

British Library announces £9m campaign to acquire the St Cuthbert Gospel - the earliest intact European book

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The British Library has announced a campaign to acquire the St Cuthbert Gospel for the nation.

Image



St Cuthbert Gospel

- National Heritage Memorial Fund makes major grant of £4.5m
- Bid to save 7th century masterpiece for the nation
- Substantial grants offered by the Art Fund and other foundations
- £2.75 million still needed to acquire Gospel

Created in the 7th century and intimately associated with one of Britain's foremost saints, the Gospel is the earliest surviving intact European book and one of the world's most significant books.

A manuscript copy of the Gospel of St John, the St Cuthbert Gospel was produced in the North of England in the late 7th century and was buried alongside St Cuthbert on Lindisfarne, apparently in 698, and later found in the saint's coffin at Durham Cathedral in 1104. It has beautifully-worked original red leather binding in excellent condition, and is the only surviving high-status manuscript from this crucial period in British history to retain its original appearance, both inside and out.

The largest single grant for a heritage acquisition in the British Library's history, the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) award of £4.5m is a huge boost to the campaign to acquire the Gospel. The Art Fund has also generously pledged £250,000 and a similar sum was donated by The Garfield Weston Foundation in recognition of the importance of the book to Britain. The Library is now in discussion with a range of other major donors with a view to securing the full amount by the deadline of 31 March 2012.

Announcing the campaign to acquire the St Cuthbert Gospel, the Chief Executive of the British Library, Dame Lynne Brindley, said: "The St Cuthbert Gospel is an almost miraculous survival from the Anglo-Saxon period, a beautifully preserved window into a rich, sophisticated culture that flourished some four centuries before the Norman Conquest. I am delighted to announce publicly this fundraising campaign – the largest the Library has ever embarked upon for a heritage item – and wish to express the Library's profound gratitude to the funders who have already offered their generous support. In particular, the National Heritage Memorial Fund grant, amounting to half of the purchase price, helps us get our fundraising campaign off to the best possible start."

Dame Jenny Abramsky, Chair of the NHMF, said: "The Cuthbert Gospel is an extraordinary piece of our heritage. The National Heritage Memorial Fund was set up to save our most precious heritage at risk and that's why we agreed it was vital that we should do our utmost to safeguard this absolutely unique survival. It's a mark of the importance we placed on it that since our annual budget was spent at the time of this grant request, our Board decided, unusually, to dip into the NHMF's endowment to make this grant possible. We're delighted that our grant will bring the British Library's aspiration to secure it for the nation a substantial step closer."

Stephen Deuchar, Director of the Art Fund, said: "This astonishing, beautifully preserved Gospel sheds bright light on the history and culture of the Church in the 7th century. We are pleased to offer £250,000 towards the purchase and we thank all our supporters for making this possible. We wish the British Library

every success in raising the full sum, so this great treasure can be kept for the public to enjoy in the future.”

The St Cuthbert Gospel, formerly known as the Stonyhurst Gospel, has been on long-term loan to the British Library since 1979 and regularly on-view in the Library’s Sir John Ritblat Treasures Gallery. The Library was approached last year by Christie’s, acting on behalf of the Society of Jesus (British Province), and was given first option to acquire the Gospel for the UK public - a unique opportunity to make the Gospel a permanent part of the national collection.

Representing a major addition to the Library’s world-class collections relating to the early history and culture of Britain the Library plans to make a significant investment in the long-term preservation of the Gospel and will transform the possibilities for improved access to the item through digitisation and display.

Having sought opinions from a range of independent experts as well as the Library’s own curatorial specialists, a price of £9 million was agreed. The fundraising campaign announced today began in early 2011 with the aim of raising the whole amount from philanthropic sources.

In parallel with the fundraising campaign, the Library has also developed an innovative 50/50 display partnership with institutions in the North East of England, in recognition of the cultural, religious and historical resonance that St Cuthbert has for the region. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by Durham Cathedral, Durham University and the British Library paves the way for future opportunities to display the Gospel 50% of the time on the Durham UNESCO World Heritage Site, once the acquisition has been completed. The MOU establishes a framework for the increasingly strong and constructive engagement between the Library, Durham University and Durham Cathedral, which among other projects, will also see the visit of the Lindisfarne Gospels to Durham in 2013.

The Very Reverend Michael Sadgrove, Dean of Durham, said: “This wonderful book links us directly to Saxon Christianity of the north of England, and to the north’s best-loved saint, Cuthbert himself. Durham Cathedral owes its very existence to him, and we prize not only his memory, but also the treasures associated with him here at the Cathedral such as his pectoral cross and portable altar. So I wholeheartedly support the campaign to save this book for the nation, for it is a vital part of our cultural and spiritual heritage. Like the Lindisfarne Gospel Book, the Cuthbert Gospel speaks powerfully about Northumbria’s golden age, whose spiritual vision, intellectual energy and artistic achievement continue

to inspire us today. We are in the British Library's debt for having taken this initiative. We must make sure it succeeds."

