

IN THE AGE of smartphones, flat screens and tablets, there's something special about holding a beautiful, handcrafted leather book, filled with the promise that within its golden bounds there lies wisdom that might nourish and sustain.

Marysa de Veer sums up the craft of bookbinding as: 'the presentation of the written word into a tactile, attractive and real object – the book'.

I wander around her workshop in Midhurst, West Sussex picking up and stroking various tomes breathing in the scent of leather.

"The majority of our work is restoration - in particular, family bibles (the earliest being from the late 1700s), but we restore anything from visitors' books, to beloved childhood tales," says Marysa, who established Otter Book Binding in 1993. Upon leaving Guildford College, under the tutelage of master binders Maureen Duke and John Mitchell, she worked at The Royal Bindery at Windsor Castle before quickly gaining a reputation as a specialist restorer of antiquarian books, including rare and early bindings. She now has an online shop with her own range of notebooks, log books and photo albums.

Steve Orris, her right-hand-man, has been working on and off with Marysa for 15 years, and joined the company full time in 2015. As I talk to them about their craft I soon realise it's multi-faceted with paper conservation, 'marbling', gold tooling and edge gilding being separate areas of expertise as skilled as craft bookbinding.

Steve explains: "When a book comes in for restoration, first of all we photograph it so we have before, midway and after shots. Then we write a detailed record if it's antiquarian or valuable, and collate it making a note of the number of plates, folios and any missing pages. We check for severe damage – such as mould or insect damage, ensuring any infestation is dealt with. If the book is dirty we start with surface cleaning."

"Paper conservation is vital for restoring books," adds Marysa. "Paper can be acidic so it can start to break down over time. Part of our job sometimes involves de-acidifying the paper, dry cleaning it with a chemical sponge and brushing with a light paint brush to remove dust that has gathered



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TIMELESS CRAFT: Marysa de Veer shows Charlotte the art of bookbinding

in the inside margins."

"Next, we start to remove the spine if it's damaged and the sewing is broken down," says Steve. "Books are made up of folios, groupings of sheets, these are taken apart, washed, de-acidified, resized and pressed, before being re-sewn with linen thread and tapes to brace it if they need it. Most of the leather bindings are goatskin but we also work with calf, pigskin and, occasionally, wooden bindings."

Marysa is helping me bind a notebook, a handy thing in my trade. She says my first task is to sew three folios together with linen thread (each comprising five sheets of paper folded in half). She stitches two together and adds two strips of linen tape at the spine, which provides strength to the emerging book. I gather them with the linen thread and join the third folio to the other folios.

Once sewn I place the folios into the 'lying press' and clamp it tight. Marysa inserts a gold satin page marker and I glue the spine ready to receive a vertical piece of linen tape cut to size. I press it on with a tool like an ice-lolly stick (a bone folder) until it's perfectly snug.

Marysa guillotines two pieces of greyboard to A5 size – these will become the front and hardback of the book. I have chosen a decorative Japanese chiyogami screen-printed paper as my cover; other choices include marbled paper, leather and various fabrics. She cuts the chiyogami paper to size and glues the greyboard at exact points onto it leaving room for the sewn folios to be placed in between.

I turn it over and use the bone folder tool to smooth out any air bubbles or creases. I cut a triangle off the paper at each corner and Marysa expertly folds and glues the edges to the cardboard backs. I next glue taupe paper to the inside of the cardboard front cover and to the first page of the folio and do the same at the back and, eh voila, a stunning notebook is born. I marvel at my new notebook. Marysa gives me a small fabric covered one from her collection.

They are too lovely to stain with my scrawl but from herein I decide to only buy hand-bound notebooks, knowing now that they're definitely worth the price. 📖

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