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# The Bodleian Library: Chris Clarkson and the Making of a Conservation Department

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## ABSTRACT

Christopher Clarkson was appointed Conservation Officer at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford in 1979 just months after its Conservation section was created. He remained in this post for eight years, but his close relationship with the Bodleian was to continue throughout the rest of his life. It is impossible to overestimate Chris's impact on the present-day Conservation and Collection Care section (C&CC) at the Bodleian, nor his influence on its individual members. This paper gives a preliminary overview of the innovations and achievements from his work at the Bodleian and tries to convey their legacy in our conservation work today.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Christopher Clarkson wurde im Jahr 1979 zum Restaurierungsbeauftragten (Conservation Officer) an der Bodleian Library der Universität von Oxford ernannt; einige Monate vorher war die Restaurierungsabteilung (Conservation Section) dort ins Leben gerufen worden. Er blieb für acht Jahre in seinem Amt, seine enge Verbindung zur Bodleian sollte aber sein Leben lang dauern. Es ist so gut wie unmöglich, den Einfluss von Chris auf die heutige Restaurierungsabteilung (Conservation and Collection Care section) an der Bodleian wie auf seine einzelnen Mitarbeiter zu überschätzen. Dieser Artikel gibt einen vorläufigen Überblick über die Innovationen und erzielten Erfolge seiner Arbeit an der Bodleian und versucht, sein Erbe in unserer Restaurierungs- und Konservierungsarbeit von heute darzustellen.

## KEYWORDS

Christopher Clarkson;  
Bodleian Library; University  
of Oxford; History of  
conservation; Training;  
manuscript

## SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER:

Christopher Clarkson;  
Bodleian Library; Universität  
von Oxford;  
Restaurierungsgeschichte;  
Ausbildung; Manuskript

## Creating a conservation department

In 1978 the Bodleian Library established its first Conservation Section and invited Christopher Clarkson (1938–2017) to become its Conservation Officer. Chris's conservation expertise, developed during his work following the Florence Flood, and subsequently at the Library of Congress, Washington D.C., and Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, had been noticed. He would play a crucial role in assisting Michael Turner (1935–2017) – the new Head of Conservation and formerly Head of Special Collections in the department of Printed Books – to set up and expand the newly-formed section.

The Bodleian had been repairing its collections long before the creation of a conservation section. There had been a 'binding room' since 1864, though material was also sent out to local bookbinding firms, and a spacious bindery was provided when its new premises were opened in 1946, staffed with both bookbinders and book-sewers. By then there was a dedicated 'map-mounter' in the maps department, and 'repairers' attached to the Department of Western Manuscripts.

One such 'repairer' was Judy Segal (1932–1989) who began at the Bodleian in 1969, having trained in book-binding. By 1973 she had developed a conservation

workshop and had changed old fashioned repairs with overlapping layers of handmade paper to techniques she noted as having been developed in the Florence workshops following the flood; using de-acidification, sizing and Japanese tissue repairs (Vaisey, 1973). In 1974 she convened the first meeting of the interdisciplinary Oxford Conservators Group, which continues to thrive over forty years later. She pioneered research into enzyme treatment in order to remove the troublesome transparent paper historically used to repair the Bodleian's collections. This study was undertaken in collaboration with David Cooper, who was then assistant librarian at Corpus Christi College Oxford, and they published a joint paper on the subject in 1977 (Segal & Cooper, 1977). She also began research into the treatment of birch-bark manuscripts and carried out some experimental treatments (Tremain, 1989; Gilroy, 2008). By 1977 Judy had set the foundations for what was to come, and her personal correspondence with Chris while he was at the Walters Arts Gallery shows that she was very keen indeed for him to join the Library (Bodleian Library, [s.d.]: C&CC correspondence).

The Bodleian hosted the 1978 conference of the Society of Archivists and David Vaisey, then Keeper

of Western Manuscripts and a keen advocate of Conservation who was later to become Bodley's Librarian, gave three papers acknowledging the start of a new era of professionalism: 'The British Library and The Bodleian Library have, despite their age, only just begun to see that conservation – as opposed to what in previous generations was called binding and mending – must be a fundamental part of the administration of the organisation, and not just a kind of optional extra' (Vaisey, 1978).

