



For centuries, London's Fleet Prison was a terrible place. People who owed debts were routinely jailed there. Its history leaves much to be desired:

The Fleet is proved to have been a debtors' prison as early as 1290, but it does not figure largely in London chronicles. It was probably as disgraceful and loathsome as other prisons of those early days, the gaolers [jailers] levying fees from the prisoners, and habeas corpus, that Magna Charta of the unfortunate, being as yet unknown.

The Fleet Prison was formerly held in conjunction with the Manor of Leveland, in Kent, and appears in a grant from Archbishop Lanfranc as part of the ancient possessions of the See of Canterbury, soon after the accession of William the Conqueror. That it was burnt by Wat Tyler's men is only another proof of the especial dislike of the mob to such institutions.

In Queen Mary's time some of the Protestant martyrs were confined here. Bishop Hooper, for instance, was twice thrust in the Fleet, till the fire at Gloucester could be got ready to burn his opinions out of him. His bed there is described as "a little pad of straw, with a rotten covering."

Strype says that about the year 1586 (Elizabeth) the suffering prisoners of the Fleet petitioned the Lords of the Council on the matter of certain grievous abuses in the management of the prison - abuses that were, indeed, never thoroughly corrected. It was the middleman system that had led to many evils.

The warden, wishing to earn his money without trouble, had let the prison to two deputies. These men being poor, and greedy for money, had established an iniquitous system of bribery and extortion, inflicting constant fines and payments, and cruelly punishing all refractory prisoners who ventured to rebel, or even to remonstrate, stopping their exercise, and forbidding them to see their friends.

A commission was granted, but nothing satisfactory seems to have come from it, as we find, in 1593, another groan arising from the wretched prisoners of the Fleet, who preferred a bill to Parliament, reciting, in twenty-eight articles, the misdemeanours and even murders of the obnoxious deputy-warden. ("The Fleet Prison," Old and New London: Volume 2, published in 1878, at p. 404.)

This image depicts an 1808 painting, called *Fleet Prison*, by Rudolph Ackermann. The original is maintained by the National Portrait Gallery, in London.

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Debtor's Prison: Fleet Prison

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