

Practice makes perfect – lessons from the conservation of the Winchester Bible

Andrew Honey

The Winchester Bible, made in the second half of the twelfth century, has been described by Dr Christopher de Hamel as “a candidate for the greatest work of art produced in England”. It has survived for over 900 years at Winchester Cathedral, the place where it was made and where it continues to be used. The fragile state of some of its illuminations and the restricted opening of its bindings led the Cathedral in 2014 to begin a conservation project that would see each of its four volumes disbound, conserved, digitized, and then rebound in preparation for its redisplay at the Cathedral as the centrepiece of the of [‘Kings and Scribes’](#) exhibition. They asked Christopher Clarkson the pre-eminent book conservator to undertake this work. This was Clarkson’s last major conservation project. He conserved volume one in the studio of the Oxford Conservation Consortium, and in 2015 the Bodleian Library offered him and Winchester space to continue work on volume two in the new Weston Library. Ill health forced him to stop work on the Bible at the end of 2015, and conservators from the Bodleian completed the work on volume two, continued work on volume three, and will complete the final fourth volume by spring 2018.

This paper will relate both the conservation work undertaken by Clarkson and the Bodleian’s continuing work. The length of this conservation project and the multiple volumes of the manuscript has meant that, unusually for book conservation, elements of the treatment have been repeated volume by volume, and four matching bindings are to be produced. Clarkson specified an inboard binding based on Romanesque examples for the manuscript which have been quarter covered in alum-tawed goat over oak boards. The sheer size of the manuscript, the largest of the English twelfth century lectern Bibles, has meant that the recent binding has been difficult - a problem also experienced by each of its three previous binders.

Working volume by volume has allowed us to critically review the conservation and binding of each book, leading to changes and improvements as our knowledge of this large manuscript and its handling qualities has grown. As we reviewed each completed volume, subtle changes have been suggested for the endleaves, spine lining and covering methods to improve the opening characteristics of the bound manuscript, leading to the further review of the resulting bindings. This is a rare opportunity, it is unusual to be able to learn from the rebinding of a medieval manuscript and then to immediately repeat this work more than once. It has prompted a much greater understanding of the interrelated mechanical qualities of Romanesque bindings, and the methods needed to support manuscripts in use.

The paper will also discuss the role of notes, photography and film to document the techniques across the four volumes: to maintain consistency over the long project, and as a way of learning from Clarkson’s work on volume one. They also enabled the pool of conservators working on the manuscript to share expertise, and created a resource for future work.

Andrew Honey is Book Conservator, research and teaching at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. He graduated from Camberwell College of Arts in 1994 with a BA (Hons) in Paper Conservation and studied the conservation of rare books and manuscripts at West Dean College under Chris Clarkson from 1995-1997. Andrew was instrumental in arranging the move of the

Winchester Bible project with Chris Clarkson to the Bodleian in 2015, and is now lead conservator on the project.