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Maureen bound for Winchester to receive gong

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Maureen Duke

IT doesn't sound like the most exciting profession, but being a bookbinder for 70 years has given Maureen Duke, who lives in Trotton, near Petersfield, a worldwide circle of friends, travel across the globe, and a skill she is still using at the age of 88.

In recognition of her services to the craft of bookbinding, Maureen, who grew up in Fernhurst, near Haslemere, has been awarded the British Empire Medal, which she will receive from the Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire in Winchester in May.

She decided on her future career when, after enrolling as a student at what was then Guildford

Art School, she met her “mentor”, William Matthews, who found fame in the bookbinding world.

“As soon as I was handed one of the leather-bound books he had worked on, I knew I had found my future,” she said.

After gaining her degree in 1948, Maureen returned to the family home in Fernhurst – her grandfather was the local doctor – and set up a studio/workshop in a shed in the back garden, working there as a freelance and handling a wide variety of books, some very rare volumes, or precious family heirlooms.

“You can say a book is rare but it can be rare because it is old and valuable or because it is one that is very much loved by someone.”

Maureen gained a wide reputation for her book-binding skills – she describes herself as a book binder and conservationist – and also found when asked what she did “people often replied ‘I have a Bible that needs restoring’”.

“I have had a lot of Bibles,” she laughed.

She was also called upon to teach and give lectures, and this led to travel to every part of the world except Asia, said Maureen, who is also president of the Society of Bookbinders.

At the age of 50 she was invited to teach students in Guildford, and she did so well in the job that her former students now have the honour of being able to say: “We were trained at Guildford!”

Maureen moved to her cottage in Trotton in the early 1980s and on her first morning went to a dairy farm to get milk.

“I met the farmer, Alfred Witherwick,” she said, “and although I didn’t know it then, he was to be my future husband.”

They married in 1988 and Maureen acquired a stepdaughter, Sara Tupper, who is also a bookbinder in Midhurst, and a step-grandson, Nathan, a top Formula One mechanic with Mercedes.

Her husband, in between running the farm, used to help Maureen with her work, which offered a lot of variety in the bindings she was asked to produce.

“You can bind a book in almost anything,” she said. “Once I devised concrete covers for a gardening book and during a lecture in Chicago demonstrated covering a book in thick fake fur.

"Also, I had one of the first copies of Harry Potter and bound it in snake skin with bright coloured designs and it had a clasp in the shape of a tiny sword. I gave it as a present to a small child."

Sadly, Maureen's husband died a few years ago and because of failing sight she no longer takes commissions.

"But I help out friends and people I know if they have a book that needs restoration and a little loving care," said Maureen.

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