

# New chapter in saga of forged Dickens letter

A second note allegedly written by the novelist surfaces, but it is believed to be faked by same hand

By Dalya Alberge

PETER LAWSON did a double-take when he read a *Sunday Telegraph* report on the unmasking of a Charles Dickens letter as a forgery earlier this month.

The retired lawyer realised the letter looked suspiciously similar to one that he has treasured for some 25 years. He contacted the expert in that report, inset right, and was dismayed to hear

the verdict: his own letter was also a forgery by the same forger.

"I thought mine was genuine," Mr Lawson said. "It is painful. It isn't the money because it cost me, I think, £1,400 and I've had a lot of pleasure out of it. But, by the same token, if it was genuine and it was worth £10,000, well, it would be very nice, wouldn't it?"

*The Sunday Telegraph* reported on Jan 10 that Dr Leon Litvack, an expert analyst of Dickens's letters and handwriting, had dismissed a two-page letter offered by the Ideal World TV website for almost £10,000 as "definitely not Dickens's handwriting or prose style".

Ideal World had stated that the letter was "100 per cent genuine" but, after

being approached by this newspaper, withdrew it "to carry out further inquiries". Dr Litvack said it has so much in common with Mr Lawson's letter that they may have been forged by the same hand. He said: "Investigating the punctuation, spelling, dating, the closure, signature and poor flourish. It is undoubtedly a forgery, 1,000 per cent."

Mr Lawson, 79, from the Fylde, near Blackpool, is a retired solicitor, specialising in crime. As an avid reader of Dickens, he had bought the two-page letter offered by Gorrings's, an auction house in Lewes, East Sussex.

Philip Taylor, senior partner at Gorrings's, said: "We get rid of our records every seven years. At the time, we cer-



tainly would have taken our own independent advice to verify the authenticity of the letter. If it's found now to be a fake ... we would obviously do the decent thing and refund [Mr Lawson's] money."

Dr Litvack, reader in Victorian Stud-

ies at Queen's University Belfast, said that it does not look like the genuine letters he knows as principal editor of The Charles Dickens Letters Project, which publishes correspondence that has emerged since the 2002 final volume of the Pilgrim Edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*.

Like the Ideal World letter, this one suggests it was addressed to William Henry Wills, Dickens's close friend, and features a letterhead of a view of Brighton. Apparently sent from a hotel, in this case the Bedford, they both refer to Gad's Hill Place, Dickens's country home near Rochester, Kent.

With barely any punctuation, it reads: "I had a most amusing conversation

with our friend that Capt Collins... he persuaded me to take a trip in his famous Skylark and it was a lark."

Dr Litvack said: "Dickens never knew a Captain Collins and never mentions either him or the vessel Skylark in his letters. He could not have been staying in Brighton on June 8 1869. In a letter of June 1 ... he says that his American friends are coming to Gad's Hill on June 2 and staying for a week."

The letter also contains the incorrect spelling "definitely". Dr Litvack said Dickens never spelt the word incorrectly or idiosyncratically in such a way.

Mr Lawson might ask for a refund, but in the meantime he will keep it: "It's a talking point, even if it's wrong."

## Off note How the fake was flagged up

### 1. Dates

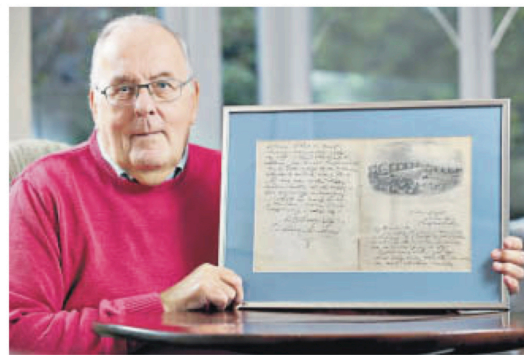
When Dickens dated letters he always wrote "Eighth", whereas in the forgery "Eight" appears. In Dickens's case the capital "e" is formed by a right-facing curve, with a horizontal cross through it; in the forgery the "E" is formed by two curves, both opening to the right, with no separate crossing stroke.

### 2. Punctuation

Dickens was quite meticulous about punctuation. The forgery has almost no punctuation marks whatsoever.

### 3. Form of address

When Dickens began his letters with "My Dear...", the "m" in "my" was not pronounced, but written as a lower-case "m" above the line -



usually in the form of a single, short curve to the right, which

extended into a downward stroke to form the "y". In the

Peter Lawson with the forged Dickens letter he bought 25 years ago for £1,400

forgery the "M" is written with too much care, as a distinct upper-case "M", with two humps to constitute the "m", rather than Dickens's characteristic single, indistinct hump.

4. Signing off Dickens rarely used "Yours Faithfully" in correspondence, and when he did it was never written with two upper-case letters (Y and F).