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Charles Dickens railed against 'atrocities' of slave trade in previously unpublished letter

The letter provides vital evidence to show that the writer was a vigorous opponent of slavery

By Dalya Alberge

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Charles Dickens condemned the slave trade as “inhuman” and an “atrocities” in a previously unpublished letter that has been discovered.

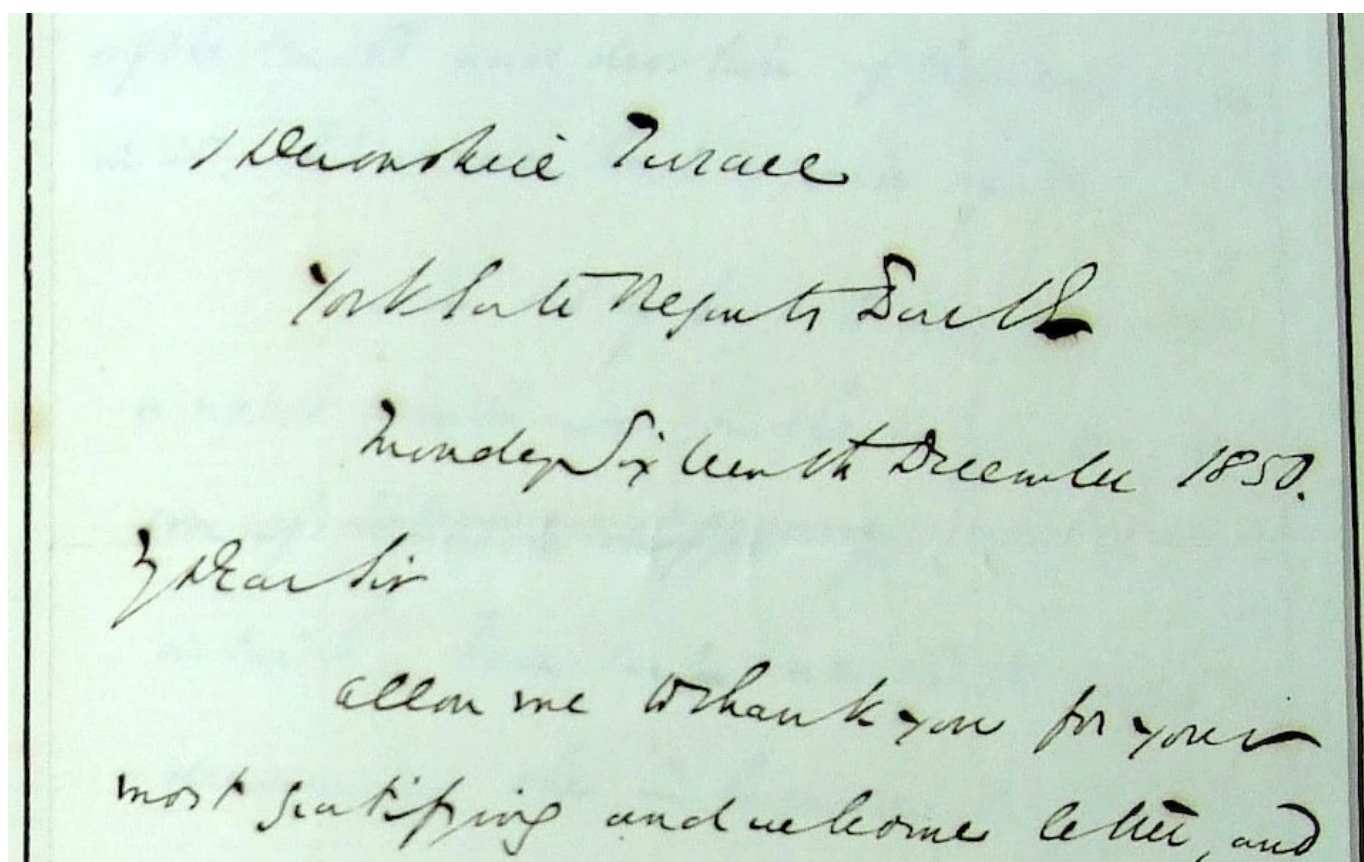
In 1850, he wrote to Captain Joseph Denman, who had served in the Royal Navy’s anti-slavery squadron that patrolled the coast of West Africa, part of the “African Blockade”, whose [effectiveness in stopping](#)

[the transportation of slaves](#) sparked debate at the time.

Addressing him as “My dear Sir,” Dickens told him in no uncertain terms: “You cannot too strongly represent to yourself the horror with which I contemplate that atrocity the Slave Trade, – although I have (I must confess to you) had my doubts of the efficiency of the African Blockade. Of the truth and devotion of those engaged in it, I have never had a grain of distrust.”

He continued: “I am sure we shall agree in denouncing the inhuman traffic with our utmost might.”

The letter’s authenticity has been confirmed by a leading expert, Dr Leon Litvack, principal editor of The Charles Dickens Letters Project, an online resource for his correspondence.



The start of the previously unpublished letter from Charles Dickens

He told The Telegraph that it adds to [what we know about Dickens’ attitude to slavery](#): “There’s great passion in this letter. The language that he uses is striking in its forcefulness.”

He will deliver a paper on it on July 8 at a Dickens conference at City University in London.

