

File name: Library

Audio length: 2:18 minutes

Meg: Now we have to do this one very quietly, because it's the library, right Sarah?

Sarah: Yes, so this is a really interesting room because we can connect it to specific people. Up until 1539 it was a library, where the monks stored their books, would come to read, or meditate through the act of reading. It was so small because books took so long to produce. It could take one monk three years to write one copy of the bible. Then it was turned into a grotto by adding a copper roof and a fireplace by a family called the Beecrofts. The Beecrofts are famous locally for running Kirkstall Forge.

Meg: Lovely. And what kind of things would the monks be reading?

Sarah: So we know exactly what they would have been, because some of them still exist! And that's because of a monk called Edward Heptonstall. In his will of 1558, he revealed that he had taken the abbey's library with him after it was closed and kept it safe. This would have been particularly annoying for King Henry VIII as he had taken a lot of the abbey's treasures; he'd taken the roof away, it was made of lead and worth a lot of money; he'd taken away the window, and any cash that the abbey had. But he didn't get his hands on the books and the books were very, very valuable. Edward became a priest after the dissolution of the monasteries, where King Henry VIII closed all of the abbeys in the country. And when he died and he left the books to his nephew, so that if the abbey ever reconvened, the books could be returned to Kirkstall.

Meg: Well done our Edward! Do we still have those books in our collection?

Sarah: They aren't in our collection sadly, they are spread around other collections across the country, like the British Library and the Bodleian Library in Oxford. But it's amazing that a number of Kirkstall's books survive and represent such a wide range of subjects. They include theological works, grammatical works, travel writings, and there's a particularly interesting history book: The Coucher Book of [the Cistercian Abbey of] Kirkstall, which was written by a monk from Kirkstall called Selith, who claimed to be around 99 years old, but we think that was just so he could claim that he'd seen the abbey being built.