



Mansions of Misery: A Biography of the Marshalsea Debtors# Prison

Jerry White

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For ordinary Londoners debt was part of everyday life. The poor depended on credit from shopkeepers and landlords to survive, but the better-off too were often deep in debt to finance their more comfortable, even luxurious lifestyle. When creditors lost their patience both rich and poor Londoners could be thrown into one of the capital's debtors' prisons where they might linger for years. The most notorious of them was the Marshalsea.

In the eighteenth century, the Marshalsea became a byword for misery? in the words of one of its inmates, it was 'hell in epitome'. In 1729 a parliamentary committee of enquiry found that prisoners had been deliberately starved to extort fees from them and that many had died of deprivation and brutality at the hands of the gaolers. In 1768 a mutiny led to an attempt to burn down the gaol.

But the prison was also a microcosm of London life, and where as its poor inmates lived in fear of starvation, the more wealthy and better connected living in the prison's 'masters' wing' carried on as they would in the outside world, employing servants and entertaining guests — a lifestyle that was often funded again by debt. In 1824 Charles Dickens's father was detained here and the experience deeply scarred the writer who lived in fear of debt — and a similar fate — for the rest of his life. And although the Marshalsea was demolished in the 1840s Dickens would immortalise it in his novels, most memorably in *Little Dorrit*.

In *Mansions of Misery* Jerry White, acclaimed chronicler of London life, tells the story of the Marshalsea through the life stories of those who had the bad fortune to be imprisoned there — rich and poor? men and women? spongers, fraudsters and innocents. In the process he gives us a fascinating and unforgettable slice of London life from the early 1700s to the 1840s.

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