HISTORIC BOOKBINDINGS: KEY POINTS

Bookbindings, for those not familiar from experience with their look, feel and recognisable characteristics, may seem to present a bewildering variety of possibilities. Much of this book is dedicated to showing what bindings of different types and periods typically look like, to make their identification easier. Underlying the mapping of particular characteristics, there are some basic principles which are set out at several places throughout the text, and which it may be helpful to bring together. These are points which apply to all historic bindings, and which should be borne in mind when looking at them collectively or individually.

- Before the introduction of mechanisation to book production in the early nineteenth century, all bookbindings, however simple or elaborate, were individually hand-produced. All bindings of the handpress era are essentially unique objects.
- The concept of publisher, as we understand it today, is largely a nineteenth-century development; during the handpress period books were not bound up in a uniform style determined by the publisher, before being passed to retail outlets. If you locate twenty copies of the same sixteenth-, seventeenth- or eighteenth-century book, surviving in contemporary bindings, those bindings will almost certainly display considerable variety.
- Books were often not bound where they were printed, and the place of printing is not necessarily a guide to the place of binding. In England, continentally-printed books were commonly imported in sheets and bound where they were sold; collections formed in England before the nineteenth century will typically contain a higher proportion of English bindings than foreign ones.
- The date of printing is, likewise, no sure guide to the date of binding. Although many books received permanent bindings within a decade or so of printing, many did not; they may have passed through temporary bindings, or earlier permanent bindings, before being put into the binding they have today. Books have regularly been rebound, over the centuries, for various reasons. The dating of bindings should rely principally on their decorative, structural and material characteristics, aided by any other copy-specific evidence that is to hand.
- Spines and endleaves have more commonly been tampered with than other parts of bindings, for purposes of rebacking or other repair, labelling, decoration or strengthening. Many bindings survive today with their original covers and boards, but with spines and/or endleaves which have been altered at some point.
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- Binding work was carried out in many workshops across England, although London, Oxford and Cambridge were always major centres. Most workshops were capable of producing work of varying degrees of quality and elaborateness, to suit the wishes of different customers.

- At any point in time most workshops would be using decorative tools of very similar design, according to the fashion of the day, and laying them out in very similar patterns. With rare exceptions, neither binders nor customers sought the expression of individuality through distinctive graphic effects on their bindings (although bindings were sometimes personalised by adding names, initials or armorial tools).

- The fashion of the day was a thing which was continuously changing, following wider trends in design and ornament; many bindings made by different binders at the same time have a unanimity of design, in a way that bindings made fifty years apart do not.

- There is no simple dividing line, in terms of visual impact or quality, between a ‘trade binding’ (bound in advance of sale for a bookseller’s stock) and a ‘fine’ or ‘bespoke’ one (made to order for a particular customer). There was, rather, a continuous spectrum of quality from the simplest, cheapest and most temporary structure through to the most elaborate, expensive and well-produced one.

- With rare exceptions, binding designs are essentially abstract and the designs on the covers have no pictorial or representational relationship with the text of the book.
A fillet is a simple line, created using a wheel-shaped tool with a line engraved round the rim – fillets may be single, double, triple or higher multiples of lines.

A small tool suitable for decorating corners of frames, and elsewhere, based on some kind of stylised foliage design, is commonly called a fleuron.

The term ‘centrepiece’ is sometimes used to describe any focal ornament at the centres of the covers, whether created with a single tool or a collection of small ones; in this book, the term is only used to refer to single tools, usually purpose designed as centrepieces.

A roll is a wheel-shaped tool with a pattern engraved round the rim, which is run along the surface of a book cover to create a continuous line of ornament – they come in many sizes, from narrow ones with very simple patterns to broad ones with more elaborate designs.

