

## Durham Cathedral Library from the Dissolution to the Restoration

David Pearson

*The text of a lecture given as part of the Institute of English Studies History of Libraries Research Seminar series, 27 February 2008*

In the 1530s, shortly before the dissolution in 1539, Durham Cathedral Priory possessed one of the major institutional libraries of medieval England, with well over 1000 volumes, both manuscript and printed, distributed in various places around the monastery.<sup>1</sup> A little under 100 years later, shortly after the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Cathedral Library was described in rather different terms by Robert Hegge:

“this book had better fortune in the sea, than the books of Saint Cuthbert have now in his library at Durham, which was once a little Vatican of choice manuscripts, but now rather a [bibliotaphion] than a library: rather a place of sepulchre, than a place to conserve books: for since the art of printing was invented, old manuscripts were bequeathed to the moths: and pigeons, and jackdaws became the only students in church-libraries: and books were wounded with pen-knives for their pictures, with as great cruelty, as Cassia, or Johannes Scotus martyred by their own scholars”.<sup>2</sup>

The story of the Cathedral Library in the 150 years following the dissolution, like that of a number of other cathedral libraries, is something of a rise and fall from riches to rags and back again, with more than one reversal of fortunes before the relatively calm waters of the later 17<sup>th</sup> century allowed things to proceed in an altogether calmer and more orderly fashion.

To return to the beginning, Durham in the 1530s possessed a fine library of well over 1000 manuscript volumes and over 100 printed ones, accumulated over many centuries and ranging across the medieval knowledge base, including holdings not only in every branch of theology but also in history, science, medicine, law and other subjects. Between then and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that collection was reduced to about 320 manuscripts and 60 printed books. As English medieval libraries go, Durham was one of the most fortunate in terms of the proportion of the original library which survived into modern times, and particularly in the number of books which remained in situ. Most of the other big abbeys and priories saw their books more extensively dispersed, and even when a respectable number of volumes survived they have typically been alienated to other collections. The monastic library of Christ Church, Canterbury, estimated to have contained over 2000 volumes, was probably the biggest of the medieval Benedictine libraries; well over 300 books from the collection survive today, but only 30 are still in Canterbury. There are a little under 150 known surviving books from St Albans, none of them still in situ, there are about 50 from Ely, one of which remained there until the library was deposited in Cambridge in 1970. There are about 230 ex-Durham manuscripts now scattered in libraries across the world, so maybe a bit less than half the total original collection has

---

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the history and development of the monastic library, see A. J. Piper, ‘The libraries of the monks of Durham’ in M. B. Parkes and A. G. Watson (eds), *Medieval scribes, manuscripts and libraries: essays presented to N. R. Ker*, London, 1978, 213-50.

<sup>2</sup> R. Hegge, *The legend of St Cuthbert with the antiquities of the church of Durham*, London, 1663, p.43.

made it through to the present day, and the largest block of surviving material remains here. Of the English medieval foundations, only Worcester is comparably fortunate in the proportion of its medieval library which has stayed in situ.<sup>3</sup>

There was nevertheless a significant process of alienation and destruction which took place during the 16<sup>th</sup> century to reduce a collection of maybe 1500 books to a rump of just 300. What we know irritatingly little about is just how and when that process took place, and who the active parties were. You might at first imagine that the greatest period of turmoil took place in the years immediately following the dissolution, but there are reasons to doubt this. The *Rites of Durham*, the account of life in the monastery written towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by an anonymous sympathiser with the old faith, describes the vigorous destruction of the shrines of Bede and St Cuthbert at that time, but has nothing to say about damage or dispersal of books.<sup>4</sup> The dissolved priory was soon refounded as a cathedral, with a Dean and prebendaries where there had previously been a Prior and monks, and there was a strong element of continuity between the old establishment and the new. All the major posts, and many of the minor ones, were given to ex-monks. Although that 18-month period between the dissolution in 1539 and the issuing of letters patent to create the new foundation looks like a time of much uncertainty when things could have been pilfered or gone astray, the cathedral and its library were soon formally entrusted back into the hands of those who had previously cared for it. The religious sympathies of the first generation Dean and Chapter lay more with the old world than the new, and they were not obviously a body of men who would wish to neglect the monastic heritage.

