



# Researching English Criminal Ancestors

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

**H**AVE 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](http://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](http://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](http://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.*

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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.

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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.*

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

# THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE OLD BAILEY, LONDON

Although the criminal registers and newspaper articles surrounding Mary's conviction were enlightening, the most accurate record of events were found by searching the Old Bailey Online, [www.oldbaileyonline.org/](http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/) records. This wonderful resource can be searched by either a keyword or name, and details almost 200,000 criminal trials held at London's central criminal court. Here I found two pleadings and convictions for simple larceny for Mary Ann Stow of Greenwich.

The printed session report detailed her crime (stealing drapery materials), the victim (draper Charles Harris), witness statements (draper, pawnbroker, landlady and police constable) and cross examinations. It also

mentions a character reference (good), the final verdict (guilty), sentence (confined one year) and age (40).

This website also provides many research tools and tutorials, on a variety of interesting subjects such as policing in London, categories of indictable offences, how trials were conducted, judges and jury's decisions, trial verdicts, and punishments. It also contains articles on the development of London including the population, environment, social structure, occupations, culture and politics between 1674-1913. Another interesting section focuses on the different communities in London (black, gypsies, homosexual, Irish, Jewish, Huguenot and Chinese). The history of the Old Bailey Courthouse, including maps, is also thoroughly explained.

It appears Mary, aged 40, was indicted for stealing 17 yards of printed cotton from a local draper's shop. Mr Charles Harris of Brunswick Place, Greenwich attested he found his missing cotton in the local pawnshop the following day. Unfortunately for Mary, the pawnshop owner confirmed her as the seller of the stolen material.

Another interesting titbit emerged from Mary's landlord, Mrs Priscilla Miller, who stated that the prisoner occupied her back bedroom, and she was present when the police officer searched her room, and found duplicates of the stolen material there also. She stated Mary, a dressmaker, was of good character, and that her brother had always paid her for the room.

I had previously found reference to Mary in 1840 as a milliner in the UK City and Country Directories 1766-1946 on Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3145](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3145). Then, in the 1841 census on Ancestry, she is living with her widowed mother and sister in Luton Place, Greenwich, [www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8978](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8978).

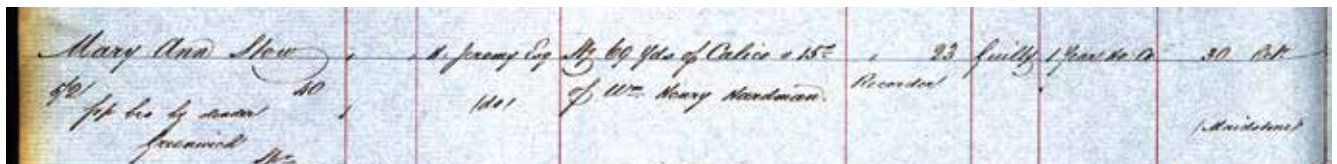
Mary was also convicted of stealing 26 yards of linen, 22 yards of printed cashmere, 14 yards of silk and 69 yards of calico. She pleaded guilty and was sentenced to the House of Correction for one year. The Newgate Calendar of Prisoners 1782-1931, [www.digitalpanopticon.org/Newgate\\_Calendars\\_of\\_Prisoners\\_1782-1931](http://www.digitalpanopticon.org/Newgate_Calendars_of_Prisoners_1782-1931), confirmed her sentence, and described Mary as aged 40, 5ft. 2in., brown hair, and slender. These records are indexed and available to search on Findmypast.

But what led her to this situation, and what other records could I find that would tell me more about her family circumstances? Something didn't ring true, as I had previously found evidence of her brother William's wealth and high standing in the community. He appears in multiple land lease documents held at the National Archives UK which I found by

searching the Discovery Catalogue using the key words "Stow" and "Greenwich" in the search box, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>. So why was



The Milliner and Dressmaker, July 1870".  
(Wikimedia Commons)



Mary Ann Stow, Criminal Registers, England & Wales 1805-1892, HO27,1844



she now stealing dressmaking items?

I started with her parents and soon found her father, John Stow, appearing in the 1816 London Gazette, a fabulous resource which details bankruptcies, insolvencies, military awards and honours, etc. at [www.thegazette.co.uk](http://www.thegazette.co.uk). John appears in an order to make a “Dividend of the Estate and Effects of a Bankrupt” published in the London Gazette on 15 April 1817. Clearly, he had fallen on hard economic times.

John’s cabinet making and upholstery business was previously doing well, and he had been taking in apprentices in 1805 and appeared in the UK Register of Duties Paid for Apprentices’ Indentures 1710-1811 on Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/search/collect/ions/1851](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collect/ions/1851). He also placed business advertisements in London newspapers and appeared in several Greenwich trade directories.

