In Elizabeth de Burgh’s will drawn up in 1355, several books were listed for Clare Hall. These are of considerable interest, revealing her as somewhat unusual for the time. Book ownership itself was rare, as transcribing books was labour-intensive and costly. Book ownership by women was rarer, although increasing. However, ownership does not necessarily tell us about patterns of usage within a household, or women’s influence over book commissions. Elizabeth’s royal relatives and in-laws, in particular the successive queens Eleanor, Margaret, and Isabella, are suspected of influencing some strikingly thoughtful commissions.

Elizabeth’s book bequests to Clare Hall are all religious or academic; they are liturgical, theological, canon law and university texts. She also bequathed religious vestments and plate, and may have envisaged usage in the college chapel, planned but yet to be built.

Apart from the books mentioned in the will, Elizabeth gave at least two other books to Clare Hall, a breviary (‘portiferium’) and a psalter. These are listed in an inventory compiled c.1440, the earliest of the notes and documents collated into a volume known as the ‘Master’s Old Book’. Several books included indications that they had belonged to Elizabeth, e.g. ‘quondam Elizabeth de B. domina de Clare’. The breviary is recorded as most beautiful and the psalter as most sumptuous, suggesting that they may have been illuminated and/or beautifully bound.

The books in the bequest
The will describes the books for Clare Hall succinctly, as follows: ‘deux bon antiphoners chascun ove un grayel en mesme le volum, 1 bon legende, 1 bone messale bien noté, 1 autre messal covert de blank quir, 1 bone Bible covert de noir quir, 1 Hugucion, 1 legende sauctorum, 1 poire de decretals, 1 livre de questions, et xxxii quaiers d’un livre appelé De causa Dei contra Pelagianos.’
- *Deux bons antiphoners chascun ove un grayel en mesme le volum*
  2 good books of antiphons each with a gradual in the same volume.
  These books were to be used by choirs for chants in services; they were often very large. Antiphons (or antiphonal) are biblical texts, parts of the divine office or mass; a gradual has other parts of the mass that are chanted or sung.

- *1 bon legende*
  1 good book of saints’ lives.
  Biographies of the saints often formed part of the divine office.

- *1 bone messale bien noté*
  1 good missal well noted.
  Missals contain texts of prayers and scriptural readings for the mass; this one included musical notation.

- *1 autre messal covert de blank quir*
  Another missal covered with white leather.

- *1 bone Bible covert de noir quir*
  1 good Bible covered with black leather.

- *1 Hugucion*
  1 book by Huguccio/Hugutio.
  Huguccio of Pisa, Bishop of Ferrara, was the author of a *Summa* on Gratian’s *Decretum* in the late twelfth century. However, the grammarian Huguccio, who may or may not be the same man, is known for *Liber deriuationum*. The Master’s Old Book list of c.1440 includes a book described ‘Hugucius de vocabulis…’. Clarke (2002) described the bequest as ‘Hugutio of Pisa’s *Liber deriuationum*’, but some uncertainty persists.

- *1 legende sanctorum*
  1 Legend of the Saints.
  One of the most popular and frequently copied works of the period was Jacob de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, written in the mid-thirteenth century. Its chapters are arranged by the Christian year.

- *1 poire de decretals*
  1 pair of Decretals.
The Decretals of Gregory IX, a thirteenth-century compilation of canon law, replaced earlier compilations. Manuscripts were often very large and elaborate.

- *1 livre de questions*
  1 book of Questions.

Questions represented the scholastic method of university teaching, juxtaposing authoritative statements which seemed to contradict each other, and then finding a resolution. Any number of important fourteenth-century English theologians could have been the author, including William of Ockham, Adam of Woodham, or Thomas Buckingham. Buckingham wrote a response to Thomas Bradwardine’s *De causa Dei* (see below), and at least one extant manuscript combines Buckingham’s 88 Questions and Bradwardine’s *De causa Dei*.

- *xxxii quaiers d’un livre appellé De causa Dei contra Pelagianos*
  32 quires of a book called *Of the Cause of God against Pelagius*.

Hunt notes that this work was ‘a type of book unusual in such a bequest’; standard texts in theology, law, medicine and natural philosophy were more usual. Thomas Bradwardine is regarded as one of the most influential theological writers of the fourteenth century; his distinguished career included a stint as Archbishop of Canterbury. He had known Elizabeth since at least 1338, when she sent him a gift of game. He died of plague in 1349, only a few years after completing this work; when Elizabeth wrote her will in 1355, it had been in circulation for about a decade. It continued to circulate in manuscript form until publication in 1618. A recent research project found 53 extant manuscripts, some complete, some abridged, and some with only parts. The book discusses human free will, predestination, and divine foreknowledge, important intellectual themes of the time. The fact that the book was given to Elizabeth in quires, i.e. unbound, is intriguing.

Only some of the twelve books mentioned in the will were still clearly identifiable in the 111-book inventory of c.1440, eighty years after Elizabeth’s death. Several studies have explored the limited records of Clare College’s early books. In 1950, R.W. Hunt wrote ‘Medieval Inventories of Clare College Library’. In 2002, Elizabeth’s will bequests and the Master’s Old Book were described by Peter Clarke in *The University and College Libraries of Cambridge*. There are some slight discrepancies between these studies,
but Hunt definitely identified three of the books listed in Elizabeth’s will with those listed in c.1440: the two antiphoners and the missal with musical notation. Another three possible matches were the other missal, the good book of saint’s lives (the Master’s Old Book lists a *Legenda pulchra*), and the Hugucion. Clarke also suggests that the pair of Decretals might be part of a 5-volume set listed in c.1440.

In any case, none of Elizabeth’s books are known to have survived into modern times. A few later medieval manuscripts once owned by Clare College survive in other collections. Many books came into the library through gifts and bequests, and the occasional purchase. More mundane documents such as title deeds came with land acquisition, and one of these bears a fine impression of the Great Seal of Edward III, similar to the pendent seal thought to have been on the foundation charter.

Information on the early centuries has been pieced together from fragmentary evidence. After the inventory in the Master’s Old Book, the next reference is a 1496 list of unbound books. Leland saw the medieval books in 1535, and noted thirty of special interest, so it seems that the library may not have been too greatly affected by the fire of 1521 which destroyed the master’s chamber and treasury. (Recent archaeological excavation also revealed no structural fire damage in the part of Old Court examined.) However, a new library and chapel were built in 1528–35. A letter of 1549 reports that all the worthwhile books had been taken away by the fellows; this may well have been for safekeeping, following the Protestant visitations of the university and the threats to close or merge the college. An inventory dated 1557 mentions only one manuscript, but a respectable print library, which doubled in size by 1560.9

The low survival rate of medieval manuscripts at Clare College is typical of other libraries, countrywide. Fire, reformation, civil war, and the eternal unreliability of book-borrowers have doubtless all played their part. It also now seems that a huge number of books were simply deaccessioned when damaged or considered out of date, to make way for modern content. Despite the loss of the books she donated, Lady Elizabeth would probably be happy to see how the library she started has grown.

2 Elizabeth had acquired a papal licence in 1348 for the college to have a chapel, as noted by Professor Underhill on p. 167; actual construction of a chapel may have been delayed by the impact of plague.


4 Professor Underhill, p. 171.


7 See note 3.
