

Doctor warned Dickens of diphtheria risk to family

Mark Bridge History Correspondent

A newly discovered letter reveals how an Irish doctor may have saved the lives of Charles Dickens's wife and sons by persuading him to send them home from France during a diphtheria epidemic.

Dickens, then 44, his wife Catherine, sister-in-law Georgina and eight of his children were spending the summer of 1856 at the Channel resort of Boulogne, which he thought "as quaint, picturesque, good a place as I know".

The city was the centre of an outbreak of diphtheria that would kill about 366 people, but there was a debate in the British press as to whether accounts of the risk were "exaggerated".

The letter, uncovered by The Charles Dickens Letters Project and reported on The Conversation website indicates that Sir Joseph Olliffe, a Cork-born

physician to the British embassy in Paris, had warned Dickens of the particular risk of diphtheria to children.

On August 24, Dickens wrote to thank Sir Joseph "most heartily and earnestly" for his warning. He said: "I have taken the most efficient means of shewing you the value I set on your opinion and advice, by sending all the boys home to London this very day. I would have sent them yesterday, but that the Steamer was gone, before your letter came."

He added: "We have had a general knowledge of there being such a Malady abroad among children, and two of our children's little acquaintances have even died of it. But it is extraordinarily difficult (as you know) to discover the truth in such a place; and the townspeople are naturally particularly afraid of my knowing it, as having so many means of making it better known."