

# Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

## St Davids – The Only In Situ Cathedral Library in Wales

Mari James

St Davids Cathedral has the only *in situ* Cathedral Library in Wales. Built in 1350 the Thomas Becket Chapel provided space on the 2 floors above for housing the Cathedral's Chapter Room and Treasury - which contained the silver and the other valuables including books and manuscripts. Being on the North side of the cathedral the building was ideal for providing a north light through the windows, retaining the original medieval stone-canopied seats for working on manuscripts.

The 'Turbulent Tudors' during the Reformation declared "*Olde books cancelled and torne up*" - as 'out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new' with the introduction of the new Protestant prayer books. Other manuscripts were "*dispersed*" (or liberated!) to the new colleges of Oxford and Cambridge! They centralised printing work in London so the Crown had greater control over what was printed so that small-scale printing became illegal until the mid C18th. Much of the Library's collection originated from the Dean Allen, donated in the C18th. As a Classicist much of his collection reflects his own interests but also many of the key interests and topics of debate of the clergy (who needed to be informed as to the burning questions of the day). The 2 floors above the St Thomas Becket Chapel became St Davids Free School, or Grammar School and many books donated to the Library date to this period - including bound copies of the 'Spectator', used in teaching about the current events of the day! Popular texts have been much-handled and are often therefore in a poor condition whilst more academic treatise have survived in good condition! The room also retains the original C14th fireplace which would have heated the clergy whilst at work in the Chapter and later the Library.

The Library includes over 7,000 items collected over the centuries – not just theology but all manner of topics the clergy felt they needed to be informed about, though many of the books are Bibles. Printing was a great contributor to the Reformation and all books in the Cathedral's collection are printed – although as printing became more technological it included both colour and illustrations – even mimicking Illuminated Manuscripts. From the late C15th Erasmus and friends contributed to the rethinking of church and society across Europe at the time producing **11 volumes of tightly printed Latin** (language of universities of the time), influencing the work of translators and reformers in Wales and Europe during the reign of Mary Tudor.

Other books include: C16th - Martin Luther (after leaving the Catholic Church, became a bit of a 'cult figure') his **Divine Discourses**; new **Welsh Bible** produced and circulated in Wales before England (distracted by the Spanish Armada!); C17th **Thomas Tomkins** b.1572 St Davids – wrote **Musica Deo Sacra** - his son published his work after his death; **Breeches Geneva Bible** – provided Old and New Testaments, Psalms, etc everything in a single book; **Bishop Parry Bibles/ Esgob Parry Beibl** – widely produced and circulated throughout all churches; **Rhemes Bible** – Counter-Reformation Anglo-Catholics worked on their own translation of the bible; **Bishop Fox's Book of Martyrs** – counter-



Reformation Catholics extolling execution of Protestants; Rev J.S.Henlow's **The Botanist** (the vicar on board the Beagle with Darwin. George III declared official records be printed and placed for people to access –St Davids Cathedral, as the equivalent of the 'public library', became the repository of these; **Domesday Book**; Dr. Johnson's 1<sup>st</sup> dictionary in the English language; maps (including **Speede's 1610 map of Wales** and the **1776 map "British Empire in North America"** - at the time of the War of Independence).

**See Twitter and Cathedral Website for details.**

