

Obituary: Christopher Clarkson

Submitted by bborghese on 13 Apr 2017

Christopher Clarkson, who died just before midnight on Thursday 30 March 2017 at the age of 79, was the pre-eminent conservator of medieval manuscripts and early printed books and a much-respected historian of book-binding and in particular of the structural history of bookbinding, specializing in the period from the birth of the codex to the early Renaissance. From an early training in design and the graphic arts and without a university education, he made himself, by virtue of his manual skills and a single-minded dedication to his craft, the pre-eminent conservator of early books, equipped with a deep knowledge of the materials used to make them and the techniques used in their construction. He was born in on 19 November, 1938 in Blackheath, the son of Victor and Kathleen Ruth (née Hopgood). He was not a strong child, having been born with a hole in his heart, and only went to school when he was seven. It was at school that one of his teachers suggested that he should go to art classes at the Whitechapel Art Gallery on his Saturday mornings, which led, at the age of thirteen, to his being sent to the Junior Art School at the Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts. There the curriculum was dominated by painting and painting techniques, drawing and all the graphic reproductive methods, with one day a week only given to other subjects. When he was only fifteen, he moved on to the Senior Art School and developed an abiding interest in medieval architecture, heraldry and brass rubbing, touring around southern England on his bicycle, making drawings and taking photographs. At seventeen he gained his National Diploma in Design – and took a part-time position at Camberwell assisting Frank Martin in teaching wood-engraving and lettering and writing and illuminating under Vernon Shearer. He took on various commissions for lettering, on seeing some of which the typographic designer, Berthold Wolpe suggested he apply for a place at the Royal College of Art, as a result of which he studied there from 1960 to 1963. While there, he one day found an apparently empty room in which to do some work which happened to have some bookbindings in it, and was soon discovered there by Peter Waters, then working with Roger Powell and teaching bookbinding one day a week at the RCA. As result of this encounter, Chris added 'Fine Binding' to his studies for his last two years. He was not allowed to give up his other studies and had to complete twelve bindings for his final diploma show in addition to his other work, as well as studying bookbinding history, helping Howard Nixon at the British Museum with his bookbinding rubbings project and going to evening classes with George Frewin at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. His encounter with Peter Waters was soon to take him to Florence and then to Washington, but before that, with the help of a Minor Travelling Scholarship from the RCA, he travelled in Europe, getting as far as Crete (he found it too hot in Greece), where his intention of walking around the island was discouraged by a local inhabitant, who provided him with a donkey by way of transport. He graduated from the RCA with an ARCA Diploma in Graphic Art in 1963 and was invited by Jeff Clements to teach graphic design, wood engraving, writing and illuminating, letter cutting and 'fine' bookbinding to diploma level at the Plymouth School of Art and Design. After that, in 1964/5, he went on to work under Tony Cains at Douglas

Cockerell & Son (run by Sydney (Sandy) M. Cockerell) in Grantchester, outside Cambridge to learn more about the repair of early printed books and manuscripts, and later with Roger Powell in Froxfield, Hampshire. At some point in and amongst these other activities, he developed a keen interest in origami. Late in 1966 he was invited by Tony Cains to join the English Government team in Florence after the devastating flood of 4 November, to work with him, Peter Waters, Don Etherington and Roger and Rita Powell as they began to work with the international teams assembling to rescue the millions of books that had been damaged by water, mud, sewage and oil. On arrival, Chris was put in charge of the many volunteers at the Florence Railway Power Station, where books were being washed and dried. They subsequently moved into the workshop created in the main reading rooms of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (BNCF), where he worked on devising treatment protocols as well as supervising and teaching volunteers and students carrying out basic treatment procedures. His growing awareness of the importance of the bindings, not only as examples of a medieval craft, but also as part the history of each book began to inform his approach to their repair. As a result, he began to train selected volunteers and binding staff in the application of approaches to book restoration based on those being established in painting conservation. It was therefore in Florence that he began to formulate, along with the other bookbinders with whom he was working, the principles of what became known as 'book conservation' (a phrase he coined), as opposed to the simple repair of books without reference to the historical and archaeological significance of their bindings. He also started to note the strengths and weaknesses of the various types of binding structures on the books they were working on and began to question why so many limp binding structures had survived intact when other binding types had suffered badly. He went on to develop methods of limp vellum binding based on late medieval examples that he had seen in Florence. By 1971, Frazer Poole, who had visited the BNCF, had taken Peter Waters and Don Etherington to Washington to work at the Library of Congress. Chris continued to repair books from Florence in Roger Powell's workshop in Hampshire, but by January 1972, with his newly-married wife, Oonagh O'Donoghue, (they were married in September 1971), he joined Peter Waters and Don Etherington in Washington, where he was made Head of Rare Book Preservation. He developed a section devoted to the conservation and treatment of the rare book and special collection material within the Library and was closely involved in designing the first library and archive preservation and treatment programmes. This included radical thinking about collection care, which included designing different types of protective enclosures (the now ubiquitous 'phase box' temporary wrapper was one of these) and setting up survey programmes within the collections. With Don Etherington's help, he worked with suppliers and manufacturers to achieve the high standards in materials required for conservation purposes, a concern that remained with him throughout his working life. With the exhibition department, he pioneered the use of Plexiglas to create the first plastic book cradles designed to support and protect books on display in exhibitions. At the same time, he continued his research on binding structures and past repair techniques, and finished a detailed report on Limp Vellum Binding which was sadly never published, though the film made to accompany it does survive, and he published his paper entitled 'Limp Vellum Binding' in 1985 (a revised edition was published in 2005). For the National Gallery of Art, Chris was approached to work on the housing and display of the Rosenwald collection of miniatures cut out of medieval manuscripts. The thread mounting technique that he invented for this purpose utilizes the principle that twisted thread shortens and lengthens in environmental fluctuation in the opposite way to the expansion and contraction of parchment in the same conditions. This work culminated in a small, jewel-like exhibition at the Gallery. He also worked on the Freer Gallery's collection of

