

# **THE ZIBBY GARNETT TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP**

**Report by Julie Sommerfeldt**



**Conservation of Parchment Bindings**

**At centro del bel libro, Ascona, Switerland**

**28 November – 9 December, 2011**

## **Table of Contents**

<b>List of figures</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Trip Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Report</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Ascona</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>centro del bel libro</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The Course</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>24</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b> A train on the famous Gotthard pass, Switzerland	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 2:</b> A Map of Europe showing location of Switzerland	<b>8</b>
<b>Figure 3:</b> A Map of Switzerland showing location of Ascona	<b>8</b>
<b>Figure 4:</b> A map showing the location of Ascona on the shore of Lake Maggiore, and the proximity to Italy (blue dotted border)	<b>9</b>
<b>Figure 5:</b> The lake promenade in Ascona, with the Alps visible behind	<b>10</b>
<b>Figure 6:</b> The view from the promenade out over Lake Maggiore	<b>11</b>
<b>Figure 7:</b> The building housing the centro del bel libro Book and Paper Conservation department (on the second floor)	<b>12</b>
<b>Figure 8:</b> The studios of the Book and Paper Conservation department at the centro del bel libro	<b>12</b>
<b>Figure 9:</b> My two fellow course participants, Susanne and Elisa, at work	<b>13</b>
<b>Figure 10:</b> Practical demonstration on filling losses and repairing tears in Parchment	<b>15</b>
<b>Figure 11:</b> Identification of parchment species under the microscope	<b>15</b>
<b>Figure 12:</b> Two methods of extending broken cord sewing supports with linen thread and thinned leather	<b>16</b>
<b>Figure 13:</b> <i>Fastorum Romanorum Consularium Libri Duo</i> , published in Amsterdam, 1705	<b>17</b>
<b>Figure 14:</b> <i>Disprezio Della Vanita del Mondo</i> , Italy 1724	<b>17</b>
<b>Figure 15:</b> <i>Fastorum Romanorum</i> ; drawing a template of damage and loss on the spine	<b>19</b>
<b>Figure 16:</b> Colouring selected new parchment for repairs	<b>19</b>
<b>Figure 17:</b> <i>Disprezio Della Vanita del Mondo</i> ; clamped front board drying	<b>20</b>
<b>Figure 18:</b> <i>Disprezio Della Vanita del Mondo</i> ; corner repair made with new (lighter) parchment	<b>20</b>
<b>Figure 19:</b> Gardi Hutter	<b>22</b>

**Figure 20:** *Dispregio Della Vanita del Mondo*; parchment loss in-filled at top of spine 23

**Figure 21:** *Fastorum Romanorum*; new parchment spine in place, clamped between boards to dry 23

## **Introduction**

### **Introduction**

My name is Julie Sommerfeldt; I am 39 and came to the UK from Australia in 2008 to study Book and Library Materials Conservation, graduating in 2010 from West Dean College in West Sussex with a Masters in Conservation Studies. Since graduating, I have worked as a conservator on short contract in Egypt and have undertaken a one year internship in the Conservation department at the British Library. I am currently a Book Conservator at the Bodleian Library, Oxford University on a two-year contract.

During my studies, volunteer placements and work as a conservator, I have been fortunate to come into contact with a wide variety of parchment bindings from extremely diverse origins in libraries and archives throughout the UK, Italy and Egypt. Parchment is an ancient and wonderful material with unique properties making it a strong, beautiful and durable binding material that houses books in collections the world over, for centuries if not millennia. It behaves unlike leather, paper, or any other material commonly associated with books, and for this reason a thorough understanding of its structure and properties is required in order to safely and appropriately treat damaged parchment bindings.

Book Conservation is a specialised area, and within that, the conservation of parchment bindings is even further specialised, with surprisingly little dedicated training and education available. There is an acknowledged need for this type of expertise, and very few places for conservators to acquire it. The *centro del bel libro* in Ascona, Switzerland, is a technical school with the specialized areas of Bookbinding and Design and Book and Paper Conservation. It is internationally

renowned, and the course on parchment bindings offers the unique opportunity to study this ancient and unique material in depth.

