

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

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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 shed

more light on John Dickens's debt and the way his son dealt with it. Bought by a family for five guineas in 1900, the letter has 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.

The frustration, embarrassment and shame that his father's financial troubles caused Charles Dickens is clear. He refuses to contact Mr Drewe or Mr Taunton to query his father's debts and caution them against lending more,

saying 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, adding that he is "ashamed" of this request. He describes the subject of his father's debt as "the besetting misery of [his] existence" and asserts that his "heart sickens within [him] now" that he has to trace the "same weary ground" again.

Leon Litvack, principal editor of the

Letters Project, said: "The language he uses is certainly heartfelt. 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. He had an idealised vision of his father because he had made Dickens learn shorthand, which had furthered his career... Now, however, he was worried things were getting out of control."

The full letter can be viewed online.