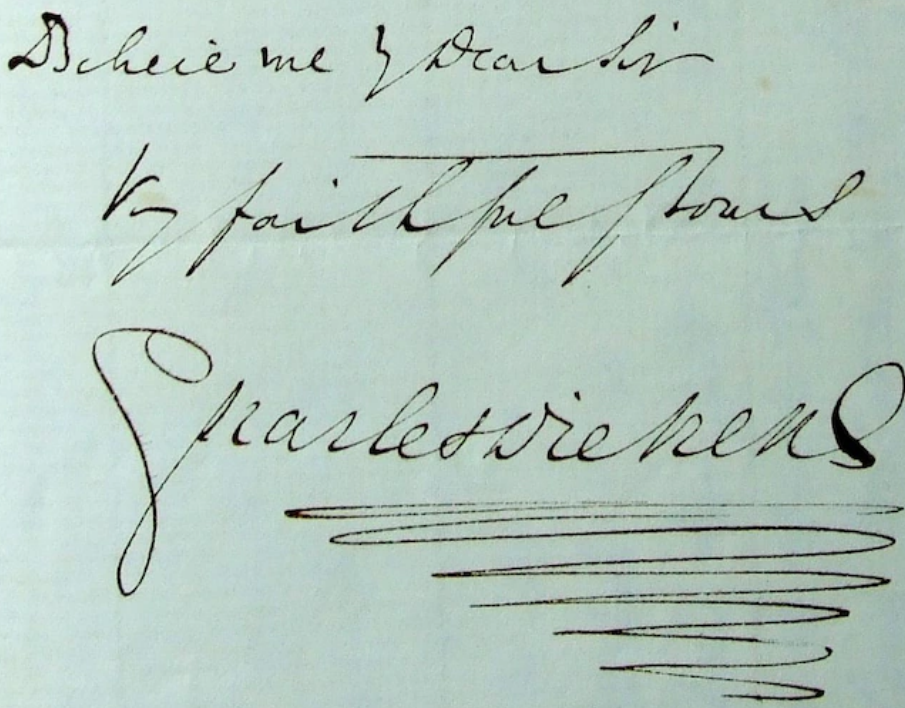
The letter was spotted among Denman family papers by Dr Pieter van der Merwe, Greenwich Curator Emeritus of the National Maritime Museum, while conducting unrelated research. It was in a volume of miscellaneous examples from notable people of the time.

As a specialist in Clarkson Stanfield, the marine-artist friend of Dickens, Dr van der Merwe realised its significance: "I suspected it wasn't known. It's just serendipity, the art of finding things you're not looking for."

He contacted Dr Litvack to whom the Denman family has given permission to publish it on Dickensletters.com.

It is a somewhat topical reminder of just [how hard Britain fought to halt the slave trade](#).

At its peak, the African Blockade involved up to 36 vessels and more than 4,000 men, and was estimated to cost half of all naval spending. They tried to prevent slaving ships from taking boatloads of slaves - shackled together with heavy irons - to Brazil and Cuba primarily, with the Spanish and the Portuguese among the main perpetrators. Such was the traders' ruthlessness that, in 1831 the *Rapids* slaver, chased by H.M.S. *Fair Rosamund* and *Black Joke*, threw overboard 250 slaves shackled together, who drowned.



Believe me & Dear Sir
Yr faithful servant
Charles Dickens

The Hon: Captain Denman.

The end of the letter that Charles Dickens wrote to Captain Joseph Denman

Dr Litvack said that the deterrent force patrolled 2,000 miles of coastline between Cape Verde and Luanda, and facilitated the release of nearly 200,000 slaves, but they were hampered by international laws: "For example, the squadrons could not intercept Portuguese slaving ships if they were sailing south of the equator."

Denman had joined the Navy in 1823 and, as a lieutenant and commander, served in anti-slavery work. In 1840, while commanding HMS Wanderer, he blockaded the mouth of the Gallinas river - the modern-day border between Liberia and Sierra Leone, [a notorious spot for the loading of slaves](#).

Dr van der Merwe said: "His effectiveness resulted in legal action against him by Spanish slaving interests, in which the British government successfully supported him."

In his paper, Dr Litvack argues that the time and trouble that Dickens took in approaching Denman reveals his respect for those sailors "who were committed... to the final suppression of slavery".

Denman may have kept the letter because it reflected his own views. He was a key witness to parliamentary committees and described his experience in various pamphlets: "Every slave ship carries a mass of human beings, obtained by robbery and murder."

Dickens also wrote to Denman's father, Lord Denman, the Lord Chief Justice and a prominent abolitionist, who had asked why the author had not expressed a more forceful opinion on the slave trade and [criticised his portrayal in Bleak House of Mrs Jellyby](#), a philanthropist who devotes herself to setting up a mission in Africa while ignoring the poor at home - even though Dickens had intended her as a satirical figure who does not notice that her own family desperately needs her and charity begins at home.



The 'Capture of a Large Slave Ship by H.M.S. Pluto' from 1860

In his reply, Dickens wrote: “Because I am not satisfied that the African Blockade advances the great end it is designed to promote.”

Dr Litvack said: “There was some disagreement about the statistics that were being used in the parliamentary reports and Joseph Denman provided counter evidence. After having read these publications, Dickens changes his opinion about the West African squadron.

“It’s on that basis that I’m claiming that, while Dickens had been critical of the squadron, after he’d read Denman’s reports, he was much more sympathetic. This new letter does show he changed his attitudes about the means that were being used to try to halt the slave trade.”

Although Dickens’s masterpieces such as Oliver Twist reflect that he was a [tireless campaigner against all forms of social injustice](#), he has been among targets of the current anti-racism movement. He did, for example, criticise the “melancholy absurdity” of giving African Americans the right to vote.

But Dr Litvack said: “I don’t think he could be considered a racist because there were these prevailing attitudes of the time.”

The new letter provides vital evidence to show that he was a vigorous opponent of slavery.

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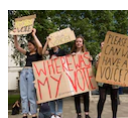
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