other works to life.

And when all of that was done, it was time to make some serious bids for some serious Dickens' themed prizes at the auction. *A Tale of Two Cities* – one luxury holiday in Paris and one in London – was first to go. *David Copperfield* – meet the world-famous magician and see his fantastic Las Vegas show – swiftly followed. And *Our Mutual Friend* – dinner with Oscar-winning actress Kate Winslet – was one of the most popular lots prompting something of a bidding war among the more competitive Alpha males.

Then, as the clock struck midnight the guests once again streamed into the 'market place' where they were given an explosive send off by a fabulous fireworks display and toasted a successful Lazard-sponsored fundraiser that brought in more than £500,000 for that most famous of children's hospitals.