

# Mary Ann Peters and the Cambridge Spinning House

*A case study in streetwalking, poverty, punishment and University discipline, 1846-1856*

**Source base:** Compiled spreadsheet of Mary Ann Peters entries in the Cambridge Spinning House committal books. The spreadsheet records 44 arrests over 114 months and 262 days of imprisonment; 42 dated apprehension rows are tabulated below.

Measure	Value
Name	Mary Ann Peters
Age range in entries	21-30
Birthplace	Harlton, Cambridgeshire
Family note	Father and mother at Harlton
Employment/lodging note	Mr Metcalfe's, Brunswick Place
Principal charge	Streetwalking
Period covered by dated entries	13 Nov 1846 - 5 May 1856
Spreadsheet total period	114 months
Spreadsheet total arrests	44
Dated apprehension rows tabulated	42
Spreadsheet total imprisonment	262 days

## 1. Introduction

Mary Ann Peters is a substantial and revealing case in the Cambridge Spinning House records. The spreadsheet identifies her as a young woman from Harlton, first aged 21, with parents still living there. Between November 1846 and May 1856 she was repeatedly apprehended for alleged streetwalking. The spreadsheet summary records 44 arrests over 114 months and 262 days of imprisonment. The surviving tabulated rows give a detailed sequence of dated appearances, addresses, officers or proctors, outcomes and remarks.

Her case is historically important because it shows how quickly a woman could become known to the University authorities, how repeated warnings shifted into custodial punishment, and how the Spinning House system operated across a decade of repeated encounters. Like Ann Ashbury/Ashby, Peters can be followed over time; unlike a single isolated committal, her record reveals the cumulative effect of University discipline.

## 2. Personal and Social Background

The records consistently name her as Mary Ann Peters and give Harlton as her birthplace. Early entries add that her father and mother were at Harlton, placing her within a local rural family network rather than presenting her as an anonymous transient. One early note associates her with Mr Metcalfe's, Brunswick Place. Her addresses within Cambridge shift over time: Abbey Street appears in 1846, Short Street in 1847-1850, and later entries record No. 2 Wellington Road and No. 18 Wellington Road. These changes suggest movement within the poorer lodging and working-class districts most frequently subject to University surveillance.

## 3. Statistical Overview

Category	Count / Detail
Spreadsheet total arrests	44
Dated rows in table	42
Spreadsheet total days imprisoned	262
Most common punishment in dated rows	One week imprisonment
Longest recorded sentence	Five weeks
Principal addresses recorded	Abbey Street (3); Short Street (5); No 2 Short Street (1); No 2 Wellington Road (1); No. 18 Wellington Road (1)
Number of named proctors/officers in dated rows	22

Outcome category in dated rows	Occurrences
Dismissed	1
Admonished/discharged or released	13
Discharged by Vice-Chancellor	1
One week imprisonment	18
Two weeks imprisonment	5
Three weeks imprisonment	2
Five weeks imprisonment	1
Two nights imprisonment	1
Year	Dated apprehensions
1846	5
1847	6
1848	10
1849	6
1850	2
1851	2
1852	4
1853	2
1854	2
1855	2
1856	1

### Phase 1: first apprehensions and early repetition, 1846-1848

Date	Record	Age	Address	Officer / proctor	Outcome	Days	Remarks
13 Nov 1846	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21	Abbey Street	Saunders	Dismissed not having been seen before		
21 Nov 1846	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21		Brummell	One week	7	
4 Dec 1846	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21	Abbey Street	Atlay	Admonished and discharged		
6 Dec 1846	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21	Abbey Street	Saunders	One week	7	
14 Dec 1846	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21		Saunders	One week	7	
3 Feb 1847	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21		Saunders	Admonished and discharged		
17 Feb 1847	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21	Short Street	Kingsley	One week		
1 Apr 1847	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21		Saunders	One week	7	
15 Apr 1847	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21	Short Street	Brummell	One week	7	
11 May 1847	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21	Short Street	Kingsley	One week	7	
13 Dec 1847	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21		Bunch	Admonished and released		
12 Jan 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 703	21		Williams	Admonished and released		
20 Jan 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22	Short Street	Williams	Admonished and discharged		
3 Feb 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Williams	One week	7	
11 Feb 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Bunch	Admonished and released		
22 Feb 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Williams	Admonished and released		
6 Mar 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Bunch	One week	7	
22 Mar 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Bunch	Admonished and discharged		
1 Apr 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Williams	Admonished and discharged		
15 May 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Williams	One week	7	
27 May 1848	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Williams	Two weeks	14	