It was in the 1560s rather than the 1540s that the Cathedral clergy underwent a more profound transformation, with the appointment of James Pilkington as Bishop in 1561 and William Whittingham as Dean in 1563, and the replacement of reactionary prebendaries with men more in tune with protestant thinking. Three canons were deprived in 1559 for refusing to subscribe to the Elizabethan Articles, and further deprivations followed during the following decade.<sup>5</sup> According to the author of the *Rites of Durham*, Whittingham “could not abide any ancient monuments nor nothing that appertained to any godly religiousness or monastical life”; David Marcombe, in his entry for Whittingham in the new *DNB*, has questioned whether this is not too partisan a source to be altogether reliable, but the story of Whittingham’s wife burning the reputedly indestructible banner of St Cuthbert is surely a sign of a culture that was at least sympathetic to iconoclasm, if not actively promoting it. Ex-monks deprived of their canonries in the 1560s may well have taken books with them – indeed, Ian Doyle has shown that many printed books of Durham monastic provenance, which ended up in the library of the Tempest family in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, appear to have taken their first walkabout via Nicholas and Stephen Marley, canons who were deprived in 1560 and 1572.<sup>6</sup> Doyle has written further about the dispersals of the later 16<sup>th</sup> century, pointing out that a number of the books which went to York and Bristol via the agency of Archbishop Tobie Matthew emanated from the Durham

---

<sup>3</sup> Statistics can be derived from N. R. Ker, *Medieval libraries of Great Britain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> J. T. Fowler (ed), *Rites of Durham* (Surtees Society Publications, 107), Durham and London, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> P. Mussett, *Deans and canons of Durham 1541-1900*, Durham, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> A. I. Doyle, ‘The library of Sir Thomas Tempest’ in G. A. M. Janssens and F. G. A. M. Aarts (eds), *Studies in seventeenth-century English literature, history and bibliography: festschrift for Professor T. A. Birrell*, Amsterdam, 1984, 83-94.

monastic collection, and were probably taken by Matthew during the years between 1583 and 1595 when he was Dean of Durham.<sup>7</sup> We know that Matthew Parker acquired at least one Durham manuscript in 1568 as a gift from Robert Horne, who had been Dean of Durham in the 1550s, although this didn't join the Parker collection in Cambridge and after centuries of wandering it returned to Durham in 1950.<sup>8</sup>

As regards what was lost and what stayed, I think that can be simply and perhaps not surprisingly summarised by saying that on the whole interesting books disappeared, and dull ones were left. The monastic manuscripts still in Durham in 1600 (and, on the whole, still here today) included extensive collections of glosses and commentaries on the Bible, patristic texts, Thomas Aquinas and canon law. Some material like this was also lost, but chronicles and histories, saints' lives, astronomical and medical works were much more prone to pilferage. Bede was clearly more desirable than St Augustine in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; of 15 manuscripts of Bede's writings which have survived from Durham Priory, 12 are no longer in Durham and had probably gone by 1600. The comparable figures for St Augustine are 30 manuscripts, of which 4 have been alienated. Five Durham manuscripts of works by the chronicler Simeon of Durham have survived, but all have been dispersed and most have inscriptions of 16<sup>th</sup> century lay owners.

The story of the Cathedral library during the last two thirds of the 16<sup>th</sup> century is largely shrouded in mist and conjecture, as there are no archival records to draw on or any contemporary accounts of the state, housing or use of the collection. Many of the Chapter records for this period are missing, including the Act Books up to 1578 and from 1584 to 1618, and I was never able to find any mention of the library in what little remains. It was, however, not entirely a tale of dispersal and neglect as we know that some books were also acquired during this time. There's a group of about 40 printed books in the Library today which carry the inscription "Liber Ecclesie Cathedralis Dunelm" in a distinctive mid-16<sup>th</sup> century hand.<sup>9</sup> Although none of them has an imprint date later than 1534, both the handwriting and more particularly the wording point quite definitely to these inscriptions being post-1539, and it seems plausible to guess that they were acquired around the middle decades of the century, perhaps the 1540s or 50s. Several have previous ownership inscriptions of Robert Ridley, who died in 1536, or Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, who died in 1559; they include theological works by Dionysius the Carthusian and Rupert of St Heribert, Biblical paraphrases by Erasmus, medical works of Galen and Dioscorides, and the works of Tibullus and Strabo. Royal injunctions in 1547 and 1559 called for the creation and maintenance of libraries in cathedrals and perhaps these books are a response to this?<sup>10</sup> We don't know.

John Crawford, Warden of the Franciscan Convent at Newcastle before the dissolution, and a prebendary of Durham from 1543 until his death in 1562, bequeathed to the Cathedral "all saynt Augustynes workes and Basyll in Greike and

---

<sup>7</sup> A. I. Doyle, 'The printed books of the last monks of Durham', *The Library* 6<sup>th</sup> ser 10 (1988), 203-19.

<sup>8</sup> Durham Cathedral Library ms A.IV.36: see N. R. Ker, *Medieval manuscripts in British libraries*, v.2, Oxford, 1977, 486-7.

<sup>9</sup> Reproduced in Piper, *op. cit.*, plate 70.

<sup>10</sup> C. B. L. Barr and D. Selwyn, 'Major ecclesiastical libraries' in E. Leedham-Green and T. Webber (eds), *The Cambridge history of libraries in Britain and Ireland*, vol. 1, 2006, 363-99, p.366 ff.

