

Burial Records: Conserved and Restored

Charles Dunn of Blissett Bookbinders, a family firm of bookbinders and conservators based in London relates how these valuable registers can be preserved

Are your volumes of burial registers and records now difficult to handle and showing vital signs of decay and dilapidation? Deteriorated leather bound ledger books containing the important burial registers can be restored and preserved for extensive future use with careful and skilled conservation treatment by craft bookbinders and paper conservators.

The first task is for the bookbinders to assess the extent of the damage to the sewings, pages, bindings and cases in order to prepare a schedule of recommended treatment and associated estimated costs. The problems for leather or cloth bound registers will vary from volume to volume depending on the quality of the original ledger book, their age, the amount of use, or abuse, the storage conditions and the overall size of the books. Larger, more voluminous ledger books are more prone and susceptible to becoming severely misshapen, early breakdown of the sewings and bindings with consequent deterioration in the condition of the paper evidenced by crumpling, tears and stains for instance.

Once analysed and a course of remedial work has been agreed and budgeted for with the custodians, the restoration and conservation treatment can begin. The volumes will usually need to be disbound by carefully removing the bound pages or book block from the original covers and case before removing old sewing threads and glues from the back of the pages or spine. If necessary, pages can first be hand numbered lightly in pencil to ensure that the correct sequence of pages appears in the restored volume. Provided the component materials of the cases are reasonably sound, the original covers can sometimes be preserved and repaired to be re-used when re-casing the conserved pages.

Leather skin used for bookbinding in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, often contains impurities and an in-built decay mechanism resulting from the tanning process of the cow, sheep or pig hide. Being an organic material, signs of leather decay and wear are fairly obvious with the weakening and drying out of the natural oils contained within the membranes of the skin leading to scuffs, tears and evidence of 'red-rot dust' – that horrible red dust residue left on your hands when handling these sort of volumes.

Once leather has lost its suppleness and strength it is a difficult and expensive process to strengthen and restore it again but it can usually be done. However, probably the most advantageous and economical approach is to agree with the bookbinders when originally specifying the restoration work to have the volumes rebound in full cloth. Modern bookbinding cloths are still woven from cotton and need no on-going maintenance. The cloth can either be lettered direct with gold

lettering and numbering on the spine or front board or alternatively have leather or cloth lettering pieces glued on to it if trying to match up with an existing set or replicating the original look of the volume.

Tears and creases in the pages or areas of weakness are repaired using special archival methods and materials. Some poorer quality paper may benefit from acid neutralisation to help prevent further deterioration and old unsuitable adhesive repair tapes and the sticky residue remaining on the paper can be removed and replaced. Fox marks and other staining caused for instance by ingress of water or the yellowing of the paper resulting from pressure sensitive repair tapes used on the paper cannot be removed or fully alleviated but provided the hand written burial records are still legible, such staining is acceptable to be left in situ. If tears and areas of weakness are not repaired and strengthened, the paper will continue to deteriorate and eventually important information may be lost or become illegible. Active mould growth on paper caused by damp or humid storage conditions or floods is very deleterious and must be treated to kill and brush away the harmful spores before the paper is damaged beyond repair. Very dirty and grimy paper can be carefully dry cleaned to remove the worst of the dirt from the surface and damp paper can be dried out as part of the conservation treatment.

The treatments are concluded by the careful reconstruction of the volume. The pages are re-sewn together in the correct order, usually done by hand especially for very thick volumes. The traditional rounded convex/concave shape to the book block is reinstated by a process known as rounding and backing. Then the pages are either re-cased either back into the original strengthened covers, or a newly made case. Finally, the required lettering and numbering of the volume is blocked in gold on the spine and or the front board. The volume is now ready to return to the cemetery having been preserved for extensive future use. Such a process was recently successfully carried out on a very large burial register volume for Gravesend Cemetery in Kent.

One humorous aspect of conserving and restoring burial records occurs when the registers are still in use but at the conservators' studios being treated. Inevitably a need arises for a reference to an entry in the volume so bookbinding staff have to find the relevant entry and convey the pertinent information back to the cemetery. It's all in a day's work!

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