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Girls of the Spinning House – a Social Study of Young Cambridge Streetwalkers, 1823–1894

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Abstract

This thesis examines the exceptional circumstances of prostitution in Cambridge in the nineteenth century – a topic that interconnected with many other issues that were central to Victorian society, notably religion, morality, class perspectives and the status of women. It shows how the university authorities used their power to reinforce existing patterns of class and gender through the control of sexuality. The research focuses on the streetwalkers of Cambridge, suspected prostitutes who were arrested by the university proctors and sentenced to imprisonment by the Vice-Chancellor without a fair trial. It highlights the relationship between two distinct communities, the academic and the local, and demonstrates how the university’s obduracy and its rigid regulation of sexuality delayed civic reform in the town.

During the nineteenth century, challenges to the university’s archaic and authoritarian practices, both in the courts and in local and national newspapers, weakened its dominance until eventually it was forced to abandon its control of the streets and close its prison. This investigation of prostitution in Cambridge has revealed how the special powers held by the university and the external pressures that brought about the demise of the regulation of streetwalking made the town distinctive. The records of 1550 young women and over 6300 arrests have been entered onto a computer database and analysed. They show how the experiences of suspected prostitutes in Cambridge differed from those in other towns.

The research findings are significant because they offer new insights into the connected histories of two diverse sets of people – young working-class women and the unmarried proctors, ordained university dons, who apprehended them. Regulation in Cambridge illustrates how national themes were played out in a local community at a time when the passing and repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts were matters of widespread concern, and thus this thesis contributes to the knowledge and understanding of prostitution in Britain in the nineteenth century.
CONTENTS

Chapters

1. Introduction

Synopsis 1
Historical background 4
The nature and role of women 6
Working-class attitudes 8
Criminality 10
Contemporary perceptions of prostitution 14
Novelists' and journalists' accounts of prostitution 18
Further debates 19
Attempts to regulate prostitution 20
Modern investigations of Victorian prostitution 22
Comparisons between different towns 28
Sources of information for this study 30

2. Cambridge, Town and Gown 35

Pre-Norman and Medieval Cambridge 36
The sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries 38
The nineteenth century 41
The streets 42
The borough police 46
The people of Cambridge 48
‘Gown’ 51
‘Town’ 53
Tensions between Town and Gown 56
Municipal reform 59
The railway 64
Concerns with overcrowding and public health 65
Change, reform and population growth in the town 69
Barnwell 74
Cambridge emerges into a thriving modern urban community 84
Conclusion 86

3. The Spinning House 87

The founding of the Spinning House 88
Bridewells in the eighteenth century 92
The Spinning House in the eighteenth century 96
Prisons and prison reform 101
The Spinning House in the nineteenth century: university prison for women 105
Inspections and reports 108
The Spinning House: publicity in the local and national press 113
The Spinning House: some improvements 117
### 4. Proctors, undergraduates and university discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University administration</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform of the university</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proctors and university discipline</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodging houses</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The undergraduates</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public schools</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate behaviour</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual undergraduates</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political, social and religious challenges</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5. The committal books and the Spinning House girls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streetwalking and prostitution in Oxford</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE STREETWALKERS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committal book entries</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of birth or parish</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family background</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ages at which the girls were first arrested</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of arrest</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dates of arrest</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charges</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disease</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentences</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proctors' comments</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEYOND THE SPINNING HOUSE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Spinning House girls' lodgings</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning House girls and the courts</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning House girls and the Cambridge Refuge</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodging-house keepers</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Lodging-House Syndicate</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 6. Conclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices
1: Rules for the government of the Spinning House, Cambridge (University/Endow.1.15) 268
2: Reynolds’s Newspaper, 10 December 1876 269
4: Reynolds’s Newspaper, 5 June 1892 271
5: The occupations of the Spinning House girls’ parents and guardians where named (University/T.VIII.1–3) 272
6: List of girls’ names and numbers at the front of a committal book (University/T.VIII.3) 273
7: Suspected Houses of ill fame and brothels (University/Min.VI.6/13) 274

Bibliography
Archival sources 276
Parliamentary Papers 277
Newspapers 277
Unpublished dissertations 277
Internet 278
Books before 1900 278
Books and articles in journals after 1900 280

Illustrations
1: Sample page from the first Spinning House committal book (University/T.VIII.1) 32
3: Tobias Hobson (Cambridge Antiquarian Society and Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library) 89
4: The cells on the first and second floors of the Spinning House (Cambridge Antiquarian Society and Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library) 93
5: The Spinning House (Cambridge Antiquarian Society and Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library) 93
6: Proctor 1815, from A History of the University of Cambridge by R. Ackermann (London: 1815) 98
7: Page from the third Spinning House committal book showing entries for Daisy Hopkin and Beatrice Cooper (University/T.VIII.3) 143
8: Sample page from the first Spinning House committal book (University/T.VIII.1) 204

Figures
1: Spinning House girls: location of parishes 206
2: Spinning House girls: age at first arrest 215
3: Spinning House girls: number of arrests in each decade 220
4: Spinning House girls: length of imprisonment 236
**Maps**

1: Cambridge in the nineteenth century, from *Cambridge: The Shaping of the City* by Peter Bryan (1999) (by kind permission of Peter Bryan) 72

2: Cambridge 1830 by R. G. Baker 76

3: Cambridge 1840 by J. Dewhurst & W. Nichols 77

4: Cambridge by J. W. Lowry 1863 79

5: Cambridge 1897 by Walker & Boutall: Places where some of the streetwalkers were apprehended, from *Cambridge Described & Illustrated* by T. D. Atkinson (London: 1897) 217

6: Barnwell c. 1860: home to many of the Spinning House girls 245
Introduction

Synopsis
This thesis addresses a significant and largely ignored perspective on Victorian prostitution. It describes class and gender relationships in Cambridge, a town divided by social prejudice into two distinct communities, the academic and the local, where for centuries the university authorities had dominated the townspeople. It shows how in the nineteenth century the Spinning House, the university prison, epitomized the tense relationship between the university authorities and the townspeople and explains how the local young streetwalkers of Cambridge, suspected prostitutes, were arrested by university proctors, denied a fair trial and sentenced to imprisonment in the Spinning House by the Vice-Chancellor. Details of the arrests are recorded in three committal books which are held in the university archives. The House also provides the focus for a broader study of Cambridge – the university and the town – and prostitution. The thesis reveals how Cambridge gradually emerged from a community regulated by tradition into one more in step with the rest of the country. It shows how the law of the English courts replaced the archaic judgment of the Vice-Chancellor’s court and how power came to be shared more fairly by the citizens of the town. Prostitution intersects with many issues that were central to nineteenth-century society, notably religion, morality, class perspectives and the status of women. This study also has a wider significance, because, although confined to Cambridge, it offers insight into the way in which national themes were played out in local communities.

Prostitution in the nineteenth century became a subject for investigation and debate by men such as William Acton and William Tait because of anxieties about class, gender and moral decline. These were particularly relevant in Cambridge in view of the coexistence there of middle-class young men and working-class girls. The thesis will examine the attitudes and

behaviour of the university dons who were responsible for patrolling the streets of Cambridge and the unique situation of the local young women who were arrested and imprisoned in the Spinning House. The regulation of streetwalking in Cambridge was exceptional, and the analysis of its extent, the reasons for and consequences of its existence and the way in which it was both tolerated and repressed in the town can enrich the continuing debate on nineteenth-century prostitution. In this thesis the category ‘streetwalker’ is used as it was applied in contemporary discourse. There are difficulties in proving the status ‘prostitute’, but the discussion in Chapter 5 will help to evaluate whether in Cambridge such labels were warranted.

The first law that made reference to the term ‘common prostitute’ was the Vagrancy Act of 1824. Subsection 3 of this Act stated that ‘any common prostitute behaving in a riotous or indecent manner in a public place or thoroughfare’ was liable to a fine or imprisonment.2 Walkowitz treated prostitution as ‘an occupation – one that involved casual sexual encounters with men for “cash payment”’. She argued that, although being a ‘common prostitute’ was an activity structured and defined by the law, ‘it was an extremely vague legal category generally meant to designate women who solicited men in public thoroughfares’.3

An important component of this thesis will be a challenge to some of Philip Howell’s tenets in his paper ‘A private Contagious Diseases Act: prostitution and public space in Victorian Cambridge’.4 Howell argued that the proctors detained the streetwalkers in a ‘regulationist manner’ in order to keep the undergraduates free of venereal disease.5 In Chapter 5 this argument will be confronted. It will be shown that, although prostitution was regulated in Cambridge, the reasons for regulation differed from those which prompted later regulation

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in the garrison towns. Only a small percentage of girls were detained because they were diseased: the inspection and treatment of prostitutes were not major roles for the Spinning House. The proctors' main purpose in removing the women from the streets was to protect the morals of the undergraduates.

Prostitution in Cambridge cannot be considered in isolation. Evaluation of the part played by Evangelicals, social investigators and reformers in the discussion about the causes, treatment and policing of prostitution provides a background for this local study and is thus an important constituent of this thesis. Beliefs about separate roles for men and women set the tone of debates on prostitution throughout the nineteenth century and were used to inform policy when severe problems of public health and public disorder emerged in the 1830s and 1840s. The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 reinforced existing patterns of class and gender domination, through the control of sexuality. The passing and eventual repeal of these Acts, which were matters of widespread concern in the second half of the century, also figure here.

This study is not restricted to the Spinning House girls; it also examines their environment in detail. Chapter 2 explores the history and geography of Cambridge and looks particularly at the town's rapid expansion. Besides considering the social, economic and political changes that took place during the nineteenth century, it studies the relationship between the university and the town, a relationship which was dominated by the university in 1800 but had developed into a more equal partnership by 1900.

Chapter 3 gives an account of the Spinning House. Chapter 4 considers the administration and structure of the university and the part that tradition and religion played in the conduct of those in authority. It looks at a society in which a large number of virile young male undergraduates lived in close proximity to numerous working-class girls, in a period when strict conventions forbade any social contact between members of the two groups, and shows

Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 4
how the university authorities, through the control of sexuality within the town, sought to reinforce the existing patterns of class and gender domination, patterns that were deeply resented by many in the town community. Chapter 5 examines the records of the many young streetwalkers who were held there during the nineteenth century.

**Historical background**

In order to understand how the social climate and attitudes to gender and class framed debate about prostitution in the Victorian period it is helpful to look at events which had influenced society in the preceding years. The last years of the eighteenth century were dominated by fear and uncertainty both in Britain and in other parts of Europe. The French Revolution and the subsequent wars caused political and economic anxiety across the country. There were mutinies in the fleet, fears of a French invasion, rebellion in Ireland and worries about revolution at home. The historian Mike Davis believes that some people in the 1790s thought that 'Britain was in danger of being overrun by a force so wicked and dangerous it would drive the country into moral and political degradation, produce a nation of heretics, and send the national economy into an irreversible downturn'. There was an atmosphere of panic in the government that seeped down to the British public, causing some to imagine that 'their world was on the brink of being turned upside down'.\(^7\) The fear was not of the enemy abroad but that revolution might erupt from within Britain itself.

The overriding problem of the early decades of the nineteenth century, which faced all those who cared for the country's welfare and prosperity, was that of extreme poverty among the working classes. David Englander, in his study *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in Britain*, noted that 'between 1790 and 1820 the poor rate quadrupled' and that 'within the propertied classes there spread a deep sense of unease'.\(^8\) From the mid-eighteenth century onwards the population of England had grown steadily and relentlessly: it was a time of transition from


a society where land was the main source of power to an industrial one with an influential bourgeoisie. The transition from relationships regulated by custom to relationships regulated by cash was unsettling.

Parliament’s reaction to the problem of poverty was to set up a number of committees, which did little to reassure the population. Englander has commented: ‘Contemporary wisdom held that high wages promoted indolence, riot and dissipation and that only by payment of barely subsistent wages could the poor be compelled into work and submission.’ There were members of the aristocracy and upper classes who believed that industrialization challenged political stability and churchmen who, in the midst of social unrest, thought that the apparent irreligion of the urban poor threatened the position of the Church.

Some historians have asserted that modern class and gender relations were forged in this period of upheaval from 1780 to 1850. Catherine Hall, for example, believed that an industrial bourgeoisie was made in the period and defined itself in opposition not only to the new proletariat but also to the gentry and the aristocracy. Its definition ‘was built not only at the level of the political and the economic . . . but also at the level of culture and ideology’.

Hall has argued that there was a need for new, strong, moral leadership to restore confidence throughout all levels of society in England. Evangelicals, staunch members of the Church of England who sought to reform the Church from within, provided this leadership. Their members included William Wilberforce and fellow abolitionists who had gained respect for their stance on slavery and were known for their integrity. They blamed the nation’s problems on widespread immorality and their crusade was to promote Evangelical principles in political and social fields and change moral attitudes throughout the country.

9 Englander, Poverty and Poor Law Reform, p. 5.
The Evangelicals propagated their ideas through the means of pamphlets, manuals and sermons, as well as bringing about changes in the law on issues such as Sabbath observance, public amusements and obscene publications. Their strong religious base enabled them to argue that their campaigns were moral and not political. From the earliest days the group had links not only with the political elite - Wilberforce was a close friend of Pitt's - but with members of the new middle-class culture in all parts of industrial England. During a period of demographic, economic and social change the Evangelicals were able to bridge the gap between different groups that were defined by class and by geography. As Hall points out, 'The Evangelicals were able to play a mediating role in this transition. They neither unquestioningly supported the old society nor uncritically welcomed the new.' They were seen to represent not only large sections of the middle classes but the best interests of the country as a whole. Gradually Evangelicalism became part of the dominant middle-class civic culture and became linked to urban reform.

The nature and role of women

Central to the debate on reform and the creation of a new morality was the nature and role of women. The Evangelicals believed that the sexes were distinctively different and, although they agreed that women should be better educated, they saw education primarily as a way of making them better wives and mothers. The Evangelical way of life gave women the responsibility for bringing about moral renewal. The household was perceived as a safe, loving environment, in contrast to the hostile world outside its doors. In Hall's words, 'Home became the sphere of women and the family; the world outside became the sphere of men.'

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argued that gender played a crucial role in the structuring of an emergent provincial middle-class culture, for they believed that it was the ideology of domesticity and separate gender spheres that gave distinctive form to middle-

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class identity. Some historians have challenged this assumption. Amanda Vickery has disputed the idea that women’s behaviour changed little in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She pointed out that ‘our preoccupation with the ideology of separate spheres may have blinded us to the other languages in play in the Victorian period.’ She argued that ‘public and private’, ‘separate spheres’ and ‘domesticity’ were rapidly becoming unquestioned key words, although she acknowledged that interpretations had developed over time. ‘Proponents of the British separate spheres framework have revised many of their early generalizations. . . . Most are now at pains to present women as sentient, capable beings rather than as passive victims, emphasizing the ways in which women shaped their own lives within a male-dominated culture.’ Vickery also suggested that ‘the history of ideas tells us that in every era alternative “ideologies” are usually on offer’. She noted that Patricia Branca had also already contested the idea of the pure and passive stereotype, the ‘Angel in the house’, and had argued that it was only prosperous upper middle-class ladies who idly received callers and supervised staff with cool aplomb. The vast majority of middle-class housewives coped with heavy housework and quarrelsome servants. ‘Wherever angelic uniformity was to be found, it was not in Victorian sitting rooms, despite the dreams of certain poets, wistful housewives, and ladies’ advice books.’

Linda Colley has suggested that the conservative backlash of the 1790s offered opportunities for greater female participation in a new public life of loyalist parades, petitions and public subscriptions and that reactionary politics offered these ‘angels of the state’ a higher public profile, not an upholstered private cage. Undoubtedly, religious associations, moral

16 Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres?’, p. 401.
campaigns and organized charities gave women the chance to work in a voluntary capacity outside the home and there is also evidence that many women helped their husbands in family businesses, although they were not usually encouraged to explore the wider world of business and commerce. There were many notable women who defied convention and played a dominant role in society, such as the social reformer Josephine Butler, the nurse Florence Nightingale and the writer George Eliot. Lady Charlotte Guest did not fit the ‘separate spheres’ mould either: she translated the Mabinogian from medieval Welsh and managed the Dowlais iron works after her husband’s death, whilst simultaneously mothering her ten children. They were not constrained by Evangelical thinking on domestic ideology and did not challenge it, but used the language of separate spheres to argue for a public political role for women. The present study shows how this discourse dominated debates on women and prostitution. Whatever the truth was about the roles of the sexes, the different natures of men and women and their separate spheres were widely articulated and promoted in the nineteenth century, particularly in contemporary English fiction.

Working-class attitudes

In Sex, Politics and Society Jeffrey Weeks described the way in which he considered that domestic behaviour informed class identity. He stated: ‘The fundamental problem as conceived by the middle-class moralists . . . was the effect of industrialisation and urbanisation . . . on the working-class family and the role of the woman within it.’

Contemporary observers painted a very bleak picture of life in industrial towns and wrote of disrupted families and widespread immorality. Peter Gaskell described ‘unnecessary poverty, drunkenness, parental cruelty and neglect of conjugal rights’ caused by industrialization. Edwin Chadwick, the prominent Benthamite social reformer, blamed the atrocious sanitary conditions which existed in working-class districts for the tendency

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'to produce an adult population short-lived, improvident, reckless, and intemperate and with habitual avidity for sensual gratifications.' The Victorian journalist and social investigator Henry Mayhew wrote about the 'misery, ignorance, and vice, amidst all the immense wealth and great knowledge of "the first city in the world"'.

Weeks warned against making quick and simple generalizations about working-class attitudes to sexuality 'precisely because it is very difficult to enter into the subjective and customary meanings'. He suggested that working-class girls may have put a different 'social meaning' on chastity to middle-class ladies because of their different patterns of courtship and marriage. Was this so for the young Cambridge streetwalkers? There is no doubt that, when workers left their long-established rural communities and moved into towns, urbanization and changes in their social environment disrupted their traditional patterns of family life; but Weeks commented:

Far from being 'immoral' or promiscuous, there is plentiful evidence that in fact the working class, partly inheriting structures from their rural predecessors, had a very clear set of ethics of their own which survived for a considerable time.

What did the notion of 'respectability' mean in a working-class urban community? It has long been established that in many working-class neighbourhoods public opinion played an important part in the ethos of the area. Michael Mason has argued that people have overestimated the influence of Anglican Evangelicals on moral attitudes. He points to the work of Francis Place (1771–1854), who excluded religion from analysis of working-class

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28 Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 60.
respectability. According to Place, members of the working class cultivated respectability because such a cultivation fostered social and political advancement.\(^{31}\)

As in other social groups, the woman was held responsible for the conduct of her husband and offspring in working-class communities. This is discussed further in Chapter 5, with examples to show how families risked shame and ostracism if any member offended against the local code of acceptable behaviour. When women left the confines of the family and entered the public space of the town they immediately became more vulnerable to criticism if not to predatory males. This study looks at those girls in Cambridge who became ‘unrespectable’ in the eyes of the middle class by walking the streets in the evenings unescorted and apparently seeking male company. Prostitution was not a crime, but women who brought behaviour that was perceived to be private in nature into the public arena were considered to have betrayed the very ideal of womanhood and were categorized as prostitutes. Although the Spinning House girls demonstrated ‘unrespectable’ behaviour on the streets of the town, their status was ambiguous and they were usually referred to as ‘streetwalkers’ or ‘suspected prostitutes’ by the university authorities. The term ‘prostitute’ was only used by the university to describe a streetwalker when there was no doubt about her occupation.

Criminality

Evangelical attitudes shaped expectations about the roles of men and women and influenced policy in criminal matters. Women were expected to be morally superior to men and it was believed that they were innately less criminal. Weeks held that ‘the ideological division of women into two classes, the virtuous and the fallen,’ was already well developed by the mid-eighteenth century.\(^{32}\) Lucia Zedner, emphasizing the impossibility of understanding the history of crime and its control in isolation, has demonstrated the role of gender in determining Victorian attitudes and responses to female criminality.\(^{33}\)


Male crime was usually examined and explained with reference to economic need or to motives which, although morally unacceptable, were recognized as rational. Female crime, however, was often condemned outright.\(^{34}\) Henry Mayhew wrote of criminal women:

> In them one sees the most hideous picture of all human weakness and depravity – a picture the more striking because exhibiting the coarsest and rudest moral features in connection with a being whom we are apt to regard as the most graceful and gentle form of humanity.\(^{35}\)

Clive Emsley has pointed out that Victorian middle-class commentators on the criminal classes had an audience in mind which was middle-class or at least respectable.\(^{36}\) ‘Contemporary comments about the prostitute, as with the professional criminal, invariably tell us more about Victorian perceptions than about the women themselves.’\(^{37}\) Emsley drew attention to the similarity between the Victorians’ perception of the male criminal and of the female prostitute, pointing out that the terms ‘hardened offender’ and ‘abandoned prostitute’ were almost synonymous in the way they were used with reference to women transported for theft.\(^{38}\)

Havelock Ellis’s description of prostitution in 1890 was damning:

> It is a remarkable fact that prostitutes exhibit the physical and psychic signs associated usually with criminality in a more marked degree than criminal women. While criminal women correspond on the whole to the class of occasional criminals, in whom the brand of criminality is but faintly seen, prostitutes correspond much more closely to the class of instinctive criminals.\(^{39}\)

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\(^{34}\) Zedner, *Women, Crime and Custody*, p. 29.


Emsley argued that the criminal class was perceived overwhelmingly as male and in general, although it was believed that prostitutes indulged in petty theft between themselves or upon their clients, they were not seen as members of the criminal class in their own right, but as the appendages of male thieves. ⁴⁰

National and local newspapers indicate that crimes committed by women rarely involved victims, but they included offences such as drunkenness and importuning which severely offended middle-class sensibilities and that could be prosecuted under the Vagrancy Act. Respectability and moral behaviour had become the preoccupation of a large section of Victorian society and particular attention was focused on sexual offending by women. Although some social investigators noted economic hardship as a spur to some women to take up the 'profession', it was believed that female crime was mainly the result of a lack of moral principles and self-restraint. ⁴¹ As Michael Pearson argued,

> The Victorians could only see sexual issues in stark terms of black and white. Never before had female virtue been so highly romanticised. Virginity was a 'priceless pearl' and the loss of it a 'fate worse than death'. Virtuous women were not just human beings – they represented an ideal of purity that was in striking contrast to the natural impurity of men. ⁴²

Mayhew's collaborator, John Binney, argued that 'the habitual crime of the female portion of the community is in most cases associated with prostitution'. ⁴³ Zedner, however, has suggested that, although accurate statistics are difficult to collect, it appears that in the mid-nineteenth century the most common crime in all summary convictions for adults of both sexes was drunkenness, the second was 'common assault' and the third was larceny. She pointed out that the only single category where convictions of women consistently

outnumbered those of men was that of ‘offences against the Pawnbrokers’ Act by persons unlawfully pledging or disposing’. It does not seem that the proportion of female crime made up by prostitution was as high as Victorian literary sources would lead us to believe.\textsuperscript{44}

In fact it is difficult to identify convictions related to prostitution; although it may have been an aggravating factor, for example, in charges for drunkenness and larceny, it was not a crime in itself.

The criminal justice system was run exclusively by men. Judges, jurors, police and legislators were all men. Women were involved only as victims, witnesses, or suspects. The law reflected and sustained the dominant social ideology of the period. The ideal relationship between a man and a woman was seen as one in which the male was strong and protective and the female weak and innocent. ‘By her criminal actions the female offender, in the Victorian period particularly, was seen as challenging the social position designated for women.’\textsuperscript{45}

In sexual cases women victims were often seen in the courts as having allowed themselves to be seduced and were blamed for failing to protect themselves from ‘normal’ male impulses. Unless there were serious injuries it was almost impossible to prove rape. Youths were expected to be manly and exuberant. Most victims of sexual assaults were deemed to have lost their character as well as their chastity. Carolyn Conley quoted a case from the Maidstone and Kentish Journal where a labourer and a girl were charged with committing an immoral offence on a cricket field. The girl was given one month’s hard labour and the youth was discharged.\textsuperscript{46} Frequently women were not only found guilty of their own wrongdoing but also held responsible for corrupting male criminals.

\textsuperscript{44} Zedner, \textit{Women, Crime and Custody}, pp. 34–36.
\textsuperscript{45} Emsley, \textit{Crime and Society in England}, p. 163.
Contemporary perceptions of prostitution

As discussed above, Evangelicals believed that moral renewal in the nation could be brought about by women in the home. The debate on the pivotal role of wives and mothers brought into focus those ‘fallen’ women who betrayed their sex and worked as prostitutes in the sphere outside the home. As the historian Mary Poovey has argued, ‘Prostitutes challenged prevailing stereotypes about gendered morality.’\(^{47}\) By the middle of the nineteenth century, after a long period of social anxiety, prostitution, ‘The Great Social Evil’, a threat to the sanctity of the family, had become an obsession. There was widespread and exaggerated fear of its social implications and its accompanying diseases. The prostitute was an ‘object of fascination and disgust’.\(^{48}\) Prostitution featured in editorials, novels, letters to the newspapers and published diaries of the famous, as well as in research reports. It was a topic of conversation and debate throughout all groups and individuals in society from the Prime Minister and Members of Parliament down to the inhabitants of the meanest streets and alleyways of the towns and cities of England. According to Trevor Fisher, prostitution was tolerated widely. ‘Despite the puritan attack and the unease of the “respectable”, the rights of prostitutes to ply their trade – and customers to purchase their wares – remained unchallenged in the mid-nineteenth century.’\(^{49}\) Early in 1858 a *Times* editorial commented:

> The Great Social Evil, as it is not unfairly called, will remain a problem in our time. . . . We acknowledge, and we deplore its existence, but we know of no remedy which would not rather aggravate than soften the evil. . . . We cannot import this offence as a crime into our Penal Code. It must be left almost entirely to private feeling; indeed, all that we can do is insist, on the part of the public, that outward decency be preserved.\(^{50}\)

Throughout the nineteenth century explanations were sought for women turning towards prostitution for a living and in a climate of social disruption and unease a minority set out to


\(^{48}\) Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 32.


\(^{50}\) *The Times*, 25 February 1858.
investigate the issue. Commentators found it difficult to assess the true extent of the problem. The motives of many writers in defining 'the prostitute' were undoubtedly deeply political. Changes to the traditional social order in Britain had caused confusion and apprehension. Moral attitudes, social problems and the need for reform sometimes influenced judgment. Poovey believes that the drive to explore the subject was part of a broader growth in official inquiry into social problems and crucial in popularizing certain perspectives. 'Like the cities in which [prostitution] flourished, it focused anxieties associated with industrialization and capitalism more generally.'

Some reformers seemed to believe that, if prostitution was managed, pauperism would be contained, population growth controlled and 'the moral debility that vitiated national prosperity' reversed.

In 1800, Patrick Colquhoun, one of the first stipendiary magistrates to be appointed under the Middlesex Justices Act of 1792, believed in the inevitability of prostitution and argued for the use of severe police power to curb it. In the sixth edition of his pamphlet, *A Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*, he wrote of prostitution: 'It is an evil which must be endured while human passions exist; but it is at the same time an evil which may not only be lessened, but rendered less noxious and dangerous to the peace and good order of society.' Colquhoun estimated that there was a total of 50,000 prostitutes in London. Unfortunately it is impossible to know how he made this calculation.

The French investigator A. J. B. Parent-Duchâtelet used statistics to back up his research in his book on the prostitutes of Paris, a massive, two-volume survey that gave new momentum to English campaigners. The demographic study of 12,000 Parisian prostitutes between 1816 and 1831, detailing their background, earlier occupations, social status and where

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possible their lives after retiring from the streets, was obtained from interviews with the women and from police and hospital records.  

Dr Michael Ryan, whose observations were based mainly on the reports of a puritanical organization called the London Society for the Protection of Young Females and Prevention of Juvenile Prostitution, stated: ‘Not less than 80,000 prostitutes exist in London — a great proportion of whom are of a tender age. It is computed that 8,000 die every year, and yet the number so far from being reduced, is rather on the increase.’ He identified many reasons for the existence of prostitution, including seduction, neglect of parents, idleness, . . . poverty; want of education; ignorance; misery; innate licentiousness; improper prints, books and obscene weekly publications; and the profligacy of modern civilisation.

Controversy over figures punctuated the debate on prostitution. In Lectures on Female Prostitution: its Nature, Extent, Guilt, Causes and Remedy, given in Glasgow in 1842, Ralph Wardlaw questioned the figures of both Parent-Duchâtelet and Colquhoun: ‘The extent of prostitution is the first subject that engages our attention; and there is scarcely any example more striking, of the exaggerations that result from the neglect of statistical accuracy.’ Wardlaw also challenged Ryan’s figures. He thought that, if Ryan’s estimate that two-thirds of the 80,000 prostitutes on London’s streets were under twenty years of age, it would mean that ‘upwards of 53,000’ girls ‘between the ages of fifteen and twenty’ were prostitutes in the city. As the census returns for London in 1821 showed that 10% of the population of 789,628 were between the ages of fifteen and twenty, Wardlaw thought it unlikely that 53,000 of them were prostitutes.
Dr William Acton’s *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects* was first published in 1857. It has been suggested that his views should be ‘regarded as an interesting example of a middle-class Victorian male’s ignorance, fear, prejudice and guilt’.  

He often contradicted himself; for example, he described the prostitute as having ‘a healthy frame, an excellent constitution, and in the vigour of health’ but also wrote that prostitution was ‘the cause of disease, premature decay and premature death’. He tended to make sweeping statements without substantiating the facts, such as ‘year by year in increasing extent, the better inclined class of prostitutes become wedded wives in every grade of society, from the peerage to the stable’. Although extreme poverty was included in Acton’s list of the reasons for prostitution, he put most of the blame for prostitution squarely on the shoulders of the women.

Acton was a keen campaigner for the introduction of legislation to regulate prostitutes and in a lecture to the Royal Medical Society in 1860 he announced that ‘philanthropists and clergymen had to admit that their own reforming schemes had completely failed’. He believed that ‘the problem needed to be handed over to scientific investigation. Moral intervention was by itself at best a mere palliative unless coordinated by official sanitary regulation.

The debate on prostitution, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, was the background for events and disputes that centred on the Spinning House in Cambridge over the same period. The exaggeration of numbers, the perceived degradation of the prostitutes and the belief that harsh policing would help solve the problem all featured locally and reflected national concerns.

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63 Acton, *Prostitution*, pp. 72–73.
64 Acton, *Prostitution*, p. 118.
Novelists' and journalists' accounts of prostitution.

Our knowledge of prostitution in Victorian Britain, partial as it is, has not come only from the pens of religious and medical reformers: there were other writers, including novelists and journalists, who sometimes challenged the stereotypes. Charles Dickens, in his novel *Oliver Twist* of 1838, gave a colourful, though not necessarily accurate, account of low life in Victorian London. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London, 1838; repr. London, 1949), pp. 298–299.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poem *Jenny* portrays a prostitute who is well dressed and blooming. In contrast, in her novel *Mary Barton*, Mrs Gaskell, wife of a Unitarian minister, depicts another prostitute, Esther, as a pathetic creature. These literary accounts of prostitutes reflect a broader interest in describing the lives of the poor, an interest seen also in the development of social reporting.

Henry Mayhew combined anecdotal evidence with statistics in his four-volume *London Labour and the London Poor* published between 1851 and 1862. The book was compiled from articles which first appeared in the *Morning Chronicle*. His text has been described as ‘the single most important source for the manner and speech of the nineteenth-century poor’. Mayhew recorded the stories of individuals, often in the form of conversations, in London’s most overcrowded parishes. His journalism was usually remarkable and sometimes sensational. The accuracy of the pieces may have been questionable, but he brought the characters he described in his encounters to life. In his account of a visit with a police officer to the ‘rookery of St Giles’ in 1860, he described five young women seated around a table in the kitchen of a ‘low lodging house’. ‘They were all prostitutes or thieves but had no appearance of shame. They were apparently very merry.’ Mayhew went on to reflect ‘on the sad consequences of one wrong step’ that had launched the young and

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thoughtless into such a career. Mayhew’s writing reflected his humanity: detailed and informative, it showed sympathy and understanding of the poor, including prostitutes.

Further debates
Alongside the debates on prostitution were broader questions of health and welfare. A cholera epidemic in England in 1831 brought fear to the country. Poverty and immorality were linked with contagion. It will be shown in Chapter 2 that in Cambridge beggars and prostitutes were perceived as pollutants that needed to be controlled. Many reformers in England proposed greater surveillance and regulation of the poor, who were perceived as the vehicles of disease. The proposed solution was to ‘isolate human sources of infection’, subjecting them to a regime of compulsory inspection and education. Frank Mort points out that underlying the battle for public health was a fundamental argument about the validity of state intervention.

Debate on prostitution was widespread and contentious. William Logan, a leader with Josephine Butler in the campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, believed that the main causes of prostitution were overwhelming poverty, overcrowding and poor pay, working conditions and employment opportunity for women. In his book The Great Social Evil; its Causes, Extent, Results and Remedies, published in 1871, he challenged many of Acton’s assertions.

Research into prostitution was not confined to writers in London and other English cities: diligent Scotsmen also investigated it. The Evangelical William Tait, a house surgeon at the Edinburgh Lock Hospital and Secretary of the Edinburgh Society for the Protection of Young Girls, claimed to know ‘more than three-fourths of all the common prostitutes in

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71 Henry Mayhew, reproduced in http://learning.north.londonmet.ac.uk/history/Mayhew.pdf
72 Mort, p. 13.
74 William Logan, The Great Social Evil; its Causes, Extent, Results and Remedies (London, 1871).
Edinburgh' by name. Tait showed sympathy and understanding in his writing, probably because of his close involvement with the girls. As well as listing moral weaknesses, such as licentiousness, love of dress and pride, he added poverty and unemployment as environmental causes. Another Evangelical, James Miller, Professor of Surgery at Edinburgh University, blamed lower-class life and public morality; he condemned the theatre and modern fiction and believed that censorship, moral education and sexual purity were the answer to the problem of prostitution.

Attitudes towards prostitution were always ambivalent. There were those with a pragmatic approach who perceived it as socially beneficial and to be tolerated for its function as a sexual outlet for some male members of society. But there were other commentators who were more rigid in outlook, to whom it was a degrading social evil, evidence of society’s moral failing. Contemporary investigators not only looked for the causes of prostitution but also sought to understand the phenomenon. For many, their zeal in research reflected a missionary desire to reform the women. Evangelical writers tackled the problem from a religious viewpoint, taking an uncompromising stand on the purity of the sexual act within marriage and condemning adultery as evil. They believed that prostitutes contaminated society, but at the same time they acknowledged the part played by middle-class men, the girls’ social superiors, in causing their downfall. There was consensus on the need for some sort of regulation.

Attempts to regulate prostitution

In the 1860s the issue of prostitution became one of 'public health' for the Government and prostitutes faced regulation, repression and reform. Walkowitz pointed to 'the deep-seated social fears and insecurities' of middle-class Victorians at this time. The social underclass, although powerless, was perceived as threatening. 'Pollution became the governing metaphor for the perils of social intercourse between the “Two Nations”. . . . Literally and

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76 James Miller, Prostitution Considered in Relation to Its Cause (Edinburgh, 1859), p. 7.
figuratively, the prostitute became the conduit of infection to respectable society. Walkowitz’s work has made an immense contribution to the study of prostitution, but she has tended to generalize from particular examples. This study substantiates many of her findings, but it also shows how locally specific the treatment of prostitutes was.

Inevitably the greatest concentration of prostitutes was in the towns where there were large numbers of single men. In the garrison towns such as Colchester and ports like Plymouth and Southampton, women, usually defined as private by their sex, found a niche in the world of the public, in the market place. Venereal disease, known to be rife among members of the armed forces, became a serious concern for the Admiralty, the War Office and the Government. Military medical returns reported that one out of three sick cases in the army were venereal in origin by 1864. Venereal disease rates were lower for the navy, but still a source of concern. Women were to be targeted for inspection, since previous attempts to institute the examination of soldiers and sailors had failed because of the violent objections voiced by the men. The state regulation of brothels and prostitutes was already practised in France, Belgium and other parts of continental Europe.

The Contagious Diseases Acts and their regulation of prostitutes became the focal point for public discourse on prostitution from 1860 onwards. In certain designated areas, notably garrison towns and ports, women could be apprehended by plain-clothed policemen and then subjected to an internal examination for disease. This could take place every two weeks, and, if a woman refused to be examined, she was taken before a local magistrate and had to prove that she was virtuous and free of disease. Although at first the focus of attention was centred on the armed forces, in the late 1860s regulationists wanted further state control. They justified their demand for the extension of the ‘sanitary supervision of prostitutes’ to other towns, notably in the north of the country, by drawing on ‘a variety of legal precedents – such as the medical clauses of the Poor Law, Common Lodging House Act, vagrancy statutes

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78 Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, p. 49.
and the new Vaccination Acts'.\textsuperscript{79} There was widespread opposition both to the C. D. Acts (as they became known), which were seen as being aimed at working-class women, and to any proposal to extend their provision. The part played by women like Josephine Butler in the repeal of these Acts will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Although Cambridge was the residence of a large number of unmarried men, it was not treated like the garrison towns, had no lock hospital (a hospital containing venereal wards) and was not included in the extended list of towns for state control. This thesis explores the impact of the debates in Cambridge relating to the policing of prostitution and the C. D. Acts and assesses both support in the town for the extension of the terms of the Acts and demand for their repeal. Chapter 5, in particular, shows how the debates about policing prostitution in Cambridge in both the local and national press centred on moral issues rather than those relating to public health. There were significant differences in the treatment of women believed to be prostitutes in different towns. Although some girls in Cambridge were being treated for venereal disease in the first half of the century, there are only two records for such treatment after the year 1850, 14 years before the first C. D. Act was passed. Eventually, in 1883, Parliament condemned the compulsory medical examination of prostitutes in the designated areas, but the 1869 Act itself was not formally repealed until 1886.

\textit{Modern investigations of Victorian prostitution}

Except for outstanding women such as Josephine Butler, the picture of 'fallen women' portrayed in the nineteenth century is painted almost exclusively by men. In contrast, twentieth-century research into prostitution has been carried out in the main by women. Most Victorian commentators, with notable exceptions such as Mayhew, ignored the individual participants in the acts of prostitution. The absence of the voices of Victorian working-class women has hampered historical investigation; however, in the last thirty years, authors such as Frances Finnegan, Judith Walkowitz, Maria Luddy, Margot Holbrook and Philip Howell have returned to the period and searched for sources that relate directly to named women.

Two approaches that emerged to challenge traditional history in the 1970s, feminist history and history 'from below', highlight the history of the prostitute. Most of the clients continue to be anonymous, but, by using local newspapers, Poor Law records, the minute books of refuges, census returns and other contemporary sources, it has been possible to identify some of the women who were practising prostitution in the nineteenth century. More importantly, the aim of recent investigators has been to learn more about the life histories of the women and less to evaluate their culpability.

In 1979 Frances Finnegan published Poverty and Prostitution, a Study of Victorian Prostitutes in York. This study 'examines all prostitutes and brothel-keepers found to be operating in the cathedral city of York during the first fifty years of Queen Victoria's reign'.

'It does not attempt to explore the institutional or psychological implications of Victorian sexual behaviour, but is a pioneer study of the prostitutes themselves.' Finnegan's main evidence was drawn from the two local weekly papers, the York Gazette and the York Herald, which published detailed reports of the weekly magistrates' court proceedings and the Quarter Sessions. The York Poor Law Guardians' Application and Report Books identified further prostitutes, usually those suffering from some form of venereal disease. She also used the Minute Books of the Ladies' Committee of the York Refuge, which recorded information on the prostitutes who applied to the shelter, such as the age, background and reason for each applicant's initial 'downfall'.

Thus by linking together evidence from the various sources used, it is possible to obtain a very detailed picture of the circumstances, housing conditions, family background and career of the many prostitutes who appeared several times in some or all of the above; and at the same time the main characteristics of the total recorded prostitute community in the city begin to emerge.

Finnegan rightly insisted that this was the first time that such an examination of the subject, at

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80 Finnegan, Poverty and Prostitution, p. 11.
81 Finnegan, Poverty and Prostitution, pp. 14–15.
82 Finnegan, Poverty and Prostitution, p. 14.
the level of the prostitutes themselves, had been undertaken or that material such as Poor Law records and reports of court proceedings had been systematically used for this purpose. Her research suggested that most of the prostitutes in Victorian York lived in ‘those parts of the city most associated with poverty, and, further, that their clients too were drawn from the labouring rather than the middle-classes’.

Finnegan highlighted an editorial in the *York Gazette* published in 1849 which stated that the districts of Walmgate and the Water Lanes had become the major centres of prostitution in York, ‘presenting scenes ... disgusting and disgraceful’. As was so often to be the case in this paper’s observations, there was a sharp distinction between ‘the respectable’ and the ‘poor’.

Finnegan observed that, since prostitutes (like the rest of the poor in York) lived in conditions of ‘great personal filthiness’ and in ‘wretched homes’, it is unlikely that their services were much demanded by those more fortunate than themselves, and that it is difficult to imagine, even if such women turned from a life of prostitution, how they could ever, in view of their poverty, enter ‘respectable’ society.

She believed that, for the vast majority of women discussed in her book, poverty was the result, as well as the cause, of their taking to prostitution and that it was also the condition in which they lived while engaged in that activity.

Finnegan’s monograph has been criticized for its lack of quantitative evidence and for not putting its analysis into any kind of theoretical context. There is no doubt, however, that she contributed a vignette of a group of women in a particular place at a particular time which fits, like a piece of a jigsaw, into a wider Victorian picture. As part of the general movement towards the study of history from below, Finnegan attempted to explore the reality of the Victorian prostitute’s life, separating the facts from the fiction through the systematic examination of all the available sources.

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83 Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution*, p. 34.
84 Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution*, p. 67.
86 Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution*, p. 32.
Judith Walkowitz’s scholarly *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (1980) examined the lives of prostitutes in two ports, Plymouth and Southampton. Her particular interest was in the effects of government regulation on women working as prostitutes in garrison towns. She believed that it was possible to construct a general profile of the women registered under the Contagious Diseases Acts from hospital and police records, from local newspaper reports of petty-session trials of prostitutes, and from the public testimonies of local authorities and repeal workers.  

Finnegan had restricted her exploration to the social and economic plight of particular women working in the brothels and named streets in York, but Walkowitz was interested in the wider picture. She ‘not only explains the timing of the acts, – how, why, and where they were enforced, and who conducted repeal campaigns – but also analyzes more basic questions such as “the enthusiasm for state intervention” into the lives of the respectable poor’. She used the study of ‘an outcast group’, outlining some individual case histories, to explain the political, economic and social implications of the C. D. Acts on the whole community. The prostitutes living in Plymouth and Southampton emerge as a very different group from those living in the city of York. (Although York housed an army garrison, it was not subject to the C. D. Acts.) Unlike the York model, where the standard of living for prostitutes and other working-class women was uniformly low, the prostitutes living in the naval ports were privileged. Walkowitz wrote:

> Indeed the standard of living of prostitutes was perceptibly higher than that of other poor workingwomen. When the ships came in, a prostitute, even a sailor’s woman, could easily earn the weekly wages of a respectable workingwoman in a day. Prostitutes had a room of their own; dressed better; they had spending money and access to the pub, the principal facility in the working-class neighborhood that provided heat, light, cooked food, and convivial sociability. Venereal disease and

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alcoholism were occupational hazards for these women, but they regarded their general state of health as better than the dressmakers and laundresses who slaved away for fourteen hours a day.\textsuperscript{90}

Walkowitz’s study focused on three groups, the working class, feminists and doctors. She concluded that the Acts and the public policy that followed their repeal altered the structure of prostitutes’ relationship with the larger working-class community. Although the social isolation of prostitutes was largely imposed from above, it received the passive acquiescence of the poor themselves.\textsuperscript{91}

Maria Luddy has recently examined the controversial history of prostitution in Ireland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{92} Her description of the life style of the ‘wrens’ or camp followers of the army garrison at Curragh in the nineteenth century emphasizes how diverse the practice and regulation of prostitution was in Ireland.\textsuperscript{93} In Curragh the prostitutes, known as ‘wrens’ because they lived in the bushes and ditches around the camp, were loathed by the local people but were tacitly accepted within the camp boundaries which kept them separate from ‘respectable society’.\textsuperscript{94} As Luddy argues, ‘It was their collective existence that was the threat rather than their individual selves.’\textsuperscript{95}

Margot Holbrook was the first author to use the Spinning House committal books in writing about the history of Cambridge. In 1999 she highlighted the experiences of particular girls and proctors in her article for the local history society, entitled ‘The Spinning House’.\textsuperscript{96} Holbrook was the Secretary of the Lodgings Syndicate for almost twenty years and she has also written about the proctorial system in her book about lodging Cambridge.

\textsuperscript{90}Walkowitz, \textit{Prostitution and Victorian Society}, p. 195.
\textsuperscript{92}Maria Luddy, \textit{Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800–1940} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{93}Luddy, \textit{Prostitution and Irish Society}, pp. 61–62.
\textsuperscript{94}Luddy, \textit{Prostitution and Irish Society}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{95}Luddy, \textit{Prostitution and Irish Society}, p. 61.
undergraduates. These are both local studies which did not attempt to interrogate the Spinning House sources in the context of prostitution nationwide.

Philip Howell also examined the university’s system of policing prostitution in nineteenth-century Cambridge. He contended that it was a precursor to the Contagious Diseases Acts, and he argued that the system ‘produced a geography of prostitution’ in the town. Howell’s analysis of proctorial practice in Cambridge is sophisticated and his bibliography is comprehensive, but, as will be shown, his interpretation of some of the data is suspect.

Other historians who have examined communities in other places have used similar local sources. Linda Mahood, in her book *The Magdalenes: prostitution in the nineteenth century*, described prostitution in Scotland, particularly Glasgow and Edinburgh. Conversations in Cold Rooms, by Jane Long, examined the experiences of women and girls in Newcastle upon Tyne. All have increased our knowledge of the way in which working-class women coped with life in a society undergoing great social and economic changes.

There is also a growing volume of work on the policing of prostitution. Tony Henderson has written about the control of prostitution in London in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and analysed the changes to the law and in public attitudes towards prostitution in that period; like Finnegan and Walkowitz, he has used the testimonies of the prostitutes themselves whenever possible. Robert Storch has examined the restraints imposed on the Metropolitan Police by the law in Victorian London and traced their reactions to pressures

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from the press and other groups. Similarly, Stefan Petrow has described relationships between the police and reform groups, such as The National Vigilance Association, in the last decades of the nineteenth century. These three surveys reveal the constraints placed on the police in London, restrictions that were not experienced by the proctors in Cambridge throughout the seventy years of this study.

Comparisons between different towns

Finnegan thought that only if further research took place would it be possible to make comparisons. This assessment of Cambridge, the Spinning House and its inmates is just such a study, and it challenges Finnegan’s assumption that it was ‘unlikely that the fundamental conclusions reached regarding the circumstances of York’s women on the streets would be substantially different, were another Victorian city chosen for a similar study’.

Walkowitz has shown already that things were very different in one town from another. The garrison town of Aldershot, built for the army in the early nineteenth century with little history and few opportunities for civilians, attracted one kind of prostitute. Many Aldershot prostitutes appear to have been impoverished, transient camp followers, with a large number coming from London and Ireland. In contrast, prostitutes in Greater Plymouth and Southampton had migrated from the surrounding countryside and encountered a more complex and established community life. My research suggests that there was even a difference between the streetwalkers who were arrested in the university towns of Oxford and Cambridge during the same period.

