Repairing a Geneva Bible (1592)

Glenn Malkin – Signature Bindings

This Bible is a family Bible and the client wanted it restored to useable condition so it could be passed on to future generations. Dating from 1592, it also had some historical significance. However, for some time it had languished in a damp garage, and consequently was in very poor shape.

The Bible had its original leather covers with much of its original brass work present (though heavily worn). At some time during the early 19th century, it appears that one of the joints failed and one of the boards became detached. This was repaired at the time by adding a new vellum spine which was attached to the thick boards by means of brass strips and hand-made nails. The corner of both of the boards was badly damaged with one almost being severed. The pastedown on the front cover included inscriptions and these needed to be retained.

Partly due to the damp nature of the conditions the Bible had been kept in, the backbone of the book block had deteriorated significantly. As can be seen from the photo, the pages at the spine edge were heavily damaged with many of the gutters partially or wholly missing. All these would need to be repaired or replaced.

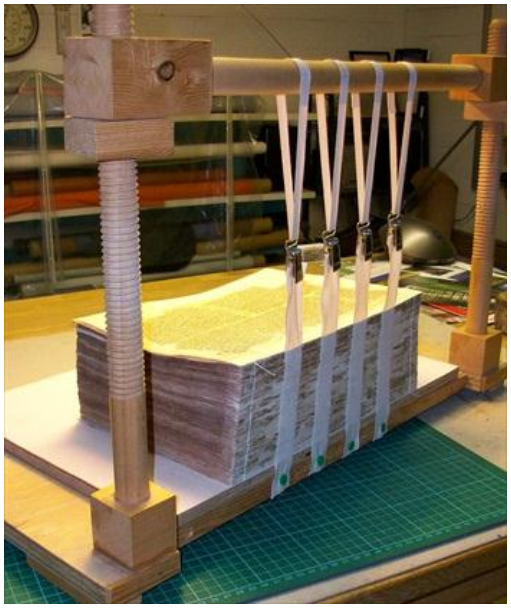
The first action was to take the Bible apart. The covers were removed and the pages inspected to note any missing leaves. It was noted that the book was constructed in sections of three sheets (forming six leaves). At over 700 pages, that meant there were around 120 sections to repair and re-sew. Some of the pages were also mis-numbered, so care had to be taken to ensure the sections were maintained into their correct order. A number of pages, including the frontispiece, were missing. These had to be replaced and an order was submitted to The British Library for scans of the missing pages from a copy of this Bible they hold in their rare books collection.

Repairing the Sections

Every folio (folded sheet) in the book needed its gutter replacing or repairing. Each one was carefully opened, lightly brushed clean, any remains of original thread removed and then positioned on a board for repair. A narrow strip of Japanese tissue (a thin but very strong paper) was pasted across the gutter area to replace lost paper and to offer a strong point for re-sewing. Interestingly, most of the rest of the paper remained strong with just occasional tears and a few areas of loss. These areas of loss also needed replacing. Where the loss was significant, it was replaced with a copy of the original page (taken from a British Library scan printed onto suitable hand-made paper).

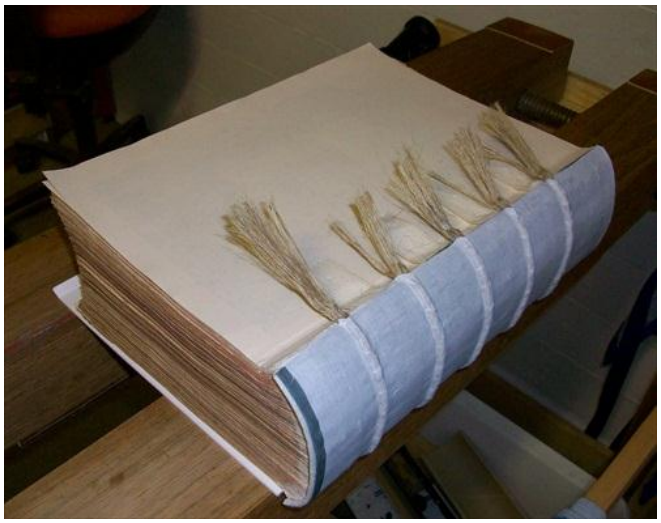
Smaller losses were replaced with blank hand-made paper. Tears were repaired using heat set tissue – a thin tissue with a heat sensitive adhesive which forms a strong bond to the original paper.

With over 700 pages to repair in this way, this was by far the longest part of the repair process and took several months to complete.



Once the pages had been repaired, they were re-collated into their sections and stacked ready for re-sewing. Because each page had been given additional thickness near the spine edge due to the added tissue, the text block was pressed and left under weight for some time to try and minimise the effect of swell at the spine. This could never be eliminated, but needed to be reduced to an acceptable level before re-binding.

