

# The Spinning House girls: Cambridge University's distinctive policing of prostitution, 1823–1894

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the regulation of prostitution in nineteenth-century Cambridge by an appraisal of the committal books of the university prison. Each evening in term-time the university proctors arrested and imprisoned local 'streetwalkers' in an attempt to protect the students' morals. This research offers insight into the ways in which Cambridge's geography and its dual system of governance influenced the policing of prostitution in the town centre. The former compelled students and townspeople to share the same crowded space and the latter enabled the university to enforce traditional patterns of class and gender to control sexuality in the town.

## Introduction

'Oxford is a University in a town; but Cambridge a town in a University. Very little business of any kind is carried on in Cambridge, but what is immediately or remotely connected with the University.'<sup>1</sup> Cambridge was a flourishing county and market town for 500 years before it became famous as a seat of learning. The first students arrived in 1209 and almost from the beginning there was friction between them and the townspeople. Mayors and chancellors were soon competing for power in the town's administration. Both the town's close association with the crown and its physical geography influenced the way in which it was governed.

In 1068, on William the Conqueror's instructions, a castle was built on the hill across the river and from then onwards royalty was closely involved with the town. Cambridge flourished for both kings and merchants in one of the most densely populated and economically prosperous parts of the country and in 1207, King John granted the town a royal charter and the right to elect a mayor. A century later, Edward II invested power

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., *New Cambridge Guide*, 5th edn (Cambridge, 1821).

in Cambridge academics in royal charters that gave them legal authority over their town neighbours. The mayor and bailiffs were obliged to take an oath agreeing to observe the liberties and customs of the university.<sup>2</sup> Soon after 1440, Henry VI closed roads with access to the river and removed townspeople's homes and shops for the building of his college, King's College.<sup>3</sup> In 1561, Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter which augmented the university's powers and confirmed its authority to arrest and punish women of the town who were 'suspected of evil'.<sup>4</sup> In 1603, James I granted the university the right to have its own prison by letters patent.

The physical constraints of Cambridge, built on a vital river crossing, meant that for many centuries its townspeople and students were confined to a small oval-shaped area between the broad curve of the river and the King's Ditch, an artificial watercourse (see Map 1). This land was easy to protect but left little space for urban expansion. The high walls of the colleges presided over the town's narrow streets and the cramped shops and houses in which the tradesmen and their families lived and worked. One of the particular consequences of this crowded environment with its dual system of governance was the way in which the streets were policed and the unique system of regulation of prostitution in the town.

### 'Town and gown'

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Cambridge was a town with a population of about 10,000, of which nearly a tenth were resident members of the university. All were living in the same small area as had the few hundred inhabitants 800 years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Cambridge was divided by tradition and prejudice into two distinct communities, 'town' and 'gown', each closely dependent on the other. The 'town' consisted of a mixed community – men, women and children, young and old, married and single. Most of them were working class and many were employed in servicing the university. In contrast, the university was made up entirely of men, an elite group, united by gender, by class and to some extent by age. The majority were young, unmarried members of the upper and middle classes, isolated from female company and whose physical and moral welfare the university authorities saw as their responsibility. Class and gender defined relationships and for centuries the university authorities dominated the lives of the townspeople. There can have been few towns in England where two communities were physically so close yet socially so far apart.

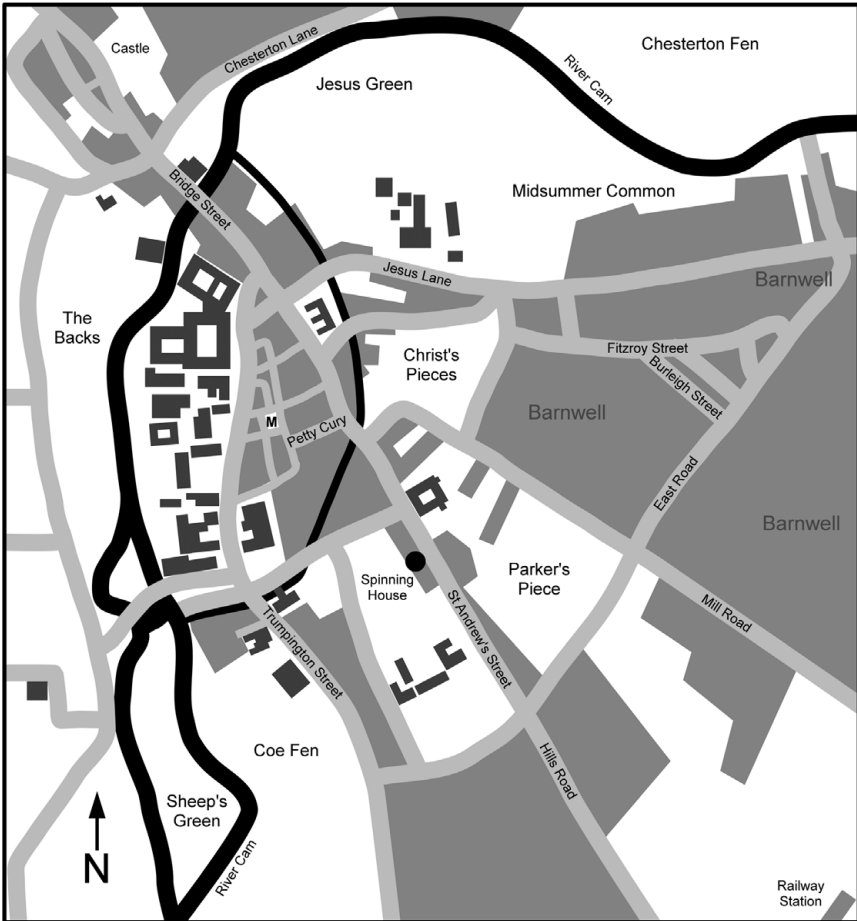
This article portrays Victorian attitudes to class, gender and sex – issues that were of national significance in the nineteenth century. Segregation

<sup>2</sup> D.A. Winstanley, *Early Victorian Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1940), 122.