Chris Higgins, Vice-Chancellor of Durham University, said: "Durham University is proud to partner with the British Library in the conservation, display and interpretation of the oldest and one of the most important of all western manuscripts. The University and Cathedral, together, house one of the most important collections of early books and manuscripts, visited by researchers and scholars from around the world, and closer working between the University and the British Library will enhance scholarship and the wider appreciation of the role of Durham and the North East in the development of England's remarkable written heritage."

A spokesman for the British Province of the Society of Jesus, said: "The St Cuthbert manuscript, which records the founding of Christianity as told in St John's Gospel, speaks across thirteen centuries of British history. The Society of Jesus is delighted that this rare text is likely to be fittingly housed, and congratulates the Library on a successful start to the fundraising campaign. The Library not only has great expertise in conservation but also has the means to ensure access direct or virtual by people from around the world, who will be able to view the Gospel in its setting among the Library's other treasures of the Christian faith and of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic art."

Notes for editors

To support this acquisition please visit the ['Support Us' page on the British Library website](#).

St Cuthbert

St Cuthbert was a 7th-century, English Christian leader, renowned for his ascetic practices and the miracles attributed to him during his lifetime and posthumously. Born in Northumbria around 635, he entered the monastery of Melrose in 651, and later became guest-master at the newly founded monastery at Ripon. Cuthbert subsequently became prior of Melrose, then prior of Lindisfarne, and went on to live as a hermit on the island of Inner Farne, off the coast of Northumberland. He was consecrated as bishop of Lindisfarne in 685 but died at his Inner Farne hermitage on 20 March 687. He was elevated to sainthood in 698 when his body was reinterred in a new wooden coffin. This coffin was subsequently removed from Lindisfarne by the community of St Cuthbert and was

carried with them as they travelled around the North East in the wake of Viking raids in the 9th and 10th centuries. At the end of the 10th century, the community took Cuthbert's coffin with them to Durham and settled there. In 1104, Cuthbert's coffin was opened and the gospel was discovered inside with the saint's body, which was reburied at the East end of the new Norman cathedral. He was one of England's most popular and widely venerated saints both in the Anglo-Saxon period and after the Norman Conquest, and his shrine was a major medieval pilgrimage centre.

The British Library

The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and one of the world's greatest research libraries. It provides world class information services to the academic, business, research and scientific communities and offers unparalleled access to the world's largest and most comprehensive research collection. The Library's collection has developed over 250 years and exceeds 150 million separate items representing every age of written civilisation and includes books, journals, manuscripts, maps, stamps, music, patents, photographs, newspapers and sound recordings in all written and spoken languages. Up to 10 million people visit the [British Library website](#) every year where they can view up to 4 million digitised collection items and over 40 million pages.

Durham University

[Durham University](#) is a world top 100 university with a global reputation and performance in research and education. The most recent UK league tables place Durham in the top handful of British universities; we are ranked 5th in the country in the influential Complete University Guide. Based in North East England, we are a collegiate university based at two locations: Durham City and Stockton-on-Tees. Durham is England's third oldest university and has at its heart a UNESCO World Heritage Site, jointly owned with Durham Cathedral.

Durham is a member of the 1994 Group of 19 leading UK research-intensive universities: www.1994group.ac.uk.

Durham Cathedral

Durham Cathedral - The building of Durham Cathedral commenced in 1093 and took around 40 years to complete. It replaced a Saxon cathedral built by the Community of St Cuthbert after it arrived in Durham in 995 following its flight from the 'Holy Island' of Lindisfarne 80 miles north of Durham. The body of St

Cuthbert is enshrined in the Feretory at Durham Cathedral and the Tomb of the Venerable Bede is in the Galilee Chapel. The cathedral existed as a Benedictine Monastery until 1539 when it became one of the Church of England's major Cathedrals. It continues to be a focus for pilgrimage and attracts over 600,000 visitors each year from all over the world. The cathedral has internationally important collections of artefacts, manuscripts and books that include St Cuthbert's Saxon coffin and his pectoral cross, a superb example of Saxon craftsmanship. Durham Cathedral is often referred to as the best example of Romanesque architecture in Europe, or as American writer Bill Bryson put it, 'the best Cathedral on planet earth.'

Since construction of the cathedral, Durham has been alive with people and a centre for community activity. The cathedral is home to a vibrant worshipping community and continues to celebrate the English Choral Tradition with sung services by its highly acclaimed Choir. As a new century unfolds Durham Cathedral aspires to enrich the many different ways in which it engages with people and organisations. It is cherished equally by those who live, work and study in the region and by those who come to visit.

The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the national fundraising charity, helping UK museums and galleries to buy, show and share art. It offers many ways of enjoying art through the National Art Pass which gives free entry to over 200 museums, galleries and historic houses across the country as well as 50% off major exhibitions. Over the past 5 years, the Art Fund has given £24 million to 248 museums and galleries to buy art. It also sponsors the UK tour of the ARTIST ROOMS collection – reaching several million people each year, and fundraises: recent campaigns include bringing in £6million to save the Staffordshire Hoard for the West Midlands and Brueghel the Younger's The Procession to Calvary for Nostell Priory. It is funded entirely by its 80,000 supporters who believe great art should be for everyone to enjoy. Find out more about the Art Fund and how to buy a National Art Pass at www.artfund.org.

Further information

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