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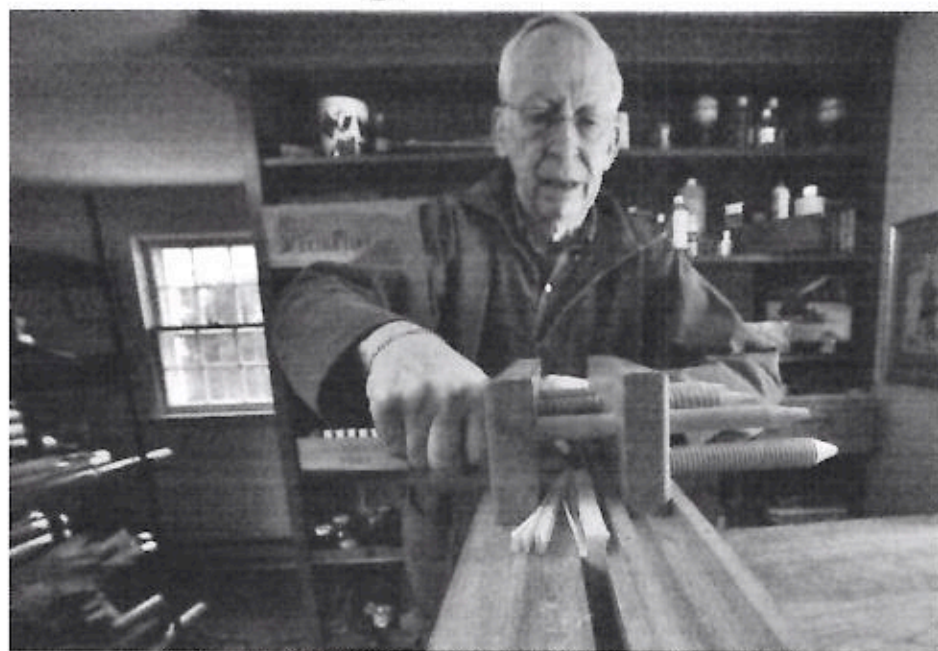
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Brattleboro Reformer

Medieval solutions for a modern problem: Bookbinder services in high demand with discerning collectors



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KRISTOPHER RADDER - BRATTLEBORO REFORMERMalcolm Summers, owner of The Chester Bookworm, in Chester, uses a laying press and plough to cut away some fray of a book that he is restoring on Friday, April 7.



Posted Friday, May 5, 2017 5:42 pm

CHESTER — When Malcolm Summers rebinds a book, he expects his work to last for centuries — and he uses equipment from the Victorian era and techniques that medieval monks used before the printing press was invented. In his workshop in Chester, Summers talked about his craft.

"For a lot of the work on leather, I'm doing exactly like book binders did a thousand years ago, particularly monks in monasteries," he said. "I fuse the gold to leather with a heated tool, and to get the gold to stick onto the leather, I use white of egg."

While he gets some orders from Vermont, his suppliers and many of his customers are from farther away.

"The first thing I need is the postal service and UPS to deliver the books to me," he said. "And then I need the postal service to deliver my supplies, because most of my supplies come from Scotland — J. Hewit and Sons. That is because they have been in business for 180 years and their leather is probably the finest in the world, and it's guaranteed acid-free. A lot of leather that's sold today is not acid-free, and people more knowledgeable than myself claim that the acid will start attacking the paper within 10 years."

He intends his work to last much longer than that.

"I'm just doing a book for a customer in Zurich, Switzerland," he said, "and the object of the restoration is to give 200 to 300 years of life to the book."

He noted that many of his customers are walk-ins who want to restore their Bibles or cookbooks.

"Not a week goes by when I'm not doing a cookbook or a Bible," he said. "Cookbooks — it's either their mother's, their grandmother's, or their great-grandmother's. They've got themselves in a state, and they need some tender loving care."

"I did a restoration of 17th-century Bible in Swedish," he went on. "Bibles have been passed down and can have information about the family."

Other books also have sentimental value for customers.

"I did a restoration for a doctor, a lot of his medical books from when he was in college," Summers recalled. "One of his books you could buy online for six dollars, and I was going to charge him \$50 to restore it. I pointed this out to him, and he said, 'I don't care what it costs. It's got my notes, but more important, it's got my beer, wine and pizza stains on it from when I was in college.'"

Summers's work is customized according to his clients' needs.

