The repair and rebinding history of blockbooks printed in the fifteenth-century now in the Bodleian Library

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The intentions of earlier owners of printed books when commissioning the repair or rebinding of individual volumes has largely been lost in the mists of time, though the resulting repairs and rebound volumes survive in large numbers. Likewise the reasoning and decision-making process of the bookbinders who undertook this work is now difficult to recover. The work recently completed at the Bodleian library to catalogue the library’s collection of incunabula offered an opportunity to compare the approaches taken with one form of fifteenth-century book whilst allowing comparisons to be made with other fifteenth-century volumes bound or repaired at the same time for the same owners. This paper will concentrate on the repair and rebinding of four blockbooks, carried out in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for three separate owners, and will attempt to explore both the intentions of these owners and the methods of their binders.

Blockbooks are a form of fifteenth-century book whose unusual codicological structures have posed particular problems for bookbinders both ancient and modern.1 The term blockbook describes a book or booklet whose text and/or illustrations were printed from incised woodblocks without recourse to movable type; Palmer has refined this definition further, however, describing them as ‘sets of plates, printed by woodcut or – much more rarely – the metalcut or intaglio method, and designed to be to be made up into a codex consisting of one or more quires or of folded double leaves’.2 The dominant codicological features of blockbooks could be categorised as including the following, though all of these features are not necessarily present in each example:
1. Being printed on one side of the paper only ('anopisthographic'), with the sheet of paper being placed on the block and then rubbed from the reverse.

2. Being printed using water-based printing inks.


The resulting series of printed double leaves could either exist as a series of individual bifolia, or the blocks could be arranged so that the bifolia were grouped into quire. In both cases the blank verso of the sheets, necessitated by their printing process, appear to have been pasted together in their final book form. The interventions of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have 'destroyed ninety per cent of the evidence for the original presentation of medieval blockbooks'\(^3\) making it now difficult to state clearly what their original structure would have been, or how or whether blockbooks were originally sewn.\(^4\)

The Bodleian Library in Oxford has a small but important collection of fifteenth-century blockbooks which were recently catalogued as part of the larger catalogue of Bodleian Incunabula.\(^5\) These volumes, although a small collection by comparison with the much more numerous holdings in London, Munich, Paris and New York, have been described as 'of exceptional importance for our early understanding of early woodcut printing and its function'.\(^6\) The individual volumes that comprise this collection entered the library in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a range of private and institutional owners. Although none of these volumes now retain their original fifteenth-century bindings, glimpses of their original structure have been preserved and these have been noted and described since around 1700. Subsequent repair and rebinding of these volumes carried out by private collectors prior to their arrival at the Bodleian and later by the Bodleian itself have preserved different aspects of this codicological evidence. A brief overview of the eight blockbooks now at the Bodleian is given in Table 2; for detailed descriptions including the bindings refer to the Bod-inc. catalogue.

This study is based on research undertaken during the preparation of binding descriptions for this catalogue and its provenance research. This paper, in three case studies, will compare the differing approaches taken to the rebinding and repair of four of these blockbooks carried out in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with reference to other printed and manuscript volumes repaired/rebound for the same
Table 2. Overview of fifteenth-century blockbooks now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Items in bold are discussed in this paper, blockbook fragments are marked with an asterix.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blockbook</th>
<th>Date of impression</th>
<th>Date of Bodleian accession</th>
<th>Given to the Bodleian by</th>
<th>Date of binding</th>
<th>Bound for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB-1</td>
<td>c. 1466–70</td>
<td>1834</td>
<td>Francis Douce (1757–1834)</td>
<td>Before 1826</td>
<td>John Bellingham Inglis (1780–1870)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-2</td>
<td>c. 1470</td>
<td>1639</td>
<td>William Laud (1573–1645)</td>
<td>Before 1639</td>
<td>William Laud (1573–1645)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-3</td>
<td>c. 1472</td>
<td>1853</td>
<td>Bought</td>
<td>1847–53</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-4</td>
<td>c. 1465–70</td>
<td>1834</td>
<td>Francis Douce</td>
<td>Before 1823</td>
<td>Sir Mark Masterman Sykes (1771–1823)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-5*</td>
<td>c. 1462–68</td>
<td>1755</td>
<td>Richard Rawlinson (1690–1735)</td>
<td>1714</td>
<td>Thomas Hearne (1678–1735)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-6</td>
<td>c. 1470</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>Francis Junius (1589–1677)</td>
<td>c. 1790</td>
<td>Bodleian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-7</td>
<td>c. 1469–70</td>
<td>1677</td>
<td>Francis Junius</td>
<td>c. 1790</td>
<td>Bodleian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-8*</td>
<td>c. 1476/80</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>Bought</td>
<td>After 1841</td>
<td>Bodleian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
owners. By examining the approaches, priorities and aims of the binding and repair campaigns, it is possible to discern the value given to different aspects of the blockbooks by different owners, often at a similar time.