The first phase is marked by frequent admonition and discharge, but also by a quick shift into one-week sentences. Abbey Street and Short Street appear in the address column, indicating Peters's early connection with poorer urban streets within the area of University policing.

### Phase 2: escalation and repeated imprisonment, 1849-1850

Date	Record	Age	Address	Officer / proctor	Outcome	Days	Remarks
19 Feb 1849	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Edwards	Admonished and discharged		Has been asked to church. Threatened if

							found again.
23 Feb 1849	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Edwards	Two weeks	14	
15 Mar 1849	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Edwards	One week	1	
17 Apr 1849	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Stoke	Two weeks	14	
11 May 1849	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Stoke	One week	7	
22 Oct 1849	Vol. 2 / No. 778	22		Latham	Admonished and discharged		
22 Apr 1850	Vol. 3 / No. 25	24	Short Street	Theed,	One week	7	Used abusive language
11 Oct 1850	Vol. 3 / No. 25	24	No 2 Short Street	Fenwick	Discharged by VC		

By 1849 the pattern hardens. Warnings continue, but two-week sentences appear repeatedly. The remark that she had been asked to church and threatened if found again suggests an attempt at moral admonition alongside punishment.

### Phase 3: later record, violence/abuse notes and child references, 1851-1856

Date	Record	Age	Address	Officer / proctor	Outcome	Days	Remarks
11 Nov 1851	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30	No 2 Wellington Road	Nine	Two weeks	14	With a child said to be in need of nursing,
27 Nov 1851	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Barnard Smith	Five weeks	35	used very abusive language. Was also very. Violent and abusive when committed by V.C.
12 Feb 1852	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Barnard Smith	One week	7	
27 Feb 1852	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Adams	Three weeks	21	speaking to a gownsman,
26 Mar 1852	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Nine	One week	7	
3 May 1852	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Bainbridge	One week	7	speaking to a gownsman,
2 Feb 1853	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Power	One week	7	
4 May 1853	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Clark	Three weeks	21	
7 Mar 1854	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30	No. 18 Wellington Road	Long	Admonished and discharged		She promises to go home
28 Mar 1854	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Bright	Two nights	2	Child 4 years old
8 May 1855	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Luard	Admonished and discharged; 4 weeks if caught again this term		Came quietly
30 Nov 1855	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Wolf	One week	7	Came quietly
5 May 1856	Vol. 3 / No. 74	30		Picton	Two weeks	14	

The later record is particularly revealing. Peters is recorded at Wellington Road, is described as being with a child in need of nursing, and is several times noted for abusive or violent language. These details provide rare glimpses of domestic responsibility, distress and confrontation within the otherwise formulaic committal books.

### 4. Remarks and Qualitative Evidence

Date	Outcome	Remark
19 Feb 1849	Admonished and discharged	Has been asked to church. Threatened if found again.
22 Apr 1850	One week	Used abusive language
11 Nov 1851	Two weeks	With a child said to be in need of nursing,
27 Nov 1851	Five weeks	used very abusive language. Was also very. Violent and abusive when committed by V.C.
27 Feb 1852	Three weeks	speaking to a gownsman,
3 May 1852	One week	speaking to a gownsman,
7 Mar 1854	Admonished and discharged	She promises to go home
28 Mar 1854	Two nights	Child 4 years old
8 May 1855	Admonished and discharged; 4 weeks if caught again this term	Came quietly
30 Nov 1855	One week	Came quietly

The remarks are especially significant because they move beyond the bare formula of charge and sentence. They include references to being asked to church, threats of future punishment, abusive language, violence when

committed by the Vice-Chancellor, speaking to a gownsman, the presence of a child, promises to go home, and occasions on which she came quietly. Together these notes reveal both the moral language of the authorities and the human complexity of Peters's circumstances.