The term ‘panel’ is sometimes used to refer to a rectangular area marked out with fillets or rolls; in this book, ‘panel’ is only used in connection with panel stamps (single large rectangular tools, see p.47), and a rectangular space marked out like this is called a frame.
Chapter I

THE MEANING AND INTERPRETATION OF BOOKBINDINGS

What does a bookbinding mean? Before the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when mechanisation and mass production of books began to bring major changes to all aspects of their creation, every bookbinding, whatever its degree or quality, was an individually handmade object and its making and purchase therefore involved a series of active choices. In those choices lie meanings which are part of the history of every book, and which are ours to interpret today.

Printed sheets, before becoming usable, have to be folded and cut, and turned into something book-shaped. Because they have a predetermined order which the user would wish to preserve, it is desirable to fix the sequence by sewing or gluing the folded sheets together. Depending on the size and thickness of the book, there is an element of choice here, as small books can be stitched or glued quickly and cheaply as an alternative to the creation of a ‘proper’ binding. The functionality of the resulting bookblock is then greatly enhanced by providing an outer cover, which offers an arena for various kinds of decoration. Here the layers of choice increase. The covers can be flimsy and temporary, a paper or a vellum wrapper, or something more permanent, typically leather over stiff boards. These covers could then be decorated in a variety of ways — for example, paper or vellum can be drawn or written on, leather can be tooled, cut or painted. The decoration may be essentially functional — most obviously, lettering showing the title of the book — or aesthetic, decoration for the sake of making the object more satisfying as an artefact. It may be simple, highly elaborate or anywhere in between.

Every book, at every stage in its binding history (and books may often have had several rebindings or repairs over time), passed through this sequence of choices, and the decisions that were made reflect something about the book, the binder and the owner. A binding’s quality may signify the regard in which the text is held, or the level of use it is expected to have, or it may say something about the owner’s taste and standing. The choices involve financial considerations as well as aesthetic ones but there is no automatic equation between the bindings on someone’s shelves and the depth of their pocket.

It is important to realise that the place of printing of an early book, certainly of any pre-1800 one, should not be taken as an indication of its place of binding. Books were distributed in sheets all over Europe and bound, generally, where they were sold. The English book trade, particularly down to the later seventeenth
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century, dealt extensively in books printed abroad. Most of these books were bound in England, as legislation passed in 1534 forbade the importation of bound books, a measure intended to protect the native trade. English libraries formed at any time before the nineteenth century (when the break-up of big continental libraries generated the beginning of a much greater flow of books of all periods across national boundaries) usually contain a high proportion of continentally-printed books in English bindings.

There is similarly no automatic equation between the imprint date and the date of the binding. Certainly, many books were bound within a few years of being printed, and have remained in those bindings for many centuries, but many others have had more complicated binding histories. Books were sometimes bound several decades later than their date of printing, after spending some time in temporary coverings, and they were often subject to re-binding as they passed down the generations, according to the wear and tear of use and the dictates of taste.

In order to decode the evidence offered by any particular binding, we need to be able to place it not only within place and time, but also within its contemporary framework. Whereabouts, within the production standards of its day, does it sit: at the simple end of the spectrum, at the luxury end, or somewhere in between? Is it coterminal with the date of printing, or later? If later, does that reflect a need for repair (because the book was heavily used), or a re-evaluation of the text? The great classics of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature, along with many other books which became collectable long after they were printed, are often found today in heavily gilt goatskin bindings put on in the nineteenth century, a reflection of the values of that period. Contemporary bindings for such works, when they survive, are usually much simpler. A theological text printed in the 1620s is far more likely to be found in an elaborate early-seventeenth-century binding than Shakespeare's first folio.

Trends in Bookbinding Interpretation

Trying to turn the spotlight on the wider meaning of bookbindings is not new and binding historians have been increasingly moving in this direction. This is very much the theme of Mirjam Foot's History of bookbinding as a mirror of society, the 1997 Panizzi lectures, whose text opens by quoting E. P. Goldschmidt's description of the history of bookbinding as 'a humble auxiliary discipline, rather childish to some, attractive to others, not entirely useless and undoubtedly innocuous.' Foot's message is a comforting reassurance that we no longer see things that way, and that bookbinding studies have moved on. However, a focus on the fine, the fancy and the attributable, and a concentration on the top end of the market, remain strong traditions as far as studies of binding decoration are concerned.

