

Bookbinder's cover story speaks volumes

Gavin Rookledge is constantly rewriting his craft in his Rook's Books workshop.



Gavin Rookledge in his office at Rook's Books in London © Tom Jamieson

Jonathan Foyle
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To the north of Gypsy Hill's sloping streets of Victorian houses spreads the City of London, a horizon of steel and glass drowning the leaden dome of St Paul's Cathedral. Off the area's elevated high street lies Cooper's Yard, presided over by a black and white cat, the apparent guardian of an array of salvaged architectural ironmongery: stairs, balconies, columns; together recasting a courtyard lined by unremarkable ranges of workshops into something theatrical.

The sign indicating Rook's Books is hidden by foliage, but within its open-fronted entrance sits an improbably leather-clad vintage van with inexplicable bull-horns. Everything indicates this won't be a temple to necessity.

So it proves. Gavin Rookledge emerges with a leather apron and white shirt, his thick salt-and-pepper hair tied back. "I'm building an elevated greenhouse," he explains, gesturing to an unfinished colonnade on the far side of the courtyard that will support it, before turning my attention to a vast iron mill-wheel from Wales delivered on its crate that morning, soon to be laid flat as the geometric frame for a central cobbled pavement, like some lithic blackcurrant flan.

"Rook's Books" is quite the understatement. It's not that the workshop we enter doesn't have books — there are hundreds of them with tags, straps, gilt letters and plain bindings — but that there is so much else that they become a backdrop. What you notice are leather helmets, a sword, comic books, a top hat, accounts filed on the hooks of a baronial chandelier.

Rookledge is 53 and an insatiably curious artisan. His student years were spent in Brighton, where he was inspired by a bookbinder called Faith Shannon. She taught him how to make bindings to

protect his prints and more importantly encouraged him to take risks and think freely. He consequently became the country's only postgraduate student in outdoor education and fine art at Exeter university.



The leather-bound company vehicle © Tom Jamieson

After a summer as a canoe instructor, which garnered him £500 in savings, he set up his bindery business in September 1987. A few years on he joined an artists' co-operative nearby, with the principle he shouldn't own more than he could carry on his back. "Now I own eight buildings full of cack," he says.

His first opportunity to own a property in Cooper's Yard came in 1999, having already branched out from books toward lining yachts and private jets with leather interiors. Gradual property acquisitions came through reinvesting the proceeds of those plum jobs.



A book's edges are 'gathered' © Tom Jamieson

Since 2004 Rookledge has rented workshops around the yard to other artisans, enjoying a creative community now comprising 26 businesses. Rookledge values collaborations that refresh experience and develop techniques. But he also experiments.

In his early career, he says, "I thought I'd make books and paint in my spare time. But most pursuits [in working hours] wither and die if they don't have income attached."



Victorian bookbinding/cordwainer shears © Tom Jamieson

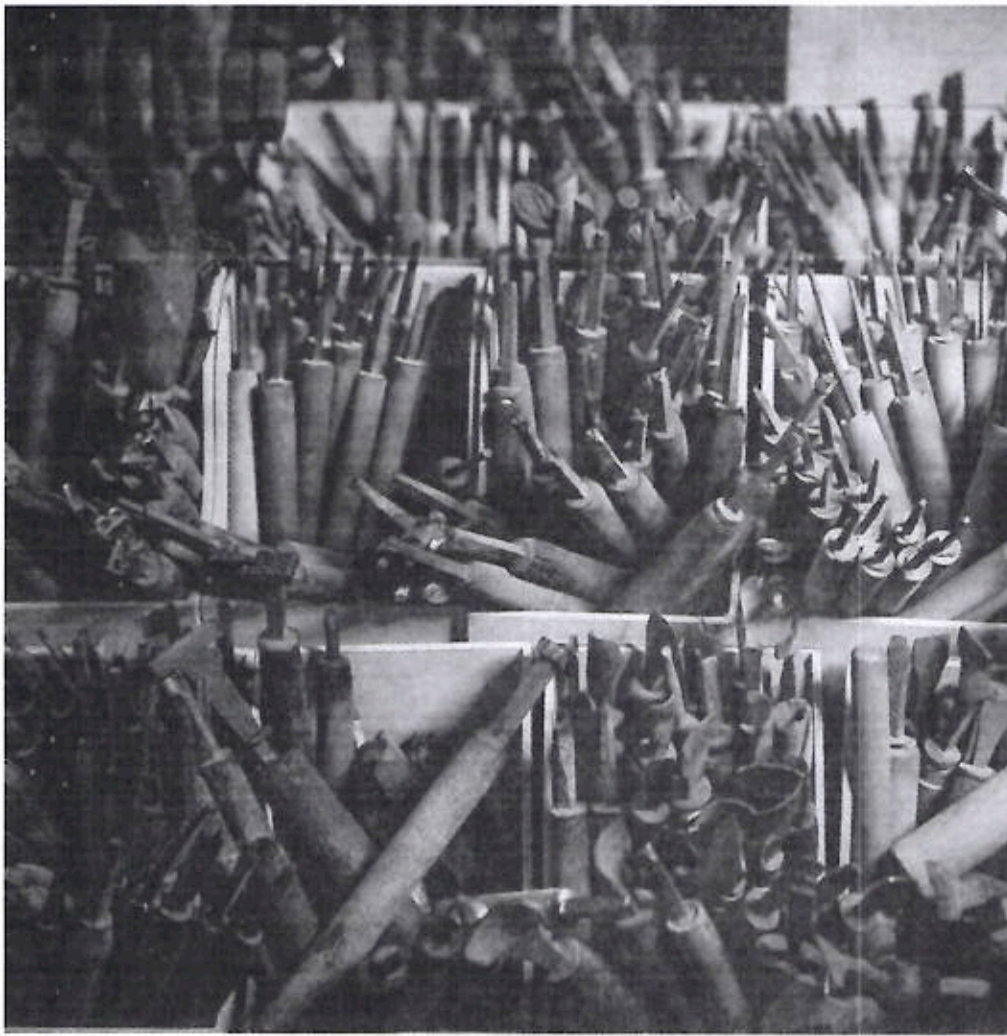
The solution is some “grit in the oyster”, a disturbance to prevent repeating the same processes for an entire career. How could he develop his repertoire? Not by taking risks with clients’ commissions, but investing his own time and materials. He reaches for a closed book and runs his fingers along the edges of the pages. It is pitted and black, as if eaten away and burnt. “I clamped it, drilled into it and daubed it with black ink. Not the kind of thing you can do with someone’s family bible unless you know it’s going to work.” Then he opens it out, and shows how the ink has seeped a few millimetres into the edge of the page, creating a dark border to better frame the printed words. “I did another by dipping it into a tank of ink.”

