

‘as you come in on the right’

Most have heard of the famous chained library of Hereford Cathedral. It is good to know that as a parish church we once had a chained library of our own, but where was it?

The intriguing phrase, ‘as you come in on the right’, appears in the copy of the inventory of the books in St James Church delivered to John Man and William Briggs, churchwardens, on 13th October 1599.

Ten classes of books of the Church Fathers from Augustine to Chrysostom were on the ‘right’ and ten classes of Continental Reformers from Luther to Peter Martyr were ‘As you come in on the left hand’. This tells us where the books were but not where the library was.

This is revealed in the Vestry Book of 1778 when Roger Hasted paid £5 for the internment of his daughter, Sarah (aged 5), in the Library. The nineteenth century plan of the memorials shows this to be in the North Chapel, along with those of Mary & Henry Hasted, Henry & Elizabeth Craske and Mrs Palgrave Isaack. These three are now part of the path outside the Pilgrim’s Kitchen.

So where was the Library/North Chapel? In the north transept, about where the clergy and choir form up before processing in for Mattins and Evensong.

If you have visited the present library above the north porch you will have seen the splendid medieval-style book cases made by Lennie Gough in 2004. Inevitably the way the books were stored over 400 years ago is a matter of speculation. However just under a half of the 162 books that remain from the 200 or so mentioned in the inventory have holes on the foot of the front cover near the spine and traces of rust. Professor John Craig considers these to be chain marks.

Evidence from other libraries shows that there were many patterns of shelves and benches which enabled chained books to be read either from a standing or sitting position. We cannot know what our library looked like but a study of the books shows that 78% of those on the right were chained and 49% of those on the left were chained. The other third of the books, possibly those ‘straight ahead’ were almost all unchained. Perhaps there were reference books and those which could have been borrowed.

None of the books obtained after 1599 have chain marks. So as Hereford’s was constructed in the early seventeenth century ours may be earlier.

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