

In the spring of 1909, Dr. Arnold Henry Page, Dean of Peterborough Cathedral, was visiting the cathedral library when he noticed a piece of paper on the floor. When he picked it up, he realized it was a leaf from *The Golden Age*¹ marked with 'X3, 23.'² It was a curious event, and he recollected seeing a visible gap in the library shelves during his preliminary inspection of the cathedral upon becoming Dean the previous year. At that time, he had thought the books were on loan or temporarily taken away and dismissed any niggles of concern.³ Now, he thought better and alerted the police and members of the church chapter.⁴

The library at Peterborough Cathedral contained 8,000 volumes of rare and valuable works, all of which had been cataloged several years prior.⁵ It occupied a room above the west front porch, and could be approached by two staircases located at either end. The door to the library had an old lock on it, and Dean Page knew of at least 4 keys in existence—one for himself, and the others belonging to the Bishop, the canon-in-residence (selected every 3 months, also the acting librarian), and the head verger.⁶ Peterborough Cathedral was (and still is) a popular tourist attraction, and people milling around the front porch generally did not arouse the suspicions of the cathedral staff.⁷

Dean Page decided to consult with Cosmo Alexander Gordon, a librarian and book expert. Gordon checked each book in the library against the catalogue and found that in

¹ At the time of writing, the author was unable to identify the specific *The Golden Age* work.

² "Peterborough Cathedral Library: The Accused before the Magistrates," *Times*, February 22, 1912.

³ "Disappearance of Priceless Books," *Evening Post*, April 6, 1912.

⁴ Page, Arnold, "Peterborough Cathedral Library: To the Editor of the *Times*," *Times*, February 17, 1912.

⁵ "Disappearance of Priceless Books."

⁶ "The Accused before the Magistrates."

⁷ "Peterborough Cathedral Library: Theft of Rare Books," *Times*, February 15, 1912.

addition to missing individual volumes, some bound collections also had been mutilated by the removal of pamphlets from the binding.⁸ In total, 215 works were missing,⁹ many of them early or first editions and all dating from the 15th to 17th centuries.¹⁰ The Americana category was most severely culled.¹¹

A list of the missing items was inconspicuously compiled and distributed to the police, chapter members, and other helpful parties in June 1910. Among the reported missing were: Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), a quarto of *Copie of a Letter of Queen Elizabeth to the Right Honourable the Earle of Leicester* (1586), John Dryden's *Year of Wonders* (1666), and a quarto of Henry VIII's *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (1521). While the lost books were valuable, the cathedral library's most famous or unique possessions, fortunately, were intact.¹²

Police investigators determined that thefts at the cathedral library had been taking place since 1904. The value of the stolen books and pamphlets were estimated at £100 and a warrant was issued in December 1910 for the arrest of John Edward Tinkler,¹³ who was 46 years old and a father of 2 children.¹⁴ However, Tinkler, a clergyman's son, and himself a former clerical professional,¹⁵ managed to avoid capture for more than 14 months.¹⁶

⁸ "Disappearance of Priceless Books."

⁹ "Peterborough Cathedral Library: The Robberies of Books," *Times*, April 12, 1912.

¹⁰ "Theft of Rare Books."

¹¹ "Peterborough Cathedral Library: Expert Evidence," *Times*, March 1, 1912.

¹² Theft of Rare Books."

¹³ "The Accused before the Magistrates."

¹⁴ "Robbing Libraries," *Evening Post*, June 5, 1912.

¹⁵ "Expert Evidence."

¹⁶ "The Accused before the Magistrates."