The availability and use of primary sources can influence perceptions. Finnegan relied heavily on York’s two local weekly papers with their reports of the weekly magistrates’ court proceedings and the Quarter Sessions. If my research had depended mainly on the court

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104 Finnegan, Poverty and Prostitution, p. 212.
105 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 8.
reports of the Cambridge Chronicle and other local papers, the findings would have been quite different: most of the Spinning House streetwalkers would have been absent from the study, as they rarely appeared in the borough courts. Those women who were arrested by the police and came before the Cambridge magistrates were often identified as prostitutes in the papers, but they were usually charged with drunkenness and disorderly conduct in the courts. Judging by the newspaper accounts, most of these women were older than the Spinning House girls and, like Finnegan’s prostitutes, went with working-class men, not university undergraduates.

Prostitution was a common problem in Victorian England, but the way in which it was controlled was distinct to each neighbourhood. The importance of ‘place’ in the study of prostitution cannot be over-estimated. In Walkowitz’s ports it was sailors on leave whom the prostitutes served and specially recruited police, often in plain clothes, who made the arrests. Finnegan asserted that in York ‘the whores identified were catering in the main for men of their own class’. There the local police were responsible for patrolling the streets. In Cambridge the Spinning House girls’ clients were relatively wealthy undergraduates, a particular source of concern for those responsible for the young men. University proctors patrolled the streets and made the arrests. Undoubtedly the experiences and behaviour of the women were determined by the kinds of clients using their services and by local policing.

The story of prostitution in London is better documented than that of most other places. The capital’s geography and history, going back to Roman times, made it special and different from other places in its experience of prostitution. Geography played the major part in determining the role of prostitution in a community. The position of a town, such as its proximity to London or to another large city, its size and its raison d’être all made a difference. A growing, modern community behaved differently from a traditional established community. An industrial town such as Manchester had a different ethos from that of a

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106 Finnegan, Poverty and Prostitution, p. 213.
market town such as Norwich. Although Cambridge too had its own local particularities, its distinct history and status brought it to national attention more than many other towns.

Attitudes to prostitution in Cambridge had been defined since the time of Elizabeth I. Monarchs had invested power in Cambridge academics since the reign of Edward II, not only through gifts of land but in Royal Charters which gave them legal authority over their town neighbours, including the power to imprison ‘immoral women . . . suspected of evil’. It was power that Vice-Chancellors were reluctant to relinquish. Cambridge was made up of two competing communities: the one, the town, provided sexual services and the offenders; the other, the university, provided the customers and its police force. It was policed significantly differently from almost every other town in England. Not only were the streets policed by the university’s own men, the proctors and their assistants, the ‘bulldogs’, but the university, unlike Oxford, had its own private prison, the ‘Spinning House’, where women and girls suspected of being prostitutes could be detained for up to two months.

Sources of information for this study

In Cambridge, as in York, Plymouth and Southampton, it has been possible to use local newspapers of the period for research. Cambridge University’s status in the country meant that The Times and other national papers also featured editorials and letters concerning the issue of prostitution and the Spinning House. Contemporary applications by ‘fallen women’ to the local refuge, which were recorded in the Ladies’ Committee Minute Books, are held in the County Record Office, and published and unpublished letters and diaries of ‘respectable’ college fellows are available for scrutiny in Cambridge University Library. Census returns, another useful source, can be consulted, as for other towns in England.

The University Library holds other valuable archives for research into the experiences of the young prostitutes, which make this particular study different from all others; amongst these

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107 Cambridge University Archives (henceforth University/) Collect.Admin.9, pp. 154–169.
are the Spinning House’s three committal books. No written records of the inmates of the Spinning House are available until 1823, but from that year until 1894 handwritten details on about 1550 girls who were detained by the proctors were kept in committal books. These records are now held in the Manuscripts Department of the Library. The first book is quite a slim, leather-bound book and lists those who were arrested from 1823 until 1836. In contrast, the second book is a heavy tome, about eight centimetres thick. This relates to the years from 1836 to 1849 when the Spinning House was at its busiest. The entries in the third book, which cover the period from 1850 until its closure in 1894, are sparser, although the proctors’ comments are often more detailed.

The books were printed with headed columns ready for their manuscript entries. The entry for each young woman stretches across two pages and the open volume displays the records of two inmates, one above the other (Illustration 1). Each girl was given a unique number and the details of subsequent committals were added to her original record. There is room for about twelve entries for each girl and, if her allotted space was filled, she was given a new page with her original number and also a new number. Sometimes an inmate’s entries were carried over from one volume into another. Some clerks were more conscientious than others and, although there is space to record the girl’s age, her parish, the names of her parents, the address of her last situation, her present address, the date of her apprehension and by which proctor she was taken, as well as the charge under which she was held and her punishment, the records for each individual prisoner are rarely complete. There is a wide column on the right-hand side of the page for remarks by the proctor who was on duty, and it was here too that some presiding Vice-Chancellors entered pertinent remarks regarding arrests or sentences. The reader soon learns to recognize the handwriting of individual proctors. Those who were writing in the first half of the century often used a beautiful copperplate script, but unfortunately the entries of others in later decades are sometimes illegible. Ink blots and crossings-out spoil some pages, and occasionally information, apparently added by the warden, reveals the man’s limited literacy and poor spelling.

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108 University/T.VIII.1, T.VIII.2, T.VIII.3.
Illustration 1: Sample page from the first Spinning House committal book
In order to investigate these records in depth, all the handwritten information has been entered onto a computer database, which enables questions to be explored statistically and calculations and evaluations to be made about the history and experiences of the Cambridge streetwalkers. Two linked 'FileMaker' data files, entitled 'Girls' and 'Arrests', facilitate the analysis of information about the girls' backgrounds and highlight changes in both the proctors' and the girls' behaviour over the century. Besides providing the data to examine social trends, the database has helped to elucidate the careers of individual girls. The authentic social experiences of the young women can never be fully identified, but, by linking this information with material gathered from newspapers, institutional records and similar sources, it has been possible to glimpse into the everyday lives of the Spinning House girls: not only do particular named girls emerge from the pages, but their siblings, families and communities also begin to take shape.

The thesis has also presented the opportunity to look at the University of Cambridge in some detail and observe how such a closely knit Victorian community endeavoured to cope with developments taking place beyond its walls, such as the changes in policing within the town. Information on the students who were the streetwalkers' clients is impossible to trace, but it has been possible to gain a general impression of the attitudes and behaviour of members of the university and to examine the lives and literature of some individuals in particular.

In her preface to *Prostitution and Victorian Society* Walkowitz noted: 'The Contagious Diseases Acts present a particularly good opportunity to study class and gender relations in mid-Victorian Britain.'\(^{109}\) She believed that the C. D. Acts opened up 'a small window' into the private lives of the women of the garrison towns.\(^{110}\) Similarly, study of the Spinning House has provided insights into class and gender relations in nineteenth-century Cambridge through the experiences of the local streetwalkers. Just as the C. D. Acts generated social and political resistance, crises relating to the Spinning House motivated people to voice their

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opposition to university privilege and the proctorial system in particular. This thesis will show how the examination of prostitution in Cambridge is similarly related to an analysis of power and authority in the town.

The policing of prostitution in the centre of Victorian Cambridge had consequences that stretched beyond the local streets. This thesis demonstrates that events surrounding the Spinning House not only became a focus of national debate from time to time but also helped to bring about changes in a town which had been divided for centuries by attitudes to class and gender. It shows how the needs of the townspeople of Cambridge eventually prevailed over the traditional, deeply rooted mind-set of some members of the university and how the people claimed their rights to constitutional privileges and self-government.
2: Cambridge, Town and Gown

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.¹

This history of Cambridge, Town and Gown, is centred on its streets – narrow thoroughfares, which for centuries were unpaved and squalid, badly lit and polluted. It was in the crowded heart of this medieval town that the younger members of the university and the town youths brushed shoulders, exchanged insults and fought. Like many urban residents in nineteenth-century England, the Cambridge townspeople were concerned about the pollution of the streets, which for them was mud and dirt. For the university authorities pollution extended beyond the debris to the young women who paraded the public streets and who in the eyes of the proctors posed a threat to the undergraduates, both morally and physically. Through the examination of historical events and the interaction between the lives of the academics and working people, this thesis investigates the tensions that existed in the town in the Victorian period.

The early history of Cambridge is included in this chapter to show how the town changed and developed in the centuries before Victoria’s accession and to highlight the particular part played by the university in its development. For centuries the town has been perceived first and foremost as a seat of learning, but for five hundred years before the university became famous Cambridge was a flourishing and important county and market town.² The university grew gradually stronger and richer within the boundaries of the town of Cambridge and eventually became the dominant partner in the relationship

between Town, represented by tradesmen, innkeepers, craftsmen and their families and Gown, represented by students and dons. The proud, independent townspeople depicted in the Domesday Book were gradually overwhelmed physically and politically by an academic community that became powerful and arrogant, as events in the nineteenth century will show.

The history of Town and Gown in Cambridge began nearly 800 years ago, when the first scholars arrived in the town. It soon became a place with a population that was peculiarly divided between town and university. Charles Bristed, an American student at Trinity College, reflected that, in the medieval centre of Victorian Cambridge in 1840, even the architecture reflected the unequal nature of the division:

Among these narrow, ugly and dirty streets, are tumbled in, as it were at random some of the most beautiful academic buildings in the world. . . . Sometimes the “old court”, or primitive part of the building presents a handsome front to the largest street near it; but frequently, as if to show its independence of, and contempt for, the town, it retires from the street altogether, showing the passer by only its ugliest wall, and the shabbiest gate. This is particularly the case with the very largest and most distinguished colleges.3

The overcrowded houses and shops of the townspeople were squeezed between tall, overpowering walls of handsome colleges and spacious courtyards. The two communities shared the town, closely dependent on each other. It was in the nineteenth century that the town began to reclaim its power from the university and regain its independence.

Pre-Norman and Medieval Cambridge

Peter Bryan has argued that the first settlement to have had truly urban functions was a

fortified Roman encampment on Castle Hill. However, it was not until after the Norman Conquest of 1066 that Cambridge grew in wealth and population. In 1068 William the Conqueror appointed Cambridgeshire’s first Sheriff, Picot, who took up residence on Castle Hill. As a royal borough, Cambridge became economically and politically important to the King and so began the crown’s close association with the town.

Throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, arable and livestock farming became more intensive in the countryside surrounding Cambridge. The trade in wheat and wool made East Anglia one of the most prosperous parts of England and, with the help of its river and the link with the seaport of King’s Lynn, the town’s merchants grew rich and prosperous. With their increased wealth, the burgesses of Cambridge resented the power held by the monarchs. They wanted to govern themselves. In return for payment, the burgesses negotiated charters for certain rights and privileges from their royal rulers. These included the right to hold weekly markets and annual fairs. The largest of these was Stourbridge Fair, which was granted an official charter by King John in 1210 and was said to have been at one time the most important fair in Europe. Other charters granted the townspeople the right to appoint their own officers such as Mayor, bailiffs and treasurer.

The first written evidence of scholars settling in Cambridge is dated 1209. A document refers to the migration of scholars from Oxford to Cambridge. Legal documents in 1226 and 1231 mention the ‘Chancellor and Masters’, but Peterhouse, the first college, was not founded until 1284. King’s Hall, set up by Edward II in 1317, was followed by Michaelhouse in 1324. A further eleven colleges had emerged by 1520. Some of these

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5 Bryan, The Shaping of the City, p. 30.
6 Bryan, The Shaping of the City, p. 56.
7 Bryan, The Shaping of the City, p. 59.
foundations profoundly affected the local townspeople. In the years immediately following 1441, roads and buildings were appropriated by Henry VI for his college – King’s College. It took several years of negotiation to acquire the plot because of its ownership by different people and institutions. There was much anger at and opposition to Henry’s plans, especially as they involved closing roads with access to the river. Other areas of land belonging to townspeople were procured for the building of colleges such as Queens’ and St Catherine’s. University and college buildings began to dominate the land between the river and the High Street. They replaced houses and commercial buildings that had served Cambridge’s river port for years.

The sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

In the last decade of the fifteenth century and in the sixteenth century, new colleges were built on land previously used by other institutions. Of the seven colleges founded in that period, five were built on the sites of former religious houses, some of which had been closed by Henry VIII during the Dissolution. The university encroached still further on land which had belonged to the townspeople. By 1600 there were sixteen colleges in Cambridge; there were to be no new foundations until that of Downing College at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The sixteenth century was an important period in the history of the University of Cambridge. It had become renowned for its great thinkers and reformers and attracted academics from abroad such as the Dutchman Erasmus. The university flourished.

Life in Cambridge also changed dramatically in the seventeenth century. The political unrest that affected the whole country throughout most of the century also damaged the

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morale and reputation of the university. Dons and students alike suffered from the upheavals of the Civil War, with interference by both the Crown and Parliament. However, by the time of Queen Anne’s accession, the university had, according to John Steegmann, ‘settled down to its eighteenth-century privacy, unmolested by Parliament, hardly interfered with by royalty, free to pursue its academic, pluralistic, slothful, learned, quarrelsome, bibulous, self-contained and supremely self-satisfied way’.

Most Cambridge dons were too poor to enjoy an extravagant lifestyle. Only a minority of them mirrored the debauched characters in Robert Cruikshank’s cartoons or fitted Steegmann’s description of a don,

*a paunchy, bag-wigged person in a voluminous gown, drinking a great deal of port and brandy, sleeping with his bedmaker, ignoring his pupils unless they were of noble birth, in which case he toadied quite unblushingly, wanting in scholarship but active in petty intrigue.*

*His home, his whole world, was not even Cambridge but his college; he had no access to the social world beyond, he saw no society beyond that of his own Fellows, and if he wanted to keep his job he was condemned to a technical celibacy. In fact, college life among the senior members must have been rather like monastic life just before the Dissolution.*

In the middle of the eighteenth century the walk from one side of the university to the other at its widest point – from Peterhouse to Jesus – took fifteen minutes and the sixteen colleges, which housed the 700 undergraduates and 400 fellows, were grouped together in less than half a square mile. ‘This small world was part of the British, or more properly

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9 John Steegmann, *Cambridge as it was and as it is today* (London: Batsford Press, 1940), p. 31.
10 Steegmann, *Cambridge as it was*, p. 33.
English Establishment."\textsuperscript{11} The majority of undergraduates were poor like their teachers, but they had a reputation for being hardworking in spite of tutorial neglect. Most of them hoped to be ordained as priests in the Church of England on graduation and to find livings in parishes with sufficient income to support them and in time a family.

It was said that an inhabitant of Cambridge from 1500 would have recognized the salient streets and landmarks of the town in 1800.\textsuperscript{12} Physically the town had changed little during the previous three centuries. Sailing barges were still a common sight on the river. Although trade to London and other English ports via King's Lynn and the North Sea declined in the eighteenth century, the river still ran through the town, bringing the 'purest Wine . . . by the Way of Lynn; Flesh, Fish, Wild-fowl, Poultry, Butter, Cheese, and all Manner of Provisions, from the adjacent Country', which, no doubt, graced the dinner tables of the Vice-Chancellors.\textsuperscript{13} There had been proposals to link the Cam with the Thames, but they came to nothing owing to opposition from the Corporation and the conservators of the Cam.\textsuperscript{14} Edmund Carter described the town in 1753: 'And in general there is no town in England better supplied with commodities of all sorts than Cambridge; first, from the conveniency of its river, and then from the many stage-waggons and coaches which are constantly going and coming between there and London.'\textsuperscript{15}

Road transport to and from London, East Anglia, the Midlands and North of England increased in the eighteenth century. By 1800 there were many waggoners and carriers based in the town and coaching inns became an important feature in Cambridge. In the

\textsuperscript{12} Bryan, The Shaping of the City, p. 100.
1790s coaches took people to London in eight hours, leaving inns such as The Red Lion in Petty Cury, The Rose in the Market Place and The Hoop in Bridge Street. At one time there were at least forty inns or ale houses in the centre, most of them in the market area, all catering for the needs of coach drivers, their passengers and their horses.

The town's inhabitants doubled during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the 1801 census for Cambridge showed a population of nearly 10,000, of which about 800 were resident members of the university. All were living in the same area as the few hundred inhabitants had eight hundred years earlier. The growth of Cambridge was still limited by a ring of common fields, and town houses were often rebuilt on the same site to give more accommodation to the growing population. This rebuilding served to exacerbate existing problems: at the end of the eighteenth century, overcrowding, the lack of a clean water supply and poor sanitation maintained a medieval aspect and increased tension between the two communities within the town.

*The nineteenth century*

This then was the town of Cambridge at the beginning of the nineteenth century. - a town apparently caught in a time-warp. Surrounded by wide swaths of countryside, small villages and quiet towns, it was, unlike Oxford, comparatively isolated. Even the cathedral city of Ely, just fifteen miles away, was hardly more than a village. Over the centuries, Town and Gown had been forced to become closely dependent on each other by the geography of the place. The university needed the local people as tradesmen, builders and servants, and the townspeople needed customers and employment. Records in the St John's College archives suggest that in the early part of the century the college had about

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140 servants, of whom 100 were bed-makers or laundresses. By 1870 it had 110 servants. The number of students in college had risen, but the proportion of servants to gentlemen residents had changed from 3:4 in 1800 to 1:4 in 1870. It is thought that the total number of servants employed by the colleges remained at about 750 throughout the period. But, although the two communities were intertwined, they were also estranged.

The streets

The first impressions of many young men new to Cambridge reveal their disappointment with the town. Alexander Gooden went up to Trinity College in 1836. In his first letter home to his mother he wrote: 'My father will probably have informed you how little I was at first captivated with the external appearance of Cambridge. Nothing material has occurred since his departure.' Gooden found the streets and pavements very narrow and the shops and houses, small and shabby 'without exception'. The River Cam was as unattractive as the streets; in colour and width it resembled a ditch. However, he found, hidden behind the walls, the beauty of the college gardens. 'The trees are very fine, the grand walks very well kept, and the grass-plots very well rolled.'

Four years later, Charles Bristed, inhabited the same shabby streets. His description emphasizes the squalor of medieval Cambridge:

Imagine the most irregular town that can be imagined, . . . Some of these tortuous lanes are without trottoirs, – like the streets of old Continental towns; but it is more common to find a passage or short street all sidewalk – as we call what the English call causeway – without any carriage road. The houses are low and antique, sometimes their upper stories project out into and over the narrow
pathway, making it still narrower, and their lower stories are usually occupied as shops—tailors and booksellers being the predominant varieties. Every now and then your road passes over a muddy little river, not larger than a tolerable canal, which rambles through and around the town in all sorts of ways, so that in whatever direction you walk from any point, you are pretty sure to come to a bridge before long. Such is the town of Cambridge—the bridge over the Cam.  

Another American, William Everett, who went up to Trinity College from Harvard in 1859, described Oxford as 'one of the most picturesque of England's old cathedral cities', but thought the streets of Cambridge were 'too crooked to be convenient or imposing, and not crooked enough to be picturesque'. He was equally unimpressed by the river:

Cambridge . . . is of all the provincial English boroughs the most insignificant, the dullest, and the ugliest. It is at once the last town on the chalk, and the first on the fen, – a combination admirable for raising wheat, but wholly at variance with beauty of all kinds. . . . through the melancholy of these marshes, creeps what seems a forgotten canal, nowhere over seventy feet wide, with a few locks and half a hundred black barges; and this you are informed is the river Cam, whence Cambridge.

Cambridge's two communities—the townspeople and the academics—inhabited the same small neighbourhood, confined by the curves of the river and the encircling common land. Through the centuries the university's stone buildings imposed their shade on the town's meagre streets. The high walls of the colleges stood over the shops and houses of the tradesmen. 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. In the daytime this was the bustling heart of Cambridge, crowded and cluttered.
The poultry and corn sellers set up in one area, the butchers in another and the fruit and vegetable stall-holders in yet another. The Hay Market and Cattle Market were held in the town centre until they moved to Pound Hill in 1820 and 1843 respectively. The narrow streets and passageways crisscrossed the Market Square. From King’s to Jesus College, Christ’s to Clare College, the Red Lion to the Rose or the Blue Boar to the Eagle, the medieval centre was the thoroughfare for Town and Gown alike. This was also the beat of both proctors and Spinning House girls. The streets, busy and safe in daylight, were sometimes hazardous on winter nights when, ill lit and poorly maintained, they were the site of confrontations between students and townspeople.

Who was responsible for the streets? Local government in Cambridge differed from that of most other towns in England because of the constant vying for power by Town and Gown. The care of the streets was a constant ‘source of discord’ between the university and the town. It was said that in the medieval period compositions were drawn up defining the duties and powers of each, but ‘the rivals were at loggerheads again before the ink was dry’. Shared responsibility did not lead to clean, safe streets and an Act passed in the time of Henry VIII explained that: ‘the auncient Boroughe and Towne of Cambraydge ... ys at this day very sore decayed in pavyng, and the high stretes & lanes within the same Towne excedyngly noyed wyth fylth and myre lying there in great heapes ... ’ Few things had changed at the end of the eighteenth century and there was little evidence of civic pride. There had been some half-hearted measures taken to improve the safety and condition of the streets in 1788, when ‘each householder was obliged to pave half the street in front of his house’. However, when about two decades later

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23 Atkinson, *Cambridge Described & Illustrated*, p. 21
members of Town and Gown petitioned Parliament for help with further paving, they were rebuffed.\textsuperscript{27}

For centuries each parish had been responsible for a ‘nightly watch’, but in 1825, in response to the failure of this force of 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 a general watch on the streets.\textsuperscript{28}

As in other towns and cities in the nineteenth century, more attention began to be paid to matters of public health and social order. Again and again there are references to the dreadful state of the town’s streets. Henry Gunning observed that in Cambridge ‘very little desire was evinced by the Corporation or inhabitants for improving the town by cleansing, paving or lighting’. He thought that members of the corporation doubted whether the heavy expense of making improvements would be worthwhile.\textsuperscript{29} In 1833, at the time of the Royal Commission on Municipal Corporations, ‘The Common Council, although they had a large annual balance, refused to undertake or to assist in works of public utility even when they were legally bound to do so.’\textsuperscript{30} A correspondent to the Cambridge Chronicle in 1833 commented that after decades of talk the streets were still ‘in the most disgraceful and dangerous state and the proper authorities do not seem inclined to stir in the matter’.\textsuperscript{31}

The altercations on the streets between young men from the town and students from the university, particularly after dark, were sometimes violent. Josiah Chater, who lived and

\textsuperscript{27} Elisabeth Leedham-Green, \textit{A Concise History of the University of Cambridge} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 11.

\textsuperscript{28} Leedham-Green, \textit{A Concise History of the University of Cambridge}, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{29} H. Gunning, \textit{Reminiscences of the University, Town and County of Cambridge} (Cambridge, 1854), pp. 321–322.

\textsuperscript{30} Atkinson, \textit{Cambridge Described & Illustrated}, p. 118.

\textsuperscript{31} Cambridge Chronicle, 18 January 1833.
worked in the centre of the town, recorded many of the outbreaks of hostility. The Fifth of November was the traditional day for battles, but on 9 March 1846, after four gownsmen had been arrested, he described in his diary an example of violence between Town and Gown:

The four University men were tried this morning at the Town Hall. One was fined £1.0.0., one ten shillings and one 2/6d. and to pay their costs. The other was let off. There was a great many people on the Market Hill and the University men vow vengeance to the police tonight. At about half past eight the gownsmen assembled in the Rose Crescent to the amount of, as near as I could guess, 300, and from there they paraded the streets till a little after nine; they began to kick up a row; they had tremendous cudgels. . . . The Proctors and Masters were all out, but to no purpose – there has not been such a tremendous row for many years. After they were taken up, the 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. Christ’s have got it worst. There are above eighty panes broken.32

Street fights like this were not confined to Cambridge. Lewes in Sussex was notorious for its anti-catholic disorder on 5 November, but in Cambridge the battles on the streets between the undergraduates and town youths were complicated by the tensions concerning responsibility for policing between the proctors and the borough constabulary.

The borough police

Cambridge had set up a system of policing in 1833 with separate day and night police, some constables being part-time. The municipal commissioners observed that on 5 November 1833 the town police were very inefficient: the chief and high constables, 51 constables and six watchmen did far less to keep order in the town than the proctors and

their servants. The commissioners believed that conditions in the town in the long
vacation must have been scandalous.33 In 1836, after the Municipal Corporations Act
1835, a Superintendent of Police was appointed for the town and a new force consisting of
two inspectors, four sergeants and 24 constables was formed. A Watch Committee was
established, which had the power to determine the number, appointment, dismissal and
entire management and direction of the constabulary force.

Relationships between the university proctors and the town police were often difficult. In
May 1846 the Vice-Chancellor and College Heads challenged the way town constables
arrested members of the university. Initially the Vice-Chancellor wrote to the Mayor
requesting that the Watch Committee give directions to police officers to take any
members of the university they apprehended to the Vice-Chancellor instead of remanding
them to the local police station. The Mayor replied that the Watch Committee had no
power to comply with the proposition.34 The Vice-Chancellor considered that there was
nothing in the Municipal Reform Act inconsistent with such a course. The Mayor had the
last word: on 29 June 1846 he wrote that the Watch Committee conceived that any change
of policy would interfere with the jurisdiction of the magistrates and the privileges of the
people.35

Although the university paid part of the cost of the borough police and had a proportionate
number of representatives on the Cambridge Watch Committee, the committee’s powers

33 Extract from Report on Municipal Corporations referred to in The Victoria History of the County of
pp. 2193–2194.
34 Cambridgeshire Record Office (henceforth CRO), Watch Committee, bundle of miscellaneous papers.
35 CRO, Watch Committee, bundle of miscellaneous papers.
remained distinct from, and unrelated to, those of the proctors until 1856. In that year, as a result of mediation between Town and Gown by Sir John Patterson (see later in this chapter), the Watch Committee was reconstituted so as to contain five members of the Senate to sit with the ten town representatives. It is apparent that from then onwards relationships between the Vice-Chancellor and the Watch Committee gradually began to improve. A letter from the Vice-Chancellor to the Mayor, copied in the minutes of the committee dated 22 June 1874, expressed ‘satisfaction at the manner in which the Police discharged their duty during the visit of His Grace the Chancellor of the University. They kept order in so admirable a manner as to leave nothing to be desired.’ He enclosed £10 for the Police Superannuation Fund.

**The people of Cambridge**

It is difficult today to envisage the gap that there was between Town and Gown in the first half of the nineteenth century. Who were the people who inhabited these two very different communities? 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 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.

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38 CRO, Watch Committee Minutes, 1874.
Since the time of Queen Elizabeth I the authorities had perceived the women of the town as a threat to university discipline and a danger to the moral welfare of their male charges. In her dissertation on the women of St Matthew’s parish, ‘Bedders and Brewers’, Angela Waller listed the restrictions relating to women working in Cambridge. Although from the eighteenth century onwards women over the age of about thirty were allowed to work as servants in the colleges, earlier, in 1625, the then Vice-Chancellor had decreed:

That the nurse of sick persons, and all laundresses should be of a mature age, good fame, and wives or widows, who themselves should take the scholars linen to wash, and bring the same back again when washed.

That young maids should not be permitted upon any pretence whatever, to go to students chambers.

That if it should be necessary to cleanse any college, the alms people, or old women of at least 50 years of age should be permitted to perform the work.²⁹

It is not difficult to establish a pattern of life for the academics of Cambridge. Members of the university, who spent their hours immersed in literature, have left a wealth of writings about their lives in diaries, letters and books, but we lack the voices of the others – the men and women on whom the university community depended. One rare voice in a culture of deference is that of John Wisken, a disrespectful scullion at Christ’s College, who was born in 1798 and died in 1873. His ditty was kept and later published by the college:

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²⁹ Angela Waller, ‘Bedders and Brewers: women of St Matthews, work and images, 1850–1900’ (unpublished master’s dissertation, Anglia Polytechnic University, 1994).
Down at the tables are seated
Scores of Men with appetites sharp
The waiters all running about
And many with tongues there do carp

Wisken's name in Hall oft sounded
A message from some one is pop't
Meat tough, or something else wanting
Or knife in the gravy is drop't

Wisken, Potatoes I do want
Wisken, do bring the greens this way
Wisken, ask if there's any soup
Wisken, do hear me what I say\(^{40}\)

John Wisken was not the only member of the family to achieve recognition within the university. One of his sons went to the Perse School and then to Caius College, where he was named eighth wrangler in 1848. Only occasionally was there such a crossing of class boundaries.

Contemporary newspapers provide some insight into particular aspects of the non-academic residents of the town and there are also diaries of the period, such as the one written by the draper Josiah Chater.\(^{41}\) Besides highlighting some of the most important local events of the period, Chater provides a bystander's observations on street life such as the skirmishes between Town and Gown youths.

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'Gown'

In 1800 the university was small and inward-looking. All its fellows were members of the Church of England and most of them were ordained. Members of the university, both undergraduates and graduates, belonged to one of the sixteen colleges. Most of the students lived in Cambridge for only part of the year, returning to their homes in the vacations. It was not until 1882 that all the colleges allowed their fellows to marry and live with their wives and families in houses beyond the precincts of the colleges.

The largest of the colleges in the eighteenth century were St John’s and Trinity, and there was intense rivalry between the two, not only academically but in every aspect of college life. All the colleges had similar statutes but each had its own particular characteristics. King’s, for instance, always had a close link with Eton College. Peterhouse was patronized by the aristocracy when Dr Keene was Master, because his brother was the distinguished diplomat, Sir Benjamin Keene. Clare was fashionable at one time because of the popularity of a tutor, Dr Laughton, who was considered particularly noble and virtuous. Some colleges attracted students from particular geographical regions: for example Norfolk and Suffolk boys tended to go to Caius College, whilst Cornish boys went to Pembroke. Given the close communities of like-minded men that the university fostered, social prejudices were not challenged.

Social hierarchy was clearly defined among the students. They were admitted to a college as a nobleman, a fellow-commoner, a pensioner or a sizar, and this division of undergraduates must have emphasised class distinctions. Most of the noblemen and fellow-commoners, who enjoyed certain privileges, could afford to be extravagant and idle. However, the majority of undergraduates were pensioners and not usually wealthy; it is probable that some of them would not have gone to the university if they had not
received exhibitions from their schools. ‘Most of them were the children of clergymen and professional men, with no pretensions to good birth and not dispensed from the obligation of earning their own living.’

The poorest undergraduates were the sizars. ‘Many of them were the children of poor clergymen and small farmers, and not a few came from much humbler stock, being the sons of artisans and petty tradesmen.’ Winstanley explained that sizars were not allowed to forget that they were charity boys and often had to work as servants in college to earn their keep. They were generally well above average ability and hardworking: many famous scholars, including Isaac Newton, began their academic careers as sizars.

Cambridge don, author, critic and Victorian mountaineer, Sir Leslie Stephen, remarked: ‘The world may be divided into two classes, those who have and those who have not received a University Education.’ In The Victorians, A. N. Wilson captured the atmosphere of a society in which education played a key role in cementing class membership. He told of a surprise encounter in the Jordan desert in 1862 between Albert, Prince of Wales, his Oxford tutor, Dr Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, and a ‘sheikh’ heading a number of mounted Arabs. After some initial confusion and apprehension on the part of the prince and his tutor, warm greetings were exchanged as Stanley recognized the sheikh as his old Oxford friend, William Gifford Palgrave. Wilson uses this anecdote to show how tightly knit was the Victorian ‘upper ten thousand’, that is, the aristocracy, the literary and political classes, and those educated at the universities, and one sees that much of the point of

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'education' for the Victorians was not merely to impart knowledge but to create a class, who regardless of social, ethnic or religious origin, were all part of the same club.  

Entry into the universities was strictly limited, so membership of this elite 'club' was denied to most of the population. In Cambridge members of the university all belonged, but few townspeople were eligible to join.

'Town'

Life for the members of the working class was very different. Before 1850 there was almost no educational provision for working-class children in Cambridge. Nearly all of the schools that existed were Church of England schools indirectly controlled by university men. They were run by parish charities which 'favoured the meek and deserving' and were in the charge of parish clergy – all Cambridge graduates appointed by the colleges who 'shared the outlook of the University authorities'. In 1838 a Non-Conformist school for poor children was founded in the town, the first primary school to be beyond the university’s control.

In 1840 the Cambridge Advertiser and Free Press stated:

In this large town containing 25,000 inhabitants there are not more than about 1,200 of the poorer classes who are receiving daily instruction. . . . In no place, equal in extent and population, is the education of the poor less cared for, than in Cambridge. In no place is ignorance so prevalent, or its attendant vices, idleness and profligacy, more abundant.  

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46 Wilson, The Victorians, p. 274.
48 Cambridge Advertiser and Free Press, 5 August 1840.
The Perse School, founded by Dr Stephen Perse in 1615 in Free School Lane in the heart of the town, was an exception. It had a long tradition of providing a good classical education for bright boys, but this was for a small minority. There is also evidence that in the middle of the nineteenth century some senior members of the university, for example The Revd F. D. Maurice, a Christian Socialist, took an active role in promoting education for working men in the town. In his diaries Josiah Chater frequently referred to attending lectures given by university dons at the Working Men’s College and the Young Men’s Christian Association.49

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, poor pay, lack of employment and the high prices of food had caused widespread distress in many parts of England. Although the pace of life was slower in Cambridge than in those towns where communications were more efficient, it was not immune to some of the problems found in other parts of the country. The decline of jobs in agriculture, because of bad harvests and the use of new machinery, had increased competition for work in the town. Life for working people in Cambridge, a town with only one major employer, the university, became more and more difficult. Local people believed that the situation was made worse by a drifting population, which wandered throughout the country, searching for work or for charity in order to survive. Those in authority believed that an influx of these travellers, whom they saw as beggars and vagrants, posed a real threat to the town’s community.

At a meeting of the Vice-Chancellor and other members of the university and of the magistrates and principal inhabitants of the town of Cambridge, held on 8 May 1819 at

49 Porter, Josiah Chater’s Diaries, pp. xiv, 74.
Magdalene College for the purpose of considering the propriety of establishing a Society for the Suppression of Mendicity, it was resolved unanimously:

1. That the Precincts of the University and the Town of Cambridge have long been much infested with Beggars and Vagrants.

2. That this class of persons, besides obtaining alms upon false pretences, are often guilty of extorting money by threats, of stealing in College rooms and dwelling-houses, and of committing various depredations in the vicinity of the Town; and that they not infrequently bring along with them fevers, small-pox, and other infectious diseases.

3. That it is expedient to establish a Society for the suppression of Vagrancy and Mendicity, within the limits of the Town and University.

4. That the Magistrates of the Town and County, present at this Meeting, are determined to proceed to conviction against, and to punish with the utmost severity of the law, all such delinquents and all who are convicted of lodging and harbouring them.

The document shows the obsession that the university authorities had with any disorder on the town's streets. Beggars were clearly offending against the vagrancy laws and could be brought before the magistrates in the local courts, but the regulation of prostitution was less clear-cut. Prostitution, like vagrancy, was perceived as a pollutant that needed to be controlled, but, since technically it was not a crime and streetwalkers could not be brought before the magistrates unless they were drunk, making a disturbance or arrested under the vagrancy laws, it was more difficult to police than vagrancy. The Vice-Chancellor's duty was to protect his vulnerable young undergraduates from the promiscuous women who polluted the public streets, both morally and physically. The university used the charter granted to it by Queen Elizabeth I in 1561, which gave the Vice-Chancellor power to arrest and punish women who were 'suspected of evil'.

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Suspected offenders were removed from the public space and detained until they were sentenced. Vagrants were usually expelled from the town, whilst women and girls were 'admonished and discharged' or given a prison sentence. This attitude to women on the streets had a long history in Cambridge, although in the sixteenth century an offender could have expected a more public expulsion. On 2 November 1565, for example, the Vice-Chancellor ordered that Mary Febbibly 'should be carried to prison at 11 of the clock, then brought out and set on a cart, from thence be carried in it through the streets to the Spitell House, and so to be banished the town for ever'.

Like similar societies in England, the original Mendicity Society, with its severely repressive attitudes, was abandoned by the 1840s. F. A. Keynes quotes the report of the Charity Commissioners in 1838 in reference to 'Hobson's Workhouse (or the Spinning House)', that it was 'used for the reception of persons sent by the Mendicity Society of Cambridge so long as it existed; & vagrants not belonging to the town or university were sent there, relieved & discharged'. In 1847 a new, more humane society was founded, with the aim of assisting artisans and labourers who were looking for work in Cambridge and giving them a meal and shelter for the night. Mendicity House was opened in 1848 in a part of the Old Manor House in Barnwell 'under the charge of a resident Constable and Matron'. It is said that over 12,000 travellers were helped between 1846 and 1854, an average of forty a week.

Tensions between Town and Gown

In the nineteenth century the university was seen by many townspeople as self-satisfied and arrogant, ignoring their views and needs. Suspicion, jealousy and hostility had for

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51 Cooper, Annals of Cambridge, v, p. 298.
52 Keynes, By-ways of Cambridge History, p. 137.
53 Keynes, By-ways of Cambridge History, p. 137.
long led to tensions in the often uneven partnership of Town and Gown, which affected not only the university and the borough but the lives of individuals as well. Although King John had granted Cambridge a Royal Charter in 1201, there is a case for believing that throughout the following centuries the Crown was responsible for aggravating the situation by giving the university privileges over the town. For example, Edward II granted a charter which obliged the Mayor and bailiffs to take an oath in front of the senior proctor agreeing to observe 'the liberties and customs of this university, as concerning the keeping of the King's Peace and the assize of bread and beer and other Victuals'. Henry III granted a similar charter to the university, known as the Magna Congregatio, decreeing that six representatives from each parish should swear in front of the Vice-Chancellor to assist the Mayor and bailiffs in keeping the peace. By the end of the eighteenth century this ceremony no longer took place, but in July 1817 the then Vice-Chancellor, Dr Wood, Master of St John's College, summoned two aldermen, two burgesses and two respectable householders from each parish to attend the ceremony in the chancel of the University Church and 'threatened reprisals if the summons was not obeyed'. The antagonism towards the university caused by the revival of this annual event is easy to imagine.

By the time that Victoria came to the throne, the powers of the university over the town were far-reaching and deeply resented by the townspeople. They were perceived as grossly unfair, but the university had the law on its side. 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 fourteen miles of Cambridge without the consent of the Vice-Chancellor. The university had sole supervision of all

weights and measures. Vice-Chancellors exercised their rights to license alehouses and the sale of wine. Two publicans from the town, Sam Boutell and William Grey, were deprived of their licences in 1838 and 1839 respectively, for 'letting undergraduates take women' into their public houses and harbouring persons of bad character.\textsuperscript{56} Strict rules governed business between the undergraduates and traders, and any divergence from the norm meant instant withdrawal of a shopkeeper's, innkeeper's or other tradesman's privilege to sell to or serve members of the university. This practice, known as 'discommuning', had its provision extended in Vice-Chancellors' decrees in 1835, 1844, 1846 and 1847, thus increasing the university's domination of the town.\textsuperscript{57}

Daniel Defoe had remarked on the gulf between Town and Gown in an account of a visit to Cambridge in the 1720s:

I come now to the Town, and University of Cambridge; ... the Colleges, Halls, and Houses for Literature are promiscuously scatter'd up and down among the other Parts, and some even among the meanest of the other Buildings, ... ; yet they are all Encorporated together, by the Name of the University, and are govern'd apart, and distinct from the Town, which they are so intermix'd with. As their Authority is distinct from the Town, so are their Privileges, Customs, and Government; they choose Representatives, or Members of Parliament for themselves, and the Town does the like for themselves, also apart.\textsuperscript{58}

Cambridge, like Oxford, had been granted the privilege of sending its own members to Westminster in 1603 and retained it until the parliamentary election in 1950. Graduates were able to vote both for their university candidates and for candidates in the

\textsuperscript{56} Mansfield, 'Grads and Snobs', p. 192.
\textsuperscript{57} Mansfield, 'Grads and Snobs', p. 186.
\textsuperscript{58} [Daniel Defoe,] \textit{A Tour Thro' the whole Island of Great Britain, Divided into Circuits or Journies. By a Gentleman}, vol. 1 (London, 1724), p. 131.
constituencies where they owned property. This meant that some Cambridge university men were entitled to as many as three parliamentary votes, and this at a time when, in spite of the Reform Act of 1832, only about one in five of the townsmen in Cambridge had a vote.

_Municipal reform_

In the nineteenth century, after centuries of unbending tradition, Cambridge was transformed. The pace of change was slow at first, but it gathered momentum as the century advanced. The university grew in numbers. The town stretched its boundaries in all directions and quadrupled its population. Physical, social, political and economic events reshaped Cambridge irreversibly. Some changes, such as the installation of a sewage system, were driven by necessity, but others, such as those relating to the licensing laws, were brought about by pressure from a town population that was gaining in confidence.

In the early decades of the century squalor and ill health pervaded the existence of the townspeople who lived in the old courts and narrow streets of Cambridge. In 1804 the workhouse population numbered a little over a hundred, with nearly five times that number receiving outdoor relief. Poverty was not confined to Cambridge; it extended to every town and city in England and the new Poor Law of 1834 was an attempt by Parliament to cope with the problem. Cambridge retained its parochial workhouses, but by 1834 most of those still open were little better than badly run lodging houses. There were beds for 150, with ten times that number being relieved outside.⁵⁹

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It is apparent that for the first third of the century Cambridge people were particularly badly served by their aldermen. A leading article in *The Times*, provoked by the Royal Commission on Municipal Corporations of 1833, commented on the town’s local government:

> Probably no judicial investigation into a public trust ever brought to light more shameless profligacy or more inveterate dishonesty, more bare-faced venality in politics, a more heartless disregard for the claims of the poor in the perversion of funds left for their benefit, or a more degrading subservience to the views of the rich when they appeared in the shape of patrons or distributors of places, a more insatiable cupidity in the corporate officers to enrich themselves with the corporate property, or a more entire neglect of their duties, and functions as magistrates, than are presented by the evidence now before us.\(^{60}\)

In the previous fourteen years the corporation had spent £1300 on dinners from public funds but only £480 on public purposes. One alderman paid only £40 for two acres of public land in Hills Road and then sold it for £400 a year later.\(^1\) 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’.\(^2\) The mire on Coe Fen came up to the horses’ knees and medical men considered that if the common was not drained it would be fatal to the health of the town.

Commentators have described the corporation as being uniformly hostile or indifferent to the interests of the town at large:

\(^{60}\) *The Times*, 16 November 1833.


Scavenging of the town was given out to contract, and as it was to the contractor’s interest to do as little as possible the work resolved itself into little more than sweeping the paved streets with brooms. Many of the yards and streets, however, were not only unpaved but without a foot pavement; the inhabitants waded through mud and dirt to their houses, and they were practically without means of removing the heaps of refuse which accumulated in the courts. In the numerous cul de sacs the bad air remained stagnant, and often they were so narrow that light was wanting as well as ventilation. Large ponds in some of the yards and streets formed receptacles for dead dogs and cats.63

The Reform Act of 1832 had brought about the reform of the electoral system in the country. The next step in the reform of the constitution was that of the municipal corporations. The Whig government set up a Royal Commission in 1833 to investigate the working of local councils. The commission found that there were many variations in the way that corporations were chosen, but in over 180 of them only members of the corporation were allowed to vote. It was usual for them to re-elect themselves or to vote friends or relatives on to the council. Power was often held by a small number of people. The commission found evidence of corruption, with council members becoming rich at the expense of the town’s inhabitants. The report was damning:

Corporation funds are frequently expended in feasting and in paying the salaries of unimportant officers. In some cases, in which the funds are expended on public works, an expense has been incurred beyond what would be necessary if due care had been taken. These abuses often originate in negligence . . . in the opportunity afforded of obliging members of their own body, or the friends and relations of such members.64

64 The Report of the Royal Commission on Municipal Corporations, P.P. H.C. 116 (1835), XXIII.
The commissioners singled out Cambridge in the report: 'At Cambridge, the practice of turning the Corporation property to the profit of individuals was avowed and defended by a member of the council.'\(^{65}\) As a result of the commission's findings a bill was drawn up and brought to the House of Commons in June 1835. Three months later the legislation went onto the statute book.

From the middle of the fourteenth century until the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 Cambridge's town council was in the hands of a few selected officers who were elected by freemen of the town. In the early 1830s there were 158 freemen but only 118 of these were resident. 'It was the custom to elect as mayor two or three persons in rotation; these persons were generally selected from, or nominated by a particular family.'\(^{66}\) The family used its influence in support of the political party favoured by the Duke of Rutland, High Steward of the county, and received, through the influence of the Duke, appointments to various civil posts in the town and county.\(^{67}\)

The new Act brought a welcome change to the townspeople of Cambridge. It was one of 178 boroughs that were granted permission to allow ratepayers who had lived in the borough for three years the right to vote. Borough politics had been dominated by the Mortlock family and the Duke of Rutland for many years, but the Act of 1835 brought about dramatic changes: the corrupt Mortlock–Rutland Tory council was replaced entirely by a Liberal group with laissez-faire businessmen and several university Whigs.\(^{68}\)

\(^{66}\) Atkinson, Cambridge Described & Illustrated, p. 115.  
\(^{67}\) Atkinson, Cambridge Described & Illustrated, p. 115.  
\(^{68}\) Mansfield, 'Grads and Snobs', pp. 187–189.
The townspeople in Cambridge had benefited, not through any serious local political pressure, but because of pressures on Parliament by a growing middle class which was becoming more influential throughout the country. Although local newspapers drew attention to the town’s poor living conditions, the main criticism of the borough council stemmed from *The Times* and other national newspapers after the commissioners’ findings had been made public.

The Municipal Reform Act provided the townspeople with the opportunity to take a more active part in local politics. The council elected in 1836 had greater autonomy in running the borough. The replacement of the old corporation by a properly elected body brought about a new sense of community to Cambridge and hopes of regeneration in the town. The new council made a promising start. In 1836, within seven months of its own appointment, the Watch Committee established a 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, causing disquiet in the colleges. The heads of colleges guarded their privileges jealously and for a time tension between the two sides intensified. The borough police force became a favourite target for students, being instantly recognizable in their uniforms.69

In 1838, in an extravagant gesture and as a sign of the new sense of community, the borough council laid on the greatest celebration that there had ever been in the town. The coronation of the new young Queen Victoria was the occasion for a huge party for the working people of Cambridge. An account in Cooper’s *Annals of Cambridge* stated that 15,000 poor inhabitants, including nearly 3000 children, sat down to a meal on Parker’s Rowland Parker, *Town and gown, the 700 years’ war in Cambridge* (Cambridge: Stephens, 1983), p. 143.
Piece. There were a further 17,000 spectators. Staging was erected for an orchestra and choir of a hundred in the centre of the famous common and a contemporary drawing shows 60 tables, each seating 200, radiating out like the spokes of a wheel from a central rotunda. The feast is said to have consisted of 7029 joints of meat, 4500 loaves of bread, 1608 plum puddings and 99 barrels of ale, with large quantities of mustard, salt, pickles, tobacco and snuff. Men were allowed three pints of ale, women one pint and children half a pint. There was a balloon ascent, and in the evening there was a grand firework display. 70

Despite such civic events, enhancement of the town’s environment was slow and in 1849 the editor of the Cambridge Chronicle accused the council of lethargy. Cambridge had been ‘outstripped in the march of improvement by places of far inferior note and means’. 71 The council seemed weak and ineffective; it lacked the strong leadership needed to develop and modernize the borough.

