



[Clockwise from above] Books for the London Library are pressed after being cased-in; a close-up view of the Swift glue machine, which applies glue to cloth for making book cases - the glue is picked up by two brass rollers as the cloth feeds through it; colourful details; part of Downie Allison Downie's studio in Partick



BEHIND CLOSED DOORS DAD BOOKBINDERS

Breathing new life into old books, a team of artists in Glasgow are keeping an ancient craft alive

Photography Kerry Douglas and Makeworks Words Judy Diamond

Given the nature of our throwaway culture and insatiable appetite for all things digital, it seems unfeasible that a business as resolutely traditional as bookbinding could survive, let alone thrive. Yet that is exactly where Glasgow's Downie Allison Downie finds itself. A second-generation family business, established in Finnieston by Morton Downie in 1981, it is going from strength to strength, supplying customers all over the world.

John Allison joined forces with Downie in 1997 and now runs the business alongside Lesley-Anne and Robin Mitchell, Morton's daughter and son-in-law. The focus of the business is on creativity and quality, using the diverse skills and

experience of a highly trained team of eleven. It offers a wide range of services, from visitors' books, portfolios and thesis-binding to fine-binding and restoration. "We are different from other bookbinders because we like to train our staff on many aspects of bookbinding instead of just one," says Robin.

"Our team is mostly made up of former art students - we find they are both creative and have a very high attention to detail. We have a silversmith, a graphic designer, two illustrators, a jeweller, a screen-printer and an interior designer working for us just now, which brings a wealth of creativity to the company."

The team use techniques that have been around for centuries. The materials may have changed over the years as improvements have been made to their quality, but otherwise books will ▶

“I STUDIED MATHS
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be bound in the same way as Milton's *Paradise Lost* was in 1667 or Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was in 1729.

“And when we have to make paper repairs,” says Robin, “we use Japanese tissue paper – a very thin but strong paper made from vegetables; such papers have been made in Japan since 600AD.”

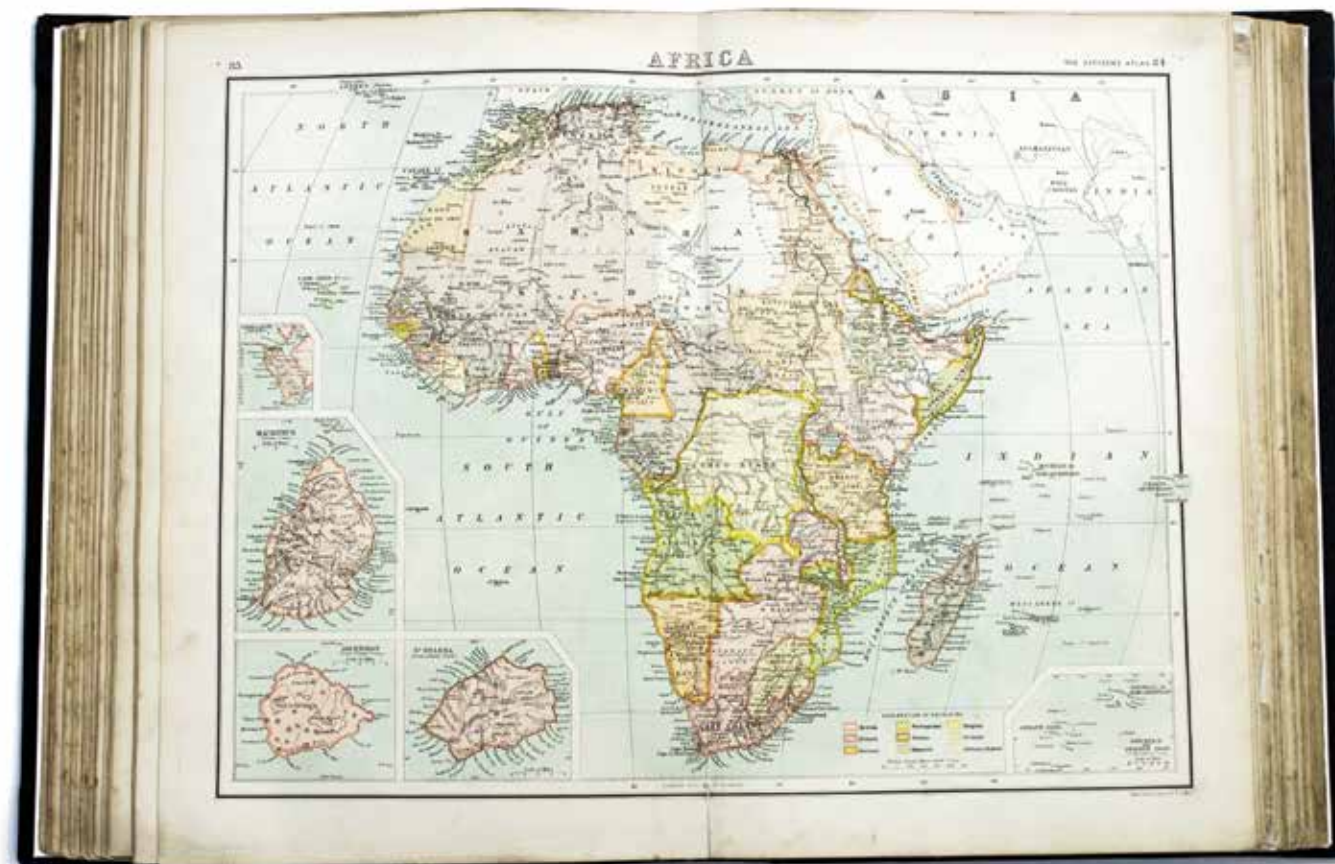
The old methods are still used simply because they still do the job. The techniques have been perfected over centuries, and DAD employs many of them. “We hand-sew in a variety of different styles that still work very well for the conservation of books,” says Robin. “Japanese or Coptic sewing styles, where the sewing is exposed, are currently very popular if people want something a little bit different on a newly bound book.”