Latten and Rabbye Moyses in print”.<sup>11</sup> The 10-volume set of St Augustine was certainly received and is still in the Library today; we don’t know what happened about Basil and Maimonides. Richard Barnes, the Bishop of Durham who died in 1587, also left £5-worth of books “to the library of the cathedral church of Durham”, the choice to be made by Toby Matthew, then Dean; if this gift materialised, the books were not marked in any way, so they may or may not be sitting on the shelves today.<sup>12</sup> The significance of both these gifts, I think, is their proof that there was something recognised as a cathedral library here throughout the later 16<sup>th</sup> century, although we know precious little about who used it and whether the dispersal of monastic books was a slow and steady haemorrhage or a series of big bangs when people with particular interests came to call - probably a bit of both.

We also have no firm documentary evidence of the housing of the collection, although it seems fair to assume that most of the books would have been kept in the purpose-built monastic library room, constructed in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century at first floor level in the east wing of the Cloisters, above the Chapter House, in what is now the song school.<sup>13</sup> The monks also used another room on the other side of the cloister, the Spendiment,, and books probably continued to be stored there; it was certainly being used in this way in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Our knowledge of the layout of the library room is primarily dependent on deductions from pressmarks in surviving manuscripts, which suggest a room with 10 desks or stalls, two with one shelf each and eight with two shelves; the total capacity would seem to have been around 450 volumes, which would have been enough to house the collection as we know it to have existed around the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The description of the library in a sorry state, by Robert Hegge, quoted earlier, dates from around that time; Hegge was born in Durham in 1599, the son of the public notary Stephen Hegge, and he spent much of his short life in Oxford from 1614 until he died in 1629. That account of the library as a place of sepulchre was probably a reflection of the state of affairs he knew during the years that he was growing up in Durham.

To summarise, therefore: by the first decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the cathedral library had dwindled from its monastic splendour to something about a fifth its original size, though many of the remaining books had survived by seeming too dull to take away. Some printed books were added during the 16<sup>th</sup> century but I imagine the library of 1600 or thereabouts as something more neglected than cherished, surviving by default rather than active design, and not much used. Neither the surviving manuscripts nor the printed books acquired in the 16<sup>th</sup> century carry marginalia or other evidence of use which can be linked with the Elizabethan prebendaries. The canons of this time were generally quite rich men, their Durham preferments supplemented by various livings elsewhere; David Marcombe estimated that their income varied on average between £100 and £1000 a year, and observed that “how they spent their money is by no means certain, but from the sources we do have it does not appear that their contribution to the social and educational well being of the community was

---

<sup>11</sup> His will is transcribed in J. Raine (ed), *Wills and inventories ... of the northern counties*, pt 1 (Surtees Society Publications, 2), London, 1835, 195. The Augustine is now Durham Cathedral Library D.VII.12-21.

<sup>12</sup> J. Raine (ed), *The injunctions and other ecclesiastical proceedings of Richard Barnes*, (Surtees Society Publications, 22), London, 1850, xiv-xvi.

<sup>13</sup> See Piper, *op. cit.*, fig. 17.

outstanding”.<sup>14</sup> A number of these men are known from their wills or benefactions to have owned books - Robert Hutton, holder of the 10<sup>th</sup> stall from 1589 to 1623, left a study of books sold for £40, Peter Shaw, who held the 6<sup>th</sup> stall from 1572 to 1609, gave 140 books to Trinity College, Cambridge, Clement Colmore, who occupied the 11<sup>th</sup> stall between 1590 and 1619 bequeathed books among his family members.<sup>15</sup> What they didn’t do was give books to the cathedral. You don’t have a sense that the cathedral library was something that featured much on the capitular horizon at this time, and there was clearly no culture of building it up through purchase or donation.

And then all that changed. It did so as one element in a series of reforms that swept through Durham Cathedral in the 1620s, under the leadership of Richard Neile, who became Bishop of Durham in 1617 and transformed the character of the Chapter from one dominated by Elizabethan Calvinist philosophy to a hotbed of Arminianism, suffused with a love of ceremonial liturgy and the beauty of holiness.<sup>16</sup> Five of Neile’s former chaplains became canons of Durham in the 1620s – Francis Burgoyne, Gabriel Clarke, Eleazar Duncon, Augustine Lindsell and most famously John Cosin. They helped to bring about a series of transformations in the life of the cathedral which included setting up a new high altar, complete with candlesticks, returning the font to the west end of the church, and making services more elaborate with musical accompaniment and the use of fine vestments. They also re-established the library, although the first spark of initiative there actually came not from one of them but from Francis Bunny, a member of the old puritan guard. Bunny, described by *DNB* as an energetic Calvinist, held the 8<sup>th</sup> stall for 45 years, from 1572 until his death in 1617. His will, drawn up in 1616 and so preceding Neile’s appointment to Durham, included a bequest of £30 “towards the making of a librarie in the vestrie, if Mr Dean and Chapter approve that course, or else to furnish with books to that value that which is now the librarie”.<sup>17</sup>

