

Binding

THE BINDING TRADE¹

Throughout the hand-press period the craft of binding books was normally separate from that of printing them. Each edition was distributed by its publisher-wholesaler (who might also have been its printer) through numerous retail booksellers, each of whom sold a few copies of it over his counter; it was generally the case that printers and publishers themselves also acted as retailers. Each retail bookseller had small batches of each edition bound up locally, and offered them for sale either in this form or unbound.

In London the retailer would have had his books bound by a specialist bookbinder, nearly all of whom were concentrated in the capital. In the English provinces, on the other hand, the binders were primarily large retail booksellers, who probably bound batches of books for their smaller neighbours as well as for themselves. Even the great eighteenth-century firm of Edwards of Halifax, which is remembered for its bindery, was concerned chiefly with bookselling and publishing. In the few cases where printers doubled not only as booksellers but also as binders (at the Foulis Press in eighteenth-century Glasgow, for instance) they did not bind up whole editions of their own books, but only such copies as they could themselves expect to sell, together with batches of books bought from other publishers for retail sale; the main stock of their own books was warehoused in sheets.²

Edition binding, in fact, was never normal in the hand-press period. It would of course have been possible for a publisher to have had a whole edition bound and to have distributed the bound copies like a modern publisher, but the economics of the trade were against it. The most important factor was that every book had to be bound separately by hand, and binding costs did not go down with quantity; it cost ten times as much to bind a thousand copies of a book as it cost to bind a hundred. Therefore to bind up more copies of an edition than could be sold within a short period of time tied up capital without any compensation. It was moreover to the provincial bookseller's advantage to buy books in sheets, for they were cheaper to transport than were bound copies.

A particular binder (for instance one of the specialist London firms) might cover many batches of copies of a book for a bookseller, or group of

¹ There is no good general account of the trade, but see Pollard, H. G., 'Changes in the style of book-binding, 1550-1830', *The Library*, xi, 1956, pp. 71-94; and pp. 398-9.

² Gaskell, P., *A bibliography of the Foulis Press*, London 1964, pp. 54-5, 347-8.

booksellers, in an unvarying trade style that can give the appearance of edition binding; but, unless a considerable and immediate sale in one area could be predicted, the batches would not necessarily have been large in number or closely related in time. Chapbooks may have been an exception, for in the eighteenth century, at any rate, they seem to have been distributed bound from London.

The normal trade binding for most of the hand-press period was an inexpensive covering of calf or sheep, and it appears that retailers actually stocked copies of most books in this form for sale over the counter. Certain classes of books, indeed, were normally sold bound: school books, classical texts, bibles and prayer books, devotional handbooks and standard collections of sermons, practical manuals, reference and law books. At the other end of the scale, controversial pamphlets, and such things as single poems, plays, or sermons were normally sold stitched (in wrappers from the mid-seventeenth century). The more expensive works of literature and learning, too, were often sold stitched, or in sheets unbound, for the customer to take to his own binder; but even the better class of book seems generally to have been available in a trade binding if required, even (by the early eighteenth century) in more than one style.³

Some binders, especially those who had diverse interests in the book trade, supplied sets of plates for Bibles and other standard texts, sets which were not specific to particular editions.⁴ Another service offered by binders was ruling the margins in red, which was done in pen and ink before folding.

BINDING TECHNIQUE⁵

When batches of books arrived at the bindery the sheets of each one were already gathered, and roughly folded in half into quires of one or two dozen sheets each. First the sheets had to be folded properly, according to the format, the page numbers in the headlines being used as guides; it was not practicable to fold to the edges of the sheets because of minor inaccuracies that had inevitably occurred when they were positioned on the tympan of the press. Having been folded, the sheets were collated by signatures. Leaves printed out of order, plates and, most probably, cancel leaves were all put in their right places at this stage. The folded book was then beaten

³ From their beginning in 1669 *The term catalogues* list most of the middle range of books as 'bound'; and many of the numerous book advertisements of the eighteenth century give prices in different styles of binding.

⁴ Many sets of plates are listed, primarily for sale to the trade, in *The term catalogues*; for instance (28 June 1669) 'The Historical part of the *Old Testament* newly Graved in 70 Copper-plates; and fitted to be bound with *Bibles* in Octavo and Twelves. Price 5s.' (Arber, E., *The term catalogues*, i, London 1903, p. 12).