The railway

The university often exercised its power beyond the academic community. Its influence on the choice of a site for Cambridge railway station and its imposition of rules regarding Sunday travel were prime examples. Between 1834 and 1844 there were six proposed sites for the station in and around the town. 72 Besides adverse physical conditions, which affected the laying of the lines, there was opposition from members of both the town and the university to the station being built in the centre of Cambridge. Eventually it was agreed that it should be placed a mile to the south of the town and the station opened in 1845. Even after its construction the university, which had strong concerns that the railway would undermine its moral authority over undergraduates, regarded the lines to

70 Cooper, Annals of Cambridge, iv, p. 616.
71 Cambridge Chronicle, 22 September 1849.
London as ‘possible routes to perdition’. As Reginald Fellows explained in his comprehensive guide to the building of the Cambridge to London line, there were restrictions on the sale of tickets, especially to undergraduates.

There was a curious prohibition in the Cambridge Railway Act which affected the travelling public generally. Under a penalty of a fine not exceeding £5 for each offence “for the benefit of Addenbrooke’s Hospital or other County Charity to be decided by the University,” the Company was prohibited from taking up or setting down any passenger at the Cambridge railway station or at any place within 3 miles of the same between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. on any Sunday.

In spite of this prohibition, soon after the line had been opened, cheap day tickets were issued for travel to Cambridge from London on Sundays. The trains left Shoreditch at 7 a.m. and arrived before 10 a.m. The Vice-Chancellor protested that these excursions ‘were as distasteful to the University Authorities as they must be offensive to Almighty God and to all right minded Christians’. Problems had delayed the construction of the railway, but its arrival stimulated economic growth and employment and led to many more houses being built between the town and the station.

**Concerns with overcrowding and public health**

The railway link from Cambridge to London, the development that was taking place around the station and the widespread rebuilding that was happening in other parts of the country only served to highlight the deteriorating living conditions in the old parts of the town. The council lacked funds and leadership and, in spite of good intentions, seemed unable to cope with many of the problems of a growing urban society, which were

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74 Fellows, *Railways to Cambridge*, p. 11.
75 Fellows, *Railways to Cambridge*, p. 11.
illustrated by concerns over public health. The presence of diseases such as typhoid, scarlet fever, smallpox and cholera were all the result of the town’s squalid living conditions. In 1849 the superintending inspector stated that ‘the sanitary conditions of numerous courts are so wretched as to be a disgrace to humanity; and I believe it next to an impossibility for their inhabitants to be healthy, clean, or even moral.’

In 1842 Edwin Chadwick had described the appalling sanitary conditions which existed in working-class areas in Britain. In October 1850, the *Cambridge Chronicle* printed a report by the special correspondent of the *Morning Chronicle* entitled ‘Labour and the Poor’ which indicted that conditions in Cambridge were no better than those depicted by Chadwick. The report painted a grim picture of life in a town which boasted such a fine university:

In many parts of the town of Cambridge the dwellings of the poor are in the most disgraceful condition. I might refer to Kings-street and the alleys leading therefrom, to Christ’s-lane and other places. But perhaps the worst of all is a place called the Falcon-yard [Illustration 2]. In one of the houses which I visited there were thirteen families residing. In a room on one of the floors lived a man, his wife and five children. The eldest girl a little over fourteen, having been for several months a common prostitute, ... The number of persons residing in this Falcon-yard, I was informed, was about 300. There are two privies for the use of the whole of the inhabitants, but as they are at a distance of about 50 yards from some portion of the premises, those inhabitants who have back windows to their rooms are in the habit of throwing all their refuse out of the windows on to a large dung-heap in the Red Lion-yard, the reeking steam from which is constantly penetrating the rooms.

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76 Murphy, *Poverty in Cambridge*, p. 78.
79 *Cambridge Chronicle*, 5 October, 1850.
Illustration 2: Falcon Yard
In the second half of the nineteenth century there was a drive in industrial cities such as Manchester and Leeds both to improve essential urban services and to establish impressive civic centres with new public buildings such as libraries and museums. It was the transformation of the central core of the industrial city that marked it out as modern. The pressure to improve these urban environments was led by ambitious local councillors.

It has been contended by Andy Croll that the civilizing of urban life could be identified with a particular social class, the middle class. Simon Gunn defined the middle class in England as 'comprising property-owning groups which engaged in active occupations, usually connected with manufacturing, trade and the professions.' Cities such as Manchester had just such a middle class – one that was large and active. Cambridge had no such dynamic group. Most of the property in central Cambridge was, and still is, owned by the colleges and rented out to local residents of all classes. There was almost no manufacturing industry in the town and the number of local professional men practising in the town was relatively small. As has already been pointed out, even the town clergy were controlled by the university. Cambridge businessmen were often cautious, as it was important for each man to keep on good terms with the university authorities who provided his customers and were responsible for local licensing. As a result of this patronage, the middle class was not a force to bring about change.

Croll's particular interest was nineteenth-century Merthyr Tydfil, a Welsh town dominated by the iron industry, which he described as 'packed with working-class urbanites'.

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middle class was noticeable by its absence. Croll noted that historians have cited the absence of a strong middle class as the key to understanding many aspects of 'Merthyr's turbulent early history'. They have also identified a 'lack of governance' that 'stemmed from a skewed social structure composed of the omnipotent iron-masters on the one hand, and the working class on the other'. Cambridge had no episodes in its past to match the brutal events in Merthyr's history, but there was a similarity in the way both towns lacked secure middle-class leadership.

_Change, reform and population growth in the town_

A Royal Commission was appointed in 1850 to enquire into 'the State, Discipline, Studies, and Revenues' of the University of Cambridge. This commission had been prompted by demands in Parliament for change and reform in the Universities of both Oxford and Cambridge. Many members of Cambridge University believed that they should be allowed to continue their reforms at their own pace and some had hoped that Prince Albert, who had been elected Chancellor of the University in 1847, would use his influence against the commission. Although the Prince sympathized, he recommended that co-operation would be wiser than protest or resistance.

The appointment of the commission coincided with a period of great tension between the university and the borough council. The university had been gradually reducing its share of responsibility for running the town and keeping peace in the streets and the council blamed the university for many of its problems, especially financial ones. With the

83 Croll, Civilizing the Urban, p. 15.
84 Croll, Civilizing the Urban, p. 16.
85 Croll, Civilizing the Urban, p. 16.
86 Winstanley, Unreformed Cambridge, p. 507.
appointment of the commission the councillors saw an opportunity to air their grievances against the Vice-Chancellor and the college authorities. In February 1852 the town council petitioned the commissioners. They complained of ‘certain privileges claimed and exercised by the university, as respects the trade and government of the town’ and others which were ‘required for the maintenance of academic discipline’.88 The borough council believed its police force could keep law and order on Cambridge streets; the university believed it could not. The university contended that only the proctors, with their special powers to arrest and imprison, could protect undergraduates from the temptations proffered by the prostitutes who walked the streets.89

The commission had no statutory rights and could not settle the dispute but recommended that representatives from the university and the town should negotiate an amicable settlement. After a year’s discussion, which only led to more bitterness, it was agreed that Sir John Patterson, a former Judge of the Court of King’s Bench, should act as arbiter. He recommended some significant changes to redress the power balance and in 1856 an Act of Parliament confirmed his recommendations. The Vice-Chancellor’s privileges were restricted but not removed. Sir John ruled that the Magna Congregatio should be discontinued and that the Mayor and bailiffs should no longer be required to take an oath pledging to conserve the privileges and liberties of the university. The Vice-Chancellor was no longer to be responsible for weights and measures in the town or the licensing of fairs and markets, and the assessment of college property for rates was to be equitable. However, proctorial power on the streets of Cambridge remained.

88 Winstanley, Early Victorian Cambridge, p. 91.
89 Winstanley, Early Victorian Cambridge, p. 91.
Where a considerable part of the population consists of young Men at a very critical time of life, with strong passions and little self control, greater powers must necessarily be given to some authorities, as well as to restrain the young Men themselves, as to guard them from the solicitations of Prostitutes, and also to protect the respectable Inhabitants of the Borough from molestation and annoyance.90

The university was to continue to arrest and punish women and girls who were 'suspected of evil'. The townspeople had not yet gained total freedom, and it took events in the second half of the century, some of which centred on the Spinning House and which are described below, to achieve closure of the university prison.

Besides these considerable civil and political changes, there was marked physical growth in the town. In 1849 a major fire in the central market place had swept away the housing at the northern end in Smith's Row. This opened up the space and changed the heart of the town. Additional university buildings, new shops and stores opened in the centre and provided new employment for the growing population.

It was the passing of the Enclosure Acts of 1801–1807 that radically changed the shape and size of Cambridge. The release of common land enabled the town to grow and prosper like similar-sized towns in Victorian England (Map 1). The new owners of the land surrounding the medieval heart of the town, both colleges and private individuals, were now free to develop their land and most of them did. There was a real need for new homes, not just because the housing in the town centre was so dilapidated and crowded, but owing to the four-fold increase in the population of Cambridge in the hundred years following the enclosures. The census of 1901 recorded a population of 38319.

90 University/T.XI.1, Award of Sir John Patterson (1855), p. 179.
In the late 19th Century, particularly after 1880, many large detached family houses were built in the Grange Road area between Madingley Road and Barton Road.

Pre 19th Century historic core
Main areas of college/university building
Main areas of the 19th Century building
Existing 20th Century railways
Existing 20th Century roads
Improvements in public health provision, including better medical facilities, cleaner water and sewage disposal, as well as improved food supplies and raised standards in transport and housing, had all contributed to a decrease in infant mortality and a longer life span for the majority.

From 1788 to 1889 the responsibility for public health in the town, once incumbent on the Mayor and the Vice-Chancellor, was the liability of the Improvement Commissioners, representatives of both the university and the corporation. The Cambridge University and Town Water Company was formed in 1853 and schemes for a main drainage system were propounded between 1864 and 1886. It was not until 1889, under the provisions of the Public Health Act of 1875, that responsibility, which had been held jointly by Town and Gown for so long, was handed over to the Town Council and it was a new health authority that carried through the main drainage system in 1895. A system of deep sewers and a pumping station two miles from the centre of the town solved the problem of the water levels.

There was cleaner water, but the River Cam remained polluted in the 1890s. Gwen Raverat remembered the smell well: ‘All the sewage went into the river, till the town was at last properly drained, when I was about ten years old (1895). There is a tale of Queen Victoria being shown over Trinity by the Master, Dr. Whewell, and saying, as she looked over the bridge: “What are all those pieces of paper floating down the river?” To which, with great presence of mind, he replied: “Those, ma’am, are notices that bathing is

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forbidden.”**93 It is to the Queen’s credit that she responded to Dr Whewell’s explanation with generosity. The Cambridge University Gazette of 11 November 1868 reported:

We have much pleasure in announcing that her Majesty the Queen has contributed £100 towards the fund which is now being raised for the improvement of the river. . . . Her Majesty believes that in thus acting, she is only carrying into effect the wishes of the Prince Consort, the late Chancellor. . . . We are happy to learn that the Cam Purification Committee are not resting on their oars.**90

**Barnwell**

From 1830 onwards the majority of the Spinning House girls lived in Barnwell, the suburb to the east of medieval Cambridge. In his dissertation on the village of Barnwell, J. Marriott has described Barnwell Field which, because of the growing pressure for housing in Cambridge in the nineteenth century, experienced the greatest development. Accommodation was needed for the influx of workers into the town. Some were attracted to work in the expanding university; others were dispossessed farm labourers from the fens who were looking for work. Barnwell, which stood just outside Cambridge on the road to Stourbridge Fair and Newmarket, was known traditionally as a ‘place of leisure’ for the town’s people. In 1807 it had seven pubs, all owned by or on lease to brewers in Cambridge, and a theatre. There was a relatively stable population of between 200 and 250 villagers in the 1780s and 1790s, who worked the (mainly) open fields of St Andrew’s the Less which surrounded the village. Marriott suggested that they were dependent for most of their money on illicit trade from the town – drinking and prostitution – and that income was also boosted by the influx of trade during the annual fair at Stourbridge.**95

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The old village was swallowed up by new housing built within the parish of St Andrew the Less and to the east of the historic core. Maps 2, 3 and 4 indicate how, over three decades, this confined area known as the Kite was developed with rows of small terraces houses. The maps also show that during this period there were few changes in the centre of the town and almost no new growth to the north or to the west of the river. Most of the new building in Barnwell was poor-quality artisan housing with workshops, 'and some of this area developed a very unsavoury reputation for its public houses, brothels and general villainy'.

Peter Bryan records that the population of the parish grew from 252 in 1801 to 27,860 in 1901. Ninety per cent of Cambridge's growth in the nineteenth century was within the old parish of St Andrew the Less. Four new parishes and a cemetery were created within the area to cope with the increased population. The 1851 census recorded the many large families crowded into the cottages and yards along the lanes and alleys in Barnwell. It had become a district bursting at the seams. The lodging houses were full of travellers and single people living away from their parents and, as the census shows, many of them were born in the villages surrounding Cambridge. Some of them were notorious in the district and the university authorities had their own list of 'Suspected Houses of ill fame and brothels'.

For many families, the move from the centre of medieval Cambridge to Barnwell did not mean a better standard of life. Overcrowding still threatened their health; old close-knit communities were disrupted, kinship networks were broken and new relationships had to be formed. In December 1852 and January 1853 the Cambridge Chronicle published two contrasting eyewitness accounts that described the streets and lodging houses of Victorian Barnwell. Side-by-side these articles present curiously contradictory but none-the-less

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Bryan, The Shaping of the City, p. 108.  
Bryan, The Shaping of the City, p. 108.  
University/Min.V1.6/13.
vibrant and sometimes disturbing glimpses into life in Barnwell. In the first of the two articles, which was written in response to the disparaging account by the *Morning Chronicle*’s special correspondent in October 1850, the editor presented a correspondent’s ‘Glance at the Barnwell Lodging Houses’:

It is now about two years ago, if we recollect aright, that the *Morning Chronicle*’s “Special Correspondent” spent a week or two here, for the purpose of “showing up” the “abuses” of our town, and laying before the eyes of a curious world something like the conditions of the lower classes.

The bulk of his report, as regards Cambridge, is description of the character and conduct of persons whom he found in *one* of the lodging houses in Barnwell ... we find that a downright disorderly house is an exception. ...

There are two phases of the Barnwell lodging-houses and their occupants, considered in reference to the nation at large, which may not be of the greatest importance, but to this town they are of paramount interest. We allude to the sanitary conditions of the houses, and the moral condition of the people who use them ... .

We are in Staffordshire-Place, East-road; the night is dark, the street or place is filthy, and you have to guide yourself from pool and mud, as you would in Rome, by the light of your understanding, and not by the light of gas. You enter William Donnex’s house; everything is, to the superficial eye, clean: the rooms are swept and garnished; the tenants and the tame goat are the only creatures within its walls. “The master & missis” are very civil; and you are bowed out with a courteous “good night”.

Later in the evening the correspondent visited Britannia Yard:

Dark locality, dark entrance, dark passage, dark stairs, bring you to a kind of underground cellar, where a splendid fire illumines and cheers all around. This is the celebrated abode of “Yorkshire Betty”, the fair damsel of 70 summers, who recently married another woman’s husband! She is the

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*Cambridge Chronicle*, 11 December 1852.
essence of politeness; she tells you that she has only 16 lodgers in tonight – things are dull with her at
this moment. ... In the room you see sturdy-looking men and women, and healthy, vigorous
children, smoking, yawning, laughing, playing, cooking, – frying, boiling, toasting – herrings, onions,
fish, flesh, etc., and so forth; but, to their honour be it spoken, no drinking! ... Then leaving this
motley crew, you walk up stairs and see Betty’s apartments. In one room you find 7 beds, the linen on
which is clean and sound – all on bedsteads; and Betty tells you, with a roguish laugh, that only two
sleep together, and the sexes never mingle in the sleeping apartments.

Now, in this short journey, what have we seen in Barnwell? About 12 common lodging-houses,
holding collectively, say 90 persons, the greater part of them vagabonds, from all parts of the country
probably. Not one of them, that we could discover, was ragged; few of them were dirty; nearly
everyone appeared cheerful; not a single one of them was intoxicated (the sleeping landlord
excepted); not an oath was heard.

In the second article, printed on 8 January 1853, the paper’s editor set out to contextualize,
and in some ways undermine, the positive report of the previous month: ‘In our
impressions a month ago, we laid before our readers some remarks in reference to the
“Common Lodging houses” of Barnwell and we will now, without preface, proceed to
place them in possession of some facts in regard to the condition in which we found most
of the other notorious haunts in that populous and still increasing parish.’ There followed
a chilling account of another tour of Barnwell, in complete contrast to the first. This time
the warmth and optimism that marked the previous encounters were replaced by fear and
depression. The report was entitled ‘The Dens and Traditions of Barnwell’.

Barnwell, improved as it has been during the past few years, is still the focus of villany, the receptacle
of dishonest spoil, the refuge of the petty thief and the fully developed scoundrel. And we defy any
mortal living to visit its dark entries, its tortuous windings, its many secret approaches from the
country, its scores of segments, its trap-doors, and its zig-zag passages, or to note its sombre, wild
dilapidated, filthy, leprous features, without being deeply impressed with the belief that it has been
fashioned by the hand of crime to meet the direful requirements of criminals. There is an air of
dissoluteness about every place we visited in this locality a short time since. There is a desolateness
around most of the places which seem to tell you are not in a civilized region; it is true that here and
there glimpses of domestic happiness are seen, but they are as transient as the moth. ... The men are
known to the police; the women live, and partly support their paramours, by perpetual dishonour! ...
This place has many an unholy tradition. It is the receptacle of all the physical dross of Cambridge. 100

This passage is not unlike some of the bleak descriptions of the rookeries of London. The
journalist has borrowed the language of social description used by contemporary writers.
He remarked that, formerly, principally harlots occupied the locality, but he suggested that
now the women lived as partners to the criminals. In other words they were, as Emsley
has observed elsewhere, like Sikes's Nancy in Oliver Twist, who was the 'miserable
companion of thieves and ruffians'. 101

Although the community of Barnwell was almost entirely working-class, its people were
far from uniform. Shady lodging houses and brothels clustered together in Gas Lane and
Wellington Row, but in other streets most of the terraced houses were homes to respectable
families, who no doubt felt incensed by the disparaging description of their
neighbourhood. The considerable follow-up correspondence showed the people of
Barnwell taking exception to the portrayal of their district in this second article. For many
inhabitants, the streets in the old part of Cambridge were more threatening than their own.
A letter from W. H. Titcomb of Barnwell Parsonage was given the heading 'A Vindication
of Barnwell'. 'My object', Titcomb wrote,

100 Cambridge Chronicle, 8 January 1853.
is to correct the false impression which must have been produced upon your readers' minds by the article in question. . . . I walk through New-street, Wellington-row, Union-row, East-road and all other parts of the parish at various times of the evening; and I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that the thoroughfares are almost always orderly. I have often asked respectable women whether they are ever insulted, and I have invariably had an answer in the negative. Indeed I am satisfied that the streets of Barnwell as a whole are much more free from vice during the dark hours of the evening than the streets of the town of Cambridge – especially Trumpington-street on Sunday nights. 102

'M. A.' wrote to the editor in a similar vein:

I have been in every locality to which the allusions refer; at all hours of the evening, and that when I have not been able to see three feet before me, I have never been insulted. I could bring to your face others who have done the same, and have been equally undisturbed. . . . I have no hesitation in saying that any lady or gentleman would be no more molested in walking through the streets and thoroughfares of Barnwell, by day or by night, than they would on King's-parade, but because I have experienced and know it to be a matter of fact. 103

The local newspapers thus present a contradictory picture of Victorian Cambridge and the articles are more the result of a genre than any serious representation of the facts. They show how difficult it remains to get beneath the skin of life in working-class districts of the town. There is no obvious evidence of a sense of camaraderie amongst the people of Barnwell. Class solidarity, which linked together poorly paid factory workers in industrial towns like Manchester or the iron workers of Merthyr Tydfil, was formed around work but was often expressed in local bodies and institutions. Industrial workers shared common experiences with their neighbours at work and continued to socialize after work.

102 Cambridge Chronicle, 15 January 1853.
103 Cambridge Chronicle, 22 January 1853.
Cambridge workers, who were mostly employed by the colleges, lacked this sense of solidarity. They usually worked alone in the students' rooms or in the college grounds and there were few opportunities for them to forge strong links with other employees at work.

The university authorities 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', a study of Town and Gown, Mansfield pointed out that 'beneath the velvet glove the iron fist still lurked'. He quoted the radical Wisbech newspaper, The Star in the East, for 17 September 1839: 'The influence of the University has been exercised to an extraordinary extent. Tradesmen and college students have received hints too plain to be misunderstood and are compelled to vote for the Tory candidate.' The poorer workers and the unemployed in Cambridge supported the radicals, as was witnessed at election time earlier in the century: 'The flagrant corruption of the Rutland-Mortlock regime provoked strong response, and the radicals found they had street support.' However, this support did not necessarily lead to overt action.

Overshadowed by the university and neglected by their councillors, the townspeople needed good leadership. Mansfield argued: 'The town's shopkeepers lacked the non-conformist backbone found in other East Anglian towns.' Unlike towns of a similar size, there seems to have been no strong sense of community or pride in Cambridge: for example, when the Enclosure Acts were implemented and the ordinary people were denied

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104 Waller, 'Bedders and Brewers', p. 30.
105 Mansfield, 'Grads and Snobs', p. 189.
the rights they had held for centuries, there was rioting all over England, but in Cambridge there was remarkably little opposition. Marriott remarked that, 'without a vigorous class culture, individuals are more open to exterior domination; lacking the resistance that such a culture could have provided, the inhabitants of Barnwell acquiesced at the theft of their common rights in 1807'. He also believed that 'the same lack of a class culture contributed to the poor of the Kite [Barnwell] accepting the glaring contribution of the propertied classes’ simultaneous encouragement and punishment of prostitutes'.

It is most unlikely that there was no working-class culture at all in Victorian Cambridge. There is evidence of a culture that was not political in its outlook but which recognized a significant difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’. For example, there was one sentiment that united working-class youth in Cambridge and that was their loathing for the undergraduates. The fierce fights between the undergraduates and the young men from the town, such as the battle in March 1846 described by Josiah Chater earlier in this chapter, demonstrate how wide the gulf between the two communities was at times.

_Cambridge emerges into a thriving modern urban community_

The nature of the university began to change with its reform and growth in the second half of the century. The entry of married academics and their families into the town community probably had a marked effect on society. The university became more willing to open its gates to working people than ever before. Increased numbers of students meant that men were needed in the colleges as cooks, gardeners, gyps and porters. There was also additional employment for boot-makers and tailors, and the University Press became

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one of the town's most important employers. Although the jobs were mostly seasonal, Cambridge men needed them.

As people moved out of the centre of the town, modest civic buildings and shops replaced housing. Two department stores – Joshua Taylor's and Eaden Lilley's – were opened by local businessmen in the 1850s. There were now jobs in the retail trade that were far more attractive to young girls than domestic service or laundry work. Beer and bricks provided employment for working men. The town had a long-standing reputation for brewing beer. For centuries visitors to the famous annual Stourbridge Fair had enjoyed Cambridge ale and spread its fame throughout England and the Continent. In 1888 there were known to be thirty brewers in Cambridge. Brick-making became important at Barnwell. The housing boom and the building of new colleges and university departments provided wide employment. Bricklayers, painters, plasterers and carpenters were all needed. 'By 1900, fifteen per cent of the population was employed in the building trade, three times the national average.'

Unlike many towns of the same size, Cambridge had no major industries, but towards the end of the century small new enterprises were founded. Some were directly connected to the university, for example those that made scientific and medical instruments. In 1873 Chivers' jam factory was opened at Histon, a village on the outskirts of Cambridge. Farmers in the Wisbech area had begun to grow large quantities of fruit after the deterioration of the land on many fenland farms and needed an outlet for their produce. By 1894 this factory had 400 employees, and by 1898 there were 800, many of them transported each day from Cambridge. These widespread economic shifts were bound to reflect the changing relationship between Town and Gown.

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Conclusion

During the century Cambridge had acquired a police force, a fire brigade, gas and electricity services, and clean water and sewage disposal systems, all needing offices and people to service them. New schools, hospitals, Nonconformist Chapels, museums and workhouses opened in the town. New colleges, including the women's colleges of Girton and Newnham, were built across the river to the west of the town. The century had opened with anxiety about unemployment and the possibility of unrest; it closed with a sense of optimism that had replaced most of the fear. These changes were, however, only slowly mirrored in the regulation of prostitution, which continued to cause tension between Town and Gown for most of the century. There had been a distinct division between the two communities in 1800, when the balance of power had been firmly in the hands of the academics, and it took nearly a hundred years to achieve a new sense of partnership. Cambridge's particular history produced and perpetuated conflicts related to class and gender that were complicated by tensions between tradition and change. These will be considered in the rest of this thesis through the history of the Spinning House.
Central to this thesis is the story of the Spinning House and the way in which attitudes to
gender, sexuality and class played a part in shaping this unique institution. It explains how
members of one community, all of them men with a middle-class background, were able to
wield power over members of another community, all of them working-class women,
through the use of proctorial privilege. It reveals how in the nineteenth century this
privilege was challenged in the press and in the courts, particularly as a result of three
court cases. Examination of the social and institutional history of Cambridge shows how
the university followed some contemporary trends in the English criminal justice system of
the period, with inspections of, and improved living conditions in, the House, but how it
neglected others, such as the introduction of useful labour. The history of the Spinning
House and its inmates demonstrates how the university was slow to change its established
attitudes and how, as a result, it did not match the image of modernity that the Victorians
liked to construct for themselves. The abuse of authority in Cambridge occurred in a
century when, as Clive Emsley has put it, 'The rhetoric of English rights and liberties
contributed to the shape and extent of change in the criminal system.'

1 'Another “Spinning House” Scandal’, Pall Mall Gazette, 4 December 1891.
Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Spinning House reflected similar institutions in its structure and function, but throughout most of the nineteenth century the Vice-Chancellor and his proctors used it exclusively as a prison for streetwalkers. Women and girls were held in the Spinning House without a proper trial or the right to appeal against their sentences and were almost all charged with 'streetwalking', not a crime in English law as this chapter shows. The nationwide publicity that accompanied scandals at the Spinning House highlighted the plight of those accused of being young Cambridge prostitutes and brought unwelcome notoriety to the House, its trustees and the university's Vice-Chancellors.

The founding of the Spinning House

Thomas Hobson, one of Cambridge's most prominent citizens, a celebrated carrier and livery stable owner, founded the Spinning House in 1628 (Illustration 3). Hobson has three claims to fame – the Spinning House, Hobson's Conduit, which still sends clean water from springs three miles outside the town to the Market Square in the centre of Cambridge, and the phrase in the English language, 'Hobson's choice', which in fact means no choice at all: customers wishing to hire one of his horses had to take the horse nearest to the stable door, whatever its quality. Hobson founded his charity for the poor of Cambridge who, 'wanting means to live upon and settle themselves in some honest calling, might thereafter be employed and set to work, and brought up and instructed in some trade or occupation; and thereby not only be enabled to live of themselves, but, by their labours, become profitable members of the commonwealth, and helpful to others among whom they should live'.

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Illustration 3

Tobias Hobson.

The Cambridge Carrier, & the first man who Let out Hackney-Horses, and from whom Originated the famous Adage

"Hobson's Choice, that or none."

Pub. by Abel Hogg, Printer at Cambridge, Dec. 1795.

With acknowledgement to Cambridge Antiquarian Society and Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library
Hobson’s initiative was not original: similar institutions already existed in London. In the mid-sixteenth century the streets of the metropolis were seen by many as the haunts of disorderly characters and the unemployed poor. The authorities believed that, in order to regain control of the city’s public spaces, there needed to be new institutions to provide shelter for the infirm and work training for the able-bodied poor. By 1550 a series of hospitals had been founded to cater for the poor of the city of London and thus clear the streets of the homeless, beggars and vagrants. The first four hospitals were for the ‘impotent’ poor and housed the old, the mad and the handicapped. The fifth such institution was the Bridewell Hospital, which was built on the site of the abandoned Palace of Bridewel1, and the aim of the governors was to provide for the ‘sturdy and idle’, many of them wilful rogues.5 By the 1560s the Hospital had taken on a dual role and set aside a part of the institution as a training school for poor boys.

Joanna Innes has shown that the ‘bridewells’ or ‘houses of correction’, created in response to the need for a new kind of penal institution, were quite unlike the traditional gaols, which were primarily places of detention. They housed ‘a heterogeneous collection of men and women detained on a variety of grounds: some to await trial, some to await punishment, some held for non-payment of fines’. Bridewells became institutions for men and women from the labouring poor who were guilty of petty delinquencies – ‘idle and disorderly behaviour of various kinds, unlicensed begging, vagrancy and the like’. They were not merely places where people were detained, but ‘rather sites of punishment and reformation’.6 Discipline was provided through regular work. As the late sixteenth-

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6 Innes, ‘Prisons for the poor’, p. 42.
century bridewell court books show, there were many prostitutes among those who were incarcerated for treatment at the houses of correction.\(^7\)

Hobson set up a trust dated 30 July 1628 to administer his charity. It was to consist of twelve persons, 'six wherof to be named by the university, or Vice-Chancellor', and 'the other six by the corporation, or Mayor'.\(^8\) The charity, like Bridewell Hospital, had a dual role—a workhouse and a house of correction. Hobson first donated property and farmland for the setting up of the workhouse in St Andrew's parish just outside the Barnwell Gate. The property included 'a messuage and tenement, a dove-house, a barn, and all houses and edifices then built upon the farms, gardens, curtilages, courts and grounds thereunto belonging, with all their appurtenances'.\(^9\) Besides the workhouse, the trustees were, 'within the space of four years, to build, erect and finish, one or more convenient houses upon the premises, as for a house of correction for unruly and stubborn rogues, beggars and other poor persons, who should refuse to work'.\(^10\) Hobson died in 1631 and in a codicil to his will he left a further £100 to buy land or property, the rents of which were to be used to increase the value of the workhouse. The House also received about £500, the residue of a collection for the poor during the plague of 1631. The charity was well endowed, but the joint trusteeship between Town and Gown was to prove a stumbling block.

From its foundation until about 1800, Hobson's Charity mirrored the bridewells. As in them, the terms 'keeper' and 'governor' were often used to designate the man in charge. The master of a bridewell was the manager of a small working enterprise. He combined

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\(^7\) Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', p. 57.
the roles of gaoler and master. The first governors of the House in Cambridge were appointed for seven years, received thirty pounds a year and were exempt from ‘all rates, taxes and harth money’. The governor provided wool for combers, ‘not exceeding five’, and spinning and weaving work for all the weavers of the town. It was also his responsibility to ‘maintain and keep all the windows usually glazed with sufficient glass and glazing’. The early keepers or governors were all woolcombers or worsted-weavers and it soon became known as the Spinning House (Illustrations 4 and 5).

The charity’s first three minute books are missing, but the following extract has survived in manuscript and suggests that half a century after he had established the House, the trustees were fulfilling Hobson’s aims and were providing a place of work for the poor:

It is this day [22 September 1675] ordered and agreed by Edmond Baldero, D.D., vice-chancellor of the university of Cambridge and James Robson, gent., mayor of the town of Cambridge, with the advice of their assistants, . . . that John Tomasin of Cambridge aforesaid, worsted-weaver, shall be master and governor of the workhouse and said house of correction belonging to the said town of Cambridge, for the space of seven years.

Bridewells in the eighteenth century

The bridewells continued their dual role as local workhouses and houses of correction until the early eighteenth century; some historians of imprisonment in England have suggested that then, ‘after a brief heyday’, they fell into rapid decline and became ‘effectively

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11 Innes, ‘Prisons for the poor’, p. 77.
15 Stokes, Cambridge Parish Workhouses, p. 25.
Illustrations 4 & 5

The cells on the first and second floors of the Spinning House

With acknowledgement to Cambridge Antiquarian Society and Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library

The Spinning House
indistinguishable from gaols'. Innes has argued that: 'war, recoinage and bad harvests in the 1690s', against a background of political tension and uncertainty, aggravated fears of crime and led to the penal role of bridewells becoming more pronounced. An Act of Parliament in 1706 indicated the government’s conviction that bridewells had the potential to reform offenders if they were given longer sentences and more rigorous punishment. Many of the houses of correction were expected to receive offenders who were convicted of simple felonies for terms of between six months and two years. This put new burdens on bridewell keepers: henceforth among their charges they had people who had to be kept under heavy security.

More changes took place in 1718, when Parliament authorized the sentencing of prisoners convicted of simple larcenies to transportation for seven years. This led to 'a sharp drop in the numbers sentenced to hard labour', and consequently for the next fifty years only a small proportion of those convicted of serious offences were sent to houses of correction. Although ‘bridewells were supposed to put the poor to work and teach them the lessons of industry', the role of work had decreased in many houses. Instead of each house running a self-sufficient enterprise, many of them depended on outside contracts for work. However, ‘the rapid turn-over of prisoners and the proverbially low productivity of forced labour made it difficult to make a profit, and most contractors defaulted or gave up their contracts.' By the 1750s there were ‘few bridewells in which work was readily enforced'. Jacob Ilive, a London bookseller who was sentenced to serve a term for libel in Clerkenwell House of Correction, expected to find the inmates hard at work. Instead he

17 Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', p. 43.
18 Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', p. 89.
19 Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', p. 90.
21 Ignatieff, A Just Measure of Pain, p. 32.
22 Ignatieff, A Just Measure of Pain, p. 32.
found men and women associating freely and drinking together in the prison taproom and whiling away their time playing games in the prison yards.\textsuperscript{23}

There had been a huge growth in the number of parish workhouses between the 1720s and 1730s and it had been hoped that the problems posed by the 'idle poor' might be focused more on these workhouses than on the houses of correction. Some of the new workhouses 'may have performed more explicitly penal functions, very like the bridewells'.\textsuperscript{24} It was hoped that the needy 'would hasten to work', if only to avoid a rigorous workhouse regime.\textsuperscript{25} Bridewells had always varied in size and character depending on their location, but now differences in function made for greater variation. County justices were given powers over gaols 'analogous to those they already possessed over houses of correction'.\textsuperscript{26} This meant that in some areas by the 1760s and 1770s prisoners awaiting trial accounted for more than three-quarters of those committed to bridewells, whilst in other areas bridewells were only being used for those who committed 'idle and disorderly' offences.\textsuperscript{27}

In the second half of the seventeenth century young streetwalkers were kept in the Spinning House alongside the idle poor and vagrants of Cambridge. Like similar prisoners of the period who were committed to bridewells and houses of correction in other towns, they would have spent short periods in the House performing tasks such as carding or spinning.

\textsuperscript{23} Ignatieff, \textit{A Just Measure of Pain}, pp. 31–32.
\textsuperscript{24} Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', p. 93.
\textsuperscript{25} Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', p. 93.
\textsuperscript{26} Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', p. 94.
\textsuperscript{27} Innes, 'Prisons for the poor', pp. 94-95.
The Spinning House in the eighteenth century

The art and literature of the eighteenth century show that prostitution was a visible part of urban culture in London at that time. Hogarth vividly depicted the wretched life of prostitutes in his *Harlot's Progress* and notable characters including John Gay, Richard Steele, Casanova, Boswell and Samuel Johnson described their encounters with prostitutes in the city. It seems that in Cambridge too, streetwalkers became more conspicuous than earlier, which resulted in changes to the Spinning House. Its function as a workhouse for the honest poor to find training for useful employment became overshadowed by its other role as a house of correction. Its dual character, as conceived by Hobson and the first trustees, had altered: the Spinning House became more of a prison than a workhouse. Significantly, on 30 January 1732 a new governor was appointed who was not a weaver. The Vice-Chancellor of the University, Charles Morgan D.D., and the Mayor of Cambridge, Samuel Belcher, together appointed Joseph Halstead of Cambridge, apothecary, 'Governor of the Workhouse and House of Correction'. According to the contemporary historian Edmund Carter, by the 1750s the Spinning House was being used mainly to hold streetwalkers who were apprehended by the proctors (Illustration 6).

The Bridewell (called by the inhabitants the *Spinning House*) is pleasantly situated near the fields at the south end of the parish of Great St. Andrew's, and is chiefly used for the confinement of such lewd women as the Proctors apprehend in houses of ill fame; though sometimes the Corporation send small offenders thither, and the crier of the town is often there to discipline the ladies of pleasure with his whip.  

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James I had granted the university the right to have its own prison by letters patent in 1603. The university leased the town tollbooth as its prison until Hobson’s Bridewell, the Spinning House, was built.

In January 1776, just months before the prison reformer John Howard inspected all the prisons in Cambridge, William Ewin LL.D visited the Spinning House. Dr Ewin did not hold a university post but was well known locally: ‘being . . . busy and meddling in other people’s concerns, [he] got the ill will of most persons in the town and university’. Ewin reported to Philip Hardwicke, M.P. for Cambridgeshire, that he had found ‘six young streetwalkers in a state of utmost misery and want. They had been there six months, having been apprehended either by the proctor or the High Constable; they had been passed home but returned again. They had no fire and nothing but what they could earn by spinning or beating hemp.’ Ewin called on the Vice-Chancellor, who said he ‘would probably send something to keep the girls warm while the hard weather held’. Ewin also persuaded him ‘to send in bedsteads so that the inmates should not lie on straw or on the ground’.

In Cambridge, the university was responsible for the supervision of the town’s public areas. Each night in term time its proctors (Illustration 6), accompanied by constables – the ‘bulldogs’, ‘not Gog or Magog are more fierce in their exterior’ – were expected to patrol the streets of the town looking for women and girls whom they believed to be

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30 British Library, Add. MS 5804, fol. 68b, quoted in The Victoria History of the County of Cambridgeshire.
31 British Library, Add. MS 25626, 22 and 26 Jan. 1776.
32 B.L., Add. MS 25626.
Illustration 6

Proctor 1815

From *A History of the University of Cambridge* by R. Ackermann (London: 1815)
prostitutes and to arrest them. A London newspaper described how they went on their rounds armed with only ‘moral dignity’ and two ‘bulldogs’:

The hounds ‘run ‘snuffling and scenting on either side of the way in search of a petticoat, and having discovered the game with the true instinct of a dog, get before the frightened quarry, and with yelps and barks drive the timid captive back to the august presence of the approaching collegiate marshal.’

Their authority dated back to Queen Elizabeth I, who had instructed Vice-Chancellors to punish ‘all public women . . . suspected of evil’.

It shall be lawful . . . to make scrutiny, search and inquisition . . . in the aforesaid town of Cambridge . . . for all public women, procurers, vagabonds and other persons suspected of evil, coming to or assembling in the said town and its suburbs, fairs, markets and places aforesaid, . . . and all and such singular persons, whom the said Chancellor, Masters and Scholars or their successors or their deputies . . . shall have found guilty or suspected of evil, they may punish by imprisonment of their bodies, banishment and otherwise.

It is apparent that in Cambridge in the eighteenth century ‘the scrutiny, search and inquisition . . . of persons suspected of evil’ was unpopular with the proctors. On some occasions they were less than diligent and this led to criticism. In February 1793 the Vice-Chancellor gave an order to the proctors telling them that ‘several very respectable members of the Senate’ had complained that the public streets had become ‘infested with lewd and disorderly women’ and that it was necessary for the proctors to be more vigilant.

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33 Anon., Gradus ad Cantabrigiam; or, New university guide to the academical customs, and colloquial or cant terms peculiar to the University of Cambridge . . . By a brace of Cantabs (London: J. Hearne, 1824), p. 86.
34 The Era, 1 July 1860.
35 University/Collect.Admin.9, pp. 154-169.
in removing 'such a nuisance'. One junior proctor, Mr Hunter, declared that 'he did not believe it was his duty to inspect the public streets for the purpose of taking up women suspected of incontinence and of being common streetwalkers, and that he would not do it till he was convinced it was his duty'.

At a meeting of the Vice-Chancellor and the heads of the colleges after this order and Mr Hunter's declaration, it was unanimously agreed:

That the University by virtue of their Charter, . . . have an undoubted right to cause the Public Street to be inspected, and the loose disorderly women to be taken up and sent to the Spinning House or house of correction; . . . That it is therefore the duty of the Proctors to continue to act according to this antient [sic] and immemorial usage, . . . and that willful omission of so important a duty is highly culpable in itself, disgraceful to any Proctor who is guilty of it, and injurious to the common morals and discipline of the University.

The Vice-Chancellor's order of 1793 meant that young streetwalkers in Cambridge faced a greater risk of imprisonment than before. It is not known whether the women and girls were put to work in the Spinning House in the eighteenth century, but a journalist recorded in 1802 that the keeper was a wool-comber who employed workers, including prisoners, for spinning. Wool and flax were still being stored in the House in 1808, but from 1807 the inmates were 'allowed to remain there in a state of complete idleness'. This had apparently changed by 4 June 1814, when the account books relating to Hobson's Charity show that the trustees had agreed that 'the persons in custody in the Spinning House' should be employed in work. It is not clear if this relates to both petty offenders and

37 Holbrook, 'The Spinning House', p. 4.
38 Holbrook, 'The Spinning House', p. 4.
39 The Report of the Commissioners for Inquiry concerning Charities, P.P. H.C. 103 (1838), XXIV, p. 27.
prostitutes. The accounts for 1 November 1818 show that prisoners were being paid, but the nature of their work is not identified.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Prisons and prison reform}

In his study of punishment in England between 1750 and 1850, Michael Ignatieff distinguished between the three major types of confinement which were in existence before 1775 – ‘the debtors’ prison, the jail, and the house of correction (or bridewell, as it was also known)’. Before that date, major crimes were punished with banishment, whipping, hanging, or the pillory rather than confinement. However, local justices of the peace used imprisonment to punish minor offences. John Howard’s prison census of 1776 listed 653 petty offenders confined in England and Wales; that was only 15.9 per cent of the total number of those confined at the time. Of the rest nearly 60 per cent were debtors and just over 24 per cent were felons, including those awaiting trial and those waiting for execution or transportation. Only a few were serving actual prison sentences. Ignatieff suggested that confinement had ‘low prestige’, that many local bridewells had ‘notorious reputations’ and that it was thought that offenders were ‘debauched further by incarceration’.\textsuperscript{41}

Many English prisons were in a wretched state when John Howard became the new High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 1773 and as a result of his appointment visited his local county gaol. The condition of the buildings and the prisoners’ living conditions shocked him. A prison sentence in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries meant not only loss of liberty but confinement in squalid and insanitary conditions. He was so disturbed by his visit that he set out to examine the state of the country’s prisons, examining all aspects of

\textsuperscript{40} University/Endow.1.3.

\textsuperscript{41} Ignatieff, \textit{A Just Measure of Pain}, pp. 24–28.
imprisonment, including the size of the cells, diet, prison routine and the warders. Howard showed that the penal system was in disarray.\textsuperscript{42} His book \textit{The State of Prisons in England and Wales} (1777) set out his ideas on penal reform, and this became his preoccupation until his death in 1790.

In 1776 Howard visited Cambridge's prisons, the county gaol, the town gaol and the Spinning House. The county gaol stood on Castle Hill and the gallows stood in the castle courtyard. The old Norman castle had been used as a prison from at least the mid-fourteenth century and from before 1601 a bridewell had been housed in the old castle barracks with a separate keeper. By 1776 the position of keeper and gaoler had merged and Howard found that this gaol was better maintained than the town gaol, but the increasing number of bridewell inmates and the shortage of solitary cells led to demands for a new gaol and house of correction. In 1802–1807 a new octagonal county gaol was built on the castle site.

The town gaol was situated next to the guildhall in the town centre. Cambridge had been granted the right to its own gaol in 1224 and by the sixteenth century prisoners were being kept in a building known as the tollbooth. In 1753 Edmund Carter described this gaol as 'a shocking place to be confined in', with no fireplace, exercise yard or water supply. Twenty-three years later it was no better. Howard found the tollbooth occupied by one prisoner, 'a miserable object'. There was still no water supply or court for exercise.\textsuperscript{43} The tollbooth was abandoned in 1790 and a new gaol was built for the town behind the Spinning House in St Andrew's Street. In 1829 this was replaced by a building to the south of Parker's Piece at great expense to the town. Finally in 1878 this town gaol was


also demolished and offenders sentenced by the local magistrates were sent to the county gaol.

Besides recording his visits to the county and town gaols, Howard described a visit to the Spinning House, Hobson's Bridewell. He found it a depressing place. ‘There was one room for men, two for women offenders, and a dungeon or dark room for the refractory. Seventeen women were confined in a workroom, 19 feet square, which had no fireplace and no sewer; so offensive was it that it occasioned a fever, whereof two or three died in a few days; where-upon the Vice-Chancellor ordered the rest to be discharged.’

The Spinning House was just one of many prisons where inmates were held in miserable conditions. All over the country the number of offenders given custodial sentences was rising and the prison system seemed disorganized and incapable of coping with the crisis that faced the government. Different methods of punishment and control were needed to replace hanging because the principal punishment for felons, transportation, had been seriously disrupted by the American War. New ideas about the structure and function of prisons also began to emerge.

The reformer and utilitarian Jeremy Bentham believed that punishment must have a positive purpose other than to inflict pain. His ideal prisons were to provide hard work, strict discipline and solitary confinement for the inmates, leaving them alone with their consciences for long periods. The profits generated by the prisons' industrial enterprises would contribute to their upkeep. Bentham’s ideas were contested by William Godwin, husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, who argued that most offenders could overcome their

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vices and moral weaknesses but not through any scheme of solitary confinement. Solitude, he asserted, 'brutalized the feelings no less than physical punishment'. Godwin believed that reformation was a social process, a matter for persuasion rather than force. He thought that all punishment should aim to return the offender to society as soon as possible.

The social anxieties of the middle class, fostered by the events of the French Revolution and the fear of unrest at home in the 1790s, served to highlight the tensions and differences between the opposing viewpoints. Although the early penal reformers were divided on the means of reforming prisoners within the penal system, they shared many beliefs, including the philosophy that the purpose of prison was to deter and reform. However, as Zedner has pointed out, 'Just how far the twin aims of reform and deterrence were compatible within the prison remained a source of much dissension.' It was agreed that women should be held in separate prisons from men and that juveniles should be kept apart from hardened criminals. The Quaker Elizabeth Fry had identified many of the problems of imprisoning women after a visit to Newgate Gaol in 1813. She insisted: 'It is absolutely essential to proper order and regulation of every prison, that female prisoners should be placed under the super-intendence of officers of their own sex.' Issues relating to the Spinning House, such as its management and ethos, need to be understood in the context of these debates. There was no programme for the girls' reform and Fry's ideas seem to have had no impact on the prison as it was another forty years before a matron replaced the male 'keeper' at the House.

45 Ignatieff, A Just Measure of Pain, pp. 117–118.
47 Elizabeth Fry, Observations on the visiting, superintendence and government of female Prisoners, 2nd ed. (Norwich, 1827), p. 27.
Some members of the middle class, including Quaker and Evangelical reformers, were troubled by the problems arising from the industrialization of cities and the growing estrangement of rich and poor. They began to see 'a connection between criminality and political disaffection among the working class'. William Allen, a wealthy Quaker businessman, had formed the Prison Discipline Society to support the work of Elizabeth Fry in 1817. The society had led the campaign for a new Gaol Act and the setting of national standards for the treatment of prisoners. In 1823 Robert Peel sponsored a Gaol Act which sought to bring uniformity to the prisons of England and Wales. The legislation introduced religious and health regulations and the separation of different categories of prisoner. It demanded inspections by local magistrates and required each gaol to produce an annual report for the Secretary of State, although the Prison Inspectorate was not established until 1835, when the Spinning House faced inspection along with other local prisons.

