

Hidden Pages & Hidden Nature: A Book of Hours Revealed

Intro: Hello and welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts and asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold tales.

Sophie: Welcome to this podcast. My name is Sophie Hacker, and I'm an artist and I'm sitting in the Eccles Room of Winchester College. And with me is Dr. Sarah Griffin and Dr. Roland Riem who are going to introduce themselves now.

Sarah: So I am the assistant curator at Winchester College, and I help look after the manuscripts and the museum here.

Roland: Roly Riem, I'm Vice-Dean at Winchester Cathedral with an interest in theology and the arts.

A Book of Hours

Sophie: Thank you very much. And in front of us, Sarah, you've brought the most beautiful illuminated book on vellum, I think it is, isn't it. And it's called a Book of Hours. Can you explain what is a Book of Hours and who would have owned one?

Sarah: So a Book of Hours is basically a Christian book full of prayers that are to be said at particular times of day. And therefore at particular hours, hence the name. Many of them would have been owned by lay people, though not always. We do have one manuscript in the collection that was owned by a priest, which is quite special, but we have thousands of surviving Books of Hours that were made for really wealthy lay people. And they are beautifully decorated and highly illuminated, such as the one we have in front of us.

Sophie: So would you describe this as a particularly fine example of a Book of Hours?

Sarah: It's a pretty beautiful example. We can identify the artist, for example. Every single page has illuminations on it, which means it has gold on every single page. And then we have 12 full page illuminations, which are full theological scenes, usually to do with the Virgin Mary. And the fact that every single page has this decoration is something quite special.

Sophie: Do you know the date that it was made?

Sarah: So, the manuscript itself isn't actually dated. So no one's written in it this was made in X, Y, Z, but we do know the artist, the Master of the Échevinage of Rouen. And because we know that they were active from around 1455 to 85, we know it's from the mid- to late-15th century, which is really useful in identifying the date.

Sophie: Thank you so much. Roly, I know you've got special responsibility at the Cathedral for the Winchester Bible. This is something that you've come across before, a Book of Hours?

Roland: I've come across Books of Hours. We don't have one in our own collection and it's lovely to see a different set of artists working to produce a work of devotion.

A Closer Look

Sophie: Beautiful. Right. Well, should we just have a little delve into it, but maybe before we look too closely, I'm aware that we've got this great privilege to be here today with you. Can anybody come and see this?

Sarah: Absolutely. So, Winchester College has a museum called Treasury and that's open to the public from two till four every day. The Fellows Library isn't open just to walk into, but if you make an appointment with us, we're really enthusiastic for you to come and see our collection.

Sophie: Wonderful. Well, it's great that you're sharing it with us today. So talk us through this first page, which looks like it's about a quarter of the way through the book, and it's a beautiful, full page illumination. What's in that image?

Sarah: So this page shows a picture of the Nativity, so Christ has just being born and around this image, we have this decoration and the border of all these flowers, but also these strips of gold with this praying man, looking into the image from the margins.

Sophie: It's quite heavily leafed, isn't it? There's quite a lot of gold leaf in there and rather strange sort of geometric patterns as well, almost like ribbons of gold.

Sarah: A little bit like metalwork has been applied to the page and it's really nicely contrasts the foliage, cause we have this really kind of organic flowering and then suddenly these strips of metal, but then those strips then have flowers on again.

Roland: I was going to say that, the layering gives a sense of depth, doesn't it? They do have some problems with perspective, and I'm sure Sophie will want to say just a few words about that, but the way that the gold strips that go vertically and horizontally work on the page is to frame the inner picture, which is the depths of the work, where you have the Virgin Mary and Jesus, and the three magi arriving behind the Virgin and child.

Sophie: And I noticed that it's just the Virgin and the child, inevitably of course you have got the beautiful gold halos. And it looks as though the magi themselves they've got a little bit of perhaps ground gold paint, but not actually gold leaf. But there are a few tiny little bits that are picked out, but the emphasis is very much on the halo of Mary and Jesus. I'm going to go and have a closer look at their faces actually, cause it's very fine work. Quite serious faces, but still very expressive despite the fact that they're really no bigger than a broad bean perhaps in terms of size.

Sarah: If you look at some of the details to make the cheeks really rosy, you'll see that it's done by these really fine, kind of pink lines, so that the amount of detail that you really need to go in closely to look at, and you can just imagine the medieval readers getting right up close.