Whether this was entirely Bunny’s initiative, or something which had been brewing as an idea among the Chapter, I don’t know, but it certainly lit a spark although it took a little while to kindle. Getting the money out of Bunny’s estate was difficult, and in 1622, 5 years after his death, the Chapter passed a resolution to sue Bunny’s widow for the £30. It actually took another 7 years for the money to be forthcoming but meanwhile many things happened. In the mid 1620s the Chapter set to work on renovating the old monastic library room, and in 1628 could report that they had “repaired the ruins of the Library, and reformed the rudeness of the old stalls, by making a fair frame of shelves, and other conveniences more useful than before”.<sup>18</sup> This work cost £50. Having done this they could turn their attention to the contents of the Library, realising that what they had inherited was far from being an up to date collection, and that investment would be needed to create a modern and fit for purpose resource. In 1628 a Chapter Act was passed creating an acquisitions fund for the Library, by levying fines on all new installations of Deans and prebendaries, on all

---

<sup>14</sup> D. Marcombe, *The Dean and Chapter of Durham 1558-1603*, Durham University PhD thesis, 1973, p.20.

<sup>15</sup> On Shaw, see D. Pearson, ‘The books of Peter Shaw in Trinity College, Cambridge’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 9 (1986), 76-89.

<sup>16</sup> See M. E. James, *Family, lineage and civil society*, Oxford, 1974, 111-122.

<sup>17</sup> H. M. Wood (ed), *Wills and inventories from the registry at Durham*, pt 4, (Surtees Society Publications, 142), Durham, 1929, 108-111.

<sup>18</sup> From the preamble to the Chapter Act of 1628, recorded in the Dean & Chapter Act Book, 1618-33.

burials inside the church, and on the sealing of leases. Henceforth, anyone involved in those activities was required to pay a fee to the Library fund, ranging from £13 6s 8d for a new Dean to £2 for a burial in the cathedral outside the choir. There is a draft of the Act in John Cosin's hand which includes an extra clause requiring all members of the Chapter then in post to make a payment too, but remarkably this was suppressed when the Act was formally passed. Nevertheless, this initiative quickly set the money flowing in, not least because these rates were quite draconian: a number of other English cathedrals introduced schemes like this in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but Worcester for example charged new Deans only half the Durham rate, and Wells charged new canons only £1 where Durham was levying £6 13s 4d. Between 1629 and 1635 nearly £300 was raised for Library purchases, from these new fees combined with other funds from the Chapter's common income, which could buy a lot of books in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were not neglectful of their heritage, as £10 was also spent on the rebinding of some of the manuscripts – as far as I know, only one example of this work survives, in early 17<sup>th</sup> century plain brown calf typical of the style of that period.<sup>19</sup> Like all good founders or refounders of libraries, they also created a Donors' Book to encourage gifts – a vellum blank book elaborately bound and gilded, incorporating the arms of the Cathedral.<sup>20</sup> This was almost certainly made by Richard Curtis, the Durham bookseller and binder of the time, and is interesting as an example of provincial binding of this kind of quality. The opening pages of the book are in Cosin's hand.

What did they do with all this money? They bought books, and they quickly realised that they needed a librarian to manage it all. Technically they already had one, as the Cathedral statutes of 1541 identified the sacrist, one of the minor canons, as being responsible for the common library of the Dean and Chapter, but it was evidently felt that the job would be carried out better if more clearly defined, and appropriately rewarded. The £4 annual stipend attached to the chaplaincy of Kepier Hospital, a sinecure in the Chapter's gift, was therefore diverted to the new post of librarian, and Elias Smith, one of the minor canons, was appointed to the job.

We do know something about Smith and his life, as his commonplace book, in which he wrote notes and book extracts that interested him, survives, his will is in the Durham probate registry, and we can track his career through the Cathedral records.<sup>21</sup> He was born probably in Northallerton in 1605, went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge in 1623, was ordained in 1628 and in the same year became a minor canon at Durham, where in one way or another he spent the rest of his life. The cathedral establishment in the 17<sup>th</sup> century comprised the Dean and 12 prebendaries, or major canons, and 12 minor or petty canons, who were on an altogether lower scale both socially and financially than the prebendaries, and who were largely responsible for the day to day duties involved with running the cathedral and its services. The minor canons, like the prebendaries, were able to supplement their income by holding parochial appointments in the Chapter's gift, too financially insignificant to interest the prebendaries themselves, and Smith became curate of St Giles in Durham in 1632, and subsequently Head Master of the cathedral grammar school in 1640.

---

<sup>19</sup> Durham Cathedral Library ms A.IV.15.

<sup>20</sup> See D. Pearson, 'A Durham binding of 1634', *The Book Collector* 43 (1994), 553-556.

