



Surveying embroidered bookbindings

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Learning experiences at West Dean, Tate, CGLAS and TNA



Details of some of the embroidered and textile bindings from the Bodleian Library's early printed books collection (Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford).

A STITCH IN TIME

Assistant book conservator Alice Evans and textile conservation intern Katica Laza on an interdisciplinary study day at the Bodleian Libraries

TEXTILES IN LIBRARIES

Since the autumn of 2021, the Conservation and Collection Care team at the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, has been working on an exciting project to explore the many places textiles appear across our library and archive collections. The scope of the *Textiles in Libraries* project has been wide, from embroidered bindings and end bands, to banners, tapestries and t-shirts.

As a team of book, paper, and preventive conservators, we come across textiles in our work every day, and thanks to a

One of the bindings from the early printed books collection examined as part of the survey: Seventeenth century English embroidered binding, decorated with 'petit-point' flat tapestry stitch in coloured silk and silver gilt threads on a canvas background and long green silk fore-edge ties. (C.P. 1630 e.3, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)



Bodleian Libraries,
University of Oxford

very generous donation we have been able to embark on this project and focus on developing the knowledge of our team in this area. This has allowed us to get to know our collections much better, and given us many opportunities to share these objects beyond our team and connect with conservators, students, and academics from across many disciplines.

EMBROIDERED BINDINGS AT THE BODLEIAN

It is impossible to say how many textile bindings there are in the Bodleian's collections, as many textile elements such as velvet, book cloth or silk ties are not listed in the catalogue descriptions for these objects. However, the embroidered bindings in our early printed books are some of the most well-catalogued types of textiles appearing in our collections and have been of much interest to readers and researchers for many years.

In 1971, a small Bodleian Picture Book publication shared thirty black and white images of a selection of the most treasured textile and embroidered bindings in this part of the collection. The publication included an introduction by Giles Barber (librarian and book historian) who had undertaken work at that time to produce a list of textile and embroidered bindings in the collections, but sadly the incredible colours and scale of these bindings - some tiny pocket sized volumes and some huge and grand - could not be fully realised. So the demand to see these objects in real life remains high, to fully appreciate their intricate design and tactile materiality, and they continue to be frequently requested for study and display in our reading rooms and exhibition spaces.

Research interest in the collection varies from looking at them from a craft and design perspective to an interest in their context and what the use of textiles could tell us about their history. Often an elaborately embroidered cover indicates that the binding had a wealthy or important owner, as such fine craftsmanship would not have been cheap to produce. Other more simple designs can suggest a more personal domestic activity or act of religious devotion, as seen with pocket Bibles.

Over the past year our Rare Books colleagues have been able to add even more textile and embroidered bindings to Barber's original list. There are now two hundred and twenty-eight textile bindings listed in the collection, of which at least sixty-seven are embroidered, while others are beaded or covered with woven textiles. This figure does not of course take into account the textiles present in our archives, early and rare manuscript collection, or Oriental collections, and the continual acquisition of books and

objects with textile elements means the exploration and study of textiles across the Bodleian's collections will certainly carry on being an area of much interest to our team.

REVISITING THE 1989 SURVEY

At the start of the Textiles in Libraries project, the Bodleian conservation team looked at the historic records of the department to see if any work had been done specifically on textiles in the collections. We discovered a survey carried out in 1989 by textile conservation students studying at the Textile Conservation Centre, which at the time was at Hampton Court Palace. The students looked at nine bindings from the collection and produced a condition survey of them, which included object descriptions and treatment proposals. We realised what a fascinating resource this was, capturing not only the condition of our bindings at that time but also the teaching and contemporary trends in the field of textile conservation.

We were keen to take a look at the bindings again, thirty years on, and got in touch with the tutors at the current MPhil Textile Conservation programme, now at the University of Glasgow, to see if a collaborative study day looking at these bindings with current students might be possible. We saw the opportunity to share our knowledge of bindings and their context in a university research library with the students, who may not have come across textiles in this format before. It was also a chance for our team to continue to develop our textile knowledge and learn a bit more about what the current approach to any practical textile conservation treatment might be.

ROAD TRIP FROM GLASGOW TO OXFORD

The Glasgow course has a deep focus on textile objects and during the second year students gain a basic understanding about how to handle other materials that are often associated with textiles, such as metals, gelatines, waxes, glass beads, and wood. However, the treatment or analysis of books through a textile conservation lens is rarely discussed, unless it is to do with textile pieces mounted in books, such as samples in dye manuals.

So everyone agreed the proposed study day at the Bodleian was a great addition to the course and in April this year seven students travelled to Oxford to visit the library and re-survey the nine bindings selected for the original survey. The visit provided an excellent opportunity for the students to see textiles functioning in a very different way and to learn more about the construction and conservation of these complex mixed-media objects from both the Bodleian's book conservation team and Sue Stanton ACR, textile conservator at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, who also joined the group for the day.

CARRYING OUT THE 2022 SURVEY

The aim of the day was to resurvey the bindings and compare the findings with the original survey, so the group began by visually assessing and discussing the variety of embroidered

and textile bindings, before writing binding descriptions and suggestions for treatment options.

