



Part of the collections at Lichfield Cathedral Library.

THREE CATHEDRAL LIBRARIES

Malcolm Dick

Cathedral libraries and archives are the oldest surviving repositories of the word in Britain. They emerged in medieval times – or even earlier – when books were handwritten, literacy was largely a religious monopoly and churches and monasteries kept records of their landholdings and relationships with local populations. There are three long-established cathedral libraries in the West Midlands - Hereford, Lichfield and Worcester. They contain some of the most important books and manuscripts in the country and provide a record for those of us who want to make sense of medieval religious, social and economic life.

Hereford Cathedral Library



Hereford Cathedral's library and archives date back over one thousand years, though the oldest book is the Anglo-Saxon *Hereford Gospels* of about 780, a unique survival of the destruction of the cathedral in 1055. One distinctive feature of the library is that it is chained, where the covers of books are secured to a bookcase which enables them to be read but prevents them from being taken away. Until the eighteenth century, libraries contained books which were either handwritten or expensively printed and often could not be borrowed. Viewers of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* will have seen a fictional example of a chained library in the Restricted Section of Hogwarts Library. It contained books which explored 'Dark Magic' and could only be read by advanced students who were studying 'Defence Against the Dark Arts'. Harry consulted this section in his first year by wearing his invisibility cloak so he could not be seen. He ran away when a book he removed from the shelf screamed when he opened it! Visitors to the chained library at Hereford won't need an invisibility cloak to see the books on their shelves and they will find theological and legal works rather than books of magic. They are guaranteed not to scream.

The seventeenth-century chained library book presses contain particularly valuable books, though only a small proportion of Hereford's collections. Like many cathedral libraries, books and manuscripts arrived at different stages of the library's history as a result of gifts or acquisitions. Today both historic and modern books are located in the New Library Building, which includes a reading room with both a reference and a lending library.



Hereford Cathedral's distinctive chained library.

Alongside the books, Hereford holds a collection of archives which mostly relate to the activities of Hereford Cathedral and includes royal charters, cathedral accounts and estate records. There is also one of only four surviving examples of the revised *Magna Carta* (Great Charter) of 1217 and the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* (World Map), c1300, the largest example in existence of a medieval map of the world. In 1988, the Dean and Chapter of the cathedral considered selling the item, but following a great outcry, the map was transferred to a trust, following the donation of money by Sir Paul Getty and support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund. A specially designed building was opened in 1996 to house *Mappa Mundi*, the chained library and the library and archive collections.

Lichfield Cathedral Library



Named after St Chad, the Northumbrian missionary who brought Christianity to the West Midlands in the seventh century, Lichfield Cathedral's *St Chad's Gospels* are a remarkable eighth-century survival from the Anglo-Saxon period. Originally there were two volumes but only one survives. The extant copy contains the gospels of St Matthew and St Mark and part of St Luke. Written in Latin, they also contain text in the Welsh language and several illuminated pages, including 'portraits' of St Mark and St Luke and a 'cross-carpet' page of interlaced bird designs.

The origins of the *Gospels* are unknown: they may have been written in Iona (Scotland), Lindisfarne (Northumberland) or Wales. Some scholars argue that they were created in Anglo-Saxon Mercia, possibly in Hereford and perhaps in Lichfield itself. Evidence suggests that the *Gospels*, in any case, were probably in Lichfield by the tenth century. They survived the Reformation, but were stolen from the Cathedral Library when it was partially destroyed in 1646. The first volume was saved, given to the Duchess of Somerset who returned it in the 1670s. Since 1982 the *Gospels* have been on display in the Chapter House in a secure and temperature-controlled case, where they can be seen by any visitor to the Cathedral.

Lichfield Cathedral Library is located in the Treasury, above the Chapter House. During the Civil War of the 1640s between



Lichfield Cathedral Library is located in the Treasury.

Charles I and Parliament, the books in the original library, built outside the cathedral, were taken or destroyed. The library was refitted in 1673, following the restoration of Charles II, and restocked as a result of a gift from the Duchess of Somerset. In 1758, it was moved to its present location. Most of the diocesan archives are located in Lichfield Joint Record Office, but the library contains some manuscripts and several rare books, including fifteenth-century manuscripts of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Wycliffe's *Bible* and a number of King James *Bibles* from the seventeenth century. There is also a collection of early printed and manuscript church and instrumental music from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Worcester Cathedral Library



The library and archives at Worcester Cathedral date back at least to the time of King Offa of Mercia, who is known to have donated a *Bible* in about 780. The Cathedral Library's current holdings include an important collection of 298 medieval manuscripts. Among these are the oldest surviving copy of a work on grammar and poetry by the Venerable Bede, dating from the tenth century, a *Book of Psalms* of 1200 which was produced at Worcester and is illustrated with precious stones and gold leaf, and the *Worcester Antiphonal* of about 1230 which contains the music and services for each day during a year in the life of the Cathedral's monastery.

Considerable conservation activities have taken place in recent years to preserve medieval documents. These include infirmary rolls, which outline the care of the sick at Worcester, and manuscript medical texts by Galen and other writers, which reveal the extent of medical knowledge available to the educated at the time.

The library also contains some objects, which are not usually found in a library, but which provide an insight into Worcester's history. These include the Viking skin, allegedly flayed alive from the body of a Viking raider who was caught stealing a bell. His skin was nailed to the west door of the Cathedral as a warning to others.



Worcester Cathedral houses a library and archives dating back to the time of King Offa.

King John, of *Magna Carta* fame, was buried in Worcester Cathedral and the library holds a thumb bone from his tomb and the original copy of his will.

The library suffered losses during the Reformation and Civil War and many documents were damaged by rain. It was located in various parts of the Cathedral after 1670 until it was housed in its

present location in the roof space of the south nave aisle. As well as medieval items, considerable collections of books have been acquired subsequently, which cover subjects as diverse as theology, travel, mathematics and history. ●

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Further Reading

Type the name of the cathedral library into a search engine or follow the links below, which also provide details of publications to enable the reader to explore the subject in depth.

www.herefordcathedral.org/education-research/library-and-archives
www.lichfield-cathedral.org/Visiting-Lichfield-Cathedral/the-cathedral-library.html
worcestercathedral.co.uk/Library.php