Bodleian Library, MS. Don. e. 250.
The Binding

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This article presents the binding description for a manuscript acquired in 2016 by the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The manuscript has a late fifteenth-century binding sewn with a chainstitch structure and the article compares it to previously published examples, and describes the range of materials and techniques used by its binder.

Der Beitrag stellt den Koperteinband einer Handschrift vor, die 2016 von der Bodleian Library, Oxford, erworben. Die Kettenstichtechnik des Einbands wird mit weiteren Koperteinbänden verglichen, und die von dem Buchbinder verwendeten Materialien und angewandten Techniken werden detailliert beschrieben.

Keywords: Bodleian Library; bookbinding; Kopert; Limp binding; Chainstitch; Recycled manuscript waste.

The binding of the newly acquired manuscript is a remarkable survival, a limp binding sewn with a chainstitch structure in wonderful condition (fig. 1). Although it is now worn and the cover has a certain amount of handling grime and it has lost some leaves, it is a visually appealing binding, perfect for the hand or pocket. It belongs to a family of limp bindings without tooled decoration that have previously been little examined but which are particularly relevant to Nigel F. Palmer's interests. He has studied the evidence for limp longstitch bindings as a structure used for blockbooks in the late fifteenth century, with evidence for this partly gained from the study of paired sewing stations.[1] Limp chainstitch bindings are a related structure, now rare but offering other distinctive sewing station patterns that may help to identify further examples from evidence within the spine-folds of surviving manuscripts now in post-medieval bindings.

[1] Nigel F. Palmer, 'Blockbooks, woodcut and metalcut single sheets', in *A Catalogue of Books Printed in the Fifteenth Century now in the Bodleian Library*, ed. by Alan Coates et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 1–50, expanded in Andrew Honey, '"The Binding was the ancient legitimate one" — looking for early binding evidence in blockbooks', *Bibliothek und Wissenschaft* 46 (2013), pp. 81–110.

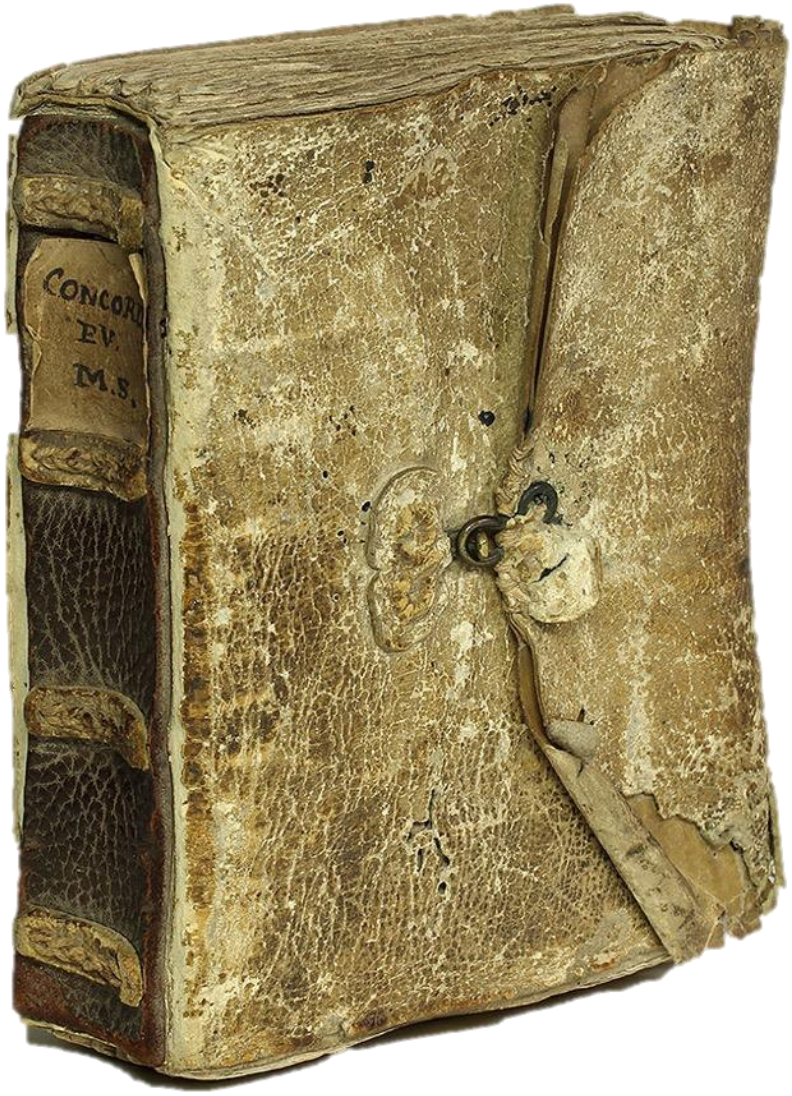

Figure 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Don. e. 250, the binding.