<sup>21</sup> On Smith, see D. Pearson, 'Elias Smith, Durham Cathedral Librarian 1633-76', *Library History* 8 (1989), 63-75.

As stated earlier, the contents of the Cathedral Library before 1630, the inherited foundation on which the new initiative could build, comprised around 320 manuscripts and 60 printed books. Between 1628 and 1635 the Dean and Chapter acquired over 200 more printed books, using their newly-generated funds, augmented with some gifts. Elias Smith set about arranging all the books in a new classified order in the old Library room, shelved according to subject, and marking all the new acquisitions with an inscription on the titlepage, “Liber Ecclesiae Cathedralis Dunelm”. The books were of course shelved fore-edge outwards, according to the standard practice of the time, and many of the books acquired during Smith’s time also have a title written by him on the fore-edge. We can reconstruct the Library Smith created in the mid-1630s because he made a catalogue of it, in shelf-list order, in a small folio blank book which he seems to have started shortly after he took up office in 1633.<sup>22</sup> The bulk of the listing was done by 1634, as the main sequence of entries contains no books with an imprint later than that, and books purchased from the London bookseller Robert Whitaker in that year are either tacked on at the ends of particular shelf-entries, or not included.

What did they acquire, and how? Between 1628 and 1635 a little over 200 printed books were added to the Library, some of them given, but most of them purchased as far as we can tell. The list of books bought from the London bookseller Robert Whitaker that I mentioned just now is the one piece of concrete archival evidence to show where books were bought from, but sadly there are no such bills or lists for most of the acquisitions.<sup>23</sup> They certainly bought books second-hand as well as new, as many of the books coming in at this time have inscriptions of earlier owners, or imprint dates going back into the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They bought a lot of theology or theologically-related works – lots of biblical commentaries, by both protestant and catholic authors, and writings around the various ecclesiastical controversies of the time. They bought commentaries by the heavyweight protestant theologians of the preceding generations, people like Musculus, Lavater and Willet, but also big sets of commentaries by catholic writers like Lorin, Pineda and Cornelius a Lapide. They bought numerous works on the various kinds of doctrinal and philosophical ping-pong between the two sides of the theological divide, the writings of people like Bellarmine, Lessius, Rainolds and Andrewes. But they also acquired quite a few books in history, some of it ecclesiastical but not all of it, and a sprinkling of titles in law, geography, classics and natural history. They acquired Speed’s *History of Great Britain*, for example, Theodore de Bry’s *India orientalis*, Mercator’s *Atlas*, and Gesner’s *Historiae animalium* in a Frankfurt edition of 1621. Not surprisingly, the majority of the books, about 87%, were in Latin, but 12% were in English.

The Library of the 1630s, in Smith’s arrangement, was organised into 45 classes, with each class representing a shelf of between 10 and 20 volumes. The subject organisation was the kind that was commonly found in most libraries of the early modern period – classes 1 and 2 comprised Bibles, then the following classes were taken up with Biblical commentaries and concordances, which took up classes 3-15. The next 7 classes comprised patristics, the writings of Church Fathers like Augustine, Jerome, Gregory the Great, Bernard, who were followed by more contemporary theological writers. Classes 27-29 were a mixture of secular and

---

<sup>22</sup> Durham Cathedral Library ms B.IV.47.

<sup>23</sup> See D. Pearson, *Book trade bills and vouchers from Durham Cathedral Library, 1634-1740*. History of the Book Trade in the North, Working Paper PH45, 1986.

ecclesiastical history, then there was a section of philosophy including class 32 largely devoted to Thomas Aquinas, before we got on to classes 36-39, which were a mixture of civil and canon law. The final classes were given over to contemporary theological controversy. There were also 7 additional classes called repositories, which I have always imagined as being housed separately, perhaps in the Spendiment, with a mixture of theological, legal, classical, medical and other works. Some classes were devoted entirely to manuscripts, some entirely to printed books, but in some cases both were intermixed on the same shelf – the controlling logic was the subject content rather than the format of the material.

Why did they do it? Why did the Dean and Chapter become so interested in having an up to date scholarly library in the 1620s? That, I think, is one of the most interesting questions though one of the harder ones to provide with a clear answer. The new-generation Arminian clergymen, the Neiles and the Cosins and the Lindsells were all men of academic bent, men who pursued their clerical careers in close association with books, who defended their ecclesiastical politics with deep textual scholarship, but so were the Calvinists who preceded them.

