

Cold Bath Fields Prison

THE POEM opposite was found in the papers of the late Mr. William Batt, and is reproduced by kind permission of his grand-daughter, Miss Hilda K. Batt, a London teacher, who writes:—

In 1855 William Batt entered upon the service in which he was to spend almost a half of his life. In those days the prisons were maintained and controlled by the County authorities, and it was not until 1877 that the Government took over all the prisons, and appointed the Prison Commissioners.

Appointment as Assistant Warder was usually only to be obtained by influence and recommendation, and in this capacity Mr. Batt began his official career in 1855 at Cold Bath Fields Prison, otherwise known as the House of Correction.

In the course of a few years, he had won the esteem and regard of the Governor, and he was then appointed to be Chaplain's Warder to the Rev. Stocken, with the privilege of escorting to other prisons in all parts of the country such men as were exchanged or transferred to other prisons.

The duties of Chaplain's Warder seem to have suited him. In this position he acted as secretary, assistant messenger, and, in fact, in any capacity, to help the Prison Chaplain to look after the spiritual welfare of the prisoners. This was a task greatly preferable to the ordinary routine of Warder duty.

One of the outstanding events in the history of the prison was the great fire, when the treadmill house and bakery, together with part of the cell buildings, were totally destroyed. This fire, which gave the whole district a night of excitement and terror, broke out one evening from an unknown cause.

Strangely enough, the granary had only that week been replenished with 700 quarters of corn, the whole of which became involved in the fire. The bakery here provided all the bread used

in the Middlesex County Prisons, the corn being ground by mills driven by the treadmill.

The alarm of fire soon spread, and when the serious nature of the outbreak was realised, all possible help was summoned, and the full strength of the London Fire Brigade was called to the scene. The great gates were thrown open for the engines to pass through, and a strong cordon of Police was thrown round the outside walls to prevent any prisoner escaping, and to keep the crowds of onlookers at a respectful distance. Within the prison there was excitement enough, but under the wise direction of the Governor full control was maintained.

From the first there was no hope of saving the treadmill house and bakery, and the flames broke the outer windows of hundreds of cells. Orders were given to unlock all the doors of those cells that were exposed to the fire, and hundreds of men were thus at large within the building. Some of these knew that an immense store of fresh bread was near at hand, and the whole crowd went headlong in the direction of this bread. The authorities very discreetly left the raiders alone with their unexpected spoil, and whilst the bread was being eaten, suitable arrangements were made for the restoration of order.

The Governor was later complimented on the fact that not a single prisoner managed to escape in the confusion, nor was any seriously injured.

Attendance for duty in those days was from 6.0. a.m. to 6.0. p.m. every weekday, and alternate Sundays and some night duty in addition. Breakfast was taken at the prison, one hour was given for dinner and there was no tea break.

When the prison was closed in 1886 and the staff transferred to Pentonville, Mr. Batt was granted permission to retire instead of making the change.

I cannot take my walk abroad
In under lock and key,
And much the Public I applaud
For all their care of me.

Not more than others I deserve
In fact much less than more,
Yet I have food while others starve
Or beg from door to door.

The honest Pauper in the street
Half naked I behold,
While I am clad from head to foot
And covered from the cold.

Thousands there are who scarce can tell
Where they may lay their head,
But I've a warm and well aired cell
A Bath, good Bookie, and Bed.

While they are fed on Workhouse fare
And grudging their scanty food,
Three times a day, one meal I get
Sufficient, Wholesome, Good.

Thus to the British Public - Health!
Who all my care relieves,
And while they treat us as they do
They'll never want for Thieves.