### **Trip summary:**

My trip consisted of a ten day workshop, *The Conservation of Parchment Bindings*, run over two weeks at the centro del bel libro in Ascona, Switzerland.

This course, run as a Masterclass for professional conservators, took place in studios in the Book and Paper Conservation department at the school, under the tutelage of Franziska Richter, the head of department. The programme, delivered in both German and English, was an intensive mix of theory and practical hands-on work, covering history and manufacture of parchment, historical binding techniques, storage and housing conditions for parchment bindings, damage analysis, treatment proposals and documentation and practical skills including cleaning and humidifying parchment, mending tears and filling losses (also in situ) and the restoration of book covers. A more detailed explanation of work undertaken during this course will be given in the main body of this report.

At the end of the course, I spent the weekend sightseeing in Zurich at my own expense before heading back to London. The Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship generously awarded £1500 towards the cost of the trip, and a bursary covering course fees (CHF 1520 = approximately £1050) was granted by the Association centro del bel libro; the not-for-profit parent institution of the school.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the generous financial support given by the Zibby Garnett Travelling Fellowship and also the Association centro del bel libro in Ascona. I am grateful to support given by David Dorning, my former tutor at West Dean College and Cordelia Rogerson, Head of Conservation at the British Library. Their generous letters of reference in my application secured me an interview; the first and most crucial step in obtaining this wonderful opportunity. Ruth Stevens, my friend and former colleague at the British Library, and a past Zibby Garnett Scholar, provided much encouragement and advice, and Flavio Marzo, my friend and former mentor and colleague at the British Library, supplied two lovely and decrepit parchment bindings to work on. My new employers and colleagues at the Bodleian Library showed a great deal of forbearance and willingness to support my attendance at the course through time away, despite having started work at the Bodleian only several weeks earlier.

## **Report**

### **Ascona**

The most straightforward way to get to Ascona from the UK involved flying to Zurich and then taking a train from Zurich to Locarno, Ascona's neighbouring town. From Locarno, Ascona was a fifteen minute bus ride away. The train journey from Zurich was extremely picturesque in places, as it passed alongside icy blue alpine lakes and through the Gotthard Mountains in a complex series of tunnel passes (see Fig. 1).



**Figure 1: A train on the famous Gotthard pass, Switzerland**  
[http://www.123rf.com/photo\\_7476570\\_mountain-scape-with-a-red-train-on-a-bridge-san-gotthard-pass-switzerland.html](http://www.123rf.com/photo_7476570_mountain-scape-with-a-red-train-on-a-bridge-san-gotthard-pass-switzerland.html) (Accessed 15/2/12)

Ascona is a town in Southern Switzerland (see Figs. 2 - 4) in the canton of Ticino.

Very close to the Italian border, the identity of the Ticinese people is proudly distinct from other parts of Switzerland. Italian is spoken in favour of German, and the food and wine carry more than a nod to Italy. Ascona sits directly opposite the town Locarno on the delta where the River Maggia flows into Lake Maggiore. Sheltered by the magnificent surrounding Alps, it enjoys an exceptional climate, and each year the long summers draw hordes of tourists.





Figure 2: A Map of Europe showing location of Switzerland  
<http://www.i-love-china.net/europe-map/> (Accessed 18/02/12)



Figure 3: A Map of Switzerland showing location of Ascona  
<http://www.switzerland-trips.com/Ascona/Ascona-Hotels-Tourist-Info-Transport.html>  
 (Accessed 15/02/12)



Figure 4: A map of the canton of Ticino showing the location of Ascona on the shore of Lake Maggiore, and the proximity to Italy (blue dotted border) [http://www.welt-atlas.de/map\\_of\\_ticino\\_canton\\_1-818](http://www.welt-atlas.de/map_of_ticino_canton_1-818) (Accessed 18/02/11)

