

Letter to Richard Bentley: a ‘fill in the gaps’ challenge

The challenge for May 2023 is to complete a partially transcribed letter in Dickens’s shorthand. The letter is part of some important correspondence with Dickens’s publisher in 1838, so any new additions to the transcription by our decoders could be potentially significant.

The letter is from the archives of the [Victoria & Albert Museum](https://www.vam.ac.uk), London, and is one of two shorthand letters in their collection.

Use our [‘Resources’](#) to help you decipher the text and look out for repeat symbols, as well as bearing in mind the context. Anyone who successfully describes a new symbol will be credited as its discoverer on our [Roll of Honour](#).

Please complete the entry form and email us (claire.wood@leicester.ac.uk and bowleshugo@gmail.com) your solutions by **31 May 2023**.

Context

Who’s who in the letter?

The letter is dated 22 October 1838 and was written, signed and sent by John Forster, Dickens’s friend and literary agent, to Richard Bentley, publisher of a *Miscellany* that Dickens was editing. **The ‘I’ and the ‘me’ in the letter refer to Forster and the ‘D’ refers to Dickens.** The fact that the letter is written in Dickens’s shorthand implies that Forster and Dickens composed the letter together. It may also be a copy, kept for Dickens’s own records.

Background to the letter

In 1838, Dickens was writing *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* at the same time! Both were being published in a literary magazine – *Bentley’s Miscellany* – in monthly instalments. *Oliver Twist* was also due to be released as a 3-volume set in November 1838 and Dickens had promised to have the entire manuscript delivered



Figure 1: Detail from a March 1837 flyer for *Bentley’s Miscellany*, drawn by ‘Phiz’, which pictures the young Dickens boldly leading the magazine forward. Courtesy of George P. Landow, via the [Victorian Web](https://www.victorianweb.org).

to Bentley by 25 October. The 22 October date of the letter is *very* close to this deadline.¹

Dickens had also been contracted by Bentley to write a new book, *Barnaby Rudge*, to be published in monthly parts after *Oliver Twist* (publication would eventually be postponed for two years). In line 3 of the letter, the word 'advertisement' (our old friend from the 'Tavistock' letter) and the capital 'B' probably refer to an advertisement for *Barnaby Rudge*, which was set to appear in the *Miscellany* in November and/or inside the 3-volume set of *Oliver Twist* when it was printed. It is possible that Dickens resented the time pressure that this advertisement would put him under.

All this suggests that the letter relates to the process of last-minute delivery, proofreading and printing of *Oliver Twist* and the advertisement for *Barnaby Rudge*. Remember that it has been written by Dickens's agent, John Forster, not by Dickens himself.

Who transcribed the letter?

