

## Daniel Wakelin

### Cambridge, St John's College Library, MS S.54

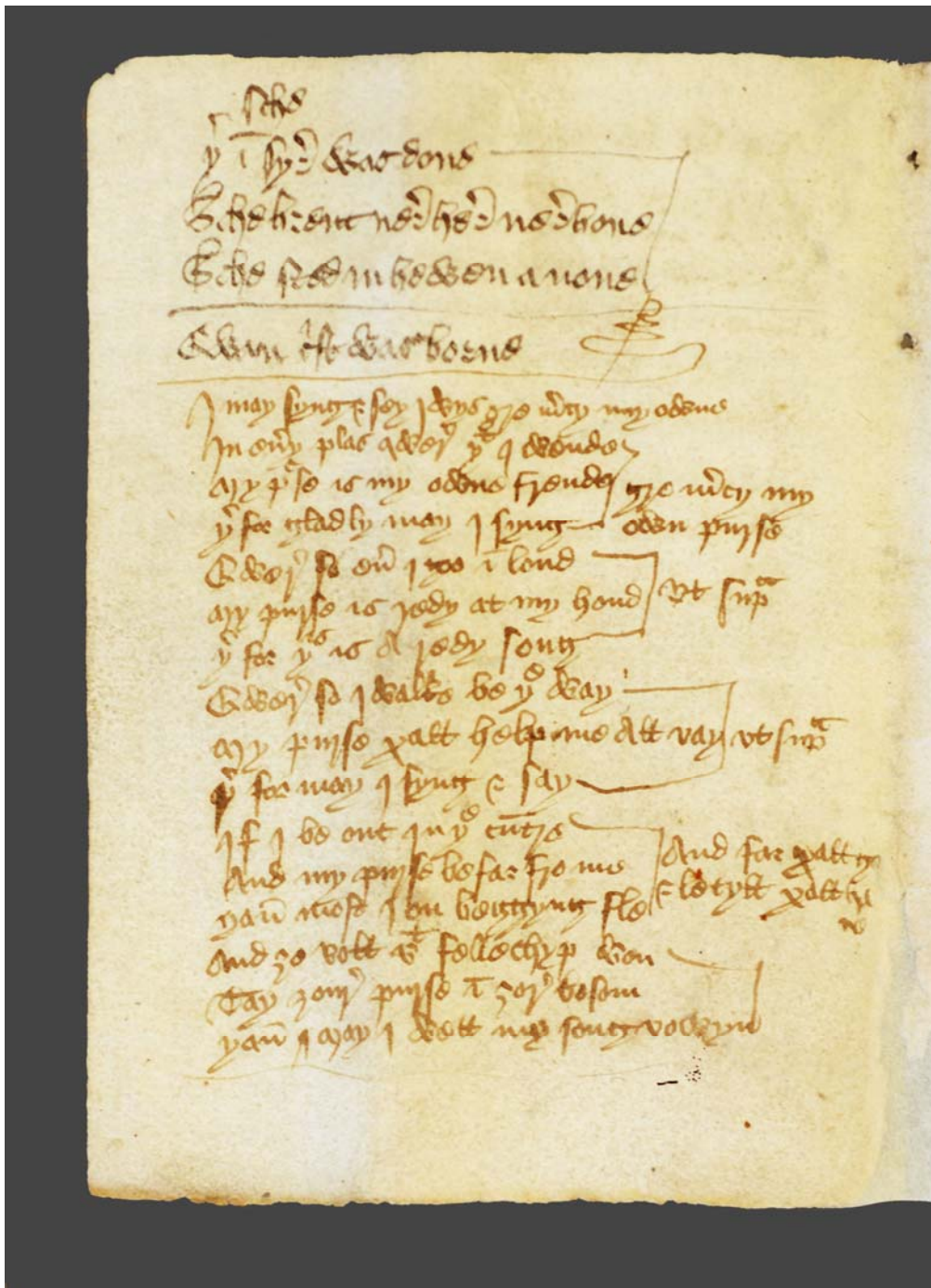
Cambridge, St John's College, MS S.54, is one of the most fragile miscellanies, but one of the most fascinating, for its unusual physical structure and its notably coherent contents, which together suggest much about its use.

