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The Brut Chronicle: Revived and Reconstructed

INTRODUCTION

Rauner Library is the Special Collections Library within the Dartmouth College Library system. Totaling more than 100,000 volumes, the rare book collections constitute a resource of major importance to the institution and the scholarly world at large. Principal concentrations include nineteenth- and twentieth- century British and American literature, printing and the book arts, the literature of the White Mountains, and New Hampshire imprints.

The Library has a strong commitment to integrating rare books, archives, and manuscripts into the Dartmouth curriculum. Since 2004, Rauner staff have collaborated with faculty on over 400 courses across multiple disciplines including Anthropology, Environmental Studies, and English History.

In 2006, through the William L. Bryant Foundation Library fund, Rauner Library purchased The Beeleigh Abbey Brut, now referred to as: Rauner Codex MS 003183 or simply, the Dartmouth Brut. The manuscript was purchased in order to expand the Library's selection of secular materials from the Middle Ages to enhance scholarly research in this area. The Dartmouth Brut is believed to have been written around 1430, and chronicles Britain's history from 1377 to 1419. (fig. 1)

HISTORY

The medieval prose Brut, first written in 1272 and extant in over 240 copies, is a chronicle of England covering her history from the first settlement up until the year 1461. It is named after England's first hero, Brutus, the founder of Britain, and includes factual information, such as the chronicles of rulers, major battles and conquests, as well as mythical stories of Merlin, King Arthur and King Lear.

There are 240 variant manuscript copies of the text written in the three major literary languages of medieval England; Latin, Anglo-Norman French and Middle English. The Middle English variants represent 181 of 240 manuscripts, with no two versions being identical.

Fig. 1. Rauner Codex MS 003183. The Dartmouth Brut, full stationers binding.

THE MANUSCRIPT

The manuscript is written on parchment in semi-cursive Anglican script in what is now brown ink. The text is laid out in single columns of 36 lines and situated between two pairs of scored or faintly ruled verticals. The first text leaf is simply illuminated and throughout the text there are rubricated initials with flourished decorations in blue. (fig. 2)

This copy is significant because it contains a high number of annotations and marginal inscriptions made by as many as ten individuals, in 15th and 16th century hands. Because this manuscript had been in private hands until its purchase by Dartmouth, these inscriptions and even the text itself had not been thoroughly documented. Therefore it instantly became popular and available to Brut scholars for new and undocumented research.

THE BINDING

The manuscript textblock measures 30 cm high, 22 cm wide and 4.8 cm in thickness comprising of sixteen parchment quires of mostly four folios each. The binding consists of a

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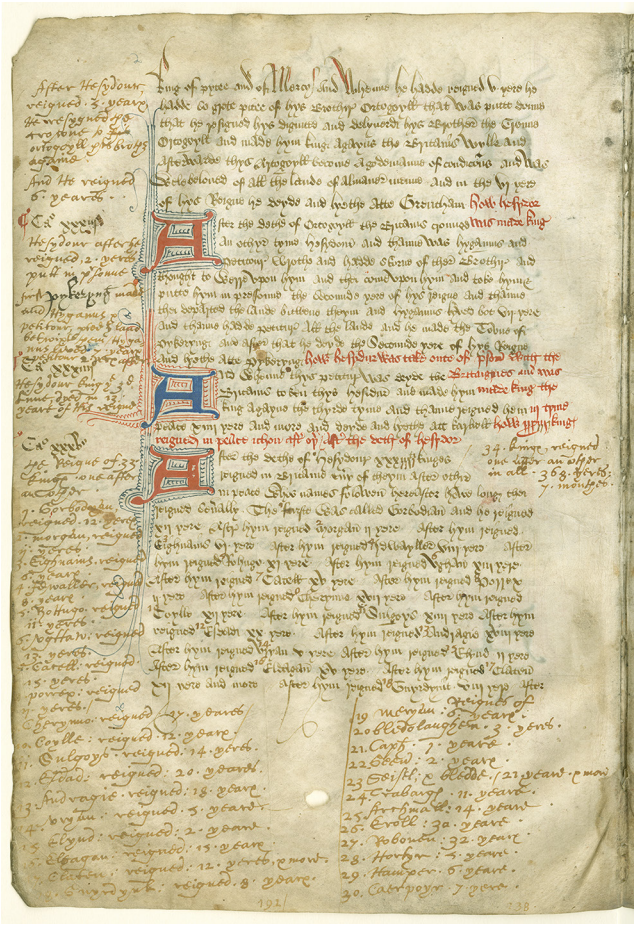

Fig. 2. Page of marginalia and text layout. Taken from scanned image.