The early 17<sup>th</sup> century was a time that saw rebirth and renewal in a number of big English ecclesiastical libraries. It has always struck me that the big 3 of the English cathedral libraries – Canterbury, Durham and York – all saw major redevelopment initiatives in the same year, 1628: Durham had its Chapter Act, in the same year the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury resolved to refurbish their library and set up a benefactors' book, and York Minster received the gift of 3000 or so volumes from the library of Archbishop Toby Matthew.<sup>24</sup> But there were other developments in the 1620s, like the major gifts at Ripon and Westminster Abbey that effectively set those libraries up on a new footing, and in 1622 Patrick Young was asked to survey the manuscript holdings of cathedral libraries and report back to the King. There was clearly a more general resurgence of interest, and belief in the value of cathedral libraries, around this time, after a long period of sleep and decay. Although there are some exceptions, like Salisbury where the cathedral library received a major benefaction in the 1570s, and Hereford where the library began to be refurbished in the 1580s, with the help of the kind of installation fees later used at Durham, the pattern of dispersal followed by dormancy or at best half-hearted interest, that we see in Durham in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, seems to have been commonly the case elsewhere. There were of course academic models of new library development around the turn of the century, most obviously the foundation of the Bodleian Library in 1600 and the redevelopment of Merton College library in the 1580s, which catalysed similar activities in other Oxbridge colleges. We should also not forget the establishment of Lambeth Palace Library after the death of Archbishop Bancroft in 1610, further fostered by his successor Abbot. Did these changes help provide the stimulus to get the cathedral libraries moving? I'm sure the answer is a bit more complicated than that but I don't think it's ever been thoroughly explored.

Whatever the motivation, it wasn't long before the fledgling Library was threatened by the events of the Civil War. Serious disruption in Durham began in 1640 during the Second Bishops War, when Durham was overrun by Scottish troops who

---

<sup>24</sup> For further information and references on all the libraries mentioned in this paragraph, see the *Cambridge history of libraries* volume mentioned in note 10 above.



remained in possession of the area for nearly a year. The northeast was a royalist stronghold in the early 1640s and in 1644 it became a theatre of war between the two sides, leading to several months of conflict before the parliamentary army won and took over control of the area. Elias Smith resigned as Librarian in 1643, to become Vicar of Bedlington; another of the minor canons, John Dury, was appointed in his stead.<sup>25</sup> Within a couple of years both men had been deprived of these posts by the new administrative systems set up by Parliament to run local affairs, and the Cathedral Library had attracted the attention of visitors who did not leave empty-handed. A notebook in Smith's hand records a list of about 25 books "taken out of the Library by Captain Gordan, and Mr Row" in 1644, which includes titles known to have been in the Library in the 1630s but which subsequently disappeared.

Overall, though, the Library survived the Civil War and the Interregnum remarkably well, and certainly much better than was the case in a number of other English Cathedrals. The cathedral libraries of Exeter, Lichfield, Chichester and Winchester, among others, were largely dispersed during the Civil War, and although some were repatriated afterwards others were not, and more or less had to start again. Durham was fortunate largely because the people who took over control after the ejection of the Dean and Chapter recognised the Library as something of value, with an ongoing purpose. A new keeper of the Cathedral Library was appointed by the parliamentary commissioners for Durham in 1645, who I'll say a bit more about in a minute, and in the 1650s the Library became an integral part of Cromwell's College, the fledgling university for the north established in the Cathedral precincts in 1657, whose existence was nipped in the bud by the Restoration. In 1646 an order was made that the library from Durham should be shipped to London, as part of a process of centralising information and property from English cathedrals, but this was ignored and the books remained in situ.<sup>26</sup> Durham was more fortunate in this respect than either Canterbury or St Paul's, both of whose libraries were taken away around 1650.

It is however clear that there were some other nasty moments. It's well known that Oliver Cromwell used Durham Cathedral as a jail for about three thousand Scottish prisoners taken at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650, who were marched south and held there in fairly primitive conditions for some time. The lack of fuel and provisions led them to destroy and burn all the woodwork in the Cathedral, with the notable exception of the clock in the south transept, reputedly saved by the thistle carved into its casing. According to one account, the Scotsmen also did some damage to the Library although the true record of events is not easy to reconstruct, and depends on some possibly conflicting evidence as to the protagonists involved.

James Mickleton, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Durham lawyer and local antiquary whose manuscript collections are now part of the Mickleton and Spearman Manuscripts in Durham University Library, credited Elias Smith with the preservation of the Cathedral Library during the Interregnum. In a short biography of Smith included in a list of churches and office-holders in the diocese, he says that Smith had custody of the books and vestments of the Cathedral during the evil times after the death of Charles I, and that he saved them from destruction. Now Smith's whereabouts during the late 1640s and 1650s are not altogether clear; we know that he was ejected

---

<sup>25</sup> Durham Dean and Chapter Act Book, 1639-61, 15 August 1643.

<sup>26</sup> S. Hingley, 'Ecclesiastical libraries' in G. Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley (eds), *The Cambridge history of libraries in Britain and Ireland*, vol. 2, Cambridge, 2006, 122-33, p.123.

from Bedlington, and that he was back in Durham in the 1650s as Head Master of Durham School, and officiating again as curate at St Giles. He may have spent some time staying with the Tempest family at Old Durham, an estate a mile outside the city. He may have had some association with the Library, particularly in the later 1650s, but there is no firm evidence of his involvement with Library affairs during the earlier part of those years, when we do know that someone else was in charge.

