The carved stone panel on the South Street facade of the building which formerly housed the Principal of St Mary’s College is thought to be commemorative of the foundation of the Common University Library by King James VI and I in 1612.

The King James Library, in St Mary’s College Library
University of St Andrews
South Street
KY16 9JU
T: 01334 462855
E: smcl@st-andrews.ac.uk

Opening hours during University term time:
Monday to Friday 9:00 - 17:00 – Admission Free

The collections of books and manuscripts accumulated during the last 600 years, including the foundation gifts, are still held by the Library and are available for use. For more information, please email speccoll@st-andrews.ac.uk.

The King James Library is a working Library. Your consideration of it during your visit as a quiet space for study is very much appreciated.

Access to the King James Library is up a flight of stairs and no lift is available in this historic building. The lower level reading room and the College grounds are fully accessible.

www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/contact/departmental/kingjames

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The University of St Andrews is a charity registered in Scotland: No SC013532.
The King James Library is one of the jewels in the crown of the University of St Andrews. Founded in 1612, the Common Library of the University was located on the upper floor of a fine building which forms the northern edge of St Mary’s College quadrangle, above a Common School, now Parliament Hall.

The University’s first book-room, in the Faculty of Arts building on this site, was set up in 1456. The colleges of the University had their own collections of books and manuscripts before the Common Library was established, and they were not completely integrated until 1843. In 1612 the vision to found a new ‘common library’ for the whole university was realised thanks to the patronage of King James VI & I.

The building was roofed thanks to a Royal donation in 1617. A gift from covenanter and alumnus Alexander Henderson in 1642 allowed the building to open as a Library and the first librarian was appointed in 1643. The upper hall of the Library was the place where distinguished scientist James Gregory, first Regius Professor of Mathematics (1668-1673) worked. A meridian line was placed in the floor in 1726 to commemorate his work. This is continued outside across the pavement of South Street.

When Samuel Johnson (author of the Dictionary of the English Language) visited St Andrews in 1773, he called the newly renovated library an ‘elegant and luminous’ chamber.

The building was extended in 1829, when the archway entrance was moved to its present position. The porch to the Principal’s House was removed in 1891. The King James Library remains an ‘elegant and luminous’ chamber designed around its contents.

The Library was built on the site of the chapel of the medieval College of St John. Carved stones from the earlier building are incorporated into this elevation.

Throughout its long history, the library has undergone many renovations and extensions. Like most libraries, it has had to cope with increasing demands on space as its collections have grown.

In 1765-1767 the height of the walls in the King James Library was increased so that the upper gallery could be added. Windows overlooking South Street were covered over with shelves to hold more books.

This eased the pressure on space for a while, but it was only the first of several extensions, including a handsome new building constructed immediately to the south, thanks to the generosity of donors such as Andrew Carnegie. Eventually, when space for further expansion ran out, the decision was taken to build a new University Library building on North Street, which opened in 1976. Despite these changes, the King James Library remains an ‘elegant and luminous’ chamber designed around its contents.

For example, as a copyright library, the University Library was entitled to claim a copy of every book published in the British Isles between 1710-1836. Collections have always been further enriched by donations and purchase.

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