Library of Birmingham Archives & Collections

Early and Fine Printing Collection – An Overview

Introduction

These collections contain nearly 13,000 items, of which over 8,200 an unusually large number for a public library, were printed before 1701. Of these, 128 are incunabula (a book printed before 1501. More than 4,500 books printed after 1700 have been chosen due to their fine printing, illustration, binding or a combination of these for the Fine Printing Collection.

Early Printing Collection

The collection includes books, incunabula, manuscripts, atlases and maps. [1] The collection includes two local parish libraries [2] on deposit from Kings Norton and Sheldon, originally the libraries of Rev. Thomas Hall (1610-1665) and Rev. Thomas Bray (1656-1730).

Fine Printing Collection

Find out about Fine Printing [3] – the Kelmscott Press and William Morris, other famous private presses and the William Ridler Collection that was deposited with the Library in 1988. There is an almost complete collection of books and ephemera printed by John Baskerville,[4] the 18th Century Birmingham type designer and printer. Celebrate the private presswork of Bill Pardoe and David Wishart.[5]

Illustrated Books and Binding

There is an outstanding collection of fine illustrated books[6], many hand coloured and a small group of early photographic books. The library is privileged to hold J. J. Audubon's "Birds of America" as well as many other beautifully illustrated natural history books. There are examples of book bindings ranging from the 15th Century to the work of contemporary designers , and a small collection of miniature books.

Miniature Books

There is a collection of tiny books which include a miniature bible printed in 1728 and the reproduction of two speeches by Elizabeth II during the Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1977.

[1] Books, incunabula, manuscripts, atlases and maps

William Caxton

The Early Printing Collection includes one of three known perfect copies of a book printed by William Caxton in 1479, three years after he set up his press at Westminster and became the first printer in England. It is a book of meditation on death entitled Cordiale or the Four last things and was translated by his patron Earl Rivers. It was bought with the help of generous gifts from various trusts and local firms and individuals in 1978, and is a fine addition to the collection. The works of Caxton's successors in England may be seen, for example, in the Policronicon printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1495 and The Ship of Folys printed by Richard Pynson in 1509.

Early Italian Printing

Early Italian printing may be recognised at its best in St Augustines De civitate Dei printed by the first printers in Italy, Sweynheym and Pannartz, in Rome in 1470, and in Plinys Historia naturale printed by Nicolas Jenson of Venice (1476). Jenson was an important source of inspiration for William Morris and T J Cobden-Sanderson, two of the leading figures of the private press movement in England at the end of the nineteenth century. Equally inspirational was the most famous book of the Italian Renaissance, the Hypnerotomachia (the strife of love in a dream) by Francesco Colonna, in a mixture of Latin, Greek and Italian. It was printed in Venice by the leading scholarly printing house of Aldus Manutius in 1499, and illustrated by fantastical woodcuts.

Early German Printing

Early printing in Germany is well represented by amongst others the Cosmographia of Ptolemy, printed at Ulm by Lienhart Holle in 1482, with hand-coloured maps engraved in wood; the Nuremberg Chronicle published by Anton Koberger in 1493, with its 1809 woodcuts by Wolgemuth and Pleydenwurff and his earlier publication the Latin Bible of 1478, with its illuminations in the style of medieval manuscripts. The most splendidly illustrated book to be published in Germany was surely the Teuerdank of 1517 which can be seen in this collection in a fine copy on vellum.

Other early printed books

These books cover a wide range of subjects. They include herbals and botanical books for example, both editions of John Gerard's Herball (1597 and 1633), and John Evelyn's Sylva (2nd edition 1670) on the cultivation of trees and geographical and travel books, such as the Voyages of Linschoten (1598) and a hand-coloured edition of Braun and Hogenbergs Civitates Orbis Terrarum (1576) with its contemporary plans and views of towns and cities of the known world.

There are local topographical and historical works such as Camden's Britannia, published from 1586 onwards. Edward Hall's Chronicles (1548) and Holinshed's Chronicles (1577 and

1586-7) were both sources for Shakespeare to draw on for the subjects of his plays. Foxe's Book of Martyrs (1563) was approved reading for the Sabbath, despite its gory woodcuts.

A large collection of political and religious pamphlets from the Civil War period reveals the controversies of the time and the progress of the military action. Daily events from 1665 can be traced in the earliest issues of The London Gazette. A set of Moxon's Mechanical Exercises (1677-83) explains in detail with illustrations the metal and wood-working crafts and trades of the time, including printing. Cookery books like Hannah Woolley's The Queen-like closet (1684) provide recipes and housekeeping lore. The obscurantist studies of the mystical philosopher Robert Fludd, illustrated by woodcuts of his anatomies, contrasts with the first edition of Hobbess Leviathan (1651), a work of political theory published during the Commonwealth period.