The Spinning House in the nineteenth century: university prison for women

Twenty-six years after Howard's visit to Cambridge, conditions at the Spinning House were as bad as ever. A journalist writing in the Gentleman's Magazine of 7 August 1802 described the House as a grim place with deplorable conditions for the inmates. The writer called the single building the 'Town Bridewell', a name not usually used for Hobson's establishment, but clearly it was the Spinning House, because he also referred to the building five feet beyond the boundary wall as 'the prison', presumably meaning the town gaol built in 1790. Although the Spinning House was still being used for both men and women, there was only a single prisoner being held on the day of the writer's visit. August was during the university long vacation, which may explain why there were no women

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*Ignatieff, A Just Measure of Pain, p. 157.*
prisoners. Nevertheless, the appalling physical state of the House enabled the writer to assess the poor conditions in which the women were held.

Like many other bridewells, the Spinning House continued to hold petty criminals and vagrants alongside prostitutes until about 1820. It was then that the House stopped receiving offenders sentenced by magistrates at the local courts. They were sent to the town gaol instead. How did Hobson’s House fit into the English penal system when it was maintained solely for the imprisonment of suspected prostitutes by the university? As a bridewell or house of correction its position had been clear, but from the 1820s it became separated from the local penal system.

As has been already discussed, prison reform was a priority for social reformers and politicians alike in the country. The Evangelicals expressed fears about the growing irreligion of the urban poor and focused on the moral reform of offenders. ‘In their vision of the ideal prison, solitude prayer, and reflection under the spiritual guidance of the chaplain became pivotal to the reformative process.’ For others, deterrence was paramount, and this was reflected in grim prison buildings and a severe regime. As this chapter will show, the evidence suggests that the aim of the Spinning House was simply to deter the girls from streetwalking. The lack of any training or instruction for the young women when they were in the House will be discussed later.

The purpose and regime of the House in no way resembled the philanthropic institutions that were being founded throughout England. Moral reformers, claiming that young prostitutes who were sentenced to prison were often corrupted by association with

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hardened criminals, set about establishing institutions where working-class girls who were believed to be at risk could be guided and trained in middle-class standards of respectability. Female penitentiaries had been common in Europe since the first opened in Paris in the thirteenth century, but they were regarded with suspicion and hostility in England, chiefly because of their association at that time with Roman Catholicism. The first penitentiary to be opened in the United Kingdom was the Magdalene Hospital in London in 1758. Others followed in London and beyond, and by 1900 over seventy female refuges existed.\textsuperscript{50}

The Cambridge Refuge was founded by Evangelical university clerics in 1837 for girls who had been 'leading a sinful course of life' and who expressed 'a desire of returning to the path of virtue'. The inmates were to be provided 'with proper employment and receive religious and useful instruction'.\textsuperscript{51} In theory, girls 'chose' to go to the Refuge and the Ladies' Committee interviewed the applicants at length and turned down many they considered to be unsuitable for rehabilitation and training. It was different at the Spinning House. In the 1820s and 1830s a handful of girls did choose to go there for medical treatment, but nearly 1550 girls were held in the House against their will. The Spinning House was a place where women and girls who were perceived to be a threat to undergraduates and middle-class morality, were held in term-time. Unlike the girls at the Refuge, who spent about two years being prepared for useful lives outside the institution, the Spinning House inmates received no proper employment, training or instruction. Although a few girls who had been apprehended by the proctors were accepted at the Refuge and did complete their training there, the sets of inmates at the two institutions were essentially different.

\textsuperscript{50} Linda Mahood, \textit{The Magdales: prostitution in the nineteenth century} (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 75.

\textsuperscript{51} Cambridgeshire Record Office, Cambridge Refuge Ladies' Committee Minutes, R 60/27/1, p. 1.
Inspections and reports

The Spinning House was a unique institution, but even so it required legal inspection. The Inspector of Prisons for the Northern and Eastern District of Great Britain made his first visit to the House in Cambridge in 1835. He found the condition of the prison 'discreditable'. Six years later there had been almost no improvement:

I regret to report that my expectations of improvement in this establishment have been almost wholly disappointed, and that I found it in nearly the same discreditable condition as on my first visit in 1835 . . . . at a quarter past nine in the morning, I found the prisoners not out of their bed cells, and the rooms in disorder. One prisoner infected with the venereal was sleeping with another free from disease.52

In the winter of 1844 a number of girls were sent home before they had completed their sentences because there were cases of smallpox in the House. It was surprising that there was no epidemic.

The eleventh inspection of the Spinning House took place on 23 June 1846, when, the 'University being on vacation', there were no prisoners. 'The interior was in a dirty and disorderly condition and was filled with the furniture of the keeper who was about to quit the premises, he having received an appointment in one of the colleges.'53 The keeper was a watchmaker, William Wright, who carried on his business at a shop in Sidney Street. He had been appointed in 1827 and, by the time of the census in 1841, he had eight children and must have been glad of the accommodation set aside for the keeper of the House. From his own account he had received no instructions as to his duties or responsibilities from the university, the town magistrates or the trustees. He described himself as 'feeling

very uncomfortable at times in consequence'. The inspector described him as a most respectable man in private life, but quite unfit for the office. 

The inspector saw the keeper's departure as an opportunity for 'the trustees to appoint proper persons, both male and female'. He went further; he strongly recommended 'the University to make an arrangement with the borough authorities for receiving these prisoners in the town gaol'. He was clearly discouraged by the state of the Spinning House:

I have so frequently and yet so ineffectually endeavoured to remedy the wretched condition of this Spinning House by personal application to the several Vice Chancellors, and public exposition in these Reports, that I am almost discouraged from any further attempt.

The Eleventh Report also included a description of the interior of the Spinning House and a summary of the inspector’s previous comments including a list of the prison’s shortcomings:

The whole prison is ill-ventilated, and ill-adapted for its purposes; the effluvia from the water-closets adjoining the cells is most offensive. . . . No sort of discipline is maintained; several escapes have taken place. The prisoners were not searched, nor deprived of money, nor any other article. . . . [The girls] pass their time huddled round the fires in obscene talk, or occasionally in singing or dancing. . . . The University has made no provision for moral or religious instruction. Some benevolent ladies occasionally visited the prison; a clergyman, a member of King’s College, some time back attended voluntarily on a Sunday, but discontinued it for private reasons. . . .

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56 Eleventh Report, p. 12.
57 Eleventh Report, p. 12.
Under a heading 'General Observations' the inspector commented:

'It is [The Spinning House’s] utter deficiency in every requisite will be observed in the above details to be so glaring as to require but little, if any, further remark. . . . These females appear to be all in the same class of degradation – the lowest – from association, all alike. It is a grievous inconsistency, if not an offence against morals, to place offenders in a situation where, instead of being corrected and reformed, their “last state must become worse than their first”.59

Elizabeth Fry had drawn attention to the special needs of women prisoners in the first decades of the century, but, although her criticisms were recognized and acknowledged, change in the way that women were treated was slow. In 1835 the Revd Whitworth Russell, a former chaplain at Millbank and a prison inspector, stated that it was necessary to devise ‘a very different system of Penal Discipline’ for women. ‘I can see hardly anything in common between the Case of a Male and a Female Convict.60 Conditions differed from prison to prison for men and women prisoners alike. They depended on many features such as the age of the buildings, the integrity of the governor and the availability of suitable work. One of the aims of the Gaol Act 1823 had been to achieve some measure of uniformity in local prisons by requiring them to improve the morals of prisoners by ‘due Classification, Inspection, regular Labour and Employment, and Religious and Moral instruction’. According to Lucia Zedner, the Gaol Act had sanctions but appears to have been widely ignored.61 Women continued to be housed in local prisons with the least effort and expense, with the result that they suffered worse

60 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 116.
61 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 133.
conditions than men convicted of similar offences. The Spinning House reflected this trend of neglect.

One of the greatest challenges the authorities faced from women prisoners was riotous behaviour. One prison chaplain, the Revd Walter Clay, was convinced that ‘women are far worse to manage, and resist what is for their good far more vehemently than men’. There were stories of women in London’s Millbank Prison smashing windows, tearing up their clothes, destroying every article in reach and yelling and shouting. Over 200 instances of noisy, riotous or violent behaviour by the Spinning House girls are listed in the committal books: it seems that they were not very different from their sisters in London. There were fears that such behaviour was made possible by the close ties that emerged in prison. It was said that ‘a Lady Visitor to Brixton deplored the “sisterhood” that existed among the women’; she cited evidence of women ‘sharing information on means of effecting infanticide’. Strong bonds were almost certainly forged between the Spinning House inmates too: long hours spent together in the common room would have provided the girls with ample opportunity to share experiences.

Contemporaries were aware that behaviour was linked to conditions, but there are few personal records to inform us of the conditions in women’s gaols in England in the nineteenth century. There is, however, an account from a woman prisoner in Tothill Fields that suggests that they were not places that rehabilitated their inmates. Tothill Fields, originally established in 1618 as a London bridewell, was rebuilt as a local gaol in 1834 and became a prison which was restricted to females and to males under seventeen years of

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63 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 185.
64 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 208.
65 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 207.
age. In a letter to The Times of 28 March 1856 the noted prison reformer, Thomas Lloyd Baker, described it as ‘as good a prison as any under our present system’. From 1860 it became a prison for convicted women only. In the 1880s Susan Fletcher, an upper-class American, spent twelve months in Tothill Fields for fraud. Although she was a wholly untypical prisoner, her description of the prison regime is worthy of note. ‘Cold, darkness, silence, and solitude are not curative or reformatory, or humanizing influences. They disease the body, and depress, stupefy, and debase the mind. Their tendency is to fill it with gloom, hatred and depression.’ In the Tothill Fields’ records there is mention of innumerable incidents of ‘obscene and disgusting language; filthy assault, and even riot and tumult’. Zedner observed: ‘These records seem to indicate defiance, anger, frustration, and lack of self-control.’ Some of the Cambridge streetwalkers expressed similar frustration and anger when they were imprisoned. Isabella Garner, who worked at the Red Lion in the centre of the town, was the daughter of a coal porter and only sixteen when she was first arrested. On her second arrest she ‘resisted violently, assaulted the constables and used the most filthy language’. Similarly, Esther Lyon was ‘exceedingly violent and furious in both language and conduct. Most violent when brought before the Vice-Chancellor.’ There is no evidence to show that either of these girls were prostitutes, but both were sentenced to twenty-eight days in the Spinning House.

The Vice-Chancellor’s court in the Spinning House was not open to the public and it was viewed with suspicion by the townspeople. The stories told by girls like Isabella and Esther must have raised public awareness of the unrestricted power of the Vice-Chancellor’s court and the conditions inside the prison and further increased distrust.

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68 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 168.
69 University/T:VIII.3.
70 University/T:VIII.3.
Those girls who resisted arrest or who spoke up for themselves, even to protest their innocence, were perceived by the university as aggressive and as troublemakers, as will be demonstrated in Chapter 5. They tended to receive longer sentences than those who were compliant and even risked being sent to the town gaol, where there was a harsher regime. If the Vice-Chancellor was unable to visit the Spinning House, girls who had been held overnight and were awaiting his judgement were released without sentence, but the committal books suggest that this was a rare occurrence.

The Spinning House: publicity in the local and national press

Most of the time the Vice-Chancellors and their proctors performed their morning ritual in the House without interruption. Occasionally something happened that brought the local people’s anger to the surface. The death of Elizabeth Howe was just such an event. On 6 November 1846 nineteen-year-old Elizabeth was arrested with another young girl, Harriet King, and taken to the Spinning House by the proctor, 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 her lodging at 7 Union Row, which was kept by Mary Ann Rose, who was ‘known to the Proctors’. A medical attendant, Mr Newby, was called to Rose’s house nine days later, but in spite of this and further visits Elizabeth died on 1 December. It is pertinent to remember that this tragedy happened only five months after a damning report on the prison’s living conditions by an inspector of prisons.

The Coroner’s inquest that followed the death brought the Spinning House into the public arena, in both Cambridge and London. From all accounts, Elizabeth Howe was a quiet sober girl who had been in service and had good friends among the other girls. Proctor Kingsley commented in a letter to a local newspaper: ‘The deceased went quietly, and
professed penitence.' There were ten females in the Spinning House on the night of 6 November, and five girls were called to testify. They told of damp beds and blankets, broken window catches and meagre rations. The prisoners were united in their condemnation of the place. The keeper of the House challenged the girls' statements, but the damage was done and the university was forced to defend its position. The jury brought in a verdict that Elizabeth Howe died of rheumatic fever caused by a violent cold caught at the Spinning House and by being confined in a cold, damp cell. The members of the jury expressed 'their abhorrence of a system which sanctions the apprehension of females when not offending against the general law of the land and confining them in a gaol unfit for the worst of felons'.

The debate in the press that followed the inquest revealed the concern of large sections of the wider community, from the clerical dons of the university and parents of undergraduates to the ordinary people of the town and the parents and relations of the girls who were held in the Spinning House. Events in Cambridge gained national significance. This letter to The Times showed how passionately some people felt about conditions at the Spinning House:

It is a fact as melancholy as notorious that no amendment of prisons or workhouses takes place till their thresholds have been sprinkled with blood. . . . What a picture of a protestant town and University! Could Bologna, or Venice, or Sevilla, in their worst days, have disclosed dungeons more fatal, or displayed a greater disregard of human suffering?

One Cambridge graduate and father of sons wrote to the Editor of The Times supporting

71 Cambridge Chronicle, 19 December 1846.
72 The Times, 15 December 1846.
73 The Times, 9 December 1846.
reform of the Spinning House but defending the university’s power to arrest and imprison the streetwalkers. He believed that the practice worked ‘to preserve hundreds of youths from sin’, but he also wanted proctorial power to be exercised within the law. ‘If the power so exercised be illegal, in virtue’s name, let it be legalized forthwith.’ The crisis at the Spinning House made even those who believed that the prison should be retained question the power wielded by the proctors.

Not all local people were convinced by arguments condemning the Spinning House. A leader writer in the Cambridge Chronicle was sceptical about the evidence provided by ‘six young ladies’ from Barnwell who had been inmates of the Spinning House. They swore that the beds were damp, and that each of them had suffered pains and colds from sleeping there. ‘This trustworthy evidence was supported by a matron who gains her livelihood by keeping a sort of menagerie of ladies in Union Row.’

The Cambridge Chronicle did little to calm the mood in the town and published an account of a disturbance that followed the arrest of a girl by the proctors’ men a few days after the inquest. It was entitled ‘Proctorial Authority’:

The agitation upon the Spinning-house question is beginning to bear its natural fruit, and mob-law is now, it would seem, to be the order of the day. Nay, for aught we know, the charitable and academic suggestion of “suspension on the nearest lamp-iron,” as the fitting fate for University officers, may be practically adopted by the legislators of our streets before we are called upon again to address our readers. On Wednesday night a disturbance occurred which is entirely attributable to the disgraceful misstatements that have gone abroad in reference to the death of Elizabeth Howe.

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74 The Times, 11 December 1846.
75 Cambridge Chronicle, 12 December 1846.
76 Cambridge Chronicle, 19 December 1846.
At the end of the inquest the jury had requested that the coroner inform the Home Department of their findings. The papers relating to the inquest were sent to Sir George Grey, the Secretary of State, who wrote immediately to Dr Henry Philpott, the Vice-Chancellor of the university, demanding that the Spinning House’s ‘glaring defects’ be remedied without delay.  

For a short time the prison had become notorious. Editorials in *The Times*, such as the following, must have had an impact on readers. Probably they also put pressure on Sir George Grey to act quickly.

The substantial evil is not the imprisonment, but the place where the person was imprisoned. The very palpable neglect of duty which appears on the part of the University, in not providing better accommodation for the unfortunate creatures whom the authorities have been in the almost daily habit of depriving of their liberty, ought to draw down upon them the severest censure. It appears from the reports of the inspectors of prisons that the disgraceful condition of the Spinning House has been known for some time. We may therefore, very fairly ask how it is that no improvement has taken place. Surely there must be a power resident somewhere of compelling the Vice-Chancellor to do what the commonest humanity declares to be absolutely requisite to prevent danger even to the lives of Her Majesty’s subjects. If there be no such power, and if the statutes of the University have constituted that place of learning an arbitrary, tyrannical, and irresponsible corporation, then it is high time that a thorough investigation be made of them, and, if need be a thorough reform. Should the members for the University refuse to undertake the task in Parliament, it will be the duty of the representatives of the borough to supply their deficiency.

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77 University/Endow. 1.7.  
78 *The Times*, 11 December 1846.
The Spinning House: some improvements

The death of Elizabeth Howe was the principal event that drove reform of the Spinning House. The management of the House became a concern of the government in London and between December 1846 and late March 1847 there was an exchange of letters between the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Henry Philpott, and the Home Office. In his first letter to the Vice-Chancellor, the Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, stated that he thought the opinions expressed by the jury were justified. He showed surprise that no material improvement appeared to have been made in the Spinning House, although the inspector of prisons had criticized its bad management and discreditable condition on more than one occasion. The university authorities had given assurance that improvements would take place in the prison, but he concluded:

I am not aware of any means which have been taken to render confinement in this prison conducive to the reformation of its inmates. . . . There are glaring defects in its management, which must bring discredit on those, under whose control and superintendence it is placed. The Spinning House should be discontinued as a place of imprisonment. 79

Grey was calling for the House’s closure, but the Vice-Chancellor seemed deaf to the proposal. He replied immediately, saying that he would comply with the inspector’s recommendations and improve conditions in the prison. The debate after Howe’s death had been not only about the wretched physical conditions of the House but also about the imprisonment of young girls as criminals. For the university there was no question of stopping the proctors’ street patrols or closing the Spinning House. No doubt Philpott took comfort from the first line of the recent editorial in The Times (see above), ‘The substantial evil is not the imprisonment, but the place where the person was imprisoned.’

79 University/Endow.1.7.
The Vice-Chancellor’s letters in reply to the Home Secretary’s criticisms state his intention to make improvements, including changes to the prison diet. Most of the girls who gave evidence at the inquest of Elizabeth Howe had complained of the high prices they had to pay the keeper for their food. Now there was to be a daily allowance provided for each inmate. It was recognized that in women’s prisons generally ‘allocations of food gave rise to “bickering and jealousy”’. 80

In March 1847 the trustees of the House proposed new regulations. Sir George Grey agreed to these rules with one proviso – solitary confinement was to last for a maximum of three days. New rules and regulations were drafted. There were separate sets of rules to govern the conduct of the matron, the chaplain and the medical officer and there was a comprehensive set of rules for the inmates, which was displayed in the day room (Appendix I). 81 Again Whitehall had insisted on approving them. This time it was a new Home Secretary, Lord Palmerston, who signed the drafts.

The Vice-Chancellor defended the appointment of male keepers. ‘The females confined in the house are chiefly of the most profligate and abandoned character and cases of insubordination and violence are of frequent occurrence, where the presence of a male officer is absolutely necessary.’ 82 A new inspector of prisons visited the Spinning House on 5 November 1849 and reported some improvements. ‘The drains have been taken up and re-constructed, and the floors of the airing yards have been repaired but there did not appear to have been any other change either in the building or discipline.’ 83 He suggested that an assistant female officer should be appointed and that during the day the prisoners

80 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 146.
81 University/Endow. I.15.
82 University/Endow. I.14.
(except those who were ill) should 'never be left for a single moment without the matron or her assistant'.\textsuperscript{84} The assistant officer should sleep in the same part of the building as the prisoners, 'in order that she may hear any disturbance during the night'.\textsuperscript{85} He thought that there should be a wash-house with a bath and that the prisoners should be supplied with shoes and stockings.

Three years later the Spinning House still had deficiencies. The inspector reported that the prisoners spent most of their day unsupervised and that there was little employment beyond the sewing they chose to do for themselves. 'In one room I found seven prisoners together, without an officer; and, in all probability, very corrupting conversation going on.'\textsuperscript{86} He also thought that whenever any male officer visited the females a female officer should accompany him. Peel's Gaol Act in 1823 had stipulated that in state prisons male staff, including chaplains, should only visit female prisoners in the company of female staff.\textsuperscript{87} The inspector's final observations were uncompromising: 'It appears to me to be very desirable that, instead of more money being laid out to make improvements, the prison should be discontinued, and the offenders who are sent to it, committed to the borough prisons. There would be a great saving in expense, and more efficient discipline might be attained.'\textsuperscript{88}

\textit{The Spinning House: further controversy in the press}

On 2 January 1851 the \textit{Morning Chronicle} printed a specially commissioned article entitled 'The Spinning House Abomination', which included interviews with ex-Spinning House girls. Although the girls' descriptions of their experiences in and around the House

\textsuperscript{84} Fifteenth Report of the Inspectors of Prisons, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{85} Fifteenth Report, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{86} Fifteenth Report, p. 214.
\textsuperscript{87} Zedner, \textit{Women, crime and custody}, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{88} Fifteenth Report, p. 214.
were almost certainly embroidered, they must have stoked the fires of hostility towards the university. They tell 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 are stories of friends being dragged by their hair because ‘they wouldn’t keep quiet’ and of one girl who was arrested when ‘she was undressed so she had a blanket thrown over her and had to be taken to the Spinning House in a coach’. One Spinning House girl reported that she had been held for 103 weeks altogether. Another said of the House, ‘We call it “going to college”.’

In January 1851 the *Morning Chronicle* printed the following:

> The Editor of a local print (who foolishly imagines that he is supporting the University by glossing over its most glaring abuses) has had the effrontery to insinuate that this account is exaggerated. It may, however be relied upon as substantially correct; and it is strongly supported by various Reports of the Inspector of Prisons.

There was clearly antagonism between the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Cambridge Chronicle*. The London paper supported the Whigs and employed writers such as Henry Mayhew to investigative social issues. The *Cambridge Chronicle*, which was linked with the *University Journal*, favoured the Tory cause, the established Church and the university.

*The Spinning House: management disputes and refurbishment*

It was not only at the exalted level of the Home Office that issues were raised about the management of the Spinning House. In his paper on Cambridge workhouses read before

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90 *Morning Chronicle*, 27 January 1851.
the Cambridge Antiquarian Society on 30 January 1911, the Revd H. P. Stokes quoted a
manuscript by the Revd William Cole (1714–1782), a Cambridge antiquarian, which
reported that the Justices of the Peace, who were independent of both the Vice-Chancellor
and the Mayor, had tried to take over the administration of the premises, ‘founding this
claim upon the Statute which gives them care of Workhouses erected by order of the
Quarter Sessions’. The trustees of Hobson’s workhouse challenged them, insisting that it
was ‘a special charity’ and that the original settlement gave the management of the House
to ‘the Vice-Chancellor and Mayor’.91

In August 1852 a long-pending suit in Chancery respecting Hobson’s Workhouse Charity
was settled. Twenty-five years earlier, in June 1837, Lord Langdale, Master of the Rolls,
had made a decree on information supplied by the Attorney General, as a result of
complaints by prominent citizens, against the trustees of the Spinning House. The trustees
were accused of mismanagement and misappropriation of funds, in particular a sum
bequeathed by John Bowtell for apprenticing young boys.

His Lordship declared that the purposes for which the Workhouse was used ought not to be
continued, and that certain salaries which had been paid ought to cease, and he referred it to the
Master to take accounts and settle a scheme for the future management of the Charity and the estates
belonging thereto, and to approve of new Trustees.92

A new scheme for the clear division of the Spinning House management was sanctioned in
1852. The university trustees were to be in charge of the accommodation for the
streetwalkers arrested by the proctors and the Mayor, aldermen and burgesses were to look
after the adjacent buildings, which were being used as a police station and lock-up cells for

holding prisoners overnight. These changes in management gave the university authorities another opportunity to reassess the need for the Spinning House, but there is no evidence that they considered any changes in their practice of proctorial privilege. Instead, the university set about planning the rebuilding of the House even before the court case had been settled and in spite of the costs involved.

The scheme for the new buildings was approved by the Court of Chancery on 4 August 1852. Part of the money would come from Hobson’s charity in the form of rents, but the university would also have to contribute to the project. In the university archives there is a large detailed ground plan of the House with correspondence between the Vice-Chancellor, H. M. Inspector of Prisons, the Surveyor General, the Home Secretary and others relating to the rebuilding of the Spinning House. The prison was closed for five months for renovation and the committal book for that year shows that, in consequence, it did not accept inmates from the end of May until 7 November 1853; it may have been by design that this closure included the long vacation.

The diarist and university registrary, Joseph Romilly, was impressed with what was achieved. He was a man both conscientious in his work and philanthropic in his life outside the university. Romilly’s diary entries show a particular interest in the Spinning House and on 4 November 1853 he described a visit he made to the House with his sister Lucy. He found that the keeper, Mr Wilson, ‘a round dwarfish tailor’, was not quite sober and had an extravagant opinion of his own merits. ‘Besides the cells, each of which had gas-light, a fixed little table, a 3 legged stool and a hammock, the Spinning house had a gloomy chapel, an infirmary, a largish kitchen & a laundry.’ The paved yard was to be

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93 Cooper, Annals, iv, pp. 70–75.
94 University/Endow.1.9.
decorated with a border of flowers. When Romilly visited the house there were no inmates; they were committed to the town gaol until the house was 'considered perfectly fit for their reception'.

Romilly had been easily impressed by the new furnishings in the cells and the promise of flowers in the paved yard, but not everyone shared his enthusiasm for the renovated Spinning House. The prison had been only partially rebuilt and some of the accommodation still had serious defects. The surgeon, Mr Fawcett, insisted that the old infirmary and cells 4, 5 and 6 were damp. The infirmary was unsuitable for its purpose and a new one was needed. The main concern of the Inspector of Prisons, Mr Voulis, was that there should be enough cells for single occupancy:

Voulis expounded a strong opinion that the system of separate confinement ought to be adopted for all the prisoners, long experience having proved that the most beneficial effects may be expected to follow from that system. ... He suggested that the present building might be fitted for the adoption of that system. ... The Inspector further stated it to be a necessary part of the system of separate confinement that constant occupation should be provided for the Prisoners in working, knitting, washing and other similar employments. ... A small Library of Books should also be provided not exclusively of a religious character.

The governors of Hobson's Trust were convinced by the inspector's argument and put the 'System of Separate Confinement' to the Senate on 24 November 1853. The Senate agreed to adopt the scheme for the Spinning House. The governors also recommended that:

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96 University/Endow.1.12.
97 University/Endow.1.11.
the Salaries of the Chaplain and of the Surgeon should be continued the same as at present; and, they desire to express their sanguine hope that if the system and management of the Spinning-House be placed upon the footing now recommended, a large amount of good may be effected by the opportunity afforded of subjecting the Inmates to the influence of quiet and separation from the haunts of vice, aided by an effectual system of moral discipline and instruction. 98

As late as 1846 the inspector of prisons had described the Spinning House’s ‘utter deficiency in every requisite’, but a decade later the atmosphere had changed. Discipline had been tightened for both staff and girls, but perhaps the most significant change had been the appointment of a matron to be in charge of the House. Miss Agnes Johnson was an ex-matron of Durham Prison and her testimonials were glowing. One referee had described her as ‘quite a treasure’. 99 There is evidence that the girls’ physical welfare began to receive more attention. The food improved and a copy of the diet was hung in the day room for the inmates to see. It was simple fare, which included twelve ounces of bread each day, meat and potatoes for dinner on four days, with soup on the other three, oatmeal gruel or bread for supper and tea to drink with milk and sugar. The medical officer was expected to pay a routine visit at least three times a week and keep a record book. Each girl was to have an examination on her committal and on her discharge. 100 For many years the surgeon was Mr Fawcett. His annual reports to the Vice-Chancellor were respectful, brief and often vague. On 27 October 1862 he noted that he had made regular visits to the Spinning House throughout the year and ‘the girls’ ailments have all been of a trifling nature and no illness of any gravity has occurred’. 101 However, four years later his report was a little more explicit: ‘No case of importance has arisen. – Two or three of a contagious nature connected with the habits of the inmates, have occurred, but they were

98 University/Endow.1.11.  
99 University/Endow.1.13.  
100 University/Endow.1.14.  
101 University/Endow.1.22.
only very slight and soon relieved." It is fair to say that from 1856 onwards the trustees of Hobson's Trust met most of the basic physical requirements demanded by the prison inspectorate.

The Act of 1856 for the better ordering of prisons had directed that in all cases of separate confinement the prisoners should be furnished with the means of moral and religious instruction and also with labour and employment. After decades of neglect, the university authorities began to consider the girls' moral and religious welfare. They accepted the idea that a prison chaplain should play the main part in the reform of offenders and that the inmates of the Spinning House should be given the opportunity for private prayer and reflection. Ordained priests, who were members of the university, had acted as chaplains to the House from 1842, when Mr Coulcher had been appointed with a salary of £40. Mr Peill had succeeded him in 1847, when the salary was raised to £60. It seems that neither of these men had any real contact with or impact on the young inmates. Mr Whitehead from Trinity College was the first chaplain who appears to have taken his commitments seriously. He took up the post in 1853 and was still chaplain in 1886. His report to the governors of the prison for the year ending 29 September 1855 suggests that relationships between the staff were good: 'I have great pleasure in bearing witness and testimony to the kind and ready assistance which I have ever received from the Matron and under-Matron and the efficiency with which they discharge all their duties.'

Whitehead's report on the inmates, which was copied from the Vice-Chancellor's guard book by Romilly, painted a more depressing picture. The impression of the chaplain given in this report and later ones is of a conscientious and compassionate man, but there must have been a wide social and intellectual gulf between him and the girls.

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80 University/Endow.1.22.
80 University/Endow.1.22.
Whitehead reported that in 1855, out of thirty-two committals, there were only two girls for whom he thought there was 'the least hope of reform'. He found the other girls of 'most degraded and hopeless character: several of them indeed, very young, from 15 to 18, but apparently already old in guilt and determined to continue in sin'. Eighteen of the girls could read quite well and only three of them could not read at all. 'Ten could write, but only one or two with ease.' The chaplain 'endeavoured chiefly to impress upon them the great doctrines of Christianity' and 'also pointed out to them privately some passages of scripture and caused them to commit some of these to memory'. He added that the inmates had 'the use of such books as the Library affords and some few suitable tracts'. It is unsurprising that, with this kind of instruction and the chaplain's attitude to the girls, only two of them seemed at all likely to change their ways. Whitehead continued to send annual reports to the trustees, which became increasingly brief until his final note in 1883, when he just wrote 'no committals'. Similarly, Zedner recounted that 'the Chaplain of Tothill Fields began by claiming modest success for his attempts to promote reform', but then how 'his reports became steadily shorter and less varied over subsequent years, suggesting a decline in his influence, or, perhaps, that he slowly became resigned to the hopelessness of his task'. This chaplain would have recognized R. F. Quinton's description of a Victorian prisoner: 'The woman who will curl her hair with the pages of a library or even devotional book, is not a hopeful subject for intellectual improvement.'

The number of cells in the House had increased and the accommodation and routine had improved, but the number of inmates dropped dramatically. In the thirty years from 1823 until the temporary closure of the House in May 1853 there had been 5462 arrests. In the

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104 University/Endow.1.18.
105 Zedner, Women, crime and custody, p. 144.
forty years from its reopening in November 1853 until its final closure in 1894 there were only 804 arrests. The proctors had become more cautious when arresting women in the streets and the length of sentences had been reduced. The Vice-Chancellors and proctors had heeded the warnings that followed the death of Elizabeth Howe and become more aware of the consequences that could follow their actions, but this did not stop them from acting in ways that were unpopular or prevent the consequences of their actions.

_The Spinning House: three court cases_

The trustees of Hobson’s Trust made regular inspections of the Spinning House from 1857 until 1891. Unlike some earlier inspections these were never critical: the House was always ‘clean and in order’ and the subject of the girls’ reform was never raised. However, it was not long before another episode involving the Spinning House caused anger and frustration in the town. It centred on the case of Emily Kemp, whom the proctors arrested with six others girls on 30 January 1860 in the belief that they were prostitutes. A journalist from the _Daily Telegraph_ reported the story under the heading ‘The Proctorial System at Cambridge’:

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, while a preconcerted signal summoned from the inner side of the gaol door the guardians of University morality who, it appears, had received an anonymous communication that a vehicle laden in the way found would travel that road about the time mentioned.
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'.

Romilly noted in his diary on 13 February 1860:

The V.C. told me of a capture wch the Proctors made at 7 in the Evening of an omnibus on its way to Shelford (I think) where there was to be a dance: the omnibus contained 5 young women & 2 gowns men (sons of Graham of Hinxton): the females were all lodged in the spinning house; they were not of the lowest class, but one of them had been there before; -- the V.C. has received indignant letters from London saying the girls were innocent milliners going out for a lark.

The Vice-Chancellor believed that the proctors had acted in good faith when they arrested the young Cambridge girls. It transpired that Edward Blore, one of the pro-proctors, had learned that some undergraduates had arranged for an omnibus to take a group of young women and a small band of musicians to an evening party at the De Freville Arms in Great Shelford, about three miles out of Cambridge. It was rumoured that Blore gained this information from a jealous girl who had not been invited to the party. He and a senior proctor, accompanied by some university constables, held up the omnibus as it passed Parker's Piece and ordered it to be driven to the Spinning House. Blore suspected that the journey was for 'an improper purpose', an opinion confirmed by hearing that the innkeeper had been instructed to provide breakfast for the group the following morning.

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108 Daily Telegraph, 2 February 1860.
The entries in the committal book for 30 January suggest that the *Daily Telegraph* report was not entirely accurate. The seven girls, none of whom had ever been apprehended by the proctors before, spent the night in the Spinning House and the following morning they appeared before the Vice-Chancellor, Latimer Neville, Master of Magdalene College. The youngest of the group, Louisa Kemp, who said she was a 14-year-old dressmaker, and Rosetta Aves, who was 17, were admonished and discharged. Sarah Ebbon, 20, Charlotte Fuller, 18, and Emma Coxall, 19, were each sentenced to three days in prison. Harriet Bell, 22, was given a week, and the only culprit given a fortnight's imprisonment was Emily Kemp (or Kempe), 22, sister of Louisa. In fact she served only five days of the sentence.

It is easy to imagine how the arrests caused a stir in both the university and the town, but now papers in London were drawing attention to them. *Reynolds's Newspaper*, one of the first mass-market papers, which vigorously supported the causes of 'the honest poor', published a letter from one of its readers about the imprisonment of Emily Kemp with the heading 'The Monarch of Cambridge, his Police and his Prison House'. He asked these questions: 'Is Cambridge an independent State, or part and parcel of the United Kingdom? Is the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge a sovereign potentate, or is he a subject of Queen Victoria?'

A further colourful article appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* on 7 February, which must have been written with the purpose of fuelling indignation beyond the town community. When Elizabeth Howe died, the proctors' authority had been questioned, but most of the

*111* *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 9 December 1860.
criticism had been aimed at the Spinning House; now it was the proctorial system itself which was being denounced:

Doors may be burst open if a proctor chooses to think that one of his lambs is in a fold of black sheep. Much worse than this, females of irreproachable character, who are impudent enough to venture into the streets after nightfall, are liable to be assailed by . . . disgusting questions and perhaps brutal violence. A virtuous girl, a spotless matron may be dragged to the Spinning House, thrust into a dirty and unwholesome cell, half-starved and half frozen during the night and next morning brought before the Vice-Chancellor and sentenced to a further term of loathsome incarceration.113

A meeting was called at the Hoop Hotel in Cambridge to consider how to curtail the proctors' privileges. Both those who supported the university and those who were opposed to the proctorial system attended. The former group presented a memorial to the Vice-Chancellor supporting the proctors. Of the 360 people who signed this petition, 260 were directly connected with the university. They included 54 university members, 50 college servants and 110 college tradesmen, which left 'a residue of only a 100 persons unconnected with the university'. Those opposing the Vice-Chancellor promptly displayed posters around the town stating that, in spite of 'every exertion', the memorial had not been signed by town dignitaries including the Mayor, four borough justices, eight aldermen, twenty-two councillors, the town clerk, the clerk to the magistrates, as well as the '12,002 Male inhabitants of the Town according to the Census of 1851'.113

The Cambridge Chronicle published the opinions of some local 'radicals' who had attended the meeting. They believed that the proctorial system was 'opposed to the spirit

112Daily Telegraph, 7 February 1860.
113Enid Porter, 'The proctors' fight against prostitution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', Cambridgeshire Life (June 1968), 21–23 (p. 22).
of the English constitution, subversive of the liberty of the subject, repugnant to the feelings of the inhabitants of this town, and wholly inoperative as affecting the objects which they profess to accomplish'.

Feelings were obviously running high and it was arranged that Emma Kemp should bring an action against the Vice-Chancellor. Eventually, at Westminster on Friday, 30 November, the action of Kempe [*sic*] v. Latimer Neville was begun. The jury found in favour of the plaintiff because, although the proctors had reasonable cause for suspicion, the Vice-Chancellor had not inquired into Kemp’s character. The townspeople were no doubt triumphant at the result, but their joy was short-lived. The judge directed that it was an imperfect verdict and allowed an appeal. The new verdict favoured the Vice-Chancellor. The university authorities had won the case, but it had been costly for them, as Emma Kemp’s action had led to unwelcome publicity for the Spinning House in both the local and the national press. The university prison was portrayed as a wretched place where young girls were held on the flimsiest of evidence.

Probably as a result of local antagonism, the university syndicate decided to seek legal advice on procedures for the arrest and imprisonment of offenders. The university solicitor, Mr Hyde, was ill at the time, so F. J. Fuller of 12 Regent Street was approached instead. Mr Fuller recommended the following form of committal, which was used until the Spinning House was closed in 1894:

> Whereas — hath been apprehended by — one of the Proctors of the said University, within the limit and jurisdiction thereof, and hath been this day brought before me and charged with — in a certain public street of the town and suburbs of Cambridge and within the precincts of the said University,

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114 *Cambridge Chronicle*, 18 February 1860.
which charge, as well upon the information of the said — Proctor as upon the examination of the said —, and after having heard what the said — had to allege in her defence, I do adjudge to be true. These are therefore to require and command you to receive into your custody the said —, and her safely to keep in your Spinning House for —.115

Fuller also advised that, if a woman denied a charge, witnesses should be called and questioned on oath, a suggestion that was accepted by the syndicate but not followed in practice by every Vice-Chancellor. From all accounts, the behaviour of the proctors and bulldogs became less aggressive over the next thirty years, although as late as 1876 a graduate who had witnessed the brutal arrest of a girl wrote to a London newspaper about 'the clerical atrocities taking place' in Cambridge (Appendix 2).116

In London, from the 1850s onwards, 'policing of street prostitution was usually tentative and 'passive'.117 A prostitute who was behaving in a riotous and indecent way could be charged under the Vagrancy Act 1824 or, if it was thought that she was causing annoyance by soliciting in a public place, she could be charged under the Metropolitan Police Act 1839. However, most magistrates 'refused to convict a prostitute for causing annoyance solely on police evidence'.118 Activists, such as members of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, pressed for stricter policing, but stories in the newspapers of indiscriminate arrests aroused opposition in the general public.

Matters came to a head in 1887 when Elizabeth Cass, a dressmaker, was arrested and charged with soliciting on the sole testimony of P.C. Endacott. The magistrate at

115 University/Endow.I.16.
116 Reynolds’s Newspaper, 10 December 1876.
Marlborough Street Police Court dismissed the charge, ‘largely on the evidence of Cass’s employer [Mrs Bowman] as to her respectability’.\textsuperscript{139} He cautioned Cass, obviously believing her to be guilty. Mrs Bowman, incensed by the implication that she had committed perjury, complained to the Metropolitan Police. Questions in the House of Commons were followed by a debate on the case.

The Cass case had confirmed fears that the Metropolitan Police abused their powers and arrested women without proper evidence – fears that were echoed in Cambridge. The proctors took to warning women rather than arresting them and the numbers held in the Spinning House fell dramatically: between 1880 and 1890 the average number of cases was about four or five a year. However, in May 1890 the then Vice-Chancellor, Dr Butler, Master of Trinity College, was concerned at the condition of the streets of Cambridge and urged the proctors to be more vigilant. As a result more women were arrested, including one called Jane Elsden. The events that followed Jane’s release from the Spinning House provided Cambridge with a drama which lasted throughout most of February 1891 and journalists with a story that led to many columns of print in local and national newspapers.

On Tuesday, 10 February 1891, Jane Elson was released from the Spinning House after being held for streetwalking. At about 11 o’clock in the evening of 11 February she was seen walking in Petty Cury in the centre of the town by the junior proctor and his bulldogs. Not unnaturally she ran away, only to be chased and caught in Sussex Street. The following morning she appeared before Dr Butler, who sentenced her to three weeks’ detention. It was reported in the Cambridge Evening News that she was defiant and said,

\textsuperscript{139} Petrow, Policing Morals p. 133.
‘I always thought England was a free country, but I find it is not.’\textsuperscript{120} Jane escaped from the Spinning House that afternoon, owing, it is said, to the negligence of an assistant matron. She went straight to her father’s house in Dullingham, a village near Newmarket, but on Saturday, 14 February, Dr Butler, having taken legal advice from Dr Kenny, the Reader in Law, arranged for her rearrest. The Vice-Chancellor’s decision to arrest the girl was to put the university in a difficult position.

Jane Elsden told her story to a sympathetic audience in the magistrates’ court on Monday, 14 February. Her escape from custody ensured her committal for trial at the assizes which were due to begin on the following day. The trial lasted for two days and, although her counsel, Livett, was unsuccessful in his challenge of the legality of her imprisonment and she was found ‘guilty of escaping from custody’, Jane Elsden was ‘greeted by the Press as a martyr in the cause of freedom’.\textsuperscript{121} Her counsel described the methods used for the arrest of the seventeen-year old as those of the Russian police. ‘In free England,’ he exclaimed, ‘this poor girl has been dogged and persecuted.’\textsuperscript{122} According to newspaper reports his speech was greeted with loud applause. Questions concerning a free pardon for Elsden were asked in the House of Commons. The publicity given to the case put pressure on both the university authorities and the borough. Not only were the former loath to lose their long-held privileges, but there was also a real fear within the university that moral behaviour in the centre of Cambridge would spiral out of control if the proctors lost control of the streets. On the other hand, members of the borough council faced growing impatience from townspeople, who, seeing the adverse publicity given to the Spinning House, believed they should seize the opportunity for closure of the prison and the removal of the proctors’ authority, which many saw as a relic of the sixteenth century.

\textsuperscript{120} Cambridge Evening News, 17 February 1891. 
\textsuperscript{122} Cambridge Chronicle, 20 February 1891.
Throughout 1891 relations between the university and the town were very strained. The proctors were particularly cautious on the streets and consequently there were no incidents to worsen the situation. High-level meetings took place regularly between the university and the borough to resolve the problems of policing for the streets, but both sides stood firm. The university authorities appreciated the delicate position that they were in and, in an effort to ease the tense situation, they decided to change their committal procedures at the prison. On 16 October the syndicate met and agreed that in future all Spinning House cases would be heard in public and prisoners defended by their own counsels.¹²³ This new practice was to be tested within two months.

On 2 December 1891, seventeen-year-old Daisy Hopkin was arrested by a proctor in the company of an undergraduate and taken to the Spinning House. The Hopkin family, who had moved from Ely to Cambridge when Daisy was thirteen, were well known locally; a brother was a billiard marker in the town. The proctors knew Daisy and an elder sister, and Daisy had been warned against loitering in the streets in May 1890. She was also on a police register of suspected women. The syndicate’s decision of 16 October ensured publicity for the case.

The hearing was in public and a town solicitor, Jasper Lyon, defended Daisy Hopkin. The Cambridge Daily News reported the trial in detail. We know that Daisy was ‘fashionably attired . . . in a navy blue costume, trimmed with gold edging, and a fawn coloured felt hat’. Her companion, Mr Russell, a married undergraduate aged 28, reluctantly gave evidence on oath and said that he had asked her whether she could take him to a room and she had replied that she could. She was found guilty and the Vice-Chancellor, Dr John

¹²³ Winstanley, Later Victorian Cambridge, p. 114.
Peile, sentenced her to fourteen days in the Spinning House. A local reporter commented, 'Well might a member of the Borough Bench, who was an interested spectator of the scene, exclaim that "it made my blood boil". The whole of the proceedings are a parody upon justice.'

A London reporter went further than his local colleague in his description of the court proceedings:

A farce with a touch of drama, is a true description of the recent proceedings in connection with the Spinning House scandal. The Vice Chancellor, like his predecessor, Dr Butler, has gained a notoriety which will stick to him with the tenacity of a leech. The Star-Chamber which exists in this enlightened borough is a disgraceful, tyrannising institution. . . . The liberty of the subject is at stake in our English University towns, and it is for us to say whether we are going to shake from our wrists these cold, steel manacles of University jurisdiction, or permit them to continue. It is for the townspeople to say if this condition of things shall continue to exist. Where else in England, except Oxford and Cambridge, would such interference with the liberty of the subject be tolerated?

Daisy Hopkin was taken from the Vice-Chancellor's court to a cell in the Spinning House when the case was concluded. The committal book states that she 'behaved violently on being sentenced'. Mr Russell faced a different fate. Only months earlier he would not have been called to the court to give evidence; in fact he would probably have slipped away unnoticed. Now, although the proctors tried to protect him, the reporters would have none of it and published his name. This is what is written in the proctorial log-book:

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125 Pall Mall Gazette, 7 December 1891.
The Proctors, who had in vain sought to induce the reporters in the Vice-Chancellor's Court to withhold his name, informed his College Tutor that, inasmuch as such a severe punishment in the shape of publicity had already fallen upon him, they did not wish to proceed further in the matter.¹²⁶

Winstanley adds that the undergraduate did not cut a heroic figure in this sordid drama. He left Cambridge immediately after the trial and took his name off the books of his college. As he had no permanent address in this country, his tutor was unable to discover his whereabouts.¹²⁷

The day after the trial Mr Lyon announced his intention to apply for a writ of *Habeas Corpus*, and six days later the Lord Chief Justice in the Court of the Queen's Bench ordered Daisy Hopkin's release on a point of law: she had been charged with 'walking with a member of the university in a public street of the town of Cambridge', but this was not in itself an offence. The Attorney General, acting for the university, admitted that the words 'suspected of evil' had not been used. The case became renowned and just over a hundred years later Lord Justice Simon Brown recalled it in a lecture in London - 'Habeas Corpus - A new chapter'.¹²⁸

Almost immediately after Daisy's release from the Spinning House, Mr Lyon was instructed to take proceedings against Mr Wallis, the proctor, for damages for wrongful imprisonment, Daisy Hopkin's legal expenses being met by public subscription. The university decided to defend the action and not to make any offer in settlement. Public

¹²⁸ Lecture given to the Administrative Law Bar Association, 23 November 1999.
opinion in Cambridge, ‘whether led or echoed by the press’, appeared to have reached an unprecedented level of outrage at her treatment.  

Daisy did not seek obscurity and her fame spread to London and beyond. The repercussions of her arrest, imprisonment and early release continued for many months. Streetwalkers were impersonating her in London. Under the heading ‘A Bogus Daisy Hopkins’, the Bristol Mercury and Daily Post reported that a young woman, who called herself Daisy Hopkins after initially saying she was Jane Elsden, said she was a milliner from Gould Street in Cambridge who had been wrongly imprisoned by the university. She was charged at the Mansion House with being drunk and disorderly and having assaulted a police constable. A solicitor’s clerk and a detective were able to vouch that the real Daisy Hopkins had not left Cambridge all that week. The next day the paper reported that the impostor was released from Holloway Gaol after only 24 hours, the fine having been paid anonymously.