Isaac Gilpin, Smith's assistant as usher at Durham School in the 1630s, had been formally appointed Library keeper by the parliamentary commissioners in 1645. Gilpin, the great nephew of Bernard Gilpin, the famous 16<sup>th</sup>-century preacher known as the apostle of the north, was a parliamentarian, unlike his old boss Smith whose royalist sentiments are very clear from his commonplace book. Gilpin's stipend as Library keeper was to be £5 per annum – a pound more, we may note, than the Dean and Chapter paid their Librarian – which was duly paid to him up 1649, when times got hard. Gilpin carried on regardless but at the end of 1651 he felt forced to deliver a petition to point out that his salary was now £15 in arrears. He based his claim not only on the fact that he had "continued in his place", despite the drying up of funds, but also that he had "been at some charge of late in preserving the books and other goods, by removing them to another place for better security, the Scotch prisoners having got into the next room, and within 24 hours afterwards into the Library, and spoiled and burned whatever they found there".

It sounds therefore as though Gilpin, seeing what was coming, moved the books out of the Library room just in time, before the Scotsmen got in to seek more fuel for their fires. Did it happen just like this, and did any books get damaged or not escape? When I was working there 20 years ago I did try to put this to the test by looking for evidence of the destruction or burning of books during the 1650s. We know that overall most of the collection did survive through to the Restoration period and I know of no evidence of smoke or fire damage to any of the printed books. There are however a few manuscripts which are blackened and buckled as though they may have been exposed to fire. MS B.I.29, a 14<sup>th</sup>-century copy of a theological work of Raymond of Peniaforte, is described in Smith's 1630s library catalogue as a "manuscript insigne", a remarkable or particularly fine manuscript, but today it's in a pretty sorry state, distorted and lacking several leaves at the beginning. If this is fire damage, which is possible if not certain, then there's every likelihood that it happened during the Interregnum, as we know it was intact in the 1630s, and as far as I know fire has not broken out in the Library since 1660. It may just be, therefore, that this manuscript and others like it suffered at the hands of the rampaging Scotsmen, but I have to say that this is very speculative, and very possibly nothing more than a good story; I doubt we will ever know the undisputable truth.<sup>27</sup>

The Scots returned home in 1652 and as far as I know the Cathedral Library suffered no further major threats or depredations during the remainder of the Interregnum. It was not being added to, as the funds established by the Dean and Chapter had obviously pretty much dried up by the early 1640s, and I know of no donations dating from this time. Whether anyone was using it in the mid 1650s I don't know, but when Oliver Cromwell came to establish his college in Durham, for the better advancement

---

<sup>27</sup> The competing claims of Smith and Gilpin as saviours of the Cathedral Library are set out in more detail in D. Pearson, 'Elias Smith', *op. cit.* (footnote 21).

of learning and religion, he specifically included the Cathedral library and its contents in the grant of property to the college, to be held by the Provost, fellows and scholars of the college and their successors.

Cromwell's College is one of those footnotes in history that now seems almost entirely forgotten, but one of those what if? moments, like so many of the things that happened in the aftermath of the English Civil War – what if the Restoration hadn't happened, would we now not have a cathedral, but rather a University of Durham which instead of being a parvenu 19<sup>th</sup>-century foundation was about to celebrate its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary? Students of the history of higher education know that there was much debate in the 17<sup>th</sup> century about the desirability of expanding the system beyond the tradition-bound and conservative ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge, of the need for academies teaching useful up to date knowledge about science and political philosophy, more in tune with contemporary needs. The similarities with the issues debated in higher education today are quite striking. Men like Bacon, Hartlib and Comenius wrote about it while others got on with founding new academies like Gresham College and Chelsea College. These were both in London but there had long been a feeling that the north needed a university of its own, and that Durham was a likely place for it.

There was, indeed, serious thought given to the founding of a university in Durham when the Priory was dissolved in 1539, and plans were drawn up for an establishment with a provost, professors, and 80 scholars, but this was trimmed back to become a grammar school on the cathedral foundation with a Headmaster and 18 king's scholars.<sup>28</sup> When the cathedral establishment was formally abolished in 1649, a group of local worthies sent a petition to the Lord Protector to ask for the transformation of the site into a new college. This was referred by Parliament to a committee, which meant the idea went nowhere fast, but they didn't give up and after further lobbying, including a direct visit to Cromwell while he was staying in Edinburgh, the plan succeeded and letters patent were issued in 1657 to found a college in Durham, on the Cathedral site. It was to comprise a provost, fellows and scholars, with a guaranteed income based on land and rent charges, it was to be permitted to run a printing press, and it would take over the Library. Appointments were made to the new positions and it all started getting into gear in the late 1650s.