The book is datable only loosely from its language and handwriting to the late fifteenth century, with confirmation from its paper, which has a watermark most similar to some others dated to 1477 and 1482. It contains only sixteen leaves of paper (now marked 'a' and 1-15), measuring roughly 100 mm. x 145 mm., and some of them now merely fragments. The leaves survive with folds along their tops, in the gutter; the rare survival of these folds, known as *bolts*, shows that the small quire was made by folding two larger pieces of paper twice each to make the sixteen leaves. And the sheets have been protected by being stitched into a scruffy and illfitting 'wallet' of vellum, which sits like a binding but then folds round the whole quire to keep it safe. This wallet might have been in place while the pages were still being copied, for there is a pen-trial which might be from another Christmas carol, the words 'Puer natus hodie' ('A boy is born today'), written on the inside of the back cover.

Being made of folded sheets, rather than a bunch of loose pairs of leaves (the 'bifolia' found in most manuscripts), and being kept in this tatty vellum wallet, the seemingly fragile physical form in fact offered a strong 'support' for copying on the move or over time. For the act of copying was itself fragile. Two people whom we might only call A and B copied the carols and lyrics in this book, but they did so with some difficulty. They each changed the colour of their ink very frequently, often after only a few lines, which suggests that time had lapsed, after which new ink needed to be mixed. Moreover, each usually only wrote for a few leaves, or even just a few lines, before the other took over. This intermittence might have been planned, but twice at least it was not, when one person interrupted the work of the other, erroneously beginning a new text in the middle of one temporarily paused (fols 3v, 10v, described by Wakelin 2006: 31-32, 42 nn. 32-34). [See image 1.] The inability to copy consistently for long stretches of time suggests that the copying was amateur or at least 'off duty', the product of enthusiasm and leisure – but not much leisure. It shares this private, unofficial feel with many famous miscellanies of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, such as the 'Findern' manuscript (Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.1.6; reproduced by Beadle and Owen, ed. 1977) or the collections of Richard Hill (Oxford, Balliol College, MS 354; described by Gillespie 2004).

Yet unlike other miscellanies, this one is strikingly coherent in its contents. It might be better described as an anthology of sixteen carols – defined for the fifteenth century as lyrics with a repeated burden, rather than as lyrics about Christmas – and two other lyrics without burdens, one of which has a burden in a

second copy in a different manuscript. (The first carol is fragmentary and there were other lyrics or carols on the final pages that are too damaged to make out in full.)



(Image 1: Cambridge, St John's College Library, MS S.54, f. 3v)

The form of the carol was perfect for communal song: there could be any number of stanzas, with a repeating 'burden' sung at the start and repeated after every stanza; many stanzas end with a 'refrain' which rhymes with the burden. It is thought that a soloist would sing the stanzas and that a chorus would sing the burden, cued for their part by the refrain. The scribes of MS S.54 were alert to the form: they usually copied the 'burdens' as long lines, with the stanzas in a column below and the 'refrains' or short 'bob' lines to the right, linked to the correct stanzas by 'bracketing' them.

The regular layout suggests that the people copying had seen that such a layout was customary in other manuscripts, and that the scribes *did* have other manuscripts – however short – to copy from. And the sharing of, and interruptions in, copying would seem to confirm the use of written exemplars. Yet the dominance of the carol in this book suggests that it might have existed in some relation to performance. While the music for such carols could be traditional or memorized, as with much hymnody or nursery-rhymes, the fact that there is no music in the book itself, and that the book is quite scruffy and fragile, suggests that it was not definitely a 'script' for performance – unlike, say, the gorgeous roll in Cambridge, Trinity College Library, MS O.3.58, where the carols have fine red and blue notation fit for display while singing in public. It is most likely an *aide-memoire*, like a set of jokes cut out from a newspaper which one might sing one day.

Who would sing such carols? It could have been minstrels, but it is unclear exactly what most minstrels' performances involved by this period; documents of the period (like those in Galloway and Wasson 1980-1) often refer to them as if they are merely musicians. Whoever made and used this book was not alone: the close collaboration of the people copying, over time, suggests that they were members of some steady community such as a religious house, school, household or lay guild. The communal singing of the burden, and the communal spirit of some of the words, would suit such communities too. This book reminds us, though, that such communities were not entirely spontaneous in their festivities: that people recorded songs for festive occasions in little books, which would presumably tell people how to sing them. The worthy content of most – if not all – of the carols would make this singing worthwhile. Priests and friars are known to have used carols for preaching or as replacements for less savoury songs. And, alongside the merrier ones, a few of these carols are lugubrious and Latinate.

However, the pair of people who bothered to copy the carols, and took care to fold their paper and tack it into its wallet, clearly cared about what they were doing. They had in mind the pleasure that would be gained from communal singing, and from some of these carols and lyrics in particular.

## Bibliography

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