

King James Bible

The Old Library has a first edition of the King James Bible printed by Robert Barker in 1611. An inscription in a seventeenth century hand shows that it was originally from the village of Fordley near Middleton in East Suffolk. However it was presented to the library in 1934 by Canon Wonnacott who had been given it by Miss Catherine Snell, of Nettlestead Hall, whose family had farmed at Nettlestead, near Stowmarket, since before 1832.

Coincidentally John Bois, one of the translators of the King James Bible, was born in Nettlestead in 1561. He was a noted Greek scholar who became Rector of Boxford and a Prebend of Ely Cathedral. He assisted Sir Henry Savile in his fine edition of the Works of St John Chrysostom, published at Eton in 1612, which we have in the library.

This is just one of the many connections with the King James Bible in the library. The decision for making a new translation of the Bible was made at the Hampton Court Conference in January 1604. James I met with Archbishop Whitgift, eight bishops, other senior clergy and four reforming Protestants. James Rainolds, the leader of this group of Protestants, suggested a new translation because others were ‘corrupt, and not answerable to the truth of the original’ and James, who did not like the criticisms of monarchy in the commonly used Geneva Bible, agreed. The translation was done by over fifty scholars in six groups, two each at Westminster, Cambridge and Oxford, and the whole process was organised by Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London, subsequently Archbishop of Canterbury. John Bois was in the second Cambridge group which worked on the Apocrypha.

John Rainolds, himself, was the chairman of the first Oxford group, working on Isaiah to Malachi. Three of his works are represented in the library, including his ‘Sex theses de sacra Scriptura’ which he dedicated to Archbishop Whitgift and an account of his debate with the Jesuit, John Hart. Also in this group was his godson, Daniel Featley, who had been a chorister at Magdalen College, Oxford and was to be chaplain to the English Ambassador to France, to Archbishop George Abbot and to Charles I – he gave evidence against Laud at his trial in 1634. The library has his ‘A case for the spectacles’ and ‘Clavis Mystica’ which he published for Sir Humphrey Lynde.

Sir Henry Savile, Warden of Merton College, Oxford and Provost of Eton, was in the second Oxford group, which translated the Gospels, Acts and Revelation. As well as his Chrysostom, the library has his ‘Rerum Anglicarum’ the first printed edition of English chroniclers including William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon.

The autograph of Laurence Chaderton, first Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, is in the library’s copy of Guilliard’s ‘In sacrosanctum’ He was in the first Cambridge group, working on Chronicles to Ecclesiastes.

The translators used the Bishop’s Bible (1568) as the foundation text – forty unbound copies were provided for their use, at a cost of £1 16s. 8d. each – but they used a range of

other translations and Greek, Hebrew and Latin texts. The library has a Geneva Bible; one using the ideas of Erasmus; Thomas Beza's New Testament, dedicated to Elizabeth I; two Polyglot Bibles with parallel texts in three languages; editions of Nicholas of Lyra who was studying Hebrew texts in the fourteenth century; and a copy of Conrad Pellican's Commentary owned by Rowland Taylor who was martyred at Hadleigh in the reign of Queen Mary.

The Minister at St James' Church just after the King James Bible was published was Richard Knewstubb. Further research is needed, but he may well be a relative of John Knewstubb, Vicar of Cockfield and leading member of the Bury Combination Lectures for which this library was founded as a resource in 1595. John Knewstubb was another of the reforming Protestants at the Hampton Court Conference with James Rainolds.

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