A bookseller, Henry Newton Stephens of Messrs. Stephens, Son, and Stiles, had known Tinkler for 20 years as an expert on antiquarian books.¹⁷ Tinkler began dealing with books as an Assistant Librarian at Chetham's Library in Manchester, and worked his way up to Librarian. He was dismissed from his post after using the Chetham's Hospital stationery to conduct suspicious business transactions with book dealers in Munich, Berlin, and New York. The hospital administration sent him to California, where he worked for 5 years. After that, Tinkler returned to Chetham's Library with £200 to help cover his debt to the Hospital and resumed using their books. When Tinkler was caught stealing a book autographed by Lord Byron, he was forbidden from visiting the library again.¹⁸

Tinkler definitely had the necessary knowledge to select items that were valuable and readily marketable (especially to American book collectors).¹⁹ At his trial, he was described as "the very quintessence of cunning and as the incarnation of book theft."²⁰ He sold the stolen books to dealers, including Stephens, in England and the United States. When asked about his sources, he would tell the dealers vaguely that he had bought the books from an old library in Kent or from a gentleman in London.²¹

Tinkler bragged to a former cotenant, John Watts, about stealing books from churches and, particularly, selling books from Peterborough, including one to a man named Levine or Devine for £800. He also showed Watts a key ring, declaring that he had one key that would

¹⁷ "Expert Evidence."

¹⁸ "Learned Book Thief Made \$10,000 a Year," *New York Times*, April 23, 1912.

¹⁹ "Expert Evidence."

²⁰ "Learned Book Thief."

²¹ "Expert Evidence."

open any church door in England. When Watts produced a bar of soap, intending to make a mold of the skeleton key, Tinkler panicked and refused to say any more.²²

Tinkler recruited an acquaintance, Arthur William Champion, a machinist, to act as a front man and sell books for him at various shops in London. The two often met in pubs to conduct their business, during which Tinkler casually discussed his trips to the United States for selling books. Tinkler told Champion that he owed money due to some bad luck in business dealings, and therefore could not go around to the shops himself.²³

On February 6, 1912, Detective Inspector Varmer accompanied Champion to the Marquis of Cornwallis pub and informed Tinkler of the warrant for his arrest. A nonchalant Tinkler professed his innocence, "When I know more about it I may help you, but I have never been to Peterborough." Eventually, during the course of police interrogation, he admitted familiarity with several titles, "I recollect some of the books mentioned in the warrant have been through my hands recently." Tinkler then offered to help the police, "When I know more about the particulars in this case I may be able to help you to throw some light on it."²⁴ Ultimately, Tinkler did not volunteer much assistance to the police towards the recovery of the stolen books.²⁵

After Tinkler's arrest, London dealers returned about 50 of the stolen books to Peterborough police.²⁶ Gordon examined these books and found a few with the signature of the

²² *Ibid.*

²³ "Expert Evidence;" "The Accused before the Magistrates."

²⁴ "The Accused before the Magistrates."

²⁵ "Learned Book Thief."

²⁶ "Theft from a Cathedral," *Evening Post*, February 17, 1912.

librarian from the time when Bishop White Kennet²⁷ donated his book collection to the cathedral library.²⁸ There was also evidence of library labels and numbers as well as chemicals used to obliterate Bishop Kennet's autograph.²⁹ Police also were able to trace some of the stolen books to the United States, such as a copy of Boccaccio's *Tragedy of Princes* (1553).³⁰ One book was apparently sold to J. Pierpont Morgan for 4 figures in pounds sterling.³¹

Tinkler was charged for the thefts from the Peterborough Cathedral Library and remanded to Northampton Gaol on February 29.³² On April 22, he received a 3-year sentence to hard labor.³³

²⁷ "Expert Evidence."

²⁸ Sweeting, W.D. *The Cathedral Church of Peterborough: A Description of Its Fabric and a Brief History of the Episcopal See*. 2nd ed. London: Bell and Sons, 1926. Project Gutenberg edition.

²⁹ "Expert Evidence."

³⁰ "Stolen Books Came Here," *New York Times*, February 17, 1912.

³¹ "Morgan Has a Stolen Book," *New York Times*, March 15, 1912.

³² "Expert Evidence."

³³ "Learned Book Thief."