



Charles Aston and his Crime



Entry in gaol register for Charles Aston, 22 January 1850 (GA Ref: Q/GC6/2)

The entry for Charles Aston reads as follows:

Date of admission:		January 22 [1850]			
Prisoners No. in index:		497			
Name:		Charles Aston N. ¹			
Late residence and trade if any:		Gloucester, boatman			
Description of prisoner					
Age:	14	Height:	5.1 (ft.ins)	Visage:	Oval
Hair:	Light	Eyes:	Grey	Complexion:	Fresh
Other Marks	Device in blue in and CA lower right arm. G lower left and small moles on back of neck				
Cause of Commitment:	Stealing at the Parish of St. Nicholas on the 14 th Dec 1849, a handkerchief, a loaf of bread and about two pounds weight of cheese, the property of William Matthews.				
By Whom committed:		Mr M. Mayler, Esq.			
By What Court to be tried:		Not given			
By What Court tried and When:		City Sessions, 7 Jan 1850			
Event of Trial:		Not given			
Sentence Passed:		Six weeks hard labour in the House of Correction			
Mem. Of expiration of Term:		1850, Feb 16			
When Discharged or Removed:		1850, Feb 16			
By What Authority:		Term expired			
Previously known character, habits and connexions:		Native of Gloucester. Father is a waterman and his mother goes with the boat. He has also been working with his father. "Independent" ²			
Convicted before and how often:		Not given			
Conduct in Prison:		Orderly			
Remarks:		City Prisoner			

¹ 'N' means 'none' and meant that he could not read or write. 'Imp' meant 'imperfect.

² 'Independent' means he was a member of a non-conformist faith rather than the Church of England.



Background information on Charles Aston

Charles Aston was born at Minsterworth, Gloucester in 1833, the son of William and Mary Aston. He was one of three children (John, 19 and Charlotte, 12) and was baptised at St. Peter's Church, Minsterworth on 2 September 1833. The baptism register describes Charles' father as a 'waterman', meaning he worked on the cargo craft on the River Severn. Usually, this term implies that the person spent most of their working life on the freshwater river from Gloucester northwards into the Midlands, rather than Gloucester southwards (downriver) and the estuary or sea (when the term sailor is used).

The gal register also provides us with a lot of background information on the family. The phrase '*his mother goes with the boat*' implies that William Aston was the master of a vessel and so could take his wife with him, something that wouldn't necessarily have happened if he was just a crewman. Unfortunately we cannot determine whether William Aston owned the vessel or had simply been appointed as its master by the vessel's owners (the ship owning registers held at Gloucestershire Archives do not cover this period). Although they would have lived aboard their vessel on trips, the family also rented a house in Gloucester as they are shown in the 1841 census, as living in New Town, Gloucester (this is now the Tredworth area of the city). In all likelihood, Charles' mother didn't always go with the boat, especially as by this time Charles had a younger sister, Anne, aged 3.

William would obtain a cargo from Gloucester, either via a shipping agent or the boat's owner and then travel up the River Severn to ports such as Tewkesbury, Worcester, Stourport, Bridgenorth or Shrewsbury. At Tewkesbury, the craft could move onto the River Avon to head to Stratford or Warwick. At the destination, the cargo would be offloaded and, if possible, a return cargo taken onboard, for delivery to Gloucester or any other destination downriver. The most common cargo on the river was coal, either going upriver from the Forest of Dean or downriver from the Midlands coalfields. Other cargoes included timber (from the Forest of Dean), stone, raw foodstuffs (wheat, rye, barley or peas, etc) or food products (flour and malt) and materials (iron, timber and bark), animal products (salted/dried meat, dairy produce, hides, etc), salt and ceramics. A typical trip could last anything from one to six weeks and most vessels undertook about 20 trips a year, which meant that most of the time, the family would be on the move, halting overnight along the riverbanks.

This was obviously not conducive to obtaining an education and Charles seemingly had no schooling as the gal register records that he could not read or write. It is likely that none of his siblings attended school either. This life afloat probably also explains why his religion is given as 'independent' when he had in fact been baptised into the Church of England, as watermen rarely attended church because they were



usually on the river. The Mariner's Chapel at Gloucester Docks was built in 1849 to try and rectify this aspect of the watermen's' life.

The boat the family used would have probably been a trow, a local flat-bottomed Gloucestershire cargo craft reminiscent of a barge. These were wooden craft with a single square rigged sail that could be propelled by the wind or more usually and especially when heading upstream, be hauled by a hired team of men called 'Bow haulers'. The trows were generally around 20m (60ft) in length and of 18-36 tonnes (20-40 tons) in weight. The larger ones were of similar length but had a weight of between 40-70 tonnes (40-80 tons). The mast could be easily raised or lowered to pass under bridges. They were a common sight on the Severn and often travelled to Bristol and beyond (although the early designs were totally unsuitable to voyages on the estuary or open sea).



Two Severn trows at Westgate Bridge, Gloucester, 1798. The craft on the left has just passed under the bridge and has raised its mast and sail, while the vessel on the right has lowered its mast and is being hauled downstream under the bridge. (Gloucestershire Archives Ref.No: SRprints/GL5.4aGS)

Charles Aston's Crime

Charles' crime is recorded as:

Stealing at the Parish of St. Nicholas on the 14th Dec 1849, a handkerchief, a loaf of bread and about two pounds weight of cheese, the property of William Matthews.



Charles was tried at the City Sessions on 7 Jan 1850 where he was found guilty and received a sentence of '*Six weeks hard labour in the House of Correction*'. He served this term without any incidents and was discharged from the prison on 16 February 1850.

