

# Cambridge

Monday 13 May 2019

## Pepys Library, Magdalene College

Our visit was hosted by the Pepys Librarian, Dr Jane Hughes, who gave us an interesting introduction to the Library. After Samuel Pepys's death in 1703 his library at York Buildings, off The Strand, was left in the provisional care of his nephew, John Jackson, until when he in turn died it was transferred according to Pepys's bequest to Magdalene in 1724. The collection consists of exactly 3000 books, many of outstanding importance, such as a manuscript Wycliffite New Testament on vellum, but also including the sort of ephemera which have not survived elsewhere, for example sheets of contemporary ballads and a tiny book detailing the times of postal collections and deliveries in various Italian cities. He housed his books in a series of 12 glazed book-cases, or presses as he called them, documented in his diary as being made by Sympson the joiner, probably from Deptford and Woolwich dockyards, the first being completed in 1666. These are the first glazed book-cases in existence and for their date

are unique in being portable rather than fitted. They are constructed of solid oak, apparently typical quarter-sawn wainscot imported from the Rhine Valley, though Dr Hughes told us she had been told that they were made of red oak, a term which caused some discussion among members of our party, as the term is usually applied to either a variety of American oak or English oak which has been infected with a fungus which affects the colour, neither of which appears to be the case in this instance.

The book-cases were designed to be dismantlable, presumably because Pepys knew he was going to move house, so the cornices are detachable, the upper section is made of two separate halves and the lower section is separate again and has a carrying handle at either end. The glazed fronts of the lower section are unusual in that instead of being hinged at the side they are detachable by being slid upwards. Dr Hughes pointed out that this would be typical of the work of a naval joiner as cupboards on ships would never have doors opening at lower leg height where they would be too vulnerable. The earlier book-cases had multiple slots recessed into the sides to allow for adjustment of the shelves. Running under the front of the shelves themselves there were iron rods. In his seminal article on the book-cases from the May and June 1930 *Connoisseur*, R. W. Symonds states that these were part of the original structure, designed to stop the sides of the bookcases from bowing outwards under the weight of the books, analogous to tie-beams in a building. Dr Hughes was of the opinion that they were early twentieth-century additions, inserted to prevent the shelves themselves from bowing. We questioned why, in that case, the rods were confined to the front whereas the bulk of the weight was at the back of the shelves.

Pepys catalogued his books meticulously. They were catalogued by size, no. 1 being the smallest and no. 3000 the largest. The problem with this system is that as he added books to the collection the numbers had to be



The Pepys Library. *By permission of the Master and Fellows of Magdalene College Cambridge*

adjusted and in fact he revised the catalogue four times, having to correct the number on the flyleaf of every volume at each revision. The small books were distributed along the front of the shelves and the large books behind and once he reached his 3000th volume the collection became fixed and survives as he left it to this day.

The book-cases have elaborate carving along the cornices and along the surbases between the upper and lower sections. These conform to 3 different patterns and within each pattern there is a variation in quality, suggesting that Symson the joiner employed a number of different carvers.

Also of interest was a partners' desk, thought to be the first ever made, having faux drawer fronts and glazed sides revealing Pepys's largest volumes inside – too large for accommodation in the main book-cases.

*John Stabler*



The RFS group outside the Pepys Library