



Researching English Criminal Ancestors

Michelle Dennis presents the evidence used to reveal the life and fate of her criminal ancestor

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT IT WAS that may have driven our ancestors to take up a life of crime – perhaps boredom, poverty, or opportunity? Having found a petty law breaker in my own family tree, I decided to delve deeper into the English criminal records to find out more.

Mary Ann Stow was born in Greenwich, Kent, England to parents John Stow, a cabinet maker, and Mary Beaver. Unmarried female ancestors are perhaps the most difficult of all our ancestors to research. They appear in baptism and burial records and sometimes it seems, are almost untraceable, leaving behind only breadcrumbs of information to follow. After searching the London, England, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials 1538-1812 on Ancestry, I easily found Mary in the St. Alfege, Greenwich baptism register, www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1624. But then the trail went cold for some time.

Mary was one of nine children born in Royal Hill, Greenwich and to my surprise while browsing the England & Wales Criminal Registers 1791-1892 on Ancestry, www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1590, she appeared in the Maidstone, Kent indexes in October 1844. I was fortunate that Stow is an unusual surname, so when I ran it through the index searching



St. Alfege, Greenwich, Kent, England where Mary Stow was baptised in 1804. (Author's own photo)

for one of her brothers, up came her name! The register stated she was accused of larceny and was sentenced to a year in prison. My curiosity was peaked, and I then consulted the London Old Bailey Online website for more of the story, www.oldbaileyonline.org.

Twelfth Session, 1843—44. 921

said, "The truth is the best; so help me God, half-a-crown and three half-pence is all I took from Shelly."

GUILTY. Aged 19.—*Recommended to mercy by the Jury.—Confined Six Months.*

2554. **MARY ANN STOW** was indicted for stealing 17½ yards of printed cotton, value 7s., the goods of Charles Harris.

CHARLES HARRIS. I am a linen-draper, and live in Brunswick-place, Straitsmouth, Greenwich. I lost some print from my shop before the 3rd of Sept., and again on the 7th—I did not miss it till I saw it at Delaney's, the pawnbroker, three or four days after—it is worth 5s. or 6s.

Cross-examined by Mr. CHARNOCK. Q. Have you any partner? A. No—I lost 17½ yards of pink, but did not miss that—Watkins was the only person in my shop at that time—half a yard has been cut off the print to destroy the mark—I know it by these holes—I could swear to it when I saw it at the pawnbroker's—it had been cut off within two days of being stolen—I do not know the prisoner as a customer—I must have seen her if she came often—the print was in my possession the night before it was stolen, and next morning it was put at the door—I received information soon after that it was stolen.

GEORGE NORTH WATKINS. I am in the prosecutor's service. I missed a piece of lilac print from the door on Saturday, the 7th of Sept., about ten o'clock—I have seen it since—this is it—I know it by the pattern—I saw it safe ten minutes before I missed it—I had not sold it.

Cross-examined. Q. Do you put your sales down in a book? A. No—it is a very common pattern.

MR. HARRIS. This lilac measures about fourteen and a half yards—I lost fifteen yards.

HENRY REARDON. I am shopman to Mr. Delaney, a pawnbroker, at Greenwich. This piece of printed cotton was pawned on the 3rd of Sept. for 4s. by the prisoner—on the 7th she pawned a piece of lilac—I had her detained when she came to redeem the piece pawned on the 7th.

Cross-examined. Q. What time of day was the lilac pawned? A. I presume about the evening—the address on the duplicate is George-street.

BENJAMIN LOVELL (*police-constable R 15*.) I produce some duplicates, which I found in the back bed-room, No. 4, Brand-street, Greenwich, where the prisoner told me she lodged—one of them relates to this print.

PRISCILLA MILLER. My husband is a broker, and lives at No. 4, Brand-street. The prisoner occupied our front sitting-room and back bed-room—I was present when the officer found these duplicates in her bed-room.

Cross-examined. Q. How long have you known her? A. Since the 30th of July, when she took the apartments—her brother's wife always paid me—she is a dressmaker.

(The prisoner received a good character.)

GUILTY. Aged 40.

2555. **MARY ANN STOW** was again indicted for stealing 26 yards of linen cloth, value 1l. 10s.; and 22 yards of printed cashmere, 1l. 16s.; the goods of John Lowe and another:—also, 28 yards of linen cloth, value 1l. 12s.; and 14 yards of silk, 2l.; the goods of John Lowe and another:—also, 69 yards of calico, value 15s., the goods of William Henry Hardman; to all of which she pleaded

GUILTY. Aged 40.—*Confined One Year.* 5 Z

Old Bailey Proceedings Online (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 21 Oct 2020). Oct 1844, trial of Mary Ann Stow (t18441021-2554).