‘Boston’ Manuscript of the Laws of Hywel Dda arrives home at NLW

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The manuscript will only be on show for a limited period, 23 July – 31 August, before being taken into the care of the Library’s conservators to be rebound and digitised.

The manuscript was bought by the National Library for £541,250 at auction in Sotheby’s in London on 10 July. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) supported the bid with a grant £467,000 with the remainder of the money from the library’s own funds, as well as a grant from the Welsh Government.

Andrew Green, the Librarian of the National Library Wales, said: "It’s obvious that without the substantial financial support and swift organisational response from the HLF that the National Library would not have been able to buy this important manuscript. Put simply, without the HLF this manuscript of the Laws of Hywel Dda would not have returned to its homeland. The National Library, on behalf of the Welsh people, are immensely grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund and its Chair, Dr Manon Williams, for their willing and decisive support."

Dr Manon Williams, Chair of the HLF Committee for Wales, said: "This manuscript is one of Wales’ true treasures and I’m delighted to see it back home and in the National Library of Wales, where experts can now study and interpret it ensuring it is better understood for the first time. I hope local people and visitors will take this unique opportunity to come and see this important piece of Welsh history on display."

The manuscript will be exhibited at the Library’s Hengwrt Room. This is the library’s special gallery for exhibiting rare books and manuscripts which at the moment is also exhibiting medieval Welsh seals. Following the public display it will be studied by the Library’s expert staff , conserved and a facsimile copy made and it will then be digitised so it can be exhibited on the Library’s website for all to see and study. This process should be complete by the end of 2012 and the MSS will then be kept at the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, alongside other manuscripts of its time.

Plans are in place for a programme of education and training opportunities for existing staff, new apprentices and volunteers to learn new skills and play their part in saving the manuscript for the future. There are also plans for a touring exhibition of the facsimile.

Information about the manuscript

The pocket-sized book, written in medieval Welsh and featuring coloured decoration, is one of the earliest manuscript of its kind ever offered in a public sale and was auctioned by the Massachusetts Historical Society who were likely to have been given the manuscript as a gift from Welsh emigrants in the early 19th century.

The Laws of Hywel Dda is a long-established descriptive term encompassing the native Welsh laws which were codified in the 10th century in South West Wales. The surviving texts can be found in around 30 manuscripts dating from the 13th – 16th centuries in Welsh and Latin.

This small parchment volume is a very early example of a key text in the history of Welsh law and would have been used by an itinerant judge in South Wales in the 14th century. It offers a new window into the development of Welsh identity and cultural life.

Unlike most other Welsh medieval manuscripts, the Boston Manuscript has handwritten additions demonstrating its use as a working law text. It is much closer to the reality and practice of the law at the time, and offers plenty of scope for important new research.