

What is Bookbinding?

IT may at first sight appear a strange question to ask in a technical journal devoted largely to the bookbinding trade, but, inasmuch as such a journal should reflect the movements astir within the community it is intended to represent, we think it our duty to both sides of that trade to ask and endeavour to answer this question: What is Bookbinding? Not that both sides of the trade have equal doubts upon the matter; oh, no; with the men there has been one general understanding, felt rather than defined, that all pertaining to the binding of a book is bookbinding, be it simple or skilful, manual or machine labour. True, some may have helped to sell their birthright for the paltry mess of pottage which a few pence of extra profit, gotten out of the assistance of boys and porters, may have brought them, not only to the detriment of themselves, but of others who looked upon their birthright as a too excellent thing to be thrown away for such garbage, but in spite of thoughtless individuals whose ill-doing consists rather in want of thought than want of heart, the great mass who earn their living at the trade have ever regarded all the processes pertaining to the binding of a book as their legitimate work.

With some employers we fear this clear proposition is clouded in the obscurity of mists begotten of other questions, and lately there has been evinced a desire to limit the processes of bookbinding, by denying the right of bookbinders to work at certain parts of the business, a proposition which in a less complicated order of society and with less of labour-saving machinery they would never have dreamed of advancing. The sum and substance of their plea is:—1st, that certain parts of the work connected with the production of a bound book—especially in the cloth branch of the trade—are not the proper work of bookbinders; 2nd, that the training required by a bookbinder is unnecessary for these particular departments of labour; 3rd, that requiring only lesser skilled labour, the price paid should be below that of the minimum price charged by the bookbinder.

The portion of work here directly referred to is the cutting of materials, but however simple the sub-division of the work, the journeymen claim that it is part and parcel of the art and mystery of bookbinding, and we hold that the workmen's position is both sound and logical.

To say that the cutting of materials is not part of the bookbinder's work is to ignore first principles. From the earliest known times the binder cut out his papers, his boards, his linings, and covers, according to the desired quality of the binding, and worked them up, and the finest work that has ever been produced has been made by hands that did all, moulding all into one harmonious piece of work that everyone admires. The concentration of one mind upon all the stages of the work counts for much, and until the sub-division of labour came in to assist in cheaper production, this was invariably the custom, so that no old precedent can be advanced for the cutting of materials by others than binders.

The cutting of materials requires no less skill now than ever it did. The use of the knife or of the machine is not all that is required. The skill of the binder is still necessary to estimate the sizes of the boards or of the covers, but the change that has taken place has been the separation of the brain and manual functions. Whereas two men used both to gauge the sizes of their own squares and cut their own boards, now one gives out the sizes while the other cuts. Both were bookbinders; but, with sub-division of the labour, which has accelerated the speed of each, it is sought to take away the name of bookbinder from the mere cutter. The cutting-out of materials cannot be satisfactorily performed without the supervision of the trained and experienced binder, however much machinery may be brought in to aid and facilitate the work.

That machinery simplifies labour goes without saying. That the sub-division of labour tends to an acceleration of speed—and therefore cheapening of production—means that a greater profit is gained thereby. But should not this mean an increase of wages to the binder, rather than a reason for squeezing them down? It may be held that men benefit by such changes since the cheapening of production invariably increases the volume of trade, but that, as it is the employer who has to provide the additional expense of new machinery, he must get an additional return upon his outlay. Admitting these propositions as just, they contain no reason why the binder should be displaced in favour of lesser skilled labour, as carried out by some employers. That which is held to be the more profitable form of production must not also be made the basis for a reduction of wages, or the employment of lower priced labour.

So far, we are not aware of any point ever having been raised as to the folding and sewing of books by women; that does not enter into our enquiry, but from the time the book leaves their hands, we hold that every stage of the work of binding is legitimately the work of binders; that all the improvements effected by the introduction of machinery should tend to make the binder's life more happy and comfortable, and not be made a pretext for ousting him from his employment; that no sub-division of labour can affect the true character of the work; that the introduction of an undue proportion of boys, or of untrained adult males or females, will be disastrous to the trade and to the community at large, as it has ever proved to be in the past; that there is no real demand on the part of the public for any such contemptible means of cheapening production, but that they are superinduced by employers in their rash competition against one another. We are happy to learn that several have already found it possible to effect some reform by paying men engaged on this class of work the minimum rate asked by the trade, and we trust the example will be followed by others. The Unions have done much for the maintenance of a fair living wage for their members, and to prevent unfair and unhealthy competition amongst employers. We trust, therefore, that the men, who would be first to suffer, will resist any changes made under such specious pretexts, and maintain in its entirety the trade of Bookbinding for Bookbinders.