Islamic manuscript fragments. In 1977, he accepted a position at The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, where he was the first conservator of their manuscript collection. He set up a small workshop and also helped Lilian Randall write the codicological and binding descriptions in their new manuscript catalogue "Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery". In 1979 Chris moved back to England to accept a post as the first Conservation Technical Officer at the Bodleian Library in Oxford. With Michael Turner as Head of Conservation and Judy Segal as the only paper conservator, they set up a Preservation and Conservation Section which combined the General Bindery and later the Stack staff and Photography sections. The section also became responsible for organising, designing and running the Book and Manuscript Programmes for the Oxford University Libraries. Later they were able to organise a more secure and safer exhibition policy. Chris was able to set-up a small area where he could carry out conservation, repair and rebinding projects, as well as one-to-one teaching. Among his innovations while at the Bodleian Library were adjustable book cradles for the more controlled and gentle handling of books during conservation treatments and photography. He also devised, with help from David Cooper, the system of foam-rubber wedges to support books in reading room use; they are now to be found in rare-book collections throughout the world. He was also able to pursue his interest in twelfth-century romanesque bindings, made in what he described, characteristically, as one of the last great periods of creative bookbinding and structural development. At this time Chris sat on various British Standards Institution (BSI) Committees, looking into archival materials, shelf storage, environmental standards etc., and worked with Stuart Welch initially of the Atlantis Paper Co Ltd., and subsequently (1992) director of Conservation by Design in developing a fully archival board for use in book and archive conservation and in supplying other specialist papers. Concerned about poor training in the field of the conservation of books and manuscripts, Chris moved in 1987 to The Edward James Foundation at West Dean College, near Chichester, taking a cut in salary to do so. He worked there on many medieval manuscripts and ran an internship programme which provided an opportunity for selected conservators from around the world to develop a deeper understanding of the conservation and repair of library and archive material. When the West Dean workshop closed in 1998, he returned to Oxford, and set up in private practice, working also as conservation consultant to the Bodleian Library, The Wordsworth Trust and the Hereford Cathedral Mappa Mundi Trust and Chained Library. As a freelance conservator, he worked on the conservation of many important manuscripts and early printed books for well-known Institutions in Europe and America, including most recently, the first two volumes of the twelfth-century Winchester Bible, work on the second of which was interrupted by his failing health. For eight years, he ran a two-week Staff Training Programme for The National Archives and National Library of Slovenia and also ran regular staff training programmes for the Bodleian Library and the Wordsworth Trust at Dove Cottage in the Lake District. He gave lectures, workshops and conducted condition & treatment surveys in many countries, including Japan and South America, and taught for many years at the Rare Book School established by Terry Belanger, first at Columbia University in New York and afterwards at the University of Virginia. As an authority on the history of bookbinding structure, he worked with the staff of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York on their early Coptic Binding collections. He also acted as a government representative advising Danish and Icelandic libraries on early manuscripts and reported on the condition of the Book of Kells for Trinity College Dublin. His latest report was for the National Museum of Ireland concerning the stabilization of the eighth-century psalter discovered in a peat bog in July 2006. The report contained historical comparisons and suggestions as to possible treatments. He wrote reports on the early fifth-

century Ms. Syriac 30 and the fragments of the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus, discovered in the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai in 1973. In 2004 he was awarded the Plowden Gold Medal of the Royal Warrant Holders Association in recognition of his significant contribution to the advancement of the conservation profession. An extract of the citation reads, "... Chris's contribution to training and educating young conservators around the world has led to the invaluable dissemination of his approach to conservation and the paradigm of minimal intervention. As an archaeologist of the book, his teachings have fostered a deep historical awareness of the object, requiring profound knowledge of a wide variety of materials and a broad repertoire of techniques...". Chris published on various aspects of the materials and techniques of book conservation and on medieval book production and binding techniques, taking enormous trouble over the language used to describe historical books and their condition and treatment. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of the Arts London (which incorporates the Camberwell School of Art) in 2012. For those of us who have followed in Chris's wake over the years, the loss of what had seemed to be a fixed star in the firmament of conservation is a terrible shock. For years, he made himself available to teach and discuss questions of treatment and the history of bookbinding, sharing with colleagues and students alike his extraordinary breadth of knowledge and his burning sense of the importance of historical books and how they should be treated. Fired by a single-minded determination to know everything that was necessary for his work, he sometimes seemed disappointed that he hadn't been able to do more to get his message across, but, in reality, there is scarcely a book conservator working today who has not been influenced, directly or indirectly, by his approach to his work and by his technical skills, and many of us owe him a great debt of gratitude for what we have learned from him and for his help. That he achieved all of this without a formal training in conservation (there was no such training when he started out) and little conventional schooling is a testament to his determination to do the best that he could for the material to which his life's work was dedicated. What is now taught as book conservation is to a large extent the result of the pioneering work that he and others carried out in the years after the floods in Florence in 1966. His true legacy will be the example that he set, which those now working in the field and those yet to enter it will do well to follow. He is survived by his wife Oonagh and their two children, Eoghan and Siobhan, and grand-daughter Seren and sister, Josie Smart. *Nicholas Pickwoad Ligatus Research Centre, University of the Arts London 12 April, 2017*