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The Telegraph

News

Sunday Telegraph reader discovers his treasured Charles Dickens letter is a forgery after article reveals tell-tale signs

The forged letter cost our reader £1,400-but he discovered it was a fake thanks to the Sunday Telegraph

By Dalya Alberge

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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 over some 25 years. He contacted the expert in that report and was dismayed to hear the verdict: his own letter is 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 January 10 that Dr Leon Litvack, an expert analyst of Dickens's letters, manuscripts 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% genuine" but, after being approached by this newspaper, withdrew it "to carry out further enquiries".

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 told the Telegraph: "Investigating the punctuation, spelling, dating, the closure, signature and poor flourish..., it is undoubtedly a forgery, 1,000%. The hand that composed [it] is the same one that authored the Ideal World TV forgery."

Mr Lawson, 79, from The Fylde, near Blackpool, is a retired solicitor, specialising in crime. As an avid reader of Dickens, he had been tempted to buy a two-page letter offered by Gorrings, an auction-house in Lewes, Sussex.

He said: "When I started bidding, it was only on a whim that it would be quite nice to have a Dickens letter. When the estimate was £400, I thought... I might get it for £250. In the heat of the moment, I eventually paid £1,400, I think, which wasn't going to break the bank."

After the sale, though, the auctioneer informed him that they had received a "mysterious" letter saying it was a forgery, prompting Mr Lawson to research the letter and its previous owner, the daughter of a former editor of a Brighton newspaper who had found it in his desk.

Mr Lawson recalled: "I did phone her. She was a nice elderly lady and I couldn't imagine her being part and parcel of a fraudulent forging ring."

He added: "She said her father was the editor of the paper. I checked that he was... He was a Justice of the Peace and... all sorts of things that were very respectable and I had no doubt that it was genuine."

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

He framed the letter, hanging it in his study. After retiring, he gave talks on cruise-ships, including on this letter, presenting the case for whether it was genuine.

Dr Litvack, Reader in Victorian Studies 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. [Dickensletters.com] He has also curated Dickens exhibitions at major institutions.

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

The earlier example, less easy to decipher, is dated 8 June 1868 or 1869, long after Dickens had written *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*, among other masterpieces.

This one is dated 8 June 1869. It suggests that Dickens took a cruise on a vessel called the "Skylark", under the command of a Captain Collins.

With barely any punctuation, it reads: "I am not returning to Gads Hill for another week, as the weather conditions here are so encouraging... 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 did occasionally stay at the Bedford in Brighton from 1845 onward, but clearly not on 8 June 1869, the date on which the letter was written. His last documented visit to the hotel was on 8 November 1861... 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 8 June 1869. In a letter of 1 June...he says that his American friends... are coming to Gad's Hill on 2 June and staying for a week."

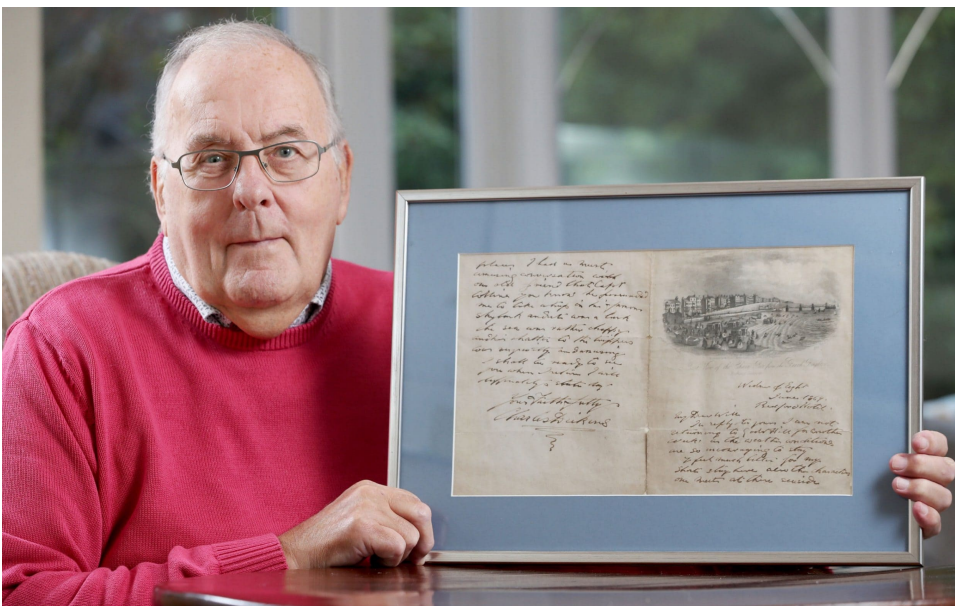
He added: "When Dickens dated letters on the 8th of the month he always wrote 'Eighth' rather than 'eight', as here.

He also questioned the absence of punctuation: "Dickens was very particular – even idiosyncratic – about punctuation. In the body of this letter there are no full stops, commas, or semicolons – all of which would be expected in a genuine Dickens letter...

"In the last line, the incorrectly spelled word 'definitely' occurs; Dickens never spelled the word incorrectly or idiosyncratically as 'definitely'."