<sup>3</sup> T.D. Atkinson, *Cambridge Described & Illustrated* (London, 1897), 356.

<sup>4</sup> University/Collect.Admin.9, 154–69 (Cambridge University Archives).

<sup>5</sup> P. Bryan, *The Shaping of the City* (Cambridge, 1999), 102.



Map 1: Cambridge in the 1860s

of the sexes, separation of the upper and middle classes from the working class, prejudice cultivated by isolation, religious beliefs and college traditions all worked together to maintain a culture in Cambridge that was distinct. The article will show how the Spinning House epitomized the tense relationship between the university authorities and the townspeople and explain how the young 'streetwalkers' of Cambridge, suspected prostitutes, were arrested by university proctors, denied a fair trial and

sentenced by the vice-chancellor to imprisonment in the Spinning House, the university prison.

By the time Queen Victoria came to the throne, not only did the university dominate the town's physical shape, it also restricted the political and economic ambitions of the townspeople. R.J. Morris has drawn attention to Thomas Chalmers' and Robert Vaughan's writings on urban relationships in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Chalmers described how, when the people 'are retained in kindly and immediate dependence on the wealthy residents of the place ... , [it] brings the two extreme orders of society into that sort of relationship which is highly favourable to the general blandness and tranquillity of the whole population. In a manufacturing town ... the poor and wealthy stand more disjointed from each other.'<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Vaughan believed that the 'urban way of life' created the conditions for 'freedom, choice, wealth and progress'.<sup>8</sup> Cambridge fitted none of these descriptions. The working population was dependent on the wealthy university, but the tranquillity was only surface-deep and, unlike Vaughan's 'urban way of life', Cambridge provided few opportunities for 'freedom and choice'.

The power wielded by vice-chancellors was deeply resented and perceived as grossly unfair. The tax burden imposed on the town was far heavier than that of the university; for example, an act passed in the reign of William and Mary exempted the sites of the colleges from land tax. Since the reign of George II, no theatre could be licensed within a radius of 14 miles of Cambridge without the consent of the vice-chancellor. The university had sole supervision of all weights and measures and regulated the weekly markets and large annual fairs. Vice-chancellors also exercised their right to license alehouses and the sale of wine.<sup>9</sup>

Surrounded by wide swathes of countryside, small villages and quiet towns, Cambridge was, unlike Oxford, comparatively isolated. 'Town' and 'gown' lived together bounded by the river and the encircling common land. Great St Mary's, the University Church, hub of the town since the early medieval period and solid symbol of its earlier prosperity, stood adjacent to the Market Square. This was the bustling heart of Cambridge, crowded with people and animals and cluttered with market stalls. In 1800, coaching inns were an important feature in Cambridge. At one time, there were at least 40 inns or alehouses in the centre, most of them in the market area, all catering for the needs of coach drivers, their passengers and their horses.

In the middle of the eighteenth century the 16 colleges were grouped together in less than half a square mile and the walk from one side to

<sup>6</sup> R.J. Morris, 'Structure, culture and society in British towns', in Martin Daunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. III (Cambridge, 2000), 395–6.

<sup>7</sup> T. Chalmers, *The Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns*, vol. I (Edinburgh, 1821), 27–9.

<sup>8</sup> R. Vaughan, *The Age of Great Cities* (London, 1843), 2.

<sup>9</sup> University/Collect.Admin.9, 154–69.

the other took 15 minutes.<sup>10</sup> In the daytime, the streets which crisscrossed the Market Square were a safe thoroughfare for 'town' and 'gown' alike. The two communities shared this common space. Academic young men made their way to lectures, and dressmakers, laundresses and girls in service went about their business unheeded. At night, this square, with its poorly lit, polluted passageways, became a contested space. It was unwise for any woman to be there unescorted; she would almost certainly be approached by a proctor and asked to explain her presence. Sometimes, the area became a battle-ground for the young students and the town youths. In 1846, Josiah Chater, a local draper, noted in his diary that there was a demonstration in the Market Square against the borough police by crowds of undergraduates. He recorded: 'The Proctors and Masters were all out, but to no purpose . . . gownsmen threw glass bottles on to the townsmen's heads, and water and stones, which so enraged the townsmen that they went to all the colleges and smashed the windows to pieces.'<sup>11</sup> It seems that neither the borough police nor the proctors could control mobs of town youths or of university students.

Who was responsible for the policing and maintenance of the town centre? The care of the streets was a constant source of discord between the university and the town. For centuries, each parish had been responsible for a 'nightly watch', but in 1825, in response to the failure of the watchmen, the vice-chancellor promoted the Act for the Better Preservation of Peace and Good Order in the Universities of England, which authorized him to appoint his own special constables for keeping the peace and maintaining a general watch on the streets.<sup>12</sup> The proctors already patrolled the streets around the colleges, controlling the behaviour of undergraduates and arresting suspected prostitutes.

