

Detective work in the Old Library

Four of the nine incunabula (books printed before 1500) in the library are volumes of 'The Postilla' of Nicholas of Lyra. He was a thirteenth century French Franciscan scholar who used Hebrew sources to correct contemporary interpretations of the Bible. His work therefore contributed in some way to the King James Bible whose four hundredth anniversary we are celebrating this year. We also have another volume of 'The Postilla' but had no idea of its date because it is missing the title page, some pages from the Prologue, and finishes part way through Chapter 36 of Job. There have been many editions of this work, so finding out which this was would be quite a challenge. Fortunately, because it ends with Job, we knew that it would be from a three volume edition rather than a much more common four volume edition. So, armed with photographs, I went to the Rare Books room in Cambridge University Library, and requested the first volume of all the three volume editions they had. As luck would have it, they had an identical volume. The book was printed in Venice by Franciscus Renner in 1482. Not only the tenth of our incunabula – but our oldest book.

Stephen Dart