Sophie: When you say that, that's in quite noticeable contrast to the foliate decoration around the rest of the page. So, I'm noticing there's five petaled red flowers, and four petaled blue flowers, and they all pretty much look the same. And there's something that might look like roses at the bottom, but there's not an awful lot of, what you might describe as kind of modeling, happening in the background. And I'm really noticing that there's a huge difference between the figures and the foliage. This is very much contrast to the Winchester Bible actually, which has got very elegant foliate designs, hasn't it?

Roland: There's nothing to stop designs of leaves and the vines and all of the aspects of nature being very, very detailed. It's just that this one isn't so detailed, which as you were implying at the beginning, Sarah, it's a fine work this, but it's perhaps not the finest that you could imagine with in terms of the artistic technique.

The Artist(s) and Further Details

Sophie: I'm wondering if there are different artists at work, and I'm wondering if the person who painted the faces in the figures is not the same person or people who filled in all the bits in between. Do you think that's possible?

Sarah: Yes, absolutely possible. So, I think I mentioned earlier, this is the Master of the Échevinage of Rouen. They ran a workshop, which would have had many different artists. And the way that manuscripts are put together is very much a collaborative process and that's not just the images. So, the way it would have been done is that the text would have been done first and then the space left out for the images, and then the images would have been built in layers with the gilding first, which is the gold leaf applied, and then the colours around that. And we know that this workshop didn't work with just one script, because there are other examples of these books created by that workshop and they have completely different scripts. So we know that they didn't have the one scribe working for them each time.

Sophie: Right.

Roland: Can I put in a word for blue? Because, well, looking at that picture, it's very predominant, the blue bursts out in all sorts of ways. Of course, the Virgin Mary's clothes are blue and it gives her that sense of being wrapped up in the heavenly realm. And there's blue in the decoration, which isn't a natural colour of trees or leaves woven in. And then you come to this incredible, like a blue genie, who's sitting on the top of the vertical strip of gold and his hands are in a position of, I would say, wonder. Which reminds me to say that serious attitudes in pictures, they're generally quite serious in these books, is supposed to express devotion. It's not that they're miserable, it's just that they're having a devotional moment.

Sophie: Yeah. And blue generally is the colour of the Virgin, isn't it? And is a Book of Hours predominantly about the Virgin Mary? There is a very strong link between the Hours of the Virgin and the Book of Hours, is that right?

Sarah: Yes, they would have often contained the Hours of the Virgin. And you do often see these scenes related to the life of Mary as well. So she appears quite a lot throughout, and there is a lot of discussion that Books of Hours were often for female donors, or female patrons.

Sophie: Do we know who this book might have belonged to?

Sarah: So that is a very good question and I'm just turning the pages now to show you the answer. So almost at the very back of the manuscript, we have a full page illumination of the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the Christ child, and next to her is a kneeling woman in a black hood, and that is presumably the person who this book was made for.

Sophie: That's the sort of hood that Catherine of Aragon would have worn.

Roland: And that takes us to the heart of what a book like this was for, because you've got there the wealthy, devoted person, the woman, and she's drawing close to the Virgin, who's in turn drawing close to Christ, and it's a very strong sense of intimacy, interiority. You know, there was a private devotional space that was being set up in this image and in the person's spirit as well. And I think the point of these regular prayers was to help people to draw closer to the source of their devotion, God.

Sophie: And you're absolutely right. That's an incredibly intimate scene because that is the child suckling at the Virgin's breasts. You know, I've looked at a lot of art in my time, that's fairly unusual, to have such beautifully intimate imagery. Do you think that's because this book was commissioned by a female donor that the artist has been so intimate?

Maria Lactans

Sarah: I wonder if the choice to choose this scene, the breastfeeding Virgin Mary and child, so often referred to as the Maria Lactans. I wonder if that's been chosen to suit the patron, but at the same time, the Maria Lactans is quite a common depiction in medieval art. Some of them a bit more strange than others, especially in the early middle ages. We have pictures where you don't actually really realise what's going on, you just see a very kind of demure looking Virgin Mary holding a Christ child. And suddenly if you look closer, you'll realise that her breast is kind of sticking out at an odd angle. And this is something that really emphasises the maternal relationship between Christ and the Virgin Mary. So really emphasising his humanity on earth, which is something we see increasing in medieval art, throughout the middle ages, getting more and more kind of tender and intimate. And then we get these Renaissance pictures where, you know, they're really maternal and soft.

Roland: It was a whole movement, wasn't there, toward the Virgin Mary emphasising the fleshliness, the humanity of Christ. And I think God, in those days, quite terrifying in some respects, you know, quite exalted, and it was quite necessary to balance the picture with this approachable intercessor that Mary's prayers were prayers that could be offered to heaven. And so coming to Mary's like a switchboard, you needn't go to this rather terrifying God up there, you could be with Mary and Jesus in this much more intimate mode.