For the first decades of the nineteenth century Cambridge people were badly served by their aldermen. The common quays along the river were in disrepair. The bridges were unsafe. So much filth accumulated at the cattle market on St Andrew's Hill that it was 'often times almost impassable'.<sup>13</sup> In 1833, the Whig government set up the Royal Commission on Municipal Corporations and Cambridge's council was singled out in its report for its poor practices.<sup>14</sup> A leading article in *The Times*, in response to the commission's report, commented on the town's government:

Probably no judicial investigation into a public trust ever brought to life more shameless profligacy or more inveterate dishonesty, . . . a more heartless disregard for the claims of the poor in the perversion of funds left for their benefit, . . . a more

<sup>10</sup> P. Searby, *The History of the University of Cambridge 1750–1870* (Cambridge, 1997), 1.

<sup>11</sup> E. Porter, *Victorian Cambridge: Josiah Chater's Diaries 1844–1884* (London, 1975), 30.

<sup>12</sup> E. Leedham-Green, *A Concise History of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge 1996), 11.

<sup>13</sup> F.A. Reeve, *Cambridge* (London, 1964), 97.

<sup>14</sup> *The Report of the Royal Commission on Municipal Corporations*, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 116 (1835), XXIII.

insatiable cupidity in the corporate officers to enrich themselves with the corporate property . . . than are presented by the evidence now before us.<sup>15</sup>

Parliamentary and borough politics had been dominated by the Mortlock family and the duke of Rutland for many years, but the Municipal Corporations Act 1835 brought about dramatic changes: the corrupt Mortlock–Rutland Tory council was replaced by a Liberal group with *laissez-faire* businessmen and several university Whigs.<sup>16</sup> There existed a new sense of community and hopes of regeneration in the town. In 1836, within seven months of its own appointment, the Watch Committee established a borough police force. This force and the borough magistrates began to take on more responsibility for law and order and did not discriminate between the undergraduates and townsmen, which initially intensified the tension between the two sides.

Enhancement of the town's environment was slow and on 22 September 1849, the editor of the *Cambridge Chronicle* accused the council of lethargy. Cambridge had been 'outripped in the march of improvement by places of far inferior note and means'. The council seemed weak and ineffective; it lacked the strong leadership needed to develop and modernize the borough. The building of the Cambridge to London railway line was delayed for years because of disagreement on the site for the station. On 5 August 1840, the *Cambridge Advertiser and Free Press* stated that in no place equal in extent and population was the education of the poor less cared for than in Cambridge. At a time when other towns were building imposing civic centres, Cambridge was still struggling to provide a supply of clean water and deal with sewage disposal. In 1842, Edwin Chadwick described the appalling sanitary conditions which existed in working-class areas in Britain.<sup>17</sup> On 5 October 1850, the *Cambridge Chronicle* printed a report that indicated that conditions in Cambridge were still no better than those depicted by Chadwick.

Reform was not confined to town boroughs: it was recognized that there was a need for change within the universities. In 1852, a Royal Commission was set up to inquire into the state of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>18</sup> The town councillors saw an opportunity to air their grievances against the vice-chancellor and petitioned the commissioners. As a result, Sir John Patterson was appointed to arbitrate between the university and the borough council. He recommended some significant changes to redress the balance of power, and in 1856, an Act of Parliament confirmed his recommendations. The vice-chancellor's

<sup>15</sup> *Times*, 16 Nov. 1833.

<sup>16</sup> N. Mansfield, 'Grads and snobs: John Brown, town and gown in nineteenth-century Cambridge', *History Workshop Journal*, 35 (1993), 187–9.

<sup>17</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Report from the Poor Law Commissioners on an Inquiry into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (London, 1842).

<sup>18</sup> *The Report of H.M. Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Revenues of the University and Colleges of Cambridge*, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 1017 (1852), XLIV.

privileges were restricted and taxes were levied more equitably, but one of the most hated impositions – the power granted to vice-chancellors to arrest and punish women of the town who were ‘suspected of evil’ – was retained.<sup>19</sup> The university had clung unremittingly to this privilege throughout the centuries and used it to justify its right to imprison girls who were thought to be a danger to the morals of its students.

From 1836, prostitution in Cambridge had been policed by two forces – the university proctors and their constables and the borough police. Any working-class girl who merely talked or walked with an undergraduate in the vicinity of the colleges risked being arrested by a proctor and sentenced to a period in the Spinning House. Prostitution was not a crime in English law, but it was treated as one by the proctors. James I had declared ‘that the suburbs and the precincts of the University should begin from the outward building of the Town everyway and be measured thence directly in a straight line for one English mile’.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the ‘precincts’, prostitutes, who mostly served men of their own class, were arrested by the borough police, usually not for prostitution but under the vagrancy laws for being drunk and disorderly. The working-class suburb of Barnwell, which lay beyond the common called Parker’s Piece, was controlled by the borough police (see Map 1). It was adjacent to the ancient village of Barnwell, which stood on the road to Newmarket and had been known for centuries as a ‘place of leisure’ for the town’s people. For years, the villagers had been dependent for most of their money on illicit trade from the town – drinking and prostitution.<sup>21</sup>

### The Spinning House

The Spinning House, also known as Hobson’s Bridewell, had been founded in the seventeenth century by Thomas Hobson, a celebrated Cambridge livery stable owner and carrier, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries poor townfolk, petty criminals and prostitutes were given shelter there. They were made to work under a warden, usually a master spinner or weaver – hence the name ‘Spinning House’. By the 1820s, the House, originally administered jointly by trustees appointed by the town and the university, was being used exclusively by the university as a prison for streetwalkers. The proctors had become particularly diligent in patrolling the centre of the town and arresting suspected prostitutes in an effort to regulate the undergraduates’ moral and sexual behaviour.