But of course it all quickly disappeared in a puff of smoke. The King did return, and the college was swept away by the political events which unfolded in 1659-60. There's a bit of doggerel verse in the commonplace book of Sir John Gibson, who was a royalist prisoner held in Durham castle in the 1650s, headed "Upon the University at Durham 1660" which sums it up:

Cromwells departure brought me for to see  
The fall, of this third universitie.  
Cromwell the founder was – now he is dead!  
How can that body live, that wants a head?<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> See W. H. G. Armytage, 'Prejudice and promise 1600-1660: some aspects of the civic university tradition in England', *Universities Review* 23 (1951), 106-16.

<sup>29</sup> British Library Additional MS 37719, fo. 159.

The Restoration saw the return of the Dean and Chapter, and of John Cosin as the newly appointed Bishop of Durham, who quickly set about returning the Cathedral establishment to what it had been before. Elias Smith came back to his post as Librarian, although he hoped for something better: he petitioned the Crown for one of the vacant prebends, citing not only his previous service as precentor but also the fact that during the late troubles he had suffered very deeply for his loyalty towards the monarchy and the Church. His case had strong support, as it was endorsed by Cosin, by John Barwick the new Dean, and other senior Durham men, but unfortunately the vacant stall went to someone else instead, who had a more influential aristocratic patron.

Of the 700 or so books, both printed and manuscript, which the Library contained in 1640, about 70 were lost at some point between then and the Restoration, but the great bulk of the collection survived. The pattern of disappearance during those years mirrors the dispersal of a hundred years earlier, in terms of the material that went astray – typically, it was interesting or useful books that went and dull ones that stayed. It was English books in non-theological subject areas that went walkabout – Speed's *History of Great Britain*, sets of English statutes, Dalton's *Country justice*, antiquarian works by Camden and Savile. St Augustine remained as safe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as he had been 100 years before.

The Dean and Chapter, and their loyal Librarian Smith, therefore had plenty to do to get the Library room back to rights, get the books back in order, and start developing the collection again. There are again parallels here between Durham and numerous other cathedral libraries, like Lincoln, Lichfield, Peterborough and Winchester, all of which saw significant effort put into the restoration of their libraries in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century, often stimulated by the gift of collections, like Honywood's at Lincoln or Morley's at Winchester. Durham didn't receive any major donations like this, but rather the creation of a whole new library environment through the munificence of the Dean, John Sudbury, who paid for the conversion of the old monastic Refectory into a Library in the 1680s and 90s. That, however, would be the subject of a whole new lecture and this is as far as I can go on this occasion.

Durham Cathedral Library is also closed on Bank Holidays, for two weeks over the Christmas and New Year period, and between Maundy Thursday and Easter Tuesday. Additional closures for Open Treasure changeovers will be advertised on this page once confirmed. Please contact the Library for further information. Our modern books are in the Sharp Library and Chapter Library, located in the Monks' Dormitory. Don't have a reader card? Just ask a member of staff who will direct you to the Library where you can register. You will need some form of ID. There are more details in Free Library Membership. The Cathedral's special collections. You will need to make an appointment to view our special collections. Durham Cathedral is a thriving religious institution with strong links to its surrounding community. The Castle is accessible through its use as part of the University of Durham, a centre of excellence for learning. A series of additions, reconstructions, embellishments, as well as restorations from the 11th century onward have not substantially altered the Norman structure of Durham Cathedral. The monastic buildings, grouped together to the south of the Cathedral comprise few pristine elements but together make up a diversified and coherent ensemble of medieval architecture, which 19th century restoration works, carried out substantially in the chapter house and cloister, did not destroy. The architectural evolution of the Castle has not obscured its Norman layout. Durham Cathedral holds the relics of Saint Cuthbert, transported to Durham by Lindisfarne monks in the ninth century, the head of Saint Oswald of Northumbria, and the remains of the Venerable Bede. In addition, its library contains one of the most complete sets of early printed books in England, the pre-Dissolution monastic accounts, and three copies of the Magna Carta. From 1080 until 1836 the Bishop of Durham enjoyed the powers of an Earl palatine, being given military and civil as well as religious leadership in order to protect the Scottish Border. The cathedral walls formed part of Durham Castle, one of the residences of the Bishop of ... Durham Cathedral, in the city of Durham in northeast England, was founded in 1093 and remains a center for Christian worship today. The present building dates almost entirely from the 12th century and is widely regarded as the finest example of Norman architecture in Europe. Around 1560, after the Reformation and Dissolution of the Monasteries, the walls of the cathedral were whitewashed, the shrine of Cuthbert destroyed, and the stained glass windows broken. The bishops of Durham were very powerful Prince-Bishops from the Middle Ages to the mid-19th century, reaching the peak of their power in the 14th century. The Bishop of Durham uses this lofty seat the first time he comes to the cathedral, but thereafter he sits near the chancel screen.