Post-Flood Development of Mass Treatments at the National Library of Florence: The Roots of Library Conservation

INTRODUCTION

November 4, 2016 marks the 50th anniversary of the most devastating flood in Florence since 1333. The average person has never heard about it, even though at the time students and their professors the world over, flocked to Florence to help in the initial rescue and clean-up. But those of us who were there and lived through the following months have indelible memories. (Figs. 1 & 2)

It is widely recognized that the vital and respected profession of book and paper conservation has its origins in the philosophy and treatments developed in the aftermath of the flood, in response to the immense challenge of dealing with so much damage to hundreds of thousands of rare books and documents in the libraries of Florence. I am a calligraphic designer, not a conservator, but I was there, and have first-hand knowledge of how the huge Restoration System was set up in the National Library, the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (the “BNCF”), during 1967. It is important for the profession to know its history so the story needs to be told before it dies, along with those who experienced it.

My late husband was the bookbinder and library conservator Peter Waters, who died in 2003. This is largely his story and that of his team members, who played a vital part in the restoration operations in the BNCF following the flood. In this talk I will describe the setting up of that massive Restoration System. It is impossible to cover this story adequately in a short talk, but it is covered in great detail in my new book called Waters Rising: Letters from Florence published this April 2016 by Cathleen Baker of The Legacy Press. (Fig. 3)

For giving information about past events, personal letters and eye witness accounts have powerful authenticity. In nearly 500 pages my book contains all the letters Peter and I wrote to each other during the months following the flood. Peter’s letters, almost fifty of them, were his chief diary. After his death, for easy reference, I extracted all the relevant technical information from his letters and notes for a Narrative-Diary section. There are over 280 photos, mostly taken by Peter, of damaged books and treatments devised for them, and also
in Washington DC from 1971 to his retirement in 1995. He was Technical Director of the setting up of the BNCF’s vast Restoration System from the end of November 1966 to October 1967. I became directly involved myself and spent a total of three months working with Peter in the BNCF during 1967. (Fig. 5)

WHY WAS PETER CHOSEN TO PLAY A LEADING ROLE?

Peter’s work in England before he was forty is not as well-known as his time in the Library of Congress, so I will give a little of his background to explain why he was chosen to lead the British team. He had no experience of dealing with damaged books on such a massive scale—who had?—but he had a reputation as an innovative designer-bookbinder and manuscript restorer, in partnership with Roger Powell (who had restored and rebound the Book of Kells in 1953). (Fig. 6)

Peter and I met while we were masters-degree students at the Royal College of Art, London (the RCA), in 1949. He specialized in fine bookbinding, lettering and typography and I in calligraphy, lettering and typography, and Roger Powell was our bookbinding tutor. Peter had previously spent four years from the age of fourteen studying bookbinding with William Matthews at Guildford College of Art. We married in 1953 and ran our own businesses of commissions and part-time teaching. In 1957 we moved from Woking, Surrey to Froxfield, Hampshire for Peter to become Roger’s full partner. From college days Peter and I collaborated on all our commissions, actively or with design critique and I designed illustrations that were used on many of his and Roger’s bindings. (Figs. 7 & 8)

I will use many of Peter’s own words, taken, not from his letters but from his article in the 1969 edition of The Penrose Annual (a British annual review of the graphic arts since 1895), because his own descriptions of the fully-developed sections of the Restoration System are so succinct that I cannot hope to improve on them. I quoted the same extracts in two previous overview talks, the first time was in 2006 in New York University’s 40th anniversary symposium in Florence. Those proceedings were published by Archetype Publications, entitled Conservation Legacies of the Florence Flood of 1966, where more technical information can be found in the talks by Tony Cains and Chris Clarkson. The second time was in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC for the 45th anniversary. The Franco Zeffirelli film, Florence: Days of Destruction, was shown on both occasions.