Once arrested, a streetwalker was escorted by the proctor and his constables (‘bulldogs’) to the university prison, a long, grim-looking

<sup>19</sup> University/Collect.Admin.9, 154–69.

<sup>20</sup> C.H. Cooper, *The Annals of Cambridge*, vol. III (Cambridge, 1852), 16.

<sup>21</sup> J. Marriott, ‘A study in the changing relationship between class structure and culture in a community undergoing rapid growth and urbanization: Barnwell 1790–1880’, unpublished MA dissertation, 1985; Cambridge Central Library, 52.



building in St Andrew's Street, less than a 10-minute walk from the Market Square (see Map 1). She would be greeted by the warden and led to a small cell in which to spend the night. Each cell had whitewashed walls, a fireplace, a single barred window and an iron bedstead with mattress and blankets. For some girls who were as young as 14, the first night in the prison must have been an ordeal, especially if they were placed in a cell alone; most lived in cramped terraced houses where they would have shared beds with siblings. In the morning, they were brought before the vice-chancellor and the proctor to be charged and sentenced. They had no one to represent them and no right of appeal.

### **The Spinning House committal books**

On her first visit to the House a prisoner was given a number, and details such as age, place of birth and parents' occupations were entered into a committal book. On subsequent visits, her name and number linked her with previous arrests. Cambridge University Library holds three large tomes, the Spinning House committal books, which record the names of over 1,550 girls who passed through the Spinning House in the 70 years between 1823 and 1894.<sup>22</sup> There are entries for over 6,300 arrests by the proctors. Not only do they give an insight into the ages and backgrounds of the young women who were held there, but they also reveal character traits of the proctors, many of whom were to become prominent members of the university later in their careers. The Revd Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873), better known as one of the fathers of modern geology and a major influence on Charles Darwin, was responsible for the arrest of 11 streetwalkers on a single evening in January 1828.<sup>23</sup>

I entered the information presented in these books into a relational database so that it could be examined in detail, enabling associations to be made between names and addresses, dates, ages and sentences. Personal histories unravelled and family relationships became obvious. Landladies' names and addresses became pertinent. Although these details are often incomplete and inaccurate, they have made it possible to detect patterns of behaviour. The records show that the majority of those whose age is known were girls still in their teens. Of those who gave their age, 94 per cent were under the age of 25 and 61 per cent were under 20; 10 of those arrested gave ages under 15. The newspaper reports for the magistrates' courts in Cambridge show that prostitutes arrested by the borough police were usually older than those apprehended by the proctors. Although a third of all the Spinning House girls were imprisoned at least four times, half were arrested only once. The arrest and imprisonment of any girl did not prove that she was a prostitute.

<sup>22</sup> University/T.VIII, Spinning House Committal Books 1–3 (Cambridge University Archives).

<sup>23</sup> University/T.VIII.1.



What is known about the girls' backgrounds? A third of the Spinning House girls did not name any parish of origin, so any description of the group as a whole must be inconclusive. Of all those girls who named a parish, about a third of them referred to one in the town, slightly less than a third said that they came from parishes within 12 miles of Cambridge and rather over a third said that they came from further afield. Those girls who named Cambridge parishes and were born before about 1815 came mainly from the parishes in the medieval heart of the town or from Castle Hill. Girls who were born later tended to name parishes in the burgeoning suburbs. Most of the girls who came from beyond 12 miles of Cambridge were still from parishes less than 35 miles from the town. A number of them came from Newmarket, just beyond the 12-mile radius, which was a favourite haunt of some of the richer undergraduates and had had a close connection with Cambridge ever since the first official horse race was run there in the time of Charles II. Only about one in ten of the streetwalkers said that she came from a parish more than 35 miles from Cambridge. Some of these came from towns and villages across the Fens to the north and north-east, including King's Lynn and Norwich. Very few of the Spinning House inmates said they came from places beyond East Anglia and the Home Counties. It seems remarkable that, spread over seven decades, there were only 19 girls who gave parishes in London as their place of origin. The construction of the London to Cambridge railway line does not appear to have played a significant role in attracting girls from the metropolis.

The committal books did not routinely record where the streetwalkers were apprehended, but streets in the ancient town centre feature constantly throughout the decades. Nearly all the proctors' arrests took place out of doors. The land between the colleges and the river, known as the Backs, and common land such as Parker's Piece were favourite haunts for the streetwalkers. A few offenders were found by the proctors in students' rooms or in 'receiving houses' in central Cambridge, such as the one in Hobson's Street where Marianne Dann was charged with being 'found in bed with a gownsman'.

