

Book restoration

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There are over 57,000 volumes in the Institute’s library. It was this piece of information that made up my mind to go to Ankara. I had sent a letter of inquiry to the Institute about volunteering in the autumn of 2012, and had received a very enthusiastic reply in response to one particular skill I had listed – book restoration.

Apart from being an archaeology student, I have been a part-time book restorer throughout my ten years studying in Edinburgh. I have worked for book dealers, bookshops, private collectors at home and abroad and university libraries; for the last six years I have been based at Edinburgh Books, the largest antiquarian and second-hand bookshop in the city.

Unsure what exactly awaited me, I packed into my luggage as many of my repair tools and materials as could be carried legally onto a plane (it’s surprising what in-flight contraband can be used in book repair!) posting the remainder ahead by courier. A proposed two-week stay stretched to four, working on the collection full time. During that time we estimate that I repaired approximately 400 books. During this first visit, many of the worst cases were repaired, but a huge amount of work remained, with rooms full of books which had not even been assessed. It was clear that I would have to come back (which, given the wonderful atmosphere – and cake – of the BIAA, suited me perfectly). Since then I have combined my preparation for a post-doctoral project with a further ten weeks spent in Ankara, conducting my own research while also continuing work on the library collection.

The type of repair work ranges from books that are ‘slightly damaged’ to those that are ‘completely falling apart’. Many of the books have suffered from common damage such as detached covers, torn outer spines and loose hinges, which can be repaired quite quickly, but some have required more comprehensive and time-consuming repairs. Specific types of books, such as the iconic blue French paperbound publications, suffer worst from regular use, and at least half of these volumes have required stabilising. A few books have required complete resewing before being rebound into their repaired covers. One such example can be seen in the illustrations accompanying this report. This book was bound by a method known as ‘tape sewing’ and the tapes, which were made of linen, had completely disintegrated over time. In order to repair it I had to remove all the old thread and the remains of the tapes, and rebind the book using the original method. Most of the materials and tools I used are easy to transport, but some, such as sewing frames, are not very portable, and I have learned to improvise; in this case, the Assistant Director’s kitchen chair became an impromptu sewing frame – and it worked perfectly!

To date, around 700 books have been repaired, with a similar number still requiring work. Some await leather which I must prepare specially; it must be carefully dyed in shades to match the patina of antique leather, then pared to almost paper-thinness. One volume is waiting while I practise a complicated technique of interlaced hand-sewing used in the 19th century, so that re sewn sections will match the original construction perfectly. Further work is planned on future visits. In addition to the books, there is a large number of antique maps which requires repair or consolidation, and the maps will be included in the scheme of future work.



The Assistant Director’s chair being used as an impromptu sewing frame in order to repair the book shown above

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