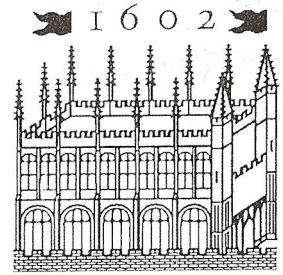


'WONDERFUL THINGS' from four hundred years of collecting: the Bodleian Library 1602-2002.



This is the second of two exhibitions held this year to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of the re-founding of the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The first (which closed at the end of May) focused on Sir Thomas Bodley, his first librarian, Thomas James and their achievements during the period from 1598 when Bodley's offer was first made to the University to restore the Library, until 1620.

When Bodley came to Magdalen College in 1560 the Library room above the Divinity school was empty, the collection of manuscripts donated by Humprey, Duke of Gloucester dispersed, and the building in a derelict state. Having lectured in Greek at Merton College, Bodley held a number of other University posts prior to being granted leave of absence by his college to travel in Europe and to learn its languages. Throughout his time in Oxford the Library remained in the sad state it had fallen into prior to his arrival in the city.

Motivated by a sense of public duty, Bodley was in the diplomatic service of Queen Elizabeth I, principally in what is now Holland, until his decision to retire in 1596. Then having had the good fortune to marry a rich widow, Bodley considered himself uniquely well placed to set about restoring the old Library. He believed that the lack of endowment was the principal reason why the University's 15th century library had not survived. He therefore not only supported it with the benefit of the rents from his London properties, but sought, 'to stirre up other men's benevolence, to helpe furnish it with bookes'. His success can be gauged from the quality of the manuscripts and books which were either accepted as gifts or purchased with funds he helped make available, and by the early reputation his Library acquired as a place for scholarly research, both for home and foreign students.

An impressive Benefactors' Register (1604), bound for permanent public display, was designed as an inducement to underwriters of the project. Its elaborate brass corner pieces and centre piece, containing an enamelled plaque bearing Bodley's coat of arms and motto, was shown and prominently reproduced in the full catalogue, which accompanied the first exhibition.

Sir Walter Ralieghe was one to make an early gift (of £50 in 1603) and to take pride in the seventy or so books, stamped on the front board with his coat of arms, which his donation was to purchase.

In addition to the desire to show some of the important books in the collection, an endeavour was made to demonstrate the early efforts to arrange the collection; the recording of acquisitions, including the chaining of books, cataloguing and the records kept of student use of the books.

Company in 1610 that made provision for the Library to claim a copy of each new book published was to ensure, in theory at least, the continued growth and development of the collection, and consequently of its buildings.

The second exhibition will show some of the most notable books and manuscripts, western and oriental, in the Bodleian collection. It will include the First Folio of Shakespeare, a Guttenberg Bible, an embroidered binding thought to have been the work of Elizabeth I and, rather surprisingly a binding executed on a Shackleton voyage to the Antarctic of observations composed and printed at sea – the binding material consisting of an old wooden packing case, with the word 'kidneys' still evident in ink. 'Wonderful things' indeed.

(The exhibition opens to the public on 2nd July and runs to 21st December. Admission is free)

Alan Isaac