
Binding Two Kelmscott Press Publications: A Contemporary View

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As a practitioner of the craft of bookbinding in the twenty-first century I am honoured to be able to say that I have bound two of the beautiful Kelmscott Press publications, of which there are fifty-three in total. I am a self-employed bookbinder, living and working in Somerset, and I specialise in embroidery on leather. A fine binding can take anywhere between 150-250 hours dependant upon the size of the book, the complexity of the design and the container in which the book is presented.

As well as creating a cover design there are many other different elements that go into a fine binding that have to be taken into consideration, including the design of the endpapers and doublures, the edges of the book, the endbands and the box. A book is a three-dimensional object and has to function properly as well as looking aesthetically pleasing, meaning that every stage of the binding process is as important as the next.

In 2018 I was entrusted with binding a copy of William Morris's Kelmscott *Chaucer* published more than 100 years earlier in 1896, and in 2016 I bound a copy of the 1897 Kelmscott Press publication *Love is Enough; or, the Freeing of Pharamond: A Morality*, abbreviated as *Love is Enough* (Figures 1 and 2).

I have been binding books since 2006, firstly as a hobby alongside my full-time job at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) as a mount-making technician. Working with metal, acrylic and wood to make a huge variety of armatures and supports for objects, I was lucky enough to be surrounded by beautiful objects on a daily basis for eight years. This work very much appealed to my senses: one day I might be making a fine brass mount for an eighteenth-century pocket watch and on another day a set of heavy steel clips for an alabaster statue, or perhaps making fabric-covered pin-boards for a fragile fabric to be sewn to.

William Morris believed that people should be surrounded by beautiful, well-



Figure 1: *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1896), facsimile edition bound by Hannah Brown in 2018.

made things. I certainly would like to say I live by that motto, and hope that the bindings I make for my clients also fit the Morrisian ethos. I left the V&A in 2014 and spent one and a half years living in the south of France, which is where I first took the leap into bookbinding as a full-time profession. I have since moved to Somerset and now live in an old Jacobean house. I live in the hamlet of Bowlish in Shepton Mallet. It is one of three hamlets next to each other that were the centre of farming and cloth production from medieval times until the turn of the twentieth century, and it made a vital contribution to the local economy over hundreds of years, employing thousands of local people throughout that time. What began as coarse woollen cloth production in the area changed to silk production following the influx of Huguenots around 1550 who brought fine cloth-making skills to the area. Such was the quality of Shepton Mallet cloth that it was prized by the aristocracy who valued it over cloth produced elsewhere, and the bills paid by Charles I still exist.

Being a female bookbinder who specialises in embroidered bindings, I cannot but be inspired by the work of Morris's daughter, May Morris. In the case of my binding of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, I was specifically selected by the client to take on this commission due to the use of embroidery in my work and the fact that this tied in really harmoniously with the work of May Morris. During my research period for this

binding, fortuitously there was also an exhibition dedicated to the work of May Morris at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, London, titled *May Morris: Art and Life*. The whole exhibition was full of exquisite objects and I was especially interested to see how May Morris built up her designs from a line drawing into beautifully embroidered works of art. I learnt a lot about May Morris in advance of binding my copy of the *Chaucer* and feel lucky that I was able to see so much of her work in person before starting out on that project of a lifetime. For the rest of this article I will explain the process I went through to create the fine binding for *Love is Enough*.

Published in 1897 by the Kelmscott Press and printed in black, red and blue in Troy and Chaucer types, this book has two wonderful full-page illustrations by Sir Edward Burne-Jones plus beautiful decorative woodcut borders and initials throughout (Figures 3 and 4).

For every binding commission I first set about reading the book to familiarise myself with the contents. The narrative of *Love is Enough* is very complex with many different stages to it, starting with a poem describing four happy sets of lovers. Morris uses many different poetic forms throughout the story to differentiate between the settings. The book initially opens like a play with a lyrical quality, followed by an actual play, titled ‘Of Pharamond The Freed’, written to lie at the heart of the book (Figure 5).