## 5. Addresses and the Geography of Surveillance

Mary Ann Peters's recorded addresses place her in a shifting geography of poorer Cambridge streets. Abbey Street is named in the earliest entries, followed by repeated references to Short Street. Later she is recorded at No. 2 Wellington Road and No. 18 Wellington Road. These addresses matter because the Spinning House records were not simply neutral lists of offences: they document the active surveillance of particular parts of the town and particular categories of women. Peters's movement between these addresses suggests that she remained within the social world most exposed to the proctors' attention.

## 6. Punishment, Escalation and Recurrence

The chronology shows a familiar rhythm: initial dismissal or admonition, repeated one-week sentences, periods of two-week imprisonment, and later more severe punishments including three and five weeks. The spreadsheet total of 262 days in custody shows the cumulative burden of what might otherwise appear to be short sentences. A single week may seem minor in isolation; repeated across nearly a decade it becomes a major interference in a woman's adult life.

The recurrence of apprehension also points to the limited effectiveness of the system. If the object was deterrence, Peters's repeated returns suggest failure. If the object was removal from public space, the effect was only temporary. The system punished repeatedly but did not resolve the social and economic circumstances that made repeated arrest possible.

## 7. Gender, Poverty and Town-and-Gown Discipline

Peters's case illustrates the gendered character of the Spinning House. The charge is almost always streetwalking, and several remarks refer directly to interaction with gownsmen. The burden of discipline fell on the woman accused of soliciting or being visible in public space, while the male undergraduate or gownsman appears only as a context for her arrest. The records therefore expose the unequal moral economy of the University town: women from poor backgrounds were made visible, named, punished and counted; the men involved were largely not.

## 8. Historical Significance

Mary Ann Peters is historically significant for several reasons. First, the length and density of her record make her one of the more important individual case studies in the Spinning House material. Second, her case links rural origin, urban poverty, prostitution, motherhood or childcare, and University discipline. Third, the remarks attached to her entries provide rare evidence of emotion, confrontation, compliance and moral intervention. Fourth, her addresses connect the institutional record to the lived geography of nineteenth-century Cambridge.

Her record also helps to test the purpose and effectiveness of the Spinning House. The institution was capable of repeated punishment, but the repetition itself demonstrates failure as much as control. Peters's history is therefore not merely the record of one woman's apprehensions; it is evidence of a system that managed poverty and prostitution through short-term confinement rather than social remedy.

## 9. Conclusion

Mary Ann Peters emerges from the records as a local working-class woman repeatedly exposed to the coercive powers of the University. From Harlton to Abbey Street, Short Street and Wellington Road, her record traces the movement of a vulnerable woman through the social and disciplinary landscape of Victorian Cambridge. The spreadsheet's summary of 44 arrests over 114 months and 262 days imprisonment makes her a major case study for understanding the Spinning House. Her experience illuminates the relationship between poverty, gender, prostitution and town-and-gown authority, and deserves to stand alongside Ann Ashbury/Ashby as one of the clearest individual examples of repeated University policing.

