

Andrew Honey reviews

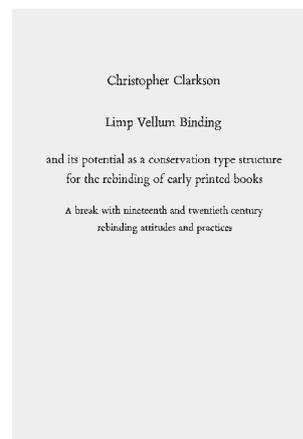
Limp Vellum Binding and Its Potential as a Conservation Type Structure for the Rebinding of Early Printed Books; A Break with Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Rebinding Attitudes and Practices. By CHRISTOPHER CLARKSON. Oxford: published by the author. 2005. 23 pp. £24.00. ISBN 0-9950070.

Being asked to review the new edition of Chris Clarkson's *Limp Vellum Binding* is something of a humbling experience. The publication has stood as a foundation document in the literature of book conservation since its publication in 1975 and was one of the first things I read when starting to train as a book conservator. Later, when I studied under Chris at West Dean College, I came to know more of its background and its importance to me as a practising conservator has steadily grown over the years. It was first published as a conference paper in 1975, then in book form by Michael Gullick's Red Gull Press in an edition of 200 in 1982.^{1, 2} This handsomely produced private press edition sold out within



Fig. 1 *Limp Vellum Report*, with models, photographs, material samples.

Fig. 2 *Limp Vellum Report*, models.



six months and many younger conservators, myself included, have up to now only known it as a photocopy. This new edition is therefore welcome but can my review say anything new about it? The importance of and enduring demand for this work might seem unusual – it is a slim volume on a subject which would seem to have a narrow appeal – but its appeal derives not from it being a ‘how-to’ manual for limp vellum binding, but from the second part of its title, ‘a break with . . . rebinding attitudes and practices’. It was one of the first attempts to codify the lessons that were learnt following the disastrous 1966 Florence flood for the emerging discipline of book conservation and although the work grew out of the need to rebind many flood-damaged early printed text-blocks in Florence, its lasting importance is due to the fresh approaches that it took to these problems.

When I arrived as an intern at West Dean College I soon noticed a large wooden cabinet with a label marked ‘LIMP VELLUM BINDING | A STUDY BY C. CLARKSON’ in the studio. The door to this box of delights opened to reveal the report, a three-volume typescript, a box of over 1000 mounted black and white photographs, six 8 mm films, 25 models, and six swatches of 58 vellum and alum-tawed samples (Figs. 1, 2). The *Limp Vellum Report* as it was known was used constantly by Chris in his teaching and was returned to again and again to help explain points of structure, technique, and materials. This report formed the basis for the work under review and its history is not, I think, widely known. The damage left in Florence after the Arno burst its banks on 4 November 1966 was immense and many conservators from across the world were quickly mobilized into teams to help. Chris arrived later that month and joined the British team that worked at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (BNCF) and, as he writes in the section ‘Abstract’ in *Limp Vellum Binding*, his awareness of, and investigations into, the potential of limp-vellum structures were positive results of the flood (p.1).

By early 1967, Clarkson was becoming aware that certain early sixteenth-century limp-vellum structures had survived 400 years of use, a damaging flood, and subsequent kiln drying in remarkable condition. His researches which followed from 1967–1972 into these bindings, their materials, and the potential that they offered for the rebinding of the flood-damaged material culminated

in the *Limp Vellum Report*. The report was largely written in Florence and draws on the research and methods that were developed there but it was completed with a grant from The Council of Library Resources after Chris moved to Washington D.C. in 1972. The Council initially housed the report though it was returned to Chris after Vernon Clapp ceased to be the Council's director.

A rather more unusual influence on the report and in turn on *Limp Vellum Binding* was the *Reader's Digest Complete Do-it-Yourself Manual* published in 1969.³ The innovation of this manual was its form, comprising two books in the form of loose leaf cards housed in a wallet of facing ring-binders. The first book covers techniques and the second projects, and as the contents page of the project section explains 'whatever the skill required, it is explained in the Techniques section pages, to which cross-reference is made'. The introduction expands on this, explaining that 'the manual is something more than a handbook of repairs: it is a graphic encyclopaedia of the techniques, crafts and tricks of the trade'; this two-fold approach of techniques and projects had a lasting effect on Chris and he saw his report as the first step towards a book conservation workshop manual, though in his case with an added third section, for 'materials'. The report makes use of a range of methods to convey its many messages; text, diagrams, record photographs as well as series of photographs of processes and techniques, a range of models including the three 'demonstration tactile samples' which explain the importance of back-tie-down structural endbands by emphasizing the features of three endbands at large scale, and finally the moving films. All of these methods reiterated and reinforced the complex message that Chris was stating and helped to change the focus of bookbinding and book repair in the emerging discipline of book conservation. This is the 'break with nineteenth and twentieth century rebinding attitudes and practices' of the title, a move away from an emphasis on decoration towards a full understanding of the qualities of structure, materials, and techniques demonstrated by early bindings. In addition to the report, a separate film was shot at Roger Powell's studio in 1970/1 where Chris was binding many volumes using these new and rediscovered techniques for the BNCF.