There were angry exchanges in borough and ratepayers’ meetings and public displays of hostility against the university; but some doubted the townspeople’s resolve to stand up to the university, including the writer of a local editorial:

Do the people of Cambridge possess any backbone or not? . . . The liberty of the subject in Cambridge is at a low ebb. The late agitation (far too weak) has done one thing, at any rate – compelled these people to hold public trials instead of private, and I trust that its first case will be

130 Bristol Mercury and Daily Post, 18 February 1892.
131 Bristol Mercury and Daily Post, 19 February 1892.
made the opportunity of a “vigorous” outbreak against the continuance of such powers as are exercised by the University.\textsuperscript{132}

On 30 December there was a meeting of Cambridge ratepayers to discuss a request to Parliament for a bill for ‘the total abolition of the powers exercised by the University’. According to a local newspaper reporter, ‘proceedings were lively and dramatic’. Councillor Vinter proposed the resolution, asserting: ‘Morality could not be kept in check by any Charter or any law; it must depend upon the good feeling – the moral training – of the men who came up to Cambridge.’ According to a local press report, Vinter was listened to ‘with rapt attention and frequent outbursts of applause’. The crowd ‘hooted the councillors who proposed amendments and the resolution was carried with acclamation’.\textsuperscript{133}

The hearing of the case, ‘Daisy Hopkin v. the Rev F. Wallis. Action to recover £500 damages for false imprisonment’, took place at Ipswich Assizes on 24 and 25 March 1892. The press from as far afield as New York reported the proceedings fully and championed Daisy’s cause (Appendix 3).\textsuperscript{134} It helped that she was attractive and she seems to have thought about how she would appear in court.

Miss Daisy Hopkin slim, fair, and a fairly good-looking young lady, wearing a golden-haired fringe low down on her forehead. Her features are pale and sharply cut, suggesting the fact, which came out in evidence, that she is rather delicate. She was becomingly attired in a black dress, a “three-quarter” jacket, and a hat trimmed with a black feather. A fur boa worn during the morning was replaced by a cream-coloured scarf later on. When first called she showed a good deal of nervousness but her replies were afterwards given with clearness and intelligence.\textsuperscript{135}

\begin{flushright}\textsuperscript{132} Cambridge Daily News, 4 December 1891. \\
\textsuperscript{133} Cambridge Daily News, 4 December 1891. \\
\textsuperscript{134} The New York Times, 25 March 1892. \\
\textsuperscript{135} East Anglian Daily Times, 25 March 1892. \end{flushright}
There is no doubt that the case profoundly affected the Vice-Chancellor and the proctors. In the university archives there is a large book with transcripts of the trial, maps and over a hundred pasted columns of newspaper cuttings relating to the case. Daisy Hopkin lost her claim for damages but she was the winner in the town. The university’s reputation plummeted even further.

What was the reaction of undergraduates to the Daisy Hopkin affair? Oswald Sickert, an undergraduate of Trinity College, wrote in a letter to the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette on 4 December 1891 saying that he believed that the actions of the university authorities were flawed: ‘This is what clergy men do; this is the kind of bigotry which is in the minds of people who talk about purity; this is part of the great puritan wave which is rolling so threateningly now.’ In contrast, at the Cambridge Union Society’s debate on 26 January 1892, the motion ‘This House would deplore any attempt to abolish the special jurisdiction of the Vice Chancellor [John Peile]’ was carried, with 92 votes for the motion and 41 against, a majority of 51.

It was said that a new version the old song *D’ye ken John Peel* was popular among gatherings of undergraduates at Cambridge:

Do ye ken John Peile and his learned court,
Do ye ken John Peile wi’ his shift so short,
Do ye ken John Peile when he’s making sport

For the dons and the Masters of Cambridge?

Yes I know John Peile, and, Butler too,
And the Proctors who prowl wi’ their sleuthhounds true,

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136 University/T.VIII.4.
But I'm thinking they'll find there is payment due
For the sport they've been making at Cambridge.

Then ye ken John Peile, and ye ken his games
Wi' the charter that dates from our guid King James,
And mayhap ye ken the unproven names
He stamped on his victim at Cambridge.

And ye'll also ken how he tried the case:
Oh, the Spinning House is a fine braw place,
And it's there they'll teach you the means of grace,
Will the dons and the Masters of Cambridge!137

The cases of Jane Elsden and Daisy Hopkin show that there had been a major shift in mood in the town towards the treatment of the streetwalkers, but the cases were also a symptom of other issues, such as the legitimacy of university privilege. The townspeople could see a parallel between the proctors' behaviour towards local town girls and the behaviour of the police towards working-class women in London and the garrison towns, where action against suspected prostitutes, particularly in the enforcement of the C. D. Acts, caused conflict between the police and the working class.138

The support for Emma Kemp in 1860 had been enough to unsettle the university authorities, but now the townspeople were demanding the immediate closure of the Spinning House in public meetings and were challenging the university openly in court. Jane had been received sympathetically in the magistrates' court and her counsel loudly applauded at the assizes. The girls themselves were increasingly confident too. Jane had

137 Pall Mall Gazette, 7 December 1891.
been not afraid to speak her mind to the press and Daisy was positively precocious in public. The undergraduate client had been called to give evidence on oath to the court, the first time such an event had taken place in the history of the Spinning House: every other young streetwalker had been left to face the consequences of her association alone. Efforts to make men bear responsibility for prostitution and illegitimacy, locally and in the wider sphere, were beginning to show fruit.

There are footnotes to the arrests of these girls. On 27 May 1892 Mr Fuller, the proctor on duty, arrested Beatrice Cooper from Barnwell. She was charged that, ‘being reputed a prostitute, and lo iterer, [she] was suspected of Evil’ (Illustration 7). However, there is an addition in the last column on the page: ‘Charge was amended, before the hearing of the case, as follows – Being a common prostitute and so suspected of evil. John Peile. V.C.’ Beatrice resisted arrest and had to be dragged to the court, but, as ‘An Eye Witness’ who was a member of the university is reported to have commented, ‘most of the [townsmen] seem to get their daily bread from the ‘Varsity, and dare not raise a finger on behalf of their women’ (Appendix 4). Beatrice was sentenced to seven days’ imprisonment to the hissing and cries of shame from the public at the rear of the Vice-Chancellor’s court.139

On 30 January 1894 Ada Elsden, Jane’s sister, was arrested, ‘being a reputed common prostitute . . . in company with a member of the University for an immoral purpose [and] suspected of evil contrary to the Charter and Statutes of the University’. Ada admitted she was guilty and was sentenced to seven days in prison. She was the last of the Spinning House girls. The university authorities, now careful to word the charges correctly, had

139 Reynold’s Newspaper, 5 June 1892.
140 Cambridge Evening News, 28 May 1892.
141 University/F.VIII.3.
Illustration 7: Page from the third Spinning House committal book showing entries for Daisy Hopkin and Beatrice Cooper
remained defiant to the end in spite of the hostility they had received during the previous months.

In 1901, Daisy Hopkin, who by then was 24 and unmarried, was still living at home at 36 Gold Street in Barnwell. She was living with her parents, Henry and Jane Hopkin, and an adopted younger brother, Herbert, her brother’s illegitimate son. Evidence given at the assizes in 1892 had made it clear that Daisy was a prostitute and sometimes brought her clients back to her parents’ house and to Mrs Rolph’s at 31 Gold Street, which was a known brothel with a back entrance.\footnote{University/T.VIII.4.} Daisy preferred to go with ‘the boys with mortar boards’, who did not ‘knock her about’. Fredrick Robinson, whom she named as her fiancé at the time of the court case, was said by her friend Caroline Bell to have given Daisy ‘blackened eyes two or three times’.\footnote{University/T.VIII.4.} No occupation was given for Daisy in the census returns for 1901 and it seems probable that she was still streetwalking as a means of supporting her family, as her parents, then aged 72 and 68, had no obvious income.

The feminists and prostitution

Mary Wollstonecraft’s \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, published in 1792, was the first full political argument for equality of the sexes, but it was not until the 1850s that an organized feminist movement was founded in London.\footnote{Mary Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (London: J. Johnson, 1792).} The Langham Place Circle, a group of middle-class women, published the \textit{English Woman's Journal} from 1858 to 1864 and pressed for women’s rights, particularly in the provision of university education for women and women’s suffrage.\footnote{Jane Kendall, ‘Langham Place group (act. 1857–1866)’, \textit{Oxford Dictionary of National Biography}, online edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, May 2007, http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/themes/93/93708.html}
In the 1840s evangelical writers had dominated public discourse on prostitution. They labelled common prostitutes as criminals and outcasts but recognized that the demand for their services came largely from members of their own class. Some of them saw a need to protect young working women from the circumstances that led to prostitution, but they still believed that repression was the only treatment for 'fallen women'.

By the 1850s prostitution was a core issue in contemporary politics: it was the 'Great Social Evil', which needed to be regulated. Members of the Admiralty and the War Office had become alarmed by the incidence of venereal disease in the armed forces but believed that there was a need for outlets for male heterosexuals in garrison towns. The Contagious Diseases Acts were implemented in the 1860s and the regulation of prostitution became routine in garrison towns.

Widespread public opposition to the Acts did not immediately emerge, but in 1869 the National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, soon known as the National Association, was formed to campaign for their repeal. Women were excluded from membership at first, which resulted in the formation of the Ladies' National Association (L.N.A.) led by Josephine Butler. By December 1869 it had published a manifesto in the Daily News. It was signed by 124 women, including Butler and Florence Nightingale, and argued not only against the forcible examination of poor women and the denial of their constitutional rights but also against the official sanctioning of male vice. Soon other organized groups opposed to the C. D. Acts began to surface. The members of these repeal groups were diverse in character, reflecting their special interests - middle-class non-conformists, feminists and radical working-class men - but all believed

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146 Daily News, 1 January 1870.
that the Acts were immoral and unconstitutional. Some attacked the Acts as ‘class legislation’ and ‘un-English’.148 Others warned against virtuous women being falsely accused of being prostitutes.

Josephine Butler, a deeply religious woman, was already well known as a feminist and reformer before she was asked to lead the L.N.A. campaign.149 Most of the other members on the executive were also feminists and prominent suffragists. They hoped that through the repeal campaign they could educate women on feminist issues. Central to the women’s movement was the demand for a single standard of morality. Feminists condemned the double standard, which assumed that, although a lack of chastity was understandable and excusable in men, it was unforgivable in a woman. Inherent in the double standard was the assumption that women were the sexual property of men.150 Although the L.N.A. leaders did not succeed in persuading many other women to become feminist political activists, they did change attitudes towards prostitutes in their portrayal of them as victims rather than pollutants.

With the suspension of the C. D. Acts in 1883, initiatives to reform and rescue individual prostitutes were largely replaced by campaigns to use more repressive measures to bring about moral reform. A new social purity crusade, aimed at working-class culture, began. The more conservative members of the repeal campaign went on to form ‘social purity’ groups such as the National Vigilance Association. There was a new preoccupation with child sexuality, and accounts of perceived scandals such as W. T. Stead’s report on child-

prostitution, ‘The Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon’, published in 1885, helped to force the Criminal Law Amendment Act through Parliament that year.\textsuperscript{151}

This Act raised the age of consent for girls to 16, but the new clauses created unforeseen side-effects. A subsection of the Act, regarding the suppression of brothels, strengthened the legislation against prostitutes. Anyone who kept or managed a small brothel faced a fine or imprisonment. Women who shared accommodation in working-class districts became suspect, and this resulted in severe housing problems for single women. Some were turned out into the streets without proper shelter and faced charges of vagrancy and imprisonment. Ironically, the new law forced some prostitutes to live with pimps, or as they were called ‘bullies’, instead of landladies. Upper-class brothels – ‘fashionable houses’ – were nearly all left untouched. The 1885 Act led to further examples of Victorian double standards being applied to gender and class.\textsuperscript{152}

Feminists were divided in their opinions towards the Act. There were those who were bent on repressing prostitution at all costs and who assumed that the removal of ‘vice’ from the streets would protect the innocent ‘victim’, which included both the respectable woman and the reclaimable prostitute. Others, including Josephine Butler, were against over-legislation which they believed would curtail the personal liberty of many women. One feminist, Mary Bunting, was aware that ‘outward decency’ was not enough. She told representatives from women’s philanthropic groups:

\begin{quote}
If we insist on merely clearing the streets of the women so that our eyes may be less pained than they are at present, and our youth less exposed to temptation, we lull ourselves into a false security,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{152} Bland, \textit{Banishing the Beast}, p. 101.
and the disease, for which the state of our streets is an outward manifestation, will get more thorough hold of the system from being inwards.\(^{153}\)

In Cambridge, Emily Davies and Barbara Bodichon, members of the Langham Place Circle and founders of the first women’s college, Girton College, were cautious in their approach to feminist concerns in the town. They did not publicly confront issues such as ‘the sexual double standard or codes of propriety’; rather, they ‘asserted the need for equal educational provision and for unfettered access to the employment market’.\(^{154}\) Their energy was directed towards raising educational opportunities in Cambridge for middle-class girls who lived all over the country; they did not become embroiled in issues concerned with working-class girls in the town.

The undergraduate Sickert had referred to ‘the great puritan wave’ in his letter to the press about the proctors, but there is no evidence that the supporters of ‘social purity’ were active in Cambridge in the last decade of the century. The townspeople in general were set on closing the Spinning House and supported the streetwalkers, Jane Elsdon and Daisy Hopkin, who had, in the eyes of many, gained the upper hand over the proctors. Within months Daisy’s tale took on the essence of folklore; indeed it was retold many years later in a musical, ‘Daisy Simpkins, or, The Spinning House’.\(^{155}\)

The debate on regulation in Cambridge continued, but the Spinning House was doomed. A committee of university and borough representatives met for the first time on 14 February 1893 and was charged with finding a solution to the problem of proctorial power.

\(^{153}\) Bland, *Banishing the Beast*, p. 121.

\(^{154}\) Rendall, ‘Langham Place group (act. 1857–1866)’.

\(^{155}\) University/M.S. Tranchell. 3. 8, ‘Daisy Simpkins, or, The Spinning House: a historical cantata written for Mayweek in Corpus Christi College 1954’, music by Peter Tranchell, lyrics by Harry Porter.
Eventually agreement was reached to promote a Bill in Parliament which reached the statute book the following year as the Cambridge University and Corporation Act 1894. This amended the law relating to 'the jurisdiction of the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and other authorities of the University of Cambridge over persons not members of the University'. It provided for the proctors and town police to act concurrently in arresting loose women; any trials would, however, take place before the borough magistrates and the Vice-Chancellor's jurisdiction over them was abolished.\textsuperscript{156} For centuries the proctors had used imprisonment to regulate prostitution in Cambridge, but with the closure of the Spinning House in 1894 the debate on its management ended.

\textit{Conclusion}

This account of the Spinning House throughout the nineteenth century tells of short periods of notoriety between long periods of obscurity. The lives of those intimately involved with the House, the proctors and the streetwalkers, remained entwined until the last decade of the century. In spite of the townspeople's loathing of the building and all the adverse publicity that it had received throughout Queen Victoria's reign, the prison was not demolished until 1901, when a police station was built on the site.

The story of the Cambridge Spinning House is significant because it highlights the interplay and tensions between national debate and local particularities on issues such as changes in the concepts of law and attitudes to prostitution. The C. D. Acts had made reformers in Britain focus on the status of women and this was reflected in a growing demand for the rights of all women and shifts in sexual politics, in particular the exposure of the double standard of sexual behaviour. However, attitudes towards prostitution in

\textsuperscript{156} Jackson, \textit{A Cambridge Bicentenary}, pp. 184–185.
Cambridge did not run in parallel with those in the rest of the country. The university authorities were entrenched in their traditional ways and were slow to react to public pressure. The double standard was applied to policing the streets of the town, with women streetwalkers being imprisoned until 1894. The case of Elizabeth Howe in 1846 roused national indignation against the proctorial system and the university was obliged to improve physical conditions in the Spinning House, but its treatment of the girls remained obdurate. The case of Emma Kemp in 1860 raised the profile of the House again, but, although the proctors became more cautious, they still stood firm in their defence of the Spinning House. It was not until the 1890s with the cases of Elsdon and Hopkin that a real change in the treatment of streetwalkers took place. These last court cases drew attention and concern from all over the country and the university authorities were at last forced to replace the outmoded judgement of the Vice-Chancellor's court with the law of the English courts.
4: Proctors, undergraduates and university discipline

Sweet are the slumbers, indeed, of a Freshman, who, just escaped the trammels of "home, sweet home," and the pedagogue's tyrannical birch, for the first time in his life, with the academical gown, assumes the toga virilis, and feels himself a Man —

"The sweetest far in life,
Except 'tis with a wife." ¹

Introduction

This chapter examines the administrative structure of the university and the need for its reform, the role of the proctors within this structure, and the life and culture of the undergraduates in Victorian Cambridge. It explores the part played by tradition, prejudice and class in university culture and the way discipline was maintained in the colleges and in the university. It also examines how university discipline was imposed on members of the town and how the use of the Spinning House as a prison caused a serious gulf between the two communities, an investigation begun in Chapter 3. As religion was so central to university life it is important to evaluate the part that it played in shaping its members and the influence it may have had in decision-making, for example about the Spinning House.

One of the key questions for this study is why throughout the nineteenth century the university clung so fiercely to its right to have proctors patrolling the streets and removing streetwalkers. Did proctorial practice in Cambridge replicate the mood and experience of other Victorian towns? Was the university’s approach to the streetwalkers a reflection of a broader policy to regulate moral behaviour throughout the country? In the nineteenth century local power and knowledge were being usurped and a ‘national culture’ was

¹ J. M. F. Wright, Alma Mater, or, Seven years at the University of Cambridge (London, 1827), 1, pp. 30–31.
emerging. Mary Poovey examined one of the conditions that made the development of a mass culture in Victorian Britain possible – the representation of the population as an aggregate, a social body. She pointed to the part played by the establishment of national associations, such as the National Association for the Promotion of the Social Sciences which emphasized a single culture, and ‘material innovations such as affordable transportation’ which brought groups together that rarely mixed and ‘represented them as belonging to the same, increasingly undifferentiated whole’.

Frank Mort has argued that the contagious diseases legislation, which passed through Parliament with ‘little immediate opposition’, was a significant manifestation of mid-Victorian consensus, which applied ‘precision social engineering to the domain of sexuality’. He has also put forward the idea that struggles over the Contagious Diseases Acts need to be read both ‘as a feminist challenge to male power and as a battle within the power block over the disciplining of the working class’. However, despite the influence of an emergent national culture, local peculiarities remained a key part of resistance to change in Cambridge, where this culture was often in tension with the traditional values and practices that were defended by the university.

Power, class and sexuality were undoubtedly central to the story of the Spinning House, but this chapter will show how Cambridge’s unique proctorial system was driven by complex local factors. As seen in Chapters 2 and 3, the ‘regulation’ of women had taken place in the university town since the time of Elizabeth I; it was a feature of the long battle

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5 Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities*, p. 77.
between Town and Gown over the balance of power and not the result of any mid-Victorian bourgeois consensus. Likewise, the struggles over the C. D. Acts discussed in Chapter 1 had little impact in Cambridge. Josephine Butler visited the town in 1871 to rally support for the repeal of the Acts, but local people showed little enthusiasm for the cause.\(^6\) It was not until after the Acts had been repealed that a feminist challenge to male power in the university and the country really surfaced in Cambridge.

For those with connections to the university, the reason for the proctors' behaviour was abundantly clear: the women were removed to prevent the corruption of the undergraduates. William Kingsley, justifying his role as a junior proctor to the readers of *The Times* on 11 December 1846, argued:

> The University removes women of bad character from the streets, not because of acting in a disorderly or indecent manner, but to prevent them corrupting the young men committed to its care.

> ... The necessity for the law must be supported by the fact that more than 100 apprehensions have been made this term.\(^7\)

As the proctors' policing was almost always confined to the streets around the colleges where the girls paraded, it seems probable that it was at least partly prompted by the demands of Victorian respectability. If the authorities seriously feared the moral corruption of their students, why was it that the proctors rarely visited Barnwell, which was within walking distance of the colleges and was where most of the prostitutes lived?

A newspaper account from June 1843 may explain their reluctance to enter the area. 'The Proctors in Danger' described an attack on proctors when one afternoon they followed

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\(^7\) *The Times*, 11 December 1846.
some undergraduates who had just completed their exams to a brothel in Barnwell. There the proctors were pelted with 'eggs and other missiles' by the 'fascinating denizens of the classic district'. The reports ends with the safe retreat of the university authorities, minus however much of their 'properties', the escape of the 'gownsmen' and an increase in the population of the Spinning House.  

In the seventeenth century the authorities had been fearful that undergraduates might become trapped into marriage with streetwalkers. Charles I expressed concern that 'of late years, many students of our University, not regarding their own birth, degree and quality, have made divers contracts of marriage with women of mean estate and no good fame'. He issued a decree from Newmarket in 1629 instructing any taverner, innholder or victualler who had an unsuitable woman living in his house to remove her to four miles out of the town.  

Moral reform of the town girls was not a motive for the proctors' practice. Unlike the founders of the Cambridge Refuge, who believed that vulnerable girls could be saved from their own 'dangerous natures' by being cared for and trained in an institution, the university authorities almost totally neglected the moral welfare of the streetwalkers. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, some proctors showed compassion for individual girls, but the records indicate that almost no effort was made to reform the women and that the existence of a chaplain and chapel at the Spinning House had negligible impact on the regime. There is also little to show that the proctors were seriously concerned with the physical health of the streetwalkers. Only a small proportion of the girls who were detained in the Spinning House were treated for disease, as will discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

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8 The Manchester Times and Gazette, 10 June 1843.
This chapter shows how in Cambridge proctorial policy was influenced by anxieties about male sexuality and how concern about women on the streets was the result of a desire to regulate men's, and in particular undergraduates', sexuality. Historians usually focus on female sexuality and its regulation, but this study examines the regulation of both male and female activity. It considers whether religion and respectability, laced with strong sexual urges, confused some of the young men who came up to the university and endowed them with unwelcome feelings of guilt and of fear of their own sexuality. Is it possible that these feelings were not confined to the young men, but also pervaded the lives of many of the ordained dons? An example of a don who was over-zealous in the performance of his proctorial duties was the Revd Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873), better known as one of the fathers of modern geology and a major influence on Charles Darwin (though he never accepted the theory of evolution). As a young man Sedgwick took holy orders and abandoned any idea of marriage to obtain a college fellowship. On a single evening in January 1828, within days of swearing in Darwin at his matriculation, this senior proctor accompanied 11 streetwalkers to the Spinning House. He was responsible for the arrest of a total of 72 girls between March 1827 and June 1828. Could university policy towards prostitutes in the nineteenth century have been bound up with the complexities of personal religious morality and related attitudes to sex? There are some pointers that suggest that this may have been the case. The subject of homosexuality added to the complexity of the debate on sexual behaviour, but, as it has no direct bearing on the study of the Spinning House, it has not been explored in this thesis.

Official records make it possible to examine in detail university administration and the role of the proctors. It is much more difficult to gain an insight into the feelings and motives,

11 University/T.VIII.1.
especially with regard to sexuality, of those at the heart of this thesis – the proctors, the students and the streetwalkers. It has been necessary to look at the memoirs of men like the American Charles Bristed, who, although they had no direct association with the Spinning House, expressed personal observations and opinions of contemporary behaviour in the town and colleges. Extracts from their accounts pieced together with fragments from other personal and published writings of the period help to illuminate the atmosphere of Victorian Cambridge.

**University administration**

Thanks to a charter granted to the university by Queen Elizabeth I, almost unlimited power over all its members rested solidly in the hands of the heads of the colleges for over three hundred years. Each year the heads submitted to the Senate two candidates for the election of Vice-Chancellor, who from 1586 onwards came from their own ranks; the Senate, which consisted of all the M.A.s, chose between them. The post of university Vice-Chancellor exacted a heavy toll on the holder. 'As he was almost the sole administrative officer of the university, there was hardly any of its business with which he was not directly concerned.'¹² He was not exempt from social duties either: on his appointment the Vice-Chancellor was expected to entertain to dinner all the resident members of the Senate.

George Peacock, who was appointed a member of the Royal Commission on the Universities in 1850, had observed earlier in his career:

> A necessary consequence of this accumulation of duties upon one person is the neglect or

incompetent performance of many of them; for it can rarely happen that this important office can be filled by a person who possesses such an intimate knowledge of the laws and customs of the University, such varied scholarship and learning, such a perfect mastery of the details of business, and such unwearied industry and activity, as to be able to meet the demands which are made upon him by such severe and distracting labours.\(^1\)

The Vice-Chancellor was advised by the Caput, a small powerful body which was also elected annually. Heads of colleges, the doctors of three faculties and two scutators (M.A.s who were responsible for counting the votes) were the only men permitted to vote for candidates for the Caput, who were nominated by the Vice-Chancellor or one of his proctors. The Caput consisted of a doctor from each of the faculties of divinity, law and medicine, two scutators, a regent Master of Arts, a non-regent Master and the Vice-Chancellor. Any member of Caput could veto a Grace, a formal motion concerning university business, which meant that there was a severe restriction on proposals put to the vote in the Regent House, making reform from within the university almost impossible. The choice of candidates for nearly all posts in the university, from Public Orator to wineseller, was made from lists of nominations drawn up by the heads of colleges. This gave them power and influence over all aspects of life within the university.

**Reform of the university**

Population growth and industrialization forced the pace of change throughout the country in the nineteenth century. There was widespread concern with the need to reform public institutions, for example the Civil Service. The Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 on *The Organization of the Permanent Civil Service* brought about the end of the system of patronage and instituted recruitment and promotion on merit. Competitive entrance exams

for the service were introduced, but they were far from universally welcomed. The thrust for professionalism, neutrality and objectivity in organizations outside the universities must have brought considerable pressure for change within them. Cambridge had always provided men for the establishment and, now that these men were faced with competitive examinations, there was a need for real change in both the administration of the university and its curriculum. The drive for reform came from both politicians and academics. As early as 1817, the mathematician George Peacock, already a tutor and lecturer at Trinity College at the age of 26, wrote to a friend:

I assure you that I shall never cease to exert myself to the utmost in the cause of reform, and that I will never decline any office which may increase my power to effect it. . . . It is by silent perseverance only, that we can hope to reduce the many-headed monster of prejudice and make the University answer her character as the loving mother of good learning and science.\(^\text{14}\)

Peacock became one of the most eminent men in favour of academic reform, but it is pertinent to recognize that his enthusiasm for reform was firmly restricted to changes within the university. As a youth he had lived a sheltered life without the company of other children, having been educated by his father at home until he was seventeen. He had gone to university after a short spell at a local grammar school. Peacock was strongly prejudiced against members of the working class. After attending the annual Service of Commemoration at Trinity College, Romilly noted in his diary for 16 December 1833: 'Peacock preached a vile sermon against the lower orders having anything to do with politics: . . . it was a furious antireform discourse.'\(^\text{15}\) These are strong words from this mild-mannered diarist.

\(^{14}\)http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/history/Mathematicians/Peacock.html
The American scholar Sheldon Rothblatt has painted a bleak picture of university life in the first half of the nineteenth century. He described members of Oxford and Cambridge as ‘isolated and consequently eccentric, peevish and narrow-minded, distinctly quaint, amusing survivals like the institutions which housed them, vulnerable subjects for condescending anecdote’.\(^\text{16}\) All aspects of the university were in need of reform – the administration, teaching, curriculum and examination system – and all were considered suitable for debate. Similarly, although Cambridge University was a stronghold for Anglicanism, from the mid-century onwards, there was growing support for more religious tolerance and the abolition of religious tests for all undergraduates was considered. Until the University Test Act of 1871 only Anglicans were eligible to teach at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. The Act opened university posts, scholarships and fellowships to non-Anglicans.

The most pressing need for reform centred on the organization of the university itself. It was clear to many that the collegiate structure did not provide the best possible academic education for the growing number of undergraduates. The standard of tuition in some of the smaller colleges was often so poor that ‘undergraduates flocked to private tutors’.\(^\text{17}\) Many of these were charging high fees and parents were becoming restless at the soaring costs of a university education. Reformers believed that teaching should be the responsibility of the university and that the best dons should be available to all scholars, no matter to which college they belonged.

The Victorian novelist and historian Walter Besant wrote:


The decay of Cambridge as a place of learning threatened to overwhelm the university. I believe that for the first half of the century the scholarship and science of Cambridge were a laughing stock on the Continent. Naturally, the dulness of the fellows was in some sort reflected among the undergraduates. There were certain colleges which seemed never to show any intellectual life at all.¹⁸

Changes perceived as depriving the heads of colleges of power and diminishing the independence of the individual colleges were rejected outright by an entrenched old guard. The traditionalists who had been nurtured and rewarded by the college system held on fiercely to their power. As members of the Caput, they could still veto Graces even though they were unrepresentative of the growing number of members of the university who recognized the need for reform. Resentment against the heads was widespread throughout the university and beyond. Eventually in the 1850s a Royal Commission was set up to inquire into the state of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Dublin. This brought about changes to the way these universities were administered. In 1856 the Caput was abolished and the resident members of the Senate elected the first members to its Council. Reform of the university had begun, but the posts of Vice-Chancellor and proctors were retained.

*The proctors and university discipline*

The proctors are among the most ancient officers of the university and, despite its reform, their role remained largely unchanged into the mid twentieth century. The office of proctor was described in the original statutes of the university in the thirteenth century and the earliest reference to the proctors’ night watch was in 1482/3.¹⁹ In medieval times they

¹⁹ http://venn.csi.cam.ac.uk/ACAD/lists/Proct.html
had important administrative duties, but by the nineteenth century, although they still took part in some Senate House ceremonies, their main tasks were disciplinary. The colleges were responsible for discipline within their own confines and the proctors for the behaviour of the students in the streets outside. Each year two proctors and two pro-proctors were elected. The office of pro-proctor was instituted by Grace on 29 April 1818 owing to 'the great increase of the students, and the necessity of their lodging in the town'. From then on proctors have served as pro-proctors in the year before their year of office. They were nominally elected by the regents, but in practice the colleges took it in turn to propose suitable men for the onerous work. They were almost all in their early thirties, ordained clergymen, bachelors who would have been immersed in the traditions and culture of their colleges throughout their time at the university and who would have probably performed their duties without questioning them. Although the appointment of proctor was officially for one year, the Spinning House books show that some men served for longer and others like G. F. Browne returned for a further spell later in their careers.

The duties of the proctors were less exacting than those of the Vice-Chancellor, but they were often difficult and tiring. They were the formal representatives of the Regent House and in that capacity had to oversee congregations of the regents and submit Graces relating to degrees at Congregations. Besides carrying out duties to ensure good discipline and public order within the university, they acted as examiners for all candidates for the B.A. degree and were responsible for prosecuting anyone suspected of unfair trading.

In earlier times it was their duty to regulate the hours of disputing and learning, of burial services, inceptions, and festivals, and to act for the University in all kinds of business. They destroyed bad herrings exposed for sale, bought vestments, bell-ropes, and candlesticks, and had charge of the

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20 http://venn.csi.cam.ac.uk/ACAD/lists/Proct.html
University Chest. They also patrolled the streets to repress disturbances, and exercised jurisdiction over improper persons.\textsuperscript{21}

When Stourbridge Fair was taking place on the outskirts of the town, the proctors kept a court there to ‘hear complaints about weights or measures’ and to ‘seek out and punish lewd women, and see that their gownsmen commit no disorders’.\textsuperscript{22} By the beginning of the nineteenth century the demise of the fair led to fewer complaints concerning weights and measures, but the proctors’ task to seek out women who were suspected prostitutes and conduct them to the Spinning House for sentencing increased. It was the proctors’ duty to regulate interaction between members of Town and Gown in the streets. Attitudes to class and sex shaped their behaviour.

Graduates of the university readily gave advice to freshmen and their parents. In the 1820s there were two publications that described the proctors’ duties:

> To prevent rioting in the streets, knocking down the snobs, too great a familiarity with a certain class of the fair sex, ... there are officers called Proctors, who are empowered to inflict the usual punishment of Imposition upon the Gownsmen. With the softer sex, however, the Proctors are a little harsher. Those ladies who make a point of parading their finery on the pave, are usually, when caught, lodged securely in the aforesaid Spinning-house, there to mend both in morals and in health.\textsuperscript{23}

> The proctors are offended by ‘public indecorum’ and the parading of ‘finery on the pave’ by the streetwalkers. ‘Provided the poor creatures keep themselves private, they are seldom molested.’\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22} C. H. Cooper, Annals of Cambridge (Cambridge, 1853), v, p. 277.
\textsuperscript{23} Anon., Gradus ad Cantabrigiam; or, New university guide (London: J. Hearne, 1824), p. 142.
\textsuperscript{24} Wright, Alma Mater, II, pp. 144--145.
The writers approved of the university regulations and saw no problem in the difference between the harsh treatment of the girls and the usually lenient treatment of the undergraduates.25

As a previous chapter has shown, the Spinning House loomed large in the lives of many Victorian proctors. Dr Okes, Provost of King's, remarked to one of them, 'When you perambulate the streets at night, you rarely see the constellation of Virgo.'26 Time and again in Cambridge the importance of the proctors’ role in policing was emphasized. In 1846 the heads of colleges announced that 'it is very important that the proctors should discharge their office exactly in the vacation as in the term'.27 However, the committal books show that the proctors continued to make almost no arrests in the vacations, which is not surprising as there were few undergraduates in the town then. Romilly wrote in his diary on 5 February 1847: 'Forgot to mention last Tuesday swearing in 11 Special Constables in consequence of the continued attacks on the proctors.' Ten more men were sworn in on 10 February.28 These ‘Special Constables’ were sworn in by the Vice-Chancellor (by virtue of the Act of George IV 1825) and worked gratuitously.29

The proctors, who were accountable to the Vice-Chancellor, had to balance the expectations of the undergraduates and the heads of colleges. Those who were seen as too strict became unpopular with the students. In 1829 Alexander Wale, a senior proctor, was chased along the street from the Senate House to St John’s College by hissing students.

29 *Romilly’s Cambridge diary, 1848–1864*, p. 257.
The offenders received punishments deemed inadequate by the proctors, who resigned, informing the Vice-Chancellor that they could not maintain discipline if they did not have the support of the heads of colleges.\textsuperscript{30} On an earlier occasion the proctors had been angered by the Master of Trinity, who refused to discipline a fellow commoner of his college who had been reported by a proctor for disorderly conduct in the town. Sometimes it was the proctors who were in the wrong, when for example in 1851 they published a notice about examinations without reference to the Vice-Chancellor.\textsuperscript{31}

Although an ancient statute stated that all disciplinary cases should be submitted to the Vice-Chancellor, it had become the custom for the proctors to report those students suspected of sexual offences to their college heads. In this way publicity was usually avoided for both the miscreant and the college. There was however criticism that the punishments given by the colleges in these cases were too lenient, often imposing only ‘the same penalty as would be inflicted on one who neglected to attend lectures regularly, a penalty which does not even interfere with the continued indulgence of the vice’.\textsuperscript{32} In 1858 a new statute was passed which restored the practice of bringing those offences which were considered serious to the court of the Vice-Chancellor.

This did not settle the problem, and within months there was disagreement between the Vice-Chancellor and the proctors about the sentencing of an undergraduate from Magdalene College who had been found in a brothel. After discussions and correspondence between the Vice-Chancellor, resident members of the Senate and the proctors, a trial of the undergraduate took place on 14 December 1858. Francis Jameson,

\textsuperscript{30} H. Gunning, Reminiscences of the University, town, and county of Cambridge, from the year 1780 (London: G. Bell, 1854), pp. 367–369.
\textsuperscript{31} Cambridge University Archives, C.H. 16.
\textsuperscript{32} Winstanley, Early Victorian Cambridge, p. 375.
the proctor who had arrested the young man, was the prosecutor, but he failed to make a strong case. The defender was only to be admonished. After the trial the Vice-Chancellor, Dr Bateson, informed the senior proctor:

There were no circumstances of special aggravation in the case. It was the general opinion of the Court that it would have been better if the case of Mr - had been dealt with by the Pro-Proctor himself or had been remitted to the college to which Mr - belongs for punishment. The Court was clearly of the opinion that none but aggravated cases of delinquency can be brought before it with advantage to the character and discipline of the University. I shall be obliged if you will make these opinions of the Court known to your colleagues in office.33

The letter implied that 'fornication unattended with aggravating circumstances was a venial offence'.34 The proctors were incensed. They resigned from office and published the correspondence which had taken place between them and Dr Bateson. The controversy reached the London press and provoked protest 'against the moral laxity of the university authorities'.35

This was not the first time that there had been a debate in a national newspaper about the Cambridge proctors. After the inquest on the death of Elizabeth Howe, The Times published an editorial and letters concerning the behaviour of the proctors.36 The editorial acknowledged the tension between the desire to protect the morality of the students and the rights of women to be subject to civil law. It questioned the ability of proctors to distinguish between 'good, bad and doubtful characters'. It suggested that 'the University

33 Winstanley, Early Victorian Cambridge, p. 378.
34 Winstanley, Early Victorian Cambridge, p. 378.
35 Winstanley, Early Victorian Cambridge, p. 378.
36 The Times, 8 December 1846.
authorities instil a regard for morality into the minds of the students' and 'the civil power be responsible for the preservation of public decency'.

Two years later, after 'an immense variety of letters from an immense variety of persons on this important subject' and yet with 'the numbers necessarily suppressed... out of all proportion to those for which we could find space', The Times published a long editorial summing up the arguments concerning university discipline. It supported proctorial discipline and concluded that 'the youthful noble would not be seriously injured by the adoption for a season of a modest form of life, and on compulsion if need be.' It is possible that this debate was fuelled by a sense that the Cambridge University authorities were at odds with the rest of public life. Throughout the next three decades the power exercised by the university continued to divide opinion, but the proctors still policed the streets, enforcing rules concerned with academic dress, arresting suspected prostitutes and preventing conflicts between Town and Gown. In 1882 The Times was still publishing letters on the subject:

The whole system of proctors is onerous to the freeborn Englishman, and in itself an incitement to those misdemeanours which their existence is supposed to prevent. The proctors, no doubt, were necessary before the police had jurisdiction over members of the University in the days of the Vice-Chancellor's Court, but circumstances have changed.

Not only did the proctors police the streets, but curfews were imposed, boarding and lodging houses were licensed and there was a rule that required the prior notification of all dinner and supper parties given in the town or in lodgings. Shopkeepers – particularly

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37 The Times, 8 December 1846.
38 The Times, 12 January 1848.
39 The Times, 28 June 1882.
wine merchants — were licensed to trade with students and tutors were given authority to review students' accounts.

For centuries the colleges had surrounded their precincts with walls, gates and ditches to 'guard the inexperienced against the temptations of youth and dangers of wasteful extravagance', but undergraduate behaviour was also controlled by the university's system of examinations.\textsuperscript{40} Success in the tripos required not only the ability to cram knowledge, but also stamina and speed to perform well during the examination week. Conscientious students and those who needed 'the academic recognition and financial reward that the tripos could bestow' would have had little time for mischief.\textsuperscript{41} College deans and chaplains also maintained discipline by insisting on the students' attendance at chapel, college lectures and dinner in hall, and there was 'a variety of punishments — admonitions, rustication, expulsion, prohibitions and literary impositions'— for violation of the rules.\textsuperscript{42} The proctorial system was an extension of this discipline.

The names of many proctors are known since the year 1314. There is some discrepancy between the university's list of proctors who held office between 1827 and 1894 and the names of the 191 proctors and pro-proctors listed in the Spinning House committal books. This may be because of a confusion of terms: 'pro-proctor' was not synonymous with 'junior proctor'. The university's official list names 145 senior and junior proctors who held office in those years. Only 129 of these men are included in the committal books, so sixteen are missing, including Oscar Browning, the eccentric historian and educationalist.

\textsuperscript{40} The Report of H. M. Commissioners appointed to enquire into the state and revenues of the University and Colleges of Cambridge, P.P. H.C. 1017 (1852), XLIV, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{41} Rothblatt, The Revolution of the Dons, p. 182.
\textsuperscript{42} Rothblatt, The Revolution of the Dons, p. 183.
The omissions can be explained partly by the few Spinning House arrests that took place in the last decades of the century.

Many of the proctors listed in this period went on to hold higher posts in the university. Several held office as Vice-Chancellor, such as Henry Philpott, Henry Cookson and Edward Perowne. William Thompson became Master of Trinity and William Campion President of Queens'. One proctor, Thomas Gaskin, was a shoemaker's boy who had been sent to Cambridge by a private patron. He went on to become distinguished both as a mathematician and as a classical scholar. He was one of the more compassionate proctors, and most of the girls he arrested were discharged with an admonishment after a single night in the Spinning House.

The debate on the extent and causes of 'The Great Social Evil' raged throughout the rest of the country, but, although there were editorials about the court cases involving the Spinning House in national and local newspapers, there was almost complete silence about the House and its girls in contemporary university literature. Several well-respected Cambridge academics, some of them notable ex-proctors such as T. G. Bonney and the Rt Revd G. F. Browne, wrote autobiographies. Both of these devoted considerable space to their years at the university but never mentioned their visits to the Spinning House, although every proctor must have visited the prison regularly when he was in office.

In his autobiography Browne devoted an entire chapter to his duties as a proctor and recounted many anecdotes of his experiences in the town:

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The office of Proctor in the University is an office of great and varied interest. To have held it as Junior Proctor for the years 1867 to 1869, and a Senior Proctor for 1877 to 1879 and again from 1879 to 1881, entitles one to have opinions on the subject. The removal of a large beard in the long vacation of 1867, in order that the undergraduates should have a full view of the proctorial bands, and so full warning to keep out of the way, was a pleasant introduction to disciplinary office, and was evidently appreciated; especially as the preceding proctor had a very secretive beard. The good terms on which the disciplinary work began were continued throughout the six years, and no one can have had a more agreeable experience of the work.44

In spite of six years patrolling the streets, Browne made no reference to the Spinning House in this chapter. The numbers of arrests had in fact fallen dramatically by 1867, but girls were still being imprisoned then and the records show that Browne was responsible for arresting seventeen of them when he was a proctor, of whom thirteen were detained for a week or more. Jane Maud, whom he arrested for streetwalking in November 1869, 'made a determined resistance' and was held in the House for a month.45

Later in his book the bishop does record that shortly after leaving Cambridge he was asked to attend a court in Ipswich to give evidence of the care taken by the proctors in the exercise of their power of arrest. A case was being brought against the university for wrongful arrest. The claimant protested that she was a respectable woman and that she was baby-sitting at the time; when she refused to say whether the baby’s mother was married or not, the case was dismissed and Browne was not called upon to speak.46

Joseph Romilly, a university administrator, unlike other writers of his time wrote about the Spinning House. He had no experience as a proctor, so perhaps it was easier for him to

45 University/1.VIII.3.
46 Browne, The Recollections of a Bishop, p. 150.
write about the streetwalkers and the students who broke the rules than it was for those who had held that position. Romilly was interested in the House on both a personal and a professional level. As stated in Chapter 3, he described in detail a private visit to the refurbished Spinning House and was also responsible for disclosing reports from the Vice-Chancellor's guard book. As a rule Romilly destroyed his personal correspondence, but, in contrast, he entrusted the manuscripts of his diaries to his nephew and executor, G. B. Allen. It seems possible that he hoped that they would be made public after his death.

Not only is there a dearth of contemporary literary sources about the Spinning House, but most writers about the history of the university have neglected the House too. There have been notable exceptions, such as the scholarly mid-twentieth-century historian, D. A. Winstanley, whose meticulous accounts give a detailed history of the main incidents in which it figured. He reported on the inquest of Elizabeth Howe and on court cases involving the Vice-Chancellor and girls who challenged their imprisonment. Winstanley also recorded the controversy between Dr Bateson and the proctors referred to earlier in this chapter. His volumes on Victorian Cambridge provide useful material for the examination of the relationship between Town and Gown throughout the period.

_Lodging houses_

The role of proctors was brought into greater focus in the nineteenth century by the increased use of lodging houses. Discipline within the college walls did not provide a serious problem for the heads of colleges. The debate centred on the difficulty of controlling those undergraduates who lived outside the colleges. The subject of those

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47 Romilly, 1848-1864, p. vii.
students' behaviour had become a priority for the authorities from the early decades of the nineteenth century and there had been an unfortunate incident in the Lent term of 1818. An undergraduate from Trinity College, Lawrence Dundas, had fallen into a ditch on his way home after dining with some friends at a lodging house in Bridge Street. It was a very cold night and the drunken student, having removed his clothes, died. The Revd F. H. Maberly, an eccentric Evangelical clergyman, published a pamphlet in which he blamed the university for the death. He maintained that 'dissipation and licentiousness would remain unchecked as long as undergraduates were allowed to live in lodgings'.

The college heads reacted quickly to the death of Dundas. In March 1818 they issued revised regulations to the keepers of lodging houses. The college authorities were to be informed if any students came in after ten o'clock or were absent for the whole night. Tutors were to make occasional visits to the houses where their pupils lodged and they were to enquire into the backgrounds of the servants who were employed in the lodgings. It was conceded that it was difficult to enforce a strict discipline on undergraduates who lived outside the colleges, but the increase in the number of students made lodging houses a necessity.

When Christopher Wordsworth became Master of Trinity College in 1820, he was disturbed to discover that less than a third of college members resided in college. More and more undergraduates were living in lodgings in the town. It was alleged that living out of college gave young men the freedom to indulge in drunken orgies and to frequent haunts of vice without fear of discovery and that they were likely to be subjected to temptation by

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servant girls. The Master of Trinity led the way in creating more accommodation for students, but some other college heads and fellows objected to spending money on expensive building projects. Problems concerning student rooms dragged on for most of the century.

The report of the Royal Commission in 1852 praised the collegiate system but believed that the private lodgings throughout the town needed closer inspection and stricter control. There was still a shortage of college rooms sixteen years after the publication of the Royal Commission report and the practice of allowing undergraduates to lodge out during their first term at the university received the sanction of Convocation in 1868. Things had not improved by 1876, when the Revd J. W. Burgon, Dean of Chichester, sent a private letter addressed 'to the members of the Congregation; especially to the Vice-Chancellor, the Proctors, and the other Members of Council', entitled 'Our present Lodging-house system, immoral: and requiring Reform':

At the beginning of Term, Lodging-house keepers hire very young Girls from the neighbouring villages, with or without characters, to wait on Undergraduate Lodgers: give them merely nominal wages: allow them unbounded liberty: instruct them to obtain of their Lodgers what gratuity they can at the end of term. Girls so hired are, for the most part, of a type which no Lady would admit into her household.

The precise yearly percentage of gross immorality resulting from the extraordinary Lodging-house system which we tolerate, can never be known. From the very nature of the subject-matter, statistics will for ever be unattainable. All the parties concerned have the strongest possible motive for secrecy. The Lodging-house keeper dreads beyond all things the loss of his license: the Lodger the

50 Winstanley, Early Victorian Cambridge, p. 59.
loss of his character. The Girl dreads ignominious exposure. What wonder if the secrets of the system rarely indeed transpire.52

Burgon suggested that the collegiate system should be greatly enlarged or that colleges should build and manage their own lodging houses. His immediate proposal was ‘to prohibit the employment of young Girls in Lodging-houses’. However, it was many years before there were enough rooms for the majority of students to live within the college precincts. Meanwhile, the lodging houses continued to provide the college authorities with disciplinary problems.

