

## The Art of Bookbinding: Irish Farmer's Journal

A leather bound book doesn't just 'happen' to have five raised bands on the spine. If it has an unusually long spine it could be permitted to have six, but five is correct... such is tradition.

Gerry Kenny's Book Bindery in Salthill, Galway, is a time-warp of tradition. Books began when the docex or manuscript sheets started to replace the scroll and had to be kept together. The art of doing this with highly decorated leather was first practised by the Coptic Church in Egypt, and became common with the 15th century development of printing. Gerry continues the craft of leatherbinding books by hand, in tandem with using modern methods for binding paperbacks, thesis and ring binders.

He can re-cover an old volume, find bind special editions, or prepare a presentation book. The client can choose to have a book fully bound in leather, quarter bound (the spine and corners), where the rest of the cover might be hand-marbled paper or buckram (linen or cotton stiffened with size).

The sheets come from the printer in sections, or signatures, often folded into 64 pages, or two 32-page sections, these are side sewn on a machine that will stitch each section to the next, holding them together. Then they are hand sewn on recessed cord; a more expensive process would be to hand sew the spine with a raised cord which would subsequently be laced into the side boards.

The book is trimmed in preparation for being gilt on three edges with gold foil, which is applied with heat and a little size. Gilt helps to prevent the pages of the book from becoming dusty. Clamping the volume in another machine, it is hammered gently making the spine rounded and 'oined' (a groove is made along the spine to the thickness of the boards used for the cover.) The headband is hand sewn on with brightly coloured silks toning with the leather and end papers already selected; this is to strengthen the spine protecting it from the tendency to yank a book off the shelf.

A piece of light card is turned over to form a to be and glued on the spine of the volume; five raised bands of narrow leather strips are glued on to this (where raised cord was sewn in, these are not necessary) Traditionally either calf or goat skin is used, cut to size with a clip knife and 'skived' or pared down, so that it will turn neatly over the edges. Mill board is used for leatherbound books, and strawboard for cloth; the board has had a piece of light card glued to the inside to help counteract the 'pull' of the newly-stretched leather. A more expensive finish would be to bevel three edges of the board. The leather is pasted onto the board and eased over the raised bands which are firmly brought into profile using a pliers.

The leather is stretched inside, over the tubular spine and the edges of the side boards, carefully folding the corners, using a bone tool to 'bone it in'. The volume is left overnight in a press to prevent the leather warping the boards. The next day the end papers are put in, and it is replaced in the press for a week. Tooling is done with 22 carat gold, using heated brass tools, and letters.

It has taken Gerry years to gather together his collection of typefaces and curlicues for the finishing... the gold leaf is very expensive, so the amount of tooling is at the client's discretion. Covetously I admired the craftsmanship of volume after volume... and went home to look more closely at some times that have descended to me through the family.