Chris joined the Bodleian in 1979. He envisaged a much wider remit for the Conservation section, creating facilities for book conservation alongside the existing conservation workshop for the treatment of special collections; redeploying the Library's bindery staff to repair post-1840s material; introducing the fascicule system for rehousing loose papers; implementing a boxing programme with a variety of enclosures for differing collection needs; and becoming involved in all aspects of exhibition and display of collections. Chris's vision required the recruitment of conservators and the development of existing staff as well as the creation and design of new workshops. Chris designed specialist furniture for many conservation activities to be made by a local joinery firm to his exacting standards – the departmental archive contains exquisite drawings made for everything from a complex bench with cloth rollers and multiple drawers for box-making to laying presses and jigs for fascicule-making (Figure 1).

Chris placed great emphasis on creating a conservation culture throughout the library. He instigated regular meetings with librarians from each of the curatorial departments to discuss the needs of the collection, including treatments, preservation measures such as boxing and storage, and exhibition or display. These meetings were also his way of imparting conservation concepts and approaches through the management structure of the Library, with a view to fostering a shared conservation ethos.

### Innovations and achievements

The over flowing files of Chris's correspondence bear witness to his assiduous activity, planning and carrying out bench work as well as searching worldwide for suppliers and manufacturers of suitable materials and equipment. He ordered special makings of paper, bespoke runs of linen braid from Barbour-Campbell for which he needed to drum up support from numerous other libraries to meet the minimum order of thousands of metres, and sewing thread and cord which he bought at the minimum order of six kilos per size.

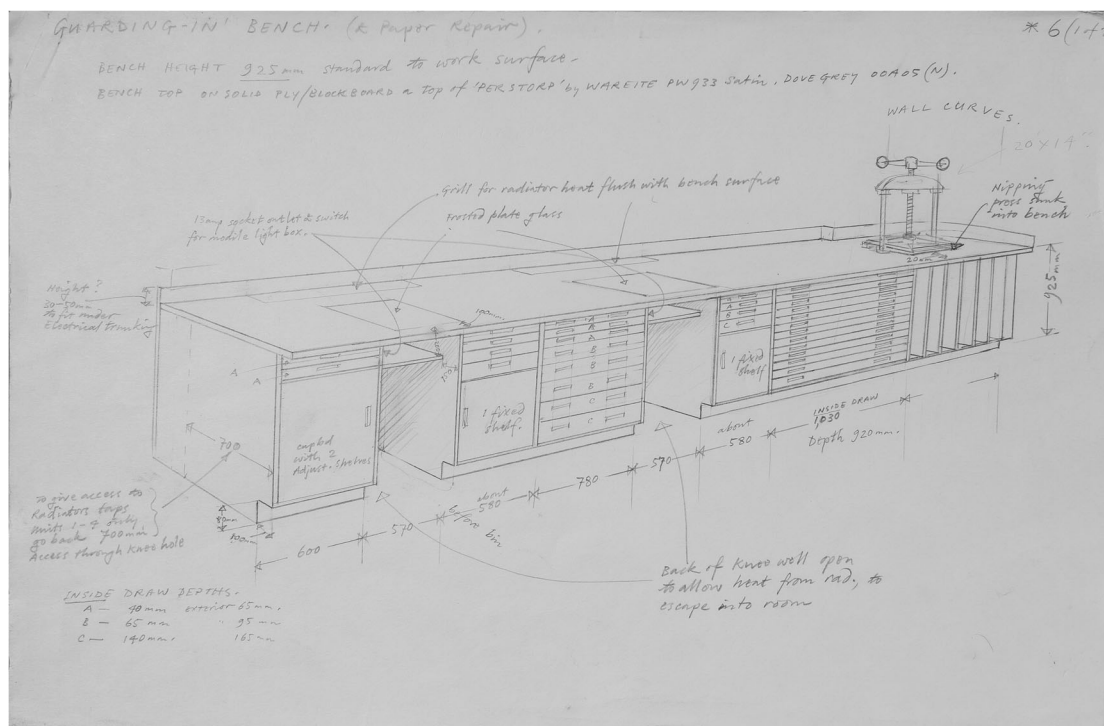
Chris researched and implemented environmental monitoring and lighting in the reading rooms and display areas. In his first few months he took hundreds of photographs throughout the library, highlighting