The problem was not confined to Cambridge. The views of an Oxford academic, Edward Pusey, on the temptations offered in lodging houses and his concern only for the young men matched those of Cambridge fellows. In evidence to the Royal Commission on the University of Oxford, Pusey said:

It has pleased God that I should know very extensively what have been the temptations to young men, both here and at Cambridge: Lodging-houses are the worst form of temptation. Elsewhere, men themselves (if they fall) seek the temptation; in lodging-houses temptations beset them. . . . The facility of easy and familiar intercourse at any hour, day by day, . . . of that class of servant, who are, I believe, often employed not as regular servants but by the term only, and whose wages are eked out by the lodger, are perils from which the young should be shielded.53

The undergraduates

The ‘threat’ from streetwalkers was present for all undergraduates who stepped outside their college precincts. There would be no story of the Spinning House without the young

52 University/W.21.18.
men who enjoyed the services of the streetwalkers, but the history of most of these undergraduates must remain untold. In the university archives there are the names of the streetwalkers and records of over 6300 arrests in the committal books, but there is almost no mention of the undergraduates and none of their names are recorded. It would be helpful to know more about the complex issues of gender, class and sexual behaviour that were part of the Cambridge scene in Victorian times. The stories of a few of the undergraduates might provide some insight into their interests, ideas and emotions and help to explain why they sought intercourse with young women from the town.

Nearly all of the young men had attended English public schools. These elite schools were supported by endowments, were administered by boards of governors and had close ties with the ancient universities. Noel Annan described how in the 1830s, before the universities were reformed, Canon Barnes of Christ Church, Oxford, admitted, ‘I’ve given Studentships to my sons, and to my nephews, and to my nephew’s children, and there are no more family left. I shall have to give them by merit one of these days.’ Patronage was the passport to getting on in life. Annan used the term ‘the intellectual aristocracy’ and described how numerous members of the university were linked to form a huge intellectual network through the intermarriage of their families.

Public schools

The oldest public schools such as Winchester and Eton were also the most renowned. The first public school to be founded for over two hundred years was Cheltenham College in 1841. Another twenty public schools were opened in the next three decades. English grammar schools, which for several centuries had served their local town communities and

families in the neighbouring countryside, had become ineffective in the eighteenth century. Most of them failed to prepare their pupils for entry to university. In the nineteenth century the better grammar schools, such as those of Nottingham and Manchester, reformed their curricula and their standards and became public schools.

Professor D. C. Coleman argued that a major distinction should be drawn between those parents who had crossed or wished their children at least to cross 'the great social divide' between 'Gentlemen and Players' and those who were content with the lesser achievement of 'respectability'. The 'respectable', who formed a larger group, were less likely to be boarders and usually left school at the age of fourteen or sixteen. They aimed at white-collared clerical and sub-professional occupations.56

Social segregation, such a feature of Victorian England, was an integral part of life at a public school. The original founders of schools like Winchester and Eton had intended them for the education of the poor. In 1442 Henry VI had instructed that 'no one having a yearly income of more than five marks' was eligible to attend his foundation at Eton. By 1800 only the sons of wealthy men were pupils at the oldest and most prestigious public schools. 'Winchester in 1818 claimed that its pupils were the "poor and needy" specified by the founder William of Wykeham: it was the parents who were the rich.'57 The wealthy had squeezed out the poor.

Most of the pupils at these schools were boarders, although there were also important day schools such as St Paul's in London. The boarding schools made a feature of communal life and each school had its own code of behaviour. The rituals and traditions not only

distinguished one school from another, but bound the boys closely together in communities which for a time replaced their families. As has been already explained in the chapter on Town and Gown, many schools had close links with individual Oxford and Cambridge colleges and the loyalty inspired by the public schools was continued at university. Eton shared its foundation with King’s College, Cambridge, and until 1865 only Etonians attended King’s.

Life at these schools and at smaller private establishments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was rough and often cruel, as described in Dickens’s novels. Harsh discipline and poor teaching pervaded the system. In his autobiography, the novelist Anthony Trollope described his school days at Harrow School in the 1820s as ‘the worse period of my life. ... Nor did I learn anything – for I was taught nothing.’

Schools joined the list of other institutions such as prisons and workhouses in need of reform. Dr Thomas Arnold, who became headmaster of Rugby School in 1828, is credited with reviving Rugby and shaping a new public school ethos. This ethos was to envelop public school boys for over a century. Arnold, who was a devout Christian, set high moral and academic standards at Rugby. For him ‘education and religion were really two aspects of the same thing – a system of instruction towards moral perfection’. Arnold believed in the need for reform but not in radical change. He favoured ‘sound classical learning and firm religious principles – nothing radical or profane’. He believed too that, alongside a classical education, it was important to provide opportunities for sport. James Walvin has argued: ‘The history of modern team games is the history of the nineteenth-century public school.’ Not only were they an agency for ‘disciplining the young’ but they also ‘involved

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60 Newsome, Godliness and Good Learning, p. 5.
the universal lessons of endurance and fortitude' which were 'clearly important in the world of imperial conquest and administration'.

Comradeship was cultivated through distinctive uniforms, newly invented traditions, school slang and hierarchies within a 'house' system. Sons of the Victorian middle classes were able to acquire the speech, attitudes and manners of the upper class and become 'gentlemen' through a public school education.

Unfortunately Arnold's ideals were not observed in all schools, and bullying and sexual abuse were all too common. Victorian novels, such as Fredrick Farrar's *Eric, or, Little by Little*, describe the unhappy experiences of some boys. 'The popularity – overt – of school stories and – covert – of flagellation, pornography, sado-masochistic prostitution and its twilight psychological hinterlands are all tokens of how potent the boarding school experience was, for generations of English boys.'

Before 1800 there was a wide range of ages for entry to the university, and the colleges accepted bright boys as young as fourteen. By the mid-nineteenth century students usually went up to Cambridge when they were eighteen or nineteen years old, well grounded in the classics and nurtured in an all-male society where nearly all their masters had been ordained members of the Church of England. They had spent five years of adolescence under strict social control, segregated from the wider community.

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63 Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learning*, p. 5.
They learned in school to be boys without women, then to be masters of other boys, and then to be guardians of the state and empire. . . . Through new-boy status and fagging they learned what it was like to be on the bottom. Then they had learned what it took to climb the ladder and stay there.\textsuperscript{64}

There is no doubt that deep emotional friendships developed and were even encouraged in Victorian public schools, but, although platonic relationships were not uncommon, it is difficult to assess the extent of homosexuality. Homosexual activity was illegal and secrecy was part of the culture. Moral issues concerning sexuality in general do not seem to have been discussed openly in schools and this silence may have led to confusion in the minds of the young men. Charles Bristed, a young man from New York, saw, as an outsider, major inadequacies in an English public school education. His father had been educated at Winchester and had emigrated to America as a young man, but his son had no experience of English public schools and felt a stranger in English society.

The moral education of English boys is very much neglected, especially that part which consists in example and in removing temptation out of their way rather than debarring them from it. . . . If boys can be made manly, that is to say, courageous, honest and tolerably truthful, the formation of habits of purity and self-denial is altogether a secondary matter. . . . indulgence in the sensual vices is not incompatible with a Christian life.\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Undergraduate behaviour}

Bristed spent five years at Trinity College and gives valuable insights into student life in his memoirs. His observations on fellow students show the freshness of an outsider. He is surprised, delighted and sometimes plainly shocked by his experiences. His comfortable, cultured, upper-middle-class American background gave him 'the perceptive judgement of


a brother. The Victorian reviewer, W. G. Clarke, commented: ‘Generally his quotations are so faithful as to convince one that the sly “chiel” must have been “takin notes” all the time.’

What impression did my new associates make upon me? With those of my own standing, and nearly my own age, I was much disappointed and somewhat disgusted. These youths of eighteen and nineteen seemed precocious enough in vice, but the veriest schoolboys in everything else. . . .

The English student of eighteen is more a boy than an American of the same age. . . . From the state of close restraint they are suddenly thrown into a condition of almost entire freedom, in which they can go where they like, order what they please, and do almost anything they please – only two hours and a half of their daily time being demanded by the college authorities, and from midnight till seven in the morning, the only period when they must be in their rooms or lodging-houses.

Bristed thought that the ‘careless and undisguised way’ that ‘gross vice’ was talked about showed that the public did not condemn it. He had been educated at Yale, where he maintained that chivalrous behaviour was the norm, since the ‘spirit of chivalry which makes every man the protector of every woman is a peculiar feature of American civilization’. He believed that the arrogant behaviour of young men towards women in Cambridge was, due not only to their poor moral education but also to English cultural attitudes which included rigid class prejudice. He was shocked by ‘the low estimate which men in the upper ranks of life form of women in the lower’ and the way in which they assumed ‘that shop girls, work women, domestic servants, and all females in similar

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66 Searby, The History of the University of Cambridge, p. 585.
67 W. G. Clark, ‘Cambridge Life according to C. A. Bristed’, Fraser’s Magazine, 49 (1854), 89–100 (p. 95).
68 Bristed, Five Years in an English University, pp. 53, 58.
positions were expressly designed for the amusement of gentlemen, and generally serve that purpose.  

The young American, whose view of England may have been prejudiced, was nevertheless acutely aware of the way many of the privileged in Cambridge damned those who came from a different background. He told of an occasion when he was walking in the town with a friend and they came upon a group of children playing. The children were aged between ten and twelve and his companion had remarked, ‘There go prostitutes for the next generation.’ Bristed described his friend as ‘strictly moral in his life’, but he, like many other English contemporaries from the ‘upper ranks’, believed that young townswomen were naturally immoral. To him it was inconceivable that a housemaid or milliner could be virtuous: female virtue was the ‘luxury of the wealthy’.  

In her investigations into the connections between class, gender and sexuality, Leonore Davidoff looked at the long relationship between Arthur Munby, Cambridge graduate, and Hannah Cullwick, domestic servant. She believed that such a study could ‘throw light on the dynamics of a whole society’. Davidoff suggested that middle-class men’s dual vision of Victorian women was laid down in childhood. They not only divided women between middle class and working class, but also between ‘ladies’ and ‘women’, ‘categories which signified as much gender as economic and social meaning’. ‘Class as well as gender divisions were, partially at least, created in the nursery.’ Davidoff drew attention to the fact that in most upper-middle-class households it was a nurse or maid who

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69 Bristed, *Five Years in an English University*, p. 419.
70 Bristed, *Five Years in an English University*, p. 422.
72 Davidoff, ‘Class and Gender’ p. 91.
73 Davidoff, ‘Class and Gender’ p. 93.
fed, nappied, washed, dressed potted, put to bed, and directly disciplined the infant and small child. It was very often these girls and women who first awakened sexual as well as other feelings in the child. 74 This was the case with Freud and has been confirmed in the memoirs and autobiographies of other upper-middle-class men. 75 The life ‘below stairs’ would have held an attraction for many Victorian middle-class children and Davidoff believed that the fascination ‘with the forbidden life of the working class’ would have had sexual overtones for pubescent boys. 76

The cult of female purity and the restrictions placed on respectable women meant that middle-class young men had little opportunity for physical intimacy with girls who came from a similar background. As sexual experience was not available for these youths in the home and the interval between puberty and marriage averaged ten to fifteen years, they had to search for it elsewhere and, given Bristed’s observations, the first place a fresh undergraduate would have looked for an available woman would have been on the streets around the colleges. Childhood interaction with working-class women and girls in the home must have helped shape a young man’s attitude to Cambridge’s young streetwalkers.

In his study of middle-class males in Victorian England, John Tosh listed the ‘key requirements’ for moral manliness in the early years of the century as ‘energy, will, straightforwardness and courage’. 77 However, he detected ‘a shift in the interpretation of manliness in the context of the rise of the public school’. 78 Tosh has argued:

74 Davidoff, ‘Class and Gender’, p. 94.
75 Davidoff, ‘Class and Gender’, p. 94.
76 Davidoff, ‘Class and Gender’, p. 96.
78 Tosh, A Man’s Place, p. 117.
Once a boy reached his teens . . . much depended on the father’s attitude since the sex education of boys was generally considered to be his responsibility. . . . Many fathers did nothing; some endorsed the full repressive rigour of the purity ethic; and some communicated a man of the world’s view of the pleasures and dangers of sex in the market-place. The latter almost certainly provide the more accurate guide to practice. 79

William Everett also recorded his impressions of the university. Like Bristed, he found some aspects of life more prescribed than at home in America. ‘The life at Cambridge is like walking in a great and elegantly kept park or pleasure ground. You may see and smell the flowers but you cannot pick any of them; the fountain will play, but only just so, and at such times.’ 80 His colourful description of his bedmakers shows another aspect of control in a Cambridge college:

The door is opened, and slowly appears an aged grim figure, not unlike the witches in Macbeth, holding a dimly burning lamp. . . . these good ladies are much more in possession of your premises than you are yourself. They have a key to get into your room at all hours. . . . They constitute themselves as inspectresses-general over all your belongings and arrangements, and know all about you much better than you do yourself. You are helplessly in their power, and have a choice of submitting quietly to their ultra-despotic rule, or carrying on a constant warfare. 81

Few women were permitted to enter the cloistered colleges. Those who did were relatives of the fellows from the upper middle class, older working-class women who worked as servants or, as an extract from the nineteenth-century novel Charlie Villars at Cambridge suggests, so physically unattractive that they provided no temptation to the young men. In a satirical play within the book, a college tutor interviews ‘two young but very ill-favoured girls, with their mother an old hag’, for the office of ‘Assistant Bed-maker’:

79 Tosh, A Man’s Place, p. 107.  
81 Everett, On the Cam, p. 221.
The only places where young men could meet young women were in the town or in their lodging houses. John Venn described his experiences as a young undergraduate in the 1850s. He found it difficult to recall the three or four occasions when there were ladies present and those 'were not exactly lively functions'. 'The female element in University society was epigrammatically described as consisting of five or six wives of Masters of the Colleges, who sat apart; of five or six wives of professors, upon whom the former did not call; and one other lady, a wife of a well-known classical coach.'

Venn recalled how his cousin, Leslie Stephen, distinguished man of letters and father of Virginia Woolf, who was three years his senior, used to say that they were a society of bachelors. Stephen did not remember speaking to a single woman at Cambridge except his bedmaker and the wives of one or two heads of colleges. 'We were beginning to propose

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some modification of the absurd system of celibacy . . . yet proposals to alter it excited horror.\textsuperscript{84}

Then, as now, satirical writing was part of student culture, and the following passage divides undergraduates into two groups – 'the readers' who worked hard and achieved academic honours and 'the varmints' who were pleasure-seeking and idle. This quotation, with its satirical overstatement and desire to create opposite poles, nevertheless has a ring of truth.

The reading and the varmint method of proceeding to the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

What cares he [the varmint] for Tutors or Proctors, for Masters or Vice-Chancellors, since his whole aim is pleasure and amusement, since a day's hard reading would drive him half mad . . .

Mr Varnit issues forth at night sine cap and gown. . . While they are pulling the girls about in the streets, up comes the Proctor: "pray, Sir, may I ask if you are a member of the University?" – "Yes, Sir, I am." – "Your name and college, Sir, if you please." . . . The next day a bull-dog calls on Mr Varmit, to deliver a message from the Proctor, viz:– That he is fined 6s. 8d. for being in the streets without his cap and gown, and that he would be glad to see him at 12 o'clock that day. . . . The Proctor informs him that his conduct in the streets last night was most ungentlemanlike and improper. . . . He therefore desires him to get three hundred verses of Homer's Iliad, Book 2nd, by heart, and requests he will by no means leave the University until it was said.\textsuperscript{85}

\textit{Individual undergraduates}

Contemporary letters, biographies and novels reveal how varied the ambitions and experiences of students were in Victorian Cambridge. Not all students went up to

\textsuperscript{84} Venn, \textit{Early Collegiate Life}, p. 266.
\textsuperscript{85} Anon., \textit{Gradus ad Cantabrigiam} (1824), pp. 122, 125.
university with the aim of achieving sporting or sexual success; there were many young men who went up to a college with the sole idea of obtaining a good degree. They showed no interest in alcohol or women throughout their stay in Cambridge. These were the satirist’s ‘readers’.

Alexander Chisholm Gooden was a perfect example of a ‘reader’. As a young boy he was educated by his father and then received further tuition from academics at London University whilst still living at home. He was a devoted son and wrote home regularly from Cambridge from 1836 onwards. No doubt because of his unexpected and sudden death from peritonitis in 1841 his family kept and treasured his letters. Later 170 letters were donated to Trinity College and an edited collection was published in 2003. The book provides an interesting cameo of Victorian Cambridge by one young man. It gives an overall impression of a hardworking student who was obsessed by, and absorbed into, academic life. He was very close to his parents and only elder brother. They were a family of hypochondriacs and one of the chief topics throughout the ten-year correspondence is their preoccupation with illness. Alexander suffered from piles and constipation and his mother sent him countless remedies to effect a cure.

Gooden’s letters add little to the main theme of this thesis, but they do show how it was possible for a young man to live contentedly in Cambridge although almost totally isolated from the outside world. Firmly supported by his family, Gooden showed no need to expand his social life, and it seems unlikely that he ever crossed a proctor’s path. His only mention of women in Cambridge was that of his landlady, Mrs Porcher, of whom he was very fond. It could have been that Gooden constructed a particular image in his letters for

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the benefit of his family, but this seems unlikely, as the correspondence he exchanged with his friends was in a similar vein to the letters he wrote home.

His life was centred almost exclusively on Trinity College, where he had good friends, mostly other conscientious students. Nearly all his letters related to his work. He kept his parents informed about his essays and exams in minute detail and recorded every academic success and disappointment. He mentioned few experiences outside the university except for visits to bookshops and occasional walks beyond the college confines, including one to Grantchester. On most days Gooden's only exercise was the short walk between his lodgings in Jesus Lane and Trinity College and that was not always to his liking. On 25 October 1837 he complained to his mother, 'It rained furiously last night and Cambridge is as filthy as a pig sty.'

Alexander Gooden was not typical. He had spent a sheltered childhood at home and had not experienced the rigours of a public school education. He went up to Trinity College steeped in the classics but without the cultural trappings and connections of most freshmen. Nevertheless he represents a group of students who like him were ambitious and hardworking and respectable members of the middle class. Gooden and his friends were at Cambridge to obtain a good degree and not to experience 'the good life'. He told his father in a letter that his friend, Turner, was leaving Cambridge for chambers in the Temple. 'He is heartily glad to be off and complains bitterly of the dullness of living in Cambridge with 18d in your pocket and 13d of that engaged for bills. So much for the dregs of amusement.'

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87 Cambridge in the 1830s, p. 101.
88 Cambridge in the 1830s, p. 140.
Gooden, Bristed, Venn and Stephen were undoubtedly all ‘readers’. It is more difficult to find examples of ‘varmints’, perhaps because few of them wrote about their time at university. There are, however, men, later well known, who wrote about their experiences as students, not as ‘varmints’ but as individuals or observers of undergraduate ‘varmint’ life.

Samuel Butler, who went up to St John’s College in 1854, was a ‘reader’ and obtained a first class degree, but his novel The Way of All Flesh suggests that he was keenly aware of Cambridge’s temptations. Although the novel was published only posthumously in 1903, it provides one former student’s recollection of university discipline as it was in the early 1850s and indicates that there were those who challenged the status quo from within the university walls.

Butler based the early years of his hero, Ernest Pontifex, on his own childhood in the vicarage at Langar, Nottinghamshire, where his father had the living. Like Butler, Ernest was sent to public school, the fictional Roughborough, modelled on Shrewsbury School where Butler spent his teenage years, and then, like Butler, he went up to Cambridge. In his introduction to the 1966 edition of the novel, the literary critic Richard Hoggart described it as ‘partly an autobiography ... in which a young man rejects his background and finds his own way’. Butler himself certainly regarded the novel as an autobiographical document. His childhood, he used to say, really had been exceptionally unhappy. “I had to steal my own birthright. I stole it, and was bitterly punished. But I

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saved my soul alive" he wrote in his Notebooks. The Way of All Flesh suggests that Butler was dealing with deep intellectual and emotional personal problems:

[Ernest] set himself to live soberly and cleanly, as I imagine all his instincts prompted him to do, and when he fell – as who that is born of woman can help sometimes doing? – it was not till after a sharp tussle with a temptation that was more than flesh and blood could stand; then he was very penitent and would go a fairly long while without sinning again; and this was how it had always been with him since he had arrived at years of indiscretion.

The novel tells how, shortly after leaving Cambridge, Ernest mistook a respectable girl for a prostitute and was arrested for his indiscretion. In a London court he faced a magistrate, who upbraided him soundly:

Ernest Pontifex, yours is one of the most painful cases that I have ever had to deal with. You have been singularly favoured in your parentage and education. You have had before you the example of blameless parents, who doubtless instilled into you from childhood the enormity of the offence which by your own confession you have committed. You were sent to one of the best public schools in England. It is not likely that in the healthy atmosphere of such a school as Roughborough you can have come across contaminating influences; you were probably, I may say certainly, impressed at school with the heinousness of any attempt to depart from the strictest chastity until such time as you had entered into a state of matrimony. At Cambridge you were shielded from impurity by every obstacle which virtuous and vigilant authorities could devise, and even had the obstacles been fewer, your parents probably took care that your means should not admit of your throwing money away upon abandoned characters. At night proctors patrolled the street and dogged your steps if you tried to go into haunts where the presence of vice was suspected. By day the females who were admitted within the college walls were selected mainly on the score of age and ugliness. It is hard to see what more can be done for any young man than this.

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91 Hoggart, Introduction to The Way of All Flesh, pp. 8–9.
Ernest had transgressed in spite of 'every obstacle which virtuous and vigilant authorities
could devise'. In the heavy satire of the magistrate's admonishment of Pontifex, Butler
exposes Victorian hypocrisy in its guise of respectability and implies how important these
'obstacles' were to the university authorities in nineteenth-century Cambridge.

Senior members of the university were divided in their attitude towards young men who
gave in to temptation, but few wanted them to be severely punished for visiting a brothel or
going with a prostitute. An 'imposition', or memory task, was a common punishment for
any offence from non-attendance at Chapel or cutting lectures to being observed talking to
a streetwalker. 'To get the first book of the Iliad by heart, would be thought a severe
punishment.'\(^{94}\) In fact some undergraduates expected heavier punishments than an
imposition. In March 1850, Harry Lyon, a chemist who had not submitted a student's bill
for college approval, pleaded: 'I could not send in the bill because it was a venereal case.
The young man entreated me not to send in the bill and said he should be ruined if I did.'
Lyon paid for his compassion: he was no longer allowed to trade with students.\(^{95}\) Just as
Lyon suffered for his trouble in helping the student, so the Spinning House girl suffered for
going with an undergraduate. There was one rule for Town and another for Gown.

Not surprisingly, there is no evidence of demands from senior members of the university
for the closure of the Spinning House. However, there was a strong petition by them to
close down the Amateur Dramatic Club, the A.D.C., in 1871. Twenty-five college tutors
believed that the plays had become highly detrimental to the discipline and studies of the
university and that they were strongly disapproved of by the parents of many of the

\(^{94}\) Anon., *Gradus ad Cantabrigiam* (1824), pp. 61, 86.

undergraduates who took part in them. Burlesques were especially popular with the students, particularly those that made fun of the proctors. In one play, *Alonzo the Brave*, which was remotely based on Goethe’s *Faust*, Faust sent for a proctor to investigate a noise outside his study. After singing a solo, the proctor left the stage dancing, accompanied by his two bulldogs. Francis Burnaud, a Trinity student and the A.D.C.’s leading light, described this part of the performance: ‘This was encored six times at least—the Proctor and attendants becoming wilder and wilder in their antics. It was without exception the funniest thing, of its kind, I ever saw on the A.D.C. stage.’ The theatre was saved, but it became highly regulated and burlesques were no longer included in its repertoire.

In 1875, his second year at Trinity College, George Campbell Macaulay, father of the novelist Rose Macaulay, dared to defy the authorities and as a result was struck off the Master’s visiting list and made to sign two public apologies in the presence of witnesses. His daughter relates how Macaulay’s Latin Tripos verses, composed ‘in the bawdy style of Plautus’, were considered ‘immoral and impudent’ by the Master and senior dons. He had dared to mock an identifiable individual. ‘George’s Latin skit is a pun-filled comic triologue: an undergraduate with a hangover and an aggressive prostitute are discovered together by a grey-haired senior proctor; instead of punishing the student for being in bad company, the proctor himself goes down the alley with the luscious Erotium Meretrix.’ The ‘scurrilous lines’ survive in the official records.

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Political, social and religious challenges

In his book *Public Moralists* Stephan Collini concentrated on 'reconstructing the thoughts and sensibilities of some of the leading members of the educated class' in the Victorian period. He was interested in the English 'intellectual' as a public figure, a participant in the various controversies of the age. Collini believed that fundamental values like 'altruism', 'character' and 'manliness' drove much of the political thought of the Victorian period. He defined Victorian masculinity as largely physical, disdainful of childlike and effeminate traits and scornful of 'sentiment'. Collini stated: 'There was in fact rather little substantial moral dispute among the educated classes in this period.' The disputes were 'essentially theoretical disputes . . . about the foundations of morality' which were 'prompted by "new intellectual factions" such as Social Darwinism'.

It seems pertinent at this point to look at the narratives of some of the most interesting 'intellectuals' of the era, men such as Charles Kingsley (1819–1875) of Cambridge and John Henry Newman (1801–1890) and Edward Pusey (1800–1882) of Oxford. Examination of the theological and political debates that took place between these men illustrates the way in which sexuality was intertwined with moral and religious thinking and indicates how profound was the insecurity experienced by some academics of the period.

Close examination of the life and ideas of the Revd Charles Kingsley provides some insight into the anxiety and disquiet concerning matters of religion, class, gender and sexuality that preoccupied the minds of senior members of the university. Sometimes,

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102 Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 64.
despite the university’s attempts to police sexual mores, contrary opinions were revealed. Kingsley was an undergraduate at Magdalene College, Rector of Eversley in Hampshire and Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. He was also chaplain to the Queen, notable social reformer and popular novelist. He was never a proctor and had no direct connection with the Spinning House. Kingsley’s anguish as a young man, when faced with the conflict between his religious beliefs and passionate sexual feelings, brought about a need to explore his faith and practice of Christianity. The confusion that he experienced then probably enveloped other young men on the brink of manhood, but, unlike many of his contemporaries, Kingsley was not afraid to express his inner thoughts and feelings. He believed that sexual desire, when righteous, was God-given. For him, sexual union was spiritual fulfilment.

However, Kingsley’s ideas went beyond the sexual: he came to see ‘the whole of man – intellectual, aesthetic, and animal – as spiritual’. Together with other Christians, notably liberal men, Kingsley promoted the idea of ‘harmony and health’, linking spiritual wellbeing with physical strength. This ‘muscular Christianity’ – or ‘manliness’, a term preferred by Kingsley – was interpreted in different ways. For some it meant ‘a gentle, liberal but realistic, and hard-working social activism’, while for others ‘muscular Christianity meant macho: Tom Brown boxing bullies at Rugby and bloodying townies at Oxford’.

David Newsome suggested that in the last half of the nineteenth century there was a gradual abandonment of the ideals of godliness and good learning as promoted by Arnold. ‘Moral earnestness became “theumos” – the hearty enjoyment of physical pursuits, the

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belief that manliness and high spirits are more becoming qualities in a boy than piety and spiritual zeal. As more schools opened to educate the sons of newly rich middle-class parents, ‘playing the game’ became a substitute for the religious idealism of many of the established schools. Similarly, in the universities, manliness was more likely to be expressed through the discipline and teamwork needed for competitive rowing than in the intellectual discipline of religious practice and debate.

‘Manliness preoccupied Kingsley.’ David Rosen suggested that ‘Kingsley eventually reconstructed masculinity as a private, partially disclosed, substructure of self’. In her biography of Kingsley, The Beast and the Monk, Susan Chitty described Kingsley as both a highly sexed human being and a devout Christian. Kingsley’s first sexual experience with a woman, a Cambridge prostitute, filled him with such shame and loathing that he passed his second long vacation from Cambridge in a mood of black despair. It was an experience that had a profound effect on him for the rest of his life. Feelings of guilt and perhaps concern about venereal disease made him confess his weakness to his beloved Fanny before they were married:

You, my unspotted, bring a virgin body to my arms. I alas do not to yours. Before our lips met I had sinned and fallen. Oh, how low! If it is your wish, you shall be a wife only in name. No communion but that of mind shall pass between us.

When Kingsley was separated from Fanny during their long engagement, he drew a series of erotic drawings of young women being tortured by monks to illustrate a life of

105 Newsome, Godliness and Good Learning, p. 26.
St Elizabeth of Hungary. A Cambridge tutor of the time who saw the drawings is said to have remarked that no pure man could have completed them. Other erotic drawings that he made to accompany his poems and fantasies were not published until the late twentieth century. Throughout their marriage Fanny and Charles shared an appreciation of erotic sex. In a letter to her he wrote that their marriage bed was to be ‘our altar’, where ‘you should be the victim and I the priest, in the bliss of full communion’.  

Kingsley’s belief in the sanctity of the flesh and the virtue of man’s full expression of his individual inner nature was in complete opposition to the beliefs held by some of the most powerful theologians of the time, such as the Oxford tractarian Edward Pusey, don, Anglican cleric and leader of the Oxford Movement. Pusey’s rigid religious beliefs informed his uncompromising opinions on sexual morality. (See an earlier passage in this chapter on his view about Oxford lodging houses.) In spite of his views on celibacy Pusey was married with a large family. He was a strict disciplinarian and it was said that when he and his wife became fixated on fasting they imposed the same discipline on their children, who were not so fervent about self-abasement. Pusey’s punishment of his children has been considered sadistic:

Austere and guilt-ridden, Pusey seemed to many, not wholly without justification, curiously inhumane. His son was constantly chastised. His daughter, Mary, was once tied to a bed post for mispronouncing a word in a lesson and lashed, sometimes four times a day, until on the eleventh day she got the word right.  

Pusey’s treatment of his daughter suggests that he was a man with severe emotional problems and that he would have been unsuited for a position of responsibility, but he was

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widely respected by his colleagues in Oxford and his sermons and tracts were highly regarded.

Kingsley abhorred sexual repression and accused the Catholics, Evangelicals and Puseyites alike of ‘repressing both generic and personal areas of existence’. In his feud with John Henry Newman he criticized Catholics’ denigration of the body and its subjugation in the name of religion. Kingsley deplored the Catholic insistence on celibacy for priests and members of religious orders. He invoked the conventional accusations against Roman Catholicism – that it was a conspiracy of crafty clergy over laity kept in a superstitious and credulous thraldom in order to preserve ecclesiastical privilege. Newman had left the Anglican Church and converted to the Roman Church because he believed, like others, that liberal trends in politics and theology had led to the undermining of the Church of England’s authority in matters of class, gender and sexuality.

Walter Houghton, in his commentary on muscular Christianity, related the fears of many Victorian men who were ‘deeply troubled’ with religious doubt. He associated the anxieties of the age with scientific discoveries that called into question Biblical accounts of the creation, with technological advances that rendered the world increasingly complex and hostile, and with industrial processes that isolated individuals from each other and the past.

Houghton’s ‘hostile’ world brought about not only religious doubts but political and social challenges as well. Scientific and technical discoveries and their application posed a real

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112 Rosen, ‘Muscular Christianity’, p. 29.
threat to the traditions and culture of the university, but, more importantly, they threatened to loosen the power the university held beyond its precincts in Cambridge. For Vice-Chancellors and members of the Senate, it had seemed imperative since the sixteenth century that they should not lose their authority over aspects of town life.

In his essay, David Rosen investigates the theory that 'muscular Christianity' was born in response to perceived and imagined threats to the country.115 The 1840s were a period of extreme economic hardship. Revolution spread across Europe in 1848 and an influential group among the Chartist leadership threatened violence if their petition was rejected. Class tension was high. Rosen draws attention to impoverished rural labourers and to the craftsmen whose skills were undermined by technological change and who felt a loss of manliness. Coupled with this there were women who were quietly rebelling against what they saw as the repression of their natural abilities. The middle and upper classes in England believed that they were facing a serious social crisis. They were fearful and on the defensive.116

Like others from their background, members of Cambridge University who held authority were not exempt from pressure: they too were filled with the anxiety that so often accompanies change. One of Parliament’s responses to the country’s problems was to reform the public services. The reorganization of established institutions such as the civil service, as referred to in Chapter 2, was to have a profound impact on men from Oxford and Cambridge. For centuries, graduates from these two ancient universities had held prominent positions in running the country; reform brought that loss of influence and

competition for the posts they held. With their authority in Cambridge under threat as well, it is not surprising that they would not compromise over the Spinning House.

Conclusion

Change had been a dominant feature of Cambridge University in the nineteenth century. Its administrative structure and curriculum were modernized. It had grown physically, with more buildings, new colleges and more undergraduates, but, in spite of these changes, traditional attitudes towards class, gender and sexuality continued to pervade university life throughout most of the century. This study has not only considered the regulation of the female streetwalkers but has focused on the university authorities' efforts to regulate male sexuality. Segregation of the sexes, separation of the upper and middle classes from the working class, prejudice cultivated by isolation, religious beliefs and college traditions set in stone, all worked together to maintain a culture that was unique. University discipline in Victorian Cambridge, governed by self-interest and enforced by proctors, was imposed on both Town and Gown. It caused deep divisions in Cambridge, and these were exacerbated by the existence of the Spinning House.
Visit from the Vicechancellor: he came on a melancholy business; he was on his return from the Spinning House where he saw a young girl (only 15 or 16) who was committed by the proctor; her father is Johnson and referred the V.C. to me as having employed him as a carver and gilder: it is true that I did so, and then knew no harm of him: now however his family is very disreputable and this is not the only daughter who has gone astray.

Introduction

Who were the Spinning House girls who caused the university authorities so much anxiety? This chapter examines the Spinning House committal books for information on these working-class young women who lived in Cambridge in the nineteenth century, were perceived by the proctors to be prostitutes and were labelled by them as 'streetwalkers'. It explores the extent to which those girls who were arrested on a single occasion were similar to and shared the motives of those arrested numerous times. The books, which have already been described in Chapter 1, span seventy years (1823–1894) and are a rich source for the social history of Victorian Cambridge. They describe the experiences of the streetwalkers, their arrest and imprisonment, as well as the attitudes and conduct of the university authorities. The books expose the proctors’ collective stance on the problems posed by the women and their individual judgments upon them. However, they do not reveal the actual sexual behaviour of those who were arrested and there is no evidence to suggest that the term 'common prostitute' could justly have been applied to more than a small minority. 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 discourse and the proctors' policy suggested. Sources apart from the Spinning House archives are used to show how individual girls encountered other institutions such as the Cambridge Refuge.

The construction of a database using the committal books' handwritten records, as explained in Chapter 1, has facilitated analysis of the information contained in the books and given insights into prostitution that would not have been feasible otherwise. A FileMaker software programme was used to design a relational database. The girls' Spinning House identification numbers link the two files, 'Girls' and 'Arrests'. The first file includes 12 fields giving the girls' personal details such as their names and dates of birth. The second has 21 fields relating to arrests, with information such as the name of the proctor concerned. The collection of data in electronic files has made it possible to compare and contrast trends in the behaviour of both streetwalkers and proctors over the century. Likewise, the record linkage has made it easy to trace individual girls' histories, their backgrounds, their friends and families, and personal traits that often determined their treatment by the Vice-Chancellor's court. The written account and graphs constructed from these statistics reveal patterns of behaviour that were peculiar to Cambridge.

*Streetwalking and prostitution in Oxford*

As has already been shown in the opening chapter of this thesis, prostitution was a serious concern throughout the Victorian period and so the history of streetwalking in Cambridge cannot be considered in isolation. Oxford, like Cambridge, had a long history of prostitution and shared many of its problems and practices; for centuries working-class girls paraded the streets around the colleges in Oxford whilst proctors patrolled the same areas ready to arrest those they suspected to be prostitutes. In that they were ancient university towns, these two were more alike than any other two towns in England. However, in the nineteenth century there were also differences between them and these add an important dimension to this thesis. Detailed records of the young women and their arrests were kept in both places, so that it is possible to make comparisons between the streetwalkers' backgrounds and the proctorial and policing policy towards prostitution in the two towns. Oxford's records, however, relate only to those girls charged with streetwalking who were held by the proctors for a single night or imprisoned in the town gaol. Oxford University had no prison of its own; there was no equivalent to the Spinning House. It is the existence of the House that makes Cambridge unique.
Arthur J. Engel investigated the lives of the young working-class streetwalkers in Victorian Oxford.² He used information from university committal books as well as the ‘caution books’, which were peculiar to Oxford. The latter were used to identify prostitutes and record any official warnings they received. Engel commented that ‘the caution books provide a wealth of miscellaneous biographical information, especially in the first entry for each particular woman’.³

Unlike the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, who in the nineteenth century still exercised powers given to him by Elizabeth I to imprison streetwalkers, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, acting as a magistrate, used the current law to imprison suspected prostitutes in the city gaol, charging them as ‘Rogues and Vagabonds . . . wandering abroad . . . not giving a good account of themselves’.⁴ In 1824, when Parliament altered the law dealing with prostitution to permit imprisonment only for a ‘riotous or indecent manner in a public place or thoroughfare’, the university solicitor argued that the new Vagrancy Act would not keep ‘the Streets of Oxford from being thronged with Prostitutes and Bullies’.⁵ The university wanted to retain its ‘indiscriminate powers of commitment’, but the town objected, not least for financial reasons. A compromise was approved in 1826 and the university kept its old powers but agreed to pay the city 10d a night for every woman held in the city gaol.⁶ It also agreed to pay for the maintenance of a separate force, the university police, which had full jurisdiction over the entire city of Oxford as the ‘night watch’, patrolling from 9 p.m. until 4 a.m. The proctors continued to detain streetwalkers overnight in the rooms under the Clarendon Building, a woman being either cautioned or committed to prison as a ‘common prostitute’ by the Vice-Chancellor the next morning. According to Engel, ‘It was well known that the city police, who had responsibility for Oxford during the

⁴ Engel, ‘Immoral Intentions’, p. 81.
⁵ Engel, ‘Immoral Intentions’, p. 81.
⁶ Engel, ‘Immoral Intentions’, p. 81.
day, operated according to the national law and took no cognizance of prostitution except when accompanied by drunkenness or public indecency.\(^7\)

Engel explored the relationship between the university authorities and the citizens of Oxford. The university’s power to arrest and imprison local women ‘had always been deeply resented by the city authorities and had been the cause of much conflict and animosity between “town and gown”’.\(^8\) The dual policing also led to inefficiency. Although the police force in Cambridge was receiving satisfactory reports, the Inspector of Constabulary’s official report for the Borough of Oxford in 1858 stated:

> It is impossible for me to make a satisfactory report on the efficiency of this force, which is divided, as to duty, with the University police, the day duty being taken by the city force and the night duty by that of the University. This arrangement so completely interferes with the regularity of the system being adopted, that I can see no prospect of the city force being made efficient, until some alteration takes place.\(^9\)

The two Oxford police forces amalgamated in 1868, but it was not until the turn of the century that the practice of cautioning, detaining prisoners overnight and bringing them before the Vice-Chancellor was abandoned and all prostitutes were brought before the town magistrates.\(^10\)

**THE STREETWALKERS**

*Committal book entries*

The Vice-Chancellor’s court in Cambridge was held in the Spinning House on most mornings during term. Any girl arrested the previous evening was brought before the

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\(^7\) Engel, ‘Immoral Intentions’, p. 84.


\(^9\) *The Reports of Inspectors of Constabulary to the Secretary of State, Eastern Counties, Midlands and North Wales District, 1857–1858*, P.P. H.C. 17 (1859), XXII, pp. 16, 32, 33.

\(^10\) Engel, ‘Immoral Intentions’, p. 100.
Vice-Chancellor and sentenced on the advice of the proctor who had been responsible for her arrest. She might protest, but she had no one to represent or defend her. The committal books are a record of the girls and women who faced this court.

Any young woman out in the streets around the colleges in the evening, particularly if she was seen talking to an undergraduate, could expect to be stopped and questioned by the proctors. If she was unable to give a satisfactory reason for her presence she would be escorted to the Spinning House. The proctors met at least once a week during full term 'to report what each [had] done during the week preceding, to take counsel generally, and compare notes'. They became expert, with their constables, in recognizing known miscreants, and any other girl who was foolish enough to keep their company could expect to be apprehended too. It was said that in Oxford the identification was extremely easy since the badge of the prostitute was simply to appear in the public streets with an uncovered head: one constable went as far as to label the absence of a bonnet as 'indecent conduct'.

There is no suggestion that in Cambridge in the 1850s the young streetwalkers were recognized by their uncovered heads, but the local Police Superintendent, William Jaggard, believed that they were different from most girls who walked the streets in other towns and cities. He described them thus to Henry Mayhew: 'They are most of the middle class of girls, and all walk the streets at times generally well dressed.' Jaggard's use of 'middle class' presumably means that they were not the lowest and meanest but shop girls and young women who were working and decently dressed. Forty years later the Chief Constable of Cambridge borrowed 'smart young constables' for a few days from neighbouring county forces to tempt prostitutes into soliciting them; the women could then be prosecuted and it was hoped that this would deter others.
When a streetwalker was arrested and taken to the House for the first time, her details were entered into a committal book and she was given a number (Illustration 8). On subsequent visits her name and number linked her with previous arrests. It was the practice for the proctors to record details of every apprehension, but the information was not always reliable. Names, numbers, dates and addresses were often entered inaccurately. Sometimes the handwriting is difficult to read, spelling is erratic, especially of place names, and there is evidence that the information provided by the girls was not always the truth. Some girls deliberately gave aliases, although this was often discovered before they were discharged. For example, Mary Greengrass was also known as Mary Suden and it was suspected by the proctors that she was also ‘Eliz Markhall’. Even the number of Spinning House girls cannot be assessed precisely. The figure of 1550 girls mentioned in Chapter 1 is probably close to the actual number, but it is possible that some young women appear in the committal books more than once with different names and identification numbers. A few, hoping to avoid punishment, used their imaginations to embroider their stories. One such was Sarah Fromant, who, according to the proctor, Mr Evans, ‘declared herself married: which on investigation was found not to be the case’.

Omissions and errors mean that statistics can only give a partial picture of streetwalking in Cambridge. Most of the numbers quoted in this study relate to those girls for whom details were recorded and not to all the girls who were arrested. However, such figures can still show the trends and changes that took place during the century.

Place of birth or parish

What is known about the girls’ backgrounds? The entries for their parishes in the 1820s are sparse and in the 1830s and early 1840s omissions appear in clusters: undoubtedly some proctors were more diligent about completing the record of parishes than others. However the records from 1846 onwards, with the exception of one or two years, appear to be

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15 Spinning House committal books, Cambridge University Archives (henceforth University/), T.VIII.1-3. Footnote references to these committal books will not given where it is clear that they are the source of a statement in the text.
Illustration 8: Sample page from the first Spinning House committal book
reasonably complete. A third of the Spinning House girls did not name any parish, so any
description of the group as a whole must be inconclusive. Philip Howell has identified the
'Geographical origins of arrested women 1823–94' in a map in his paper on prostitution in
Cambridge. This map is misleading because, although the title suggests that it is
comprehensive, it relates only to two-thirds of the girls and only to those from England.
Most women were in their teens when they were first committed to the House, so probably
gave the parish of their birth, but those who had lived in Barnwell for some years might well
have named their adopted urban parish. If this was the case, the figures underestimate the
number of the girls who had been born in the villages (Figure 1).

The same was true of Oxford. Engel discussed the parishes of origin of the women who
were arrested and his assessment mirrors the situation in Cambridge. The authorities there
were anxious to obtain accurate information on this point since it could be used as a basis for
sending offenders back if they ever became public charges. Nonetheless, the information
must often have been hard to discover since women from elsewhere would probably have
preferred to have it thought that they lived in the city of Oxford; so the figures that can be
derived from the committal books can safely be assumed to err on the side of overestimating
the number of Oxford women.

In Cambridge, 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. In the early years,
those girls who named Cambridge parishes came mainly from Castle Hill or those in the
medieval heart of the town, such as St Mary's the Great, St Edward's and St Botolph's. Later, girls named parishes which had been formed to the south and east, in the new suburbs

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16 Philip Howell, 'A private Contagious Diseases Act: prostitution and public space in Victorian
17 Engel, 'Immoral Intentions', p. 86.
18 Engel, 'Immoral Intentions', p. 86.
Figure 1. Spinning House girls: location of parishes

Data for the 69% of girls who named a parish at the time of their first arrest between 1823 and 1894
Source: Spinning House Committal Books

- More than 35 miles from Cambridge: 14%
- Between 12 and 35 miles from Cambridge: 25%
- Less than 12 miles from Cambridge: 30%
- Cambridge: 31%
of Barnwell, such as the huge parish of St Andrew’s the Less and then the new parishes of St Matthew’s and St Paul’s which were carved out of St Andrew’s.

The villages within 12 miles of Cambridge included parishes in Fulbourn, Shelford and Trumpington. These were all within easy reach of Cambridge, but, when the girls started work, whether as servants, milliners or prostitutes, they may have found their place of employment too far from home to travel daily and preferred to find lodgings in the town. There were few references for the parishes of Royston and St Ives, which lie just within the 12-mile radius of Cambridge. In the twentieth century both these villages became towns. The parish of Chesterton, only a short walk from the town centre along the river, was unlike the other town parishes. Today it is well within the city boundary, but in the mid-nineteenth century it was an independent village outside the borough. Although only 37 girls named it as the parish of their birth, quite a number gave it as their place of residence and lived in lodging houses there, particularly in the 1850s. In the graphs Chesterton has been included with the local villages, not the Cambridge parishes, in spite of its proximity to the centre of Cambridge and its similar character to the town parishes.

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, which is just beyond the 12-mile radius. Newmarket had had a close connection with Cambridge ever since the first official horse race was run there in the time of Charles II; it was a favourite haunt of some of the richer undergraduates. Cambridge also attracted young women from the cathedral city of Ely and from fen villages such as Chatteris, Ramsey and Soham, where there was considerable poverty and there were few opportunities for employment except for backbreaking work on the land.

Only about one in ten of the streetwalkers said that they came from parishes 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. Over the 70 years very few of
the Spinning House inmates said they came from places beyond East Anglia and the Home Counties. This was different from nineteenth-century Oxford; according to Engel:

One conclusion which can be drawn is that Oxford served as an important magnet for English prostitutes, in type, though certainly not in scale, like London. At least one-quarter of the prostitutes in Oxford came from great distances, and it may reasonably be inferred that they came specifically with the intention of engaging in prostitution.\(^\text{19}\)

The Spinning House records include only one girl from Scotland and just three from Ireland. Elizabeth Thompson arrived in Cambridge in 1830 aged 15. She claimed that she came from a parish in Scotland, had no parents and had been working in London. She was detained for one night and was never recorded again. There is also little information about the first of the three Irish girls, Margaret Vine, who received two warnings in 1834. The other two girls, who arrived in England ten years apart, were both 17 when they were arrested. Jane Huston's father was a tailor and her mother a dressmaker; she was taken to the Spinning House in November 1847 but was released after being 'admonished'. Annie Taylor, a shoebinder, whose father was a soldier, had left her parents in Cork to come to Cambridge; in the spring of 1857 she spent a total of 21 days in prison, after being caught streetwalking twice by the proctors, but her name does not appear in the committal books again.