Fig. 3. Detail of cut and pierced leather sewing support with tacket.

Fig. 4. Cover with clasp and blind tooling.

blind tooled flexible leather case with a fore edge flap and three reinforcing leather overbands covering areas of the spine. The textblock is attached through the overbands to the sewn textblock with six secondary tackets. This style of binding involving a leather case, overbands, blind tooling, fore edge flap, and a closure system is sometimes called a "stationer's binding" and was commonly used for account books and other record keeping texts. It is less often found on literary or historical manuscripts, though non-account book texts were sometimes sold in simple tacketed bindings without tooling or overbands that may have been considered temporary bindings.

In many stationers bindings the sewing supports are left long in anticipation of new quires as new transactions and updated information became available. In the Brut binding, the supports have been cut short indicating that there would be no need for further additions.

A detail I found interesting about the sewing supports was that in the center of each support there is a pierced hole located at the first and last signature station with the tail support having an additional piercing at the middle signature station. I believe these were used as supplementary sewing stations for security and strength, and helped keep the quires cinched onto the support so they would not slide off. (fig. 3)

THE COVER

The leather cover with foredge flap is tooled in blind. The pattern of the tooling replicates samples of roll tooled designs from 1530 to 1630, leading me to believe that the binding was made during this time, almost 200 years after the Bruts creation in 1430. There are three over bands with decorative

alum tawed lacing. Paper paste downs extend the width of the cover which gave the limp leather a bit more rigidity at the time of its fabrication. A brass metal clasp is crudely sewn to a leather strap at the foredge flap, with no sign of a catch plate. (fig. 4)

CONDITION

The condition of the binding reflected its age as evidenced with various damages throughout. The leather cover was worn especially at the spine, exposing the backs of the quires. Previous repairs of machine made paper and leather had been glued over the interior of the lower cover and flap to strengthen it and a thin thread was used as reinforcement sewing. The nature of the repairs suggests that they were done in the 1950s. (fig. 5)

The parchment leaves were highly soiled and had some distortion, especially the title page which had contracted from moisture damage. The media appeared to be in stable condition and did not show evidence of flaking or powdering. A number of pages were torn and had losses. The exterior folios were weak and damaged, and the gutters were filled with dirt and debris. The front joint was almost completely detached, and the sewing was broken and loose throughout. With each viewing this sewing became weaker and more insubstantial resulting in potential damage to individual pages, essentially the binding was mechanically self-destructing.

My challenge as conservator was to treat the Brut so that it could be used and studied as a physical object in an active special collections reading room. Dartmouth Special Collections Librarian, Jay Satterfield, wanted the text scanned to make the contents accessible through our digital library collection. As an option to outsourcing the digitizing and possible conservation work, I contacted the Northeast Document and Conservation Center which recommend that after digitizing, the binding be stabilized to the best degree possible and have limited use, a common conservation action. While this is a viable conservation approach this was not an option for us. The manuscript was a major investment and was intended to be used for regular teaching instruction. Stabilizing the binding as best as possible would not ensure the protection needed, therefore an alternative solution was desirable.

PRETREATMENT AND DIGITIZING

Digitizing the manuscript was our first priority. As we were not going to retain the current binding, the first step was to disbind the manuscript, to facilitate the scanning process. First, I released the tackets to allow the case to detach from the textblock.

The exposed quires revealed another set of sewing holes and remains of old adhesive, indicating that there was a previous binding, most likely the original one. This evidence explained the incongruity of the binding with the text-block,

Fig. 5. Inside cover, previous modern repair: machine-made paper and leather patches to reinforce cover.

