

# Like Topsy, It Grew!

MEMORIES OF OUR FIRST 25 YEARS

by Mike Duckworth

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## IN THE BEGINNING...

**A**lthough not a founder member of the Society of Bookbinders, my subsequent membership was to be inevitable. In 1955, already two years into my apprenticeship, I began attending evening courses at the, then, Manchester College of Science and Technology in preparation for City and Guilds qualifications, having attended a previous course for the Lancashire and Cheshire Institutes.

I had to attend in the evenings because my firm classed bookbinders (the glue brush brigade) below the more elite printers and compositors. However, despite having to travel twelve miles to and from college, I did have an advantage in the long run; lecturers who taught in the evenings were

all working craftsmen, so I learned 'straight from the horses' mouths'.

When I began, John Coleman was in his second year as Lecturer in Charge of Bookbinding. Also amongst our skilled lecturers were Arnold May, manager of the University of Manchester Library Bindery, and Arthur Durham, of Durham and Wilson in Manchester.

During the first year of our course, full time students joined us in order to complete the set projects for City and Guilds. Amongst these was one John McIntyre, who, as many of you will know, became Head of Preservation for the National Library of Scotland. Another fellow student was Roger Bolton, but more of him later!

In 1970 I joined the firm of J.F. & C. Carter of Manchester. The managing

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director, Bernard Carter, asked me, in 1972, if I would stand in as lecturer for John Coleman, whose course was now at Manchester Polytechnic. Bernard kept close ties with the Polytechnic and knew that John had been ill.

When John returned, the course split onto two sites. (Two years at Fielden Park College in Didsbury). Michael Slingsby, the lecturer at the Polytechnic, kept me on part-time until 1974, when I obtained a full time position working with John Coleman at Fielden Park, to where the whole course would later transfer. Whilst at the Polytechnic, Mike Slingsby informed me of a meeting at Fielden Park to discuss the idea of a new Bookbinders Society. This was in 1973. At that time there seemed to be a need for a society which catered for 'ordinary' bookbinders and amateur binders. Designer Bookbinders ideals, it was felt, projected different principles to those with which most binders were familiar.

Not being quite sure what my own feelings were at the time (and being involved with other interests), I did not attend the meeting.

I knew most of the people at that meeting quite well: John Coleman, Terry Walker, John McIntyre, Arnold May, Alan Taylor and Bernard Carter, along with Eric Podmore.

Recently I was informed that some members were questioning the date of our Society's founding. Let me put their minds at rest: before leaving J.F. & C. Carter's in 1974, Eric Podmore, the Bindery Manager, came into my office to ask my opinion on something. He had some photocopy images of book ends, which he had juggled around into various configurations. We both agreed that the one he had chosen would be the one we are now familiar with as our Society logo. Eric had offered to design a letterhead following the founding meeting. This logo has survived and at our 21st Anniversary Dinner, a logo-shaped cake was cut by John Coleman and John Mitchell. In the early years we had silk ties bearing the device, and later aprons.

When I joined the Society, John Coleman was President, Terry Walker was Chairman, Cyril Formby was Vice Chairman and John McIntyre was the Secretary. Eric Podmore was the Assistant Secretary and Norman

Wilson of Durham & Wilson, Treasurer. You can now see why it was inevitable that I would become a member.

It may have been late 1975 or early 1976 when I joined the Society. I cannot be sure. I do have a membership certificate signed by John McIntyre but it bears no date!

Alan Taylor, who was manager of the Manchester Central Library Bindery, arranged for us to use the staff meeting room (known as the 'Book Trough'). Meetings were held monthly to hear invited speakers or see members' demonstrations. By the end of our meetings the library was closed and we had to leave via the book stacks and the delivery



entrance. Some evenings our enthusiasm and discussions meant that we overstayed our welcome. This may have been the cause of the security problems which lost us the use of this ideal venue some years later.

One of my part-time students informed us of the availability of the Friends Meeting House in Stockport. In the period prior to this we met at a Stockport library for a short time.

My first contribution to the society was an article dealing with the history and methods of marbling. This appeared in a journal edited by John Woodhouse of the Manchester University Bindery. John is currently the manager of what is now the John Rylands University of Manchester Library Bindery. Later I gave my first demonstration to the Society, 'Headbands and Their Construction'. Eventually I was responsible for organising meetings until we moved to Stockport.

## THE JOURNAL

My first involvement with the National Council was at an Annual General Meeting in Prestwich, Manchester in 1986. During this meeting I was foolish enough to ask why we had lost the journal edited by Geoff Brown. I felt that the circulated newsletter was inappropriate to a developing National Society. The reply came, I think, from the Chairman, Brian Edwards, who had just taken over from Terry Walker. He suggested that I help put together a professional journal. Following this, a number of us retired into a corner to set up a Journal Committee. Volume 1 of 'Bookbinder' subsequently appeared in 1987 under the editorship of William Bull, with John McIntyre, Brian Edwards and myself making up the editorial committee.



