Our Portrait Gallery.

No. 3.—ROBERT PECK.

The subject of our sketch occupies a prominent position among the publishers' bookbinders of to-day. His capacious premises in Bartholomew Close are fitted with the most elaborate and complete machinery, thus enabling Mr. Peck to undertake every variety of work both as regards quality and quantity. His specialties in blocking are known throughout the trade, and for perfection of execution in this special line there are few others able to compete with him.

Mr. Peck is a gentleman of full business capacity, although he has seen many long years of work, and personally conducts the ever growing business which he himself has created. When calling upon him, our representative was most cordially received, and having overcome Mr. Peck's modesty as regards publicity, he was able to elicit the records of the house.

"This business was originally started by my father in 1834," said Mr. Peck; "his name was Thomas Peck, and he started in Cowper-street, City-road, as an ordinary bookbinder. Later on the business was removed to Hoxton-square, and then removed again in consequence of increase of business to Warwick-square, Paternoster-row. At that time it was a miscellaneous binder's, my father working at all branches of the trade. He died in 1857, and soon after that event, by reason of a steady further increase of business, larger premises were taken at 90 and 91 Bartholomew-close. The building was destroyed by fire in 1876 and then entirely rebuilt, being planned to suit the convenience of the business. Subsequently the premises on the opposite side of the square, Nos. 24 to 26, were added, and the two premises are still carried on."

"You turn out some high-class work by a special process," remarked our representative.

"Yes," replied Mr. Peck, "I think the superior quality of the work done here is very well known. Our special line is blocking, in what we call photogon, and it is very effective in its results."

"And what are your own recollections of bookbinding?"

"I was brought up to the business in every branch and have sometimes worked three nights and days at a stretch. In those days we did certainly work most unearthly hours, and have often kept at it straight on the whole week through. My father did the binding and repairing for a London institution, and I remember there was very little machinery used then. The old plough was the chief feature. In fact there is no real hard work nowadays compared with those times. Backing is certainly hard work, but blocking is nothing to compare with it. Then there was the old beating hammer: but the trade is entirely changed now."

"You are considerably assisted in the business by your son, Mr. Peck?"

"Yes, I have one son with me (Mr. Robt. H. Peck) who takes a deep interest in all the advanced stages of the work."

Mr. Peck, junr., here entered, and said he had now been with his father twelve years. He produced a cover—the latest novelty turned out by the house.

"I don't think there is any binder in England who has done anything like that before," said Mr. Peck, and our representative concurred.

The cover was a small one with an oval bevelled glass mirror let into the board. There was a gold beading around the glass and a well drawn, cleverly blocked figure stood gazing into it. The board was not of unusual thickness, and the whole was finished with much neatness. The title of the book is "Fortune's Mirror set in Gems," being verses by M. Halford.

"Have you turned out any long runs recently?"

"Yes, we have bound some books that have run into immense numbers—hundreds of thousands in each case."

At this point a number of most recently produced covers were thrown upon the table as specimens. In several instances the blocking of elaborately drawn pictures was very remarkable. A striking example represented a moonlight scene, with the silver moon rising and shedding its rays upon rippling waters and green banks. The photogon shades had been very dexterously blended in order to obtain this effect. It was the blocked portraits, however, that were the most impressive, the forms and faces standing out with the distinctness of an engraving upon white paper.

Upon our expressing a desire to run over the premises, Mr. Peck immediately led the way across the square, remarking on the way that he employed about three hundred men and women, and had introduced all the latest machinery. On the ground floor of the building all were very busy clearing up for the night: the huge glue pots had just ceased boiling and a steam hammer was resting from its labours. Mr. Peck, however, set this instrument to work, and for a few moments its heavy descents deadened all other sound. This hammer is used in the place of a nipping press, and for small work is certainly more effective. Repassing the entrance, Mr. Peck drew attention to a large frame of covers which was shown at the Agricultural Hall Exhibition about seven years ago. Passing into the basement, huge stacks of millboard were noticed, and in a small apartment a large stock of bookbinders' cloth in every shade was stored. Mr. Peck said many figured patterns had been tried in cloth but they somehow did not go, principally
because they were too expensive to use. A very pleasing crocodile pattern was examined, but this, Mr. Peck said, hardly met with any demand. Some patent paper-lined cloths with surfaces like satin and delicately flowered, were also admired.