During my two weeks in Ascona, I stayed in a small studio apartment set several streets back from the lake edge, in the old part of town, and very central. The school had provided a list of local accommodation and this apartment was within budget, was situated within close walking distance to the school, and had simple facilities to self-cater. Like many European towns, Ascona is fairly sprawling, but the Old Town is compact and central. A short walk from either the school or the apartment took me to the long promenade on the lake edge. During summer, Ascona overflows with locals, multitudes of tourists and those fortunate enough to have summer houses

along the lake edge. As summer ends, many of the shops and restaurants close, hotels and summer houses shut up for the season; the crowds depart and the inhabitants dwindle to a tiny fraction of their summer numbers. During my stay, the town was in its winter semi-hibernation mode, and only Sunday afternoons brought people out in any significant number to enjoy the winter sunshine, walk with their tiny dogs, chatting, and sipping drinks at the cafes lining the lake shore. The panorama of the promenade along the lake rising up to the narrow, cobbled streets of the Old Town, framed by the Alps towering behind, is spectacular, as is the view across the lake itself (see Figs. 5 and 6).



**Figure 5: The lake promenade in Ascona, with the Alps visible behind**



**Figure 6: The view from the promenade out over Lake Maggiore**

### **centro del bel libro**

The centro del bel libro in Ascona is an internationally known and recognized technical school with the specialized departments of Bookbinding and Design and Book and Paper Conservation (see Figs. 7 and 8). The parent Association is a not for profit organisation and offers financial assistance in the form of bursaries to cover course fees to eligible students who would not otherwise be able to attend. The courses offered attract professionals from institutional and private practice worldwide, and delivers internationally recognised training in theory and practical applications, in a number of highly specialised areas in Book and Paper Conservation and Bookbinding and Design. Course numbers are kept deliberately small to ensure one to one tuition.





**Figure 7: The building housing the centro del bel libro Book and Paper Conservation department (on the second floor)**

<http://www.cbl-ascona.ch/html/gallery.html> (Accessed 15/2/12)



**Figure 8: The studios of the Book and Paper Conservation department at the centro del bel libro**

## **The Course**

Course #130, *The Conservation of Parchment Bindings*, was a ten day course in the department of Book and Paper Conservation, run over two weeks (Monday November 28 to Friday December 9, 2011). It featured an intensive mix of theory

and practical application, and allowed each participant to work on the treatment of individual objects. Luckily, there were only three course participants, allowing excellent one-to-one time with the tutor throughout. My fellow participants (see Fig. 9) were Susanne, a bookbinder from Germany, and Elisa, a Brazilian conservator working in Brussels.



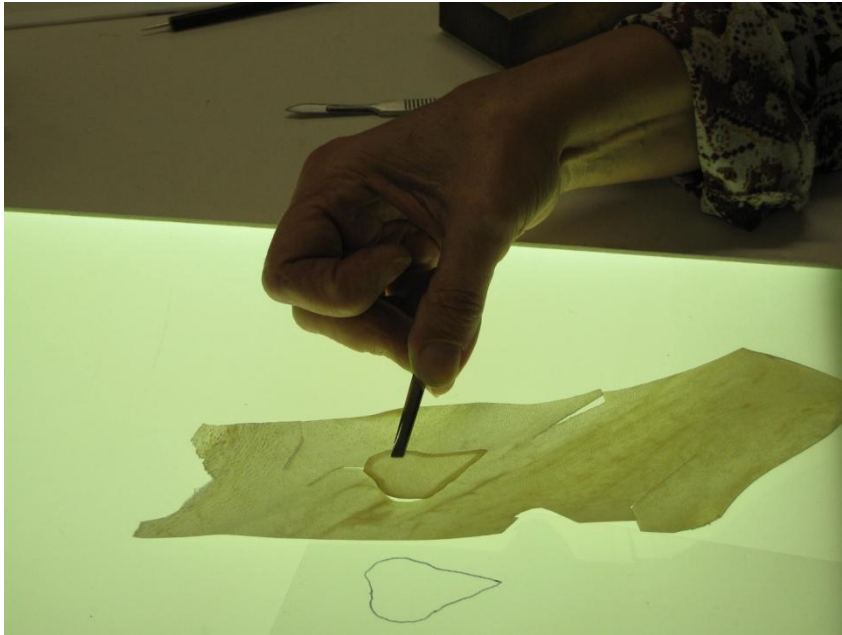
**Figure 9: My two fellow course participants, Susanne and Elisa, at work**