storage conditions, damaged items and collections. He took on the task of assessing the safety and conservation needs of the Library's portraits, wall paintings and non-book objects, particularly those which were on permanent display or which were frequently in demand for exhibition loans. He investigated methods of fumigation and freezing for insect infestation as well as searching for better stamping inks for ownership marking of the collections. He developed and implemented a system of boxing and foldering, ranging from the bespoke cloth covered box with pressure flap, through a tailored phase box, to the commercial folders he designed alongside Stuart Welch to suit the standard sizing system at the Library, and which are still sold today as 'Western manuscript' folders by Conservation by Design (Conservation by Design, 2020).

A year after Chris's arrival, he had convinced the Librarian to fund a box-making programme, primarily producing phase-boxes for vulnerable manuscripts and rare books. He worked with paper mills and suppliers to test and specify materials for his boxes – archival card, adhesives, rivets, buttons and thread (Bodleian Library, [s.d.]: C&CC correspondence and order records). Within the Library too, there was work to do; there was significant reluctance to hide historic bindings within boxes. Chris's solutions included the detailed labelling of phase boxes with descriptions of the contents and condition, and the use of the book-shoe, developed by Nicholas Pickwoad for inconspicuous support of books in National Trust libraries, and encouraged by Chris in a publication of the University Libraries in 1984 (Clarkson, 1984).

Two years into Chris's work at the Bodleian, Cambridge hosted the International Conference of Library and Archive Materials and the Graphic Arts, organised by the Society of Archivists and the Institute of Paper Conservation. This was attended not only by the Head of Conservation and David Vaisey, but also by Chris, Judy and two other conservators, affirming the significant achievements of the new section. David Vaisey spoke on training of conservators through the Society of Archivists whilst Chris delivered two papers '*Priorities in Book Conservation*' and '*Preservation and Display of Single Parchment Leaves and Fragments*' (Clarkson, 1980, 1987)—and David Cooper gave a paper on his collaborative work with Judy Segal on enzyme treatments.

Chris continued to publish throughout his time at the Bodleian. In the year he arrived, he published 'The conservation of early books in codex form: a personal approach' in *The Paper Conservator* (Clarkson, 1978) which set out his philosophy on book conservation as it grew from his Florence Flood experience and into a more holistic scholarship of books. The article reflects his thinking about training, which was to be at the forefront of his mind for the rest of his career: 'the training and advising of young people [is] a rather



**FIGURE 1.** Design by Chris Clarkson for a guarding-in (fasciculing) bench c.1981 (The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford).

treacherous business, but a vitally important one [...] It is the training of such people that concerns me now' (Clarkson, 1978: 46).

In 1982, with the help of Michel Gullick, Chris published in book form his study on limp vellum binding (Clarkson, 1982). This was a condensed account of a much larger study which formed part of a unique teaching resource comprising a number of models, materials, photographs and films, referred to collectively by Chris as 'The Limp Vellum Report'.<sup>1</sup> Many have examined with a mixture of admiration and trepidation the deceptive simplicity of these models which embody the depth of enquiry and understanding that Chris developed surrounding this binding concept.