Sarah: Yes, and Christ as well, turns from being this kind of mini adult, you know, just a person that's been shrunk down to an actual kind of baby looking figure, as a kind of extension of that as well.

Sophie: Yes, very much so. And just thinking about the history of this book and the story that this book tells us, and I noticed two quite distinctive things on this particular page. The first is that Mary's definitely gone down the beauty parlour. I mean, she's got some serious blush on

there. And then the other is that there's a very roughly painted, I don't know, a coat of arms or something like that, that almost looks like it's been coloured in with biro. I know it hasn't, but could you just explain a little bit about why this face of Mary is so different to the one that we just looked at and what is this strange medallion here?

Sarah: Oh, the two things are absolutely connected. They're probably done at different times. So the face of the Virgin Mary looks like it's been coloured over because it kind of has. In the 19th century we think, it looks quite 19th century. They've added on top of the face of the Virgin so that her face just looks different to any other. It's a bit unclear as to why they would have done that. There are a few reasons why, but with the kind of coat of arms, you mentioned, below it's in this circular gilded strip of pattern, but then even though that circle is really kind of beautifully done, in the middle it, as you say that it looks like it's been done in biro. And that's because it's been scraped off, whatever was there was originally scraped off, probably the arms of the original owner. And then they've added these arms over the top.

Sophie: And the scraping is something that you can do, of course, because it's on vellum, not paper.

Sarah: Yeah, much more robust. These things were really meant to last.

The Hidden Nature Within

Sophie: Wonderful. One of the themes, well, I think the main theme really that definitely worth pulling out here is the overall theme of these podcasts, which is about hidden nature. And, Roly, I just wonder if you could just tell us a little bit from your perspective about what this book might offer us?

Roland: Well, I think it's important not to say that there's a picture with decoration around it. Although to a modern eye, perhaps it just seems like they put decorations around the outside. This book allows you to contemplate the mysteries of God expressed naturally, expressed beautifully. So seeing something that's approachable, that's beautiful and colourful was all part of the spiritual process, all part of the devotional process. It wasn't just an illustration. So it's important not to separate out spirit and nature, because it was all integrated, to their mind, and the whole world was speaking of this enchanted canopy, it's sometimes called, a place where God had visited and everything had a meaning, everything had a purpose, everything had an order.

Sophie: Enchanted canopy, what a beautiful phrase. That's wonderful. And actually, when you were talking, it was just making me think also about Islamic art. You know, Islamic art often has this wonderful sort of tangled, but incredibly ordered foliate patterning. Which is actually speaking to exactly the same thing, isn't it, through a different tradition, but it's the presence of God in the microcosm of nature. And that's in a way what you've got when you open this beautiful book. And, as you say, it's not just that they've chosen to fill in the pages with pretty pictures. Everything in there, regardless of the hand who actually painted it, is intended to take our eye, not just up to God, but perhaps also more in an interior sense?

Roland: Well, because it's a delightful book. You know, it's not just something you read for facts, it's a journey of the eye and the heart into the page and that process allows you to be devoted.

Sophie: Yeah, wonderful.

Sarah: In the kind of ritual of opening the book, if we close it, it's got this kind of quite scabby 19th century binding, you know, it's nothing special, but you can see that on the edge of the folios, there is this kind of golden shimmer. And then when you open them, it's a bit of a surprise to see, suddenly on every single page, this beautiful colour and the detail that's being put into each of them. So again, speaking to the idea of this hidden nature within the book.

Sophie: Are there any other great examples in some of the other pages that show more of that particular idea?

Sarah: So this one, I thought was a particularly nice one to look at, because if we look into the sky and into that figure that's in the margin, it's a really quite entertaining page.

The turkey/griffin/dragon

Sophie: And what is that blue turkey/griffin/dragon?

Sarah: I think that's the best way you could really describe it. So we have this kind of chicken head on a scale-like body, with again, kind of bird-like webbed feet. But we also have these wings that, that aren't like chickens wings, they're kind of like dragons wings that flip backwards.

Sophie: What's the story being told here? There's a rather demure young woman at the back. I need to lean over and have a proper look.

Sarah: The scene isn't immediately obvious, but there's a hint if you look into the details. So there's this, semicircle blue above with figures in goldenites and written in it is Gloria in Excelsis.

Sophie: So we've got the shepherd. He seems to be a shepherd, cause there's a lot of sheep. A young man, an older man playing flute or a whistle, and then a very obedient dog looking up. And the young man is holding two golden sticks of corn. There's something going on theologically perhaps about, you know, the good shepherd and gathering up the wheat, and I wonder who the young woman is?