⁵ Middleton, B. C., *A history of English craft bookbinding technique*, New York and London 1963.

flat with a hammer and block, several gatherings at a time, in order to get it down to its proper thickness.

Next the book was placed on the sewing frame, and the folded sheets were sewn by hand with needle and thread on to four or five cords or thongs. In the best work the thread was passed along the inner fold, emerging to take a turn round each cord, and then back in the same manner along the inner fold of the next sheet, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was usual to sew trade bindings 'two on', whereby the thread was passed from one sheet to its neighbour and back again at every other cord, so that two signatures were sewn at each passage of the needle. The cords themselves could be placed either outside the backs of the folded sheets, where they would show as raised bands across the spine of the book, or in slots sawn into the folds to give the book a flat back.

Then the endpapers were sewn on. These were folds or sections of blank paper (reinforced with vellum strips in the early days) which were supplied by the binder and did not form part of the printer's book. Their purpose was, as paste-downs, to reinforce the joints of the covers and, as flyleaves, to give additional protection to the end pages of the book.

The spine of the book was rounded and given shoulders ('backed') with a hammer to accommodate the covers or 'boards'. The boards were generally made of wood up to the later fifteenth century (until the end of the sixteenth century for some large books and for quarto Bibles); then of sheets of paper pasted together ('pasteboard'); and then, from the early eighteenth century in good-quality binding but later in cheap work, of rope-fibre millboard. They were attached to the books by means of the ends of the cords on to which the sheets had been sewn.

The three outer edges of the book (or occasionally the top edge, or the top and fore-edges, only) were next cut with the plough.^{5a} This was a long vice in which the book was clamped, the edge to be cut upwards, so that a knife in a small frame could be pulled along it and moved sideways by degrees, progressively trimming the rough edge smooth; the boards were normally trimmed to the right size at the same time. The cut edges might then be sprinkled or brushed with colour or (less commonly) marbled, gilded, or painted.

Then the headbands were attached to the head and tail of the spine. In medieval bindings thick headbands were sewn in at the same time as the cords, but by the sixteenth century they were generally sewn on after the edges had been cut. Later still, from the early seventeenth century, head-

bands were made up separately and stuck on to the book. Whichever method was used, its purpose was to resist the strains imposed on the volume by handling, especially when it was pulled from a shelf.

Next the book was covered, usually with leather. A strip of paper or vellum was pasted on to the spine to reinforce it, and a skin of the right size was stuck down over the spine and the outside of both boards, the overlapping edges being turned in and secured inside the boards under a paper paste-down. Until the very end of the hand-press period the cover was always stuck down tight on to the spine; the hollow back that became the normal form in the nineteenth century did not appear until about 1770 in France and about 1800 in England.

The binding was finished with more or less decoration on the outside of the cover, which was normally applied by pressing hot metal stamps on to the surface of the leather, either blind (without gilding) or through gold leaf. These stamps could be large metal blocks, measuring 10 cm. or more across and applied to the cover with a mechanical press. More often they were smaller hand tools which could be used in combination to build up a decorative pattern. The most usual tools (which were generally made of brass, set in wooden handles like chisels) were simple design units such as short lines or little flowers; lines set on curved rockers (pallets); wheels with lines on the circumference (fillets); and wheels with elaborate designs on the circumference (rolls). There were also tools for individual letters of the alphabet and for figures, with which the binding could be lettered (either directly or on leather labels stuck on the cover).

The tools were heated for use at a small brazier, and no further preparation was necessary for blind tooling. The face of the tool was simply pressed into the leather, its position in a complicated layout being aided by guide lines (paper patterns were not used until the nineteenth century). For gold tooling, impressions of the tools were first made in blind. An adhesive glair of egg white was next brushed into the blind impression, allowed to dry, and greased. Finally gold leaf was laid in place over the blind impressions, and fixed into them with further impressions of the hot tools, surplus gold being rubbed off. Sixteenth-century examples are also known of gold-blocking with wooden tools, used cold.

TRADE BINDING STYLES⁶

Superbly decorated bindings have been commissioned, and carefully preserved, from the medieval period up to the present day, not only in tooled leather, but also in wood and metal (sometimes carved or jewelled), in cloth and embroidery, and in pierced or painted vellum. Their stylistic

⁶ There is unfortunately no illustrated survey.

