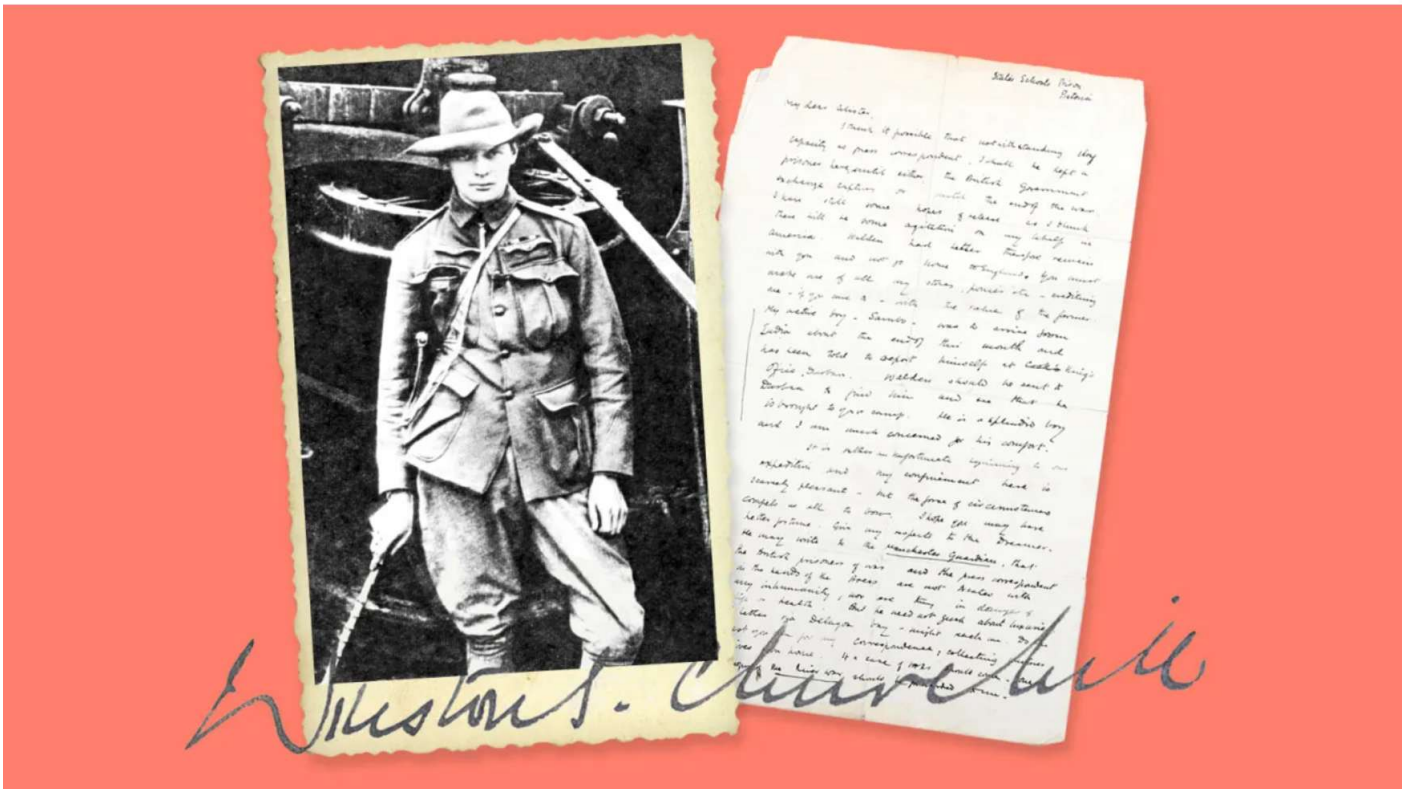


For sale: Churchill's 'remarkable' letter before daring prison break

• NEW

The 25-year-old future prime minister was captured during the Boer War. Read what he thought of it below as his papers return to market at £75,000



The correspondence was written by a young Churchill to reassure a fellow war correspondent of his safety



Jack Blackburn, History Correspondent

Wednesday June 17 2026, 4.56pm, The Times

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A young man, taken prisoner in a war, writes a letter of reassurance to inform his fellows that he is being treated well. On the face of it, there is nothing too remarkable about this, but the man in question was about to achieve international fame with a daring prison break. For many that would be the first time they heard the name of Winston Churchill.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that such a letter was once described as “the most remarkable letter by Churchill ever to be offered for sale”. After 40 years, the item is returning to market via the rare books specialists Peter Harrington, who will sell it at the Treasure House Fair in London this month with a price tag of £75,000.

State School Prison
Paterson

My dear Sister,

I think it possible that notwithstanding my capacity as press correspondent, I shall be kept a prisoner here, until either the British Government exchange captives or until the end of the war. I have still some hopes of release as I think there will be some agitation on my behalf in America. Walden had better therefore remain with you and not go home to England. You must make use of all my stores, pencils etc - crediting me - if you care to - with the value of the former. My native boy - Sambo - was to arrive from India about the end of this month and has been told to report himself at Cook's King's Office, Dublin. Walden should be sent to Dublin to find him and see that he is brought to your camp. He is a splendid boy and I am much concerned for his comfort.

It is rather an unfortunate beginning to an expedition and my confinement here is scarcely pleasant - but the force of circumstances compels us all to go. I hope you may have better fortune. Give my respects to the Dreamer. He may write to the Manchester Guardian, that the British prisoners of war and the press correspondent in the hands of the Boers are not treated with any inhumanity, nor are they in danger to life or health. But he need not grieve about luxuries. A letter via Delagoa Bay - might reach me. Do the best you can for my correspondence; collecting whatever arrives from home. If a case of 100s should come, one copy of the River War should be forwarded to me.