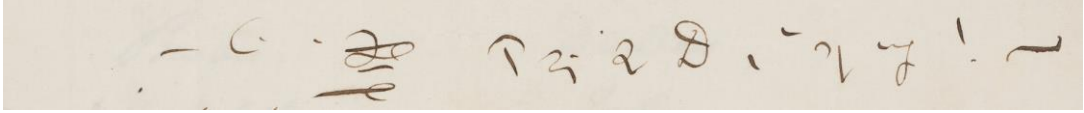
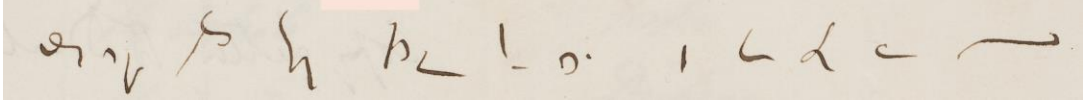
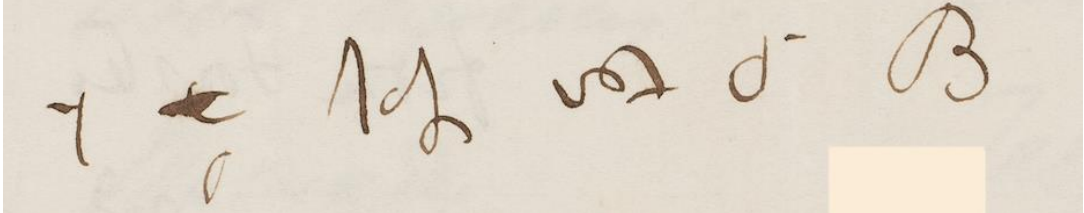
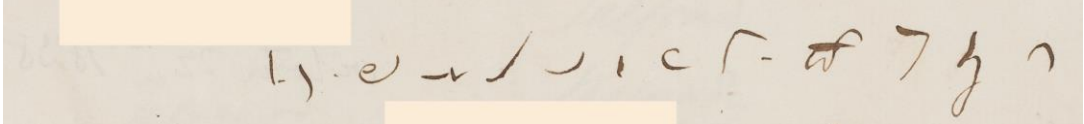
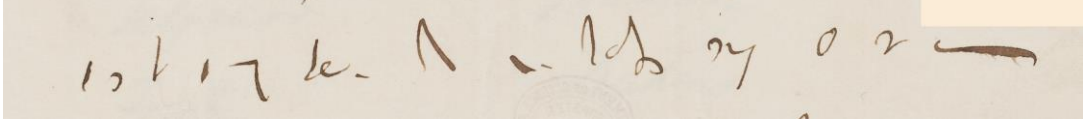
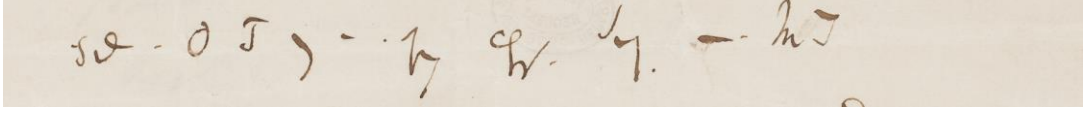
Transcription of the letter was carried out by the Dickens scholar and stenographer William Carlton in the early twentieth century with the help of two other experts in the Gurney system, whose papers are held in the archives of the [Charles Dickens Museum](#), London. The fact that the letter is only partially transcribed tells us that the shorthand is extremely difficult.

The transcriptions that you can see under the shorthand are the ones that the trio agreed on, but there could always be alternative readings that they had not thought of so please check everything and feel free to provide your own suggestions. Dickens does not seem to be marking the breaks for the ends of sentences in his shorthand so these will have to be guessed.

¹ For more on the oft-fraught relationship between Dickens and Bentley, see chapter 4 of Robert L. Patten's *Dickens and his Publishers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). You can access this work with a free account at [Archive.org](#). Philip V. Allingham also provides further context in this short web article on 'The November 1838 Three-Volume Edition of *Oliver Twist*' for the Victorian Web <<https://victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/olivertwist/3vol.html>>.

Solution

Please decode as much of the text as you can, below, writing your solution for each character or group of characters under the appropriate line of shorthand script.

Line no.	
1	
	that all matters relating to your
2	
	agreement to me. I have just seen your
3	
	advertisement Barnaby (Rudge)
4	
	To this subject
5	
	I am sure I need scarcely add that the advertisement
6	
	of Oliver Twist. This is the customary in the Miscellany .

7	
	<p>Would you be to trust to my friend(ship?) for D(ickens)</p>
8	
	<p>to the 20th of this month the whole matter</p>
9	
	<p>to (the) printer ?</p>
10	
	<p>Believe me</p>
	

Name:

Email:

Country of Residence (optional):

Do you consent to being credited for your efforts and as the discoverer of any new symbols on the Dickens Code Roll of Honour? (please tick)

Yes No

If 'yes', please state the name that you would like to be credited under (this could be your full name, your first name, a pseudonym, or a social media handle)

I wish to be credited as: _____

By signing this form and emailing in your competition entry, you agree to license your solution and report under a [Creative Commons CC BY-NC](#) license and grant permission for the 'Dickens Code' project website and related social media channels to reproduce your work, with appropriate credit. If you do not provide a signature, unfortunately we will be unable to process your competition entry.

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____



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