1) Bound for the Bodleian Library by Heinrich Walther c. 1790 [Bod-inc. BB-6 & 7]

Two blockbooks entered the Bodleian with Francis Junius’s collections in 1677 as a sammelbänd and were described around 1700 with BB-2 as ‘small thin books in folio’. In 1789 a new room at the Bodleian, the Auctarium, was set aside and furnished with wire fronted bookcases by James Wyatt to be ‘consider’d as an Archive room to the Library for the reception chiefly of MSS. and books of an early date relating to Greek and Latin learning’, and these two blockbooks entered the room together with other examples of early printing. This gathering together of volumes from the Bodleian’s collections coincided with a campaign to purchase incunabula at a number of sales, and many of these new purchases as well as those volumes moved into the Auctarium were rebound at this time as befit their new surroundings.

The so-called ‘Junius sammelbände’ were sumptuously rebound, unfortunately resulting in the loss of all evidence of early structure or appearance, on their move to the Auctarium (Fig. 60). The sammelbände, originally bound together in one volume, were separated into their two constituent parts and rebound as two albums. For these bindings the leaves, with their blank versos pasted together, were separated and each pair of bifolia was divided into individual leaves. Each leaf was then radically trimmed to the size of the printed area, and the leaves were reordered. Each trimmed woodcut was inlaid into a support sheet without any overlap, and held in place by a second sheet pasted across the entire verso, a black ruled ink line disguising the join (Fig. 61). These mounted leaves were made up into sections and bound together to present the leaves of each blockbook as an album with the woodcuts appearing on the rectos. This method of mounting, which is both laborious and expensive, created large false margins, and these two bound volumes are now considerably larger than the other blockbooks within the collection. The completed text-block was ploughed and the edges were gilded. They were then bound as matching volumes in blue straight-grained tanned
Fig. 60. Biblia Pauperum, c. 1470 [Bod-inc. BB-6], spine and left board of binding.
Fig. 61. BB-6, detail of inlay and mounting method.
morocco with elaborate blind- and gold-tooling, and with the centrepiece of the Bodleian Library.

The Auctarium contains many other volumes bound by Heinrich Walther for the Bodleian in the 1790s. The two blockbook bindings, though now somewhat worn, stand out from the other Walther bindings on account of their wealth of intricate tooling, which taken together with the mounting method seems to indicate that they were especially valued. Although other Walther volumes do not display the same wealth of tooling they are all bound to the same high standard in a uniform style of gold-tooled morocco with gilded edges, silk double-core endbands, and are provided with silk bookmarks. Some of these volumes also show evidence of the same attempts to erase marks of early use and to present them as pristine examples. Staining to the leaves of Bod-inc. J-290 shows an early and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to remove marginalia and present the volume as a clean copy (Fig. 62). The volume was washed and bleached to remove manuscript marginalia before binding. This resulted in bleeding and offsetting from the rubrication, which was then excised with the leaves being repaired in the worst cases. The bleaching process also resulted in the now prominent dark stains to the margins of many leaves, probably caused by the incomplete rinsing of the bleaching agent. Although the mounting method and amount of tooling present on the blockbook bindings marks them out as unusual, the general approach when rebinding these volumes seems to be in keeping with the approach taken when binding other examples of early printing for the Bodleian.