**A Coroner’s inquest was held on Monday last, at the Tyger’s Head, Greenwich, on the body of Mr. John Stow, upholsterer, of No. 3, London-street, who shot himself with a fowling-piece, in his workshop, on Saturday, the 12th instant, about 12 o’clock. It appeared from the evidence, that the deceased had sent his wife and family out of the way. His son on his return home, being unable to obtain admittance, got over a neighbour’s wall, and discovered his father lying on his back, having discharged the gun through his left side. The slug went through the crilling. Deceased said, “Don’t be alarmed, William, I have not hurt myself.” The son then ran to the meat house, and fetched Mr. W. Collingwood, who came and staid with the deceased while he lived. To his enquiries as to the cause of the rash act, deceased replied, “It was nothing about my wife and family.” To a similar question from Mr. Finch, he replied, “Trouble; but don’t ask me any questions; leave me, leave me.” He lingered nearly three hours, and then expired, aged 51, leaving a wife and several children who were dependent on him. Verdict—Shot himself in a temporary fit of insanity.**

Inquest of John Stow, *Bells Weekly Messenger*, 21 July 1823.

But after some years his financial situation became desperate and tragically, in 1823 John shot himself, and died, leaving his wife Mary and their six children alone. Alexander, his youngest son was just eight years old. Searching the Newspapers on Findmypast, I was able to find the Coroner’s Inquest and read the circumstances of his death, <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search/british-newspapers>.

I also consulted The British Newspaper Archive website, [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/search). Another useful online English newspaper site is The Times Archive, [www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/archive](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/archive).

Using the free Index of Historic Births and Deaths on the General Register Office of England and Wales website, [www.gov.uk/research-family-history](http://www.gov.uk/research-family-history), I was able to find and have Mary’s mother Mary Stow’s 1846 English death certificate emailed to me.

The certificate provided the crucial information, that Mary (senior) had died in the Greenwich Jubilee Almshouse, a charity housing project run by the local parish church for destitute or poor members of their

parish. I then emailed the Greenwich Heritage Centre, [www.greenwichheritage.org](http://www.greenwichheritage.org), who generously provided me with the Almshouse Committee Minutes all in a few days by email, stating that Mary (senior) was admitted there on the charity of the St. Alfege parish in December 1844.

Ironically, or perhaps fortunately, the Vestry Minutes also mentioned that a John Stow, possibly a brother or cousin, had previously served on the St. Alfege Committee to manage the Jubilee Almshouses. He was appointed a few years earlier under the guiding hand of the Rev. Masters with five other gentlemen to manage the painting, fixing the iron railings of the houses, and other duties.

The Heritage Centre staff explained that the Almshouse was funded by the Board of Charity Commissioners, and is still in existence today, with their website stating, “This almshouse charity caters for residents of the London Borough of Greenwich, with preference given to women over 50 years of age”.

Both of Mary’s parents and her siblings, appear on the burial register of St. Alfege, but where was Mary? I could not find her in any church burial records. Following her parent’s deaths, I tracked her through the 1851 census on Ancestry where she gave her occupation as a dressmaker lodging with the Spong family at 5 Little Orchard Row, Camberwell, Surrey, [www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8860](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8860).

Now back to her wealthy brother William, who worked with their father John, in London Street, Greenwich, as cabinet makers and auctioneers. A counterpart lease document found on the National Archives UK website, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>, show William taking over the lease of his father’s property in 1834 two years after his father’s death. Using one of my favourite sources, online newspapers, I found the election of William Stow of St. Alfege to churchwarden in 1845, Vicar’s Warden in 1847, and to the Board of Governors in 1848.

Then in 1848, I found a sensational Greenwich Police Court article involving Mr William Stow, churchwarden, summoning his neighbour Ebenezer Carpenter, to answer a charge of “insulting and using abusive language leading to a breach of the peace”. Mr Stow swore that the defendant publicly shouted in the street that Mr Stow “should be ashamed of himself, sending his own mother to the workhouse to die, then to the Jubilee Almshouse to get rid of her and obtain the benefits, and had driven his sister Mary to Newgate, and was a blackguard”. That newspaper article confirmed that the Newgate Criminal Calendar records I had found for my Mary Stow, were correct.

Mr Carpenter denied insulting Mr Stow at first, and then pledged “that nothing of the kind would ever happen again”. The last line of the article was the most telling. “The above charge arises out of church-rate disputes”. It seems Ebenezer was most unhappy with Churchwarden Stow collecting his church rates!

## Mary's Death

So, what of poor young Mary, the would-be victim in all this? It appears, despite her brother's wealth, after her release from Newgate she plied her trade as a dressmaker until her death. After searching the usual death registrations and burial records I finally found her, dying in 1856 in the London House of Correction, aged 51.

So, it seems she continued in her life of petty crime, dying in prison, and was buried in a pauper's grave in Victoria Park Cemetery, Hackney. The England and Wales Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers 1567-1970 include her in their burial register on Ancestry, [www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2972](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2972).

Wealthy brother William Stow died in 1854, and his lengthy will states he left his money, stocks and various properties to his wife Mitty, his sister Catherine, and brother Alexander Stow, my third great grandfather who immigrated to Australia in 1857.

