

Bookbinding in England.

BY W. SALT BRASSINGTON, F.S.A.



HERE is very good reason for a belief in the existence of a school of English Bookbinders so far back in the Dark Ages (so called) as the 12th century. The honour of the rediscovery of this native school and its works is due mainly to the researches of Mr. W. H. James Weale, who on various occasions has referred to the early English bookbindings and carefully described the few examples of the 12th century work now remaining at The Public Record Office, The Society of Antiquaries' Library, The British Museum, and Durham Cathedral. The chief characteristics of these bindings are the fine quality of the leather, the thoroughness of the work, both as regards forwarding and finishing, and the peculiar appropriateness of the stamped ornament to the material it adorns. Upon the sides a number of stamps are arranged in rows and circles. The stamps are various in shape and bear representations of men and animals, leaves and flowers treated conventionally, and exactly suitable for purposes of decoration. Some of the designs have been traced to a classical source. It is claimed for these bindings, that they exercised a distinct influence on continental work; certainly they demonstrate that English craftsmen living in the days of the Norman kings were art workers of no mean order, and this fact should by no means be overlooked. Probably most of the books bound in England during the middle ages were the handiwork of monks, but it is likely that secular craftsmen, combining several kindred trades, lived and worked in the chief cities of Mediæval England, notably at Winchester.

In the 15th century, as appears by the wills of several wealthy persons, books were bound in velvet, sometimes beautified with rich ornaments in silver, gold, and enamel work. Velvet being a perishable material, very few examples of these sumptuous bindings have descended to our times, but there are a few remaining still. The family Bible of the Bohuns, in the Library of Exeter College, Oxford, is in an original velvet binding (if I am not mistaken, for it is some years since I last saw this venerable manuscript) and another well-known example was lately exhibited in the rooms of the Burlington Fine Art Club. It was in the 15th century, if we may judge from examples still existing, that a system of ornamenting the sides of leather bound books with stamps of a large size was introduced into England. On the continent this system had long been practised occasionally, and after the introduction of printing the practice became common. The use of large sized stamps commended itself to the printers, who were also bookbinders, because it was a cheap and easy way of ornamenting the sides of the volumes they had to bind. One of the earliest English examples known appears on a book belonging to Westminster Abbey Library, bearing the impress of a stamp with the arms and supporters of Edward IV. Stamps bearing the arms of Henry VII. and his son Henry VIII. are, comparatively speaking, common, they were used by several known and several unknown

English bookbinders. But it should be remembered, that it does not follow, that because a book bore upon its sides the royal arms of England it was intended for the Royal Library. Stamped bindings were what would now be called publishers' bindings, and were not special bindings for great people, but intended only for the ordinary reader. The royal books, now chiefly located at the British Museum and the Bodleian Library, are known, and the bindings can be easily identified. Besides, they belong to a different order, viz., gold tooled work. The stamps attract the notice of book-lovers by the variety of their designs, some heraldic, some scriptural, some legendary, and some purely ornamental. Then, again, many of them bear initials or marks of well-known printers, Julian Notary, Pinson, John Reynes and Godfray in London, Nicholas Spierinck, Garret, Godfrey and another at Cambridge, some small stamps bear the marks of printers of lesser note, of men who worked in the provinces at York and Hereford. The best stamped work ended before 1550, and degenerated into ornament produced by means of a roulette.

It is generally supposed that Thomas Berthelet introduced the art of gold tooling upon leather into this country. The supposition is borne out by accounts of privy expenses temp. Henry VIII., where Berthelet's bills for "binding in the Venetian manner" may be seen. The books he so deftly ornamented can also be seen in the Library of the British Museum. King Edward VI.; Queen Elizabeth; Mary, Queen of Scots; Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester; The Earl of Arundel; Sir Nicholas Bacon; and Thomas Wotton, Esquire, were the chief collectors of books and lovers of beautiful bookbindings living in England in the 16th century. Many examples of binding done for these book-lovers may be found in public and private libraries. James I., his sons, Henry, Prince of Wales, and Charles I. were lovers of fine bookbindings. The names of two or three of the skilled workmen who bound for them are known, that of John Gibson standing in the foremost rank. A complete series of English royal bindings has recently been exhibited, which if not so gorgeous as those of the French monarchs will at least compare very favourably in other respects with any other continental collection. The English Amateurs mentioned above seem to have employed an Italian workman, who produced several ornate bindings in the Italo-Oriental style. Hugonots, skilful in the art of illuminating and binding books, settled in England during the time of Elizabeth. Probably Georges de la Motthe, who addressed a curious poem to the Virgin Queen, was one of these. The presentation copy, now in the Bodleian Library, bound in a curiously tooled and inlaid binding, appears to have been the work of one of these religious refugees. To foreigners we owe, at least, many of the good points which characterised the best English binding of the 17th century.—*From Introduction of Catalogue of Exhibition of Bookbinding at Nottingham Castle, September, 1891.*

THE box and jewel case makers of Vienna are now on strike. They demand a nine-hours' day and a minimum wage of 10 florins per week. And little enough too!