However humble and auxiliary binding history may be, it has generated a great deal of literature, and the standard international bibliography of the subject,
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down to 1985, lists over eight thousand books and articles. A sizeable majority of those concentrate on what are typically called fine bindings – bindings which have interest and appeal because they are obviously beautiful or luxury objects, created for connoisseurs or wealthy collectors, representing the top end of the binding market. Every generation has produced objects like this, although they represent only a tiny proportion of the total binding activity of their time. Bookbinding history began life in an art-historical mould, concerned with bindings as objects of beauty and taste, which naturally led to a focus on those which could be recognised and appreciated as individual works of art. Summarising bookbinding research during the second half of the twentieth century, Mirjam Foot has described the move away from the beauty and taste approach towards a more analytical attempt to identify tool groups, workshops and binders. 'It is not surprising', she wrote, 'that the study of decorative tools proved both the most attractive and the most fruitful way to further the subject.... Its attraction needs no explanation, for anyone with an eye for colour and form will be struck by the rich glowing colours of leather, the creamy smoothness of vellum at its best, the grandeur of velvet and the shimmering of silks and satin....'

Here we are still very much in the realm of fine bindings. This may be a fair description of the kinds of coverings found in the artificial gatherings of beautiful and interesting bindings which form the contents of exhibitions or special bookbinding collections, but anyone with any experience of the subject will know that this is not an accurate representation of a typical historic library. Such a library is likely to contain some bindings from the luxury end of the scale, but a great many more whose aesthetic qualities are less immediately ravishing, simply blind-tooled according to the standard patterns of their day. In fact it will probably contain a whole range of styles, of varying degrees of decorative elaboration, most of which are scarcely documented in a literature which remains dominated by the traditional perspective on those bindings which are worth studying. Howard Nixon's History of decorated bookbinding in England – whose title might suggest that the present book is unnecessary – is concerned almost exclusively with the top end of the market. The same point could be made about many of the standard reference works on binding which are in use today.

It is perhaps partly as a consequence of this trend that the study of bookbinding decoration has begun to be called into question. An increased professional and scholarly interest in the subject coming from conservators, rather than curators, has encouraged a shift in emphasis away from decoration and towards structure as the area on which to focus. While this has produced a welcome expansion of horizons and a growing quantity of valuable studies, it cannot be said that the structural approach has produced the kinds of insights which threaten to make the decorative approach obsolete. The outside of a book – the covering material and the way it is decorated – remains, for the great majority of people who encounter or work with early books, the first thing that they see and the main body of evidence available for understanding and interpreting the
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binding. Structural features which may only be apparent once a book is taken apart on the conservator's bench cannot, for most practical purposes, become mandatory prerequisites for binding elucidation. It may also be observed that detailed structural studies of bindings of similar date and provenance reveal a range of diversity in structural qualities, suggesting that such features may be no more reliable than decorative ones for the purposes of identifying binders and workshops.