"I've bound books in leather for a customer in Kenya," he said. "The weather conditions are such that it's hot and humid sometimes and very dry at other times. When it's hot and humid, the leather absorbs the humidity and protects the paper; when it's dry, the leather releases the moisture, so the paper in those conditions will last much longer."

Once a customer, a sales representative, placed a very particular order to impress clients at meetings.

"She wanted something to break the ice with," Summers explained. "So I took large sheets of beautiful Italian paper, Magnani velata — Magnani has been in business for 400 years. I cut it down, and sewed it into a book, and then bound the blank pages with a pink cloth cover, and on the front board she wanted, 'RANDOM CRAP,' and then you turn the book over — it's called a topsy-turvy book — and it says 'CRAP I GOTTA GET DONE,' and that's her ice-breaker for a meeting, to put on the table, because it gets everyone's attention."

Providing an estimate is the first step in his relationship with his customers.

"If I don't know the customer, I start by telling the customer what the main material will cost," Summers said. "For an average-size book bound in cloth, the cloth will cost me five

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dollars. If I bind a book in leather, the cost to me of the leather will be \$120 ... so I start with that kind of information to find out what they want to spend, because that makes a huge difference."

Whether leather or cloth, covers are attached to "board," to keep the cover rigid.

"The board comes from Talas in Brooklyn," he continued. "When it's delivered, it's so heavy that the FedEx man complains every time about the weight. It's called davey-board, and it's acid free and very difficult to cut, so I use a board-cutter that's Victorian, made by Jean-Jacques in Worcester, Mass. His company was there because they were making trains there. The board cutter weighs 550 pounds."

Part of his craft is decorating the book's covers. In addition to applying gold leaf, Summers decorates leather-bound books with "blind-tooling," using heated tools to stamp borders and other motifs directly onto the leather.

"Some of the stamps are 100 years old or more, and to think how many bookbinders have used them," Summers commented.

Summers spent 25 years in finance — "foreign exchange, interest rates and commodities" — in New York, Chicago and Geneva. After he and his wife, both British, raised four children, they decided to return to England so he could apprentice with Alan Constance, a bookbinder in Bristol.

"I'm basically a clone of him," Summers commented. "I use the same tools and operate in the same way. He was a very tough teacher; he was very strict with me. He was so neat that he would actually bookbind in a suit."

"He was very fast, and he had specific tools," Summers continued. "One of the first things he taught me was that you never measure anything. You use a ruler as a straight line and that is all. You use your eye to measure, because books aren't perfectly made, they're not at 90-degree angles, and I still cut books in the traditional way. He was very precise about everything — the way you glue, the way you bind the book. He doesn't make it on a bench; he holds the book and wraps the leather around."

One of Summers' biggest orders came from Stellafane, a club based a few miles away, in Springfield.

"It became the world's leading club for astronomy and telescope-making," Summers explained. "They have a site on Breezy Hill, on over 100 acres. In August they have astronomers and telescope makers from all over the world coming to them."

He said the club engaged him to bind its records, which go back to 1923.

"They want them preserved for future generations, so they're digitizing all of the records and also printing them on 100-percent cotton paper," Summers said, "and I am binding them into books for them. It will be a hundred and more."

"In 1923 when they bought their buildings, they were desperately short of money so they went to the town of Springfield and asked for paint to paint all the barns and buildings," he continued. "They mixed all the paint together and it finished up a pink, and the buildings are still pink to this day and that's their club color ... and I'm binding all the books in pink."

For some jobs, Summers calls on other local artisans.

"I restored a book that was printed in 1512 and bound in Basel, Switzerland," he said. "I assume it would have been bound in a monastery. One of the clasps holding the board down was missing, so I took the clasp that I had to Sage Jewelry, on the green in Chester. Michele Bargfrede, the jeweler, dismantled the clasp — it was brass — and found that inside of it was a clock-spring and that was what gave it the spring. She recreated it by using a clock-spring, and you couldn't tell the difference."

Summers gives workshops in bookbinding for individuals, college students, and groups, including a Girl Scout troop from Westminster, and he and his wife have an antiquarian

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bookshop attached to his workshop in Chester.

"Booklovers and people interested in book restoration are the best human beings on the planet," he commented. "People say, 'When are you going to retire?' Only when I'm 6 feet under."

Maggie B. Cassidy, a former high school French teacher, is a regular contributor to the Reformer. She can be contacted at mcassidy@sover.net.

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