The various Polyglot Bibles are masterpieces of printing synchronised texts in ancient languages. Christopher Plantin in Antwerp (1569-1572) printed the texts in 8 volumes in 5 languages, and at Eton (1654-57) under the directorship of Brian Walton the texts were translated into 9 languages.

For the history of science there are contemporary editions of the work of Robert Boyle as they came out and the mathematical works of Thomas Digges (1573), of Edmund Gunter in the 17th century and practical works like Robert Record's Arithmetick (1646). The rare account of mining and metallurgy by Georgius Agricola, De re metallica (Basle, 1657) is illustrated by lively woodcuts of workmen and processes. A London edition of Galileo's Sidereus nuncios (1653) represents revolutionary astronomy.

For early editions of Shakespeare, see the Birmingham Shakespeare Library.

Manuscripts

A small collection of manuscripts includes eight medieval illuminated books. One, a Psalter, written in Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century, contains the arms of the Medici family. A Psalter is a volume containing the "Book of Psalms" and which often contains other devotional material. Another, a Dutch Book of Hours, was probably illuminated by Jan Spierinc in 1502. A Book of Hours is a common surviving type of medieval illuminated manuscript. Each is unique, but all contain a collection of texts, prayers and psalms, along with appropriate illustrations, a private prayer book for a Catholic Christian.

Atlases and Maps

Atlases of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gradually revealed the new European discoveries of lands and seas in Africa, Asia, North and South America and mapped out profitable trade routes throughout the known world.

The large collection of early atlases was in the main generously donated by Alderman W A Cadbury during the 1920s and 1930s. It includes an atlas published by A. Lafreri in Rome (1553 80) which contains five unique maps found in no other surviving copy. Amongst his other gifts were a number of early editions of Ptolemy, some hand-coloured and dating from the Venetian edition of 1475, and a Mercator atlas of 1633. This is hand coloured, printed in

Amsterdam and orientated according to his new projection which more accurately aligned longitude and latitude. The earliest English marine atlas, the Mariners Mirrour (1588), nicknamed a Waggoner, was based on a Dutch atlas by Wagenaer, and the later more comprehensive French marine atlas was called Le Neptune franis (1693). The finely coloured and decorated Grand Atlas by Blaeu in 12 volumes (1667) was an earlier acquisition, and the Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine, an atlas by John Speed (1614) was presented by Paul Cadbury in 1966.

The map collection, including the library's unique copy of Christopher Saxton's wall map of Great Britain (1583) – pictured above – is now housed in the Library of Birmingham. Saxton's atlas of maps of England and Wales (1579) is available in two hand-coloured copies.

[2] Local Parish Libraries

The early printing collections also contain two local parish libraries of the seventeenth century, that of Thomas Hall of King Norton (1610 – 1665) and Thomas Bray, Rector of Sheldon (1656 1730).

Thomas Hall

Thomas Hall first taught at the Grammar School at King Norton (pictured left), where he so raised the standards as to attract students from all over England. He was appointed curate in 1640, but became a Presbyterian during the Commonwealth period. An implacable Puritan, he refused to conform to the Act of Uniformity in 1662, and so was ejected from his living.
In his will Hall left the best of his books to the library at Birmingham possibly that of King Edward School. The rest of the books were to remain in King Norton parish for the use of the minister and schoolmaster. There they stayed, in cupboards in the old Grammar School building in the churchyard, until in 1892 they were deposited in the Birmingham Reference Library.
The Thomas Hall Library contains about 1140 volumes, mainly seventeenth century theological works of a surprisingly wide range of persuasions, and some rare foreign treatises. There are some incunabula, including a rare copy of De tribus puellis, attributed to Ovid, and printed by Cornelius de Zierikzee in Cologne about 1500, and some interesting original bindings, including one bearing a panel with the Tudor rose and royal arms, together with the trademark of John Reynes, stationer, who bound books for Henry VIII.

BBC Restoration

The Old Grammar School and the medieval house known as the Saracen's Head were the winners of the BBC2 Restoration series in 2004. Twenty-one properties competed, including three for the Midlands heat, the others being Newstead Abbey, Ravenstead, home of Lord Byron and Bawdsey Radar Station at Felixstowe.

Thomas Bray

Thomas Bray, Rector of Sheldon from 1690 to his death in 1730, is best known for his successful schemes to provide parochial libraries throughout England and Wales and in the mission field, notably in North America. His work developed into the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. In his Essay towards promoting all necessary and useful knowledge (1697) and Bibliotheca Parochialis (1707) he gives instructions for the setting up of parish libraries and details what they should contain.