"Strawboards are supposed to be very cheap," the proprietor remarked, "but we cannot get a good board under £7 5s. the ton. At that price, however, it is a good article and a vast improvement upon the old strawboards." Noticing the men's rapid action in covering the boards, it was explained that each cover passed through the hands twenty-two distinct times. This was worth remembering in the face of the cutting prices. A three-and-a-half horse power gas engine was pointed out as the motor of all the machinery throughout the house, and on the way to the upper floors, while passing the stacks of printed sheets, Mr. Peck said the new system of cutting large sheets in half on the printing machine had been an immense boon to bookbinders.

On the top floor, rows of girls were at work folding and collating, the apartment being excellently lighted. On the floor below, the case makers and limp-cloth workers were operating, and a row of seven Brehmer wire-stitching machines were in full swing. A Boomer press, three Furnival cutting machines, and a row of backing machines, were also noted.

The blocking being almost entirely done at No. 90, that building was returned to and explored. On each floor were a number of blocking presses of all shapes and sizes, and at the moment of calling a very tasteful case for "Atalanta" was being worked. In a solid iron-frame case the best of the brasses were stored and locked, Mr. Peck expressing the hope that in case of fire this safe would come out intact.

Having again reached the offices our representative thanked Mr. Peck for his kindness and left the building well pleased with what he had seen.

The Plantin Celebration.

The Conference on Books held at Antwerp from Thursday, August 7th to Saturday, August 9th last, in connection with the Tercentenary Celebration of the death of Plantin, cannot be regarded as an unqualified success. In the first place, it attempted to cope with too many subjects; and, in the second, too much time was wasted in discussing questions of second-rate importance, or questions upon which opinion will be strongly divided so long as the world lasts. The gathering, on the other hand, was so thoroughly representative—delegates from nearly every important country in Europe being present—that, if it be made an annual affair, and each meeting and even powerful Parliament in the republic of letters. It is an institution greatly needed, and one which, with a warning, might in future achieve results as yet scarcely dreamt of. That the Conférence du Livre should become international in every sense of the word was an opinion freely expressed at Antwerp; but a more general and sincere co-operation on the part of "admirable" is absolutely necessary before the scheme can be worked with success. "Absent," "Absent," and "Pas ici" were the too frequent responses when the names were read out; and in this respect the English were especial sinners. Out of nineteen who sent their names only five appeared. From this number, which included Mr. J. Yates, Mr. H. Morse Stephens, and the Rev. J. C. Hudson—Mr. Charles Welch, the Guildhall Librarian, was elected a vice-president.

Although the Conference was not officially opened until Thursday morning, the "home" members met Wednesday afternoon in the rooms and charming garden of the Cercle Artistique to welcome the foreign adherents. The constitution of the "bureau," as read by M. Max Rooses on Thursday morning before the first general assembly, contained a long list of men distinguished in various paths of literature and science. The four honorary presidents were M. J. Vandepersboom, the Minister of Railways, Posts and Telegraphs; the Baron Osy de Zegwaart, Governor of the Province of Antwerp; M. Leopold de Wael, Burgomaster of Antwerp; and General Renette Moretus; the acting president being M. Charles Ruelens, Conservator of the Royal Library at Brussels. There were ten vice-presidents, whilst M. Max Rooses acted as the general secretary. M. Ruelens, in a brief and happy opening speech, described the aim and object of the Conference. The chief question discussed on the first day related to the adoption of a general system for the determination of the forms of books, it being contended that the words "folio," "octavo," &c., have no real meaning at the present day. One member went so far as to state that he had in his library no fewer than twenty-one different sizes of octavos. The proposition that a universal system should be adopted met with an extraordinary amount of opposition, and, it must be added, excitement, several members speaking simultaneously, with a result which is better imagined than described. The most logical speech on behalf of the existing order of things was made by M. Plon, the well-known publisher of Paris, who, basing his theories chiefly on the ground of the rights of liberty, argued that the matter is one which should be left entirely to the discretion of the printers and publishers. The exceedingly excited and unnecessarily prolonged discussion was wisely stopped with a short and very vigorous speech by M. Max Rooses, who, taking a medium view, threw, so to speak, oil on troubled waters. The question had already been discussed in committee, where it was decided unanimously that a general system for determining sizes should be adopted. It seemed superfluous, therefore, to discuss it at the general meeting, where eventually it was referred back to the committee. The proposition, formulated by M. Dauby, director of the Moniteur Belge, to the effect that the Governments of various countries should be prevailed upon to employ a uniform and handy size for official publications of all sorts, was adopted after a short debate. The subject of national bibliographies occupied some considerable time in discussion, without eliciting many views either new or remarkable. It was somewhat superfluously