

This is the third of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

'HONEST TOM' MARTIN AND HIS VISIT TO ALL SAINTS' CHURCH IN 1731

A couple of years ago, when looking through some old copies of the *Swanton and Worthing Parish Magazine*, I came across a scrap of paper which I think was probably written by Rev. Andrew Hunter, a rector of Swanton Morley who died in office in 1914. This piece of paper carried a partial transcript of some notes made by a certain 'Tom Martin' when he visited All Saints' Church on Christmas Day 1731. It is only recently that I have both unearthed Tom Martin's notebook and also found out more about him. In fact, very little has been written about him, so I was particularly fortunate to come across a paper called "The ill-gotten library of 'Honest Tom' Martin" by David Stoker. This not only describes how he came to possess one of the most valuable private libraries in England, but also tells us a lot about this extraordinary man.

In this article I shall talk about Tom Martin and his library, and in the next one I shall describe his visit to All Saints'.

Part I

TOM MARTIN AND HIS LIBRARY

The man himself

He was a truly a man of contrasts. He was a skilled and intelligent attorney, but one who hated practising law. Instead he devoted all his energies, together with several fortunes, to his two passions – strong drink and the collection of historical antiquities.



Stoker gives a number of quotations which demonstrate this:

“He is a blunt, rough, honest downright man; of no behaviour or guile; often drunk in a morning with strong beer, and for breakfast, when others had tea or coffee, he had beef steaks or other strong meat. His thirst after antiquities was as great as after liquors: the one injured his fortune, as the other did his health.”

“When he began what he called a frolic, he would never give up whilst his money lasted, but would continue it for days and nights together, treating and carousing with porters, chairmen and persons of the lowest rank, to whom you might find him telling stories and singing songs with every degree of humour suited to his company.”

His constitution must have been quite robust, however, because, in spite of the damage he is supposed to have done to his health, at the age of sixty-five he still had:

“so great a pliancy of limbs that he could turn his foot so as to place a glass of liquor on the sole of it and drink it off.”

Yet in total contrast:

“As an antiquary he was most skilful and indefatigable; and when he was employed as an attorney and genealogist he was in his element... He had the happiest use of his pen, copying, as well as tracing, with dispatch and exactness, the different writing of every era, and tricking arms, seals etc with great neatness. He dated all the scraps of paper on which he made his church notes etc. Some of these began as early as 1721, and ended but the autumn before his death (1771)”

His library

At its height, in about 1761, Martin's private library probably consisted of about 12,000 printed books and several thousand manuscript volumes. In addition, it included many tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of unbound documents. However, although on his own he might have been able to build up a respectable library, he would never have been able to amass such a collection by legal means. The true origin of much of Martin's library lay with his rich elderly friend, Peter Le Neve. The irregular way in which Le Neve's manuscripts came into Martin's possession makes his nickname of 'Honest Tom' seem something of a joke.

Peter Le Neve was a distant cousin of the Le Neves, who provided five rectors for Swanton Morley (and whose memorials are still in the church). He was a great scholar, but he published nothing during his lifetime. However, he had built up an enormous collection of manuscripts, and it was this collection that fell into Martin's hands. Le Neve was a rich but cantankerous and eccentric man, who in his seventies had married a young and strong-willed wife. He had intended his vast collection of manuscripts relating to Norfolk and Suffolk to be made available for public use, with other books and documents to go to a distant relative. However, when he died in 1729, he left an imperfect will and his young wife, Frances, and his executors (one of whom was Tom Martin) could not agree on exactly what fell into each category. The relative wished to sell the books bequeathed to him and eventually there was an auction at which Martin was one of the principal purchasers.

Shortly afterwards, Martin's wife died leaving him with eight young children and within a few months he had solved this domestic crisis by marrying Le Neve's widow. At much the same time, his co-executor, Thomas Tanner was promoted Bishop of St Asaph and moved away. Martin and his new wife moved to the Suffolk village of Palgrave, taking with them the enormous collection that Le Neve had intended for public use. This was nominally until the question of their future custody could be resolved, but they gradually became amalgamated into Martin's library. Tanner did object, but ill health prevented him from doing much about it.

Fortunately, however, Martin did allow Francis Blomefield, a fellow antiquarian, free access to all the material and Blomefield's monumental publication, *An essay towards a topographical history of the county of Norfolk* was largely based on this material. To this day, this ten-volume publication remains the standard reference work.

The fate of the library

By 1762 Martin's profligate life-style and obsessive book-collecting had caught up with him and he was deeply in debt. He was gradually forced to sell off his books. By 1768 he had to invite the London bookseller Thomas Payne to Palgrave to make an offer for whatever books he wanted, although he rather pathetically tried to hide those he valued most.

After his death in March 1771, his widow quite naturally decided to sell off the collection which had dominated her life through two marriages, and had reduced her last years to poverty. The remaining library was dispersed over the next seven or eight years.