

## George Abbot's Library Books *by Mary Alexander and Robert Cotton*

George Abbot was an academic, and naturally loved books. As a bishop, then Archbishop of Canterbury, books were essential for his working life. He founded the Lambeth Palace Library, in that he accepted Archbishop Bancroft's gift of his own library on behalf of future archbishops. Previous archbishops had their own libraries but they tended to be broken up on their deaths. Bancroft was not sure that his gift would be successful so he got the king, James I, and George Abbot, as Bishop of London, to support the idea before his death.

Interestingly, Abbot had had experience of the difficulty of leaving a library to an institution. While he was at the Grammar School, in 1575 John Parkhurst, bishop of Norwich and an old boy of the school, left his library to the school. However, his executors and the new bishop had to be forced to hand them over. This is the chained library. Bishop Parkhurst himself had been involved in translating the 'Bishops' Bible', published in 1568. The wording of Parkhurst's will is slightly ambiguous but he may have intended the library to be for the use of the whole town, in which case it is one of the earliest public libraries in the country. As the town ran the school, Parkhurst may not have seen a clear distinction between them. Even if the teenage school boy was not very interested, his father, as one of the 'approved men' who ran the town, is likely to have talked about it at home.

Bishop Abbot of London, and Archbishop Bancroft were both book lovers, and were both friendly with Sir Thomas Bodley, whose personal library is now the Bodleian in Oxford. It opened in 1602. Bancroft died in 1610 and Abbot became archbishop. Abbot had a catalogue made of Bancroft's books in 1612, with a preface explaining how the library had been founded. James I was, fortunately, a great admirer of learning and felt that the library was 'a monument of fame within his kingdom'. His solicitor, Francis Bacon, advised the catalogue as the best way of safeguarding the collection of books. The library was not just for the archbishops, but for the 'Kings and Common wealth of this Realme' – a public library.

The library included Bibles and commentaries, theology, sermons, histories and dictionaries. It was arranged in categories around the four sides of the Palace cloister at Lambeth. Bancroft had acquired books from various sources, including Henry VIII's library, and from contemporary scholars. He also collected books from the dissolved monasteries, most of which were manuscripts rather than printed books. It is through collectors like this that some of the glorious medieval manuscripts survive. About half of Archbishop Whitgift's 6,000 books were included in the new library. He died in 1604.

In the catalogue Abbot explained that he would bequeath his own library to Lambeth in due course. It was shelved with Bancroft's books during his lifetime. In those days books were bound for the owner, and Abbot had elaborate gilt-stamped covers with his coat of arms surrounded by typical Jacobean strap-work ornament. Bancroft's bindings were plainer. Both men collected similar books on theology - both of them were puritans - but they also collected books from the 'enemy': Roman Catholic authors, so they could argue against

them. This was a time when religion was very much a part of politics. There were also books on literature and current affairs, particularly in Abbot's library.

In his will, George Abbot noted that he had many books in the library marked with the letter 'G.C.' – 'George Cantuar' (archbishop of Canterbury). He bequeathed them to future archbishops and asked for a catalogue to be made of them, still aware that gifts like this could get diverted to other people. He rather severely 'in the name of the dreadful and Almighty God ... lay it upon the soul and conscience' of future archbishops to keep the library safe.

He also bequeathed 'five and twenty' books from his study at the archbishop's residence at Croydon to the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury, and the same number to Winchester. He left his pictures and maps 'now hanging in the gallery at Lambeth' to his successor. These would have been the natural ornaments of an educated man's home and clearly they were his personal property. Maps were still fairly rare, but printed copies were making them more accessible. They could have been maps of the world, of foreign countries, or of Britain, and indicate Abbot's wider interests. He left the pictures and maps at Croydon to his two chaplains. We don't know where his pictures and maps are, but his books remain at Lambeth, available for everyone to see.

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