Fig. 6. The cover released from the tackets, reveals sewing holes from original sewing.

an observation that had perplexed me from the beginning: the worn and damaged stationers binding was historical but was neither completely contemporary with the text-block nor congruent with its subject matter. (fig. 6)

Based on the date the manuscript was written, the original binding might have been bound in wooden or heavy boards covered in an alum tawed skin. This could also explain the clasp that was stitched to the foredge flap; perhaps a remnant of the original binding. Once the textblock was dis-bound, I mechanically cleaned the pages using vulcanized rubber sponges avoiding the manuscript area and brushed out the large amount of debris. The outer folds of the broken folios and the tears were mended as necessary with a lightweight Japanese tissue and cooked wheat starch paste. In this unbound condition the pages were stable enough to be digitized. Each of the 16 quires was placed in a paper folder and put into a temporary box during the digitizing process. Each folio was scanned on an Epson Expression 10000 flatbed scanner, with 600 ppi resolution and 48-bit color. Later, the

image files were sequenced in proper order and integrated into the Dartmouth College Digital Collections. http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library/digital/collections/manuscripts/ocn312771386/.

REBINDING OPTIONS

Given that the manuscript was bound in a stationers binding, I concluded after discussions with colleagues that perhaps the Brut had been rebound by a merchant in the sixteenth century, who could have taken it to his binder who bound his account books. Nicholas Pickwoad references this suggestion about a printed text he found in a stationers binding (Pickwoad, N. 2000). This idea was later validated by then student Emily Ulrich who surmised the manuscript belonged to a sheep merchant based on evidence from the marginalia of readers' annotations that she transcribed as part of her senior thesis. This shows a direct relationship of the owner to the method he chose to bind his valuable book. When the time came to rebind the manuscript I faced a dilemma. In instances where rebinding happens on a parchment manuscript it usually entails taking it out of a terrible 19th century inflexible binding. This was a manuscript that had been historically rebound and still retained that significance. As a general approach we try to use and retain the original binding to maintain historical accuracy. Reusing the original cover was out of the question as the leather and overall condition was too far degraded. To think through the option of rebinding back into a stationers binding, I fabricated a facsimile in order to evaluate this option with the Special Collections Librarian. Upon completion of the facsimile it seemed clear that this would probably not be the best option. I felt this style would be too mechanically demanding for the old and weakened quire folds and it also seemed as though this treatment choice was trying to make the Brut fit back into something it no longer belonged to and the Special Collections Librarian agreed. (fig. 7)

The second option was to rebind it in an historical replica similar to the possible original wooden board style. In book conservation we are often rebinding our books into historical replicas in order to preserve historical context and provide a pleasant viewing experience. In current practice we approach our work with the ideals of what conservation means, such as reversibility and less intervention. Going back to the early 1950's, Roger Powell emphasized the importance of keeping adhesive off the back of manuscripts, parchment manuscripts in particular and established the idea of reversibility and openability. Following this line of thinking conservation re-bindings like the Elsmere Chaucer at Huntington by Anthony Cains, and Robert Espinoza's Rigid Board Specifications all stem from a traditional concept of conservation rebinding. So rebinding the manuscript in an historical replica was a viable consideration.

Fig. 7. Facsimile stationers binding with toggle closures.

Because the Special Collections Librarian wanted to start using the text in classes I decided as an initial step to re-sew the quires onto tanned leather supports using the sewing holes from the previous stationers binding. To attach the handmade double folio flax endsheets, I used the same sewing method of the centered pierced sewing supports. Resewing in this fashion seemed the most practical as it was in keeping with the previous sewing of the stationers binding and put minimal stress on the quires. In this manner, the manuscript could be used in the classroom, a supported non-adhesive binding, without covers. The Librarian remarked on how wonderfully it opened and implied he wouldn't mind if it stayed like that, but I knew that was not a responsible option and a protective cover was essential. (fig. 8)

COLLABORATION

The process of rebinding the manuscript coincided with the conference *From Medieval Britain to Dartmouth: Situating the English Brut Tradition* which took place on campus and I was invited to present a short summary of the binding and the conservation work I had completed to a group of Brut scholars participating at the conference. At the conclusion of my talk, there was a thought-provoking discussion about what should happen with the binding. Some scholars favored the

Fig. 8. Completed sewing of text block on tanned leather supports.

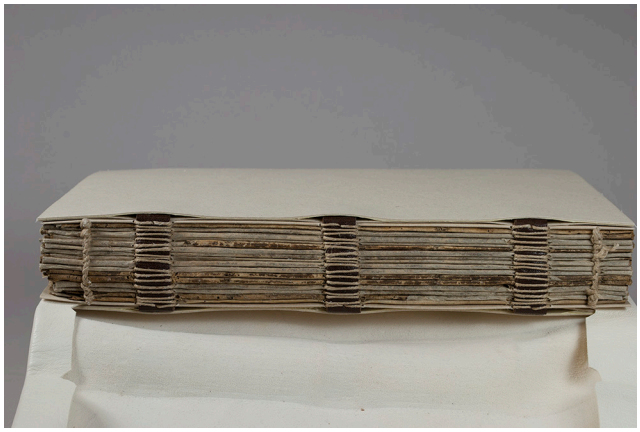

Fig. 9. Binding with attached slotted covers.

