

Sticking with it: repairing the Rolls series at Corpus Christi College

Albeit in a slightly illicit way, the Rolls series is a conservator's dream: an extensive collection of largely identical books, the majority of which display various degrees of damage and deterioration and therefore require some form of conservation intervention. Having worked on modern collections for most of my conservation career they presented an attractive challenge.

Two types of binding styles have been used in the construction the Rolls series. The earlier volumes are bound in identical quarter mid-brown leather with dark blue paper sides, with the later volumes in the series having quarter cloth spines and the same paper sides. The majority of the conservation issues surrounding the collection are concentrated on the leather-bound volumes and the project to repair the collection has started with this section. These books demonstrate a veritable catalogue of classic binding damage: torn headcaps, split joints and spines, losses from the spines and bumped and worn board edges and corners. The surface of the leather is powdery and flaking, and there is a large amount of surface dirt on the head (top) edge of the textblock.

As well as the intrinsic weakness of the books' structure and material construction, as detailed in the



introduction, the storage and user handling arena into which these cheaply bound books have been thrown has proved too much of a challenge for them. The chemical degradation of the poor quality materials has been accelerated by long term storage in an uncontrolled environment where the main focus, necessarily, is on human comfort for readers rather than the longevity of book collections. Much of the damage indicates that these already fragile books have been handled in a way that is less than ideal, with clear

evidence of books being hooked from their shelves by their headcaps writ large in the vertical splits to the spines and spine losses (see image above), and vigorous sliding on and off shelves evident from the damage to the lower edges of the boards and corners.

The main aim of the on-going treatment of the Rolls bindings is not to restore them to pristine condition but to stabilise them sufficiently to prevent further losses to the bindings and allow them to be handled and used with care. There is nothing any conservator can do to halt the degradation processes built into books such as these, but we can work to slow them down and make sure that further areas of the binding are not damaged and lost. This takes the form of practical, interventive conservation to repair what damage there is and preservation methods centred on encouraging future good handling practice.

The conservator's toolkit is well stocked with high quality materials to undertake this type of book repair. The main material used is Japanese paper in various weights. This long fibred paper not only has strength but is also thin, allowing an unobtrusive but sturdy repair. Further strength is added by the use of a textile layer, in the form of aerolinen. This is 100% linen textile also has the advantage of being both thin yet strong. A pure form of adhesive, wheatstarch paste, is used to attach the repairs.

Most conservation treatments start by cleaning the surface of the object to remove loose storage and handling dirt which is unpleasant for users, can discolour and damage the substrate over time and can attract mould and pests, particularly in damp conditions. In the case of the Rolls, minimal cleaning using a latex rubber sponge has been carried out to allow repairs to take place, as the main focus of the project is to stabilise the damage to the bindings. Many of the spines were split



vertically along their length so to prevent further deterioration this damage has been bridged using thin strips of a thick Japanese paper that had been toned to blend in with the colour of the spine. This was adhered to the reverse of the spine to bring the two edges of the split together. Headcap damage and losses are being repaired by bridging the gap with a combination of textile, where possible, and toned Japanese paper to provide a strong repair for this vulnerable area (see image above right). The split and torn inner joint areas have been reinforced as necessary with a thinner Japanese paper. By the end of the project, all the leather spines will be consolidated using a cellulose ether solution to reduce further surface abrasion and degradation, and improve the handling qualities of the books.

Interventive, treatment based conservation continues to expunge the handling and storage sins of the past, but the ongoing redemption of this collection relies entirely, and literally, in the hands of the readers who use the books. Although repaired against further loss or deterioration of existing damage, all the bindings in the Rolls series remain vulnerable to handling damage, particularly when removing from the shelves and when opening the text block. If hooking books from shelves by the headcap was consigned to the past and all readers used foam wedges to support the spine and boards during use, then a more genuine conservator's dream would come true.

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