See the bottom of the article for a full transcription

PETER HARRINGTON

Do all you can to advocate exchange of
prisoners - and mention correspondents as well
as military officers.

Woodford is here. He came to see
me yesterday. He is not a bad fellow and of
course to show his loyalty to the Boer cause,
you should write to Jones to show him some
consideration if he fell into the British hands.
The British should not retaliate for any imprisonment
by catching more correspondents or soldiers from the
other side. We must hold our heads
high. Also agitate for every indulgence that
may be shown to the Boer prisoners. There is
a prejudice here against their being kept
on work ships - and as we tell the French - this
seems to me to be somewhat unnecessary. We
till the time when I arrived here, I have
no complaints to make of the behavior
of the Boers in the field. It remains however
to be seen what view the world's press
will take of the capture of correspondents and his
imprisonment as a hostage.

Yours sincerely
Winston Churchill

PETER HARRINGTON

"For many years, the Boer War is absolutely central to Churchill's legend," John Ryan, politics specialist at Peter Harrington, said. "It's right before he becomes famous and it's the moment that makes him famous."

- [Churchill, Hitler and Franco yearned to be artists – but who was the best painter?](#)

The letter was written by Churchill to a rival journalist in the late autumn of 1899. He was in [South Africa](#) as the war correspondent for the Morning Post and was gaining a degree of fame as a writer. In November he was on patrol with the British Army on a train when they were ambushed. Churchill was taken prisoner and held in Pretoria.

It was from there that he wrote the letter to his fellow correspondent Captain Alister Campbell, but it gave no hint as to the tremendous act of derring-do Churchill was about to commit. On the night of December 12, when the guards were looking the other way, he jumped the prison fence. Through swamps and mines, and via stowing himself away on freight trains, Churchill made it back to the safety of Portuguese East Africa, which is now Mozambique, from which he was taken to Durban and greeted as a hero.



Churchill, right

ALAMY

In the letter Churchill, then aged 25, shows flashes of a recognisable Churchillian style. “He writes well — he’s a well-educated man and there’s no immaturity about it,” Ryan said. “He wants to shape a narrative, but he’s not writing for publication so he’s not considering every word for its literary impact.”

Churchill opened the letter by saying that he expected to be kept a prisoner until either a prisoner exchange or the end of the war.

- [Historical figures ‘too divisive’ for banknotes](#)

“It is rather an unfortunate beginning to our expedition and my confinement here is scarcely pleasant — but the force of circumstances compels us all to bow,” he wrote. “British prisoners of war and the press correspondent in the hands of the Boers are not treated with any inhumanity, nor are they in danger of life or health. But he need not gush about luxuries.”

Later in his life, after the great tides of history had run through his life, Churchill recalled his experiences at this time almost with nostalgia. He thought that his treatment at the hands of the Boers represented a lost era where war was conducted with more decency.

“He reflected on the First and Second World Wars and compared them with his youth and said that, when he was young, people acted much better and war was fought with a set of rules — that if you were imprisoned you were treated fairly well,” Ryan said. “He almost looks back fondly on the days where you have war like this, when war was not all-consuming.”

The correspondence was last on the market in 1986, when Steve Forbes of Forbes magazine bought it at Sotheby’s for \$18,330, a record for a Churchill letter.

Read the letter in full

States Schools Prison

Pretoria

My Dear Alister,

I think it possible that notwithstanding my capacity as press correspondent, I shall be kept a prisoner here, until either the British Government exchange captives or until the end of the war. I have still some hopes of release as I think there will be some agitation on my behalf in America. [Thomas] Walden had better therefore remain with you and not go home to England. You must make use of all my stores, ponies etc — crediting me — if you care to — with the value of the former. My native boy — Sambo — was to arrive from India about the end of this month and has been told to report himself at Cook’s Agency Office, Durban. Walden should be sent to Durban to find him and see that he is brought to your camp. He is a splendid boy and I am much concerned for his comfort.

*It is rather an unfortunate beginning to our expedition and my confinement here is scarcely pleasant — but the force of circumstances compels us all to bow. I hope you may have better fortune. Give my respects to the Dreamer. He may write to the Manchester Guardian, that the British prisoners of war and the press correspondent in the hands of the Boers are not treated with any inhumanity, nor are they in danger of life or health. But he need not gush about luxuries. A letter via Delagoa Bay — might reach me. Do the best you can for my correspondence, collecting whatever arrives from home. If a case of books should come, one copy of *The River War* should be forwarded to me.*

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Do all you can to advocate exchange of prisoners — and mention correspondents as well as military officers.

Woodford is here. He came to see me yesterday. He is not a bad fellow and is anxious to show his loyalty to the Boer Cause; you should write to Jones to show him some consideration if he fall into the British hands. The British should not retaliate for my confinement by catching non-combatant sympathisers from the one or the other side. We must hold our heads high. Also agitate for every indulgence that may be shown to the Boer prisoners. There is a prejudice here against their being kept on hulk ships — and as we feel the pinch — this seems to me to be somewhat unnecessary. Up till the time when I arrived here, I have no complaints to make of the behaviour of the Boers in the field. It remains however to be seen what view the world's press will take of the capture of correspondents and his confinement as a hostage.

*Yours sincerely,
Winston S. Churchill*