Fig. 10. Opening at back with leather supports inserted into the cover boards.

potential original binding, in wooden boards covered in an alum tawed skin, while others leaned toward the facsimile stationers binding style, and as we talked a consensus developed that a third option would be best. The Brut appeared to have been bound in the 16th or 17th century by a merchant in such a fashion that made sense to him. Now in the 21st century, the book's context is quite different, with new considerations and requirements. It was agreed that some sort of hybrid would be appropriate for the binding, something that would suit our needs today but would reflect and pay respect to its history. The opportunity to work collaboratively and receive input gave me the chance to hear different perspectives and helped me to develop an alternative solution.

TREATMENT

Left with the task of creating the new binding, I knew I wanted to maintain the sewing that I had already completed, since it was functioning well. The idea to fabricate pasteboard or cartonage for the cover boards was inspired from a workshop I had taken with Maria Fredricks, head conservator at the Morgan Library. In the workshop on historical paper bindings, I was reacquainted with the beautiful cover weight flax paper made by Tim Barrett from the Paper Research and Production Facility at the University of Iowa. Layering this paper would produce boards that were protective but not overly heavy or stiff—a middle ground between wood boards and flexible leather.

Using multiple layers of the handmade paper with two inner boards of forty point board, I fashioned the boards with 3 small openings along the spine edge where the corresponding leather supports slip in. In order to keep the boards in place and provide a covering, I created a chemise of alum tawed goatskin, to reference its possible original binding. This assembly allows the boards to be removed to show the sewing structure and the original sewing holes which can be used as a teaching tool. To facilitate the insertion of the supports into the slots of the board I reinforced the ends with an inner layer of parchment. (figs. 9–10)

The over cover, or chemise, of the conservation binding, offers a protective exterior to the boards, akin to a medieval dust jacket. It provides support and a cohesive finish to the binding, at the same time allowing for ease in opening and is non adhesive. The finished binding has a glimpse of what it may have looked like in its original form before the surviving stationers binding, and is flexible and stable for reading purposes. In the end, this simple design has met all goals of the Brut's current use while at the same time maintains reference to its past life and respect to its history. (figs. 11–12)

To augment the Brut's value for teaching and create a research archive, I saved all the material that was removed from the binding during the conservation process. The debris from the sections is encapsulated in a small pocket and all

Fig. 11. Outside of binding with alum tawed chemise.

Fig. 12. Open manuscript illustrating flexible opening.

tackets, sewing thread and repair thread are kept with the manuscript. The surviving cover is housed in a simple folder lined with Volara foam and covered with the same handmade paper used for the paste boards and all are housed together in a custom box. (figs. 13–14)

This practical treatment solution takes into account the bindings' historical provenance and its contemporary situation: which is that of an object people use and study. In the end the importance of most books is not as museum pieces to be cherished on a shelf, but in their ability to convey intellectual ideas to further the human project. A book has the ability to shape people's lives and change them. The conservation decisions made had to take into consideration that the book was a teaching tool, not just a trophy. It is now in a climate controlled facility with caretakers, here to be used and appreciated reflecting the idea of making conservation work.

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Fig. 13. Preserved fragments: six large tackets made from parchment, debris brushed from the gutters of the quires (dirt and hair), thin thread used for repair, leather sewing supports, and sewing threads.

Fig. 14. The Brut in its box: the bound codex, a folder containing the stationers binding cover, a sleeve preserving sewing fragments and debris, and a sleeve with provenance documents.

Dartmouth College, Maria Fredricks, Head Conservator; Morgan Library, Walter Neuman, Paper Conservator, Stephanie Wolff, Assistant Conservator; Dartmouth College Library, Joshua Lascell, Manuscript Supervisor, Rauner Library; Dartmouth College Library, Jay Satterfield, Special Collections Librarian, Rauner Library; Dartmouth College Library.

All photographs taken by Deborah Howe.

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