

Doctor warned Charles Dickens of family diphtheria risk

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Charles Dickens, with his wife, sister-in-law and two daughters, wrote parts of several books during the family's stay in France

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An Irish doctor's account of the deaths of a colleague's wife and two young sons helped to persuade Charles Dickens to send his own family home from Boulogne-sur-Mer during a diphtheria epidemic, a letter reveals.

The [letter from Dickens](#) reveals that Sir Joseph Olliffe's description of the "terrible" loss suffered by Dr Philip Crampton in the French city convinced the novelist to take the threat from the airborne disease seriously when debate raged about the danger to visitors. So alarmed was he that he put his sons on the next steamer home, a step that researchers say may have saved their lives.

The events unfolded in August 1856, when 44-year-old

[Dickens](#), his wife Catherine, sister-in-law Georgina and eight of his children were spending the summer at the seaside resort that was popular with Britons.



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Although the city, described by Dickens as “as quaint, picturesque, good a place as I know”, was the centre of an outbreak of diphtheria that would kill about 366 people, there was a debate in the British press about whether accounts of the risk to visitors were exaggerated.

The letter, uncovered by The Charles Dickens Letters Project and highlighted in an article on *The Conversation* website, indicates that Sir Joseph, the physician to the British embassy in Paris, had warned Dickens of the particular of the risk to children, who were more likely than adults to die from the bacterial infection. Sir Joseph had been introduced to Dickens in the 1840s by their mutual friend, the Irish painter Daniel Maclise.

In his letter of August 24, 1856, Dickens thanked 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.

“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.”

Leon Litvack, principal editor of the Dickens Letters Project, said that Dickens appeared to have been swayed by Sir Joseph telling him about the case of an Irish doctor staying in Boulogne. Dr Crampton had lost his 39-year-old wife Lavinia and their sons Philip and George, aged six and two, in the space of eight days, between August 12-19. Dickens wrote: “I had no idea of anything so terrible as poor Dr Crampton’s experience. We are greatly concerned for him, and deeply sympathize with him.”

The author said that he was confident of being “in the healthiest situation, and in the purest house” at the Château de Moulineaux, his rented home in Rue de Beaurepaire, but would “obey” if Sir Joseph told him to leave too.

In fact, Dickens, who had intended to stay until October, sent his daughters Katey and Mamie home two or three days after his wife and sons and followed with his sister-in-law on September 3.

On August 28, four days after his sons Edward, Sydney, Henry, Alfred, Frank and Walter, aged between four and 15 had left Boulogne, Walter à Beckett, the nine-year-old son of his friend the humorist Gilbert à Beckett, died of diphtheria there. Gilbert died of typhoid fever two days later.

Dr Litvack believes that Sir Joseph’s intervention may have saved Dickens’s children from serious illness or death. He said: “Because there were conflicting views concerning the pervasiveness and the infectiousness of diphtheria in the

Boulogne area in 1856, Dickens was in some doubt about what he should do. He obviously cleaned his own residence and took every precaution, but because he trusted the views of Olliffe whom he had known since the 1840s he took that advice very seriously and sent his family home for their own safety and indeed Olliffe it would seem to me probably saved Dickens's children from serious illness or perhaps even death owing to the advice that he conveyed to his friend."

He added that it was clear from the letter, which is owned by an American collector, that Dickens was well aware that he had an opportunity to publicise the diphtheria outbreak in the British press.

He said: "The fact that he didn't reflects badly on Dickens, in so far as he did not feel that it was his duty to warn people off coming to Boulogne, despite the obvious threat to life. He got his own family out, and for the moment, that was enough for him. His sense of responsibility, in this particular case, began and ended with himself and his family."

He suspects that Dickens did not want to jeopardise his relations with French friends in Boulogne, including his landlord, Ferdinand Beaucourt-Mutuel, who, in the following decade, would lease Dickens the love nest in nearby Condette where he installed his lover Ellen Ternan.

Dickens had written sections of *Bleak House*, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit* at Boulogne, sent four of his boys to school there and would return many times.

In his article in *The Conversation*, Dr Litvack draws parallels with the Covid pandemic, including in the arguments about the risks from diphtheria and in the efforts of Boulogne's hoteliers and landlords to counter adverse publicity and protect the local economy.

The letter does not only deal with diphtheria. In it, Dickens also teased Sir Joseph, saying that he hoped the physician had read his article in *Household Words* about “your friend the late Mr Palmer”, a reference to William Palmer, the Staffordshire doctor turned gambling addict and poisoner who had been hanged earlier that summer.

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