As a direct result of his pioneering work in Florence, Peter served as Chief of Conservation at the Library of Congress included is a section of some of Peter’s student bookbindings, and later commissioned and exhibition bindings, that he made before the flood. I am very grateful to Cathleen Baker for the huge amount of time she has so enthusiastically given to this project, and to our eldest son Julian Waters, her co-designer, and for his immense help in preparing visuals for this talk. I am also indebted to Randy Silverman for introducing us to Cathleen, and for his masterful introduction about Peter’s life, work and impact on the library field, naming him Father of Preventive Conservation. This presentation is but a microcosm of the much bigger story told in the book. Waters Rising comes with a remastered DVD of the 40 minute film about the Restoration System made by Roger Hill and Peter in 1968. (Fig. 4)
In the Forte working conditions were uncomfortable with no heat and little water and students were busy scraping dried mud off books. Meanwhile, student volunteers were still digging books out of the BNCF basement, wiping off excess mud with wet sponges and scattering sawdust over them to absorb some water. In the three weeks after the flood over 400 truckloads had already gone to drying plants. (Figs. 10 & 11)

Peter describes the state of the dried books in his Penrose Annual article:

THE CALL FOR HELP

On Friday afternoon, November 25, 1966, Peter was phoned by Howard Nixon, Keeper of Printed Books at the British Museum. Nixon had been contacted by Dr. Casamassima, Director of the BNCF, who needed advice on restoring at least 110,000 badly damaged rare 16th and 17th century printed volumes. These included 90,000 of the Palatina and Magliabechiana collections, a primary source for western scholarship and the nucleus of the library. Howard Nixon knew Peter’s work well. When Peter was only 21 and still at the RCA, he was commissioned by Nixon to design a binding for Le Livre Anglais exhibition in Paris in 1951. Peter revived the tradition of pre-1500 blind-stamped binding and Nixon bought the book for the British Library’s permanent collections. So Nixon had confidence in Peter’s ability to assess the unusual and desperate situation at the BNCF and make recommendations. (Fig. 9)

Nixon asked Peter to choose two colleagues and fly to Florence the very next day! Tony Cains, a skilled private binder and Dorothy Cumpstey, an expert teacher of binding, were able to drop everything to go with him. The three arrived in Florence, complete with gum boots, without any clear mandate and were set to work in the Forte di Belvedere to look for mold on dried books. These were arriving by the truckload every day from grain and tobacco drying facilities in Italy. Wet, muddied books had been dried en masse and inevitably many had suffered further damage from the heat.

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Fig. 9. Dr. Casamassima with Sandy Cockerell.
Despite good superficial cleaning before drying and the wise rule by the Director at the beginning, that none of the books should be opened before arrival at the dryers, many of them, arriving at the Forte, resembled abstract sculptural forms. Vellum and leather covers were distorted and shrunk-en. Book stacks in the library have characteristic openings at each end and vellum bindings stored originally at the ends of the stacks had rotted where the water had run through these shapes, combining with the vellum to form a glutinous mass. Other covers were defaced with a combination of mud, sawdust, oil and mold and edges were badly stuck with gelatin, mud and sawdust. (Figs. 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16) The books had been stood upright to dry in the heated dryers, allowing water and gelatin to drain. The concentration of gelatin was greatest in the openings between the sections, leaving them brittle. Covers that had been too hurriedly ripped off had dragged the sewing through the backs of the sections. The water, combined with excessive gluing of the spine when originally bound, had accelerated the damage to the backs of the sections. Early 16th century spines suffered least because they had been pasted with starch paste rather than hide glue. The leaves of books bound in limp vellum withstood the flood better than most.

This was a very important finding because it led to the later development of non-adhesive and limp vellum binding techniques.

PETER’S VISION

Only four days after the team’s arrival, a high level meeting showed that there was no plan at all for the future, beyond dry-cleaning, wrapping and storing the often very badly distorted books. In that state they would be unusable by readers, maybe indefinitely. Peter questioned this policy and suggested an outrageous idea: to set up a colossal dry cleaning, washing, drying and pressing plant to save and store the majority of the
collections, wrapped, but flat, to await mending and rebind-
ing. The effect of this idea on Director Casamassima was
dynamic and from that moment he supported the team and
the implementation of Peter’s plan, no matter any opposition.
In fact, he cut though enough red-tape to warrant a prison
sentence in normal times.