^{5a} Cheap bindings were commonly cut 'out of boards' from the seventeenth century (i.e. before rounding and backing and the attachment of the boards); but cutting 'in boards' has always been normal for the better class of work.

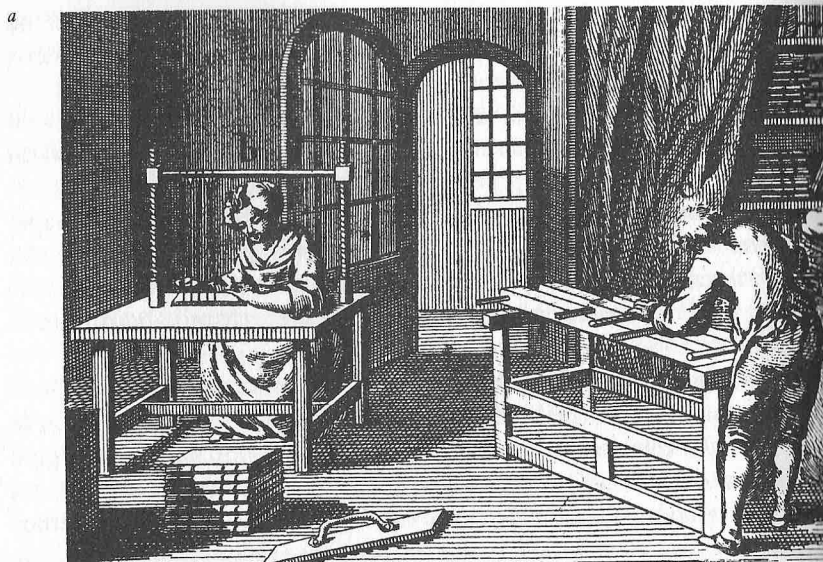


FIG. 68 (a, b). Bindery work in eighteenth-century France. (a) Sewing and ploughing; (b) finishing with a roll. (*Encyclopédie*, planches viii, Paris 1771, 'Relieur', pls. 1, 5.)

development (which affected trade binding styles, made as they generally were by the same workmen in the same shops), is too complex to follow here. Such special bindings have survived in large numbers, however, and they are copiously—usually exclusively—described and illustrated in works of binding history.

Trade bindings are more difficult to investigate. The finer a binding, the better chance it had of survival, and cheap bindings of the earlier hand-press period are now relatively rare. The simultaneous execution of the trade binding of an edition by many different shops, moreover, makes

generalization more than usually hazardous; and there are the further complications that individual finishers might be anachronistic in style; that books might be bound or rebound long after they were printed (possibly, though this was very rare, in a binding taken from an earlier volume); and that in seventeenth-century France binding and finishing were separate trades, carried on in different shops.

Early-sixteenth-century bindings generally have a medieval air about them. Many books were still large and solid, their blind-tooled covers secured with clasps or ties. Blocks and rolls tended to be large and deeply impressed, the cords to stand out thickly on the spine. Even smaller books were liable to be lumpishly bound, but here there was more variety.

From the later fifteenth century books were more often stored on their edges than on their sides (so that metal bosses to protect the covers were no longer used), but for most of the sixteenth century they were normally placed fore-edge outward on the shelf, the title of the book being written across the fore-edge in ink. Some institutional libraries were chained (when the books were necessarily shelved fore-edge outwards), the chains being attached to a staple riveted to an edge of one of the boards.⁷

Tanned calfskin—or tanned cowhide for large books—was the commonest covering material in the sixteenth century, followed by vellum (also frequent in trade bindings) and pigskin; tanned sheepskin was still unusual. Books were sometimes sold in paper wrappers and paper boards even at this early date. Certain Augsburg editions of the 1490s were equipped with wrappers of stiffened paper which were specially printed for them; this looks like an attempt at edition binding, but it found no imitators.⁸ A number of north Italian books of the early sixteenth century were sold in printed paper boards, although in this case the covers were not specific to particular editions.⁹ A good many small books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had decorations or sub-titles printed on the first and last pages, and may have been intended to be retailed sewn but uncovered.¹⁰ Finally, examples of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plain paper wrappers have also survived.