Recent interest in these bindings dates from 1975 when Petersen published a photograph of three limp chainstitch bindings from the Herzog August Bibliothek at Wolfenbüttel, where they are described as 'Kopert mit Rückenverstärkung'.[2] In 1978 Clarkson published a photograph of 11 further examples from the Abbey of St. Peter, Salzburg, noting that 'the gatherings are sewn to semi-flexible or inflexible spine materials'.[3] By 1999 Szirmai was able to review the published information on about 140 bindings which have primary sewing through rigid spine plates dating from 1375–c.1500, mainly from German speaking areas, with only 40% of these having a chainstitch sewing structure.[4] Since then Ottermann has

[2] Dag-Ernst Petersen, Mittelalterliche Bucheinbände der Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel (Wolfenbüttel: HAB, 1975), pp. 66–76.

[3] Christopher Clarkson, 'The conservation of early books in codex form: a personal approach: part I', *The Paper Conservator* 3 (1978), p. 38 and fig. 5a.

[4] John A. Szirmai, *The Archaeology of medieval bookbinding* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 297–304.

described 20 bindings with a 'Kettenstich' structure in her study of the 35 'Koperte' now in the Stadtbibliothek, Mainz, and illustrated 10 examples.[5] Finally, Scholla has expanded our knowledge of limp bindings with her doctoral thesis in which a corpus of 89 limp bindings dating from the eighth to fourteenth century are described, with 38 of these from Germany or Alsace.[6]

MS. Don. e. 250 fits the general trends found within these published works on chainstitch bindings but has some features that have not been reported before. Szirmai has noted that these bindings are 'nearly exclusively on literary manuscripts on paper' and fall into three distinct groups by height 150, 210 or 300 mm; MS. Don. e. 250 with a page size of approximately 150 x 112 mm falls into the smallest group.[7] However, the tawed cover is more unusual, as he notes that the 'covering is largely coarse parchment […]; limp leather coverings […] are exceptional'.[8] MS. Don. e. 250 is fastened with a loop-and-hook clasp bent from copper-alloy wire, which appears to be original to the binding, but neither Scholla or Szirmai have reported this type of fastening on other limp chainstitch bindings. The use of two layers of pierced sewing supports on the spine in contrasting colours and materials is also previously unreported.[9] Scholla noted that limp binding structures have previously been 'said to be the work of non-professionals' though her research suggested that they were 'made by professional craftsmen', and that 'more provisional forms of binding occur' from the thirteenth century onwards.[10] The binding of MS. Don. e. 250 is not a provisional one, and the range and careful choice of the eleven materials (including five types of recycled waste) used by the binder, point to the work of a skilled craftsman. Although the structure might appear to be simple, great care has been taken in the choice of materials appropriate to their function and in its execution. Scholla deduced that limp bindings were 'meant for the everyday use of a single person', and the binding of MS. Don. e. 250 indicates that it was indeed intended from its conception for the private use of a professed monk in the Strasbourg charterhouse.[11]

Technical description of the binding

For the following description the binding is described, where possible, in the order in which the original binder bound it. The bookbinding terminology used follows The *Language of Bindings Thesaurus*, a thesaurus of bookbinding terms for book structures published online by Ligatus, a research centre of the University of the Arts London.[12]

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[5] Annelen Ottermann, 'Wege zu Koperten — eine Orientierung am Beispiel der Stadtbibliothek Mainz', *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* 76 (2001), pp. 348–64.

[6] Agnes Scholla, *Libri sine asseribus. Zur Einbandtechnik, Form und Inhalt mitteleuropäischer Koperte des 8. bis 14. Jahrhunderts* (PhD Dissertation, Leiden University, 2002); summarised in English in Agnes Scholla, 'Early western limp bindings, report on a study', *Care and conservation of manuscripts* 7 (2003), pp. 132–58

[7] Szirmai, The Archaeology of medieval bookbinding, p. 299.

[8] Szirmai, The Archaeology of medieval bookbinding, p. 299.

[9] For single-layer tanned-leather pierced sewing supports of the Scholla 'bar' type see Scholla, 'Early western limp bindings', plate XXV.

[10] Scholla, 'Early western limp bindings', p. 150.

[11] Nigel F. Palmer, email 1 April 2017.

[12] http://www.ligatus.org.uk/lob/, last accessed 25 March 2017. The following terms, defined by the LoB thesaurus, have been used in this description: text-hook endleaf, continuous sewing guard, limp cover, full-

Late fifteen-century limp chainstitch *Sammelhandschrift* binding containing four manuscript texts on paper (Hermann A-D). 150 x 140 x 47 mm.

Quire tackets: There are remains of two thread quire tackets at the centre of the first quire of the second text (quire 4, fols. 40/41, Hermann text B).[13] These tackets were looped from single stations near the head and tail edge of the spine fold over the edge, and have been trimmed with this binding (fig. 2).