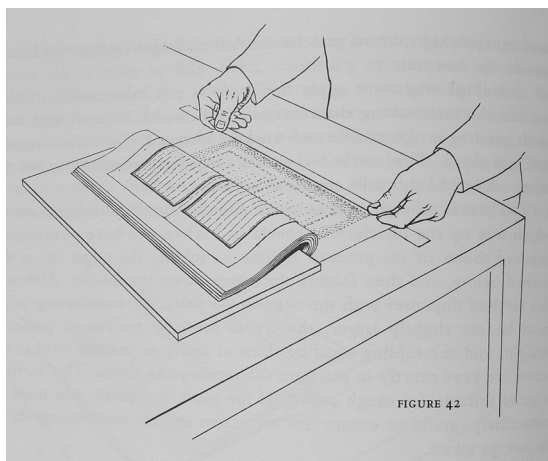


FIGURE 42

**FIGURE 2.** One of Chris Clarkson's illustrations for *The Repair and Binding of Old Chinese Books* (reproduced with permission from Princeton University and David Helliwell).

In 1983, Chris reviewed a publication on traditional Chinese bookbinding (Bodleian Library, [s.d.]: C&CC correspondence and order records).<sup>2</sup> Around this time, the Bodleian's Curator of Chinese Collections was also working on a translation of a Chinese text on the repair and binding of old Chinese books, and asked Chris to draw illustrations to accompany the book. Although the translation was not published until 1998, Chris' involvement became central to the work which goes beyond a simple translation and incorporates western approaches for the conservation of Chinese books. Chris's drawings perfectly captured the essence of the techniques shown (Helliwell & Clarkson, 1998) (Figure 2).

The 'fasciculing' system, developed by Chris as an alternative to the traditional guard book for rehousing loose papers, was inspired partly by the concept of the Chinese book with its soft-covered 'fascicles', protected by their separate wrap-around enclosures: in the 'fasciculing' system he devised, the soft-covered 'fascicule', protected by a separate box, were designed to conform to the library's standard system of shelf sizes. In 1983 the first 'fasciculer' was employed (Bodleian Library, 1983) and the technique was published after Chris had left the Library (Lindsay & Clarkson, 1994).

Chris was deeply concerned with the handling and display of books both in the Library and on loan to exhibitions at other institutions. When Chris arrived at the Library, many of the Library's treasures were on long term display with high light levels, little protection from environmental fluctuation, and *ad hoc* physical support.<sup>3</sup> He made recommendations for UV filtering and blinds on windows and curtains on display



cases. He instigated systematic and detailed condition reporting prior to exhibition loan and started to courier and install fragile items to loan venues himself. He worked with David Cooper on the design of a modular book support system made from expanded foam, a system which has been widely adopted and is now sold as the 'Clarkson Book Support System' (Conservation by Design, 2019; Conservation Resources, 2019). Chris worked on specifications for the in-house photography and microfilming studios and introduced checks and restrictions on external contactors who wanted to film or photograph the collections.

When it came to intervene with the integrity of early books Chris was deeply conservative, but with regard to technology and materials he was a true innovator and an early adopter. He gathered vast amounts of data in surveys and had plans for mechanising these records, creating a range of edge-notched documentation cards. Although his ambitious plan did not come to fruition, the thousands of documentation cards are still of immense value to the library, recording concisely both the treatment proposal and the actual repair done (Figure 3).

### Training book and paper conservators

Chris focused on developing conservation staff at all levels through education and training to widen their knowledge and practical skills. He gave lectures and practical training courses in colleges and conservation studios across the world on the sewing of books; exhibition and display; aspects of parchment, its handling, conservation and repair; in-situ repair techniques in book conservation; limp-vellum binding, and an introduction to medieval and Early Renaissance Bookbinding structures.

Chris regarded a deep understanding of the collections to be essential before attempting conservation treatment decisions. Chris used the Chinese collections as a training resource for junior technicians, to help develop an appreciation of techniques which respected the specific qualities and aesthetics of the book's structure and materials. He advocated a minimal intervention approach, retaining original materials and structures wherever possible. By use of in-situ repair techniques it was possible to retain the paper twist holding the text-block leaves together, the silk corner protectors at head and tail of the spine and the original covers, replacing the thread sewing only where absolutely necessary.