We should not seek to move away from an interest in binding decoration, but rather to broaden our approach. We should not concentrate only on those decorated bindings which are striking, or have immediate visual appeal, and ignore the rest, but try to understand how those bindings fit into the overall spectrum of contemporary binding activity from which they came, while also increasing our knowledge of the rest of that spectrum. We should also perhaps become less concerned about attributions to particular binders or workshops. The motor for much binding research during recent decades has been the wish to identify tool groups and associate them with individual bookbinders, and Nixon and Foot's History is written very much as a succession of known binders. It is unquestionably useful to be able to date and localise bindings, based on their tools – knowing that the book you hold in your hand was bound in London or Cambridge somewhere around 1670 immediately tells you something about where and when it was likely to be read – but focusing too strongly on the binders, rather than the books, is likely to be a limiting approach for reasons which are explored further in the following section.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Some fundamental observations about the production of bookbindings underpin much of the content of this book, and apply throughout the handpress era. At any point in time during that period, there would be a multitude of binding workshops in operation in different towns and cities, each capable of producing work of varying degrees of quality (this being measured in terms of the materials used to make the bindings, and the amount of effort and craftsmanship put into their construction and decoration). The quality would be reflected in the price paid to the binder by the purchaser. We should not assume that the 'best' workshops in the capital produced only elaborate gold-tooled bindings, while provincial workshops turned out simpler work, as there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate otherwise. Fig. 1.1 shows two bindings made around the same time in the workshop of Samuel Mearne, long celebrated as the greatest name in English Restoration bookbinding; the one on the right is a highly decorated luxury object, while the one on the left is much simpler and also entirely in conformity with the design language of its day. Within the workshops, binders would be producing work forwarded and finished according to the conventions of the time. As far as the final appearance of the books was concerned, the patterns produced and the tools used to make them would conform very much to prevailing fashion; a
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Fig. 1.1: two bindings made in the London workshop of Samuel Mearne, c.1675: BL C.83.c.18, 1674, and 7.f.13, 1674

Fig. 1.2: three bindings made in three different workshops in Oxford, c.1545-55: St John's Coll., Oxford D.3-4, 1541; Magdalen Coll., Oxford H.10-11, 1545; Jesus Coll., Oxford Gall.B.3.17, 1498 (bound c.1545)
binder in a workshop in London would be using tools of very similar design, and laying them out in very similar ways, as a binder in any other workshop in London, Oxford or York. This is not to say that regional characteristics can never be detected, but they are more noticeable between countries than between places within countries; it is generally easier at a glance to tell a German binding from an English one than to tell a Wittenberg one from an Augsburg one, or a London one from an Oxford one.

The progression of binding fashions – like ornamental fashion more generally – can be crudely thought of as a wave-like process, rippling all across Europe, with ideas starting in one place and spreading outwards. The waves would take time to travel, and they would be caught in local pools in particular countries and places where individual twists on the basic ideas would develop, but there was generally an underlying unity at any one time. English decorative styles were particularly influenced by binding practices on the other side of the English Channel, in France and the Low Countries, but they in turn were often influenced by trends set further south. Arabesque centrepiece blocks, for example, started life as a design idea in the medieval Islamic world, and entered the European ornamental vocabulary via the Italian trading ports around the end of the fifteenth century. By the end of the sixteenth century, centrepieces were being used right across Europe, from Spain to Russia, taking in England and Denmark as well as Germany and Bohemia.

The process was a restless and ongoing one chronologically as well as geographically. Decorative fashions changed steadily and continuously, so that styles in vogue at one point in time were being supplanted by others twenty-five years later, looked decidedly old-fashioned after fifty years, and were positively anachronistic after seventy-five years. This principle applies to bindings at all points on the scale, from the simple to the elaborate, and it means that it is possible to map the changing styles with some precision; most bindings can be localised and approximately dated, on stylistic grounds alone, to within perhaps twenty years on either side.

Much of this book, and in particular chapters III and IV, is devoted to developing that map in more detail. Appendix II, on p.183/col.pls.11–16, comprises a series of illustrations of bindings from different English workshops, of varying degrees of decorative quality, at approximately fifty-year intervals. These bindings are in every case entirely typical of their time, and are representative of many thousands of bindings being turned out all across the country. Each time slice clearly demonstrates a scale of decorative sophistication, from the simple to the elaborate; it should also be clear that the ornamental vocabulary is consistent within each chronological snapshot. The tools used to create the middle of the road binding in 1575, or in 1675, are very similar in shape and form to those used to create the top of the range one from the same time period. Any one of these bindings belongs with the others alongside it, but would look out of place if switched into another time slice.

