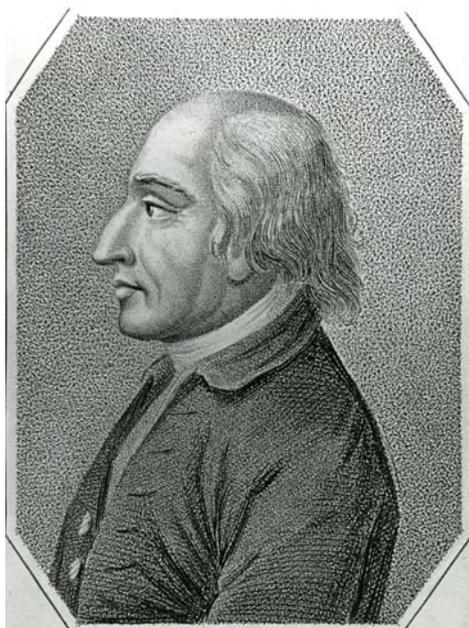


## The Mystery of the Sinister Schoolteacher: Eugene Aram

Lynn Museum has a collection of images and artefacts relating to Eugene Aram on display in The Old Gaol House. Contact the Museum for details on 01553 775001.

On Monday August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1759, former Lynn schoolteacher Eugene Aram was executed at York for the murder of Daniel Clark.

Eugene Aram was born in 1704 in the Yorkshire village of Ramsgill. He was the son of a gardener, but from a young age he showed a love of learning. He was interested in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and was almost entirely self-taught. Unfortunately he was unable to afford an academic lifestyle so he moved to London to become a clerk. Ill-health forced him to return to the north, where he married and became a teacher.



Eugene Aram

By the time he was 30, Aram was living in Knaresborough. It was while living there that Aram befriended Daniel Clark. Daniel Clark was a young shoe-maker from Knaresborough and he disappeared on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1744. He had recently married a young woman who had a fortune in trust and Clark appeared to be living above his means in expectation of the wealth that was soon to be his. Before he disappeared Clark had obtained a number of

valuable goods on credit and it was initially suspected that he had run off with these goods. The last people to be seen with Clark prior to his disappearance were his friends, Eugene Aram and Richard Houseman (a flax-dresser). Clark's creditors believed that his friends had helped him to escape, so Aram's garden was searched and some of the missing goods were found. Aram and the other friends who were discovered to have Clark's property claimed they were security for loans made to Clark.

Clark's creditors issued the following description in the York Courant in an effort to trace him:

*"Whereas Daniel Clarke, of Knaresborough, a thin, pale looking, pock-broke man, about five foot six or eight inches high, aged about 23 years, has a very great impediment and stammering in his speech, went from Knaresborough on Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> of February, as last, and defrauded several Persons of large Quantities of Goods ... Whoever can give an account of the said goods... shall receive Fifteen Pounds Reward... and no Questions asked."*

Suspicious of Aram were apparently raised when he began paying off his debts but there was not enough evidence to charge him. Aram suddenly left the town the following April, abandoning his wife and family.

Aram then travelled around the country for the next 13 years taking jobs as a schoolteacher until he eventually arrived in King's Lynn. He was appointed the deputy headmaster (or Usher) of the grammar school on St. Valentine's Day, 1758. The grammar school was situated above the Shambles in Saturday Market Place and Aram proved to be popular with the boys he taught. He also befriended the vicar of Heacham and stayed with him during the summer. It was during a visit that Aram was apparently recognised by a Yorkshire horse-dealer who carried the news of Aram's location back to the north.

The following year, in the summer of 1758, while digging for limestone on Thistle Hill a labourer found a skeleton. Memories of Daniel Clark's disappearance resurfaced and the skeleton was suspected to be his. Mrs Aram voiced her belief that Clark had been murdered by her husband and Richard Houseman. During the inquest Houseman was made to pick up a bone from the skeleton by the coroner and was confronted with accusation of his guilt. Houseman is reported to have responded, "These are no more Daniel Clark's remains than mine". He then confessed that Aram had murdered Clark with a pickaxe for his valuable goods and that he (Houseman) had helped Aram bury the body.

Houseman claimed that Clark's body was buried in St. Robert's cave, and when this was investigated another skeleton was found, with a hole in the back of its skull.

Two constables were immediately dispatched to Lynn where they arrested Aram at the school and took him back to York to await trial. Aram had to wait a year to be tried and spent the time working on his defence and a comparative dictionary. During his trial before Mr Justice Noel at York Castle Aram's defence consisted mainly of the following points:

- Clarke had disappeared, and there was no proof of murder. A prisoner had recently escaped from York Castle, so had he been murdered?
- No one had proved the skeleton was Clarke's. The skeleton's gender had not been established. The remains could be those of a hermit.
- He was of good character (his neighbours disagreed, apparently there were arguments with his wife)
- He had been ill on crutches at the time of the murder
- He had no motive for murder and there was no sign of the money he was supposed to have murdered Clarke for.

This defence misses out many key points, such as if he had really been fleeing justice, why had he not changed his name? He could also have argued that if he had killed for profit why did his lifestyle not reflect this? Perhaps because of this Aram was found guilty and was sentenced to death. On the morning of his execution he was found in his cell after attempting to commit suicide. The surgeons treated him enough that he was fit to hang that day on the 6<sup>th</sup> August, 1759. His body was then taken to Knaresborough where it was hung in chains in a gibbet. While it was there his skull was removed.

Eugene Aram's skull was gifted to The Old Gaol House in 1993 by the Royal College of Surgeons where it is still displayed today, alongside a skull fragment from Daniel Clark.

Eugene Aram has been remembered in literature Thomas Hood wrote a poem about him, while he was also the subject of a book by Bulwer Lytton (whose grandfather had known Aram), and a play starring Henry Irving. P.G. Woodhouse also alludes to Aram in his Jeeves and Wooster books.

Aram's own academic legacy was also impressive, in his "Outline of a New Lexican" he was one of earliest scholars to recognise the importance of the relationship of Celtic to other European languages and because of his ability to argue successfully against the then accepted belief in the derivation of Latin from Greek he has been called 'the true father of comparative philology'.

Forensic examinations have been carried out on a portion of the skull believed to be that of Daniel Clark. They conclude that the wound on the back of his head happened not long before his death and would have been sufficient to kill him. The wound could not have caused by a fall and does not support an accidental death (unless it was similar to a falling rock). They were unable to date the skull fragment at the time without damaging it, so the theory that both skeletons discovered at Knaresborough were prehistoric burials remains unsupported.

What do you think? Was Eugene Aram guilty of murder?

*'Calm, and compos'd my soul her journey takes,  
No guilt that troubles, and no heart that aches!'*  
- written by Eugene Aram while in prison.

