

SAINT MARTIN – *Dover's Patron Saint* 31

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WHO WAS THIS GUY, St. Martin, Dover's patron saint, whose name is so much to the forefront in our town? In the Great East Window in St. Mary's Church he is depicted as a warrior saint with a goose clucking around his feet. Yet he was more a conscientious objector than a warrior.

Martin was a native of Sabaria, a town of Pannonia, born in the fourth century, the son of an army officer. Because he was the son of a veteran, at the age of fifteen he was forced to join up himself - a sort of early-day conscript. Yet he disliked the life of learning to kill.

It was while Martin was stationed at Amiens that he made a name for himself in an incident which is depicted on our Coat of arms, 1,500 years later.

One freezing morning, at the gate of Amiens, he noticed a poorly-clothed, old beggar pleading for alms. Rather like today, the passers by tried to ignore the old man. But not Martin. He had no cash at hand, only his armour, sword and cloak. Jumping from his horse he slashed his own cloak in two and gave one half to the beggar, while wrapping himself in the remaining section. Those who saw this generosity were ashamed. That night, so it is told, Martin had a dream in which he saw Jesus dressed in the half of the cloak that he had given to the beggar.

Martin did not immediately leave the army. Probably men could not buy themselves out in those days. But when he was about twenty there was a barbarian invasion of Gaul. With his comrades, Martin paraded before his commander-in-chief to collect his war bounty. When it was his turn to go forward, Martin told his commander, "I have served you as a soldier. Now let me go to serve Christ. Give my bounty to the others who are going to fight for you but I am a soldier of Christ and it is not lawful for me to fight."

Martin was accused of cowardice but he

responded by saying that he was willing to go into the battle line without arms and advance against the enemy in the name of Christ. Instead he was thrown into prison but shortly afterwards was honourably discharged from the army. His killing days were over.

He went from the army to Poitiers where St. Hilary welcomed him into the church. For his beliefs he got into further trouble, after converting his mother to Christianity. For years he lived in virtual isolation on an island in the Gulf of Genoa. Eventually he returned to Gaul, where he tried to pursue his vocation in solitude, but about A.D. 371 the people of Tours demanded Martin as their bishop. He wanted none of it but they tricked him into visiting Tours and he was acclaimed bishop by the local clergy and people.

He lived in a cell near the church but had so many visitors that he retired to an isolated abbey where, it is claimed, he carried out many miracles.

He was no member of the Green Party, judging by the number of trees he had chopped down. This was because many people in Gaul worshipped trees as idols. One of his reported "miracles" was to have himself tied to a tree, on the dangerous leaning side, and then order the woodcutters to get to work. The tree, so we are told, always fell the other way!

Saint Martin had a knowledge about his approaching death. His disciples pleaded with him not to die but, on 8 November 397, in a remote part of his diocese, he departed this life and was buried a couple of days later at Tours, where a chapel was built over his grave.

Why Martin should have been adopted as Dover's patron saint is difficult to understand, especially as Dover was a garrison town and Martin was not a particularly good PR story for the army.

But perhaps, through his vocation, he was.