Bray bequeathed his own library or the use of the Rector of Sheldon forever and it is this which is now deposited here. It contains about 370 items, a few of which were acquired after Dr Bray death, and some still bear the library distinctive ownership stamp. The books are predominately theological in subject matter, but varied in standpoint.

[3] Fine Printing

Private Presses

Earlier private presses such as the Strawberry Hill Press of Horace Walpole (1757 89) and the Hafod Press of Thomas Johnes of Aberystwyth (1803 10) are represented. There is a very good collection of books printed by John Baskerville (1706 75), the amateur printer who lived at Easy Hill, Birmingham and whose first book, an edition of Virgil, "went forth", according to Macaulay "to astonish all the librarians of Europe". Baskerville gained the support of Matthew Boulton of the Soho Manufactory, who was one of its subscribers. He printed his magnificent lectern Bible at Cambridge with special permission from the University who held the patent. There are also several editions of his Book of Common Prayer, some finely bound in contemporary gilt-tooled bindings, such as the one by John Baumgarten. The type specimens and prospectuses in the collection are extremely rare – any that appear on the market are snapped up by libraries and collectors.

Kelmscott Press

The Library of Birmingham has a complete collection of Kelmscott Press books printed under the direction of William Morris, including the Press most renowned book Works of Chaucer (1896) which was illustrated by the dramatic wood engravings of Edward Burne-Jones. He was the pre-Raphaelite artist born in poverty in Birmingham who rose to public acclamation and a knighthood from Queen Victoria for his work.

The Kelmscott Press and William Morris inspired the private press movement in England and abroad at the turn of the century, and the Library has a comprehensive collection of books printed at the Doves Press (including the Bible, 1903-5), the Ashendene Press, the Golden Cockerel Press (including The Four Gospels with wood engravings by Eric Gill, 1931), The Gregynog Press, Essex House Press and others. Amongst them is a set of the books produced at the Birmingham School of Printing under the supervision of Leonard Jay.

Contemporary Private Presses

The Library continues to support the tradition of buying examples of the work of contemporary private presses in the UK. The Old Stile Press, run by Nicholas and Frances McDowell, matches literary texts with imaginative illustrations. The Whittington Press is owned by the Randles who escaped the mainstream publishing scene for hand printing on historic presses. The Rampant Lions Press was founded by Will Carter, and later run by his son Sebastian, both typographic designers. The Fleece Press of Simon Lawrence is known especially for its wood engravings. Find out about other private presses of the UK.

In the USA, there are examples of the publications of the Ariel Press, the Bird and Bull Press, the Janus Press of the artist Claire van Vliet, the Pennyroyal Press and others. There are also small collections of French, German and Italian fine printing.

The Library is fortunate to include in the collection works by both Bill Pardoe and David Wishart, two Birmingham Printers, who have both sadly died in the last few years.

Recent Acquisitions include Avocet to Zander by Anne Cathcart, one of the highly commended entries for the Clarion/Fine Press Association Competition for alphabet books. Weaving and Interlocking Book Structures from the Janus Press, and Inwards where all the battles is by Alun Lewis printed at Gwasg Gregynog. There are two miniature books from the Old Stile Press, Be still and Psalm 150. A collection of pamphlets and ephemera printed by F.E.Pardoe have been added since his death in 2002. He will be much missed.

In 2005 the library purchased for the collection The bricks of Venice by Peter Harris, printed at the Old School Press in a limited edition of 150 copies of a volume of text and a box of watercolour plates.

For details see http://www.theoldschoolpress.com.

Ridler Collection

The William Ridler Collection of Fine Printing was deposited on loan from Dr Ann Ridler in Birmingham Central Library in 1988, and is shelved in glass fronted cases on Floor 6.
It contains about 3,500 finely printed and illustrated books, dating from the beginnings of the private press movement in the 1890s to the 1970s, and complements the Library own collections.
The illustration on the right is from The Tale of Igor, published by the Beaumont Press in 1918.
The Ridler Collection has its own printed catalogue.

Interesting facts about the EFP Collection
- The smallest book is one inch high and is in the Bijio Series, a set of miniature books printed c. 1850.
- The largest book is 3'3 by 2'2 unopened. There are four volumes of J. J. Audobon's *Birds of America* (1827 – 1838) containing life-size illustrations.

- The oldest book was printed in 1469 in Augsberh, Germany. It is called *Catholicon* by Joannes Balbus.
- The oldest book printed in England is *Cordiale of Four Last Thinges* by William Caxton, printed in 1479.
- Eight medieval manuscripts, including an extremely heavy church psalter and a book of hours was used by an itinerant priest.