The sixteenth-century books acquired by the British Museum Library from Holkham Hall included Chaucer’s Workes, printed by John Reynes in 1542 (STC 5070). This volume belonged to Chief Justice Sir Edward Coke and is no. 861 in his Library Catalogue. L. H. Horstein showed that this actual copy was quoted three times in the second and third parts of Coke’s Institutes of the Laws of England (London, 1642-4). In discussing ‘Felony in such as use the craft of Multiplication’ [i.e. alchemy], Coke quotes ‘the tale of the Channons Yeoman, fo. 63. (in libro meo,)’.

Lord Coke recently acquired at Christie’s some letters of Alexander Napier the elder written to his father. He was later to be librarian at Holkham, but on his first visit he was only a young new chaplain. In helping his predecessor Collyer, and Francis Chantry, in a voluntary capacity in a reorganization of the library for the second Earl, he found that this volume was condemned to be sold, perhaps because it was much wormed. Other Coke books were to be sold at the same time. Napier wrote to his father on two occasions, 12 July 1844 and 29 December 1845, asking him to intervene to prevent this, successfully as it turned out. The text of the relevant parts of these letters is as follows:

Lynn
July 12, 1844

My dear Father,

... You don’t understand about the Library;—a Mr Chantry has been sent from London by Sir Denis Le Marchant, to arrange the Library and I contribute my assistance, freely & voluntarily to the job. My Lord, who likes to have a finger in every pie, has been mighty active in his way, a bad one I avow for he knows nothing whatsoever of books, and is only a great hindrance to the work. It is pretty well over now....

Your affectionate Son,
Alex. Napier

To Professor Napier
39 Castle Street,
Edinburgh
Postmark: LYNN JY 12 1844

Holkham, Dec. 29, 1845

My dear Father,

You know, I think, that Lord Leicester has been employing, for some considerable time, a person, by the name of Mr Chantry, to re-arrange and catalogue the Library at Holkham, and also
to purge it of duplicates and worthless books. This work has proceeded almost to a conclusion; and among the books condemned for sale by auction are many volumes—at any rate above 150—containing the autograph of Sir Edward Coke Lord Chief Justice—the famous Coke! and Lord Leicester actually meditates the sale of the said Sir Edward’s Law Library, many of the volumes of which possess long notes in his own handwriting, and nearly all his autograph. In fact Sir Edward Coke’s Library may be said to be in Holkham Hall, and if Lord Leicester proceeds according to the plan pursued already, it will be exposed for sale! I will give you one instance, and from this learn all, among the books condemned for sale only last week is a copy of Chaucer—an old [volume, crossed out] folio, black letter copy of the date 1561. It is much wormed, but otherwise sound; and it contains a beautiful autograph of Sir Edward Coke. In fact it was his copy of Chaucer. The condemnation of this book led to some conversation yesterday after dinner—and then I discovered the fact that they had condemned many [many volumes, crossed out] such like volumes which had belonged to the great Lawyer, and contain his autograph; and then it was that Lord Leicester proposed he did not care for the Chief Justice’s books that he would sell them—if he possessed better copies of the same book; and that he meant to empty the house of the Law Library of Sir Edward Coke, as a heap of rubbish! I vehemently opposed the sale of any one book duplicate or not that had belonged to Sir Edward Coke; and suggested that all the books belonging to him should be carefully collected together, and formed into one Library called the Coke Library. Lord Leicester seemed moved by my earnestness, and I said I should write to you for your opinion—whether Sir Edward Coke’s books, duplicate or not, should be sold by auction. I am shocked at the utter vandalism of my Lord; and I think you will be so too. However, I hope you will write me a letter which I can shew to his Lordship—expressing your opinions of the value of Sir Edward Coke’s Library; and especially to his descendant.

Unless I am grievously mistaken, you will be vexed to hear that such a proposal was ever entertained. It will show you what little feeling exists in my Lord. In my opinion it is the most horrid vandalism I ever heard of. I hope you will be able to answer this soon—and that you will give me your judgement for his Lordship’s use, as he wished me to get yours . . .

Your affectionate Son,
Alex. Napier

Holkham,
January 18 1846

My dear Father,

... I was truly delighted to receive your letter about the Coke books, which so entirely bear me out in all I said. Henry Coke is furious at his brother thinking of selling these books, and he was much pleased with your letter, which he saw before my Lord did. Your letter will have great weight, and I think will be the means of saving [selling, struck out] the books. I see that my Lord is vexed with himself. He now discovers that he has been meditating an utterly barbarous, discreditable act, and so has become rather sore. But don’t be afraid of my committing myself. I believe Leicester respects me for my honesty and frankness, and even now I am sure he is far from being displeased with me for my opposition to his wishes, and the day will come when he will thank me in his heart for having saved these books, for I regard them as good as sacred. The only thing I dread is the subserviency of some of his advisers to whom the matter is often referred, for they may fear to oppose him. I see well that a man in Leicester’s station rarely, very rarely hears the truth. Mr Ellice has been here and he opposes the sale, but still he does not sufficiently value these books as really historical books worthy
of all care and reverence. Lord Roseberry—Mr Stanhope—Sir Dennis le Marchant will be here this week; and they will decide on the matter. I shall take care that two of these shall see your letter, if not publicly at least privately. I hardly think Leicester will produce it, for it shames him too much; he did not show it even to Ellice. But be sure—I am cautious and on my guard . . .

Though Napier's intervention succeeded and the Chaucer was not sold on this occasion, just over a century later, on 10 November 1951, it was purchased, together with twelve manuscripts and eighty-two other printed books from the fifth Earl of Leicester by the Trustees of the British Museum.

I am grateful to Lord Coke and to the Leverhulme Foundation.

1 L. A. Sheppard, 'A list of the printed books recently acquired by the British Museum from the Earl of Leicester', The Book Collector, i (1952), p. 185. His only comment on the Chaucer was that it was in modern (i.e. nineteenth century) blind-stamped morocco. See also T. C. Skeat, F. G. Rendall, and H. M. Nixon, 'The Manuscripts and Printed Books from the Holkham Hall Library', British Museum Quarterly, xvii, 2 (1952), pp. 23-40. The Chaucer is now at C.132.h.47.
5 Letter from A. Napier, 12 July 1844.
6 Ibid., 29 December 1845.
7 Ibid., 18 January 1846.
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