Gold tooling, usually with sizeable blocks, became increasingly common from the mid sixteenth century, and was not confined to bespoke bindings. A good many heavily gilt retailers' bindings (such as the small English devotional books that were sold in large numbers from the 1560s until the later seventeenth century) were indeed intended to look expensive while

⁷ Clark, J. W., *The care of books*, Cambridge 1901, *passim*.

⁸ Nixon, H. M., *Broxbourne Library, styles and designs of bookbindings*, London 1956, pp. 14–17.

⁹ Nixon, H. M., *op. cit.*, pp. 27–8.

¹⁰ Jackson, W. A., 'Printed wrappers of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries', *Harvard Library bulletin*, vi, 1952, pp. 313–21.

really being cheaply executed, with two-on sewing and a simplified attachment to sawn-in cords. Not all embroidered bindings were bespoke, either; there was a flourishing trade in retailers' bindings for service books made by professional embroiderers in London during the period 1600 to 1650.¹¹

Ordinary trade bindings of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had very little decoration on the covers, and were rarely gilt. Calf continued to be the prime covering material, but sheep was now introduced for the cheapest work. Vellum remained popular on the continent, less so in England; while goatskin (morocco), although well established by this time for fine work, was seldom used in trade binding except for prayer books. Tooling might involve no more than blind fillets beside the spine and, from the 1670s, a blind-tooled panel on each board. The covers, or parts of them, might also be sprinkled with acid to pattern the leather with black dots. Sawn-in cords, giving flat spines, were common in the mid seventeenth century, but then went out of fashion until they were reintroduced in about 1760.

Books began to be turned round on the shelf to show their spines in the later sixteenth century, apparently rather later in England than in Italy or France.¹² Tooled decoration appeared on the spines of better-class bindings, but titles were not normally lettered until the mid seventeenth century, and then chiefly on bespoke work. Ordinary trade bindings remained unlettered until the mid eighteenth century, although the volumes of sets were often numbered; trade bindings of the more expensive sort were given coloured leather lettering pieces from about 1700. The longitudinal labels printed on otherwise blank leaves of a few late-seventeenth-century English books may have been meant for use as fore-edge labels, or they may have been intended for labelling the bins or shelves that contained a stock of books—whether the printer's, the wholesaler's, or the bookseller's stock is unclear.¹³

The seventeenth century also saw the appearance of decorated papers, marbled and printed, but they were uncommon in retail work until they began to be used for covering the boards of half- and quarter-bound books¹⁴ in the 1730s, and shortly afterwards for endpapers as well.

From the mid eighteenth century leather trade bindings became more sophisticated. Gold-tooled fillets and lettering pieces were normally added, and spines gold-tooled with pallets in imitation of the detailed tooling of

bespoke work were not uncommon. Blind-tooled panels on sprinkled calf were given up, acid being flowed over the covers to produce 'tree calf', sometimes polished. A greatly increased proportion of books were retailed in paper wrappers and paper boards, uncut to allow for later rebinding in leather. The wrappers of periodicals and ephemera were often printed; and from the 1780s printed labels were sometimes stuck on to the spines of boarded books, being supplied by the printer on a spare leaf.

Edition binding was approached in the 1760s by the printer-publisher Newbery of London, who supplied booksellers with thousands of copies of his juvenile books ready bound in a standard cover of quarter vellum and paper boards, labelled.¹⁵ 'Juveniles' have always been a special case, however, and the generality of books continued to be bound by booksellers, not by printers or publishers, until well into the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ Sadleir, M., *The evolution of publishers' binding styles 1770-1900*, London and New York 1930, pp. 10-12, plate 1 (a). Quarter vellum was a regular substitute for quarter calf in the ordinary trade bindings of the same period.

¹¹ Nixon, H. M., *op. cit.*, pp. 143-4.

¹² Pollard, H. G., *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹³ Pollard, H. G., *op. cit.*, pp. 91-3; Jackson, W. A., 'English title labels', *Harvard library bulletin*, ii, Spring 1948. Manuscript longitudinal fore-edge labels are also known.

¹⁴ Half binding: spine and corners of leather, the rest of the boards being covered with paper or cloth. Quarter binding: the same, but without the corner pieces. On the history of marbled paper, see Middleton, B. C., *op. cit.*, pp. 33-9 and footnote references.