John Coleman had retired as President after eleven years and K. Russell of the British Library was elected for a short period until the election of William Bull, who proved to be a very valuable asset to our society.

Philip Brooks was at this time our National Treasurer and our Secretary was June Peterson of Dunblane. By the time Bookbinder appeared I was Assistant Secretary. Bookbinder meetings were held first at the India Office in London and then later in Bonnington's Hotel lounge. Bonnington's is just a few doors away from Falkiners in Long Acre, London. This venue was worth the trip to London (no expenses then!) as the British Library was just down the street and that other ancient institution, Mr. Lawrence's establishment, was in Bleeding Heart Yard. At our first editorial meeting we tried to lay down definite standards to follow. Paper was

to be acid free, sections were to be sewn, the type face was to be Baskerville (later adopted as our standard for the society), columns were to be double and text was to be kept separate from advertisements.

All articles received were photocopied and circulated around the committee for scrutiny; a procedure which worked quite well. However, on one occasion I returned my own notes with a label pasted over the envelope and the label came off. William Bull praised my ideals but said that PVA would have been acceptable in this case! William Bull and Brian Edwards took much of the responsibility for 'putting the Bookbinder to bed' at the printers.



## THE NEWSLETTER

At the Nottingham conference in 1989 Frank Hippman held a meeting to which, as the current National Chairman, I was invited. From this came Frank's wonderful Newsletter, which filled the gap between issues of Bookbinder beautifully. Editorship of the Newsletter has now passed to Jenny Codrington who is already carrying the torch admirably.

## UNREST

The year 1987 saw major problems arising within the Society. These stemmed, I believe, from the inability of all our regions to keep in touch by attending council meetings due to their 'scattered' nature.

Council learned that a very small number of members in the south wished to reform the Society. This came to my notice when a

member in the Midlands Region rang me, as Assistant Secretary, to say that he had been approached to join them. The request had, in fact, come from a founder member. Council saw the danger of this situation. If this were not 'nipped in the bud' we would end up with a London-biased society, thus losing the valuable regional structure which we had built up. It was decided to confront the few members who were not satisfied with the society as it was, at an 'open' meeting in London (using up vital funds in the process).

This meeting was held at the London College of Printing. As I was not known to the people involved, I was asked to act as secretary. I accepted, as I knew that any

term was due because of some ill feeling within the Council. Two members who had contributed so much to the society during our difficulties, were now being treated rather badly. This may help to set the record straight, as the minutes reported that I left due to pressure of work! Maureen Duke stepped in as Acting Chairman until her election as permanent Chairman.

Because William Bull and Brian Edwards had left the editorial board of Bookbinder, it was assumed that I had also stepped down. As I was not approached to continue, my connection with Bookbinder came to an end. Ron Clarke stepped in to take on the onerous task of editor as well as that of National Treasurer. Over the years Ron has taught us that our society cannot survive on enthusiasm alone; it also needs a healthy bank balance.



*Messrs McIntyre, Edwards, Duckworth and Bull at an early editorial meeting*

disruption of our society would come as a great disappointment to my friend and colleague John Coleman. John had made it an important part of his life's work, as we know. It was a make-or-break meeting as central funds were very low at this point. I was most gratified to leave the meeting knowing that we had a satisfactory outcome and that we could 'get back on the rails' again.

To rectify the problems we eventually began holding our Council meetings in Birmingham. Although we had tried to move around to different areas, we still had a similar problem. Although Birmingham was not the centre of Britain as far as our Scottish members were concerned, it was easily accessible by road and rail. Luckily our Scottish Chairman at the time (Tom Valentine) had relatives in the Midlands!

My Chairmanship of the society ended in 1989. I left office before the end of my

## REGIONS

Our society's strength relies heavily on our regional structure, as we know. To set up a society and then form regions later would prove difficult. In our case, the regions were part of a fortunate accident. Much of this was due to the late William Tomlinson, who's widow, Dorothy, is now Chairman of the North West Region. Bill travelled around the country selling second hand equipment and bookbinding materials. He was also known via his long connection with the Winterbottom Bookcloth Company. As he moved around, Bill would mention the Society and encourage people to 'get together' in their own area and join us. In other words, groups elected to join us, rather than central Council setting up regions.

However, not all of our regions were formed at the beginning; some have evolved as our membership has grown. It was interesting to note that when Paul Delrue left Wales for Chester, we saw the region move with him and become Chester and North Wales!

Following the aforementioned problems in 1987, everyone tried to bring in more members to swell the funds. The North West Region was expanded with my own evening

25 YEARS OF	PRESIDENTS &	CHAIRMEN
1974 - 1984	John Coleman	Terry Walker
1985	Roy Russell	Brian Edwards
1986	William Bull	Brian Edwards
1987 - 1989	William Bull	Mike Duckworth
1990	John Newton	Mike Duckworth
1991 - 1993	John Newton	Maureen Duke
1994	George Barlee	Maureen Duke
1995 - 1996	George Barlee	John Mitchell
1997	George Barlee	Tony Ward
1998 - 1999	Malcolm Lamb	Tony Ward

class students. Having relatives in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, I occasionally paid visits to the University Bindery where Derek Bradford ran classes in Bookbinding. Due to the enthusiasm shown by Derek and his class, I was invited to speak at one of their meetings. They subsequently joined the North West region but, as this was geographically rather inconvenient, they later formed their own North East Region. This also encompassed York, where Trevor Jones had built up enthusiasm for the society.

