LIFE IN A MODERN LIBRARY BINDERY

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In the year that marks the Centenary of book binding activity at Riley Dunn & Wilson's Huddersfield bindery, Charles Dunn, Sales & Marketing Director for Riley Dunn & Wilson Ltd., examines the development of this specialist industry in the context of serials preservation. Current activities and technological advances are explored as well as some of the future challenges facing the five major national commercial binding suppliers.

Your all persuasive Editor of this august journal, when inviting me to contribute an article, suggested a working title along the lines of 'the life and times of a modern journal binder'. On reflection, I rather suspect for most readers, you would regard such a headline as the beginning of an obituary entry in a long winded technical style.

This particular modern binder is far from being dead and buried, indeed at both our Huddersfield and Falkirk binderies we are just about to start a second century of production. The emphasis is clearly going to be on how our industry continues to modernise itself and take advantage of new technologies. Despite the march of progress, our aims have remained the same over the years, namely to preserve information in good condition for the end user and to aid library stock management.

With this in mind perhaps it would be more relevant to look first at 'a day in the life of a journal part' to show why binding has played an important rôle in library collection management before looking at how the binding industry has developed and what the future might hold for at least the five national commercial binders in the industry generally.

The journal's point of view

Since first being put to bed by my publisher, albeit a-fortnight late, and then consolidated by my efficient subscription agent, I started my rough and bumpy career in the information chain as I landed on the desk of my guardian in the serials office.

Immediately, I was fusssed over, with much licking of labels and special stamping. I felt especially important and highly valued, when I received my very own security trigger and barcode. How else should such a smart journal part have been treated? Within a few hours of arriving I was displayed face outwards showing my pristine covers off to all the world. It was a lonely position though, as those who have gone before were nowhere to be seen.

Over the next month my hard life really started. I was unceremoniously lifted from my lofty position and used and abused. My delicate covers were soon bent and dog eared and my
pages torn and ruffled, they even wrote all over me and folded me in half.

Eventually I was moved to be with my predecessors, packed tightly on a dusty shelf, but the use didn’t stop. Even in the summer when everyone should be on holiday I continued to be battered and bashed. They even forced me open and laid me flat onto a glass plate, inflicting me with intense light. If they carry this on I think I’ll just split in half.

Sometimes I would be left out all night or put away in completely the wrong place, which at least provided some peace the next day. Once I even got pushed so far onto the shelf that I fell down the back - they didn’t find me for weeks and I was a funny shape when they eventually pulled me out.

It turned out that my index had arrived at long last and I was now to be sent to the binders, along with the rest of my journal parts. Along with a computerised binding slip we were carefully placed in a box which was sealed up ready to be sent for some pampering and tender loving care.

Life at the bindery couldn’t have been better, although I wasn’t there very long. We had so much attention paid to us, it made us feel important again.

First, we had a thorough check up to see that we were complete and our records were pulled out. The bindery staff wanted to make sure we matched up with the other bound volumes we’d left behind and see if we needed any special treatment. The fancy computerised system told the binders everything they needed to know, including the style of binding, what colour to bind us in, which bits had to be removed to save space on the shelves when we got home and what lettering to put on our spines.

Carefully and efficiently they put us in the correct order, mended our tears and flattened our bent corners. They sewed us firmly together and put us into a hard case with fine gold lettering.

In just a few short weeks we were looking and feeling grand and even more special, ready for a new lease of life back on the library shelves. And this time they could mistreat us as much as they liked, but we would be able to stand up to it and still look good. We would never be misplaced or lost on the shelves again.
Historical perspective

The modern library binding and information preservation industry, as we know it today, would be unrecognisable one hundred years ago. The first popular part publications of the 19th century, such as Punch and The Spectator, began to be collected and bound by private collectors, learned and professional societies, museums and subscription libraries. It was mostly trade binders, acting in their capacity as print finishers, who carried this trade. Deluxe bindings in leather or buckram, often highly decorated, were produced, always by hand.

As the growth of libraries took place in the 20th century, within the academic, corporate, public, professional, government and research sectors, so the library binding specialists flourished and developed, to serve more purposefully the burgeoning need to bind the explosion of journals, reports and newspapers being published.

The greatest requirements came from the scientific, medical and technical library departments, who demanded an economical and durable binding in the shortest possible time. Library style bindings of various specifications were introduced by binders in both the commercial sector and in-house binding departments of institutions such as national libraries, universities, local authorities, government departments and even in prisons.

