



The Old Library

A Short History



THE HISTORY OF **THE OLD LIBRARY**

EARLY HISTORY

St Edmund Hall's first collection of books was begun under the auspices of Dr Thomas Tullie, the Principal from 1658 to 1676. Tullie initiated a system by which members leaving at the end of their studies would make a gift to the Hall to the value of £5, in the form of either books or plate. This custom was continued under his successors, the Rev. Stephen Penton and Dr John Mill. Previously, like Oxford's other medieval halls, St Edmund Hall had existed for centuries without its own library, which is unsurprising given its lack of endowment and the scarcity and expense of

books, especially before the invention of the printing press. In 1680, Penton made the decision to construct a building which would house a chapel and a library together. He set about raising funds by selling the Hall's silver plate, as well as by drawing on his own resources and encouraging donations from former students. At first, progress was rapid, and the chapel was consecrated in 1682, but the library (above the antechapel) was not completed until 1685/86. The building work was carried out by Oxford mason Bartholomew Peisley, who later worked on Blenheim Palace.



CHAINED BOOKS

The library of St Edmund Hall was the first library outside the Bodleian to use walled shelving, and the last library to chain its books. The iron chains confined the majority of books to the library – scholars could not remove them from the building to read. The chains were also long enough to place the book on a desk for reading.

THE CATALOGUES

The first catalogue was produced by Thomas Hearne in 1699, recording 421 books. By the 1770s, this number had risen to nearly 1000, largely as a result of continued gifts from old members and a charge of 20 shillings imposed on students wishing to use the library. Accessions increased significantly under Principal Dr George Dixon, who donated more than 100 books himself in 1780.



PRESSURE ON SPACE

In 1920, newer books were removed to a succession of other rooms in the Hall for everyday use by students. The New Library was established in 1927, housed in the Canterbury Building in the Front Quad. The main student library then moved to St Peter-in-the-East following the deconsecration and conversion of the Church in the late 1960s.

THE COLLECTION TODAY



Of the Old Library's 4800 books, many were the gifts of Aularians (members of St Edmund Hall) or relate to important figures in the College's history. Overall, the collection is particularly strong in the theological field, and includes a copy of the rare first English edition of the Koran, *The Alcoran of Mohamet* (1649). The Library includes several books on magic and witchcraft, including *Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex* by Martin de Rio (1633), and works of geography and geology, including many atlases. The ribald poet John Oldham (1653–1683) is also well represented. The first editions of Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) and of Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) are of particular interest to scholars.

A detail from a St Edmund Hall Benefactors' Book



St Edmund Hall

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