

The Southampton Psalter: a History of Ownership

Video transcript

We are here in the Library of St John's College in Cambridge, the current home of the Southampton Psalter. The manuscript has been here since 1635, when it was donated by the Earl of Southampton, from whom the Psalter gets its name. These are the initials of Thomas Wriothesley, 4th Earl of Southampton. '*Thomas comes*' (which is Latin for 'earl') '*Southampton*'.

His father, Henry Wriothesley, who is well known as a patron of Shakespeare, had obtained the manuscript when he bought a vast gentleman's library, belonging to his friend William Crashaw, in order to present it to St John's College, where both men had studied. The gift of so large a collection, amounting to nearly two hundred medieval manuscripts and over a thousand early printed books, prompted the College to build a magnificent new library, the largest in Cambridge at the time. The printed book collections arrived in the College in the 1620s but Thomas Wriothesley, the fourth earl, kept the manuscripts until 1635, by which time he had inked his initials inside them. We don't know exactly how William Crashaw obtained the manuscript. The name, R. Benet, appears, as indeed it does in six other manuscripts belonging to Crashaw. There was a mayor of Romney in Kent with this name in the 16th century. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the monasteries, many medieval devotional manuscripts were lost. Others fell into the hands of bibliophiles and collectors and perhaps Benet was one of these. We are fortunate that we can tell which monastery owned this manuscript before the dissolution. It is listed in a catalogue of St Martin's Priory in Dover, compiled by the Priory's precentor John Whytefield in 1389. This classmark in Whytefield's handwriting shows that it was in the first place on the fifth shelf in class A. As a security device he repeated the classmark on another page, together with the first two words on that page and the total number of folios, which uniquely distinguished this manuscript from any similar manuscript, so that if it ever wandered from Dover, it could be identified and returned.

By 1389, the manuscript would already have been well over three-hundred-years-old, but where was it before that? How did it get from Ireland to Dover? Pádraig Ó Néill may have filled in a little of that gap. He discovered that corrections in the manuscript in a 12th-century English hand are consistent both with the scribes at Canterbury and with the theological teaching there. It is possible that the Psalter was one of several books given by the monastery at Canterbury to the house at Dover. So, we can trace the manuscript's journey probably from Canterbury to Dover, then via Benet in Romney to William Crashaw's great library, then to the Earls of Southampton, and at last to St John's College here in Cambridge. However, we still cannot fill in the details of the manuscript's journey from

Ireland to the south of England, although further analyses of pigments and materials may provide more clues to the manuscript's early history. There is always more to learn.