Other information can be inferred from this entry. Firstly, there would have been at least two, possibly more, judges sitting, one of whom would have been a senior judge. Secondly he served the sentence in the City Gaol on Southgate Street rather than the county gaol (located on the site of the old castle by Gloucester Quay and which is still used as a prison today in 2012). A plan of the City gaol (also known as the Bridewell) is shown below. However by this date, prisoners were often moved between the two buildings, primarily from the city prison to the county one as the city prison was deemed to be unsanitary and unsuitable for large numbers of prisoners (in 1858 it was closed permanently and all prisoners transferred to the county gaol).



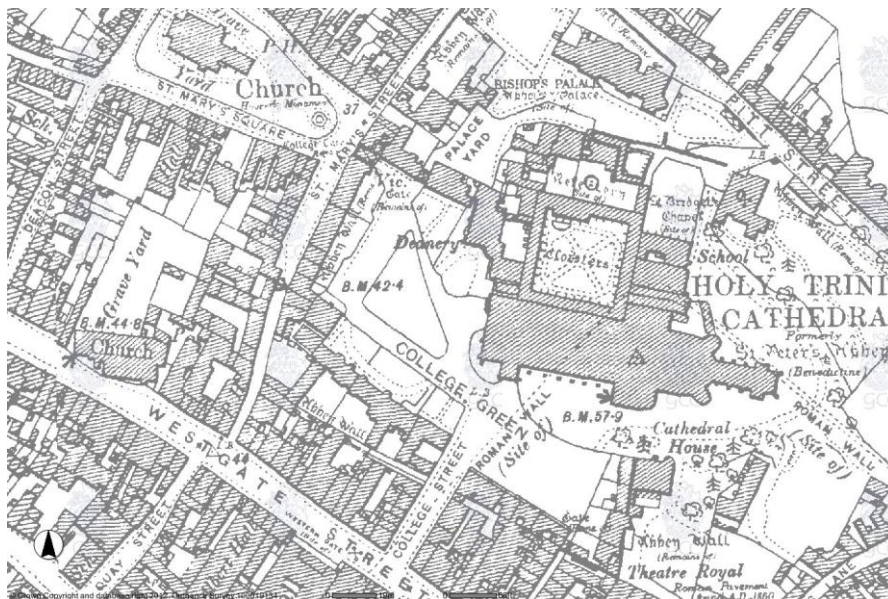
Plan of the ground floor of Gloucester City Prison & Bridewell, 1844

(Gloucestershire Archives: Ref.No: GBR/G3/AG1)



Finally, young Charles also picked the wrong person to steal from as the owner of the bread, cheese and handkerchief was William Matthews, a 29-year old solicitor and attorney in Gloucester. Matthews had his own law firm and was well-versed in law, so no doubt pressed for the case to be tried to the law's fullest extent, possibly to help make a name for himself.

As to other details of the crime we can only speculate. The location of the crime is only given as the parish of St. Nicholas which covered the area where Matthews lived – which in the 1851 census was given as 11 College Green in Gloucester. This is also the business address given for Matthews in *Pigot's Directory of Gloucestershire, 1842* so he obviously maintained his office there as well. As bread, cheese and a handkerchief seem an odd set of things for well-to-do attorney to carry around with him, it would suggest that Charles stole these goods from Matthews' property but, not by breaking in or this would have been given as 'house-breaking' in the 'Cause of Commitment' column.



College Green, Gloucester. Home of William Matthews

The other obvious failing of the gaol register is that it does not record the precise details of how Aston was caught. Presumably it was by a sharp-eyed observer or passers-by or members of the City Police force.

Charles Aston's later life

The archives do reveal some important details about Charles' later life. Perhaps the most important fact is that the records reveal that he went to prison on two more occasions.



In 1860 he was sentenced to four years with hard labour for stealing 7½ cwt of iron from Gloucester, the property of William Montague, an iron founder who operated a foundry on Gloucester Quay (GA Ref.No: Q/GC6/4). The result of the trial was that he was found guilty of larceny (the wrongful acquisition of the personal property of another person). The harsher sentence was firstly that the stolen property was of higher value, but also because it was deemed a second offence. In the entry, the gaol register notes that he had a previous conviction, having served six weeks in the City Prison for stealing pears from Maisemore (possibly from along the river bank). The date of this offence isn't given, suggesting that it was probably the same year.

By this time the 'Other Marks' indicates that the 'A' of the 'CA' tattoo on his left arm had removed or had blurred but he had added 'J.L.C.' and an anchor on his right arm. We can only guess what these initials stand for (they do not appear to relate to his family). He also gave his religion as 'church', which is the usual shorthand for Church of England, so had presumably returned to the Church of England rather than a non-conformist church. Interestingly Charles did not serve the full term of four years for this offence but was released after only a year by order of the Secretary of State. The reason for this is not given.

In December 1867 Charles married Mary Ann Marson of Hartbury in Gloucester St. Mark's Church. By this date, the couple already had one child, Alice Aston, who had been born in Gloucester in 1863. In 1869 a second child, Charles, was born and in 1870, the couples' last child Charlotte was born.

By 1880, the family were living in Kirk's Yard, a small street on the west side of Southgate Street, next to the Victoria Dock. The 1881 census shows that by this date Charles was a 'labourer' and that his two children, Charles and Charlotte (mis-identified as 'Caroline') were at school.



Charles Aston's 1880 home – Kirk's Yard, Gloucester, 1925 OS map



By 1911 Charles was living with his granddaughter, Edith, at Pear Tree Cottage, St. Mary's Square in Gloucester. He died on 23 November 1915 in the Workhouse Infirmary in Gloucester at the ripe old age of 80. The cause of death was given as 'senile decay' – the usual description for someone who simply died of old age.