

The Forgotten Nelly

not the one who heard the call
and packed her trunk in 1957,

this one lived a hundred years before
when rooms were filled with elephants.
Britannia ruled

an empire of factories, railways,
theatres, music halls, sanitation,
family values and public faces

and Charles Dickens, celebrated
author of the day
characterised filth and scandal.

Caged in Slough, Peckham or Paris,
an unwritten story, hidden by family.
And when he died

she became younger, innocent,
a Margate schoolmaster's wife,
the consummate actress

left her children unaware
that once she had been intimate
with the perfect Dickens myth.

*With thanks to *The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens* written by Claire Tomalin*