

## M R James and the Cathedral's Ancient Library

M R (Monty) James (1862-1936), the writer of ghost stories and Provost of Eton and Kings, had a detailed knowledge of the St James Library (now the Cathedral Ancient Library) when it was housed in the Guildhall in the late nineteenth century. He moved to Great Livermere at the age of three when his father began his forty four years as rector and had a lasting interest in East Anglia. In 1902 he supervised the excavation of the chapter house at Bury Abbey, which exposed the graves of five abbots, including Samson, and he gave a talk on the Abbey in the Athenaeum in May 1932.

His 1878 notes on the books in the library are in the Fitzwilliam Museum and two strips of manuscript in a volume of Beza particularly excited him. In March 1879 he wrote to his father from Eton, 'Yesterday I found in looking over my note books, and aided by a subtle process of reasoning terminating in absolute certainty, that a manuscript fragment in St James Library on the right hand corner as you go in, bottom shelf, a white vellum book, contains a Latin translation of Plutarch's Life of Sertorius in a hand of the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century.' Monty's article on the manuscript appeared in the July issue of *The Academy* that year.

The article refers to other books including 'a fine copy of the Homer of 1488 which (to the small credit of the authorities be it spoken) is kept on the floor among dusty tomes, wormed, damp and torn.' His notes show that his main interest was in the manuscript and early printed pastedowns which were used to strengthen the bindings. He writes in detail about a medical work in Hemmingsen (printed 1586); legal commentaries in Nicholas of Lyra (1482-97) and a dialogue between the devil and the Virgin Mary in Pineda (1613).

In his biography *Eton and King's* (1926) he revised his youthful conclusion in *The Academy* 'I suppose it now to have been from a fifteenth century humanist version: at the time I believed it to be much older.' Yet the delight he had in the library was still fresh in his memory: 'With what joy I carted off from the library at Bury and carried for several miles the eighth volume, in folio, of De La Bigne's *Bibliotheca Patrum*.'

Monty James' ghost stories were originally written as Christmas entertainment for his friends or possibly the choirboys at King's. They are still in print.

You can see the volume of Beza with the manuscript fragment in the Treasury exhibition of books donated by William Jermyn of Rushbrooke in 1595.

Stephen Dart