Later when referring to the importance of teaching he reiterated

Such a wonderful subject as Chinese traditional binding taught merely as if it were a different sewing style is not an education, it is not even training. A teacher must try and present the subject within its historic, cultural and book handling background. After all the

Chinese *Ce* (fascicle) grouped within its *Tao* along with the uncovered Ethiopic chain-stitch binding in its leather pouch are the two most successful preservation book structures (Bell & Clarkson, 2001).

In 1988, a report on the condition and care of collections in the libraries of Oxford University (University of Oxford, 1988: 28) was published, stating that the University as a whole needed a major conservation facility based on the one at the Bodleian as, the College Libraries had no central facility serving their own early and rare collections. Chris was becoming increasingly concerned about training of book conservators to serve the needs of the University and beyond and in 1989 he left the Bodleian to set up a training facility in the Conservation of Rare Books and Manuscripts at West Dean College.

### Conserving Bodleian treasures

Chris remained a consultant to the Bodleian Library and delivered a number of taught courses as well as regular advice and tuition to its staff. His influence remained extremely strong, to the extent that he was asked by the Library to undertake significant conservation treatments of three of its treasures: the Saint Margaret's Gospel Lectionary, the Kennicott Bible and the Gough Map of Great Britain. He carried out this work at the Library, often with the assistance of Bodleian conservators, further enriching their training and experience.

Saint Margaret's Gospel (MS. Lat. liturg. f. 5), is an eleventh century parchment lectionary which was in a seventeenth century binding. Chris's report summarizes his work on this manuscript from its initial study in 1982 to its conservation and rebinding in 1993. He leads the reader through various recommendations and possible compromises, including whether it is appropriate to incorporate the later boards in the new binding. The new binding in alum-tawed skin includes many of his recurring solutions for the problems encountered rebinding medieval manuscripts, from the adhesive free concertina guard of the quires to the parchment doublures.

The Kennicott Bible (MS. Kennicott 1), dated 1476, is a Hebrew manuscript with splendid illuminations and an original hispano-moresque box binding of very rare form. Chris's report compiled in the year 2000 provides details of its conservation, from the local consolidation of the illuminations to the in-situ repair of the binding structure. Chris's ingenuity was put to the test in re-attaching the unusual boards; the right board forms a rigid box around the text block, while the left board acts as a lid fitting between the walls of the box (Figure 4).

In 2006 he started the conservation treatment of the Gough Map of Great Britain (MS. Gough Gen. Top. 16), dated around 1400. This would be his last

The image displays a series of overlapping documentation cards. Each card contains a grid of fields for recording book information. Key fields include:

- SHELFMARK:** (e.g., MS. North adds. b.1, fol. 13-14; MS. Johnson c.12; MS. Lyell 72; MS. Lyell 8)
- DEPT:** (e.g., W.Mss., Pr.Bks., Or.Dept., Ind.Inst., R.H., R.S.L., L.L., Other)
- TITLE:** (e.g., Letter of the 5th Earl of Guilford; D.F. Foxon, Pope vs the early 18th book-trade (Lyell lectures, 1975); Processional, with plainchant music; Sermons collected by Gilbert Scot)
- AUTHOR:** (e.g., D.F. Foxon, Pope vs the early 18th book-trade (Lyell lectures, 1975); Sermons collected by Gilbert Scot)
- BINDING:** (e.g., Date/cent., No. of Pieces, Incomp., Donat., Sep. Parts, Collation Comments)
- FEATURES OF SPEC. IMPORTANCE:** (e.g., 27. Mould, 28. Insect, 29. Loose Frag, 30. Other)
- ACTION:** (e.g., 27. Mould, 28. Insect, 29. Loose Frag, 30. Other)
- PROCESSING:** (e.g., Gen. of Decay, P.Co, Con, Box, Conserva)
- REPAIR:** (e.g., 34. Bk. Box, 35. Ph. Box, 36. Tao, 37. Gd. Bk., 38. Other)
- QUESTED BY:** (e.g., B.C. Barker-Benfield)
- DATE:** (e.g., 1826, 1975, 19th cent., 13th cent., 25/4/82)