Figure 2: Remains of a thread quire tacket at the tail edge, in the centre of quire 4 (Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Don. e. 250, fols. 40v–41r)

Endleaves: Separate paper endleaves (fol. i & 160) were added to the 14 quires of text leaves before the manuscript was sewn. They are single leaf text-hook endleaves, i.e. a leaf that is folded with a stub around the adjacent outer quires (quires 1 and 14), with the stub conjoint with fol. i between fols. 10 and 11, and the conjoint stub of fol. 160 between the unfoliated torn stubs after fols. 147 and 148. Two paper stocks of the same size and format as the text-leaves (chancery octavo), were used for the endleaves. Fol. i has part of a bull's head watermark, and fol. 160 part of an anchor watermark; they are both different paper stocks to the four used for the text-leaves. Fol. 160 is probably recycled waste from an earlier bound codex. The stub that is conjoint with fol. 160 has text on both sides, horizontal to the page and truncated by trimming, and there is a small rounded hole made by an insect in the centre of fol. 160 though there are no matching holes on fols. 159 or 161. It appears that this blank leaf was recycled from an earlier paper manuscript of a similar size.

Sewing guards: At the centre of each quire there is a loose inserted folded-parchment continuous sewing guard approximately 7 mm wide, held in place by the sewing and used to reinforce the spinefolds. The guards are recycled manuscript waste with text on both sides, probably the leaves from a codex. Quires 1–5 and 7–14 use waste with the text parallel to text of MS. Don. e. 250 and appear to be from a single source. The guard used for quire 7

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cover pierced sewing supports, pierced sewing supports, envelope flap, chainstitch, sewing station, change-over station, flush edge, right-to-left fastening.

[13] For quire tackets see Michael Gullick, 'From scribe to binder: Quire tackets in twelfth century European manuscripts', John L. Sharpe (ed.), *Roger Powel, The Complete Binder. Liber amicorum. Bibliologia* 14 (1996), pp.240–59 and J. P. Gumbert, 'The tacketed quire: An exercise in comparative codicology', *Scriptorium* 65:2 (2011), pp. 299-320.

(fols. 77v–78r) has text perpendicular to the text of MS. Don. e. 250 and is probably from a different source.

Limp cover and pierced sewing supports: The 14 quires are sewn through a limp cover and two layers of pierced sewing supports with a continuous thread. The cover is a laminate of tawed skin lined with recycled parchment manuscript waste (Hermann items 1, 2), and acts as a full-cover pierced sewing support.[14] The tawed skin is relatively thin for a covering leather (approximately 0.5 mm thick), is probably sheep skin and was used grain side out. The limp cover extends from the lower or right cover and folds across the fore-edge of the text-block reaching onto the upper or left cover to form an envelope or fore-edge flap. The edge of the fore-edge flap is straight cut (Scholla type A).[15] The tawed skin has been lined with two different pieces of parchment, the first lines the left cover, spine and right cover (fol. 161), and the second lines the fore-edge flap and originally extended 20 mm beneath fol. 161. The first piece was folded under at the tail edge approximately 30 mm, and the second at the leading edge of the fore-edge flap by 9 mm. Both of these folds were cut away when the cover was trimmed and the turn-ins are now separate pieces and have losses in places. Both lining pieces were pasted to the covering leather, though they have now largely lifted, and traces of paste containing bran can be seen on the inner face of the tawed skin. In addition to the two layers of limp cover there are two further thick layers of pierced support in contrasting colours. The entire spine of the bookblock from head to tail and side to side is covered in one piece with a continuous pierced sewing support of thick tanned calf skin of a rich brown colour (142 x 30 x 2 mm, Scholla type A, continuous back plate).[16] At each of the four sewing stations there are also additional single-station pierced sewing supports of thick tawed skin (8–9 x 30 x 2.8 mm, Scholla type D1, ‘bar’ as one-hole sewing stations).[17] These two layers with the cover are over 5 mm thick; they stiffen the back and prevent the manuscript becoming concave in use.[18]

Sewing: The 14 quires are sewn with a chainstitch structure at four sewing stations. The four stations are arranged so that there is an equal distance between the stations, ‘but a markedly smaller distance between the outermost sewing station and edges’ (Scholla, Type B).[19] The manuscript was sewn with a regular chainstitch pattern: quire 1 was sewn at all four stations, quire 2 at stations 1, 2 and 4, quire 3 at 1, 3 and 4, with this alternating pattern then continuing until quire 14 (fig. 3). This pattern of using the outer stations as the change-over stations and only one of the intermediate stations for an additional chainstitch in any quire is

[14] In this description, the term ‘tawed skin’ rather than leather is used to describe the covering material. Alum-tawing is a process by which animal skins are treated with a solution of alum and salt which results in a strong and flexible white material ideally suited to bookbinding. Leather properly defines an animal skin that has been treated with vegetable tannins to make it impervious to putrefaction by water, a property that is not required for bookbinding. The term ‘skin’ refers to one from a small or young animal (calf, sheep, or goat) as opposed to ‘hide’ from a larger animal (such as a cow, horse, or ox). For tawing see Ronald Reed, *Ancient Skins, Parchments and Leathers* (London and New York: Seminar Press, 1972), pp. 61–65.