Roland: What does the writing say underneath, God

Sarah: 'Deus in adventus meum interior organisms. Domine ad.'¹

Sophie: You're gonna have to translate, Sarah, cause I've never done a Latin lesson in my life.

Roland: Gloria in Excelsis is obviously like "Glory to God in the highest," which is the scene of the shepherds outside on the Hill country. So it's got that reference, but I'm not quite sure if the text goes with it. It's lovely to have an adventure and a puzzle to solve, isn't it?

¹ NOTE Actually the phrase says 'Deus in adiutorium meum intende. Domine ad...' which means 'God give heed to my help. O Lord...'

Sarah: Exactly. It takes a long time to get into the details, but that's exactly the scene being shown.

Sophie: Sometimes when you look at religious painting across any tradition, you get some really obvious clues about what the story is. I have to say, I mean, I've seen a fair amount of religious art. That is a total puzzlement to me as to what it's actually about, but it's got some fantastic details there. Like, I was just noticing, you were talking about the transition to Renaissance art and Roly was hinting about things like how the buildings were done and perspective and all of that sort of thing. And you can see very much that this is a book that's still in the late medieval tradition before the Renaissance has reached France. It's still Northern art, isn't it, rather than that Southern European sort of movement of the development and the understanding of how to depict three-dimensional spaces, it's very much two-dimensional space.

Sarah: Absolutely. With the way that the buildings are shown, but also the buildings themselves. So in the background to the right of this image, there's this kind of small Gothic chapel, and I think there's a rose window at the West end. So it's very much the kind of architectural style of its time as well.

Roland: Which makes a biblical scene a contemporary scene, doesn't it? Again, another way in which the history is made approachable is by setting it into the present time. And it is this, the shepherds out in the fields, it's very odd to have a woman there, but maybe that's again a sign that all society, its simple folk, can be gathered together, waiting for God to reveal himself in the heavens like that. So it's just changing a story, so like riffing on the story, you know, to say, 'well, we'll let a woman and we'll, we'll put it in contemporary times.' And suddenly it has a different feel.

Sophie: The whole page has a different feel actually, because there's this extraordinary sort of trunk of a tree lying down on its side. If that's what it is?

Sarah: I think that is what it is.

Sophie: But I haven't seen that on any of the other pages and it's painted with the same care as the figures.

Sarah: Yeah, but the gradation of the blue to the white, it's very kind of soft, but there are details as well. And if you look at kind of diagrams, which are based on trees from the middle ages, that is kind of how they draw them as well. But I think, if I hadn't been studying medieval art for however many years, I'd say 'what on earth is that?' It's quite, you know it's beautifully done, but it's very much kind of a pattern.

Roland: One of our artists in the Winchester Bible has trees like giant lollipops.

Sophie: The turkey/griffin/dragon thing, is that because the artists are simply drawing from their imagination or are they drawing animals that they think might exist somewhere else in the world, but they've never seen them? Like, monkeys and elephants and things like that that you see in medieval buildings. They clearly don't know what a monkey looks like, but they make it up. So what do you think's going on there?

Sarah: So it's a really big question that medieval art historians are still debating. What is the purpose of these kind of wild, exciting marginalia, because there's the bestiary tradition that

you refer to, which has pictures of animals, which are quite often based on textual descriptions. So, an elephant looks nothing like an elephant. Or there's the other possibility, or one of the other possibilities, and that they were just a bit bored or they were creating just, they were just, you know, letting their imaginations run wild and having a bit of fun. And you really get that sense in this manuscript and other manuscripts by the same master, or the same workshop, because every single one of their Books of Hours, that at least I've seen, has different types of creatures and different hybrids. And this is one of my favourites in this book, but we also have a man doing a handstand. And I'd love to know if there is a deep theological symbolism in a man doing a one handed handstand, but it does just look like he's having a bit of fun.

The Four Gospel Writers

Sophie: Great. So were there any other pages that you particularly wanted to draw our attention to?

Sarah: The page at the very front.

Roland: Oh yes. This is the one where there are the four gospel writers because they do have passages from the Bible in there to fuel their devotion, don't they? And it is interesting to see that John, which wasn't, people believed, the first of these stories of Jesus to be written in the gospels, he has the priority. Because his gospel is regarded as the spiritual gospel, the one that took you more deeply into the truth of things. And the other gospels, which were written earlier, we certainly think now, they have a subordinate place.

Sophie: Are those the ones called synoptic?

Roland: Yep. All the ones that weren't John, they're sort of married with each other.