Although 42 girls said they had worked in London, mostly as servants, nearly all had grown up in or near Cambridge. It seems remarkable that, spread over seven decades, there were only 19 girls who gave London as their parish 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 university authorities' fears that the railway would undermine their moral authority over undergraduates, alluded to in Chapter 2, seem to have been unfounded.\(^\text{20}\) Two girls who did come to Cambridge soon after the railway had opened were sisters.

\(^{19}\) Engel, 'Immoral Intentions', p. 86.

Rose Calder (20) and Henrietta Calder (15). They came from Goudhurst in Kent and said that their father was a stonemason in Pembrokeshire. In 1846, after living for a while in London with their mother, a nurse, they travelled to Cambridge. They spent nearly five years in the town and spent regular periods in the Spinning House. In 1851 the entries for both ceased.

Family background

The family reputation of the Spinning House girls and their parents was important, as the quotation from Romilly’s diary at the beginning of this chapter 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, in contemporary terms, 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. Mr Johnson’s young daughters had damaged the family name and as a result it was unlikely that their father, a skilled craftsman, would have been able to find employment with the university again.

Because of the significance of reputation, a girl’s family background formed part of her Spinning House record. Once again, the records are far from complete and there are no details for the parents, relatives or friends of about a quarter of the girls. It is also difficult to distinguish between those who named only one parent and those who really had only one alive; however it seems that about half of them had at least one parent living. Seventy girls said that both parents were dead. The figures suggest that many of the streetwalkers may have come from broken families. Writing about prostitutes in London, Walkowitz argued that, despite evidence of continued family connections, ‘the family background of these women seems to have been unusually disrupted. An extraordinarily high percentage of
prostitutes had lost one or both parents.  

The many missing entries in the committal books make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the backgrounds of the Cambridge streetwalkers. There were reasons too why the young women would have wanted to mislead the proctors. The streetwalkers were suspicious of the university authorities and mistrusted them. Many of them lied to the proctors when they were arrested and it is more than likely that they gave incorrect information about their parentage, probably because they were wary of the consequences of telling the truth. An address could sway a proctor’s opinion: a lodging house in Barnwell was an obstacle, but if a proctor thought a girl came from a respectable home she was sometimes taken back to her parents, not necessarily at the wish of the girl. Philip Howell also emphasized the prostitutes’ resistance to authority, saying that ‘apprehended women had constant recourse to false names and accounts, or learned to tailor their responses to elicit the greatest sympathy and leniency’. Walkowitz has suggested that ‘calling oneself an orphan was a way of eliciting sympathy as well as closing off one’s past to unwelcome middle-class scrutiny’.

If relatives brought up a girl, it was usually a grandmother or an aunt who gave her a home. Girls sometimes named sisters and brothers or indicated the size of their families. Occasionally an exceptional record declared bluntly that there were no friends or family, as in the case of Caroline Evans from near Oundle. She was ill, presumably suffering from venereal disease, and came to the Spinning House out of term in 1831; she stayed until she was well, but there is no indication as to how long that was.

It was not unusual for sisters or cousins to walk the streets together. Often a girl’s first experience of the proctors was in the company of a sibling. Surnames, dates of apprehension and the addresses of Spinning House inmates suggest many family connections. For

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example, there were five Aves girls who were born in Cambridge in the early 1820s, two of whom lived with grandparents; it seems likely that they all were related. There were clusters of inmates’ surnames, such as Beasley, Briggs, Pratt and Rutter, all belonging to girls born in the first two decades of the century. The Howlett sisters from Exning, near Newmarket, lived together in the town. In February 1850 they were apprehended with another girl by a proctor on King’s Parade, cautioned and released. This was the elder sister Emma’s only experience of arrest, but Sophie, who was only 16 at the time, was arrested two weeks later and then held on seven more occasions in the next 12 months. The Lunn sisters from Lynn in Norfolk came to Cambridge together and stayed in the Spinning House together more than once. Numerous local pairs of sisters were companions on the streets, such as the Fletchers, who lived in Willow Place on the town edge of Barnwell, and the Solesbys, who were brought up by an aunt in Falcon’s Yard in the heart of the town. Sometimes the same surname occurs twenty to thirty years apart and it would be interesting to know whether these belonged to mother and daughter, but there is rarely any way of telling.

The census returns, which are available for every tenth year from 1841 onwards, can sometimes help in unravelling family relationships. In 1834 Charlotte Offley was apprehended in the Castle district of Cambridge and was discharged the same evening on promise of ‘not being again seen on the streets’. When Fanny Offley was arrested in 1862 and said she lived with her mother at 81 Castle Street, it was tempting to assume that Charlotte and Fanny were mother and daughter. This seems not to have been the case: the census returns for 1851 and 1861 show no reference for Charlotte in Cambridge and it seems likely that she was a relative on Fanny’s father’s side of the family. Fanny is on a list of keepers of ‘Suspected Houses of ill fame and brothels’ pasted into the Spinning House Case Syndicate minutes book for 1860–1863. Her parents, Robert and Susan Offley, and their younger daughter, Ann, lived at number 81, but there is no evidence that it was a ‘house of ill fame’ or a lodging house. Another 19-year-old Spinning House girl and

24 University/Min.VI.6/13.
Fanny’s friend, Elizabeth Aylett, was listed by the proctors as a keeper in the Castle area too. Elizabeth’s parents also lived nearby, just off Castle Street. Her father, Richard Aylett, was an agricultural labourer and there were three younger children. Like the Offleys, the Ayletts had no lodgers, although Fanny Offley was named as a visitor in the 1861 census. When a proctor arrested Fanny and Elizabeth in March 1862, both girls gave Mason’s Court in the Castle area as their address, but there is nothing to support the fact that either of them kept a ‘house of ill-fame’ there; however, there is no evidence either to show that they were bona fide dressmakers, as they claimed.

Both the Offley and Aylett families continued to live in Castle area long after Fanny and Elizabeth had left home. Fanny’s parents lived in Castle Street until their deaths in 1897; they were then both over the age of 70. Elizabeth’s father died in 1865, but Elizabeth was still living at home with her mother and siblings in 1871, aged 28 and unmarried.

Fanny Offley’s last sentence in the Spinning House was for ten days in 1870. There is a note in the committal book recording her violent behaviour on her last three arrests; she had to be taken to the House in a cab on two of these occasions, once in the company of Elizabeth Aylett. It has not been possible to trace the life of Fanny after 1870 or of Elizabeth after 1871. By that time they were both nearly 30 and it seems likely that they married and perhaps left the Castle district with changed surnames.

Nearly all the girls’ fathers came from the labouring and artisan classes. Some worked as brickmakers and bricklayers and unskilled labourers in the flourishing building industry, particularly in the second half of the century, but many more were artisans, using their skills in a wide variety of trades (Appendix 5). They included skilled coachmakers, printers, cabinet-makers, carvers and gilders, bootmakers and tailors. There were fathers who were publicans, gamekeepers and clerks, as well as soldiers and farmers; there was 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. In contrast, Eliza Nunn’s father was a surgeon in
Royston. Although a ‘surgeon’ at that time was not necessarily a fully trained doctor, his position placed Eliza in a class above the other Spinning House girls. The committal books show that she was unlike most of them in other ways too. She spent the 26 years between 1818 and 1844 in and out of institutions, including the London Penitentiary, from which she was sent home because she was pregnant, the Magdalene Hospital in Southwark and the Cambridge Refuge. She was committed to the Spinning House 29 times, which included a sentence of seven days in solitary confinement. She was treated for disease on at least two occasions, being sent to a lodging in Haslingfield ‘in very bad health’ after 42 days at the prison in 1826.

The fathers’ occupations were thus far from uniform. Victorian Cambridge was expanding and the number of opportunities for men with the necessary skills was growing. In contrast, the choice of work for women and girls outside the home remained restricted throughout most of the century. Sixty-six 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. In the committal books just over half of those arrested gave information about their last place of work. Again, there are fewer entries from the early decades. A small number had been apprenticed to dressmakers, tailors or milliners, but most of the girls had been in service. It was the same in Oxford. According to Engel: ‘The women most commonly entered were Oxford servants.’\(^25\) In Cambridge nearly all those who had been in service had worked in private households, although a few had been employed in public houses and eight stated that they had been working in lodging houses. 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

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\(^25\) Engel, ‘Immoral Intentions’, p. 85.
below the age of 20 were in service, but in Cambridge the figure was nearly double the national average.  

Two girls were neither local nor typical: Sarah Badley, who was 25, had been ‘a steel-pen maker in Birmingham, at Yuck and Welles’, and young Eliza Apthorp, aged 17, without any parents, had been about the country ‘traveling’. Only seven girls admitted to being ‘common prostitutes’ or ‘on the town’. A number did not give a place of work, but said they were helping at home with one or both parents. 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 census returns for the town: in the 1861 census a surprising number of girls, both known prostitutes and local working girls, named dressmaking as their occupation.

The ages at which the girls were first arrested

When the streetwalkers were first taken to the Spinning House they were asked to give their ages. These entries were often inaccurate and the girls frequently contradicted themselves on later visits to the prison. Nevertheless, ages are included in the data and the approximate dates of the girls’ births are noted, calculated from the given age at the date of their first arrest (Figure 2). Although these details, like others, are incomplete and inaccurate, they have made it possible to detect patterns of behaviour that can be related to age.

No age is given for 332 of the 1550 girls who were taken to the Spinning House, but the records show that the majority of those whose age is known were still young women in their teens. Of the 1218 who gave their age, 94% were under the age of 25 and 61% were under 20; ten of the streetwalkers gave ages under 15. The youngest girl to be held at the House was Sarah Anne Taverner, who said she was 12 years old when she was arrested with her older sister in 1847. The oldest inmate was Eliza Owen, who was 43. The newspaper reports

Figure 2. Spinning House girls: age at first arrest

Source: Spinning House Committal Books (1823–1894)
for the magistrates' courts in Cambridge show that prostitutes arrested by the borough police were usually older than those taken by the proctors. In 1892 P.C. John Perry said that in his experience St Andrew’s Street was the usual resort of prostitutes of the better sort. ‘When they get older and less attractive they go further afield.’

According to Walkowitz a ‘characteristic of prostitutes that seems to have remained constant was their age of sexual initiation. Sixteen seems to have been the most common age, when . . . they “first went wrong”.’ If this was the case in Cambridge, it would suggest that many of the girls who really were prostitutes had had their first sexual encounter a year or two before being arrested, as most of the girls were between the ages of 17 and 19 when they were first detained. Girls who applied to the Refuge often stated that they lost their virginity at the annual fairs, such as Sturbridge Fair and Midsummer Fair.

Half of all the Spinning House girls were arrested only once, but a third went on to be imprisoned at least four times. These figures apply to all ages, including those who were under 16 when they were first arrested. A girl’s apprehension at an early age seems to have had no link with her subsequent behaviour and did not predict a career in prostitution.

Place of arrest

The committal books did not routinely record where the streetwalkers were apprehended, so a graph to plot distribution of the sites would not be useful, as only about 80 places of arrest were recorded. Philip Howell’s map shows ‘Locations of streetwalking and soliciting offences, 1823–94’, but, since these represent only a small fraction of the 6300 arrests, his figures are inconclusive. Map 5 of this thesis identifies the areas of Cambridge patrolled by the proctors and their men throughout the 70 years. Streets in the town centre, such as King’s Parade, Trinity Street and Jesus Lane, feature constantly throughout the decades.

27 University/II. VIII.4.
28 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 17.
Map 5: Cambridge 1897 by Walker & Boutall
Places where some of the streetwalkers were apprehended
Nearly all the proctors’ arrests took place out of doors. Engel reported that in Oxford ‘there is some evidence that the parks and dark alleyways were sometimes used by prostitutes and their clients’.

Similarly, in Cambridge open spaces such as Parker’s Piece and the land behind the colleges known as the Backs were favourite haunts for the streetwalkers. These areas were within the tight circle of streets which the proctors patrolled. 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’. Rebecca Blanks was ‘found in a house of ill-fame with a university man’ and Clara Gray was ‘found in a lodging house with three university men’, but these houses were probably like the ones in Hobson’s Street and Mill Road and some distance from Barnwell.

It was the custom for the proctor and his constables to escort the arrested girl to the Spinning House on foot, but occasionally a girl refused to go quietly and was taken to the prison in a fly or a cab. Sometimes a crowd gathered to witness the 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.’

Two years later Harriet Herring ‘walked very slowly and a mob gathered but did not resist’. In 1857 Caroline Morton ‘was brought with some difficulty and attracted a great crowd by her outcries’.

In February 1860, a Hull newspaper reported that ‘when the proctors and the people of the borough [were] at serious loggerheads’ a young girl of ‘irreproachable character’ was stopped by the senior proctor and detained for three or four minutes. She was allowed to go after a crowd had collected. Her parents demanded a written apology from the proctor, but, although he expressed his regret for what had occurred verbally, it was not until the parents

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30 Engel, ‘Immoral Intentions’, p. 90.
threatened legal action that he sent the required written apology through his solicitor.\textsuperscript{32} A month later the \textit{Cambridge Independent Press} reported further disturbances:

We regret to hear that during the past week there have been two unseemly fracas with the Proctors and their men. On Saturday night, a woman was rescued (from arrest by the Proctors), a most unseemly tumult and persons charged to assist in the Queen’s name, positively refused to do so.\textsuperscript{33}

There must have been some excitement in the town when, in 1891, Lizzie Mountain, who ‘scratched the hand of the constable’, was arrested: a ‘very violent and abusive crowd collected’ and one man was arrested and taken to the police court.

\textit{Dates of arrest}

The first entry in the Spinning House books, on 13 November 1823, is for Alice Warren, who was discharged the next day. Strangely, this was not the earliest date recorded in the surviving nineteenth-century books. Several pages later there is an entry for 16 January 1823, nearly ten months before Alice’s committal, in the name of Mary Ann Jenkins, who was sentenced to 28 days’ imprisonment; so it appears that, at least to begin with, some records were entered in the book retrospectively. It is reasonable to believe that records of arrests had been kept before November 1823, but unfortunately there is no evidence that any have survived.

The university authorities were careful about recording the date of arrest: the date is missing only 48 times out of a total of approximately 6300 committals. In 1831, in the first Spinning House book, there are several consecutive omissions that are particularly puzzling. Close inspection of this book makes it clear that four pages have been neatly cut away near to the spine: the entries for eight girls have disappeared. There is a summary of the girls’ names and numbers at the beginning of each committal book, and this has made it possible to

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{The Hull Packet and East Riding Times}, 24 February 1860.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Cambridge Independent Press}, 31 March 1860.
Figure 3. Spinning House girls: number of arrests in each decade

Source: Spinning House Committal Books (1823–1894)
recover the names of six of them (Appendix 6). Why were the pages and the two names removed? As the summary must have been collated after the book had been filled, could it be that whoever compiled the list decided to omit the two names for diplomatic reasons? Is it possible that inclusion of the names would have caused embarrassment to the Vice-Chancellor and the university authorities? Were the girls arrested in error? Was one or other of the girls related to someone in authority, such as the keeper of the Spinning House, who decided to exclude the names? The removal of the pages was so skilful that initial casual examination did not immediately reveal the damage. The book could have been defaced with a Stanley knife recently or with a very sharp penknife over 170 years ago. There is no way of telling: the disappearance of the pages remains a mystery.

The majority of arrests took place between 1823 and 1848, but, as already described in Chapter 3, the numbers dropped away dramatically from the mid 1850s (Figure 3). Philip Howell has discussed this development in some detail and has argued that 'by the second half of the nineteenth century the question [of proctorial privilege] had become firmly a political one, with local radicals seizing on the issue as symbolic of the chains in which the borough was kept by the University'. Several events had made the proctors more cautious in their contact with the streetwalkers. The death of Elizabeth Howe in 1846 and the subsequent inquest had brought unwelcome publicity to the Spinning House, as had the court case concerning Emma Kemp, who had been seized with four other girls on their way to a dance in Shelford. Sir John Patterson’s arbitration in 1855 had allowed the university to retain its proctorial privilege of arrest, and this decision had increased resentment against the university in the town. The dispute between the Vice-Chancellor and the proctors in 1858, mentioned in Chapter 4, had exposed internal dissension and emphasized divisions between members of the university. It is also possible that the actual number of streetwalkers dropped in the second half of the century as a result of there being a wider choice of employment for

35 University/F.XLI, Award of Sir John Patterson, 1855.
young women. More shops had opened in the centre of the town after the market fire of 1849.

Most of the university students returned to their homes for the summer vacation, which lasted from the middle of June until October. Few arrests were made in June, and throughout the 70 years of entries only 21 records refer to arrests made by the proctors during July, August and September. Of these, 17 were made in a single summer vacation, that of 1840, when Mr Gibbs and Mr Smith, two particularly conscientious proctors, were on duty. All except two of the 17 girls were 'admonished and discharged'. Susan Peake, who was violent, was sent to the county gaol for 21 days and Isabella Jones, who was drunk, was held for three days in the Spinning House. There were no admissions recorded during the summer vacations for the 50 years from October 1844 until the prison's closure in 1894.

The streetwalkers do not seem to have been arrested more often on one weekday than on another. Examination of clusters, that is five or more arrests in a single evening, show that they were not confined to Friday or Saturday evenings; they were just as likely to occur on Mondays or Tuesdays. However, there was a significant drop in arrests on Sundays. In the year 1843, a year chosen at random, there were 203 arrests by the proctors, but only 13 of these occurred on a Sunday. One Sunday in 1865 Louisa Kidman took a chance with the proctors when she walked past Great St Mary's Church as 'the University Congregation', no doubt consisting mainly of students for whom attendance was compulsory, was leaving after a service. Four days earlier Louisa had been arrested for speaking and walking with undergraduates. A proctor, Mr Hopkins, expressed his surprise at seeing her on a Sunday so soon after her discharge from the Spinning House.

**Charges**

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. The streetwalkers were rarely charged with breaking the law; it was enough to be caught 'talking' or 'walking with a gownsman' for them to be escorted to the
Spinning House. In 1824 two girls were charged with dancing at How House with gowns: they paid heavily for the privilege; each received a prison sentence of 42 days. Rebecca Roberts was obviously an adventurous girl with initiative: she was charged in 1826 with attempting to enter Trinity College in disguise and sentenced to 12 days in the Spinning House. Three months later she was charged with refusing to open the door when a gownsman was in the house: this time she was sent to the Castle Gaol for seven days. Such a sentence was usually reserved for rebellious or violent women. Similarly, Frances Talbot was charged twice with being found inside a college.

From October 1828 onwards, over 80% of the young women who were arrested were charged with 'streetwalking', even though this was not a recognized crime. Emma Kemp's action in 1860 against the Vice-Chancellor for wrongful imprisonment forced the university authorities to review their committal and sentencing procedures. They sought the advice of a London solicitor but failed to accept most of his suggestions, which included the introduction of a clerk and the examination of each girl on oath at the Vice-Chancellor's court. From then onwards, instead of most of the charges being 'streetwalking', they usually became 'streetwalking, suspected of evil', although this was still not a criminal offence. A decade later the words 'accosting' and 'soliciting' began to be used in the list of charges.

There is evidence too that in the final years of the Spinning House's existence Vice-Chancellors were always present in the court. The penultimate charge in the last committal book in May 1892 shows that the Vice-Chancellor intervened and altered the wording of the original charge, 'Being reputed a prostitute and a loiterer, was suspected of evil': 'Charge was amended, before the hearing of the case, as follows - Being a common prostitute and so suspected of evil. John Piele, V.C.'

The case of Emma Kemp also highlights the problems that faced the proctors in identifying
suspected prostitutes. Girls such as Emma and the other young ‘milliners’ whose omnibus was diverted to the Spinning House were undoubtedly out to enjoy themselves. This outing to the De Freville Arms raises interesting issues about relationships between the young women and students in Cambridge. Could the university authorities sometimes have been criminalizing the thrill of young people who were simply enjoying each other’s company? Were the young milliners expecting to be paid after attending the party? Walkowitz stated that ‘it is impossible to estimate the number of clandestine prostitutes . . . who supplemented their meager earnings as dressmakers, milliners, and the like, by occasional prostitution’.  

She also argued that it was not easy to differentiate casual sex from prostitution. She suggested that frequently ‘it is difficult to distinguish what may have been a traditional bartering of goods in exchange for sexual favours from an obvious violation of traditional sexual mores’.  

It is certainly possible that in times of need some Spinning House girls may have used prostitution to increase their regular income and that others chose to go with undergraduates in return for their company and entertainment.

There can be little doubt that gownsmen paid for sexual favours, but there is only one reference to money in the committal books: Eliza Owen, one of most disreputable inmates, was said by the proctor who arrested her to have offered his man ‘a large bribe’, presumably to avoid being taken to the Spinning House. However, it was revealed in the newspaper reports on the notorious Hopkin affair that the Barnwell brothel-keeper, Mrs Rolph, expected five shillings from each young man who entered her house and that Caroline Bell charged Daisy Hopkin two shillings and sixpence ‘for the use of her bedroom with a gentleman’.  

John Perry, a police constable who had patrolled the streets for 25 years, said in court that a gentleman had told him that he had paid Daisy three shillings and sixpence for her services,
but on the whole there is little evidence of money changing hands between the streetwalkers and the undergraduates. 40

It was unwise for unescorted girls to be out walking after dark without an obvious purpose. The proctors would have considered it both improper and improbable that ‘respectable’ young women would be out alone in the evening. Evidence from the Spinning House books suggests that proctors immediately suspected the girls’ motives and intercepted them. On 24 January 1832 three young girls who lived in the old centre of Cambridge, Eliza Owen and Elizabeth Rutter, both aged 17, and Elizabeth Gilder, aged 16, were arrested by the proctor and taken to the Spinning House. The proctor had no evidence that they were ‘streetwalking’ and each was charged with ‘walking about out of their proper line of way’. This was an unusual charge, but, as has been already discussed, there was no law to govern arrests by proctors; it was enough for young women to behave in an irregular manner. The proctor added to each of their records ‘not able to give any good account of herself: she had been reported previously to the proctors as light in character’. All three were ‘reprimanded and discharged’. The records show that this was the first time any of them had been to the Spinning House, although they were already known by sight to the proctors. Gilder and Rutter were incarcerated in the prison several times over the next two years – Gilder seven times and Rutter on three occasions. For Eliza Owen, 24 January 1832 marked the beginning of a long relationship with the university prison: over the next 28 years she was committed 48 times and served many months in prison. She was living in the Falcon Yard when she was 17 and was still living in the town centre on the last occasion that she is mentioned in the committal books at the age of 43; she never moved to the lodging houses in Barnwell.

There are many records of proctors taking girls to the Spinning House simply on suspicion. On 18 March 1842 Mr Ansted arrested two girls. Ann Fabbs was strolling about alone after dark; she was ‘admonished and discharged’. Jane Gee was also ‘found strolling about’ on

40 University/I.VIII.4.
her own, but her punishment is not recorded. Both girls were in service and there is no record of either of them being stopped by the proctors again. Mr Ansted seems to have been over-zealous in his duty that evening; there is no evidence that the girls were anything but innocent. A month later Mr Ansted arrested Eliza Hallard, who was charged with ‘being out late and suspected of being a regular streetwalker’; she was ‘admonished and discharged’, but again there is no other record of her in the books. Eliza Ward from Barnwell was out walking on her own late one night when a proctor stopped her near the Spinning House. She was more fortunate than most girls from Barnwell and was ‘admonished but not kept’; it was her only recorded encounter with the university authorities.

There was almost no female response to the wrongful arrest of young women by the proctors before 1860 and the high-profile case of Emma Kemp. At the time of Elizabeth Howe’s death in 1846, a proctor, William Kingsley, observed:

The greatest care is taken in apprehending none but women of ill-fame. The proctors’ servants, who are constables, and of whom several have been employed for many years in the service, make it their business to find out improper women: they stop those believed by them to be bad characters and then if the proctor is satisfied that such is the case, convey them to the Spinning-House. 41

It is highly unlikely that the proctors would have recognized all the young streetwalkers, but it is almost certain that their constables, the ‘bulldogs’, knew most of them. The proctors were usually appointed for just two years and did not necessarily patrol the streets every night. The constables, on the other hand, were paid employees of the university, held their posts for considerably longer than the proctors and would have patrolled regularly. It is also likely that the bulldogs, like the borough policemen, lived in Barnwell, in the same neighbourhoods as the young women, and would known their reputations and those of their families and friends.

41 The Times, 19 December 1846.
It was rare for the proctors or the bulldogs to be challenged in the law courts for their mistakes, but on one occasion a senior proctor, Mr Barnard Smith, was confronted by an older married woman. Joseph Romilly 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'. This is from Romilly's diary entry for 18 June 1859:

I then went to Westminster & got into Court in the case Cattaway v. Barnard Smith: . . . I thought Barnard Smith [the proctor] gave his evidence in a remarkably clear stile: the matron (Mrs Johnson) also spoke well to the point. The speech of Mr James derided the laws of Cambridge wch were (he said) utterly unlike the laws of England & interfered with the liberty of the subject: he also made a tirade against the defendant's having stated that Mrs Cattaway wished for one of the prostitutes, - as if these unfortunates were to be debarred from cleanliness . . . The Jury (1/2 special, 1/2 common) gave £50: - the damages had been laid at £500.  

Romilly added that, 'although the case attracted considerable publicity, it was less than that of Kemp v. Neville'. Mrs Catterway had unwisely accompanied a known prostitute in the street; similarly it was foolish for any young girl to keep the company of girls who were known to the proctors. Rebecca Bridges, who lived in Trinity Back Lane near the colleges, was apprehended in the 'company of bad women'. She was 'let off because it was her first time', and no doubt because, as the proctor noted, 'her friends [were] respectable bedmakers'. In May 1852 Phoebe Cooper and Mary Ann Lapsom were charged with 'skulking around Parker's Piece at half past ten'. These two teenagers grew up together in Ely, lodged with Miss Jackson in Carter's Lane and both worked at Mr Jourdan's in Bridge Street. No doubt the proctor, Mr Bainbridge, had reason to suspect the girls' motives for being out so late at night and they were sentenced to spend seven days together in the Spinning House. Phoebe was never apprehended again, but later that year Mary Ann was twice charged with streetwalking by other proctors. On the first of these occasions her

Romilly, 1848–1864, p. 353.
mother came to the House and took her home, but two days later she was back again and this time she was sentenced to seven days' imprisonment.

Susan Palmer from Wellington Row made an unfortunate mistake in 1867 when she 'addressed' a proctor: she had hoped for a client, but she received seven days confinement instead. There were occasions when women were charged although they were with a townsman and not an undergraduate. For example, Maria Watson 'was arrested on Sunday Evening in company with [a] Wagon man. [She] affected modesty refused to give her name behaved violently and struck the man.' No doubt her aggressive reaction ensured her arrest, but it cannot have helped that it was a Sunday. She was 'discharged same night in consequence of her having a child only nine weeks old'. This was not the only occasion that Maria Watson avoided staying at the Spinning House. She was arrested 23 times, but, unusually, on at least six occasions she was discharged on the evening of her arrest, either because she had a young child or because she was near her confinement. Once she was sent home early because there was a case of smallpox in the House.

Abusive behaviour, insolence, impertinence or, in Jane Mackey's case, the use of 'bad language to the proctors' men' usually meant at least a week in the prison for the offenders. Those charged with creating a disturbance, breaking windows or riotous conduct could expect an even more severe sentence; the proctors did not tolerate troublesome girls. Eliza Wright was sent to the Castle Gaol on three occasions - 'in consequence of bad conduct' and 'for breaking out of the Spinning House'.

When the streetwalkers made a nuisance of themselves in a public place, the borough police could legally arrest them. Those who were found drunk in the street faced being brought before the town magistrates under the vagrancy laws the next morning. It seems surprising that, although known older prostitutes regularly appeared in the magistrates' courts charged with being drunk and disorderly, only 13 girls were ever charged by the proctors with being drunk or intoxicated. Louisa Dykes and Elizabeth Childs were found 'intoxicated in the streets' together. After spending a night in the university prison they were released -
'in consequence of the Proctor being out of town the next day'! There is no evidence to show that the proctors handed intoxicated streetwalkers over to the police or that Spinning House girls were charged for drunkenness by the police. Although alcohol was often linked with prostitution, it was evidently not a significant problem with the Spinning House streetwalkers.

The final charge in the book was against Ada Elsden; it stated:

That she on the 30th of January 1894 being a reputed common prostitute was in a certain place called Christ's Pieces in company with a member of the University for an immoral purpose, suspected of evil contrary to the Charter and Statutes of the University in that case made (provable).

Disease

Philip Howell has claimed to show that 'one recognized precursor and precedent for British regulationism existed in Victorian Cambridge, in the powers of the University to apprehend women suspected of threatening the morals and health of the male undergraduate body'. He maintained that all the essential elements of regulationism – 'identification and registration of prostitute women, periodic medical inspection, and incarceration if found diseased' – could be found in Cambridge.

As has already been discussed in Chapter 3, the Contagious Diseases Acts 1864, 1866 and 1869 provided for compulsory medical examination of prostitutes in garrison towns. There was strong opposition to the Acts throughout England on moral and humanitarian grounds and the first public meeting in Cambridge to discuss them took place in 1871. In his diary Josiah Chater recorded a second meeting that took place in the town in April 1872. The main speaker was Josephine Butler, the feminist leader and sister-in-law of Dr H. M. Butler,
Master of Trinity College. According to Chater the meeting was well attended and a deputation of Y.M.C.A. members was appointed to see Mr Fowler, the Member of Parliament for Cambridge, and ‘urge his immediate attention in the matter’. However, it seems that the townspeople of Cambridge were not in the forefront of the campaign to have the C. D. Acts repealed and there is no evidence to suggest that they saw a direct link between the Acts and proctorial practice in the town.

The apprehension and detention of suspected prostitutes in Cambridge could be considered to be regulationist. The university proctors arrested suspected prostitutes from the streets, identified them and registered them in the Spinning House committal books. They then imprisoned the women ‘to prevent them corrupting the young men committed to [their] care’. The upholding of Christian moral values was of crucial importance for the proctors and it is quite clear that their first concern was to protect the morals of the young men; their physical health paled into insignificance alongside. Proctorial practice in Cambridge was concerned mainly with ethical issues, the Contagious Diseases Acts with physical ones. In this university 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, women were apprehended for reasons of disease, not for any inappropriate behaviour. Both places regulated prostitution, but there was a wide difference between the attitudes of those in authority and the motives for their strict policing.

Howell considered that Cambridge 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 exchange whenever they were found to be infectious’. The committal books, however, suggest that this was by no means the case. There is no evidence to suggest that the streetwalkers were inspected regularly or that they were imprisoned in order to safeguard the physical health of the male undergraduates.

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46 The Times, 11 December 1846.
It is apposite here to examine the Spinning House practice regarding 'contagious diseases'. If a girl was taken in to the Spinning House because it was suspected that she had venereal disease, the 'charge' entered was 'diseased', 'unwell' or 'ill'. Between 1823 and 1826 there was a reference to venereal disease in the committal books about five times a year, but there was no mention of it at all in 1827. In 1828 Mr Okes was appointed medical officer for the Spinning House and the numbers treated for the infection rose. From then onwards until Mr Okes retired in 1841, most common among the proctors' comments were those concerning the girls who were 'unwell'. The proctors frequently alluded to Mr Okes' book, which recorded when a girl who had been ill was released from the prison; unfortunately it does not survive. The impression given by the entries in the committal books is that Mr Okes would treat girls who were referred to him by the proctors but did not do routine inspections.

In the 1820s and 1830s the streetwalkers knew the Spinning House as a place where disease was treated 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 records at that time. Treatment was free, so it is not surprising that girls who were diseased and wanted help turned to the place they knew, although they did not always receive immediate help. According to Mr Baily, a proctor, in December 1838 Susan Peake wanted 'to get into the SH to be cured at the expence [sic] of the university', but he would have none of it and 'admonished and discharged' her. This contradicts Howell's contention that infected girls were regularly removed from the streets. However, a year later she was 'sent in' by another proctor for treatment by Mr Okes. There were no set rules relating to the admission of girls to the House and practice was inconsistent. The reception given to Clara Duncan, who was not diseased, was quite different from that of Susan Peake:

Came to Mr Luard in the hopes of getting into the Magdalen Hospital — was in the Female Refuge but left it — came in to the Spinning House of her own accord — and permitted by the VC. to remain for nearly a month. She was admitted to the Magdalen Jan 4 1855. H.R.S.
Records show that girls from the Cambridge Refuge with venereal disease were sometimes sent to the Spinning House for treatment. Although Addenbrookes Hospital was one of the first provincial hospitals in England, having opened in 1766, it was very small and may not normally have treated diseased young women; there is however a record of 17-year-old Mary Ann Ellam being sent to the hospital in 1831 after spending 21 days in the Spinning House. It was usual for diseased girls to spend between two and three weeks being treated by Mr Okes, but Ann Dean, mother of two children, spent 85 days at the prison. In the first years of the committal book records and before Mr Okes’ appointment, less than 4% of the girls arrested had received treatment for venereal disease. During Mr Okes’ 13 years of duty this rose to just over 5%.

Mr Fawcett, who replaced Mr Okes, did not have the latter’s high profile. The proctors rarely referred to him by name, and between December 1841 and October 1849 there were just 24 cases of disease recorded in the committal book, relating to less than 1% of those arrested. These figures might suggest that the incidence of the disease, or at least its diagnosis, was unusually high in the early years and particularly in Mr Okes’ time; however, examination of the reports of the inspectors of prisons indicates that this is an incomplete picture. An appendix to the Prison Inspector’s Report lists 11 girls who were ‘admitted to the Spinning House for the purpose of being cured of disease on their own application from June 30, 1846, to June 30, 1847’.

The girls are listed by their Christian names and the initial letter of their surnames, so it is not always possible to make positive identifications, but it seems likely that only three girls appear in both the committal book and the Thirteenth Report, leaving eight girls missing from the Spinning House database during that academic year. Perhaps it was regular practice at this time to omit the names of girls from the committal books who presented themselves voluntarily to the House; this was not so in Mr Okes’ time.

There were no cases of disease recorded between October 1849 and April 1854. Two cases were recorded in May and December of that year and then not a single case of venereal disease was noted in the committal books for the rest of the prison’s existence; however the surgeon’s report for 1866 suggests that, although the proctors may not have recorded the detention of streetwalkers with disease during the second half of the century, nevertheless girls were still being treated in the House.

After Mr Okes’ departure, although some diseased girls were treated, not all of them were held in the prison out of harm’s way; some young women were returned to their lodgings after only a night in the Spinning House. For example, in 1849 Jane Smith from Wellington Row ‘was much diseased’; she was ‘admonished and discharged’ after a night in a cell, but not treated.

Throughout the 70 years of the committal books, only about three entries in a hundred referred to disease; this in itself casts doubt on Howell’s assertion that the policy of registration as practised at the Spinning House can be considered as a ‘private Contagious Diseases Act’.

The proctors sometimes also recorded other illness and even death. In January 1843 Jane Thurley had ‘permission of the V.C. to remain till she [was] well enough to be admitted to the Refuge. H.W.C.’ Another proctor, G. Cordsham, noted: ‘Applied and had leave to enter but having been permitted to go for her clothes did not come back.’ Jane was imprisoned again in 1843 and in 1844. A last proctorial entry was added to the original record, noting her death: ‘Buried at Meldreth Feb. 15 1846. G. C.’ Mary Ann Dowley and Jane Morrison were arrested together for streetwalking in King’s Parade in January 1844; they were both sentenced to 14 days in the prison and both released seven days later, Dowley because she had smallpox and Morrison because she had slept with another girl who had smallpox.

Sentences

The sentences imposed on the girls by the Vice-Chancellor's court were entered in the committal books. The proctors played the major part in the court's proceedings and in sentencing; the handwriting of each individual proctor can be identified and there is a remarkable correlation between the proctors' handwriting and the punishments awarded to the girls. It is clear from the pages that the proctor who was responsible for a girl's arrest helped to decide her sentence and had to be present at the court. As has already been noted, the records show that at least two girls were released 'in consequence of the proctor being out of town'.

There is no entry in the punishments column for about 10% of the girls arrested. Many more did not receive a prison sentence, but were 'admonished and discharged'. The streetwalkers were usually arrested by the proctors and their men in the evening and taken straight to the Spinning House, which stood just out of the centre of the town. The Vice-Chancellor's court was convened in the morning, so the girls, even those arrested for the first time, were held in the cells overnight before being disciplined; the records suggest that it was the exception to be released and 'not kept' overnight. Most of the young streetwalkers lived in the Castle district of the town or in Barnwell, both some distance from the prison, so it is improbable that the proctors would have sent the girls back to their lodgings on foot in the dark. There are three entries which show clearly that the girls concerned were 'not brought' to the Spinning House although the details of the arrest were noted. If a girl was allowed home in the evening the reason was usually added; for example, the entry for Susan Rogers shows that she was 'let go because her child was alone with the whooping cough and no one could be found who could take charge of it'.

In this study 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 gownsman' were usually treated similarly. This might be repeated, but, if a girl continued to walk the streets, eventually she would receive a prison sentence of seven days. Further arrests usually meant further
imprisonment, with the length of the sentences increasing by seven days at each arrest (Figure 4).

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 than later, when they may have been reduced as a result of contemporary criticism of proctorial power. 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 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. Elizabeth Waters from the nearby village of Impington was arrested for the first time too on the same evening; Pope also sentenced her to 56 days, but, when some of her friends, no doubt respectable ones, appealed for her release, he relented and freed her after only one day. The records show that in his year of office Pope detained eight girls (including Waters) for just a single night, but gave another 45 girls sentences totalling 214 weeks, an average for those girls of 33 days each. In contrast, Mr Hildyard, who was proctor for a year from November 1843, detained 21 girls for one night and a further 31 girls for a total of 44 weeks; for the latter the average sentence was 10 days, less than a third of that given by Pope.

Hildyard gave longer sentences when he felt they were deserved. Isabella Jones was arrested in November 1843 for streetwalking and ‘was most violent and refractory’; she was sentenced to 28 days in the Spinning House, the longest sentence given by Hildyard. Two months later she was ‘again violent and screaming’; this time she was sent for ‘14 days to the castle, hard labour and gaol allowance’. Hildyard was prepared to listen to good excuses: he released a young woman without detention because it was ‘near her time of confinement’ and another because she ‘declared the man spoke to her without her consent’. Another was ‘let off in earnest promise never to be found again’. This promise was not kept and
Figure 4. Spinning House girls: length of imprisonment

Source: Spinning House Committal Books (1823–1894)
three months later Mr Bates brought her to the prison, but again she was fortunate: ‘The Proctor didn’t appear against her by oversight.’ Another streetwalker, Sarah Cowen, escaped altogether! She was apprehended by Hildyard in Trinity Street at 10 o’clock one evening, but she ‘ran away from the Proctor while engaged with another party’.

Mr Dodd was a contemporary of Mr Hildyard. He too was reluctant to give long sentences. He ‘admonished and discharged’ 21 girls out of the 58 he arrested and never gave more than 14 days in the Spinning House. However he, like Hildyard, disliked violence and sent three girls who resisted arrest to the Castle, the county gaol. An 18-year-old orphan, Charlotte Manning, was fortunate not to spend time in the Castle in 1853. The committal book records that she was ‘brought with very great difficulty, she used very bad and abusive language and kicked one of the men very often and very violently’. She spent 14 days in the Spinning House and there is no record of her returning.

Another lenient proctor was William Kingsley, who was the proctor who arrested Elizabeth Howe, the girl who died after a night in the Spinning House. The records show that the average length of his sentences was four and a half days. His proctorial comments show compassion too: he paid ten shillings for a girl to return to Gravesend and sent a girl who was pregnant home without detaining her overnight. He ‘admonished and discharged’ another girl because she was ‘lately married’ and dismissed the charge against another ‘as she is now married; tho before notorious’. Some proctors, however, rarely released offenders without making them serve some time in prison. Mr Howerth was one such: of the 51 girls whom he arrested, four were released after one night, four after seven days and the rest all served 14 days or more.

Over 90 girls left the House before their sentences were completed. Some escaped, for example Caroline Robinson and Elizabeth Johnson, who had been arrested together and both sentenced to 21 days but broke out of the prison after three days and left Cambridge; but these were the exception. Most sentences were curtailed if a relative or friend went to the House and promised to take the girls back home. Sarah Asprey is one example: she was
sentenced on 29 January 1827 to 56 days in prison, but was 'released after 9 days her father having procured a situation for her at Redhouse's a blacksmith at Fulbourn'. Her release was on condition that 'the remaining 47 days confinement should be added to any future punishment she should come hereafter liable to'. There is a footnote to the entry: 'was retaken 12 Feb not having gone to Fulbourn as promised'. A number 'professed penitence and resolution not to come to Cambridge again on any pretence'. One girl left to get married, one because her brother died, another because she was having fits and yet another because she was filthy; five girls were released early for good behaviour.

The reasons for sentences being extended were far less complicated. There were two main reasons: either the girls were ill and needed further treatment or they were so aggressive that they were held for longer in the Spinning House or sent to the Castle; thus Jane Morrison and Maria Deer had their sentences extended and were committed to the Castle Gaol for striking the keeper and breaking windows.

The proctors' comments

The last column in the pages of the committal books was for 'Proctors' Comments'. These remarks, which are usually routine and repetitive, are sometimes colourful and add flavour to the other entries. They describe the girls' behaviour, reveal the proctors' values and give insights into wider cultural attitudes, such as the way that respectability was judged. The proctors took note of the streetwalkers' conduct when they were arrested; it was common for them to describe the girls as 'extremely violent', 'exceedingly violent' or 'excessively violent'. Jane Osborne must have come prepared to do battle with the proctor's men: she 'was very violent and most abusive and threw pepper into the constable's eyes!

When the phrases 'came quietly' and 'came very quietly' appear on the page, the reader can almost sense the proctor's relief. Similarly, there was no disguising the proctor's disgust when he wrote 'very dirty' and 'dirty, not worth keeping'. These two offenders were 'admonished' and dispatched quickly. The second girl refused to give her name and is one of only three anonymous girls in the records. Emma Campion was 'a silly light girl' and
Lydia Parfey ‘the natural daughter of an idiot, either drunk or silly’. Physical features or dress are rarely mentioned, although Harriet King was described as a ‘tall girl’ and Ann Collins from the Cross Keys in New Town, a pub which is still there, was ‘tall pale furtipped b and w. dressed in black’.

Respectability often made a difference, as in the case of seventeen-year-old Martha Briggs, who lived at home. Her father worked in the butteries of St John’s College and the proctor recorded that her parents were ‘very respectable people’, which probably accounted for Martha’s being ‘admonished and discharged the same night’ even though she had been charged with streetwalking. Similarly, Elizabeth Brooks was charged with ‘walking with a young man in the street suspected to be an undergraduate’. Her mother ‘attended’ the Spinning House and ‘seemed a very respectable person’. Elizabeth, whose last situation had been at Hauxton Vicarage, was ‘admonished and discharged’ to return home with her mother after spending just one night in the House.

Sometimes there is a brief biography of a girl in the proctors’ column. Harriet Lewis, who lived in Bridge Street in the centre of Cambridge, came from a respectable family. She was arrested just once for streetwalking and was ‘admonished and discharged’. Her entry includes the following:

Brother James Lewis with Butterly at Kings with Mr Oakley. She thinks lives in Fitzroy Street . . . .
Father works at Fitzwilliam Museum. Can do plain cooking. . . . is wayward – lives with her father and keeps his house. They cannot agree. Brother Arthur Lewis at the Industrial School.

Elizabeth Watson was also ‘admonished and discharged’ after one appearance. Her short biography concerned her marital status: ‘Gave a false account of herself, said she was married and afterwards on being confronted with Maltby (policeman) acknowledged she was not. She acknowledged that she was living with a man and not married to him. H.W.C.’

The pen portrait of Elizabeth Nichols was unusual: ‘Has been in Refuge, left of her own
accord. Supposed to be crazy. She gets her living by hawking laces, Wilson says.' Wilson was keeper of the Spinning House at that time.

If a girl admitted being a prostitute, the proctors recorded the fact. They also noted if a girl denied being on the streets. Sometimes proctors showed real concern for the girls. Emma O’Hara, who was 16, was ‘retained for a few hours while Mr Hays speaks to her parents respecting her. Had (in company with the girl above) been warned out of the streets a few days before.’ She was then released. Mary Osborne had her fare home paid by a proctor and Ann Jones was ‘sent home at the Proctor’s expense’ [sic]; however this second entry concluded that Jones ‘returned in a few days to Cambridge’. Even Eliza Owen, who had already been escorted to the Spinning House 25 times, was released because ‘her child was dangerously ill’, and there is a sense that the proctor felt sympathy for Mary Bitcheno when he wrote the following report:

Never lived with parents. Brought up by her Grandfather, who is in good circumstances – never used to work – was treated kindly by her grandfather, till the Winter of 1829, when she came on a visit to her Father and Mother in Cambridge, was seduced, returned to her GF who on discovering her state withdrew his protection. (Mr Gooch, 6/10/1830.)

Sometimes the proctors saw marriage as a positive alternative to imprisonment. Elizabeth Todd, who had escaped from the Spinning House and then been recaptured and sentenced to 42 days in prison, was released after three days so that she could marry:

In Company with townsmen and rather riotous and released on 5 Feb after having escaped from her confinement and having been retaken. She had been asked in Church for the purpose of being married to Edward Watts in to whose hands she was delivered for the purpose of being married and living at Madingley with her mother.

The proctors were often direct in their advice to the girls. Mr Legh strongly admonished Emma Taylor and assured her that ‘if brought here again she shall be retained a fortnight. She pleads being obliged to go out on her business as a seamstress. I have ordered her to
attend to all these matters in the morning, and forbidden her to appear in the streets at any other time.' This was her final visit to the Spinning House after ten previous arrests.

Often the comments served to inform other proctors. Elizabeth Askew 'began this course of life only on Tuesday'. Hester Bangle, 'an old offender, said to be a thief', had been 'in the Refuge'. Mary Ann Allpress, who was found 'in company with a gownsman at the Blue Lion', was 'admonished by Mr Dodd. said she was daughter of landlady of Blue Lion'. The proctors also recorded when the police already knew a girl. Alice Howlett had 'been before the magistrates'. One girl who did not co-operate with the proctors or the Vice-Chancellor at the Spinning House on 21 November 1865 has the following entry under the name of Frances Sammons:

Refused to give her name, very violent. It is conjectured that this female is the person described in the following entry in the Cambridge Police Records Thursday June 22 1865: Frances Sammons, aged 19, of Staffordshire Street, Common Prostitute charged by P.C. 24 Covell, with creating a disturbance. J.C. V.C.

There are some notable exceptions, but generally there is no evidence in the records that the girls were in the pay of anyone else when seeking clients. One case was that of Susan O'Brian, who was seen 'sitting on Jesus Lane Rails and charged by Parker with alluring gownsmen coming off Jesus Common, husband waiting at a little distance'. Susan was admonished and discharged the next morning. Another exception was Mary Ann Allen. The proctor described her as 'A married woman whose husband hawks her about as a prostitute. Her husband admitted as much at the SP.' She was arrested twice for being with gownsmen on Coe Fen and was admonished and discharged on both occasions; the second time she was released the same evening.