The immediate defining visual characteristic of all the bindings illustrated in
appendix II is a combination of tool designs and layouts which allows a trained
eye to recognise at once that they are all English bindings of a particular period,
but not necessarily of a particular binder. Despite the considerable effort that
bookbinding historians have put into isolating the groups of unique tools used
by individual binders, the proportion of workshops which can be thus identified
is very small when considered within the totality of English binding activity.
Workshop or binder identification will always depend on seeing an identical
match between a tool on a binding and a reproduction on a tool chart, rather
than on recognising a binder's particular style. Today, we are used to the idea that
a handmade object will incorporate the personal flair of the maker. Ever since
the revival of craft binding at the end of the nineteenth century, and the growth
of the designer bookbinder movement, binders have been producing work which
is often instantly recognisable, in the way that an art historian will recognise
Picasso or Hockney: the bindings of Sybil Pye (1897–1958), or Edgar Mansfield
(1907–96), or Ivor Robinson (b.1924), can usually be told at a glance. It is
a striking aspect of bookbinding of the handpress era, and one which distin-
guishes it from handmade binding today, that it was generally not part of the
culture to express individuality through the obvious medium of distinctive
graphic effects. It was neither practised by the binders, nor expected by the
customers. Fig. 7.2 shows three bindings made in Oxford between c.1545 and
1555; the tools used are different, they were made in different workshops for dif-
f erent customers, but the decorative scheme is identical.

The motor for ornamental change, and the reasons behind it, are easier to
observe than to explain but form part of the wider picture of design history.
Bookbindings, as decorated artefacts, are a small tributary to the broad river of
decorated objects of all kinds, and it is readily apparent that an urge to decorate
our surroundings and the things we create has been a feature of human activity
in all cultures and all periods. The ornamental grammar of bookbindings has
always belonged to, and been closely connected with, the wider design concepts
of the time, and the arabesque patterns found on sixteenth-century bindings, or the
classical motifs found on eighteenth-century ones, are clearly related to contem-
porary designs found in woodwork, metalwork, textiles, architecture and every
other kind of decorated object. That said, it is generally the case that binding tools
have their own distinctive twist on the design ideas of the day, so that a binding
tool can rarely be mistaken for one which might be used as a printer's ornament,
or match identically a pattern engraved on a piece of silver. When binding tools
do stray outside their normal sphere, they are usually recognisable as such. The
changing interpretations of particular common themes in binding tool design,
and their relationship to broader trends, is explored further in chapter V.

Trade versus fine

'Trade binding' and 'fine binding' are terms which are widely used, if vaguely
understood, in bookbinding literature. The Library of Congress Dictionary of

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descriptive terminology for Bookbinding and the conservation of books defines trade bindings as 'plain calf skin or sheepskin bindings issued by publishers in England from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. They are rarely lettered.\textsuperscript{6} This profoundly unsatisfactory piece of prose begs more questions than it answers - what exactly is meant by plain? what does the word 'publisher' mean in this context? what does lettering have to do with it? John Carter's description in his ABC for book collectors is a shade more analytical in approach in saying that 'books bound before sale by the retail or wholesale bookseller ... are conveniently called trade bindings'.\textsuperscript{7}

This is conceptually clearer and encapsulates a definition which many people would support, but it rests on the dubious assumption that the meaningful distinction to be made is that between bespoke and non-bespoke bindings. It springs from a traditional belief that most bindings made before 1800 or thereabouts were created according to the orders of individual customers, who bought their books in sheets at the retail outlet and specified the binding at that point. According to this model, only a small percentage of booksellers' stock was ready bound before purchase, and the bindings on such books would be of the simplest and plainest sort.

Early retail practice is not easy to reconstruct, but bibliographers have been increasingly questioning this view of things. Stuart Bennett's study of Trade bookbinding in the British Isles, 1660–1800 has finally brought together the detailed evidence that we need to lay this model to rest, and to demonstrate that in fact a significant proportion of books were normally stocked and sold ready bound.\textsuperscript{8} It is wrong to assume that these would carry only the bare minimum of decoration; booksellers certainly carried popular devotional bestsellers like bibles and prayer books ready bound in a range of styles, knowing that there would always be a steady sale, and this will have applied to other titles where trade could be anticipated. The early bookbinders' price-lists indicate a spread of titles in regular demand, likely to be stocked ready bound, with a range of binding options.\textsuperscript{9} It is equally erroneous to assume that bindings ordered by customers might be less plain, or automatically distinctive in any meaningful way, from those made in advance of sale.