The selected bindings ranged from velvet-covered manuscripts decorated with cord, to printed books with covers intricately embroidered in metal and silk threads, to those still with their long and very fragile fore-edge tie attached. The group was struck by the minute scale and detailed craftsmanship in the decoration of many of the bindings. Not only did the techniques used on each binding vary greatly but so did their condition. Some of the bindings were in good condition, suggesting they were appreciated as a decorative object rather than being heavily used for their texts. By contrast, others exhibited loss of fabric along the spine, splits in the covering textile along the joints, and damage to fore-edge ties, if they were still present! The fragile condition of these bindings greatly limited the amount they could be

Another of the surveyed bindings: C17th English binding, covered in cream silk with applied decorative motifs worked in polychrome glass beads threaded with silk thread. (Broxb. 42.8, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)



Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford



Students from the University of Glasgow examining the bindings with Sue Stanton ACR, textile conservator at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

safely handled and also meant that access to the text block inside was restricted. During the assessment of each binding it was particularly fascinating for the students to see how the use and handling by the reader was directly visible from the damage on them, particularly in areas of high stress and movement such as the joints and fore-edges of the boards.

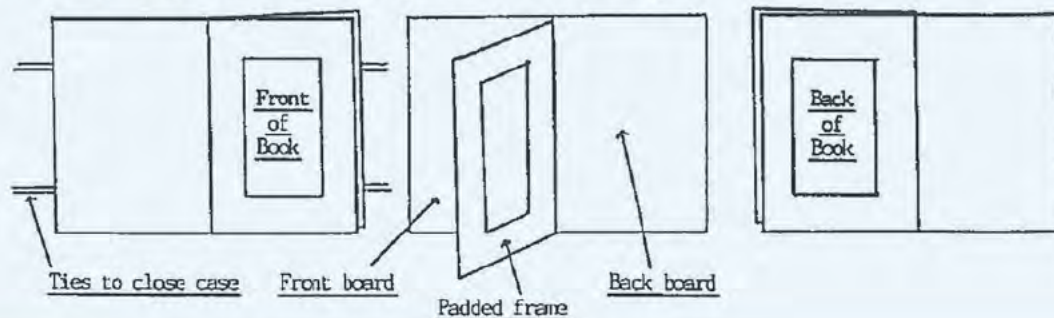
Whilst examining the books the Glasgow students were asked to compare their observations and assessments to those made in the original 1989 survey. What struck the group most about the earlier survey was the highly interventive treatments recommended for bindings that were in relatively stable condition. The earlier suggestions ranged from designing protective cases to reduce direct handling, to covering books in protective netting, through to completely removing and wet or solvent cleaning the covering textiles on the bindings. This last, and very interventive treatment option, was quite popular in the original survey, and the

Glasgow students noted that this could be due to a contemporary case study article written by Mary Lampart in 1987, which described a similar treatment and could have influenced the students' thought processes at the time.

It was particularly useful for the students to be able to undertake the survey with the help of the Bodleian team, so as to be guided in specific book terminology and to gain a better understanding of the approach of book conservators when considering such complex objects. The students were used to working with objects destined for display or storage in museums; but here, by contrast, despite the books being notable for their design importance, it was emphasised that they must be considered as working objects when held in a library collection. Accessibility to the text block is essential for their study. So the treatment recommendations the students had to propose felt even more challenging, as they would need to both support and protect the textile covers while also providing safe access to the text block.

Diagram of proposed mounting system for Broxb. 85.13 from the 1989 survey

The proposed method of storage involves use of a sandwich of three separately padded and fabric covered acid-free boards. The middle board would be as thick as the book. It would be cut to form a frame, slightly larger than the book itself. By opening from different sides, both faces of the cover could then be examined, without handling the book. The object could also be removed by lifting the frame, so avoiding any abrasion of the edges.



Diagrams detailing damage:



Fig 1. Left board



Fig 2. Spine

Key

-  Missing ties
-  Damaged Corners
-  Abrasion of pile
-  Split in fabric
-  Missing fabric

Diagram of damage on binding from 2022 survey (*University of Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Broxb. 85.13*)

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The study day was valuable in giving the students a better understanding of the difficulties conservators face every day when dealing with complex and fragile mixed-media objects. The experience of working in a multi-disciplinary team to look collaboratively at objects greatly complemented their studies thus far, and showed how effective it can be to bring together a mixed team of experts to give multiple perspectives on a project.

Having the opportunity to discuss these mixed-media objects in a group also emphasised the lack of current published research and case studies in the area of conservation of textile bindings. From discovering the intriguing influence of Lampart's 1987 article on the earlier survey, it was noted by the group that there has been relatively little written in this area since - something that the recent interest in this area of interdisciplinary conservation work will hopefully change.

Overall, the study day was a rewarding and engaging learning experience for all involved. The Glasgow students were able to practise their observation skills and widen their knowledge of textile-related objects, while the Bodleian team were able to enhance their understanding of these complex objects in the library's collection.

Revisiting the 1989 survey and looking at the same objects emphasised the continuity of care for these objects in the

Bodleian's collection, and created a link back to past students on the textile conservation programme allowing the current University of Glasgow students to engage with, and continue, the legacy of the course in its various iterations.

With thanks to Nicole Gilroy ACR, Joanne Hackett ACR, Sue Stanton ACR, Sarah Wheale, Jo Maddocks and the MPhil Textile Conservation student group.

About the authors

Alice Evans is an assistant book conservator at the Bodleian Libraries, where she works on the practical treatment and preservation of objects from across the collections. Over the past year, she has been leading the Bodleian's *Textiles in Libraries* project looking at textiles found in library collections in both expected and unexpected places.

Katica Laza is a former textile conservation student at the University of Glasgow and was one of the study day group of students. She is currently undertaking a one year internship at the Bodleian Libraries as a T.A. Barron intern. She also runs the social media for Icon's Emerging Professional Network.

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- 'Textile and Embroidered Bindings', Bodleian Picture Books (Oxford, 1971)
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