

# Bookbinding

Bookbinding does not relate exclusively to letterpress printing: books were bound before printing started, but the rise of volume production with printing made for a corresponding increase in the scale of bookbinding. Originally a hand craft, it developed through the industrial revolution into a mechanised and eventually largely automated branch of the printing industry, with an artistic craft element surviving alongside. At the same time, new materials, and new methods, were developed, most significantly the paperback style of adhesive or “perfect” binding.

Early printed books were very expensive items, making investing in a good protective binding a worthwhile investment. Bindings were usually of leather, made by hand, and done to the buyer’s specification, rather than arranged en masse by the printer. Hand binding used its own specialised tools, and had its own technical language, but could be done with minimal facilities. The largest piece of equipment was a screw press to clamp the work whilst it dried, to prevent warping. The other major items were a wooden vice to hold the book, a wooden *plough* (much like a carpenter’s plane) to trim the edges of the book, and a *frame* to hold the threads and guide the work when sewing sections.

When printing a book, the sheet of paper, usually the full size of the press, would be printed with several pages on it at once, and it was then folded to form the pages into order. If it was folded once, with only two pages printed on each side, the book would be *folio* size, if folded twice with four pages on each sheet, the book would be *quarto*, and so on. Usually a convenient number of pages (commonly 16) would then be held together by sewing with linen thread at the fold, to form a booklet called a *section*, and then these sections would be held together by sewing them onto strings or cloth tapes, protected on either side with heavy card, and wrapped in leather, often decorated with embossed or gold decorations. As books became cheaper and more commonplace, cheaper bindings were used with less durable materials: covers were cloth or paper. Machines were devised in the nineteenth century to

fold the printed sheets into the sections. Stitching was likewise mechanised, and then the making of the outer cover in one piece (the *case*) allowed the complete process to be fully automated.

“Perfect” binding is much simpler: the sheets are folded and the sections assembled unstitched. They are then cut at the spine, and held together by gluing the resulting surface. While this is much cheaper, being simple and suited to automation, it relies on the glue penetrating the paper enough to hold every page firmly, and remaining flexible enough to survive the movement caused when the book is used. Although the process was tried much earlier, suitable glues really only became available after the 1940s with the development of the plastics industry, as the old fish, bone, and paste glues of the past centuries were too brittle. Few perfect bindings last more than a decade or two, but this is adequate for many purposes.

There were of course many more details and processes to the bookbinding trade than in this brief summary.

Bookbinding was one of the few areas of printing which employed many women from an early date, possibly because of its use of similar methods & materials to ordinary sewing. Since it was usually done away from the main printing area, so workers didn’t necessarily have access to the skills of the secretive printers, and was regarded as a less skilled trade, women in the bindery were not seen as the threat they might have been elsewhere.

*Top right: a sewing frame for hand binding. The frame held the strings or tapes onto which the sections were sewn with linen thread.*

*Centre: a plough for trimming the edges of a book. The book is held in the screw vice at the bottom, and the plough, effectively a small horizontal knife held rigidly in a wooden frame, run too & fro over the book cutting a few pages each time.*

*Bottom: an industrial bindery in the 1920s, with a machine for collecting sections of a book together in order automatically. The completed piles are being removed by hand.*

