



The York Minster Police

York Minster, the magnificent cathedral in the city and county of the same name dates back hundreds of years and is one of the most magnificent buildings in the north of England. As with other major buildings because of the enormous numbers of visitors, the presence of valuable items and significant amounts of money being handled security is a significant problem.

The Minster is however unique, in the UK at least, in having a police force and has probably had a Constable more or less continuously since 1285 although specific reference to a Minster policeman dates from 1855. The office of Minster Policeman derives from that of the Constable of the Liberty - a post which goes back into antiquity and was similar to that of Parish Constable. In 1285 the Minster Close was enclosed by a stone wall some 12 feet high, within this wall the Dean and Chapter were the law and, until 1839 had a Liberty of their own. This Liberty was called the Liberty of Saint Peter and Peter Prison and had its own Chief Constable, constables, coroners, magistrates, bailiffs, stewards and under-stewards.

Minster constables existed long before the great fire of 1829 but that fire, started by the insane Jonathan Martin late at night, was a turning point in the care of the building. At a chapter meeting on 6 March 1829, the Dean and Chapter decreed that 'Henceforward a watchman / constable shall be employed to keep watch every night in and about the cathedral' - one comment indicated that it was pity the last watchman had been dismissed some time before.

The new watchman could have been Thomas Marshall, although the first record of his name appears when the Liberty of St Peter and Peter Prison was abolished in 1839 and its jurisdiction passed to the civil Corporation. We know Marshall was employed by the Dean and Chapter until 1854 on a wage of forty one pounds and twelve shillings per year. The title of Minster Police first occurs in 1855 when William Gladin replaced Thomas Marshall. The fact that Gladin's name replaced Marshall's directly in the records suggests that the latter's post of Constable of the Liberty was identifiable with that of Gladin's post of Minster policeman. If such a conclusion can drawn, it means that the post of Minster Police officer precedes the establishment of Sir Robert Peel's modern day police and the Metropolitan Police in particular. In fact, Sir Robert Peel is said to have examined the Minster

Police before instigating the 1829 Police Act. To an extent this should not come as a complete surprise as Sir Robert's sister was married to the then Dean, William Cockburn. Needless to say on visits to her at the Minster he would almost certainly have seen the Minster Police on duty. Today, the Minster Police watch over upwards of 2,000 people at any one time, dealing efficiently and effectively with whatever problems may arise. At night they patrol the streets around the base of the Minster, taking care of Minster property and keeping order, sometimes a dangerous and difficult job, requiring patience and good humour. Their base is a police office which has recently opened off the North Choir Aisle marked by two old-fashioned trunkchons hanging next to the door.

Adapted from an article by P.C John Key, York Minster Police

A book, **'Close Encounters: Reminiscences of a York Minster Policeman'** looks at life behind the scenes in the Minster's own Police force. York Minster is one of only two cathedrals in the world to have its own Police, and Minster Policeman John Key has published a collection of his highlights in the force. John Key has been a member of the Minster's Police for 21 years, and his book features stories of a woman smuggling a dog into the Minster in her blouse, Civil War ghosts, and unusual intruders in the Minster's grounds. John also writes about the history of the Minster Police. There have been constables at the Minster since 1285, and the Police force was formed in 1829, following the great fire of February 1829. The Chancellor of York Minster, Canon Glyn Webster said, "John has written a lively and entertaining series of stories about the life of a Minster Policeman. Anyone who loves the Minster, or wants to know more about one of its more unusual departments should buy this book, especially as all profits go towards Martin House hospice." John Key said, "I wrote this book to let people know about the Minster Police force, to explain who we are and what we do. We are Police Officers in a non-Home Office force, and that's rather extraordinary. The Minster Police force, and the constables before them, have been looking after the Minster for over 700 years, and this is the first book that's been written about this distinctive force." "Close Encounters" is available at the Minster Shop, priced £3.99, and all proceeds go to Martin House, Yorkshire's hospice for children and young people. Contact 01904 557219 or email

shop@yorkminster.org for details on how to buy.

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Thanks to Paul Dew