

Ann Ashbury (Ashby): A Life in the Cambridge Spinning House Records

Personal Details

Item	Details
Name	Ann Ashbury (also recorded as Ashby)
Age when first recorded	25–26
Birthplace	Haddenham, Cambridgeshire
Residence	Wellington Row (occasionally recorded as No. 33 or No. 18 Wellington Row)
Occupation/Background	Formerly worked for J. Drage; at one point stated to have lived with Aunt Elwood at Trumpington
Principal Charge	Streetwalking
Period Covered	October 1847 – April 1859
Duration of Record	138 months
Recorded Apprehensions	40 times
Total Days Imprisoned	336 days (approximately 11 months)

Apprehensions and Punishments, 1847–1850 (Volume 2)

Date	Punishment / Outcome	Days
21 Oct 1847	Admonished & discharged	–
11 Nov 1847	Admonished & discharged	–
12 Jan 1848	Admonished & discharged	–
20 Jan 1848	Admonished & discharged	–
22 Feb 1848	Admonished & discharged	–
30 Apr 1848	Admonished & discharged	–
15 May 1848	Admonished & discharged	–
25 Oct 1848	Admonished & discharged	–
9 Nov 1848	Admonished & discharged with threats of severe punishment if brought back again	–
Nov 1848	Admonished & discharged	–
7 Feb 1849	Two weeks	14
24 Oct 1849	Two weeks	14
7 Nov 1849	Three weeks	21

24 Nov 1849	One week	7
8 Feb 1850	Two weeks	14
15 Feb 1850	One week	7
23 Feb 1850	Four weeks	28

Subtotal

17 apprehensions; 105 days imprisonment

Apprehensions and Punishments, 1850–1851 (Volume 3)

Date	Punishment / Outcome	Days
22 Apr 1850	One week	7
14 May 1850	Discharged by Vice-Chancellor	–
12 Oct 1850	Discharged by Vice-Chancellor	–
14 Oct 1850	Two weeks	14
1 Nov 1850	One week	7
9 Nov 1850	Two weeks	14
11 Dec 1850	Discharged by Vice-Chancellor	–
3 Feb 1851	One week	7
27 Feb 1851	Admonished & discharged	–
4 Mar 1851	One week	7
13 Mar 1851	Two weeks	14
5 Apr 1851	One week	7
7 May 1851	Two weeks	14
5 Jun 1851	Six weeks	42

Remark: "Made resistance to the proctor."

Subtotal

14 apprehensions; 133 days imprisonment

Apprehensions and Punishments, 1851–1859 (Volume 3 continuation)

Date	Punishment / Outcome	Days
20 Oct 1851	Admonished & discharged	–
13 Nov 1851	Three weeks	21
27 Feb 1852	One week	7
16 Mar 1852	Two weeks	14
22 Nov 1852	One week	7
23 Feb 1855	Four weeks	28
8 May 1855	Two weeks	14
30 Oct 1858	Admonished & discharged	–
1 Apr 1859	One week	7

Remark (23 Feb 1855): "Came very quietly."

Subtotal

9 apprehensions; 98 days imprisonment

Summary of Outcomes

Outcome	Number
Admonished & discharged	13
Discharged by Vice-Chancellor	3
One week imprisonment	9
Two weeks imprisonment	8
Three weeks imprisonment	2
Four weeks imprisonment	2
Six weeks imprisonment	1
Total apprehensions	40
Total imprisonment (days)	336

Chronology of Apprehensions

Phase One: Repeated Warnings (1847–1848)

The earliest entries show a striking degree of leniency. Between October 1847 and November 1848 Ashbury was apprehended repeatedly but almost invariably admonished and discharged.

This pattern suggests that the authorities initially regarded her as someone who might be reformed through warning rather than punishment. The repeated nature of the warnings is itself significant. By November 1848 she was being discharged "with threats of severe punishment if brought back again," indicating growing frustration among the proctors.

Yet the warnings failed to deter further appearances.

Phase Two: Escalating Punishment (1849–1851)

Beginning in February 1849 the authorities increasingly turned to imprisonment. Sentences of one, two and three weeks became common. By February 1850 Ashbury was receiving progressively longer periods of confinement, culminating in a four-week sentence.

The period from 1850 to 1851 represents the height of official intervention. Fourteen apprehensions were recorded in just over a year. Sentences became more severe and the authorities occasionally recorded observations on her behaviour.

One entry notes that she "made resistance to the proctor," suggesting either an attempt to evade arrest or open defiance of authority. Such remarks are unusual and provide rare glimpses of individual agency within otherwise formulaic records.

The climax came in June 1851 when she received a sentence of six weeks, the longest punishment recorded in her case.

Phase Three: Persistence and Decline (1851–1859)

Despite increasingly severe punishments, Ashbury continued to appear before the authorities.

The later entries show that imprisonment remained the preferred sanction, although the intervals between arrests grew longer. In 1855 she received another four-week sentence. On this occasion the clerk recorded that she "came very quietly," a revealing contrast with the earlier note about resistance.

By the late 1850s her appearances had become less frequent. The final recorded apprehension occurred in April 1859, when she received a sentence of one week.

Whether this marks a genuine change in circumstances, a move away from Cambridge, advancing age, illness or merely the survival of records cannot now be determined.

Wellington Row and the Geography of Poverty

Ashbury's repeated association with Wellington Row is highly significant.

Wellington Row and the adjoining Wellington Street formed part of a district repeatedly linked with poverty, overcrowding and prostitution in nineteenth-century Cambridge. The Spinning House records reveal a concentration of women from this area among those apprehended for streetwalking.

Ashbury's case therefore illustrates how the University's disciplinary powers were directed disproportionately towards particular neighbourhoods. The geography of arrest was not random. The same streets, courts and terraces recur throughout the committal books, demonstrating how University policing intersected with the social geography of poverty.

Her experience helps place Wellington Row and parts of the Kite as locations where economic vulnerability exposed women to repeated surveillance.

The Limits of the Spinning House System

Ashbury's record demonstrates the fundamental weakness of the Spinning House system.

The institution was designed to remove women deemed morally dangerous from the streets and to deter future offending through imprisonment. Yet Ashbury's forty apprehensions reveal that repeated confinement did not achieve these objectives.

Over eleven and a half years she spent approximately 336 days in custody—almost a full year of her adult life. Despite this extraordinary level of intervention, she continued to reappear before the authorities.

The records suggest that the University successfully punished behaviour but failed to alter the conditions that produced it. If poverty, lack of employment opportunities and social vulnerability lay behind women's involvement in prostitution, imprisonment alone offered no lasting solution.

Ashbury's experience therefore exposes the gap between the intentions of the system and its practical outcomes.

Historical Significance

Ann Ashbury is important for three reasons.

First, she is one of the most frequently apprehended women currently identified in the Spinning House records. Forty recorded apprehensions over 138 months make her an exceptional case.

Secondly, her story provides a rare longitudinal record of one individual's encounters with University authority. Most women appear only briefly in the surviving records. Ashbury can be followed for more than a decade.

Thirdly, her case connects several major themes in Cambridge history: poverty, prostitution, women's lives, Wellington Row, town-and-gown relations and the operation of the Spinning House.

For these reasons, Ann Ashbury should be regarded as one of the key individual case studies through which the history of the Spinning House can be understood.