The book’s many references to the cycle of nature are particularly striking. The following passage, for example, deserves quotation:

Ah, what shall we say then, but that earth threatened often
Shall live on for ever that such things may be,
That the dry seed shall quicken, the hard earth shall soften,
And the spring-bearing birds flutter north o’er the sea,
That earth’s garden may bloom round my love’s feet and me?¹

This natural imagery, paired up with Morris’s designs for fabrics, borders and wallpapers, made me think about how I could combine these two elements. I also wanted to try and include repeat patterns, like those he used in so much of his work, and I was particularly drawn to Morris’s 1862 *Trellis* wallpaper design, so I decided to base my cover on this (Figure 6).

As Charles Harvey and Jon Press write:

The early Morris wallpapers were very simple and naturalistic. The idea for the first, *Trellis*, begun in November 1862, probably came from the rose trellis at Red House. Morris did the basic design and [Philip] Webb drew birds perched on the trellis nestling amongst the flowers and foliage. *Trellis* was



Figure 2: William Morris, *Love is Enough* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1897), facsimile edition bound by Hannah Brown in 2016.

beaten into production by the designs known as *Daisy* and *Fruit*.²

Elsewhere, Lesley Hoskins comments that:

Flower trellises also appear elsewhere in the work of Morris and his associates, for example in 1862 stained glass for St Helen's, Darley Dale [...] and All Saints, Selsley, and in Burne-Jones's 1863 sketch design for an embroidery for Ruskin illustrating Chaucer's *Legend of Goode Wimmen*. Mackail [...] describes the 'wattled rose-trellises inclosing richly-flowered square garden plots' at Red House. This is a typical medieval garden plan, illustrated in numerous manuscripts. [...] Morris remained fond of the early, simple patterns and hung a blue-ground version of *Trellis* in his bedroom at Kelmscott House.³

The original *Trellis* design has birds repeated on it. I chose to modify the pattern and change these birds to represent one for each of the seasons, to tie in with the cycle of nature that featured in the text: for spring, a goldfinch; for summer, a housemartin; for autumn, a serin; and for winter, a brambling. I drew up some designs on paper until I was happy with the layout (Figure 7).

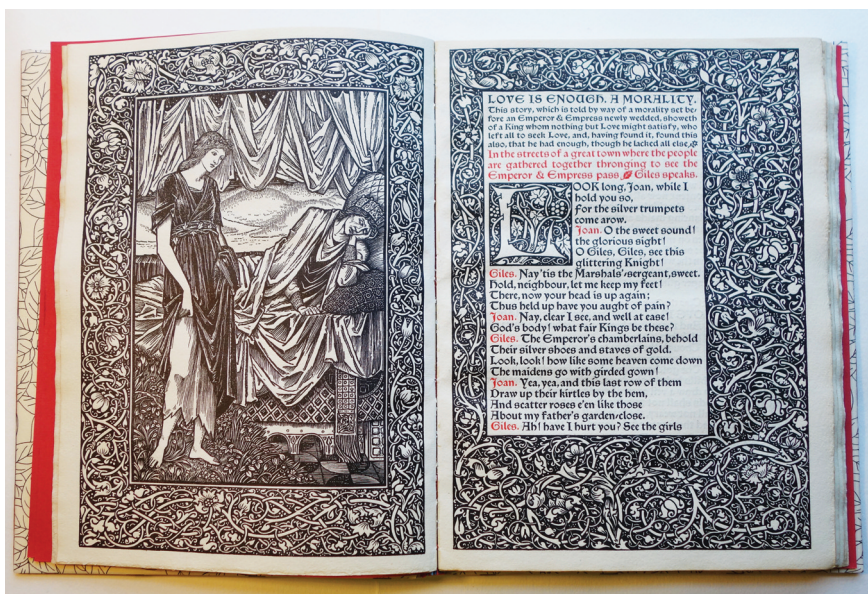


Figure 3: William Morris, *Love is Enough* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1897), wood cut title pages by Edward Burne-Jones.

For each of the fine bindings I work on I make a sample board of a section of the cover design for a number of reasons: firstly, to test out colour combinations and techniques; secondly, so I have a permanent physical record of the binding once it has been delivered to the client; and finally to keep as a teaching aid to show students. The sample boards measure about 125mm tall by 75mm wide and the *Love is Enough* board is now number forty in my collection (Figure 8).

