

Committee:	Date:
Culture, Libraries and Heritage Committee The Honourable The Irish Society	1 July 2013 16 July 2013
Subject: Restoration of the Great Parchment Book, 1639 – final report	Public
Report of: The Director, Culture, Heritage and Libraries Department	For Information
Summary	
<p>This report marks the successful completion of the project to restore the Great Parchment Book, an iconic item in the archive of The Honourable The Irish Society lodged at London Metropolitan Archives (LMA). The four key elements of the project have been achieved: the physical conservation of the item; the development of a digital imaging process to recreate the manuscript in digital form; transcription and text encoding, to allow interpretation and exploitation of the text itself; and the display of the Book (and its digital recreation) in 2013, the 400th anniversary of the charter of Londonderry and of the building of the City walls.</p>	
Recommendation	
<p>It is recommended that the achievement of the project be noted, and in particular the digital recreation of the book on a dedicated website www.greatparchmentbook.org and the display of an original folio of the book in the exhibition Plantation: Process, people, perspectives at Derry Guildhall which opened on 10 June 2013.</p>	

Main Report

Background: History of the Great Parchment Book

1. In 1639, after prolonged proceedings in Star Chamber, Charles I claimed as forfeit the Irish estates of the Irish Society and the City companies in Northern Ireland. A Commission under the Great Seal was instituted to survey the forfeited estates, consolidating all contracts and particulars of the affected rental lands and enrolling their details into one volume. The resulting book, which is lodged with the Society's archives at London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), therefore includes invaluable information about the County of Londonderry in the early 17th century. The book was apparently passed to the Irish Society when it was reconstituted by Charles II in 1662. (Archive reference CLA/049/EM/02/018).
2. A fire at Guildhall in 1786 caused extensive damage to the historical collections of the Irish Society, destroying a large proportion of the 17th century material entirely, and causing dramatic 'shrivelling' and fire damage to the vellum pages

of the Great Parchment Book. This important document therefore had been unavailable to historians since this date.

Background: Physical condition of the Book

3. All the folios were fire damaged with severe overall cockling and, on most, shrinkage of at least one edge. Where the shrinking had occurred, the parchment was very stiff and slightly transparent and the text had shrunk too. On some folios, the cockling was so severe that the parchment folded in on itself, meaning that substantial areas of text were not visible.
4. At LMA the surviving 165 folios of the volume were stored loosely tied into bundles equating as far as could be determined to the passages dealing with the particular lands of the different Companies and of the Society. They were all classified as 'unfit' and could not be consulted by members of the public.

Project

5. The Irish Society agreed in December 2009 to approve the project to restore the Great Parchment Book subject to external project funding being obtained for (a) the physical conservation of the Great Parchment Book, (b) the creation of a surrogate version of the book and (c) its display in 2013. It was envisaged that the project would lead to the recovery of as much of the text of the Great Parchment Book as conservation science would allow, through both the physical conservation of the folios, and digital surrogacy and interpretation. It was hoped that the project would form the centrepiece of the City of London's contribution to the process of commemoration of the Plantation of Ulster. If the results (or at least partial results) could be available by 2013, the 400th anniversary of the charter of Londonderry, the volume and accompanying digital resource could take centre stage in the planned exhibitions in Northern Ireland.

Current Position

6. LMA was awarded a grant by the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust (NMCT) in 2012 for a short term project to conserve the Great Parchment Book with match-funding from Derry City Council. The aim of the project was to document thoroughly the format and condition of the Great Parchment Book; investigate the treatment options for the project; carry out tests and develop workable methods to open out the parchment sufficiently to facilitate digital imaging; to carry out and fully document the treatment; train other conservators at LMA; publish the results of the conservation project; and contribute to the dissemination of the wider project as a whole. The work was completed in September 2012.
7. On the digital imaging, LMA entered into an agreement with the Centre for Digital Humanities at University College London to sponsor a research engineer on the Engineering Doctorate in Virtual Environments, Imaging and Visualisation programme for four years. The engineering doctoral student, Kazim Pal, began work in September 2010 at the start of the 2010/11 academic

year. Most of his first year was spent completing the taught element of his course, but in his second year he turned his attention to research and imaging. Following on from the conservation, he carefully photographed each folio in order to create a digitally enhanced image. At the same time he also worked on software to enable selected text to be flattened as it is being read.

8. The third element of the project was the transcription and encoding of the text using standard-based methodologies to capture information to enable sophisticated online presentation and searching of the document contents. Following the award a grant from the Marc Fitch Fund towards the transcription, LMA recruited a palaeographer to transcribe and encode the text. She also worked with the Centre for Digital Humanities to test their software. This work was also supported by donations from eight of the Great Twelve livery companies whose estates are recorded in the Great Parchment Book.
9. The encoding of the text has enabled comprehensive online searching of the document and LMA is very grateful to the Irish Society which gave £5000 towards the Great Parchment Book website. The design and development of the website was undertaken by a commercial company with which LMA worked very closely to produce the unique website www.greatparchmentbook.org. On the website, the text and images are displayed alongside each other, and users can choose whether to view an encoded or modern transcription, and between the original or enhanced images. The text is searchable as free text, or by personal name, place name and company, and it is possible to browse through the book or display a particular page, making it accessible to a wide range of users from academics to local and family historians. The website went live on 29 May 2013, in time for the press launch of the exhibition **Plantation: Process, people, perspectives** in the refurbished Derry Guildhall, which opened on 10 June 2013. The website is a central feature of the exhibition which also features an original folio of the Great Parchment Book. Both the website and the exhibition have been very well received: the exhibition received 1,100 visitors on its first day including members of the Irish Society and the website has received nearly 14,000 page views in the 20 days since it was launched. This included 1,000 views on the first day and 4,500 the day after. Supportive comments, many of which can be found on the blog, have been received from a range of people around the world including local historians in Northern Ireland, family historians in Australia, the City livery companies involved and the Irish Society
10. The project has been publicised through a blog which has attracted interest from around the world. The blog is now embedded in the website and LMA staff are continuing to post updates on the project. The project is also being promoted at events such as an international digital humanities conference at the University of Nebraska, United States of America in July 2013 and the forthcoming history conference in Belfast and Derry in September 2013.

Conclusion

11. This project represents a major partnership of international significance. The ground breaking work, particularly in conservation and digital imaging, will

enhance the City's reputation and the results will be of longer term benefit both to LMA and to other institutions. The digital imaging and transcription will provide a lasting resource for historians researching the history of Northern Ireland in local, national and international contexts.

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