The proctors' duties were often difficult and unrewarding. Sometimes girls kicked or hit the proctors' men, and in 1846, Jane Osborne is said to have thrown pepper into the eyes of a constable. Usually a proctor and his constables accompanied the girls to the Spinning House on foot, but occasionally girls were so violent that they had to be taken to the House in a cab. Bad behaviour invoked longer sentences. Sometimes a crowd gathered to witness an arrest. Josiah Chater witnessed a rescue in January 1847: 'There was a great row in the street this evening with the proctors. They had taken up some girl, but the townsmen had rescued her and were hooting the proctors.'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Porter, *Josiah Chater's Diaries*, 31.

During the first years of record-keeping, there was a lack of consistency in charging the Spinning House girls and some served sentences as long as a month without any charge being specified at all in the committal books, but from October 1828 onwards over 80 per cent were charged with 'streetwalking', although this was not a recognized crime. Talking or walking with an undergraduate was seen as proof of immoral intent. Sometimes the charges were more explicit. Two girls were charged with dancing at How House with gownsmen and paid heavily for the privilege; each received a prison sentence of 40 days. Rebecca Roberts was charged with attempting to enter Trinity College in disguise and sentenced to 12 days in prison. Susan Palmer made an unfortunate mistake in 1867 when she 'addressed' a proctor; she had hoped for a client, but she received seven days in prison instead.

Newspapers often suggested that innocent local women ran the risk of being wrongly arrested, but it was rare for the proctors or the bulldogs to be challenged for mistakes in the law courts. However, on one occasion, a senior proctor, Mr Barnard Smith, was confronted by an older married woman: Joseph Romilly, university administrator and diarist, described the case, in which Mrs Cattaway, the wife of a fireman on the railway, claimed that 'her reputation had been injured by having been seen to be taken mistakenly into the Spinning House and held there for half an hour'.<sup>25</sup> She claimed £500 in damages but was awarded only £50.

The streetwalkers were usually arrested in the evening and taken straight to the Spinning House. The girls, even those arrested for the first time, were held overnight before being brought before the vice-chancellor; the records suggest that it was the exception to be released and 'not kept' overnight. As most of the young streetwalkers lived in the Castle district of the town or in Barnwell, both some distance from the prison, it is improbable that the proctors would have sent the girls back to their lodgings on foot in the dark. Just over a third of all those who were charged were 'admonished and discharged' after a night in the prison. First offenders were nearly always 'admonished and discharged' and those who were charged with 'talking to a gownsmen' (an undergraduate) were usually treated similarly. If a girl continued to walk the streets, eventually she would receive a prison sentence of seven days. Further arrests could mean further imprisonment, with the length of the sentences increasing by seven days at each arrest.

The punishment that a girl received seems to have been influenced by three factors. First, the date of her arrest could make a difference: it is noticeable that the sentences were harsher in the earlier decades of the century than later. Secondly, the girl's behaviour and personal record were often critical. For example, Ruth Gotobed caused Mr Goodwin's displeasure: she 'behaved very ill upon my committing her for two

<sup>25</sup> *Romilly's Cambridge Diary, 1848-1864, Selected Passages from the Diary of the Rev. Joseph Romilly*, ed. M.E. Bury and J.D. Pickles (Cambridge, 1994), 353.

weeks, which induced me to double the time'. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it mattered who was responsible for the apprehension: the length of sentences varied from proctor to proctor. Mr Pope, who was a proctor for one academic year from October 1826, was particularly severe; for instance, Sarah Minet, who was 18 and came from Barnwell, received 56 days from Mr Pope on her first arrest.

Besides giving her parish of origin on her first apprehension, a girl was supposed to give her place of residence every time she was arrested. Although the addresses are far from complete, with the aid of dates, those that are listed help to build up a picture of the areas where streetwalkers lived at particular times. In the 1820s, most of the streetwalkers were living in the medieval centre of the town or at Castle End, but in the 1830s and 1840s the terraced houses in Wellington Row and Fitzroy Street and the yards and passages of Barnwell dominated the entries. By then, fewer girls came from the old part of the town, although Falcon Yard, notorious for its filth and overcrowding and just off the main shopping street, Petty Cury, was home to some.

The passing of the Enclosure Acts of 1801–07 radically changed the shape and size of Cambridge. The new owners of ground to the east and south of the old town were now free to develop their land. There was a need for new homes, not just because the housing in the town centre was so dilapidated and crowded, but because the population of Cambridge was growing rapidly. The university and colleges were relatively slow to build compared with private owners. 'Colleges tended to use their lands to build higher class houses on long leases for the wealthier members of society . . . Private owners were often more interested in short-term gains from selling their lands to speculative developers for higher density, low-cost housing' such as that in Barnwell.<sup>26</sup> Common land such as Parker's Piece, Christ's Pieces and Midsummer Common all escaped development and served as a 'green belt' between the medieval town and the suburbs (see Map 1).

Cambridge's lodging-houses and brothels were well known to the police and the proctors. The university authorities drew up their own list of 'Suspected Houses of ill fame and brothels'. In 1863, this list of houses and their keepers was pasted inside the cover of the minutes book of the Spinning House Case Syndicate.<sup>27</sup> All lay outside the area which the proctors patrolled. Links between the Spinning House and 'suspected houses' in Barnwell are tenuous and only one person whom the proctors identified as a brothel-keeper, Mrs Shed, definitely had Spinning House girls as lodgers. It is not easy to detect where the streetwalkers took their clients. The committal books suggest that coupling often took place on the land around the colleges, such as the Backs and Parker's Piece. Very few couples were found in bed. Luisa Howells was discovered 'in bed with a gownsman' at Suttons in Mill Road, not in her own lodging-house in

<sup>26</sup> Bryan, *The Shaping of the City*, 106.