Fig. 1.3 shows a book from the collection of Sir Thomas Knyvett (1539?–1618), whose personal library of a little over 1400 volumes survives today in Cambridge University Library.\textsuperscript{10} Many of his books look like this, typical early-seventeenth-century centrepiece bindings of middle of the road quality, or slightly better - compare it with the other centrepiece bindings of that time shown in figs. 3.35–40, and with the bindings in the second and third plates in Appendix II. A number of centrepiece tools recur frequently among Knyvett's books and it is clear that he was patronising a particular supply channel, but there is no sense that he wanted harmonious uniformity within his library as regards the tools used; if so, he could have insisted on the more regular use of a single tool. This particular example is one of a group of six books bought by him on 27 May 1609, three of which are bound using this centrepiece, while others have a different tool.\textsuperscript{11} What
Fig. 1.3: a binding made for Sir Thomas Knyvett, c.1610: Cambridge UL S.14.13, 1609
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was happening here? I believe that he visited his bookseller from time to time, chose a number of titles, and specified that they be bound to a certain quality (and price), without much interest in the detailed visual appearance of the end product. What he got was dictated by the fashion of the period, and the tools chosen by the binder from his repertoire, on the day the books happened to be bound. Does this make them off the peg bindings, or bespoke bindings? Trade bindings, or fine bindings? The questions are not really meaningful and betray an attempt to fit preconceived notions onto an historical reality which does not match. All historic bindings are potentially interesting, however fine (or not) they look.

OWNERS AND BINDINGS

How, then, did owners approach their bindings? What was it about bindings that mattered to them and interested them, and what did they regard as accidental details which they hardly noticed? What were the elements they wished to specify, when selecting a binding, and what did they take as it came? When is a binding merely a container for text, and when is it an object of taste and fashion? Were decorated bindings commissioned to give aesthetic pleasure, or primarily to reflect the owner’s status and material standing? There are, obviously, no one-line answers to these questions, but rather a whole matrix of historical realities which need to be teased out. A very simple mid-seventeenth-century leather binding with minimal decoration is hardly an object of taste according to the orthodox canon of bookbinding studies, but it does have a place in the history of binding fashion, in that it was a recognisable style which came and went and was in vogue for a discernible period of time. Someone buying a book in a binding a few steps up the scale from there made an active choice to pay for a more elaborately decorated object, but we should be wary of overestimating the degree of engagement they are likely to have had with the specification of design. To illustrate this point more clearly, consider the case of Samuel Pepys.

Pepys is well known as a collector with an active interest in bindings, and he is often cited as an example of the kind of owner who paid particular attention to the look of his books. His diary records not only how he would make a trip ‘to the booksellers and bought, for the love of the binding, three books’, but also how he purchased books and sometimes had them rebound to achieve a pleasing and harmonious total effect. In January 1665 he ‘did give thorough direction for the new binding of a great many of my old books, to make my whole study of the same binding’; the bill for this, ‘to make them suit with my study, cost me £3 but it will be very handsome’. Howard Nixon carried out a comprehensive analysis of Pepys’s bindings across his entire library, and produced a valuable and detailed account of the different styles found among his books during the forty years or so in which he was actively collecting. He noted a number of standard styles which appear, with some overlap, in chronological succession, and described how this progression applies not only to board design but also to such
details as spine and edge decoration. From this it has been inferred that ‘it is clear that Pepys himself specified the way the spines of his books were to be tooled’, and ‘it is likely that Pepys also specified the treatment of the edges. Roughly speaking, at the beginning of his collecting career he favoured red-sprinkled edges, during the middle period he preferred marbling, and towards the end of his life he reverted to sprinkling.’

