

Jonathan Martin

Early Life

Jonathan Martin was born in 1782 in Hexham. He had three brothers and one sister although his sister was killed as a child. Jonathan had a speech disability and didn't talk until he was around 6 years old. He didn't go to school, but he liked to draw and paint. He taught himself to read and write but never learnt to spell correctly!

His mother taught him from a young age that if he sinned or lied, God would punish him. When bad things happened, therefore, he saw it as punishment from God. He also had dreams throughout his life of Hell and God's Judgement.

In the Navy

In 1804 aged 22, Jonathan was press ganged (forced) into the Navy on a ship bound for the Napoleonic wars. He tried to leave his ship several times unsuccessfully. He saw some traumatic incidents on board and according to his 'Life' (a leaflet he wrote about his adventures), he finally made his escape after 6 years with the help of some of his shipmates.



His Religious Views

Jonathan often worried that he wasn't a good Christian and that his sins weren't forgiven. He didn't like the set prayers and readings in the Church of England and so he started going to a Methodist Church where the services were less formal. Jonathan was later expelled, however, because he was too outspoken and critical of the Church leaders. He went to various churches in the area and would sometimes hide in the pulpits and jump up to complain about what was wrong with the service and the priests. This would often end up with him being thrown out of the church.

His Autobiography

Jonathan moved to Darlington and wrote (or dictated) a 56-page leaflet of his life called 'The Life of Jonathan Martin, of Darlington, Tanner, Written by himself'. He spent time travelling around the North East, selling over 14,000 copies of his 'Life' and preaching outside because he had been banned from entering churches.

Warning Signs

In December 1828 Jonathan moved to York and wrote a series of 5 warnings to the clergy of York signed 'Jonathan Martin, Your sincere friend'. One of these was placed on the Quire Screen gates in the Minster. He thought God was going to punish the priests because they were greedy and unspiritual.

The idea of the fire

One night Jonathan had a dream of smoke coming from the top of the Minster. He woke up and thought God was telling him to set the Minster on fire as a warning to the clergy for going to plays, balls, playing cards and drinking wine.

The events of 1st February 1829

On the 1st of Feb 1829 (Candlemas eve) he came into the Minster for the service. At his trial he said of the organ 'I'll have thee down to-night: thou shalt buzz no more'. He then hid behind a tomb. He brought with him a razor, a pocket knife, a candle and some matches. Once the service had finished and the building was locked up, he cut some of the prayer bell rope, made a rope ladder and vaulted over the gate into the Quire. He piled up kneelers, prayer books and music books (but not Bibles which were the 'Word of God') and then lit a candle and set it all on fire.

Making his escape

Jonathan cut off a section of crimson velvet from the bishop's chair and some gold tassels. He also took a Bible so that he would have something to read in prison. He then escaped out of a window in the North Transept at 3 am by tying his rope to a machine used to clean the Minster. The rope he left behind showed his skill in making knots and this linked him to the crime because of his history in the Navy.

Minster damage

The following morning, at 7 am, a choir boy called Robert Swinbank was playing on the ice whilst waiting for the Minster to open. He slipped and fell. As he looked up, he saw smoke coming out of the south west tower. He raised the alarm and eventually more than 12 fire engines were sent for. The roof collapsed which stopped the fire spreading to the rest of the building and it was finally extinguished the following afternoon.

The 14th century oak roof was destroyed along with 66 carved seats, the pulpit and the organ. 21 monuments were damaged and many more were also destroyed.

The Suspect

Jonathan was the prime suspect and a 'wanted' poster with a reward was put out for his arrest. He was eventually captured and brought to trial. He had said that it was a shame the whole Minster hadn't been destroyed because the worship was so idolatrous and superstitious.

The Trial

Jonathan's brothers stood by him. His younger brother John paid for his defence and his brother Richard gave evidence that Jonathan was insane*. He did this because if Jonathan was found to be thinking clearly, he could have been executed. This annoyed Jonathan who said why would God choose a mad man to do his work? The trial focused, not on whether he set the Minster on fire, but whether he understood that what he had done was wrong. Some witnesses gave evidence that he was mad/insane* while others said he had appeared to be a clear-thinking, pleasant man.

* *'Insane' was the word used at the trial.*

