



Shame and misery of Dickens when father's debts kept turning up

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Charles Dickens wrote of paying one of his father's debts in a previously unseen letter

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Wilkins Micawber, the optimist of *David Copperfield*, believed that when in financial strife, something would turn up. For Charles Dickens's father, upon whom the character was based, that something was his son.

A previously unseen letter, written by Charles Dickens in March 1841 and preserved within a private collection for more than a hundred years, has recently shed more light on the issue of John Dickens's debt and the way his son dealt with it. Bought by a family for five guineas in 1900, the letter has now been transcribed by the Charles Dickens Letters Project.

Addressed to Thomas Latimer, a radical journalist in Exeter and close friend, the author not only repays a debt of £14 (nearly £1,500 today) that Latimer had loaned to his father, but also inquires as to other arrears.

The letter names other possible creditors: a Mr Franklin, a Mr Taunton and a Mr Drew, thought to be William Drewe, lord mayor of Exeter in 1840, from whom Dickens's father had borrowed £15 using his son's publishers Chapman & Hall as guarantors.

“What is so striking about this letter is that it shows how widely the debt was spread,” Leon Litvack, principal editor of the Letters Project, said.

The frustration, embarrassment and shame

that his father's financial troubles caused Charles Dickens is clear from the letter. He refuses to contact Mr Drewe or Mr Taunton to query his father's debts and caution them from lending any more, stating that it is "so extremely painful to have to correspond with people for the first time on such a miserable theme".

Instead, Dickens asks Latimer to do so on his behalf and goes on to apologise for doing so, saying that he is "ashamed" of this request, describing the subject of his father's debt as "the besetting misery of [his] existence" and asserting that his "heart sickens within [him] now" that he has to trace the "same weary ground" again.

"The language he uses is certainly heartfelt," said Dr Litvack. "Yet the letter actually shows that there was a strong father and son relationship. No matter the shame or frustration, Dickens was still prepared to underwrite his father's debts."

At the time of writing to Latimer, Dickens had already moved his father to a cottage in Alphington in Devon as a way to stop him running up large debts in London, making him sporadic payments throughout the previous year.

He had also tried to move his parents and brother Augustus abroad, writing to his solicitor to propose a yearly allowance of £20 should they move to Calais, Boulogne or Antwerp. His father did not accept that plan.

“He had an idealised vision of his father because had made Dickens learn shorthand, which had furthered his career. He would, therefore, often help financially. Now, however, he was worried things were getting out of control.”

Such emotional outbursts by Dickens were not common. He rarely dealt directly with his father's creditors and, despite having a great many friends, he rarely spoke to them on the topic of his father's debts.

However, other than his extremely close friend John Forster and his solicitor Thomas Mitton, Thomas Latimer was the one who Dickens confided in – it just so happened that he was also a creditor for his father.

Their friendship stemmed from their work as parliamentary reporters on the election of 1835. “There is an allusion to free masonry between them in the letter and Dickens is using this as a metaphor for intimacy and secrecy,” Dr Litvack said.

“He doesn’t want his father knowing about this correspondence or the cautions to other creditors, but he also does not want this business to become public knowledge. The level of trust he is putting in Latimer with this letter is remarkable.”

Public reputation for Dickens was extremely important. In the 1860s he burnt many letters from various contacts that could have caused a bad impression, including those relating to his affair with Nelly Ternan or to his father’s financial problems.

“Even his friend Forster destroyed any damning letters once he had written Dickens’ biography,” said Dr Litvack. “Very few remain in manuscript. It is interesting that this one to Latimer has survived and resurfaced.”

The letter is [available to view online](#).

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