<sup>27</sup> University/Min.VI.6/13, 1860–63.

Burleigh Street, Barnwell. The proctors referred to 'receiving houses' and it is conceivable that there was a number of these in the centre of the old town where the streetwalkers could take their clients. It seems unlikely that undergraduates accompanied prostitutes to lodgings or brothels in Barnwell: it would have been a long walk from King's Parade to Wellington Row and there are no positive records of streetwalkers being arrested by proctors in the Barnwell district.

It was the borough police, not the proctors, who controlled Barnwell's terraced streets. The brothels there, which were known to the proctors but were rarely entered by them, mainly served local working men. Little is known about the sexual behaviour of the senior members of the university, but undoubtedly some visited the area; Barnwell village had satisfied their needs for centuries. It is likely that they were more discreet than the younger men: the majority of dons were already ordained clergy or expected to be ordained into the Anglican Church.

The reputation of the Spinning House girls and their parents could be significant, as an entry in Romilly's diary illustrates. On 14 December 1859, 15-year-old Annie Johnson was sentenced by the vice-chancellor to three days' imprisonment. A fortnight earlier she had been 'admonished and discharged' from the Spinning House for streetwalking. Annie's elder sister Mary Ann, who had also 'gone astray', had been apprehended by the proctors on a single occasion in 1856 for 'talking with a gownsman on Parker's Piece' and held overnight. Romilly wrote that Mr Johnson 'referred the V.C. to me as having employed him ... it is true that I did so, and then knew no harm of him: now however his family is very disreputable'.<sup>28</sup> Johnson's young daughters had damaged the family name and as a result it was unlikely that their father, a skilled carver and gilder, would have been able to find employment with the university again. The university authorities, the town's main employers, were paternalistic in their treatment of their employees and it was in the interests of members of the working classes (or at least the 'respectable' working class) to pay lip service to a social hierarchy because their very livelihoods were dependent on that structure. In his article 'Grads and snobs', N. Mansfield pointed out that 'beneath the velvet glove the iron fist still lurked'.<sup>29</sup>

Nearly all the girls' fathers came from the labouring and artisan classes. Most were artisans, using their skills in a wide variety of trades. They included skilled coachmakers, printers, cabinet-makers, bootmakers and tailors. There were fathers who were builders, publicans, gamekeepers and clerks, as well as soldiers and farmers; there were also an engine driver, a cricketer, a travelling fiddler and a dog fancier. Louisa Codman from Norwich, who had four brothers and three sisters, was a 'nigger singer' with her father and mother. Two girls stated that their parents were hawkers. The fathers' occupations were thus far from uniform.

<sup>28</sup> *Romilly's Cambridge Diary*, 338.

<sup>29</sup> Mansfield, 'Grads and snobs', 184–98.

The choice of work for women and girls outside the home remained restricted throughout most of the century. Only 66 girls indicated their mothers' occupations. Most of them worked as dressmakers, laundresses or servants; the last included cooks and bedmakers in the colleges. Like their mothers, the girls faced work that was hard, unrewarding and poorly paid. The list of the Spinning House girls' 'last situations' suggests that they were not very different from other working-class girls whose occupations were listed in the 1861 census returns for the town. A number had been apprenticed to dressmakers, tailors or milliners, but most of the girls had been in service. Nearly all those in service worked in private households, although a few were employed in public houses and eight stated that they had been working in lodging-houses. Women under the age of 30 were not permitted to work in the colleges. The fact that so many had been servants is not surprising: the 1851 census shows that in England and Wales over a third of working women below the age of 20 were in service, but in Cambridge the figure was nearly double the national average.<sup>30</sup> Some had lived at home helping one or both parents. Of the 818 girls who gave their last situation only seven girls admitted to being 'common prostitutes' or 'on the town'.

Proctorial practice in Cambridge was concerned mainly with ethical issues; the proctors' first concern was to protect the morals of the young undergraduates, and the upholding of Christian values was of crucial importance. The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 were concerned with physical issues. In Cambridge, town girls were rarely detained because they were ill, but rather because they were perceived to be immoral. In contrast, in a garrison town such as Plymouth, where there was also a large number of single men, women were usually apprehended for reasons of disease, not for any inappropriate behaviour. Prostitution was regulated in both Cambridge and Plymouth, but there was a wide difference between the attitudes of those in authority and the motives for their strict policing.

### The Spinning House and the Contagious Diseases Acts

In his book *Geographies of Regulation*, Philip Howell has argued that one reason for the Cambridge proctors' detention of streetwalkers in a 'regulationist manner' was to keep the undergraduates free of venereal disease. In chapter 4, 'A private Contagious Diseases Act: prostitution and the proctorial system in Victorian Cambridge', he maintains that the university did 'all it could to make sure that the undergraduates' partners would be free from disease, by taking them out of the circuits of sexual

<sup>30</sup> P. Wilcox, 'Marriage, Mobility and domestic service in Victorian Cambridge', *Local Population Studies*, 29 (1982), 32.

exchange whenever they were found to be infectious'.<sup>31</sup> The committal books, however, suggest that this was by no means the case. Early in Victoria's reign, which is the period of Howell's study, Susan Peake wanted 'to get into the SH to be cured at the expence [*sic*] of the university', but Mr Baily, the proctor, would have none of it and 'admonished and discharged' her. In 1849, Jane Smith from Wellington Row 'was much diseased'; she was 'admonished and discharged' after a night in a cell but not treated. There is no evidence to suggest that the streetwalkers were imprisoned in order to safeguard the physical health of the male undergraduates or that they were inspected on a regular basis. The medical officer was not resident at the House and it seems unlikely that the girls who spent a single night in the prison would have been inspected physically between their arrest in the evening and discharge the following morning, in which case over half could never have been seen by the medical officer.

