

CHETHAM'S LIBRARY AND ITS BUILDINGS

INFORMATION NOTE 1

Welcome to Chetham's Library, which we hope you will enjoy. You may take photographs but we ask you not to touch the books.

HOW THE LIBRARY CAME INTO EXISTENCE

The Library was founded using funds left in the Will of a successful local merchant named Humphrey Chetham. He was born near to Manchester in 1580. Humphrey Chetham went into business with his brother George in the early 1600s. Initially they bought wool and manufactured it into yarns and woven goods, selling it locally and in London. Later they added the production of fustian, a more risky but higher value product made of linen and cotton. They were very successful. Humphrey acquired the entire business when his brother George died. He used his wealth to expand the business into the provision of financial services for other merchants and wealthy landowners. He became prominent in local society and was appointed High Sheriff (the most important administrative position in Manchester and Lancashire, the area north of the town). He did not enjoy public life and refused the honour of being made a knight, the highest honour that could be given to him by the king. His enthusiasm was directed instead towards undertaking charitable works, particularly schemes which enabled people to acquire greater learning and skills. Towards the end of his life, he wanted to establish a school for poor boys and a library for all who had the ability to use one. He established plans for this but died in 1653 before they could be put into effect. He left in his Will a sum equivalent to £30 million (approximately \$45 million) at today's values. It was left to his 24 legal representatives ("Feoffees") to put his plans into effect. The buildings in which the Library is located today were available in the last year of Humphrey Chetham's life and he wanted his school and library to be established within them. A later section in this Information Note will tell you the story of the buildings and why they were available. The story of the school is told in Information Note 2.

THE LIBRARY – PURPOSE AND CONTENTS

The Feoffees had the present building adapted for use as a library and started to acquire books, using money left by Humphrey Chetham. The architectural style of the library created is similar to those in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. It was founded in 1653 and is the oldest, surviving, public reference library in the English-speaking world. Initially, the Library held many rare books and manuscripts in ancient languages. Only a small number of the original books and documents were written in English. The early subject areas covered were theology, law, philosophy, science, history and the literature of ancient civilizations. Some of the early reference books such as encyclopaedias and dictionaries were also included. Books were chosen to meet the needs and interests of those who could read at that time and who needed knowledge for their chosen professions. These were primarily doctors, lawyers and ministers of religion.

You will see that the Library is located on the first floor above ground level. This was so the books were not spoilt by rising damp. The bookshelves (or "presses") were built from oak by a local craftsman named Richard Martinscroft. In the early years, the books were attached to the presses by chains to prevent theft. A book would be taken out and placed on the nearby work-surface and the reader would study it in that location. You will see 24 portable oak stools which were provided. The reader could take one of these to whichever aisle contained the book he wished to study. By the 1740s, the number of books in the Library had expanded and the presses needed to be increased in height. At this time, the chains were removed and gates were added to each aisle to ensure the security of the books. The meeting room of the Feoffees adjacent to the Library expanded its role to become a Reading Room. Some early chained books, which were part of Humphrey Chetham's legacy, can be seen in there.

In the 1800s, Manchester was expanding rapidly and acquiring new libraries. The Feoffees of Chetham's Library decided to focus future acquisitions on books and documents about local history and descriptions of the natural and man-made features of Manchester and its surrounding area.

In addition to the chained books, the Reading Room holds other sources of interest. There is a portrait of Humphrey Chetham above the fireplace by an unknown artist. You will see also the carved frieze above the fireplace, thought to have been created in the 1700s. In the centre is the heraldic symbol of Humphrey Chetham's family. On each side are columns with symbolic flames at the top. These represent learning. On the left side is a cockerel, thought to be a symbol of Humphrey Chetham's merchant activities. On the right, is a heraldic bird which is an ancient symbol of Christian piety and self-sacrifice. Parts of the display are mounted on carved books, again symbolising learning. You will see also the large table and 24 red leather-covered chairs dating from the mid 1600s and used by the Feoffees. The window alcove with a table and benches on three sides is of interest to many

visitors. The Library's more famous visitors included Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. Friedrich Engels was living and working in Manchester at a time of very rapid industrialisation. A key effect of this was extreme contrasts between the poverty and wealth of its citizens. Karl Marx, a friend of Friedrich Engels, visited him and wanted to read some of the works in the Library, which were relevant to these contrasts. Both men visited several times together from 1845 onwards and developed their political and economic ideas sitting in the alcove. Engels was still making visits in 1870.

As you enter or leave the Library, you will see a printing press. This is of the type that was used to print most of the books that you can see.

THE BUILDINGS

The buildings in which the Library is located were first constructed in the 1420s. There had been earlier buildings on the site, taking advantage of its raised position between two rivers. First there was a castle and then a large house owned at different times by the two most powerful and wealthy families in the settlement (The Grelley and De la Warre families.) The house and nearby church (now Manchester Cathedral) formed the core of Manchester, around which the town later expanded. In 1421 Thomas De la Warre, who was priest in charge of the church, inherited the house on the death of his brother. He wanted to link the church and the house to form a college, in which priests and scholars (known as "clerks") could study and worship together. The house was substantially rebuilt and extended. This was to provide accommodation for eight priests, four clerks and six musicians who would sing the religious services in the church and domestic staff for the whole community. The buildings of local pink Collyhurst sandstone, which you see ahead as you pass through the arch from the street, almost all date from this time. The buildings were known as The College and the church as the Collegiate Church.

In the College, the chief priest (known as the Warden) had what is now the library Reading Room as his personal accommodation. The eight senior priests had their individual rooms in a part of the building where some of the library presses are now located. Four were at ground level and four on the floor above. As you enter the Library from the courtyard, you may see the doors of the four rooms on the ground floor. You may also see the well serving the community in the courtyard outside.

It is sometimes possible to see other rooms in what was the College. This cannot be guaranteed, however, since they are often in use for concerts, meetings, or for pre-booked groups. Should access be possible and a volunteer guide available to show these rooms to you, you may see the Baronial Hall, used as a dining room. This room has remained broadly unchanged since the early 1420s, with the exception of a fireplace added in the 17th century and later enlarged. Close to the Baronial Hall is the former kitchen, known now as the Association Room. You can see the fireplace where the food was cooked and kitchen tools dating from the 1660s. The third room which may be accessible is that which was originally part of the Warden's accommodation. It is known now as the Audit Room. It contains some fine architectural features, particularly the ceiling, and also high quality furniture. There is a portrait of John Dee, a mathematician and scholar, who was appointed as Warden of the College by Queen Elizabeth 1.

During the years of the College's existence, enormous changes occurred in the way the Christian religion was conducted in England. The priests had to change the way they worshipped and transfer their allegiance from the Pope in Rome to the king or queen of England. It was a complex process with changes back to the traditional ways of worship from time to time. The buildings underwent a further change of ownership from the De la Warre family to the Stanley family. There was political conflict at frequent intervals, finally leading to a civil war. The Stanley family supported the losing side, the buildings were damaged during the war and finally they were taken from the family by the representatives of the winning side.

It was at this time that Humphrey Chetham decided that he wished to buy the buildings for his proposed library and school for poor boys.