The book's original cover was limp vellum with silk ties and a gilt-lettered spine. The book sections had been printed with the paper in the wrong grain direction, so to aid the opening I decided to sew the sections onto stubs. Stubs are folded strips of paper that are sewn to the original signature sections that make the entire sewing attachment to the boards double-jointed. The stubs were folded using red and blue papers to match the coloured printing inks on the pages and the endbands were also sewn in the same colours (Figure 9).

The onlay leather for the trellis wood was pared down to about 0.3mm thick and dyed brown using spirit dyes. On the sample board the pattern of the wood grain was sewn using threads; however, I thought a more sympathetic way of recreating this on the binding would be to make impressions into the fair calf leather. The leather was therefore dampened with water and pressed into a piece of wood with a wire

pattern attached to it and I was very pleased with the effect it created (Figure 10).

The trellis onlays were then cut into strips and stuck down to the covering leather with PVA glue using a tracing paper template for guidance (Figure 11). Following this, all of the other coloured onlays for the flowers, bugs and birds were glued down and the leather was back-pared. Back-paring involves turning the leather over and scraping the reverse with a paring knife to remove leather behind where the onlays are stuck on the front. This results in the leather cover being an even thickness throughout, rather than the onlays being proud on the surface and therefore prone to catching over time (Figures 12 and 13).

Once all of the onlays had been glued down and back-pared I could start embroidering the detail onto the design – I could not have started the embroidery process before this as it would not have been possible to back-pare the reverse of the skin without damaging the stitched threads. I used a variety of cotton and silk threads to add colourful detail on top of leather onlays, mixed with metallic threads. I initially started by embroidering the outlines and veins of all of the leaves, then moved onto the flowers and finally spent many hours adding threaded detail to each of the four birds in turn. I built up the stitches gradually using a range of colours, finally adding some metallic threads onto each of the birds until the embroidery was complete. I like to use metallic threads on my bindings as they catch the light when the bindings are finished and being handled (Figures 14, 15 and 16).

It was then time to stick the leather to the book using paste made from cooking up strong white bread flour and water over a bain marie. The covering process is always a scary stage as I have already spent so much time embroidering the leather. The leather was dampened on the front surface with water, sprayed using an atomiser, and then pasted out three times on the reverse, waiting for about five minutes between applications to make sure the paste penetrated into the leather. Once the leather was on the binding it was left overnight to dry between blotting paper and pressing boards under a light weight. I always change the blotting papers regularly during this time to allow the moisture to be drawn out of the leather.

The trellis design was embellished at the points where it crossed by inserting gold-plated brass pieces to look like pegs holding the trellis together. These were made by rounding and cutting off the end of a brass rod and soldering it to a stem. They were then polished and gold-plated and inserted in place through a hole that was drilled through the boards. I blind-tooled an impression into the leather before attaching them so that they would be slightly cushioned into the cover and the posts were turned over into a cut out channel on the reverse of the boards (Figure 17).

The inside of the boards were then infilled with watercolour paper and a lining sheet and sanded flat. The printed endpapers and doublures were designed as a repeat