The library journal binder became a dedicated player in the service - highly customer focused, to deliver individual tailor-made bindings and levels of service.

Some of the principle stages of development this century include the introduction of machine sewing in the late 1920s, the use of the Dek-O-Letter machines, with Intertype composing machines in the 1950s, the development of waterproof buckram cloths and the first monthly turnaround times on consignments, in the 1960s, the use of computerised embossing machinery in the 1980s and the possibility of adhesive bound unsewn journals in the 1990s—particularly for medium term storage and narrow margined journals. All through, great emphasis has been placed on customisation, service delivery and cost control.

Current activities

Most of the modernised binderies have invested heavily in computerised or computer assisted production equipment, databases, record keeping, costings systems and accounting packages. Investment continues in the core asset of people and quality management assurance systems, as well as adhesives and other materials.

Technological advances

The rapidly changing demand for information storage and access in many libraries, together with depressed funding of traditional binding programmes, has led to the need for more market analysis and research into the current requirements for preservation products and services needed by librarians. So far the results have been inconclusive.

Good binders will continue to have a close dialogue with the library and information management community. In our case this starts with talks to LIS students, participation in conferences and exhibitions, arranging bindery tours and open days and organising and running training and awareness seminars on all aspects of information preservation. There is currently a strong need and demand for advice and guidance on disaster control management.
and disaster recovery, which has led to the formalisation of on site disaster support services.

In the mid eighties I was involved in the UKSG Serials Administration seminars and in 1988 our then Managing Director, Austin Dunn, presented a paper to the UKSG annual conference in Leeds. We have also played a role in developing the UKSG Serials Publications Guidelines and currently sit on the UK Panel, advising on the International Standard for library bindings.

We also work closely with all our suppliers and other technologically advanced binderies to ensure that our equipment, materials and service is well sourced to be the best suited for our customer needs.

The future

The UK binding and information preservation market is a continually evolving and changing one to which the binding industry must constantly respond, if it wishes to withstand the pace of change.

Already we have had to adapt to and contend with the change in demand patterns, influenced by modularisation and semesterisation of academic courses. This only serves to reduce and shift the windows of opportunity available to libraries to carry out traditional binding programmes.

More work is received these days under tendered contracts, which is usually time dated for completion and this, with other priority work, has to be produced along with normal consignments of binding. The use of temporary staff and a very flexible, highly skilled core workforce help to achieve this.

Expectations and demands for instant access to information by readers increasingly creates the need for bindery staff to retrieve articles or volumes during the binding process. Whilst this situation is always one that supports the justification and convenience of an in-house bindery or geographically local binder, modern methods of rapid communication usually overcome this potential problem.

In our company I remember vital surgical information from a journal article being faxed to a surgeon mid-way through an operation and on another occasion, burial records being read from a register, down a telephone line, to the relevant sexton. Daily, journals have to be taken out of production to satisfy the insatiable appetite of readers who want information now.

Whilst the escalation of non-paper based primary information sources to libraries will continue and the preservation of the intellectual content in secondary sources allows the original to be discarded, the need for fast efficient modern journal binding in the medium term is set to prevail.

Production methods are likely to be further refined to deliver faster and lower cost services. Specifications of library journal binding in the UK may alter quite radically if pressure from regional purchasing consortia on individual member libraries to rationalise requirements secures a foothold, or indeed if the industry takes a lead as they did in the USA.

Computer links between binderies and libraries with large binding programmes may enable more database inputting and cleansing to be carried out in the library, thus alleviating some of the more common problems and consequent delays in the binding process. In addition, electronic invoicing, which is not yet offered by UK binders, is now possible.

Many of the everyday routines and activities in a modern journal bindery, as in any serials office, are often quite repetitive and mundane, so I have not dwelt at length on these. I have tried though to focus on some of the many challenges facing our industry and feel very confident that there will be a suitable response to most of these which is both coherent and professional. I can assure you that life in a modern bindery is far from ever dull.

If you would like to delve deeper into the machinations of the modern binder you would do well to take up a delegates place on the soon to be announced UKSG organised one day seminar 'A day in the life of ... a modern binder' which is being hosted in our Huddersfield bindery this Autumn.

References


4. The United Kingdom Serials Group, Serial Publications: guidelines for good practice in publishing printed journals and other serial publications, Working group of ALPSP, ASA, SPE and UKSG, 1993, UKSG.