[15] Scholla, ‘Early western limp bindings’, fig. 44, p. 145.

[16] Scholla, ‘Early western limp bindings’, fig. 43, p. 144.

[17] Scholla, ‘Early western limp bindings’, fig. 43, p. 144.

[18] Scholla, ‘Early western limp bindings’, p. 144.

[19] Scholla, ‘Early western limp bindings’, fig, 38, p. 136 and p.138.

explained by Szirmai. He studied the three Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel chainstitch bindings that had been illustrated by Petersen to confirm this sewing pattern, first described by Adam, noting that 'the equal number of chain links at each station could be obtained by alternately omitting linking at the intermediate stations'.[20] This alternating pattern has resulted in a chain of seven sewn links at each station across the spine.

Figure 3: The spine with chainstitch links and the centres of quires 1-3 showing the alternating sewing pattern (Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Don. e. 250, binding, fols. 5v–6r, 16v–17r, 28v–29r)

Edges: The head, tail and fore-edge of the text-block and cover were trimmed flush after the manuscript had been sewn, though due to the subsequent movement of individual quires it is not possible to state how the edges, or fore-edge flap were trimmed. The edges had a minimal trim and many deckle edges remain to the leaves, either entirely or in part throughout the text-block. The edge was not coloured or decorated.

Fastenings: The fore-edge flap is fastened to the upper or left cover with a copper-alloy loop-and-hook clasp. The fastening direction is right-to-left as is common with German bindings.

[20] Szirmai, *The Archaeology of medieval bookbinding*, p. 299 and fig. 10.13 at p.301. Petersen, *Mittelalterliche Bucheinbände der Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel*, pp. 66–76. Paul Adam, 'Die ältesten Heftweisen und ihr Einfluss auf die jetzt übliche Heftweise', *Archiv für Buchbinderei 10* (1910), pp. 73–76.

The hooked catchplate and loop clasp were both bent from copper-alloy wire, with the catchplate sewn to the left cover under a bi-lobed tawed patch. The loop was sewn at the leading edge of the fore-edge flap under a similarly shaped patch, though this is now damaged and partially loose (fig. 4). The catchplate patch was carefully sewn to the cover at its perimeter and centres of the two eyes, with the thread piercing both layers of the cover. The loop was similarly sewn to the fore-edge flap but appears to have been repaired at a later date with a blue thread, now only seen between the two layers of the flap. Both elements of the clasp are original and the tawed patches match the tawed cover. This type of bent wire fastener has not been reported on other bookbindings, but has been found as a dress fastener in late medieval and post-medieval archaeological contexts.[21] There is a later paper label to the second panel of the spine with 'CONCORD. | EV. | M.S.' written in brown ink.

Figure 4: The loop-and-hook clasp sewn to the cover under tawed patches.
(Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Don. e. 250, binding.)

Notes on Contributor

Andrew Honey is a Book Conservator at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. He worked at the National Museum of Wales, 1994–95; this was followed by a two-year internship in the conservation of rare books and manuscripts at West Dean College under

[21] Eike Barbara Dürrfeld, 'A tentative approach at reconstructing the chronology of different types of metal fastening mechanisms on German bindings of the late 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries', *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* 71 (1996), pp. 271-7, Sue Margeson, *Norwich Households: the medieval and post-medieval finds from Norwich survey excations 1971-1978*, (Norwich: Norwich Survey, 1993), p. 19 and fig. 10.90, and Anja Elser, 'Eisen- und Buntemetallfunde des ausgehenden Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit aus dem Mühlberg-Ensemble in Kempten (Allgäu) ', Rainer Atzbach and Ingolf Ericsson (eds.), *Die Ausgrabungen im Mühlberg-Ensemble, Kempten (Allgäu): Metall, Holz und Textil* (Bonn: Habelt, 2001) pp. 113-196 at p. 147 and Abb. 33 & Tafel 7:E1 and E22-3.

Chris Clarkson from 1995–1997. Following West Dean, he worked at Archbishop Marsh's Library, Dublin, for one year and has been employed since 1998 as a conservator at the Bodleian. He was a visiting research fellow at the Ligatus Research Unit, University of the Arts London from 2005–2010 and has recently researched the paper and bindings of Jane Austen's fiction manuscripts (www.janeausten.ac.uk).