St. Ann’s Steam Binding Works.

The church of St. Ann, Blackfriars, has long since been demolished; but its name is consistently honoured by Messrs. Fisher & Son, whose bookbinding establishment, known as St. Ann’s Steam Works, is erected on a portion of the rectory estate, and stands, indeed, within the enclosure of the old burying-ground. The parish register records the burial in this place of Isaac Oliver, the miniature painter, Dick Robinson, the player, Nat Field, the player and poet, and William Fairthorne, the engraver; and it has many entries relating to Anthony Vandyck, who lived for a considerable time in the immediate vicinity.

Messrs. Fisher & Son are the descendants and representatives of a very old family of London binders. Their offices, above which are some small workshops, are in Carter Lane, but the chief works are approached by Church Entry. They are substantially and commodiously built. The rooms are well lighted and ventilated, and are admirably adapted for the convenience of a large number of workpeople and a rapid execution of work. Messrs. Fisher & Son adopt, as far as it is possible, the plan of taking books through the various departments in large batches, and the work is usually conveyed in unbroken order from folding room to packing room by a method which involves the smallest amount of carrying about. This process is rendered all the more simple by the help of numerous well-constructed lifts and staircases. Visiting St. Ann’s Works on a recent occasion, we were conducted through the building by Mr. James Fisher, whose wide experience and practical knowledge have enabled him to introduce several improvements in methods and machinery. In the management of their business these binders have advanced steadily with the times. It is well to note, too, that while they are always ready to introduce improvements from outside, they duly appreciate suggestions made by their employés, and frequently much to their own benefit. A new kettle-stitch apparatus, which has been successfully adapted to their sewing machines is, we understand, the invention of one of the foremen in St. Ann’s Works. The stitch which it produces is exceedingly neat, and it gives great firmness and elasticity to the books; the new appliance, simple in itself, adding nothing to the complication of machinery. We noticed here one of Kampe & Co.’s small automatic wire-sewing machines at work on one of the illustrated magazines, and the operation was performed with surprising rapidity and nicety. Mr. Fisher informed us that they have this season given special attention to the use of caoutchouc in binding books of unusually thick paper, for which purpose, he stated, it is employed with great advantage over other processes. Like most cloth binders, Messrs. Fisher & Son have discarded the rolling machine. Books on being sewn are passed through the Richmond nipping press, a simple machine which effects a very great saving of time and renders almost unnecessary any further pressing in the ordinary manner by the screw or hydraulic press. A very good edge-trimming machine is extensively used in St. Ann’s Works; its one great merit being that the gauges are so arranged that one operation serves for the cutting of both the fore-edge and tail of books, and a clean and perfect edge is produced, however little is taken off. As a rule, the men in this bindery are set to work in pairs. This system has a decided advantage for the work of the cutting machines, where one man attends to the fore-edges and his companion to the
Messrs. Fisher & Son have in use several of Furnival's "Express" guillotines. This machine is now so well known among bookbinders and printers that it is scarcely necessary to describe it. It is constructed on the self-clamp principle, and it runs with great ease and lightness, ensuring a considerable saving of power, the clamping being worked independently of the cutting by means of counterbalancing weights. A slight pressure of the foot on a lever brings down the platen on the work, and the clamp not only secures the books in position, but also exactly indicates where the knife will fall. Both hands of the operator are left at liberty to adjust the work. By the continuous motion of the side wheel the machine is always running, and no time is lost either in starting the knife at full speed or in immediately arresting it. The action of the machine is so rapid that the knife and clamp descend, do their required work and return, in the space of about three seconds. It seems practically impossible to invent a machine more perfect in its construction, or one which could perform the work allotted to it with greater speed and neatness. Of the forwarding department it need only be added that the millboard cutting machines, rounding machines and hydraulic presses here in use include all the latest improvements. A system of steam pipes runs throughout the building, fulfilling a variety of useful purposes, such as making paste, by a peculiar method, boiling glue and providing the heated tubes used for rounding the backs of cloth cases.

In the blocking department the chief novelties are in connection with blocking and inking presses. Several of these are of German make, and one of them in particular calls for notice. It is by Kampe & Co., of High Holborn, and some improvements in the inking apparatus—notably in the number and arrangement of ink rollers, and the position of the inking table—have been introduced by the makers at the suggestion of Messrs. Fisher, who may pride themselves on the possession of a blocking press which, for both light and heavy work, approaches so nearly to perfection. The inking process, which is self-acting, effects a remarkably even distribution of ink, admitting of a most delicate combination of colours. The press is of great stability, and it has been in constant use for upwards of three years without requiring repair. No great driving power is necessary; but it is wholly concentrated by a system of cog-wheels and multiplied gearing. The action is eccentric, with knuckle joint. A large folio case can be blocked by this machine, and the impression and registration can be adjusted with the utmost precision. The designs for the best class of bindings produced at St. Ann's Works are executed with much skill and judgment by an artist specially engaged, and many of the covers which we examined were appropriate in character and of high artistic merit. Upwards of three hundred and fifty persons are employed in this bindery during the busy season, and for their comfort and safety from accident much is done. Great precautions are taken against fire, and the workrooms are not overcrowded. To guard against disputes, which so often occur in workshops, with regard to time, Mr. James Fisher has invented a time register in the form of a box, upon the upper side of which are a number of slots. On entering the house, each of the hands drops his numbered tally into the slot, which indicates the hour at which he commences work. At stated times during the day these slots are, by an ingenious contrivance, closed in rotation, so that, for example, if a man fail to drop his tally into the box at eight o'clock it must fall into the compartment labelled "8.15." The box thus becomes the silent witness whose evidence is accepted without dispute.