2) Bound for Sir Mark Masterman Sykes before 1823 [Bod-inc. BB-4]

Francis Douce bequeathed two blockbooks which he had purchased at sales in 1824 (BB-4) and 1829 (BB-1) to the Bodleian in 1834. Both of these volumes had been rebound in the 1820s for two different owners and are described here and below. BB-4, a Biblia Pauperum, has unusual evidence of its early use and came to the Bodleian in a gold-tooled binding made for Sir Mark Masterman Sykes before 1823 with his monogrammed armorial centrepiece (Fig. 63).

The blockbook leaves of this copy seem to have been used for display and adhesive remains to the versos and holes to the corners show that they were once adhered to a support and fixed with copper alloy nails
Fig. 62. Venice, 1470 [J-290], evidence of washing and bleaching by Walther.
Fig. 63. Biblia Pauperum, c. 1465–70 [BB-4], spine and left board of binding.
or tacks. The double leaves have no sewing holes to their inner margin and though there is evidence of offset from parchment strips, it is not possible to state conclusively whether it was previously bound. For the Sykes binding each double leaf (now folded) was tipped to a paper guard, these guards were then folded to provide a spine fold for binding (Fig. 64). The completed text-block was ploughed and the edges were gilded. It was bound in blue-black straight-grained tanned morocco with a restrained gold-tooled border and armorial centrepiece.

The Bod-inc. catalogue has identified 74 separate incunabula editions, now in 41 bound volumes, that had belonged to Sykes. These volumes are in a range of bindings, many bound before Sykes’s ownership and with a number bound after. Of those bound for Sykes a range of different bookbinders were used binding in a range of styles, and only one other volume now at the Bodleian, Bod-inc. F-077, is clearly by the same binder. Although F-077 does not have his centrepiece and the tooling to the outer faces of the boards is different, the endleaves, marbled paper and decorative roll used on the turn-ins are the same. Both volumes were provided with six full blank-leaves of good quality paper before and after their text-blocks, and neither of the text-blocks was washed or heavily pressed. Although both text-blocks were ploughed and had their edges gilded, one leaf of F-077 preserves its deckle edge at the tail edge, demonstrating that only a minimal amount was removed (Fig. 65). Although these two volumes were bound in the highest prevailing fashion, care seems to have been taken to preserve certain codicological features.

3) Bound for John Bellingham Inglis before 1826 [Bod-inc. BB-1]

BB-1, an Apocalypse, was once part of a sammelband but came to the Bodleian in a blind-tooled ‘spring-back’ binding made for John Bellingham Inglis before 1826 (Fig. 66). The pasted together double folded leaves were separated for this binding, and all but three of the spine folds, which have a very narrow inner margin, were repaired. Some leaves have additional paper repairs pre-dating this binding. The folded double leaves were sewn individually on three wide parchment tapes and the text-block was not trimmed for this binding. The untrimmed edge retains evidence of an early yellow edge-colouring and preserves its deckle edge in places. The volume is covered over a laminated-paper ‘spring-back’ hollow which allows for a very wide opening (Fig. 67). The volume is
Fig. 64. BB-4, detail of paper guards.

Fig. 65. Cologne, c. 1471 [F-077], detail of preserved deckle edge.
Fig. 66. Apocalypse, c. 1466–70 [BB-1], spine and left board of binding.
covered in brown tanned morocco and has archaistic blind-tooling giving the appearance of an early roll binding. The spine is tooled in black-letter type with the title.

