

GEOFFREY DE CHARNY: HITHERTO UNKNOWN MANUSCRIPT DISCOVERED - THANKS TO SHAKESPEARE...

Your editor, while looking up an article on Shakespeare's First Folio in the Transactions of the Bibliographical Society (supps 6-10, 1932-5), happened to glance through a catalogue of Holkham Hall's manuscript collection published in the same volume. The sight of one entry, no. 705, provoked no little surprise:

GEOFFROI DE CHARNY, Demandes pour la Jouste, le tournoi et la guerre. Vel. and pap. (XIVth c.). *The author's copy, with his arms* (Italics mine).

Geoffrey de Charny's writings on chivalry have long been known, the standard scholarly appraisal being an article by A. Piaget 'Le livre messire Geoffroi de Charni' in Romania, 1897, t.XXVI, pp.394-411. But Piaget knew only of secondary manuscripts in Brussels and elsewhere - certainly not what, from the catalogue at least, purported to be Geoffroi de Charny's own copy - and in England.

With the prior knowledge that an Oxford scholar, Dr. Elspeth Kennedy, was working on a definitive new publication of Geoffrey's writings on chivalry, Dr. Kennedy was contacted to determine whether she already knew of the Holkham Hall manuscript. She did not, nor did her American co-researcher Professor Richard Kaeuper of the Dept. of History, University of Rochester, New York State. They were able to impart that another American, Michael Taylor, had back in 1977 written as his doctoral thesis 'A critical edition of Geoffroy de Charny's Livre Charny and the Demandes pour la Joute, les Tournois et la Guerre'. But Dr. Taylor likewise had known nothing of the manuscript in England.

Holkham Hall was contacted to determine if they still held the manuscript. In the event they did not. The manuscript passed to the nation after World War II, becoming deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, where its reference number is MS Holkham Misc. 43.

Personal inspection at the Bodleian revealed the manuscript as a slim, octavo-size volume clearly rebound during its time at Holkham. A pasted-in oval book-plate bears the name Thomas William Coke, first Earl of Leicester (by the second creation), born 1754, died 1842. But from enquiries with Holkham Hall's administrator, F.C. Jolly, it is evident that Thomas William Coke simply initiated the rebinding, his well-recorded book purchases definitely not including the de Charny mss. This leaves two other main Holkham Hall book collectors: Sir Edward Coke, 1551-1634, and Thomas Coke, 1697-1759. Since there is a surviving catalogue of Sir Edward's collection (published in 1950 by Yale University Press, ed. W.O. Hassall), and this has no reference to the de Charny manuscript, this leaves as the likeliest acquirer Thomas Coke, known to have gone on the Grand Tour, and to have purchased books and manuscripts by the yard, rather than taking an interest in their individual titles.

There are therefore some three centuries of the manuscript's history that remain as yet unknown. But it is undoubtedly fourteenth century, and uniquely among the surviving copies of Geoffrey's works on chivalry bears his coat of arms, not only on the first page, but also elsewhere throughout the work. At some stage before being put into its present binding the manuscript

suffered water damage, for the writing on several pages has been partly effaced. There are also worm-holes. All has, however, now been stabilised, and the general present condition and legibility is good. The poem known as the 'Livre messire Geoffroi de Charny' occupies 37 leaves of vellum, and begins with the words 'L'autre jour...' Then there occur three sections of 'demandes', or questions, the first on jousting, the second on tournaments, the third on war. At the end of each question a blank is left for the answer.

With regard to the possibility of the manuscript having been written in Geoffrey de Charny's own hand, it is rather clerically laid out, and since it is clearly 'fair copy' it is most unlikely to have been the author's first draft. While awaiting proper scholarly study, the safest assessment would be that it was Geoffrey's personal copy as made for him by a scribe.

The manuscript is largely lacking in any annotations, additions, etc, that might have revealed new information on Geoffrey de Charny. But there are two brief addenda (on pp.16 & 17) written transversely to the main text. The handwritings of these differ both from each other and from the main text. The first is just a scrawl, reading something like 'Augerdi vous ces vos ...', but is basically indecipherable (at least by your editor). The second, in a more formal script, reads something like 'Supplent humblement les vostres a de nos [?] humbles chapelains les fie [?]'. Could one or other of these have been written by Geoffrey? The watermarks of the paper consist of two circles rather larger than a shilling.

While the work contains no direct allusion to the Shroud, it is inevitably of interest for its insights into the mind of Geoffrey de Charny, particularly his piety, and his high code of honour. One particularly valuable by-product of the find is the linked discovery of Dr. Michael Taylor's thesis on this, and a belated review of this now fifteen year old work is given on p.15 of this Newsletter.