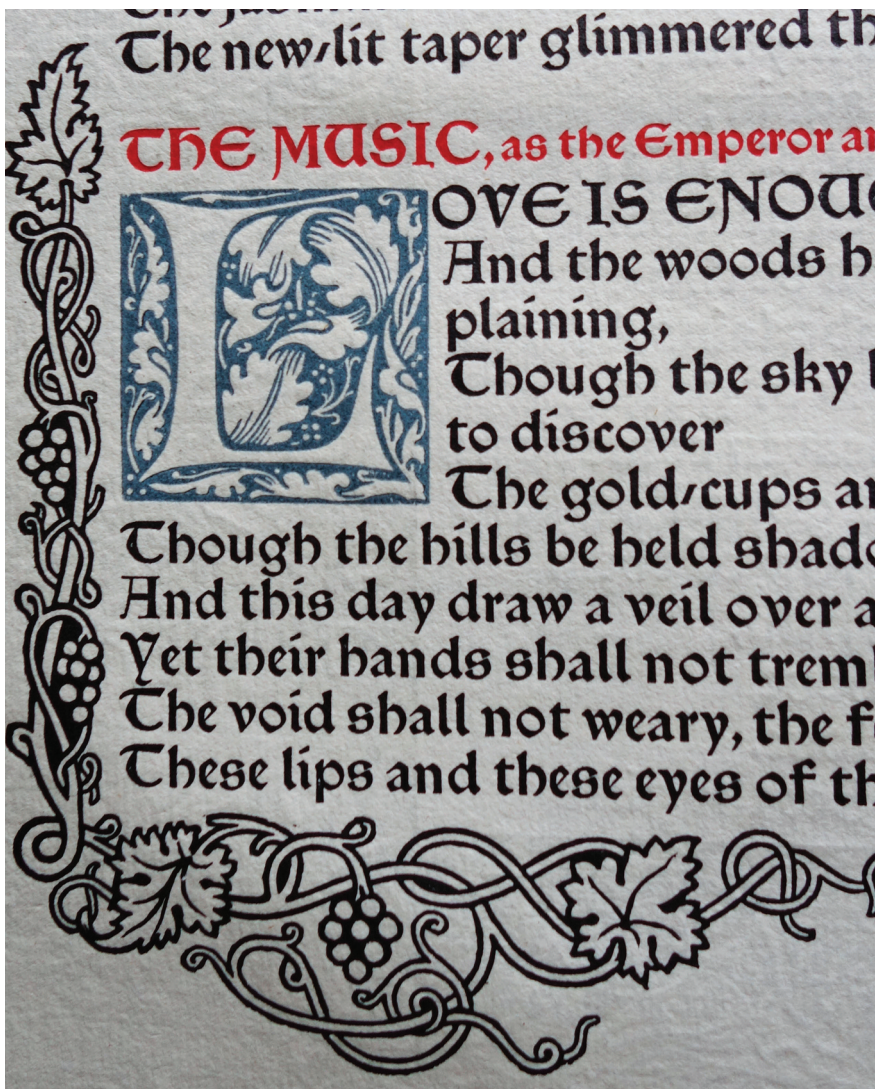


Figure 4: William Morris, *Love is Enough* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1897), detail of wood cut title letters in blue.

pattern using outlines of leaves to match those of the vine from the trellis on the front cover of the binding, printing with black ink onto handmade paper. To break up the black linear appearance, I decided to make one lot of the printed leaf stems on the doublures gold, so I pierced through the paper and pasted down 23 1/2-carat gold leaf on the board. When the doublure was glued down in place, the gold sparkled

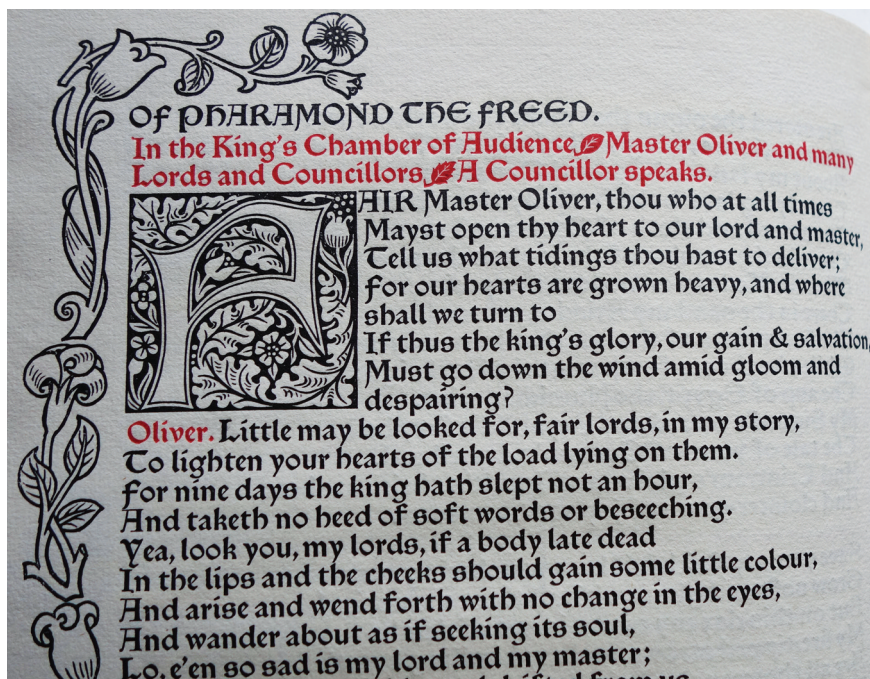


Figure 5: 'Of Pharamond the Freed', *Love is Enough* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1897).

through the pierced stems (Figure 18).