**FIGURE 3.** Edge-notched documentation cards, part of a four-card system designed by Chis Clarkson to be mechanically searchable (The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford).

work on the Bodleian Library's collections. His initial condition report in his typically blunt fashion and relishing a good story states: 'It was at a conference in Chicago in 1977, before I took up my post as technical officer for Conservation at the Bodleian Library, that a map curator told me in lurid detail of the Gough Map's dreadful condition and location, hanging as it then did on the walls of the maps reading room [...] It took Michael Turner and me at least two years before we obtained permission to remove the map from the reading room wall and store it in

the book stack. The map's condition is such that the need for a detailed physical archive of past treatments, housing and exhibiting adventures is required' (Clarkson, [s.d.]). His recognition that the conservation of an item has to be informed by research into its context and institutional history is one of the many legacies he left to the Bodleian conservators. Again Chris put his innovative skills to work, designing a sealed frame with a sophisticated mounting system maintaining the map under a uniform and light tension (Clarkson & Stiglitz, 2009).



**FIGURE 4.** Chris Clarkson and Robert Minte in 1999 reattaching the box binding of MS. Kennicott 1 (The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, MS. Kennicott 1, conservation report).

## Conclusions: Chris's legacy

In 1988, a year after Chris had moved to West Dean, Michael Turner acknowledged the central role Chris had played in the development of the Conservation section at the Bodleian in a talk at Rare Book School, now at the University of Virginia (Turner, 1988). He noted that in a climate of continued financial cuts Chris's advocacy was instrumental in securing funds for the section. Most of the conservators working in Conservation & Collection Care at the Bodleian today studied with him either formally at college or while working at the Library, and many of his techniques and systems continue. His arrival at the Library as a leading figure at such a pivotal moment in the

development of the profession enabled him to be a catalyst for great change. His legacy endures and the department builds on this, continuing to grow and respond to new challenges.

## Notes

1. For the publication history of *Limp Vellum Binding* and the 'Limp Vellum Report' see Honey (2005a).
2. An unreferenced typescript book review by Chris Clarkson of Martinique (1983).
3. For a brief history of exhibitions at the Bodleian see Honey (2005b).

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## Authors

**Nicole Gilroy** is Head of Book Conservation at the Bodleian Libraries and an accredited member of ICON. After a first degree in Biology and English literature she gained her MA in Conservation from Camberwell College of Arts, London in 2000. She continued her training as a post-graduate intern at the Bodleian Libraries and subsequently as a book conservator there, taking leadership of the Book Conservation team when it was formed in 2011. Nicole has worked with the Ligatus team on surveys and conservation at St. Catherine's monastery, Mt. Sinai, and represents book conservation on the Sculpture and Furnishings Committee of the Church of England's Church Buildings Council.

**Marinita Stiglitz** graduated in Art History at the University of Rome La Sapienza and studied conservation at the European School for the Conservation of Library Materials in Spoleto, Italy, followed by further training in the United States where she specialised in works on paper and particularly on East Asian art on paper. She worked as a freelance conservator in Rome and in 2004 she joined the Conservation and Collection Care Department of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, UK, where she is currently Head of Paper Conservation.

**Robert Minte** is a senior conservator at the Bodleian Libraries specialising in the conservation of East Asian books and art on paper. He studied book and paper conservation under Chris Clarkson and Judy Segal, before completing an internship in advanced book conservation at West Dean College in 1989, and was Superintendent of the Conservation Bindery from 1992-2004. He studied Chinese bookbinding and scroll mounting in Hong Kong, worked at the Far Eastern Conservation Centre, Leiden in 1996, and studied Japanese scroll mounting and conservation at the Usami Shokakudo, Kyoto, Japan in 2001-2. As an accredited member of ICON, he became an assessor for the Professional Accreditation of Conservator-Restorers in 2003, and has lectured on conservation in the UK, Hong Kong, and with Chris Clarkson in Japan.

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