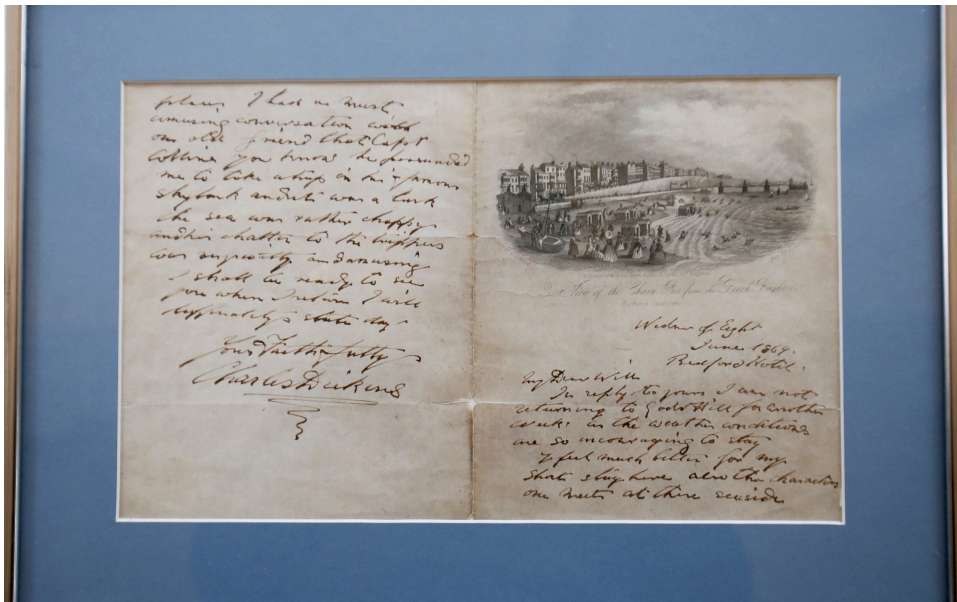
Mr Lawson might well ask for a refund from the auctioneer, although he is still not completely convinced that his letter is a forgery. In the meantime, he will continue to hang it: "It's still a talking-point, even if it's wrong."

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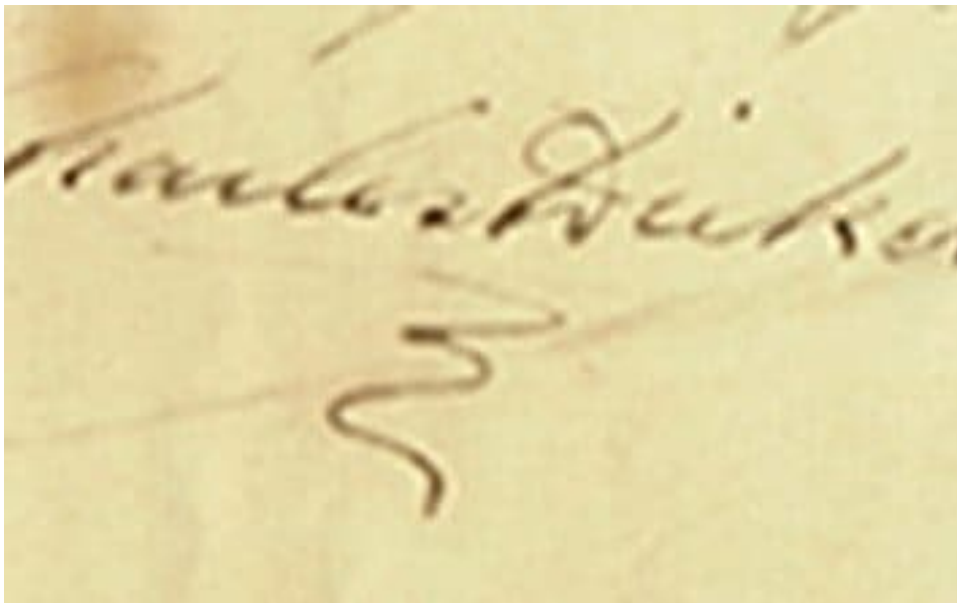


Peter Lawson of Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire, with the Dickens letter he bought, and is now understood to be a forgery.

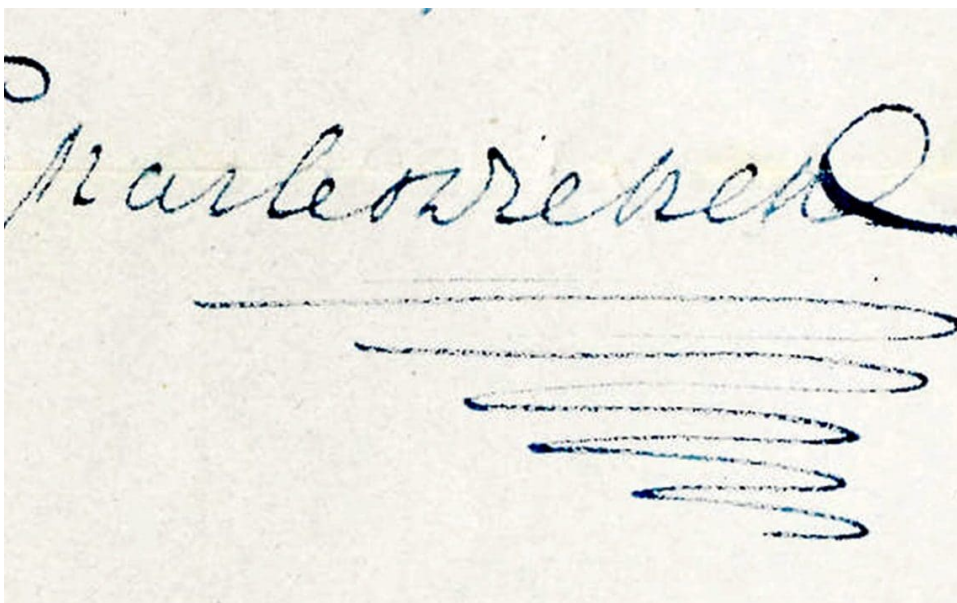
Lorne Campbell



The letter, now understood to be a forgery
Lorne Campbell / Guzelian



The signature on the letter at the centre of the forgery scandal



Signature on verified Charles Dickens letter

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