

Stoney Bowes in Prison

There were five prisons in Southwark – the Clink, the King’s Bench, Borough Compter, the White Lion and the Marshalsea, Debtors had to provide their own bedding, food and drink. Those who could afford it bought ‘liberty of the rules,’ allowing them to live within three square miles of the prison.

What we know of the twenty-two years Stoney spent in prison we learn from Dr Jesse Foot’s account: *The Lives of Andrew Stoney Bowes, Esq and the Countess of Strathmore, written from thirty-three years professional attendance, from letters and other well-authenticated documents by Jesse Foot. 1820.*

It’s an astonishing read, and though I don’t regard Foot as a reliable witness, here are the details that gave me the idea of making one of the unfortunate children born to Polly Sutton into the heroine of my novel:

After Stoney was arrested for the abduction of the Countess of Strathmore, in November 1786, he was sentenced by Judge Ashurst: ‘that he be imprisoned in his Majesty’s prison of the King’s Bench for three years, and at the expiration of said term, he find security for fourteen years, himself in £10,000 and two sureties of £5,000 each.’ The Marshall said in a loud tone that he could accommodate the gentleman...he was taken to the King’s Bench state rooms...his plate was brought from Grosvenor Square.

‘He lived at first with Mr and Mrs Peacock and their daughter and sons....a most respectable coal merchant ...Stoney drew part of his subsistence from a share in a coal ship, and shipped his own coals for the London market, and sold them by his own agents.’ Peacock took out a commission of bankruptcy against him in 1898.

The lawyer Mr Palmer , who helps Molly in the novel, was a real person: ‘He engaged a new attorney, ‘Mr Palmer of Grey’s Inn, a gentleman of erudition in literature in general, of acute observation, good address and high reputation.’

He spent twenty-two years in prison: first in state rooms, next in inferior state rooms, then within the walls of the Bench, and about the last twelve years, within the rules in St George’s Fields. At one point, ‘He had the best rooms within the walls of the prison....and tempted useful people by his dinners.’ After one of his numerous court appearances, Foot describes how, ‘Thus mauled, stripped, disgraced and blasted, the prison bolts flew open; all of a sudden he bade adieu to the outer state rooms and entered within the walls, in a pickle not unmerited and in a state which to some death would have been comparatively an Elysium.’

Here is what we learn of Molly’s mother, Mary ‘Polly’ Sutton: ‘On 13th July 1787, Bowes desired me to visit a young girl at the lodgings of her mother in Lant Street: a girl of perfect symmetry, fair, lively and innocent....feeding a pigeon with split peas out of her mouth....Her father in the prison had been a man of considerable landed property, had kept a pack of hounds entirely at his own expense.’

He seduced Polly and ‘hired a room for her in the same staircase....she was excluded from the sight of everybody....Stoney was always present, the key to her room in his pocket.... She was blessed with a native cheerful disposition and had found a channel for her affections in her children.’

When Stoney died on 16th January 1810, Foot wrote, ‘She has literally been a prisoner in his house from the year 1787 until the day of his death.’