## Appendix: Complete Dated Apprehension Table

Date	Vol/No	Age	Birthplace	Address	Officer	Charge	Outcome	Days	Remarks
13 Nov 1846	2/703	21	Harlton	Abbey Street	Saunders	Streetwalking	Dismissed not having been seen before		
21 Nov 1846	2/703	21	Harlton		Brummell	Streetwalking	One week	7	
4 Dec 1846	2/703	21	Harlton	Abbey Street	Atlay	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		
6 Dec 1846	2/703	21	Harlton	Abbey Street	Saunders	Streetwalking	One week	7	
14 Dec 1846	2/703	21	Harlton		Saunders	Streetwalking	One week	7	
3 Feb 1847	2/703	21	Harlton		Saunders	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		
17 Feb 1847	2/703	21	Harlton	Short Street	Kingsley	Streetwalking	One week		
1 Apr 1847	2/703	21	Harlton		Saunders	Streetwalking	One week	7	
15 Apr 1847	2/703	21	Harlton	Short Street	Brummell	Streetwalking	One week	7	
11 May 1847	2/703	21	Harlton	Short Street	Kingsley	Streetwalking	One week	7	
13 Dec 1847	2/703	21	Harlton		Bunch	Streetwalking	Admonished and released		
12 Jan 1848	2/703	21	Harlton		Williams	Streetwalking	Admonished and released		
20 Jan 1848	2/778	22	Harlton	Short Street	Williams	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		
3 Feb 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Williams	Streetwalking	One week	7	
11 Feb 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Bunch	Streetwalking	Admonished and released		
22 Feb 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Williams	Streetwalking	Admonished and released		
6 Mar 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Bunch	Streetwalking	One week	7	
22 Mar 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Bunch	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		
1 Apr 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Williams	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		
15 May 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Williams	Streetwalking	One week	7	
27 May 1848	2/778	22	Harlton		Williams	Streetwalking	Two weeks	14	
19 Feb 1849	2/778	22	Harlton		Edwards	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		Has been asked to church. Threatened if found again.
23 Feb 1849	2/778	22	Harlton		Edwards	Streetwalking	Two weeks	14	
15 Mar 1849	2/778	22	Harlton		Edwards	Streetwalking	One week	1	
17 Apr 1849	2/778	22	Harlton		Stoke	Streetwalking	Two weeks	14	
11 May 1849	2/778	22	Harlton		Stoke	Streetwalking	One week	7	
22 Oct 1849	2/778	22	Harlton		Latham	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		
22 Apr 1850	3/25	24	Harlton	Short Street	Theed,	Streetwalking	One week	7	Used abusive language
11 Oct 1850	3/25	24	Harlton	No 2 Short Street	Fenwick	Streetwalking	Discharged by VC		
11 Nov 1851	3/74	30	Harlton	No 2 Wellington Road	Nine	Streetwalking	Two weeks	14	With a child said to be in need of nursing,
27 Nov 1851	3/74	30	Harlton		Barnard Smith	Streetwalking	Five weeks	35	used very abusive language. Was also very. Violent and abusive when committed by V.C.
12 Feb 1852	3/74	30	Harlton		Barnard Smith	Streetwalking	One week	7	
27 Feb 1852	3/74	30	Harlton		Adams	Streetwalking	Three weeks	21	speaking to a gownsman,
26 Mar 1852	3/74	30	Harlton		Nine	Streetwalking	One week	7	
3 May 1852	3/74	30	Harlton		Bainbridge	Streetwalking	One week	7	speaking to a gownsman,
2 Feb 1853	3/74	30	Harlton		Power	Streetwalking	One week	7	
4 May 1853	3/74	30	Harlton		Clark	Streetwalking	Three weeks	21	

7 Mar 1854	3/74	30	Harlton	No. 18 Wellington Road	Long	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged		She promises to go home
28 Mar 1854	3/74	30	Harlton		Bright	Streetwalking	Two nights	2	Child 4 years old
8 May 1855	3/74	30	Harlton		Luard	Streetwalking	Admonished and discharged; 4 weeks if caught again this term		Came quietly
30 Nov 1855	3/74	30	Harlton		Wolf	Streetwalking	One week	7	Came quietly
5 May 1856	3/74	30	Harlton		Picton	Streetwalking	Two weeks	14	