The Bod-inc. catalogue identifies eleven incunabula that belonged to Inglis, of which five were bound by the same binder. One further incunable bound for Inglis by this binder has since been identified. These bindings all share the same archaising approach to tooling based on fifteenth-century bindings and have their titles tooled with black-letter type. Although their outward appearance appears to be similar to BB-1 there are major differences in the forwarding of the bindings. The six letterpress incunabula are all sewn on single recessed cord sewing-supports, as was more usual for printed books in the 1820s, and all have had their edges ploughed and gilded for these bindings. In addition, P-032, the most elaborate of these bindings, has a gauffered edge. A very different approach was taken with the blockbook and a method of binding was found which would allow the volume to open flat. This enables the woodcuts, with their narrow spine margins, to be clearly seen. It
appears that Inglis was keen to retain the three intact, though narrow, spine folds and his binder chose a binding method that would allow the leaves to open safely. Likewise, of all these incunabula only the blockbook edges were spared the binder’s plough and Inglis must have requested that they were not trimmed.

Table 3. Overview of treatment of codicological features. Items in bold are discussed in this paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leaves trimmed by binder</th>
<th>Spine-folds preserved by binder</th>
<th>Individual leaves mounted</th>
<th>Evidence of a previous sammel-bände</th>
<th>Unusual treatment by binder</th>
<th>Leaves separated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BB-1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-5*</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BB-8*</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These three case studies allow a slightly clearer view to emerge of the decisions that were taken in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when the repair and rebinding of these blockbooks was commissioned. An overview of the treatment of certain codicological features is given in Table 3, and it would seem that in each case extra care or an unusual approach was taken when an owner, or binder, was faced with this type of fifteenth-century book. These approaches aimed to preserve or highlight certain codicological features and the fact that the same approach was not taken in each case would seem to show that different codicological features, or differing ranges of these features, were valued by each of these owners. The only two unifying approaches, seen with all of these blockbooks, appear to have been the desire to present them
as individual volumes and to separate leaves which were once pasted together. Although it is easy to decry the wholesale repair and rebinding of blockbooks carried out in the past which has resulted in the destruction of their codicological structures, it would seem that early owners and binders were not necessarily unthinking when called upon to undertake this work.

Notes

5. Palmer, Nigel F., ‘Blockbooks, Woodcut and Metalcut Single Sheets, binding descriptions by Andrew Honey’, in Alan Coates, Kristian Jensen, Cristina Dondi, Bettina Wagner and Helen Dixon, A catalogue of books printed in the fifteenth century now in the Bodleian Library (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–50. Throughout this paper Bodleian incunabula are referred by their catalogue reference, i.e. Bod-inc. BB-1. Images of these volumes and their catalogue entries can be found at: www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/csb/blockbooks.html (last accessed 6th March 2009).
7. (fragment mounted by Georg Franz Burkhard Kloss before 1835)
9. Remains of two earlier sets of manuscript numbering survive.
13. The dangers and unsuccessful results of chemical treatments was realised by the early nineteenth century when the following comment was included in an
auction catalogue description for an incunable, ‘in spite of the unsuccessful attempts at getting out the writing in the margins, it is yet a very desirable volume’. A catalogue of rare and valuable duplicates from the library if the Rt. Hon. Earl Spencer, K. G., (London: Evans, 2 March, 1821), Lot 56.

14. Florus, Lucius Annaeus, Lucii anae flori epitoma idest abbreviatio de cursu ac statu romanorum, Cologne: A. ther Hoernen, c. 1471. Another blockbook owned by Sykes and now in Cambridge may also have been bound by the same binder (Cambridge UL, Inc. 2(1)). I have not seen the Cambridge volume.

15. Palmer, 2005, 11. Inglis’s 1826 sale (Catalogue of a singularly curious and valuable selection from the library of a gentleman including three extraordinary specimens of Block Printing … which will be sold by auction by Mr. Sotheby, (London: Sotheby, 9 June 1826)) contained three blockbooks BB-1 (lot 1664), another blockbook from this sammelband (lot 1663) which has an identical binding (Washington LC, Rosenwald Collection Incun. X. B 562) and a third blockbook (lot 1665) which is now at the New York Public Library (Blockbücher, 1991, 383). I have not seen the NYPL volume.

16. The Inglis sale catalogue describes all three blockbooks as having their leaves ‘not pasted together as they generally are.’ (Inglis, 1826, 106)

