

The library in the reign of James I

Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 and was succeeded by James VI of Scotland as James I. Our catalogue suggests that in the same year the library received some of its oldest books – a set of the Bible commentary by Nicholas of Lyra which was printed by Antonius Koberger in Nuremberg in 1497. Nicholas was a thirteenth century Franciscan friar who used Hebrew sources in his biblical studies. The books were given by Anthony Disburgh who was a Fellow of Caius College, Cambridge at this time. He was born at Chevington, attended Bury Grammar School and became rector of Risby in 1613. Disburgh may have been to some of the regular Monday meetings for clergy at St James, but it is almost certain that John Juelle, who was appointed minister at St Mary's in 1603, was a regular attender. He had been at Caius with Disburgh and in the same year he gave the 'Monumenta' of Jan Huss and Jerome of Prague to the library.

Six years later, in 1609, there were donations from two laymen. Henry Gipps, a mercer, who like many others of his family was fully involved in the public life of Bury, was a capital burgess, alderman and coroner of the corporation. He was also a feoffee and governor of the Grammar School and gave a volume of Hospinian. Robert Ryece gave Zanchi's 'Tractationum theologicarum'. Ryece was one of the country gentry and lived at Preston St Mary near Lavenham. It is possible that he studied at Theodore Beza's Academy in Geneva, but it is certain that he was a great benefactor of Preston church giving stained glass and providing in his will for the upkeep of the boards which had painted on them the arms of Elizabeth I, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. He is best known for his description of the county of Suffolk, 'The Breviary of Suffolk', in which he observed that the air in Bury St Edmunds and its vicinity was considered especially healthy and recommended by doctors to their patients.

Sometime between 1613 and 1617 the clergy and wardens of St James decided to dispose of some unwanted books and purchase new ones. The men involved were the minister, Richard Knewstubb, the preacher, John Heiley, along with Roger Lowdell, a woollen draper, and John Brinknell. They replaced books of a non-religious character, like Vesalius' medical works and some statutes from the reign of Elizabeth, with ones they would find more useful for clergy training. Volumes of Henriquez and Ephraem Syrus cost them 28 shillings; a copy of the works of St Isidore printed in Paris in 1601 and bound with pigskin fillets cost 14 shillings; and a Nicetus 4 shillings. The books seem to have been bought as a job lot as they all have the signature of a former owner, Jo Whyte.

During Heiley's time as preacher at St James, the library received its first legacy. James Baxter, a baker, who had signed all three petitions to the Privy Council concerning the dismissal of Protestant preachers in the late 1570s and early 1580s and was a founder member of the corporation in 1606, made a bequest in his will in 1612. He gave the income from an acre of land in Spintlemill field for 'repairing the library in St James's church' and the money was first used in 1619 for 'wiping' the books. [Spintlemill field's boundaries were Risbygate Street, St Andrews Street, Kings Road and Victoria Street.]

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