I house most of my fine bindings in wooden containers. I chose to use teak wood for the *Love is Enough* box as I felt it would work very well in colour and appearance against the binding. I opted for a frosted perspex for the lid so that the front cover of the book could be partially seen through it, drawing the viewer's interest into the box. I created a title label to match the binding. The title letters were created using the same font used inside the text block. I pierced out these letters with a sharp scalpel blade from a strip of calf-leather and consolidated the cut edges with PVA glue. I then glued some gold leaf to Japanese paper and adhered this behind the letters, making the font gold (Figure 19). The wood was machined for the lid and base, channelling grooves using a router and mitring it at the corners. As teak is an oily wood, the corner mitres were cleaned with a solvent before being stuck with an epoxy glue. Whilst drying the pieces were held together using a framing strap and then the corners were pinned with brass tacks (Figure 20). The box was lined with felt and then spacers were added to the internal box edges to keep the binding secure within the container (Figures 21, 22, 23, 24 and 25).



Figure 6: William Morris, *Trellis* wallpaper design (1862), block-printed in distemper colours, 27 x 21 1/2 in. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, image in public domain).

What a delight it was to work on this binding, which is now in a private collection abroad. To bind each of the other fifty-one Kelmscott Press publications would be a lifetime's work. Hopefully I will at least get the chance to work with a few more of them during my career as a bookbinder. One of the delights of the job that I do is the variety of the work: each binding is totally unique and bespoke and rarely do I



Figure 7: Line drawing of the binding cover design based on Morris's *Trellis* wallpaper design.

Figure 8, right: Sample board made of a small section of the *Love is Enough* cover design.

do more than one version of a book, so every project is a new challenge that requires research and thought. Just as each text block holds a different story to be interpreted throughout the overall design of book and box, there are a multitude of binding structures to be utilised, making each commission different from the next. The more bindings I create, the bigger the library of ideas and methods I have to draw upon for future work. I just wish there were more hours in the day and weeks in the year to spend working on all my hundreds of ideas!

NOTES

1. William Morris, *Love is Enough; or, The Freeing of Pharamond: A Morality*, 2nd edn (London: Ellis and White, 1873), p. 12.
2. Charles Harvey and Jon Press, *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 46.
3. Lesley Hoskins, 'Wallpaper', in *William Morris*, ed. by Linda Parry (London: Philip Wilson in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1996), pp. 198-223 (206).





Figure 9, top: Detail of the folded paper stubs used to rebind the original text block.

Figure 10: Detail of the wire detail made to press into the leather onlays for the trellis grid.



Figure 11, top: The trellis grid onlay strips laid on top of the cover design drawing.
Figure 12: Glueing down the thinly pared coloured leather onlays to the covering leather.



Figure 13, top: Using a tracing paper template through which to place the leather onlays for glueing.
Figure 14, above left: Embroidering through the covering leather and leather onlays after back-paring the leather.
Figure 15, above right: Embroidering the leather using cotton threads in a variety of colours.



Figure 16: The completed embroidery before the leather was stuck to the book block.





Figure 17, left: The gold-plated brass 'peg' inserted into the boards at the cross point of the trellis onlays.
 Figure 18, top: Fine gold leaf detail cut into the the printed doublures of the front board.
 Figure 19: Work on the title of the box, the letters were pierced from leather and backed with gold leaf.



Figure 20: Constructing the teak wood box to encapsulate a frosted acrylic lid.

Figure 21, right: The completed binding in the box, the front cover visible through the frosted acrylic box lid.





Figure 22, top: The completed binding standing next to the open teak wood box.

Figure 23: Detail of the cover design of the *Love is Enough* binding.

Figure 24, opposite top: The printed repeat pattern endpapers and doublures of the completed binding.

Figure 25, opposite bottom: Detail of the Goldfinch bird, depicted for summer in the design of *Love is Enough*.