It is apposite here to examine the Spinning House committal books regarding proctorial practice and 'contagious diseases'. The streetwalkers knew that they could receive treatment for venereal disease at the Spinning House and this meant that some girls came for help of their own accord. Phrases such as 'wished to be admitted to the House being ill', 'came in voluntarily' and 'admitted she had venereal disease' are scattered through the committal books. There were no set rules relating to the admission of girls to the House and practice was inconsistent. Throughout the whole period covered by the committal books, from 1823 to 1894, only about 3 per cent of the entries refer to disease and from 1837 to 1894, in the reign of Queen Victoria, such entries were only 1.5 per cent of the total.

The Spinning House came under government supervision in the form of the Prison Inspectorate from 1835. Unlike those concerned with many other Victorian private institutions, there is no evidence that those responsible for the Spinning House felt any pressure to improve the moral, physical or spiritual well-being of the inmates. The chapel was in disrepair for most of the century and the chaplains were ineffectual. There was no academic education and no training in skills that would help the girls find other work instead of prostitution. The Spinning House girls spent most of their time clustered together in bored idleness in the dayroom, and it was recorded by one inspector that the behaviour and language of most of the regular inmates ensured that any girl who was innocent on arrival left the Spinning House corrupted.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> P. Howell, *Geographies of Regulation, Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the Empire* (Cambridge, 2009), 126.

<sup>32</sup> *Fifteenth Report of the Inspectors of Prisons of Great Britain, Northern and Eastern Districts*, Parliamentary Papers (House of Commons), 1167 (1850), XXVIII, 215.

### The policing of prostitution in Oxford

The proctors' records in 'caution' and committal books for Oxford streetwalkers show that there were similarities in age and background with the Cambridge women and girls. However, the proctorial system there had one important difference from that in Cambridge: Oxford University did not have its own prison and so had no obvious 'thorn in the flesh' like Cambridge's Spinning House. Most girls were cautioned and discharged within a few hours of their arrest, but others were detained 'over night in "the rooms" under the Clarendon Building' and brought before the vice-chancellor for sentencing in the morning.<sup>33</sup> From 1826, 'the university agreed to pay 10d per day to the city for every woman imprisoned as a "common prostitute" by the vice-chancellor'.<sup>34</sup>

### The Spinning House: four court cases

In term-time, the vice-chancellor and proctors performed their morning ritual of sentencing the girls in the Spinning House almost without interruption, but occasionally something happened that brought publicity to the prison and the local people's anger to the surface. The death of Elizabeth Howe was such an event. On 6 November 1846, 19-year-old Elizabeth was arrested with another young girl, Harriet King, and taken to the prison by the proctor, Mr William Kingsley. The two girls spent the night together in a single bed in a cell. The following morning Elizabeth was obviously ill and the vice-chancellor discharged her to go home to a lodging-house kept by Mary Ann Rose. A medical attendant was called to the house ten days later, but, in spite of this and further visits, Elizabeth died of rheumatic fever on 1 December. At the inquest into her death, the jury expressed its abhorrence at a system which allowed the university to apprehend women 'when not offending against the general law of the land, and confining them in a gaol unfit for the worst of felons'.<sup>35</sup> The debate that followed the inquest in *The Times* and other newspapers revealed the concern felt by sections of the wider community. Events in Cambridge gained national significance. The jury had requested that the coroner inform the Home Department of its findings. The papers relating to the inquest were sent to Sir George Grey, the secretary of state, who wrote immediately to the vice-chancellor of the university demanding that the Spinning House's 'glaring defects' be remedied without delay.<sup>36</sup>

On 2 January 1851, the *Morning Chronicle* printed a specially commissioned article entitled 'The Spinning House abomination', which included interviews with ex-Spinning House girls. Although the girls'

<sup>33</sup> A.J. Engel, 'Immoral intentions: the University of Oxford and the problem of prostitution, 1827-1914', *Victorian Studies*, 23 (1979), 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>35</sup> *Times*, 15 Dec. 1846.

<sup>36</sup> *Times*, 11 Dec. 1846.



descriptions of their experiences in and around the House were almost certainly embroidered, they must have stoked the fires of hostility towards the university. They told of girls escaping through holes in the wall and breaking windows, and of inmates being forced to sleep on the bare floor as a punishment. There were stories of friends being dragged by their hair because 'they wouldn't keep quiet'. One girl said of the House, 'We call it "going to college".'

Another case hit the headlines in 1860. An editorial appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* on Thursday, 2 February, entitled 'The proctorial system at Cambridge'; it read:

On Monday last a very characteristic illustration of the liberty of the English subject was illustrated at Cambridge. About seven o'clock in the evening, an omnibus freighted with seven females dressed in evening costume, with two males, was quietly making its way past the town gaol when the driver was suddenly pounced upon by three or four men, who compelled him to draw reins.

