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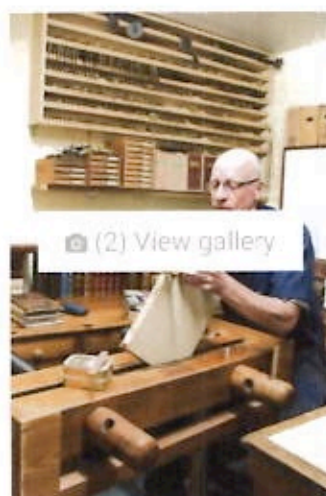
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25th October

From a passionate hobby to international recognition - Pontypool-based craftsman scoops two international awards for historic book

Free Press reporter

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A CRAFTSMAN working out of Pontypool has scooped two international awards for his work in historic bookbinding and book restoration.

Andrew Sims rebinds and restores antiquarian books at his workshop in Mamhilad and recently completed an intricate restoration of a historically important Book of Common Prayer printed in the Gaelic language in 1736.

The work won Best Historic Binding in the International Society of Bookbinders Competition 2017, and also won a separate award for the quality of the gold work, which was a key feature in the binding.

"I was delighted to be recognised for the work as it was one of the most elaborate pieces I've completed so far," said Mr Sims.

"The decorative style is known as a Scottish Wheel Binding and was prevalent on luxury Bibles and Prayer Books in 17th and 18th century Scotland.

"The gilt decoration on the leather covers is achieved by impressing heated brass hand stamps through genuine gold leaf."

As most of the original brass tools used centuries ago have been lost, the bookbinder commissioned new ones which were hand-engraved with the correct period designs.

"There were in excess of 800 individual impressions, all requiring a steady hand and a pair of strong glasses," he said.

He began bookbinding as a hobby about 15 years ago but it soon became an all-consuming passion following redundancy from his job as an industrial chemist.

With some help from a Welsh Assembly Government ReAct grant, he went on to train with a binder in Ludlow - Trevor Lloyd - on a five year mature apprenticeship.

Now self-employed, he works for rare book collectors and dealers from all over the world who send him their books for repair and restoration.

"I enjoy the work enormously but it can get quite stressful if I'm working on a particularly rare or valuable book - you do feel a tremendous sense of responsibility, not just to the owner but to the book itself. Good insurance is essential."

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Mr Sims added that in an age of digital text, he is surprised that there is still a level of interest in a skill which was more in demand in the 17th century than the modern age.

"I also get a sense of fulfilment from helping to keep alive a craft which has been in gradual decline following the introduction of machine bookbinding in the 19th century," he said.

"There's no doubt it's a very niche market but since there are a limited number of skilled practitioners worldwide, our services are in great demand by rare book connoisseurs who insist on increasingly high quality work.

"The key in this kind of business is to earn a reputation for the highest standards of craftsmanship. As that reputation grows, the volume and the value of the work coming in also grows."

Mr Sims's award-winning work will go on display at galleries in London and Bath during October and November.

For details, go to andrewsims.co.uk.

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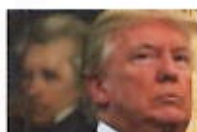
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