The text block was then re-sewn by hand onto four wide linen tapes. The spine between the tapes was lined with strips of hand-made paper pasted into position to strengthen the backbone and also provide a reversible barrier between the original text block and subsequent spine linings, should the work ever have to be removed for any reason. Originally, the Bible was sewn onto cords, but it was decided to use tapes to secure the textblock given the weakness of the paper. Nevertheless, five cords were subsequently sewn into the original positions giving the raised bands to the spine, in line with the original binding, and these were subsequently used to attach the boards to the book block in the traditional style, supported on the inside by the tapes. (It appeared from the remains of the original cords visible in the boards that these may actually have been leather thongs. The replacement cords however were hemp.)



The spine was then lined with archival kraft paper and then linen.

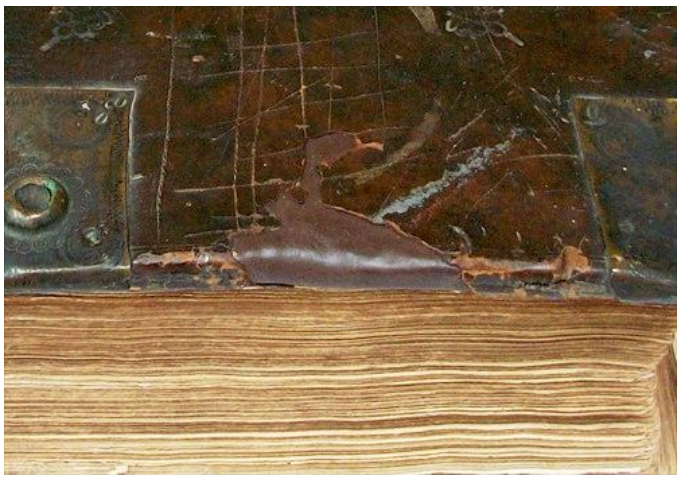
Repairing and Re-attaching the Boards.

The boards were in a very poor state. They were paste boards, made from gluing together lots of sheets of low quality paper and pressed to make a thick board. However, now they were very pulpy and both boards had severe cracks across one corner. There was also some loss of board along one edge. The original leather was still largely present though the brass-work was in poor repair, probably through general shelf wear. There were several sheets of hand-made paper stuck lightly to the inside of each board forming pastedowns. Some of these were undoubtedly added at some stage during the later life of the Bible since there were some minor inscriptions and signatures on one or two of the lower sheets (though it is just possible these were contemporary waste paper sheets being re-used by the original binder).

Firstly the cracks across the corners of both boards were repaired by the plentiful application of paste and where appropriate the addition of shredded hand-made paper to replace loss and level the surface. These were then kept under weight for several days until solid. The loss on the edge of one board was repaired in a similar way. This was then lightly sanded into shape when dry.

Prior to this, the endpapers had been lifted as much as possible. It wasn't feasible to soak the papers off since the soft boards would have reacted badly. However, the key leaves were lifted dry so the inscriptions could be read and retained.

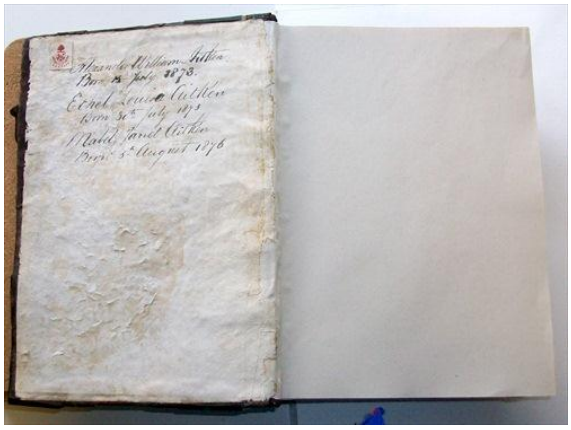
Once the boards had been repaired, any significant loss of leather was replaced by suitably dyed new calf.



The 19th Century vellum repair was removed but the brass strips which secured it were retained as to try and remove them would probably have caused more damage to the boards. Although the original leather spine was still present, it was in a very poor state and showed no gold tooling or titling. It was therefore decided to remove this and simply add a new calf spine. The original spine was retained to be kept with the Bible once it was returned to the client.

Following lining with new hand-made paper, the boards were re-attached by creating new holes along the spine edges and threading the new cords into them. The cords were then spread out and glued into position on the inside of the boards. The sewing tapes were also glued into position on the inside of the boards to give extra strength to the hinges.

The new calf spine was added at this point, secured under the edge of the original calf on the boards. The raised bands on the spine were worked and simple blind tooling applied in the style of the original spine. A new cloth joint was then applied on top of a new endpaper, adding further strength to the hinge and to mask the cords and tapes. Prior to a new pastedown being added.



Ultimately a new endpaper and pastedown sheet was added to mask the cloth hinge. And the original inscribed pastedown was re-positioned.

A cloth covered drop-back box was finally made for the Bible to protect it from further damage and to enable it to be handed on safely to future generations – perhaps for another 400 years?

Conclusion
This was a significant and time consuming project, but very worthwhile and very satisfying - not just because the Bible was so old but because it meant so much to the client and their family history. The client was thrilled with the result, and my thanks go to them for allowing me to use their Bible in this case study.

For further information, contact Glenn Malkin at www.signaturebindings.co.uk.