It was decided that the whole series of operations would
eventually be carried out in the BNCF itself. The Power
Station had a large number of sinks and plenty of hot water
and during November 100 untrained students were working
around the clock in 8 hour shifts. They were washing large
books, causing even more damage by separating their leaves
while wet, a technique normally requiring immense skill.
The British pointed this out so were asked to take over and
train them in their new system of washing, not from the wet
state but after dried books had had their sections separated
(“pulled”) by the students working in the Forte. Tony Cains
took charge at the Forte and Chris Clarkson joined them to
direct the Power Station Students. (Fig. 17)

The original briefing had called for an advisory visit to
Florence by Peter, Tony and Dorothy, but from November
through April Peter stayed there for most of the time. At
home I became the liaison between binders and restorers
going out to help and the British Italian Art and Archives
Rescue Fund. Peter describes that expansion of the team and
the funding supplied.

It became clear that a great deal of additional help was needed
and we appealed for more British restorers and binders, par-
ticularly those with teaching ability. In the following months
over forty people worked for periods of from two weeks to
several months developing the system and training volun-
teers. The team included members of the British Museum
Stationery Office Bindery and the most distinguished pri-
ivate restorers, binders, and teachers of binding in Britain.
This flow of help was organized by Howard Nixon and sup-
ported by the British Italian Art and Archives Rescue Fund,
whose major effort in Florence became concentrated on the
BNCF. From time to time the team was joined by restorers
from many other countries. Guidance on chemical prob-
lems was given to the team by the British Museum Research
Laboratory in collaboration with the Istituto di Patologia del
Libro in Rome. (Figs. 18 & 19)

PREPARATIONS TO MOVE THE WHOLE SYSTEM TO
THE BNCF

Peter then describes the preparations made, from December
through March, for the move to the BNCF. Very early it was
clear that expert careful selection for appropriate treatment
would be needed for each book, on its journey through the
system, and at Peter’s request, Roger Powell, then 70 years
old, arrived in early December to concentrate on this skilled
work and to train more experts in selection. Peter describes this process.

Before a book enters the restoration system, it has to be classified according to its value and the treatment it requires, and details of historical interest are recorded. Symbols were devised during our first week at the Forte to make international interpretation easier and designed to warn a student or worker of the state of the book and how it should be handled. For instance, OK indicated that a student could handle a book, whereas the international road ‘stop’ sign showed that it was particularly valuable and should be reserved for specialist treatment. In the beginning, these signs were written on a slip of paper, but now a detailed printed restoration card and photographs of the original binding and any significant pages, accompany each book with classification and directions for treatment. The card also indicated the history of the original structure by means of an enlarged symbol system with other relevant details.

He closes that paragraph with a very important sentence: “These symbols guard against the temptation to make the system more important than the books that are fed into it.”

To add a personal note here, during the month of May 1967, while working with Peter, I designed these cards, drew the symbols and wrote all the wording in plain, legible hand lettering, camera-ready for printing by the thousands, one card in English, the other in Italian. (Figs. 20 & 21)
they are laid flat on racked trolleys in purpose-made, electrically-warmed, automatically-controlled drying cabinets. A final collation is made by a librarian and the book is then wrapped for storage. (Figs. 26 & 27)

I must add here that Sandy Cockerell, an engineer as well as a well-known private binder and manuscript restorer, was the prime advisor in the design and fabricating of these large drying cabinets, trolleys and racks, and worked closely with Peter during several visits. (Fig. 28)

MENDING OF TEARS AND LACUNAE

Peter’s article continues with descriptions of the new mending and binding areas set up in the main reading room. This was unprecedented in a country’s national library!

Although the original intention was to send the prepared books to binderies throughout the world for mending and binding, by April 1967 it was apparent that this would be impracticable, mainly because of the wide diversity of standards and the
Fig. 26. A trolley being loaded with trays.

Fig. 27. A loaded trolley being pushed into a drying cabinet.

Fig. 28. Sandy Cockerell stretching olive netting for a drying tray.

Fig. 29. The mending area in the converted main reading room.

Fig. 30. Japanese tissue mending: cutting with a ruling pen.