## CONFERENCES

Our regions were a great asset in the organisation of the Conferences, the first of which was held in 1977. These now prompt some friendly rivalry between our regions, each trying to improve on the last (and succeeding!) My happy memories of conferences are many. For example, who will forget the medieval banquet at Nottingham, when binders were bold and mead ran free! Or perhaps my own memory of walking up Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh in the early mornings before breakfast.

1977	Owen's Park College, Manchester
1979	Owen's Park College, Manchester
1981	University of Bath
1983	Ralph West Hall of Residence, London
1985	Pollock Halls, University of Edinburgh
1987	Chester College
1989	Derby Hall, University of Nottingham
1991	University of Surrey, Guildford
1993	Churchill Hall, University of Bristol
1995	Weston Conference Centre, UMIST, Manchester
1997	St. Aidan's College, University of Durham
1999	University of Shropshire, Priorslee, Telford

Our conferences have also served to bring together both of our National Societies, members of Designer Bookbinders having been delegates and demonstrators. Perhaps because of these close links, I joined the DBs myself. We find many names duplicated in the membership lists.

At the Manchester Conference I came to realise what a small world we bookbinders live in. When I ran a small workshop in the Portico library in Manchester, we had help from volunteers. One of those volunteers was Donald Beswick who was to emigrate to California. To my great delight and surprise he made the trip to attend the conference.

Another complete surprise was a fellow student from my college days, Roger Bolton. He appeared complete with a photograph of our zany group from all those years ago. Roger now runs the Brenthurst Library Bindery in Johannesburg. He visited us again in 1999.

Most societies' Annual General Meetings are poorly attended. However, we managed to overcome this due to the organisational capabilities of Gina Isaac, our National Secretary from 1988 to 1998. Meetings were held at places of historical interest, usually with a library and often with free access to the collections. Venues such as Longleat and Chatsworth are amongst the most memorable.

The society has also sought to bring the trade suppliers together for our Trade Fairs. These began their life in the West Region and later joined the conferences. It now seems to have become general practice to elect our Presidents from the trade suppliers. From the success of the Trade Fairs we have gained the respect and help of the industry.

## COMPETITION

We have also received sponsorship from some of the suppliers for our binding competitions. Sponsorship has also come in from private sources such as Mr. Paul Getty Junior, who has a fine library and a keen interest in our craft. We must not forget the trust set up by Mrs. Portnall in memory of her son and late husband. Originally

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organised by Jill Sellars and now under Brian Edwards, high standards are being set in the competition. Unfortunately we are still lacking in young entrants but entries from students and members both here and abroad are increasing.



## EDUCATION

Due to my past experience as a lecturer and assessor for City and Guilds, I have retained a keen interest in education. It is no surprise then, that I have chaired the Education Committee and am still a member. This is an area in which we can play a major roll and I hope we can see an expansion of this in the future. Nick Cowlshaw, the present chairman, has arranged a summer school and the committee has produced two training leaflets to date, with another due shortly.

## REFLECTION

Much of my enjoyment as a member of The Society of Bookbinders has come from travelling to various areas to give talks and demonstrations of our craft. To me these provide interesting feedback; we can always learn from the experience of others. I have also had the opportunity to pass on useful tips which we have all learned over the years. To meet members of our regions

and discuss their aims and see how they see the society, is an added bonus for me.

Space does not permit me to mention the names of all those members who have done so much to further the growth of our society, both in Council and in the regions.

*This account is written from memory as all my correspondence and meeting minutes etc. have been passed on to Helen Kendal. Helen has now taken on the vital role as our archivist. As most of our earlier records have been lost, it is important that all records should now be preserved for the use of future researchers.*

*Our membership now wavers around the 600 mark and there have been some very rewarding changes taking place. The society now has charity status and, thanks to Keith Clayton, we are on the internet. Entries for our Jubilee Competition have been given exhibition space at The Barbican Centre in London. Exhibitions such as this will, I feel, give us a wider audience and help people gain a better understanding of our craft. We can now look forward to the continuation of this progress in the new millennium.*

*As Brian Edwards once said when introducing a talk which I gave, "We began in a small way but, like Topsy, we grew!"*

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• **Mike Duckworth** was apprenticed as a bookbinder from 1953 to 1959 and worked in the trade until 1974 as a bookbinder, paper buyer and bindery manager. He lectured in bookbinding and print finishing full time from 1974 until early retirement in 1990. Since then he has worked privately as a binder and conservator.

Mike is a member of Designer Bookbinders and Chairman of the North West Society for Care and Conservation of Documents (NWCARE). He was a City & Guilds assessor from 1989 until retirement in 1997.