On 11 April 1837 two widows (a term sometimes used by Spinning House women who had children but no husband), Hannah King and Mary Payne, were arrested by Mr Tuck for streetwalking. Hannah, who had a six-year-old child with her, was given 21 days'
imprisonment. Mary was sentenced to 14 days ‘because she came quietly’. She had a daughter with her and admitted to having two other children in the workhouse. The following morning, Mr Graham, a proctor who was probably standing in for Mr Tuck, noted in the committal book that both of the streetwalkers’ children were allowed to stay with their mothers, but were ‘kept apart from the other inmates of the House’ until the Vice-Chancellor’s pleasure was known. It was unusual to hold children in the Spinning House unless a young woman was arrested with her baby and then sentenced to imprisonment, as was Harriet Langham, who was given ten days in 1866. Most women who had a child with them when they were apprehended were not given a prison sentence.

Walkowitz has suggested that in the nineteenth century ‘a late age of menarche among poor working-class girls accounted for the small number of teenage pregnancies, even among young females who were sexually active’. She also argued that ‘from the limited historical evidence available, unwed mothers were in their early and mid-twenties’. Twenty-eight women were described in the committal books by the proctors as being pregnant or ‘near her confinement’. Of these, 23 were aged 20 or over, reflecting the findings of other studies. Most of these pregnant women had multiple entries for streetwalking in the committal books, but five entries were for women arrested just once. One was ‘said to be kept by a gownsman’, but what of the other four? It could be thought that girls who had a single entry in the committal books were not regular streetwalkers or even that they were arrested mistakenly; however, since these women were pregnant, it seems fairly likely that they were indeed prostitutes. Evidence of prostitution is difficult to obtain and, although it is easy to collect numbers from the committal books, it is impossible to evaluate the full picture from such records.

What is known about the 715 other young women with a single entry? Were their motives for streetwalking the same as those who were frequently committed to prison in the Spinning

50 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 18.
51 Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 18.
House? Why did a young woman go out into the centre of the town alone or in the company of other young women when she must have known the risk of being apprehended by a proctor? Reasons for girls turning to prostitution in the nineteenth century have been discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, but there seems to be no definitive single answer as to why girls walked the streets in Cambridge. Undoubtedly, as in other parts of the country, there were environmental reasons for women making this decision, such as the lack of congenial employment in the town. Walkowitz has observed that occasional prostitution was used to supplement a meager salary. Could the availability of intelligent, wealthy young students have been an attraction too? The streetwalkers' clients in Oxford and Cambridge were atypical. The difference in class between the townswomen and the students may have deterred some women, but it must have acted like a magnet for others. One of the pregnant women mentioned above, Mary Ann Brenning, was 'said to be kept by a gownsman'. Georgina Wallis was another Spinning House girl who was 'kept by a gownsman'. Is it possible that such liaisons were not unusual?

BEYOND THE SPINNING HOUSE

The Spinning House girls' lodgings

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. This usually happened on the first occasion, but rarely after that. Some proctors put ditto marks in the relevant column, while others only put an entry when they discovered that the girl had changed her address. Although the addresses are far from complete, those that are listed, with the aid of dates, help to build up a map of the areas where many streetwalkers lived at a particular time. This research has helped to extend the overall picture of the working-class community in Cambridge throughout the century.

The earliest address, on 26 December 1823, was in Castle End, the home of a number of girls in the 1820s. By 1825, places in the Barnwell district were beginning to appear in the

Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society, p. 46.
register, such as Lucern Ground, Gass Lane and Gravel Pits. New Town, Cambridge’s first real suburb, started to be developed in the 1820s and was being given as a place of residence by 1828. It became known as ‘New Zealand’, being some distance away from the town centre. It continued to be named throughout the next two decades, but addresses in Castle End and parts of Barnwell were the most common throughout the 1830s.

In *Gradus ad Cantabrigiam*, a dictionary of Cambridge slang first published in 1803, there is an entry for ‘Barnwell Ague’:

The “ague” so called ironically, now rages at Castle End. Barnwell: a small village near Cambridge, seems to have been a notorious place of amorous resort in ancient times. . . . By decree of Mr Vice-Chancellor and the Heads of Colleges, An. 1675, it was ordered that ‘hereafter no scholar whatsoever (except officers of the university performing their duty in searching houses) upon any pretence whatsoever, shall go into any house in Barnwell on pain, for his misbehaviour and contumacy, of being expelled from the university."

As early as 1632 the small village of Barnwell had been known for its prostitutes. In a comedy of that date the carrier Thomas Hobson was given these lines:

Bones – a – me, thou’rt welcome.

What’s the newes of bawdy Barnwell and at Sturbridge-fayre?

As the terraced housing for the working classes started to be built to the east of Cambridge, so Barnwell addresses began to dominate the entries in the committal books. Map 6 shows the location of most of these places and emphasizes the intimate nature of Barnwell. By the 1840s Wellington Row, which had first appeared in the books on 21 November 1830 and was one of the streets furthest from the town, had become the most popular street for lodging.

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53 Anon., *Gradus ad Cantabrigiam, or, A dictionary of terms . . . used at the University of Cambridge* (London: W. J. & J. Richardson, 1803), p. 16.
54 Anon., *Gradus ad Cantabrigiam* (1803), p. 16.
Map 6: Barnwell c.1860: home to many of the Spinning House girls
houses in Barnwell. At least 12 different houses in the Row were homes to the streetwalkers: numbers 18, 19, 20, 22, 24 and 32 appeared frequently. There were also clusters of lodging houses East Road, Fitzroy Street, Abbey Street and Union Row. Yards and passages hidden from the main thoroughfares and reportedly squalid and overcrowded were also home to some of the Spinning House girls: Judd's Passage and Brown's Yard in Barnwell, as well as Crispin's Passage and Crispin's Yard off East Road, were named by the inmates; Falcon Yard, off Petty Curry in the old part of the town, notorious for its filth and overcrowding, was also included. There were not many girls from the town centre, but addresses in King Street, Bridge Street and Magdalene Street are to be found in the committal books.

The girls sometimes misled the proctors as to their address. In 1843 Mathilda Webb 'gave a wrong residence and a false name, took the Proctor to a respectable persons house as her sisters house, threatened violence to the constable'. However, it was sometimes to the girl's advantage to give her correct address. In 1855 Mary Anne Speed was apprehended when walking with an undergraduate at the backs of the colleges at 10 o'clock at night. She gave a false name but admitted to being in service in Regent Street, near the Spinning House. Instead of being held in the prison she was taken home by the proctor. She was a 21-year-old servant living away from home and this was the only time she was arrested. Her offence was to be caught walking with a student; had she lived further away or given an address in Barnwell, she would surely have spent the night in prison.

Occasionally an entry showed that a girl lived with her mother or a sister, or it named a woman who kept her lodging. To live at home was in her favour, but to live in a lodging house in Barnwell was almost certainly prejudicial. The proctors would have recognized the names and addresses of certain lodging keepers who appeared again and again, for example Mrs Rose, who lived at 7 Union Row from 1843 to 1854 and who gave evidence at the inquest into the death of Elizabeth Howe. Other residents of Union Row were Mrs Stevens at number 8 and Mrs Binders at number 5. Fitzroy Street was another location for lodging houses, where Mrs Shedd, Mrs Todd and Mrs Norman lived. It seems that the Spinning House girls rarely stayed in one house for long; they often moved from lodging to lodging
within the same street. Marianne Major, from Bury St Edmunds, lived at five separate houses in Fitzroy Street. Sometimes, however, a young woman was loyal to her landlady and moved with her if she changed house.

**Spinning House girls and the courts**

Cambridge's streetwalkers faced arrest both by the university proctors and by the local police, whose organization and role were discussed in Chapter 2. The latter would usually charge them with riotous or indecent behaviour in a public place under the 'Act for the punishment of idle and disorderly persons and rogues and vagabonds'. Those Spinning House women who were arrested by the town police tended to be those who were, or had been, imprisoned regularly by the proctors. Frequent detention suggests that these women are more likely to have been making a living from prostitution.

The Cambridge Session Records for 1834–1838 list the convictions of several Spinning House women. Sisters Mary and Harriett Tingay were both brought before the court. In May 1834 Mary was charged with being an idle and disorderly person and sentenced to one month's hard labour in the town gaol; this would have been a harsher sentence than being confined in the Spinning House. Harriett was convicted in January 1836 of assault on Jane Langhorn, with two other Spinning House girls Rebecca Banyard and Sarah Gage; they were all given a month's hard labour too. Their victim was known to the court as a common prostitute, but she was never held at the Spinning House.55

Besides the official court records, the local weekly newspapers reported on court cases. Mary Osborne's final arrest by the proctors was on 26 November 1846, but on 12 December of the same year the *Cambridge Chronicle* printed an account of her being drunk and disorderly and sentenced at the local magistrates' court to 14 days' hard labour.56 However, no sooner had she completed her sentence than she was back knocking at the Spinning

56 *Cambridge Chronicle*, 12 December 1846.
House door asking for treatment for venereal disease. It seems that she did not stay, as the proctor Mr Kingsley gave her ten shillings to return home to Gravesend.

‘Long Eliza’ was well known to the Cambridge magistrates. Eliza Green was born in the heart of Cambridge in 1813 and her first time in the Spinning House was at the age of 18, when a proctor sent her there because she was diseased. Eliza was kept in the House for 26 days on the advice of the medical officer, Mr Okes. Soon after she moved from her father’s house in Sidney Street, near the Market Square, to Barnwell. She was arrested by the proctors 40 times between her first arrest in 1831 and her last in 1846 and held in the Spinning House for a total of 102 weeks. At the age of 33 she had spent almost two years of her life in the university prison, some of that time being treated for venereal disease. The ‘identification’ and ‘incarceration’ of Eliza could be said to support Philip Howell’s argument concerning registration, but disease is mentioned only four times in the records of her 40 arrests. There were no further records in the committal books of Eliza’s streetwalking, but she continued to feature in the columns of the local newspaper. In 1852, when she was 39, there was a report in the Cambridge Chronicle entitled ‘Long Eliza in Queer Street’:

A ‘young lady’ of considerable personal attraction named Eliza Smith, but known to the police as ‘Long Eliza’ was charged with importuning for the purpose of prostitution. From the evidence of P. C. 9, it appeared that about 1 o’clock this morning in Sidney Street, near Trinity Church, she met a gentleman and blandly addressed him thus, ‘Will you come my dear: will you come with me?’ The gentleman behaved very ungallantly towards the amorous damsel, and said ‘Get out of my way, I want nothing to do with you.’ He then passed on and she followed. P. C. 9, then took her into custody. The prisoner now said she was very sorry that she should so far have forgotten herself:

It was the first time she was ever out so late! The Bench fined her five shillings and expenses.

It has been possible to trace Eliza’s later life story through the census returns. In 1861 Eliza,

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37 Cambridge Chronicle, 4 December 1852.
aged 48, was living alone as a 'housekeeper' in Barnwell. In 1871 she was incarcerated in the town gaol on the day of the census; thirty years earlier, at the time of the 1841 census, she had been imprisoned in the Spinning House. In 1891 Liza was a boarder in the home of Mr Dakin, a cricketer, and his family in Union Row, Barnwell. 'Long Eliza' died a year later at the age of 79. Although Eliza's story adds little to the history of the Spinning House, it helps to build up a picture of one streetwalker's life beyond the House. The committal books give a restricted view of the young women and any other records that can extend our knowledge also aid our understanding of the place and period.

Sarah Ann Taverner also featured in the Cambridge Chronicle, not for importuning gentlemen but for an assault on another young woman. Sarah Ann came before the magistrates in 1852 charged 'with assaulting Sarah Tweed, a servant in the employment of Mr Wilson, keeper of the Spinning House. . . . It appeared that the complainant was passing along St Andrew's Street on Saturday night when she met the prisoner and another female, both of whom very much abused her and pulled her clothes about in a most disgraceful manner.' Sarah Ann was fined forty shillings or given a month's imprisonment. She paid. She was a Spinning House girl with a colourful adolescence. She was 12 when she was first arrested with her 16-year-old sister, Mary Ann. Their father worked at the Pitt Press, the home of the university publishers and printers. The young girls were charged with streetwalking 'in company with one Charles Brown, a scurvyer'. Sarah Ann was apprehended ten times between 1847 and 1857. On November 1851 she made a disturbance on her arrest, which collected 'a mob', and she was sentenced to 35 days. She was never intimidated by the proctors or short of excuses, and in March 1853 she was 'admonished and discharged' so that she could go to London, where she said she had relatives — 'in expectation that a man in the Grenadier Guards by whom she says she is pregnant will marry her'. Her last entry in the committal book was for 10 February 1857, when 'she came from Bury to see a dying

58 Cambridge Chronicle, 18 December 1852.
brother, her story being investigated and appearing to be partially true, she was dismissed by the proctor after an hour’s detention.

Mary Ann Taverner had also appeared before the magistrates in 1852, two days after her sister Sarah Ann. She was charged with improper behaviour, cautioned and dismissed. Bad behaviour in the streets was not uncommon among the young streetwalkers and the Taverner sisters had a reputation at the Spinning House for being troublesome. The newspaper accounts of women like Long Eliza suggest that at least some of the young streetwalkers went on to become common prostitutes in the town when they could no longer attract the students.

One of the best known of the streetwalkers was Rhode Grant. The Spinning House books reveal slices of her life story. She was born in 1818 in the village of Bourn less than ten miles from Cambridge. She was arrested a remarkable 67 times in total; in the six years between 1835 when she was 17 and 1841 when she was 23 she was apprehended 58 times. During the first 12 months she was often in the care of Mr Okes, but he seems to have effected a cure as there was no further mention of disease after February 1836. Rhode was sent to the Castle Gaol five times in the six years, once for 56 days as a punishment for breaking a window. She was placed in solitary confinement on three occasions for a total of 24 days. She broke out of the Spinning House twice. Once she was intoxicated at the time of arrest. On at least six occasions she was sent home to look after a young child. In March 1841 the entry in the committal book states that she was ‘discharged in consequence of her having a sucking child, and according to her account dangerously ill’; she was ‘taken again within an hour on Midsummer Common’. In 1844, after a gap of three years, Rhode was rearrested and she was apprehended on eight more occasions, each time being ‘admonished and discharged’ after spending one night in the House. The final entry was on 12 February 1857 when she was 39 years of age. At the time of the 1861 census Rhode was living alone.

Cambridge Chronicle, 18 December 1852.
in a house in Barnwell and she died seven years later at the age of 51. This account of Rhode's history of illness, motherhood and imprisonment sharpens our perception of what prostitution sometimes involved.

**Spinning House girls and the Cambridge Refuge**

As was explained in Chapter 3, the Refuge was a small institution founded by Evangelical clergymen and situated in the heart of Barnwell. The aim of the charity was to reform girls through discipline and instruction. It was not, as Margot Holbrook has suggested, 'a workhouse hospital'.\(^6^0\) Very few of the young streetwalkers were associated with the Refuge. Although the Ladies' Committee minutes show that a small number of Spinning House inmates applied to the Refuge, many of them were turned down or changed their minds about entering. There are only 21 references to the Refuge by the proctors in the committal books in nearly 60 years; these include 11 girls who said they hoped to go into the institution and ten girls who had been there but had then returned to streetwalking. Besides using accounts in police and university records it has been possible to embellish the life stories of several of the Spinning House girls from their applications to the Cambridge Refuge. Although these narratives were elicited though questions and may be only partly true, they can bring some insights into the lives that some of the girls experienced whilst they were growing up.

Susan Palmer was born into a large family in 1820 and was one of three sisters who spent time in the Refuge. Susan had been an inmate at the Spinning House in 1837, but was accepted into the Refuge with her sister, Charlotte, in 1838. The minutes of the Refuge Ladies' Committee show that her father was a widower, living in two rooms in Gas Lane, one of which he used as a workroom, and that he had a bed for himself and his four youngest children in the other.\(^6^1\) After two years at the Refuge, Susan went into service for a year.

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\(^{61}\) CRO, Cambridge Refuge Ladies' Committee Minutes, R 60/27/1, 9 July 1839.
but then had to go into hospital with a diseased liver; later that year she was ‘living in the Union because of ill-health’. She tried to make a living by doing needlework, but just over a year later she was in lodgings in the centre of town and was apprehended by a proctor near the Spinning House. He sent her straight home and there are no clues to her later life.

Another girl who spent time at both the Spinning House and the Refuge was Mathilda Raine, a Linton girl who was first arrested for streetwalking in 1841 when she was 16. She was unable to convince the proctor that she was visiting her sisters in Cambridge, and it was noted that she was living with women of bad reputation in Short Street. Mathilda was warned and discharged from the Spinning House, but she was back a month later, when she was committed for two weeks. Mathilda’s story, as related in her application for the Refuge, is dated 18 January 1842:

Am seventeen years of age – belong to Linton – can read but not write – can wash and do housework – my mother is married again – left home because my step father was unkind and could not support me – came to my Aunt’s when I came to Cambridge (very respectable person) – was with her three or four days then seduced by a Gownsman.

Mathilda’s submission that she had been wronged casts a new light on the interaction between Town and Gown on the streets. At the Refuge Mathilda had the opportunity to plead innocence and blame an undergraduate for her plight. There would have been no possibility for her to do this before the proctors or Vice-Chancellor at the Spinning House, where it was always assumed that the girl was the seducer.

Mathilda is missing from the census returns for 1851, but in 1861, at the age of 36, she was living as an unmarried lodger with a family in the St Pancras district of London. Her occupation was listed in the census as ‘independent’. Ten years later she was the wife of

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62 CRO, R 60/27/2, 11 October 1842.
63 CRO, R 60/27/1, 18 January 1842.
Alex Christie, a customs’ clerk, and living with him in Islington. In 1881 the couple had moved to Brighton and were boarders at the house of the two curates of St Mary’s Church, but by 1891 they had their own house in the town. Widowed, Mathida returned to London and in 1901 was ‘Living on Means’ in Hampstead with a domestic servant. She died a year later, back in Brighton, at the age of 77, having lived most of her life as a respectable married woman.

Susan Fletcher’s name appears in the Spinning House committal books, the Refuge minute books and the criminal registers at Kew. Born in 1828, Susan was one of four children. Her father, who ‘was not totally fit, having suffered from rheumatic fever’, was in service as a whitesmith; her mother was a straw bonnet maker. After frequent changes of address in London, the family had moved to Cambridge, probably in 1841. Susan was pressed by her mother to apply for a place in the Refuge. Her mother complained to the Refuge Ladies’ Committee that her daughter had kept bad company in London:

I am sure she has been living as a prostitute. She would come home intoxicated. If I sent her out for anything she would run away. I have put her in the Union, but directly she came home she returned to evil courses. She will not be ruled by her father or by me.

Mrs Fletcher explained that, although Susan ‘had attended Mrs Marlow’s school for not quite a year’ and had been at Great St Andrew’s Sunday School, she could only read a little. Susan had spent a winter with her aunt in Bury St Edmunds, but, back in Cambridge, on her own admission she kept the company of ‘bad girls’ in a house in Wellington Row. She went with them to Midsummer Fair and had her first sexual experience there at the age of fourteen. Susan described the occasion to the committee: ‘It was last Midsummer Fair that I had first connection with a man. I am sure of this – I met a man in a booth who gave

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64 CRO, R 60/27/2, 4 July 1842.
65 CRO, R 60/27/2, 4 July 1842.
66 CRO, R 60/27/2, 4 July 1842.
me beer and had his way with me received no money.\textsuperscript{67} Initially Susan told the committee that it was her 'wish to be put in a place of confinement', but in a later interview she recanted and said that her mother had 'urged it on her'. Susan did not enter the Refuge; the doctor found that 'the child was decidedly diseased'. Mrs Fletcher was told to take her daughter to the Union to be cured.\textsuperscript{68}

Later that year Susan and her brother Samuel were in trouble with the police: both received gaol sentences of three months for larceny. Later in January 1843, Samuel was convicted of stealing a duck and was sentenced to transportation for seven years.\textsuperscript{69} Susan had been employed in making cloth caps in London, but in Cambridge she went into service. Just two months after her brother's conviction, while she was working as a servant in Maids' Causeway, she was indicted for stealing 'a piece of print' worth five shillings from a draper's shop. She told her mistress that her mother had had it a year and her mother that her mistress had given it to her. She received a nine-month gaol sentence. A year later, at the age of 16, Susan was admitted to the Spinning House for the first time. The proctors arrested her 14 times in the next four years. She was only ever charged with 'streetwalking' and there is no record in the committal books of her having venereal disease or being treated for it at the House. Meanwhile, her older sister Charlotte was also spending time in the Spinning House, sometimes after the sisters had been walking the streets together. Susan Fletcher was just 20 when she disappeared from the Spinning House records.

Like the earlier accounts, these brief narratives, compiled from the Spinning House books and other wider sources, give some insights into the backgrounds of several women who encountered the proctors. They often reveal a different picture from the one presented by the proctors, where the responsibility and blame for inappropriate behaviour was placed, not on the men, who disappeared from the scene, but squarely on the shoulders of the women who

\textsuperscript{67} CRO, R 60/27/2, 4 July 1842.
\textsuperscript{68} CRO, R 60/27/2, 11 July 1842.
\textsuperscript{69} Cambridge Chronicle, 7 January 1843.
were arrested. The narratives expose the culpable conduct of some of the undergraduates and emphasize the inequalities of gender and power that structured the lives of working-class women in the town. Illness, unemployment and dependent children were often controlling factors for women, who were uneducated, powerless and poor, in contrast to the benefits experienced by many of the students. The views that the streetwalkers expressed on prostitution and their own predicament can help to explain the way that they behaved. These stories may not have been typical or always strictly true, but they draw attention to the experiences of individuals and contribute to the wider picture of prostitution both in Cambridge and beyond.

*Lodging-house keepers*

It is interesting to speculate how many of the Spinning House girls went on to become landladies of lodging houses and brothels. It is usually difficult to follow the lives of the women once they married, but because Mrs Flack kept her maiden name her story can be traced more easily than most. She was born in Chesterton in 1806 and was first arrested for streetwalking in 1828 when she was 21. She had been in service with Mrs Fenn in Castle Hill but was then living in Trumpington. She was arrested by proctors on seven occasions between 1829 and 1833 and spent a total of 13 weeks in the Spinning House. She had one sentence extended from three weeks to four for disorderly conduct. In 1830 Ann Flack gave birth to a son, William, but she went on working as a prostitute until he was three.

The 1841 census indicates that Ann Flack was then living in Blucher Row with her son William, aged 11, and her niece Emma (Pawley), aged 21. Emma soon became well known at the Spinning House. By 1851 Ann had moved to 32 Wellington Row with Emma, who had a one-year-old daughter. (There is no record of an elder child, whose birth to Emma in March 1844 is mentioned in the Spinning House book.) By then William had left home. The census names Ann Flack widow, head of the household, formerly laundress, Emma Flack niece, dressmaker, Harriet Marsh, visitor, straw bonnet maker, and Harriet Flack, daughter. Harriet Marsh (alias Bowers) had also been a Spinning House inmate.
For nearly 20 years, from 1839 until 1858, Mrs Flack provided lodgings at 32 Wellington Row for her niece Emma and other Spinning House girls, but there is no evidence to show that this house was a brothel or that Mrs Flack’s lodgers took their clients back to their lodgings. The census returns indicate that many of the Barnwell lodging houses listed in the committal books, like Mrs Flack’s, were the homes of landladies, their children and Spinning House girls, who were listed as visitors.

By 1861, Ann, Emma and Harriet Flack had moved to 28 Wellington Row. Ten years later, in 1871, they were still there, but Emma had had four more children in the intervening years. Ann died later that year at the age of 67. The census returns for 1881 indicate that Emma was still living in the house with her four adult children. It seems that neither Ann Flack nor her niece took in male lodgers.

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 Spinning House Case Syndicate minutes book (Appendix 7). All lay outside the area in which the proctors patrolled. Links between the Spinning House and ‘suspected houses’ in Barnwell are tenuous. The list includes the names of some women whom the proctors would have known, such as Elizabeth Aylett and Fanny Offley; both girls had given the proctors a great deal of trouble on the streets. As has already been argued, there is no reason to believe that either of them were ever lodging-house keepers. Of the 90 keepers mentioned in the proctors’ roll, less than 10% can be recognized as past detainees at the university prison and only Mrs Shed, whom the proctors identified as a brothel keeper, had Spinning House girls regularly as lodgers; she had houses first in New Street, then in Abbey Street and finally in Fitzroy Street. The committal books indicate that 12 girls resided with her for short periods between 1845 and 1866. This does not seem a significant number over 21 years: although

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University/Min.VI.6/13.
Spinning House young women may have lived together in small groups in lodging houses, most of these houses were probably not brothels.

It is difficult to detect where the Spinning House 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, but the usual charge against the streetwalker, ‘suspected of evil’, was ambiguous. 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 Burleigh Street, Barnwell. Likewise, Marianne Dann, Elizabeth Howe and Harriet King were arrested at different times in a house in Hobson’s Street, not in Barnwell where they all lived. The proctors referred to ‘receiving houses’ and it is conceivable that there were a number of these in the centre of the old town where the streetwalkers could take their clients. It seems impossible to establish whether or not the undergraduates accompanied prostitutes to lodgings or brothels in Barnwell. It would have been a long walk from King’s Parade to Wellington Row for instance, and there are no positive records of streetwalkers being arrested by proctors in the Barnwell district.

As has been shown, Victorian Cambridge was a town divided into two distinct districts – the old medieval centre, the ‘public’ space where soliciting and streetwalking was suppressed, and the working-class district of Barnwell where sexual activity took place ‘in private’ behind the closed doors of the brothels. Was prostitutional activity in the town isolated, segregated and domesticated in Barnwell? Philip Howell has argued that it was and that the special powers held by the university and the nature of the regulationist system practised by the proctors ‘produced a geography of prostitution in nineteenth-century Cambridge’; he states that ‘prostitutional space by and large had a single name: that of “Barnwell”’. 71

It is undeniable that most prostitution took place in Barnwell, but it is doubtful whether this

was due to a deliberate 'regulationist system practised by the proctors'. Several factors probably contributed to the 'geography of prostitution' in Cambridge: not only would the proctors' presence around the colleges have pushed prostitution into the unregulated area of Barnwell, but lack of available indoor accommodation or cover out-of-doors in the old part of the town would have had a similar effect.

The Lodging-House Syndicate

The university set up the Lodging-House Syndicate in 1854. It consisted of the Vice-Chancellor, four proctors and four other members of the Senate and its task was to advise on the proper control of lodging houses for undergraduates. The syndicate immediately defined limits within which licences would be granted. Not surprisingly, the Barnwell district was excluded. The standards required by the syndics in order to obtain a licence were extremely demanding and any licensees who broke the rules had their licences revoked immediately. For example, keepers were required to note in their returns the exact hour and minute at which their lodgers returned after ten at night. Benjamin Langton of Jesus Lane made a false return and had his licence revoked for a term.

In May 1866 the proctors arrested Mary Simonds, who was aged 40 and one of the oldest women to be taken to the Spinning house. Mary was 'found with a gownsman for an immoral purpose' and sentenced to 14 days in prison. Such a specific charge was unusual. The committal book states that she was 'judicially separated' from her husband, but it does not reveal that she was also a person 'licensed by the Vice-Chancellor and the Proctors to receive students as lodgers' into her house. Within days, members of the Lodging-House Syndicate had agreed 'to revoke the licence of Mary Symonds [sic] of 11 Brunswick Place, who had been committed to the Spinning House on Wednesday last'.

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72 Holbrook, Where do you keep?, p. 59.
73 Holbrook, Where do you keep?, p. 59.
74 Holbrook, Where do you keep?, p. 66.
Conclusion

The number of streetwalkers listed in the committal books suggests at first that there was an immense problem with prostitution in Cambridge, but closer inspection of the figures, spread over 70 years, shows that the situation was not as shocking as some commentators and journalists have described. Of the 1550 girls whose names occur in the books, 723 were only apprehended once. The fact that nearly half of the Spinning House girls appeared before the Vice-Chancellor’s court on a single occasion suggests that most of them were far from being ‘common prostitutes’. First offenders, many of them teenagers out in pairs, were usually charged with walking and talking with gownsmen; there is no proof that there was an active sexual constituent to these young women’s association with the young men.

Further investigation of the committal books’ data shows that a further 353 girls were arrested only two or three times. This indicates that over two-thirds of the Spinning House girls were arrested on three or fewer occasions. What about the other third, who were arrested more than three times – the women who walked the streets ‘suspected of evil’ and whom the proctors sometimes described as ‘common prostitutes’? Some appeared in the committal books spasmodically; often a year or more would separate charges by the proctors. The reasons for the gaps in their records are uncertain. Some may have continued their streetwalking but managed to avoid the proctors, whilst others may have turned to prostitution only when they faced financial difficulties.

There were a number of women, mainly in the first book, who were persistent offenders and spent much of their time in and out of the Spinning House and the county gaol. Besides Rhode Grant, whose records span all three committal books, there was Susan Dean from Barton, who started streetwalking in 1824 at the age of 13 and was arrested 40 times in ten years, and Sarah Virtue from Foxton, who, in spite of her name, was apprehended 36 times. Sometimes the proctors gave up on individual offenders; for example, Grant was ‘admonished and discharged’ after her last four apprehensions. Perhaps they were concerned that such girls would be a bad influence on the other prisoners.
The database has highlighted the existence of a vast network that linked Spinning House friends and acquaintances. By using the committal books it is possible to make many connections between the girls. For example, Elizabeth Leaby, who was apprehended just eight times between October 1849 and November 1851, was arrested in the company of four different girls, made the acquaintance of at least a further 57 girls during her time in the House and probably met yet more Spinning House girls at her lodgings. With frequent changes of address the streetwalkers had the opportunity to form new relationships with every move. If a girl had sisters and cousins also streetwalking, as many did (for instance Lydia Dean from Barton, whose extended family shared a total of 134 arrests), contacts would have been innumerable.

How did the inhabitants of Barnwell accept disreputable neighbours? A letter to the newspaper in 1853 about a family who lived in Watson’s Garden, off Gold Street, suggests that they were not popular with some residents:

There was till a few weeks ago a notorious brothel, the conductress of which has several daughters, and with one or more of them she frequently parades the streets in the evening. Why did she go from this locality? Was it because she could not pay the rent? Or was it the virtuous indignation of her neighbours which drove her out of this straightforward neighbourhood? If the latter supposition is correct what ‘good time is coming’ for Barnwell.75

Sometimes it became apparent that the Barnwell community as a whole did not ostracize its young prostitutes. This was demonstrated after the terrible murder on Midsummer Common in 1876 of a 16-year-old prostitute, one not listed in the Spinning House books. Emma Rolfe had her throat cut by her client, Robert Browning, in his mistaken belief that had she been responsible for his contracting gonorrhea. The local people were outraged and the crowd, estimated at 2000 people, that gathered for her funeral in Mill Road Cemetery clearly

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75 Cambridge Chronicle, 29 January 1853.
indicated the sympathy felt for the young streetwalker and the anger at her cruel fate.\textsuperscript{26}

The committal books do not provide conclusive evidence about the sexual behaviour of the Spinning House girls. Clearly they were not a homogeneous group even though they came from similar backgrounds, were of a similar age and shared the same treatment from the proctors on the streets. Interesting information about the lives of some of the streetwalkers can been obtained from census returns: some of these women who were known because their names appeared in the committal books have become individuals in their own right. Mathilda Raine is no longer just a Spinning House girl who spent time in the Refuge, but a woman who married and became 'respectable'. We know that some girls such as Fanny Offley and Elizabeth Aylett belonged to close-knit families, with parents who continued to live in the same streets long after their daughters had left home. It has been possible to trace the lives of two notorious Spinning House inmates – Eliza Green and Rhode Grant – from birth to death. These particular women are no longer one-dimensional: knowledge of their activities outside the prison shows that the mundane was also a part of their lives.

The information revealed by the committal books shows that the term 'common prostitute' was rarely appropriate. The value of this detailed local study is that it highlights important issues, such as the particular way in which prostitution and suspected prostitutes were treated in Cambridge and the critical part played by class and gender in a university town stifled by tradition and prejudice. Although prostitution was regulated in Cambridge throughout the nineteenth century, the committal books do not endorse Philip Howell’s premise that proctorial practice in the town was a precursor for the Contagious Diseases Acts. Howell’s argument that the women were ‘taken out of the circuits of sexual exchange whenever they were found to be infectious’ has been shown in this chapter to be inaccurate.\textsuperscript{27}

The identification and analysis of issues and practices that are set out in this thesis, including registration unique to Cambridge, make a significant contribution to existing scholarship.

\textsuperscript{26} Cambridge Chronicle, 16 December 1876.

\textsuperscript{27} Howell, ‘A private Contagious Diseases Act’, p. 384.
6: Conclusion

The woman is shut up not for what she does, but what she is –
an incentive to vice among the young students.¹

Although this thesis is a local study of a unique setting, it extends our knowledge of working-class women and prostitution in nineteenth-century England. The committal books with their detailed information on the suspected prostitutes lay neglected in the University Library for nearly a century with only a few academics and local historians aware of their existence. Like the books, Cambridge’s individual streetwalkers were forgotten. Judith Walkowitz argued in 1972: ‘Lower-class prostitution has received little serious attention from contemporary historians.’ She suggested that, ‘beyond [the] tendency to consign all members of the lower class to historical oblivion, scholars [had been] particularly reluctant to treat prostitution as more than a social anecdote’.² Despite the recent interest in prostitution by historians, there is still remarkably little on the life histories of the lower-class prostitutes. This study has demonstrated that it is possible to investigate the lives of individual women and show that they were far from uniform.

The male investigators of the Victorian period were preoccupied with the reasons for prostitution and the need to reform the women. Acton and Mayhew interviewed individuals, but these Victorian pioneers failed ‘to give us a precise social portrait of prostitutes’.³ It was not until the last decades of the twentieth century that several women historians undertook a deeper and more sympathetic examination of the nineteenth-century prostitute and saw her, not just as a passive victim of social injustice, but with her own

¹ Cambridge Chronicle, 27 January 1892.
feelings and perceptions regarding her situation. This thesis is an attempt to add to this body of work, whilst acknowledging that it is only a partial picture and cannot be a full account of the Spinning House girls' experiences as they would have expressed them themselves.

The committal books have information about 1550 young streetwalkers and the setting up of a database has meant that each girl can be studied both as an individual and as a member of a specialized group. For example, the history of one girl's visits to the Spinning House in the 1820s can be compared with that of another girl of the same age in the 1850s and sentencing practice in the 1830s can be compared with that a decade later. Besides the committal books, the university archives have revealed details about lodging houses and their keepers which, with the census returns for the town, have helped to cast light on the environment and life history of particular streetwalkers.

The study of prostitution in Cambridge is significant not least because class strictly divided the participants. The clients, university students, came from one particular social group and, although there are almost no records of the individuals, much is known of the prejudices and customs of these young men. The proctors were from the same class and community as the clients, whilst in other towns the police were drawn overwhelmingly from the same class and community as the prostitutes. The Spinning House girls, with just one or two exceptions, were working-class women.

This thesis has highlighted local differences in the experience and treatment of prostitutes. Frances Finnegan identified 1400 individual prostitutes and brothel-owners in York.4

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Her study described the prostitutes' destitution, drunkenness and disease caused by poverty.\(^5\) She concluded that three-quarters of the prostitutes' clients were working-class and that nearly half of them were visitors to the city.\(^6\) They contrast sharply with the rich, local clients of the Spinning House girls, and there is no evidence to suggest that the women in Cambridge experienced harsh poverty. Judith Walkowitz examined prostitution in garrison towns such as Plymouth and established how state control of sexuality, through the imposition of the Contagious Diseases Acts, reinforced existing patterns of class and gender domination. Similar control was imposed by men in authority on working-class women in Cambridge. Walkowitz has argued that prostitutes in Plymouth were effectively deprived of the due process of law because no police warrant was needed for their arrest,\(^7\) but after 1864 the police were in fact backed by the C. D. Acts. In Cambridge these laws did not apply and the arrest and detention of suspected young prostitutes without a fair trial was exceptional in England at that time. Moreover the town’s population appears to have been increasingly aware of this.

As was argued in Chapter 5, it is difficult to determine the Spinning House girls’ motives for walking the streets. There may have been many reasons. The intentions of some of the teenagers who were arrested with their friends on a single occasion may just have been to have a good time with the young bachelors of the town. Undoubtedly others chose prostitution as a way of making a living instead of working long hours ‘in service’ or back-breaking labour in a laundry or on the land. At least two women had husbands in the background when they were arrested and may have been forced by them into streetwalking. It was shown in Chapter 5 that in some families there was a tradition of prostitution and brothel-keeping. For the attractive young women in Cambridge who

\(^5\) Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution*, p. 15.
\(^6\) Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution*, p. 133.
\(^7\) Walkowitz, 'Notes on the History of Victorian Prostitution', p. 112.
chose prostitution there was the option of parading the streets around the colleges to solicit rich students or walking the dingy streets and alleyways of Barnwell to find poor working-class clients. In spite of the risk of being arrested by the proctors near the colleges, the choice may well have been an easy one for most of the women.

Were the Spinning House girls victims? 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 many saw themselves as victims of a grossly unfair proctorial system, as their recorded outbursts show. 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. However, they were grateful to receive medical treatment when it was offered and, although the conditions were hard in the House, it seems that there was a positive side to prison life; many of the streetwalkers made good friends inside and mutual support was part of the culture.

Tradition, power, youth, gender and class all played a part in the history of prostitution in Cambridge. The evidence demonstrates how deep-rooted tradition was in the university and how, from its foundation, the authorities had established a basis of power over the townspeople. Vice-Chancellors had courted royalty and received privileges in return. Valuable land was stripped from the local inhabitants with the aid of kings for the construction of grand buildings. Throughout the centuries working people became more and more dependent on the university for their livelihoods. The Vice-Chancellor was responsible for the policing of the streets and the licensing of the markets, inns and taverns and places of entertainment. In 1800 university and college life was so entrenched in its ways that any change in the relationship between Town and Gown seemed
almost impossible. Bachelor proctors, isolated in their colleges, appear to have become unreasonably fearful of those who lived beyond the college walls. However, the old guard of the university was forced to accept academic and administrative reform; attitudes gradually began to change towards admitting a wider range of new students to the university and two colleges for women were founded in 1869 and 1871. Adjustment within the establishment was one thing, but adjustment outside it was another. It took until the end of the century for the proctors to change their approach towards the streetwalkers.

Life in Victorian Cambridge was defined by the relationship between the university and the townspeople. Instead of leading movements for reform, Cambridge stood out as a town slow to modernize. As the working-class population rapidly increased, the university authorities clung to their privileges, fearful of losing their power. Interaction between Town and Gown was so disagreeable in the 1850s that the government appointed an arbiter, a former judge, to negotiate a settlement between the two communities. The people of Cambridge were still arguing about medieval traditions when other Englishmen were debating major social and political issues including the reform of the criminal justice system and changes to the civil service.

The thesis has shown how events centred on the Spinning House in the nineteenth century illustrate the tensions between Town and Gown. It is remarkable that at a time of nationwide debate on the rights of the individual, the proctors, ordained ministers, seem to have had no doubts about using the House to imprison the women. They faced the fierce challenges to their behaviour made in the local and national press with extraordinary arrogance: even the death of a young girl after spending a night in a damp cell did not make them question their ancient privileges.
The fact that Cambridge is a university town with a tradition of research has meant that there is both detailed history of the town before 1800 and a wealth of information on its growth and development throughout the nineteenth century. This knowledge has been yet another tool in examining the unique history of the Spinning House and placing it in context. Research into Victorian Cambridge has revealed how a deeply divided community struggled to cope with political and social change. It has shown how the townspeople began to claim what they perceived as their civil liberties and rights, not through riots or marches but through argument and petitions, newspaper articles and public meetings, sparked sometimes by events surrounding the Spinning House. By 1900 the borough councillors were in charge of the town, the university no longer monopolized the work force, public services such as the provision of clean water and sewage disposal had been installed, and Cambridge had its own local police force which was responsible for the streets. The balance between Town and Gown had at last become more equitable.

Although the Spinning House was closed in 1894, the proctors still patrolled the streets in the evenings and fined those students who were in breach of university regulations. Gowns were mandatory after college dinner and any undergraduate in female company could expect to be stopped and questioned. Streetwalking in Cambridge was still unacceptable, but local girls were no longer targeted by the proctors or held in a prison run by the university. It was the duty of the police to arrest prostitutes who were caught soliciting or disturbing the peace and, in the absence of the Spinning House committal books, only police records and newspaper reports give any details of individual prostitutes after 1894. It seems likely that the treatment of prostitutes in Cambridge became like that in nearly every other town in England.
**Appendix 1** (University/Endow.1.15)

**RULES FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF THE SPINNING HOUSE, CAMBRIDGE.**

1. **EVERY** prisoner after committal by the Vice-Chancellor shall have a bath and be examined by the Surgeon.

2. The Prisoners shall receive tickets for all clothes, money, and other articles taken from them by the Keeper; and the Keeper shall enter the same in a book kept for the purpose.

3. Each prisoner shall sleep in a separate cell, unless from the fulness of the prison or other peculiar circumstances the Vice-Chancellor or his Deputy shall direct otherwise.

4. The cells shall be locked up every night not later than 9 o’Clock; they shall be unlocked every morning not later than 8 o’Clock during the months of November, December, January, and February; and not later than 7 o’Clock during the remaining months of the year.

5. No candles shall be allowed to remain in the sleeping cells after the hour of locking up for the night.

6. The prisoners shall be required to make their beds before leaving their cells in the morning, and to clean their own apartments.

7. The hour of breakfast shall be at 9 o’Clock during the four winter months, and 8 o’Clock during the other months of the year: the hour of Dinner shall be 2 o’Clock, and of Supper 8 o’Clock.

8. Grace shall be said by the Master or Matron before and after dinner; and good order is required to be observed during meal times.

9. No liquors or provisions shall be allowed to be brought into the house for the prisoners by their friends, nor shall any be procured for them by the Keeper in addition to the prescribed Dietary.

10. Any deviation from the regular Dietary may be made by the authority of the Surgeon.

11. Employment such as needlework, knitting or other light occupation shall be procured, if possible, for the Prisoners; and some allowance for the work done shall be made to the Prisoners on their discharge.

12. The Prisoners shall be allowed to see their friends and relations, at reasonable hours, under such regulations as may be necessary to prevent improper communication especially between persons of different sexes, and prevent the introduction of forbidden articles.

13. One full Divine Service shall be performed in the Chapel by the Chaplain on the Sabbath; and Morning Prayers selected from the Liturgy shall be read by him on all other days of the week. Evening Prayers, also selected from the Liturgy, shall be read every night after supper by the Keeper or Matron.

14. The Matron shall visit every cell and see every Prisoner once at least every 24 hours.

15. All breaches of regulations committed by the Prisoners, all acts of violence and insubordination, all improper behaviour or conversation, absence from Divine Worship without leave, or irreverent behaviour during the performance of it shall be reported to the Vice-Chancellor; and the offenders shall be punished by close confinement in a solitary cell, and by a diet of bread and water only for such reasonable time, not exceeding 3 days, or as he or his Deputy may determine.
### Appendix 5

The occupations of the Spinning House girls’ parents and guardians where named

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brewer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricklayer</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brickmaker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butcher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet maker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrier</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carver and gilder</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellarer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk/parish clerk</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coachmaker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coachtrimmer</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalporter</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College servant</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooper</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn merchant</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cricket ground</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cricketer</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draper</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engine driver</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farmer/butcher</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farrier</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flyman</td>
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<td>Foreman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gardener</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gasworker</td>
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<td>Glazier</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardware dealer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hornkeeper</td>
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<td>Horsekeeper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housekeeper</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourer</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigger singer</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ostler</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painter</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasterer</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                | Publican | Railwayworker | Relieving officer | Saddler | Saddlemaker/innkeeper | Servant | Shepherd | Shoemaker/bootmaker | Soldier | Stonemason | Surgeon | Tailor | Tradesman | Travelling fiddler | Virtualler | Waterman | Wheelwright | Bedmaker | Brothelkeeper | Butcher | Charwoman | College helper | Cook | Dressmaker/seamstress | Farmer | Hallkeeper | Hawker | Housekeeper | Labourer | Lacemaker | Laundress | Nigger singer | Nurse | Prostitute | Publican | Scullery maid | Servant | Shopkeeper | Tailoress | Turf seller | Washerwoman |
Appendix 6: List of girls' names and numbers at the front of a committal book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bright Harriet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baden Julia</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beckettener Moore</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks Emma abe Hobart</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Ellen</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler Mary Ann</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burtet Ann</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burtell Rebecca</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone Eliza</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Maria</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Rebeka</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett Louisa</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Amelia</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler Frances</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Susan</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cockle Frances</td>
<td>228</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brown Elizabeth</td>
<td>244</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brown Elizabeth</td>
<td>244</td>
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<tr>
<td>Burton Jenny Joe</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bell Carolina</td>
<td>260</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bell Caroline</td>
<td>264</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barbona Ann</td>
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<td>Brown Harriet</td>
<td>279</td>
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<td>Hillen Susan</td>
<td>282</td>
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<td>Bell Harriet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brown Elizabeth</td>
<td>295</td>
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<td>Brown Elizabeth</td>
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<td>Barton Elizabeth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barton Elizabeth</td>
<td>311</td>
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</table>
Appendix 7
Suspected Houses of ill fame and brothels, pasted inside the cover of the Spinning House Case Syndicate minutes book, dated 26 Feb. 1863 (University/Min.Vl.6/13)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arnold Susan</td>
<td>23 Paradise Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aliot Elizabeth</td>
<td>Carters Yard Castle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barton Susan</td>
<td>21 City Road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown Elizabeth</td>
<td>Willow Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bright Harriett</td>
<td>Shelly Row</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benton Mrs</td>
<td>Carters Yard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackman Emma</td>
<td>Staffordshire St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey Adelaide</td>
<td>Coronation St</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3 Coldhams Lane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benton</td>
<td>18 Sun Street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox Mary Elizabeth</td>
<td>Benleigh Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carter Mary</td>
<td>Compasses Passage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cullam Mary</td>
<td>River Side</td>
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<tr>
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Mells Emiley
Nision Margaret
Nourish Mary Ann
Offley Fanny
Prime Emma
Palmer Susan
Palmer
Priest Emma  }
Priest Elizabeth  }
Pieters Mary  }
Pieters Isabel  }
Parker Mary Ann
Pointington Ellen
Palmer Jane
Parr Mary
Rosse Louise
Ruby Emma
Peck Eliza
Smith Jenny
Smith Ann
Stretch Mary
Taylor Betty
Wells Susan
Wraddale Ellen
Watson Elizabeth
Williams Ann
Williams Mary
Williams Alice
Wakeling Louise
Radford Louise
Fuller Mary
Farrance Ellen
Simons Mrs
Saunders Carry
Smith Betsy
Langham Harriet

Norwich St
Burleigh Street
Ropes Passage East Road
Castle Street
Cambridge Place
Wellington St
King Street
Wellington St

Burleigh Place

6 Grafton Street
Shelly Row
Friendly Place
Newmarket Road
Wellington St
Crispin Passage
Staffordshire Place
Nofolk St
Downing Court
Clement Place
Crown passage
East Road
4 St Anthony Street
Wellington Street
Northol St
carters Yard
Church St
Wessons Yard
Carter Yard
Compasses Passage
Wellington Street
11 Brunswick Place
Wellington Street
Wessons Yard
Cemetery Lane

Brothels
Shed Mrs
Benton E.
Runham Mrs
Ford Susan
Harvey Susan
Evans Mrs
Cullum Mrs
Gurney Mrs
Adams Emily
Mathews Ann
Gilby Elizabeth

Fitzroy Street
8 Sun Street
132 Newmarket Road
142 East Road
142 East Road
Wellington Row
River Side
Fields Ct
18 Sun Street
132 East Road
132 East Road
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