The journalist described how the driver conducted his 'cargo of suspected goods' to the Spinning House and how five of the females were condemned by the vice-chancellor to a fortnight's imprisonment and two were acquitted. According to his report, they were 'suspicious milliners', who had arranged with a number of university men to have a private ball at some distance from the town but were intercepted by the anonymous communication of a jealous rival. Feelings were running high in the town, and it was arranged that Emma Kempe, the eldest of the girls, should bring an action against the vice-chancellor for wrongful imprisonment. Although the jury found in favour of the plaintiff, the university authorities won the case after an appeal, but not without cost. Emma Kempe's action had drawn unwelcome nationwide publicity for the Spinning House and forced the university authorities to review their committal and sentencing procedures.

From the 1850s, Cambridge began to be transformed. The release of the university's grip on the town's commerce enabled the townspeople to expand the retail and services facilities. New shops were built in the centre of the town, primarily after the destruction of many properties in the great market fire of 1849. The railway replaced most of the horse-drawn coaches and people moved out to the suburbs; the centre of the town became less crowded. Until this time, Cambridge had lacked a strong middle class. Simon Gunn has defined the middle class in England as 'comprising property-owning groups which engaged in active occupations, usually connected with manufacturing, trade and the professions'.<sup>37</sup> Cambridge had had no such dynamic group. Most of the property in the centre of the town was, and still is, owned by the colleges. There was almost no manufacturing industry in Cambridge and the number of local

<sup>37</sup> S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority and the English Industrial City, 1840–1914* (Manchester, 2000), 14.

professional men practising in the town was relatively small, but gradually members of the town's growing middle class gained confidence and played a vital part in the town's social and economical development.

The numbers of girls held in the Spinning House dropped away dramatically from the mid-1850s. The university authorities were anxious to avoid further condemnation and proctors tended to warn the women instead of arresting them. Major changes to the market area, which made it a cleaner and safer environment for everyone, may have discouraged streetwalking and some of the streetwalkers probably found employment in the new shops. Although in the 1860s and 1870s there were no more high-profile court cases involving the Spinning House, letters and articles in local and national papers condemning the prison showed the intense resentment still felt by the townspeople against the university authorities and the proctors in particular. Between 1880 and 1890, the number of arrests had fallen to about five a year, but in 1891, two more court cases made headline news. Jane Elsdon was found 'guilty of escaping from custody'. She was 'greeted by the Press as a martyr in the cause of freedom'.<sup>38</sup> The second case involved 17-year-old Daisy Hopkins, who was arrested for being in the company of an undergraduate. The vice-chancellor sentenced her to 14 days in the Spinning House. Six days after the trial, the lord chief justice in the Court of the Queen's Bench ordered Daisy's release on a point of law. The repercussions of Daisy Hopkins' arrest, imprisonment and early release continued for many months.

Eventually, the University Syndicate decided that the Spinning House should be closed. On 18 June 1894, an Act of Parliament was passed which provided for proctors and the town police to act concurrently in arresting loose women: any trials would take place before the borough magistrates and the vice-chancellor's jurisdiction over them was abolished. Public opinion, locally and nationally, had helped to bring about changes in the university's practice and attitudes. The Spinning House was demolished in 1901 and a police station built on the site.

### Conclusion

The importance of 'place' in the study of prostitution cannot be overestimated: no two places are identical. Frances Finnegan has argued that in York poverty was responsible for 'the destitution of prostitutes' in that city.<sup>39</sup> Judith Walkowitz has depicted the particular way in which the Contagious Diseases Acts affected women working as prostitutes in the ports of Plymouth and Southampton.<sup>40</sup> Maria Luddy has described

<sup>38</sup> D.A. Winstanley, *Later Victorian Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1947), 97.

<sup>39</sup> F. Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution: A Study of Victorian Prostitutes in York* (Cambridge, 1979).

<sup>40</sup> J. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, 1980).

the complex social and religious attitudes to prostitution that were distinctive in Ireland.<sup>41</sup> In Cambridge, the presence of the university and royal charters granted to it determined the policing of prostitution in the town. The dual nature of the town's governance and its division by class and gender into two distinct communities moulded the practice of prostitution and rendered it different from that in similar-sized towns. The distinct shape of medieval Cambridge, confined within the curves of the river, had forced 'town' and 'gown' to live cheek by jowl – neighbours but separate. In this intense urban environment, it was the proctors' task to keep undergraduates and young streetwalkers apart. This special policing and the existence of the Spinning House undoubtedly made the regulation of prostitutes in Cambridge exceptional.

Were the Spinning House girls victims? It is pertinent to repeat that about half of the girls who were charged with streetwalking were arrested on a single occasion. It is impossible to assess how many of the girls were really engaged in prostitution: it seems likely that many of them were just out for a good time. Like most other Victorian working-class women, they were victims of their period, in that they were trapped by prejudice and poverty with few opportunities for escape. Certainly, as their recorded outbursts show, many saw themselves as victims of a grossly unfair proctorial system. The young men they were with nearly always escaped and went unpunished. A number of the streetwalkers were spirited young women who were not cowed by the proctors and openly expressed their anger and frustration both on the streets when they were arrested and in the Spinning House when they were imprisoned. Many made good friends inside and mutual support was part of their culture. The streetwalkers were of a similar age, came from comparable backgrounds and shared the same prison conditions, but they were not a homogeneous group as contemporary dialogue and the proctors' policy suggested.

<sup>41</sup> M. Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge, 2007).