There are added extras that can turn a leather-bound book into a work of art – gilding the edges of the pages with gold leaf and hand-tooling the title or a design onto the front or spine, for example. Gilding has been traced back to Ancient Egypt, and was brought to Europe in the 15th century from the Islamic world.

In the firm's busy studio in Partick, there's a quiet hum of activity as the day's tasks get underway. Proximity to the university means there will often be theses to bind. There's the clatter of a sewing machine as sections of pages are sewn to their bindings; the swish of the guillotine as paper is cut to size; and the tap of a hammer as covers are hand-tooled. “Most of our work is done by hand – we are a traditional bookbinders and only use machinery to assist in the process,” explains Robin. “Leather-bound books especially require a lot of hand-work, from paring the leather, creating raised bands along the spine and binding the actual book. Sometimes paper repairs are needed, which again is done by hand, as is some of the tooling to give the book a more ornate finish.”

On Saturdays, the place gets very busy; DAD started classes last year, offering people the chance to learn about bookbinding and repair their own books. “They've been very popular – we've seen a real resurgence in crafts and books in general.”

The classes certainly fill a gap – it can be difficult to learn



[Clockwise from left] A newly repaired atlas; John Allison applies ribbons to a bible which will be rebound in full leather - note the beautiful gilded edges; this Singer sewing machine is used to sew pages into a single 'section' - the sections are then gathered together and attached to the binding; a short run of books commissioned by a choir containing their scores, with an inset of their logo applied to the cover

