

Aberdeen Breviary to be displayed at NLS

Two original copies of the Aberdeen Breviary, Scotland's first substantial printed book, will go on display in Edinburgh tomorrow, Friday, November 5, to mark the 500th anniversary of its completion.

Dating back to 1510, the copies of this important prayer book will form the centrepieces of the National Library of Scotland's (NLS) latest 'treasures' display together with illuminated manuscripts and some of the earliest printed books brought to Scotland – a not to be missed opportunity to see the two books, held by two different libraries, side by side. One copy belongs to NLS, while the other is owned by Aberdeen University Library.

The Aberdeen Breviary was compiled under the direction of Bishop William Elphinstone (Bishop of Aberdeen, founder of Aberdeen's King's College and counsellor to James III and James IV) and was designed to be recited by the Scottish clergy throughout the liturgical year.

It is also the book which brought the printing press to Scotland. The country's first printers, Walter Chepman and Andrew Millar, were granted a patent by James IV in 1507 to 'bring home a printing press...for printing within our realm' breviaries and other service books, of which the Aberdeen Breviary was the only one to be printed.

Helen Vincent, Senior Rare Books Curator at the National Library of Scotland, said: "Only five copies of the Aberdeen Breviary are known to survive, along with some fragments – we know of others which are now lost, such as one which vanished from the Scots College in Paris during the French Revolution. This may be the first time these two copies have come together

since they sat side by side in Walter Chepman's printing house five hundred years ago.

"The Aberdeen Breviary illustrates how active the Renaissance was in Scotland. Elphinstone's engagement of humanist scholars to investigate the lives of Scottish saints, James IV's love of new technology and desire for a modern centralised state, the enterprise and initiative of Walter Chepman – all these combined to produce one of the great neglected achievements of the period. We hope this exhibition will rekindle people's interest in this exciting period of Scottish history and in the Breviary itself – incredibly it has never been completely translated into English."

The National Library of Scotland (NLS) was delighted to join forces with Aberdeen University Library (AUL) to make the treasures display possible.

Professor Peter Davidson, Chair in Renaissance Studies at the University of Aberdeen, emphasised the huge significance of the Aberdeen Breviary, calling it "one of the greatest intellectual enterprises of Renaissance Scotland".

He said: "This book, rich in commemorations of the feasts of Scottish saints, is an attempt to foster a distinctively Scottish church, within the frame of international Catholicism.

"This book was only one of a series of modernising initiatives which Elphinstone supported as Bishop of Aberdeen and Chancellor of Scotland. He encouraged the compilation of Hector Boece's History of the Scots, which was for many centuries a key text of Scottish identity, and he founded Scotland's third ancient University – King's College, Aberdeen – which later joined with the other Aberdonian University College, Marischal, to form the modern University of Aberdeen."

The two magnificent books will be in good company alongside

contemporary treasures from the collections of NLS and AUL, including a carefully-selected collection of illuminated manuscripts and incunables – books printed before 1500. (See notes to editors for a more detailed breakdown of exhibition items).

The display 'The Aberdeen Breviary: the 500th Anniversary of the Printing of 'Our Own Scottish Use' – which will be showcased within the National Library of Scotland's public exhibition space on George IV Bridge, Edinburgh – will run from November 5 until January 9.

If you would like to find out more about the items on display, visit the National Library of Scotland's Rare Book blog during the exhibition, at: <http://blogs.nls.uk/rarebooks>