Fig. 31. Heat-set tissue: mending tears with a tacking iron.

impossibility of maintaining proper controls. It was therefore decided that mending, the most time-consuming operation of all, should be done in the library and that binding should follow. A mending department was designed for thirty workers (the maximum number for whom space and wages could be found), to be housed in the main reading room for at least a year or so. This was ready in August 1967, when the training of about five unskilled workers per week was undertaken until the room came into full operation. (Fig. 29)

Mending methods had to be devised suitable for the scale of the operation and the condition of the paper. Long-fibered Japanese tissue paper is used to form patches, with adhesive designed to spread through to the area around the mend and remain flexible. A lens tissue is specially treated and used principally for the mending of tears. Many of the books have been reduced almost to single leaves and, on average, every section has at least two folds needing repair. (Figs. 30 & 31)

When I worked in Florence for five weeks in late spring of 1967 Peter designed the mending stations, and I drew plans
and elevations for their construction. Each unit had a small light box inserted in the desktop and plenty of storage space on either side. In the summer we were in Florence for nine weeks and I had the immense pleasure of watching the desks being carried in and installed in the reading room. We left our youngest son Chris in the care of our mothers but took Julian 10 and Michael 7 with us. They reveled in exploring the entire library and made special friends with the electrician they nicknamed Sparks.

THE FINAL STAGE OF REBINDING

Peter wrote:

A bindery was started in September 1967. Many of the smaller books will be rebound in limp vellum. A study is being made of the early Italian limp vellum structures as so many of the library’s books are bound in this way. When the structure is sound, it is a long-lasting binding, strong and pleasant to handle and fairly quick to make. A limp vellum style, unique to the library, is being evolved, as, compared with the work of the 16th and 17th centuries, limp vellum binding of today has become decadent. (Figs. 32 & 33)

In the DVD that comes with Waters Rising, Chris Clarkson, who has become recognized for his expertise on vellum structures, makes a limp vellum binding from start to finish. Peter makes a leather binding. You see only their hands and arms and no faces.

PRINT RESTORATION

A print restoration department, with on-the-spot chemical analysis, was set up adjacent to the reading room by William Boustead, Chief Conservator to the National Art Gallery in Sydney, funded by the Australian government, and he trained a nucleus of workers in print restoration. It was later looked after by the chemist Joe Nkrumah who stayed on for seven years.

THE RESTORATION SYSTEM POST-1967

After October 1967 Peter left the technical direction of the Restoration System to Tony Cains, the operation being funded for a further three years by the American Committee to Rescue Italian Art (CRIA). Mostly back in England, Peter resumed working with Roger Powell, teaching part-time at the RCA and joined as co-director with James Lewis, in a three-year program of back-up research for the BNCF, overseen jointly by the Imperial College of Science and Technology and the RCA, funded by the American Council on Library Resources.

During 1967 the student labor force at the BNCF was gradually replaced by about 100 Italian workers, the restoration estimated to take about 25 years, though it still continues today, fifty years later. The whole system was
gradually moved to basement rooms so the reading rooms could be reclaimed. Through the years the workforce dwindled through lack of financial support, and now it is down to about seven people, in a lab outside the BNCF, under the direction of Alessandro Sidoti.

INTERNATIONAL TRAINING: THE FUTURE

The dream of setting up an international training center at the BNCF never materialized because of insufficient funding and too few expert restorers available to continue training. Even so, the legacies of the BNCF experience gave impetus to the new profession of library conservation, with the Library of Congress leading the way. Peter was given the task of designing its large comprehensive department from scratch, and from 1969 to 1971 he “commuted” from England ten times to the Library of Congress until our family immigrated to the USA in 1971. During the following two years he was able to persuade the curators to think more broadly in terms of what Peter called “phased conservation” (now termed “preventive conservation”), instead of merely sending single items for repair to the library’s bindery. Since then, conservation laboratories have been set up throughout the world, many of them directed and staffed by conservators trained at the Library of Congress, and later at other centers too. (Fig. 39)

SUMMARY

Tragedies and disasters often bring out the best in people involved, and the great Florence flood certainly did that. So much good has come from its aftermath in the world of book and paper conservation. All who labored there will never forget the experience and many of them have since taught and influenced countless others. Tragically Peter died in 2003 at only 73 from mesothelioma, through exposure to asbestos...
in his twenties. I wish he could have been here to talk to you himself. He brought the skills of a designer-craftsman to the wider world of library conservation, and used what he called “sideways thinking” to solve problems. He also felt that some treatments can cause more harm than good. I feel honored to have played a small part in the effort myself, as a support to Peter. By sharing these first-hand memories I hope I have given you a feel for that momentous time after the flood and an appreciation of why the Florence experience was so pivotal.

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