

## Thomas Phillipps

In December 2010 a three-volume illuminated manuscript - some 450 pages in all - was sold at Sotheby's in London for £2,100,000. The sales catalogue called it perhaps the finest medieval manuscript still to be in private hands.

The work in question, known as the Rochefoucauld Grail, is a French romance of the High Middle Ages, recounting (and illustrating) the search for the Holy Grail by the knights of King Arthur. Given the price he got for it, the seller - a Dutchman - had no need for the real thing.

We know that the manuscript was originally commissioned by a member of the Rochefoucauld family in 1320 or thereabouts, and had remained in the family until the 1700s. A century later it was snapped by Sir Thomas Phillipps, and it is he who is the subject of this week's article.

Thomas Phillipps was born in Manchester in 1792, and educated at Rugby and Oxford. Even as a student Phillipps was obsessed with collecting books. Whilst at Oxford Thomas's father warned him against attending auctions and spending money he didn't have.. "You will be sorry you have squandered away your property so foolishly," Thomas senior added.

But Thomas Phillipps came from wealthy stock, and there was always more than enough to squander. When his father, fearing bankruptcy from his son and heir's incorrigible spending, placed the Phillipps estate in trust, giving Thomas junior access only to the income, it still provided him with £6,000 a year. Plenty of scope there to visit the bookshops.

Freed from his academic studies, Phillipps could devote himself fully to the project of a lifetime: to collect a copy of every book ever printed. And this, if anything, was a sideline. It was manuscripts that Phillipps was really interested in. He called himself "a complete vello-maniac", vellum being the material the best manuscripts were written on.

Where was he to store this impending Alexandria? The Phillipps' estate was at Middle Hill, close to Broadway in Worcestershire. Once he got hold of it after the death of his father in 1818, Thomas set about turning the house into the world's largest private library. And since it was not always possible to obtain every book and manuscript he wanted, he also set up a printing-press - Middle Hill Press - to reproduce the rest himself. Phillipps recruited a bibliographer - Adolphus Brightley - to undertake the printing and to produce catalogues of the ever-growing collection.

By then Middle Hill house was already full to bursting. But, as luck would have it, there was a perfect place to set up the press just across the valley, and a short walk from Middle Hill.

And thus one of the most eccentric pieces of architecture in the Cotswolds - the neo-gothic folly called Broadway Tower - became home to once of the most oddball projects in English history. Broadway Tower and Thomas Phillipps were a match made in heaven.

Phillipps' librarians had to live in the tower too, but the state of the building and Phillipps' failure to pay their wages, meant that none of them stayed long.

Thomas Phillipps was lucky in that vast numbers of Continental manuscripts were coming onto the market at this time as a result of the ransacking of monastic libraries in Revolutionary France. The collector brought them back to Worcestershire by the shipload, and books were coming in to Middle Hill at a rate of up to 50 a week.

By the time he was done with, Phillipps had assembled some 40,000 printed books and 60,000 manuscripts. It was not, to the man's chagrine, everything ever printed, but it was the largest private collection on the planet.

There are, however, no bookshelves in heaven. In his later life Thomas Phillipps became increasingly anxious over the fate of his magnificent library. Correspondence with Benjamin Disraeli, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, to broker a deal with the British Museum came to nothing, and negotiations with the Bodleian Library likewise broke down. Among the conditions Phillipps insisted on imposing on his collection was that no librarian could rearrange items, and that no Roman Catholic be allowed to see it.

The obsessiveness that had driven Thomas's collecting similarly marked his anxiety over its destination. Fearing that the library would fall into the hands of his son-in-law (whom he disliked intensely) Phillipps moved the whole lot to Thirlestain House in Cheltenham. It took two years to complete the move.

When Thomas Phillipps died in February 1872 the library was left in trust to his daughter, the ban on Catholics remaining in place.

So where is the Phillipps' collection today? Here we descend from farce to tragedy. The terms of Phillipps' will were overturned in the Court of Chancery in 1885, and the first of countless sales began. Indeed, it took almost a century for the whole collection to be dispersed, the final portion being sold to a New York bookseller only in 1977.

One would now have to rack up many air-miles to see what was once housed in a single building in Worcestershire. There are Phillipps' manuscripts in the Royal Libraries in Belgium and Berlin, and dozens of others in the American collections of Pierpoint Morgan and Henry Huntington. Hardly anything, as far as I can see, is still in Britain. British libraries were regularly outbid in the auctions. Only Broadway Tower stands proudly on the Cotswold Escarpment as a memorial to one of the great libraries (and collectors) of history.