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The leather helmets and sword and chandelier start to make sense. Through tooling what he reductively calls “bits of dead animal” with starch glue, those relics of skin are shaped into the chattels of history, even as the relics of old buildings are being reformed into new permutations in his yard. His agenda is regeneration and, it occurs, the grand game of

cheating time.

“I can time travel,” he says, getting up. “Really.” Sliding the door of a glass cabinet, he removes one of about 100 regimented leather-spined volumes, all with a gilt-stamped leather disc hung on a ribbon. The stamp records the date of each notebook diary: this one is from 1992. He opens the volume to absorb his writings and sketches and explains that in revisiting his younger self he returns to inhabit the experience of writing and thinking — and feeling — as if time hasn’t moved on.



Finishing tools © Tom Jamieson

He then reaches for a box. Not a regular box, but a one-off composition clad in two-century-old Russian reindeer leather, the cargo of the Dutch Brigantine, *Die Frau Metta Catharina von Flensburg*, which sank on December 10 1786 halfway between St Petersburg and Genoa. In 2010 it was recovered from black mud near Raven's Cliffs off Plymouth Sound, the umber hides still supple and fragrant from tanning in birch oil. (The sale of limited quantities of this unique leather funded further excavation of the wreck.)

The corners of the box are embellished with hallmarked silver clam shells made by Gabriella Lane, the edges trimmed with braids of pearls. "I took a month off to make this, in memory of my father." The interior of this aquatic casket is lined with delicately spotted strips of eelskin. Its inhabitant is a volume of *The Tempest* clad in perch and wolf-fish leathers, and more silverwork. It evokes a holy relic.



"The Tempest" bound in fish skin © Tom Jamieson

I thought this article would be about book binding — it's instead about craft as the binding of experience. As Rookledge put it: "It's not about legacy *per se*, it's part of an engagement of moving through time."

You could, I suppose, arrive at Rook's Books with the request to bind an old book. But you may just leave with a head full of new ideas.

Every trick in the book

Faith Shannon's first memory of Christmas is waking to a collection of Beatrix Potter books strewn over her cot — "I have them still." Now 79 and living in a "Christmas-card snowy landscape" in Argyll, western Scotland, she has been working as a freelance designer bookbinder since 1963.

By the late 1970s Shannon had received an MBE for services to bookbinding and helped to restore thousands of texts at the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, following the Arno flood of 1966. She has bound books on the Booker shortlist and an album for the Queen Mother's 90th birthday.

A lecturer in bookbinding at Brighton Polytechnic in the 1980s, she recalls Gavin Rookledge was sent to her "because his tutors didn't know what to do with him". He was a free spirit, often "tongue-in-cheek" in his approach and chided by Shannon for his laxity when it came to the niceties of "fine binding". She still asks her maverick former student how his leather corners have been turned in.

Shannon also encouraged experimentalism, an approach she inherited from her tutor Kenneth Webb at Belfast College of Art. Her own work is a blend of philosophy and craftsmanship, often influenced by the geological features of Argyll. After moving to Scotland in 1987 she collaborated on *Stone*, a collection of 10 bindings that draw on the shared physicality of books and rock formations. She is drawn to books that "seem to beckon one to handle them".

Alice Troy-Donovan

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