

The Uniqueness of the Ancient Library

There are over 500 books in the Ancient Library dating from 1482 to the mid eighteenth century and our Collection Review of March 2015 identified over 70% of them as unique.

It is true that we have some rare volumes but the uniqueness is not generally because of the subject matter, the edition or the binding. More often the donor's inscription, the marginalia that people have written in the books or the medieval manuscripts that were used to strengthen the bindings as pastedowns give them special value.

Three visitors this July, two from America and one from Australia, illustrate the uniqueness of our books:

Professor Gail McMurray Gibson is researching the 'Macro Plays' now in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington. The fifteenth century manuscript contains morality plays from East Anglia. She looked at books donated to the library by previous owners of the manuscript - James Cobbes, who also owned the Bury Grammar School Psalter, now in the Bury Record Office, and Cox Macro, whose family lived in Cupola House. Both Cobbes and Macro were old boys of King Edward VI Grammar School.

Professor Mark Rankin has examined more than 100 copies of the first four editions of Foxe's Book of Martyrs in the UK and USA. He is particularly interested in the modifications made to the text by Foxe and his Suffolk born printer, John Day. They stuck small labels over the words to be changed e.g. 'Lord Paget' became 'A Lord'. Some of our labels have fallen off and he was able to read the original text for the first time. Our 1570 edition was given by Robert Plummer, who lived in in Scandinavia House on the corner of Abbeygate Street. It was formerly owned by William Gilly and has a drawing of a monk's face in a margin.

Professor Rod Thomson is engaged in a British Academy Project to catalogue manuscripts in English libraries which contain commentaries on Aristotle. Our copy of Pausanias (Venice, 1516) contains two late fourteenth century pastedown leaves of a commentary by Walter Burley (1275-1344). More leaves from the same book are in Merton College and New College, Oxford. Professor Thomson's facsimile of the Bury Bible is at present on display in the Treasury.