Richardson Collection

This collection of early bibles, medieval manuscripts and early printed works was donated to the Public Library of New South Wales in 1926.

What's in the collection

This collection includes 289 volumes of rare bibles, religious works, early printed books and a small collection of medieval manuscripts.

Among the rare bibles in the collection is the Coverdale Bible, the first complete bible printed in English by Myles Coverdale in 1535. There is also a first edition of the Geneva Bible printed in 1560 and the King James Bible from 1611.

The collection includes a number of medieval manuscripts including the earliest manuscript held in the library, the Book of Isaiah the Prophet. This manuscript was compiled by Italian monks in the monastery of St Michael, Pisa, about 1225 C.E.

Another unique item is an early collection of English Statutes from around 1330 which includes a copy of the Magna Carta statute from 1297. The small volume is approximately 10 cm long and is in the original bindings with scraps of skin attached to the rough wooden boards. The text is handwritten on vellum in a mixture of Latin and French, with a few decorated initials. The volume also includes the Charter of the Forest, a companion document to the Magna Carta, which provided a right of common access to royal lands. Clause 10 of the Charter of the Forest repealed the death penalty for capturing deer (venison).

The finest manuscript in the collection is the Rimini Antiphonal, a large illuminated choir book from 1328. The Antiphonal was produced on vellum and contains eight historiated letters and 21 decorated initials. Antiphonals are intended for use by choirs and include the various chants to be sung during mass to celebrate the saints.

How the collection was formed

During the First World War, one of the main Australian Army camps was located at Weymouth in Dorset. The Richardsons lived in a villa named Monte Video, across the road from the camp. They entertained many of the soldiers and officers including the army chaplain, Mr Pitt-Owen and they often showed the visitors their small collection of bibles and early printed manuscripts.

This collection of 289 volumes was donated to the Public Library of New South Wales in 1926 to honour the Australian troops who supported Britain in the First World War. ‘We have liked them and the Australians so much,’ Nelson Richardson wrote, ‘that it occurred to us that it would show in a small way our appreciation of the Australians and the noble way in which they have come forward to help us in this war, and all the sacrifices they have made, if we were to arrange that these bibles should eventually find a home in Australia.’

The Richardsons began collecting bibles because Mrs Richardson believed she was related to John Rogers, the first martyr of Queen Mary’s reign. John Rogers, under the assumed name of Thomas Matthew, published the second complete bible in English, the Matthew’s bible, in 1537. The printing of the bible in English was forbidden by the authorities and Rogers was burnt at the stake in 1555.

You can find more information on what is held in the Richardson collection through our catalogue