This is only partially true, and potentially misleading. Pepys’s binding styles and edge decoration changed not because he was directing choice, but because the mainstream fashions changed. If we look at Pepys’s bindings in the wider context of contemporary English binding work, it becomes clear that his bindings are not in any way distinctive, but entirely typical of the bindings which were being turned out in countless workshops across the land. Edge marbling became particularly popular in the 1670s, and lasted for a decade or so before it fell out of vogue. This is a very noticeable characteristic of English binding of that period, and a trained eye will recognise it on a book and be able to predict with a fair degree of certainty that it was bound between 1670 and 1690. The decorative patterns on Pepys’s boards and spines likewise follow the flow of the broader current. A Pepys binding could be put alongside ones of comparable quality made for any number of English owners of the period, and be essentially indistinguishable. Pepys’s options were directed very much by the standard fare of the day, and his desire as a customer to influence the actual design choices seems to have been less than we might at first expect. By way of analogy, consider someone looking back, after several centuries, at the wardrobe of someone living in the late twentieth century. The historian might notice that in 1960 the trouser legs were straight, in 1970 they had flared-out bottoms, and in 1980 they were straight again. If he did not consider the wider fashion trends of the time, he might interpret this as a sign of active and particular interest in trouser design, but he would be wrong; the wearer was merely following the fashion of the day. It is arguably the case that someone who did not wear flared trousers in 1970 showed more interest in the shape of his trousers than someone who did.

Many writers on bookbinding history have lamented the lack of surviving documentation which might throw stronger light on the attitude of owners to binders and bindings. Despite the millions of bindings which were made, very few written instructions have been preserved to show what kinds of features were specified and what was regarded as important. There are, likewise, very few recorded observations of book owners, of the kind which might survive in diaries and letters, which comment on the decorative or artefactual qualities of books. The few examples we do have often suggest an emphasis on functional aspects like materials and sound construction, rather than looks; Sir Robert Cotton’s oft-quoted instructions, although they have an occasional mention of flowers of gold on the back, seem more concerned with the robustness of the finished products (e.g. ‘bind this book as strong as you can. Cut it smote. Beat it and press it well. And put a tard of parchment ... Sew it with twisted and waxed threde.’) When Sir Thomas Tresham, a donor of books to St John’s College,
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Oxford, at the end of the sixteenth century, was advising the College on bookbinding, he concentrated on features tending to 'the well preserving of them' and regarded decorative aspects like leather and edge colour only from the viewpoint of their usefulness in telling different books apart. The Derbyshire-based collector Sir William Boothby (1637–1707), who clearly took great interest in his private library ('my books are the great joy of my life') and who intended it to survive 'for posterity' displayed more obvious interest in looks; in one of his letters to a bookseller he referred to having 'sent you a booke of Cambridge binding for a patterne', while in another he expressed concern that 'the guilding is very apt to come off pray take care to mend this'. He too though seems equally often to have had sound functionality as his primary consideration: 'I have some thoughtes to have my bookes onely bound well, & plaine (because the guilding on backs in'rances the price)'.

This is not to doubt that owners – or at least some owners – did delight in their books as physical artefacts, and that for them the binding was an aesthetic object as well as a functional one; these observations are more to do with teasing out those things which genuinely interested them, as opposed to those which they accepted more or less without question. It is beyond the scope of this book to offer interpretative answers to these questions, which take us into wider aspects of the history of design, and the psychology of ownership, than can be dealt with by a study of bookbindings alone. Generalisations are likely to be dangerous, and all historians must be wary of the distinction between discovering meaning and imposing it. This book is more concerned with setting out a framework of knowledge which provides the essential foundations on which further understanding may be built. It aims, first and foremost, to provide an accessible and practical handbook which will allow bindings to be recognised, dated, and set in their contemporary contexts. This in itself should be beneficial to anyone who is handling, describing, owning or repairing early books, for whatever purpose, and it is the starting point for understanding the meaning of bookbindings.