

The Great Parchment Book Transcript

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The Great Parchment Book of the Honorable the Irish Society

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- among the collections we hold at London Metropolitan Archives -

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is quite unlike any book you will have come across before.

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The book was compiled in 1639 as a survey

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of all the estates in Londonderry and Coleraine managed by the City of London,

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through the Irish Society and the London Livery Companies.

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James the First had obliged the city to take these on as part of the plantation of Ulster.

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The Great Parchment Book was kept by the Irish Society in London

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because of its important evidential value.

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Unfortunately, a fire at the City of London Guildhall in 1786

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destroyed most of the early records of the Irish Society.

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Among those which survived is the Great Parchment Book -

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- however, the fire caused such dramatic shriveling and damage to the manuscript,

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that it has been completely unavailable to researchers for over 200 years.

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The book now consists of 165 separate parchment pages,

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all of which are damaged, and a number of fragments.

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A large collaborative project to restore the Great Parchment Book

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was first proposed by staff at London Metropolitan Archives in 2009,

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and the support of the Irish Society was quickly gained.

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It became apparent that traditional conservation methods alone

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could not produce sufficient results to make the fragile manuscript accessible

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- the parchment being too shriveled in places to be returned to a readable state.

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Following discussions with imaging experts at University College London,

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it was decided that our conservation team would

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flatten the parchment sheets as far as possible,

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and UCL would use cutting-edge digital imaging techniques

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to gain legibility and enable digital access.

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To make the digital imaging possible,

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conservation treatment was undertaken

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in the areas where folds and creases were obscuring the text.

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First, as much surface dirt as possible was removed

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using this gentle cleaning technique.

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Then, a controlled and limited amount of moisture was used to humidify the pages

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by placing them between sheets of gore-tex and then moist blotting paper.

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The gore-tex transfers moisture

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from the blotting paper to the parchment in vapor form

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and the sandwich is topped off with a sheet of polythene to keep the moisture in.

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After several hours the pages had absorbed just the right amount of moisture for

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the heavy creases to be malleable without posing any risk to the parchment or the ink.

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The pages were placed on top of a metal sheet wrapped in archival blotting paper,

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in preparation for further treatment.

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At this point polyester wadding was delicately placed underneath the greased areas

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to gently push them out in a vertical direction.

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Once in place, small magnets were placed around the areas of wadding

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to allow the pages to dry naturally under tension and to pull out the creases.

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Although in some cases it was only possible to release the creases fractionally,

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we knew that these small adjustments could make a significant difference to the digital capture process

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This conservation work enabled our partners at UCL to develop a digital imaging process which

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would virtually uncover the text hidden in the creases.

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As you can see in this demonstration of the software they developed,

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their cutting-edge work on the computational approach to model,

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stretch and read the damaged parchment has greatly improved the legibility of the pages.

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Alongside the images of the pages,

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the website also features the text of the book,

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which has been painstakingly transcribed by an expert paleographer.

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Both the conservation treatment and the digital imaging process,

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significantly helped the paleographer to read the text.

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The end result is the modernised transcription which sits alongside the original text and has

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been encoded using the international TEI standard

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for the representation of text in digital form.

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This allows searching by place, personal

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and livery company names and, access to a glossary

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The manuscript reveals key data about land holding and population in 17th century Ulster

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which will interest family and local historians and academics -

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as the book represents an important source for the City of London's role in the colonization and administration of Ulster.

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To start your exploration of the Great Parchment Book,

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click on 'take a look inside the book',

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search for a person, a place or a Livery company.

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Alternatively, you can investigate one of the history tabs at the top of the home page.