## Other Available Resources

What type of crime may your ancestor have committed? Was it a misdemeanour or minor crime (local petty sessions court), or was it classed as a felony, a more serious offence (Assizes trial)?

English County Records Offices may contain records pertaining to your criminal ancestors. In England, each county archive houses records such as quarter sessions, prison calendars, court minutes, depositions and briefs, formal indictments, Prison receiving books, gaol-keepers journals and prison registers, some being available online on Ancestry and Findmypast. Check the English County Record Office catalogues online. The English Genuki website has links to all the county archives, [www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng](http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng).

The Court records reveal information such as petty sessions records (no jury), quarter sessions (local magistrate and jurors), and records of the county assizes (panel of circuit judges that meet twice a year and hear more serious cases of homicide, infanticide, witchcraft, vagrancy, recusancy, etc). In the assizes the sentences were more likely

death or transportation. Many of these records can be found online, or reported in your ancestor's local town newspaper.

Do you have an English Bobby in the family? If you are fortunate enough to have a policeman as an ancestor, look at the multitude of Police records available online such as employment records, police pensions, detailed personal records, and the UK National Police Force Roll of Honour website, [www.policerollofhonour.org.uk/forces/forces-index.htm](http://www.policerollofhonour.org.uk/forces/forces-index.htm). It's also worth looking at the UK National Archives Research Guides pertaining to Transport Police, the City of London Police Registers from 1832, Colonial Police forces, and of course the Metropolitan Police Force.

You can also try looking at reformatory (convicted juvenile offenders) and residential industrial school (pauper or orphaned children) records. Try the UK National Archives research guide on children, [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/children-care](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/children-care).

Non-criminal court records include Registers of Licenses for publican owners, pedlars/hawkers, slaughterhouses, gamekeepers, as well as inheritance disputes.

For female ancestors try the England Licenses of Parole for Female convicts (1853-1887). A form of parole/community service where prisoners were released into the community until the completion of their sentence, [www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1979](http://www.ancestry.co.uk/search/collections/1979).

If you do find your ancestor in the Criminal Registers, it is also worth considering how changes of the law may have affected them. In 1823 judges were encouraged to consider a reprieve of transportation instead of death, so perhaps your ancestor was transported to the colonies as his or her punishment. Convict records contain a wealth of detail including physical descriptions and many other details.

Findmypast has a terrific collection of criminal registers, prison hulk registers, convict censuses, musters, pardons, tickets of leave, transportation registers, prison calendars, quarter sessions, Australian Convict Ships, Australian Convict Conditional and Absolute Pardons, and much more at [www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com).

If your ancestor was sentenced to transportation to the Australian colonies as their sentence, you may also find mention of them in the fabulously free online historical newspaper and record resource Trove, the National Library of Australia's collection of online newspapers, gazettes, images, maps, diaries,



Homepage of ConnectedHistories.org.

letters and so much more at [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au).

Or were they classified as criminally insane or “Not guilty by reason of insanity”? During the 18th century the test to determine insanity became extremely narrow, with defendants required to prove that they could not distinguish between good and evil and that they suffered from a mental disease which made them incapable of understanding the consequences of their actions. This was not in general use until after 1883 when the Trial of Lunatics Act 1883 was passed allowing the jury to return a verdict that the defendant was guilty, but insane at the time, and could be kept in custody as a “criminal lunatic”.

So, if your ancestor was declared a lunatic, they may have been sent to either London’s Bedlam, or Broadmoor Hospital. Findmypast has a searchable index to the London, Bethlem Hospital Patient Admission Registers and Casebooks 1683-1932 at <https://search.findmypast.co.uk/search-world-records/london-bethlem-hospital-patient-admission-registers-and-casebooks-1683-1932>.

The National Archives UK also has online searchable indexes covering Index to Criminal Petitions (1797-1853), Judges’ Reports on Criminals (1784-1830) as the result of a Petition, Criminals Calendars (1868-1971), Trial records of the Supreme Court of Judicature and Central Criminal Court (1834- ), Criminal appeal case files (1945- ) and Records of

the Justices of Assize (1554-1971). I’ve been lucky enough to find letters from members of my family petitioning the court for the release of their loved ones about to be transported in the criminal petitions records.

For further research on your possible criminal ancestors, you may also like to try the Victorian Crime and Punishment website which includes a prisoner database, case studies, prison records, and information about the courts and judiciary, the use of witnesses, lawyers and juries and sentences and punishment, <http://vcp.e2bn.org/justice>.

And one last under-used online research tool which is always worth searching is the free Connected Histories website, which contains an index to a range of digital resources related to early modern and nineteenth century Britain, [www.connectedhistories.org](http://www.connectedhistories.org).

By typing in my ancestor’s name, Mary Ann Stow, in the search box, it found six results including two larceny convictions at the Old Bailey and four newspaper articles that I had not found using the British Newspaper search. So definitely worth a look! ©

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