Sophie: So this book, whether the donor asked for it to be that way or whether the artists themselves just felt like that, they wanted to focus on John, the more spiritual gospel, because actually this book is about taking the devotee into a deeper spiritual journey through the process of the hours of prayer and so on.

Sarah: And I think that's quite fitting. So we're looking at an illumination that is very near to the beginning of the manuscripts and it comes after the very first thing in the Book of Hours, which is a calendar, which makes sense as this is a book that's related to timekeeping, that we start with a calendar of the Saints days. So right after the calendar is this full page with four different parts where we see images of the different gospels being written, with John in the top left corner, before going on to the text of John.

Sophie: Text of John, yeah.

Roland: So John has an eagle, which is about soaring, the spirit soaring and rising above the mundane.

Sophie: So this page you were saying is a calendar. And it puts it into context, so it helps the person praying with this book to know where they are in the liturgical year and presumably there's going to be Saints days and things like that.

Sarah: Exactly. In addition to this being this beautiful piece of art, or as certainly us as modern viewers we look at it as a beautiful piece of art, this is a liturgical tool. So it kind of needs to start with this calendar for tracking the time so they know which part of the book to go to, what part of the year it is. So it doesn't just have the dates of the year, but also the list of saints so they know which Saint to worship on that particular day. So it's incredibly important information which goes right at the front.

Sophie: I think what you just said there just made me shiver actually, because you said something about the person who was using this book. The way we look at this book now is so different to how it would have been understood as an object when it was first made. Of course it would have been incredibly expensive and very valuable and a high status object. And it would have been treated with great care and reverence, but here it is, it's sitting on a nice, supportive cushion. We're being terribly careful not to touch it, not to do with COVID, but just simply because the book is so precious and we're taking care of the spine and we're holding down the pages with silk cord and all the rest of it. And it just makes me very conscious of the journey that an object like this goes through from the beginning of its life to how it's now stored in this room under very perfect conditions to keep it pristine. I can see that there are sort of pencil numbers on every page, which I suspect would never have happened in the last sort of 20-30 years, you would never do that to a book. So its own story's changed in terms of the type of object that it is.

Sarah: Oh, absolutely. And I think that's what makes, even though many Books of Hours look quite similar, they might be churned out almost. I don't want to say it's like a production line because there is a lot of effort that goes into these, you know, take such a long time to produce, but they would be producing books that were very similar and a few of them. But each one of them will have their own story from the marks of who has owned them over the years. And in fact, in this one, we don't just know about the original owner, but if I turn to the back, we have a later addition, which is some entries in French, as well as another coat of arms.

Sophie: Completely different hand writing it.

Sarah: Exactly. And it's in French as well, whereas the rest of the book is in Latin.

Sophie: Yeah.

Sarah: And this tells us about Monsieur Malabarbe who gave the book to his wife when they got married in, I'm doing this from memory now, I think 1580, it does say it somewhere in there. And this on the right hand side is the dates from when all of their children were born. So you start with the marriage and then you can see that they've been adding each time they have a child.

Roland: That's like a family Bible, where in the old Victorian days you had big Bibles and you used to put your family history in the fly.

Sophie: So I think we've had an amazing time looking at this beautiful, beautiful book and we've explored all sorts of aspects about it, but I just wonder, Roly, whether there's anything that you would like to say? Specifically regarding the hiddenness of this book and the nature within it and what it might have to offer us today as a very different kind of pilgrim?

Roland: I liked what you were saying earlier about the way in which the book changes its meaning, but as somebody who uses a prayer book day by day that's mass produced, I think it's a wonderful thing to have a discipline, which involves seeking a source of beauty and goodness and order and using a book, but using it with reverence. I suppose we tend to separate out daily use from being reverential, but actually I think a Book of Hours actually tries to sanctify time. And so, you know, every moment of the day can be a day in some ways set apart, even though it remains a mundane moment in the life of perhaps of quite wealthy woman, it's still a special moment. And so this book is a way into going beyond nature into the life of the spirit.

Sophie: Thank you so much, Sarah, for introducing us to this beautiful, beautiful book, and just a reminder that it is possible for people to come along and book in and come and have a look themselves and look at the turkey/griffin/dragon for themselves.

Sarah: Yeah, please do. And we will also have images of this particular book on our online catalogue, so not every single one of its 200 and something folios, but pictures of the main illuminations that we've been discussing.

Sophie: Brilliant. Thank you. And thank you Roly so much for everything that you've brought to this wonderful journey.

We do hope you've enjoyed listening to today's episode. And if you'd like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then do visit the website, that's www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information. Thank you.