

## RECENT ACQUISITIONS

### A BINDING BY THE SCALES BINDER, *circa* 1456–65

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THE main centres of English bookbinding during the second half of the fifteenth century were London, Oxford and Cambridge. Although a fair number of plain leather bindings of this period have survived, fewer than a dozen binderies producing tooled leather bindings are known to have started work before 1475. Possibly the earliest of these is that of the Scales Binder. He worked in London from the 1450s until after 1481 and his work, noted by M. R. James, was first systematically described by G. D. Hobson.<sup>1</sup> Hobson identified twelve bindings from this binder, whom he named after one of his most characteristic tools, a pair of scales. J. B. Oldham<sup>2</sup> and Graham Pollard<sup>3</sup> also discussed this binder's work, but the most detailed account was published by Nicolas Barker<sup>4</sup> who identified seven more examples and observed that the tools used to decorate the bindings fall into two groups. The first consists of twelve bindings, all covering manuscripts, none of which is demonstrably later than 1465. The second group of seven bindings covers two undated manuscripts and five printed books dated between 1466 and 1481.

A recently discovered example of this binder's work belongs to Barker's first group. It covers the Abridgement of the Book of Assizes in French, compiled in the mid-fifteenth century. The manuscript (now Add. MS. 65194) is written on paper in eight quires of 14 folios with a final quire of 8 folios. The vellum end-leaves consist of a pair of conjugate manuscript leaves plus one blank leaf at each end. The pair of manuscript leaves at the end contains a copy of an entry on the King's Bench roll for Hilary 34 Henry VI,<sup>5</sup> so that the binding cannot be earlier than 1456.

The manuscript is sewn with thin cord on four split alum-tawed thongs, and the inner fold of each quire has been strengthened with a thin strip of paper. The backs of the quires have been lined with vellum between the thongs and there are remnants of leather headbands, tied down with sewing thread in the centre of each quire. The boards are made up of vellum leaves, plain and manuscript, pasted together and covered with brown calf. There are remnants of leather ties. The covers are tooled in blind to a panel design. A border of rectangular tools surrounds a central panel, filled on the upper cover with rows of tools, while on the lower cover the central compartment has been decorated with a knife, showing on a cross-hatched ground the initial b, almost certainly that of the original owner of the binding. This feature of cut-leather decoration is one of the characteristics of the Scales Binder's work, a technique otherwise unknown in England,





Abridgement of the Book of Assizes; mid-fifteenth century. Blind-tooled brown calf, 198 × 135 × 40 mm. Add. MS. 65194, front cover





Add. MS. 65194, back cover



though popular in German-speaking countries during the fifteenth century. The rectangular tool that has been used to form the border on the lower cover does not occur on any of the previously-known bindings from this shop.

Nicolas Barker drew attention to the Scales Binder's unusual habit of signing the quires of a number of books he bound.<sup>6</sup> The manuscript discussed here has catchwords, written in the lower inner margin of the verso of the last folio of each quire, probably by the scribe of the text. Following the catchword is an oblique stroke, after which comes, slightly lower down, the quire number in roman numerals, sometimes preceded or followed by a dot. The roman numerals are almost always in a darker ink and the shape of the v is distinct from that of the scribal v. It is therefore likely that these signatures were added by the binder.

Unlike so many bindings of this period, this binding has not been restored and it looks remarkably fresh with clear impressions of the tools. The British Library has been particularly fortunate to acquire it and owes a debt of gratitude to the Pilgrim Trust and the Friends of the National Libraries who enabled it to do so.

1 G. D. Hobson, *Bindings in Cambridge Libraries* (Cambridge, 1929), pp. 14–25; *English Binding before 1500* (Cambridge, 1929), pp. 17–18.

2 J. B. Oldham, *English Blind-stamped Bindings* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 25; 'English fifteenth-century binding' in *Festschrift Ernst Kyriss* (Stuttgart, 1961), pp. 164–5.

3 G. Pollard, 'The names of some English fifteenth-century binders', *The Library*, 5th series, xxv (1970), pp. 193–218.

4 N. J. Barker, 'Collector's Piece IV. A register of writs and the Scales Binder', *The Book Collector*, xxi (1972), pp. 227–44, 356–79.

5 I am grateful to my colleague Andrew Prescott for identifying the text of the manuscript and the text of the end-leaves.

6 N. J. Barker, art. cit., p. 368. See also N. J. Barker, 'Quiring and the binder' in *Studies in the Book Trade in Honour of Graham Pollard* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 11–31.

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