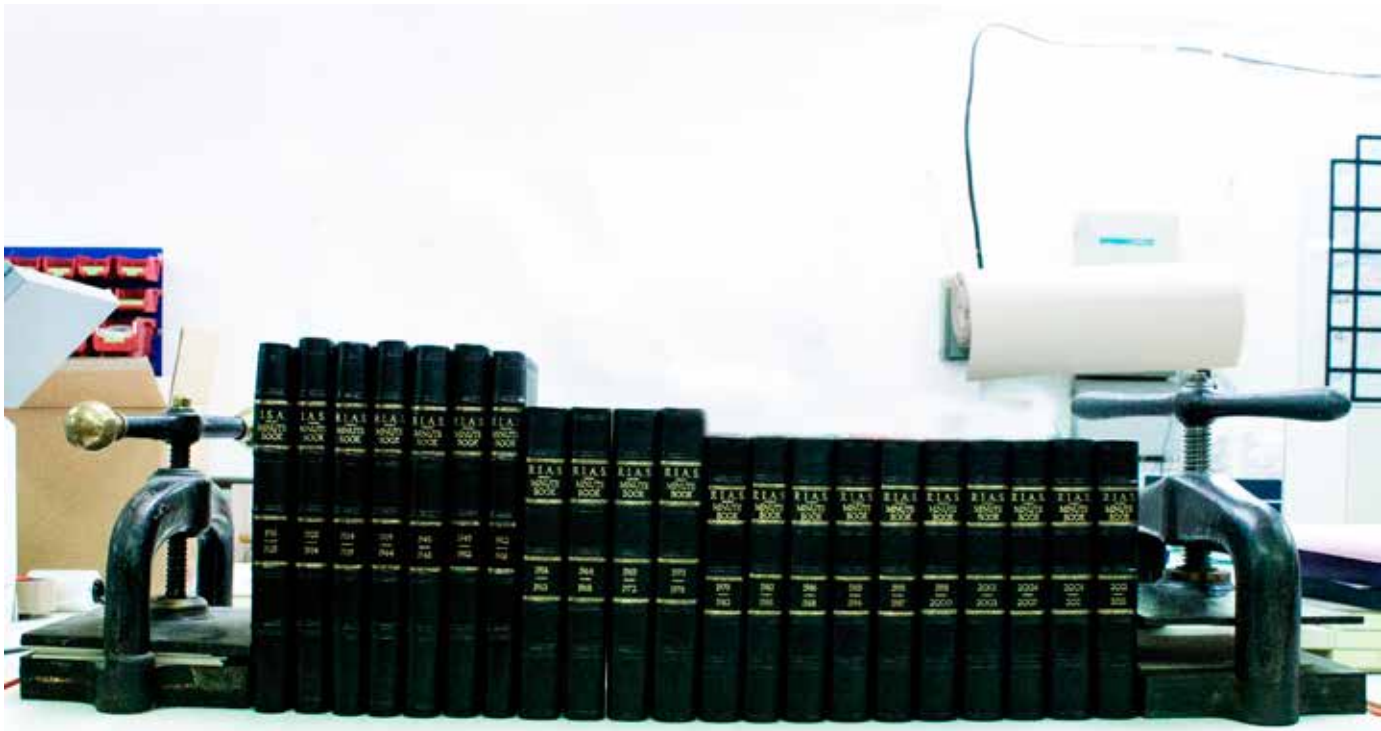


bookbinding these days. “It used to be taught as an apprenticeship at colleges and in larger binders, but there are no apprenticeships or college courses any more, just very few companies like ourselves that provide in-house training in these skills,” says Robin.

Recognising the trade is in danger of dying out, a new apprenticeship programme has recently been launched by the Queen to give eight people the chance to learn bookbinding at Windsor Castle. If it succeeds, they will find plenty of work out there: as well as fulfilling commissions for libraries and private collections, DAD's team bind artists' portfolios, repair old manuscripts, create hand-bound wedding books and work on custom-made slipcases. Robin loves the variety of the work. “No two days are the same,” he smiles. “One day we can be visiting an archive in the depths of Edinburgh looking at old books in desperate need of repair, and the next we're talking with a design company about making some bespoke boxes to promote their company.”

And he loves the value that DAD's craftsmanship can add to an heirloom. “The work we do breathes new life into old books. There is great pleasure in restoring a book that has meaning to someone – perhaps it belonged to their mother or their grandfather, and it can now be ▶





ROBIN'S FAVOURITES

Favourite book *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts

Favourite writer Bill Bryson

Favourite looking book Medieval books are fascinating as they have handwritten and hand-painted pages with incredible detail; both internally and externally and are true artworks, as well as books

Best bookshop in the world Livraria Lello, in Porto, Portugal

What are you currently reading *One Summer: America 1927* by Bill Bryson

Your greatest influences We've travelled extensively over the years and love to see different designs, styles and architecture all over the world

passed on to their children and grandchildren.”

DAD sends its work out all over the world, with clients in Hong Kong, Australia and across Europe. It regularly binds shipping registers for the British Virgin Islands, for example. “I think we’re unique in having a very creative team – our staff are all artists in their own right,” explains Robin. “They’re all highly creative people and are always looking for different ways to achieve an end result for the client. Most bookbinders stick to the traditional aspect of bookbinding and might not be willing to veer away from this to achieve a specific result. Our designs are bespoke, so first and foremost we try to get a good understanding of what the client wants as the end product.”

Did he ever think he'd be using centuries-old crafts every day? “No! I studied maths and only came into DAD to help out for a week. I loved it so much I stayed. It was the creative role and fast-paced environment that got me hooked, and I've been learning the craft ever since.” ■



[From top to bottom] A series of minute books dating from 1916 to 2015, all rebound in full leather for RIAS; traditional hand-sewing using hemp cords on a book from 1640; brass letters used for hand-blocking

