

Dover Prisoners' Friend

by Terry Sutton

It must be a horrible situation to get into debt, but it was far worse 200 years ago. Just imagine the plight of those committed to the Cinque Ports' debtors' prison in the cold outer walls of Dover Castle. Not only did the poor debtor have to pay exorbitant prison fees, but when released, after payment of the debt, he had to pay £1 to get out.

Conditions in the castle's debtors' prison were deplorable. Their tower was dark, small and damp. The prisoners were provided with neither fire nor food and there was 'no privy accommodation!' They had to rely on friends to bring them food or on charity from passers by. From their prison, overlooking the steps leading to Canons Gate, they were allowed to lower a basket from a small grill where those passing by could donate a crust or two. A bell was attached to the lowering wire to attract attention. And that is how James Neild, a rags-to-riches London jeweller, found the situation when he visited Dover Castle and its debtors' prison in 1770. He also toured similar prisons in Calais and Paris before deciding something must be done to help the poor wretches. He set up the Neild's Charity in 1810 under a trust deed which provided the three per cent dividend on consols to be used for the purchase of bread for the prisoners and, if any cash was left over, it went towards buying their discharge.

James Neild became treasurer of the Society for the Relief of Prisoners, formed in 1773, and as such appealed to the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports to improve conditions for those in the prison. At first nothing was done until the Earl of Guilford (of Waldershare Park) was appointed Lord Warden. He ordered some improvements as was necessary for 'cleanliness and decency.' Lord Guilford also reduced the prisoners' fees but even then those sentenced had to

pay 13/8d to the gaoler on commitment and half a crown (2/6d) a week for lodgings! In the year 1810 Mr. Neild, angry at lack of improvements in the prison, transferred to the mayor and jurats of Dover the £800 deed of trust, with the instruction that Dover Corporation's Chamberlain take steps to supply each day 2 lbs weight of bread to each prisoner. In addition he wanted a record kept in a book to show how his money was being spent. Eventually, after the debtors' prison was closed in October 1855, the £800 capital was devoted to the Dover Almshouse Charity.

Just who was this benefactor of prisoners? James Neild was born at Knutsford in 1744. His father was a linen draper who died young leaving a widow and five children. James went to live with an uncle who was a farmer. But James disliked that work and after two years obtained an appointment as a jeweller's apprentice. When his uncle died, James inherited a little money and set himself up as a jeweller in St. James' Street, London. The venture prospered so when he retired in 1792 he had a considerable fortune.

He had two sons but, apparently, neither got on well with their father. William, the elder, went into law and emigrated to the East Indies as a barrister, returning home broken in health, and died, aged 31, in October, 1810.

The other son John inherited his father's property valued at £250,000, lived in a large house at Cheyne Walk, Chelsea and existed as a miser. When he died, aged 72, he was worth £500,000 most of which he left to Queen Victoria. Such was the end of the family and fortune of James Neild, benefactor of the Dover Castle prisoners. No monument was ever provided for him and his good work. Today he is largely forgotten.

(Sources: Dover Express and English Heritage booklet 'Dover Castle').