Limp Vellum Binding stands as a distillation of this ground-breaking research, succinctly laid out in 23 pages. The work has three main sections: an introduction and historical background, technical innovations in brief, and materials. For this new edition the text has been reproduced from the *Red Gull Press* edition of 1982, with additional footnotes, and with a new six-page introduction placing this work in context and explaining the work done by others on materials. This might seem a slight work, but

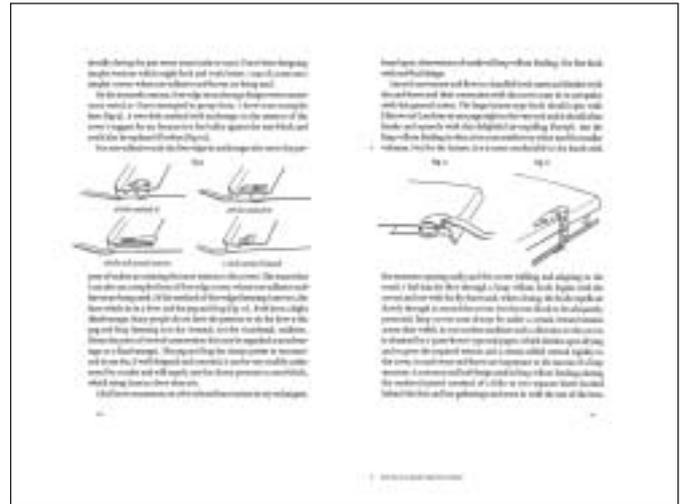


Fig. 3 *Limp Vellum Binding*, fore-edge closure illustrations (pp. 10–11).

within each section Chris articulates some of the fundamental concepts of book conservation, such as the importance of sewing, structural primary endbands, non-adhesive structures, and the careful choice and manipulation of materials. In many ways this work has not been superseded and remains a cornerstone of our discipline. It uses detailed observation of early bindings intimately linked with descriptions of technique for the practising conservator. The text has 20 clear line drawings by the author, helping to convey ideas that cannot be clearly expressed verbally (Fig. 3). The final appendix, a large illustration keyed to the terminology used in the text, is based on a wall chart produced by Chris in Florence. The new footnotes and changes from the 1975 and 1982 editions, point to Chris's continued work on this text. They may seem to be small changes in terminology but to my mind they show important refinements and a desire to achieve greater clarity of thought. I have enjoyed rereading this work and it has made me realize afresh that this remains a key work not only for book conservators, but for all those interested in the history of the book. Though it was the first work that Chris published, it remains the stem on which all of his later publications have been grafted. The new introduction states that the 1970/1 film will soon be available as a DVD; it will make a wonderful partner to this work.

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[There is no commercial distributor of this work. Readers wishing to obtain a copy should contact the author by email: c.clarkson@bindery.freeserve.co.uk—Ed.]

1 Clarkson, Christopher, 'Limp vellum binding and its potential as a conservation type structure for the rebinding of early printed books; A break with 19th and 20th century rebinding attitudes and practices', ICOM Preprints: 4th Triennial Meeting, Venice, 13–18 October 1975 (Paris: ICOM Committee for Conservation, 1975) 15/3–1–15.

2 Clarkson, Christopher, *Limp Vellum Binding and Its Potential as a Conservation Type Structure for the Rebinding of Early Printed Books; A Break with Nineteenth and Twentieth century Rebinding Attitudes and Practices* (Hitchin: Red Gull Press, 1982). Reviewed by Guy Petherbridge in *Fine Print* 11/2 (1985) 107–8.

3 The 'Reader's Digest' *Complete Do it Yourself Manual* (London: Reader's Digest Association, 1969), book 2, contents page & book 1, 3.