The first half of the course was heavily weighted towards theory, and with PowerPoint lectures, short films, extensive printed course notes and written diagrams we covered the history and manufacture of parchment, a brief classification of binding structures and techniques involving parchment, the structure and chemistry of parchment, causes of damage and how to determine them, and an overview of repair techniques and materials.

Throughout the first week, the theory sessions were interspersed with gradually increasing amounts of practical exercises and demonstrations (see Figs. 10 to 12), as well as the examination and photographing of our objects, analysis and discussion of their structures and damage and formulation of comprehensive treatment plans. The practical demonstrations and exercises were tailored towards gaining the skills we would need to undertake treatment of our objects, and included tear-repair and infilling losses/holes in parchment, with particular emphasis on using a range of adhesives and repair materials in order to gain familiarity with their properties and characteristics, benefits and limitations. Similar demonstrations and practice was undertaken involving identification of animal species used in parchment manufacture based on microscopic examination of the parchment surface and hair follicle patterns, extending broken textblock sewing supports<sup>1</sup>, wet-lining parchment with another material to increase its strength and stiffness, and various ways of colouring new repair parchment to match the original.

---

<sup>1</sup> A sewing support, usually cord or tape, is used when sewing a book together, and provides a means of attaching the book (often referred to as the *textblock*) to the binding, or boards. Sewing supports often break along the joints down each side of the spine where the boards swing open and closed, resulting in the detachment and potential loss of the boards and vulnerability of the exposed textblock to damage.



**Figure 10: Practical demonstration on filling losses and repairing tears in parchment**



**Figure 11: Identification of parchment species under the microscope**





**Figure 12: Two methods of extending broken cord sewing supports with linen thread and thinned leather; note the strips of parchment waste with text from a previous manuscript used as patches to line the spine of the book, between the cords**

By day four we had completed the preliminary work on our books (documentation and photography of the object description and condition, initial dry cleaning and formulation of a draft treatment plan) and began the treatment. We had brought at least two books each to work on, and worked on them simultaneously; as repairs on one were drying, we could make progress with the other, and vice versa.

My own two objects (see Figs. 13 and 14) were both semi-flexible parchment bindings<sup>2</sup> on printed books; one Dutch from 1705 and the other Italian from 1724. I identified the animal species used to make the parchment as goat on the latter, but identification was inconclusive on the former. This kind of detail in the object examination influences the selection of repair materials, to match the visual and behavioural characteristics of the original skin.

---

<sup>2</sup> The term semi-flexible means the binding features stiff boards, but the covering material is not adhered to the boards except on the turn-ins, where it wraps around onto the interior face of the boards. Fully flexible bindings have no boards, and are often called limp bindings.



Figure 13: *Fastorum Romanorum Consularium Libri Duo*, published in Amsterdam, 1705; note the back board is detached from the textblock and the spine is mostly missing



Figure 14: *Dispregio Della Vanita del Mondo*, Italy 1724; note the extensive parchment losses on the spine

A great strength of the course was the daily examination and discussion of each other's objects. This allowed us to encounter a wider range of structures, damages and techniques beyond those on our own bindings, and this greatly enhanced the learning potential during the limited time available.

Another feature of the course that particularly stood out for me was the emphasis on the bespoke nature of each of our treatments (see Figs. 15-18). Every book structure is unique, as well as the materials used in its construction. Together with its age and history of use, these characteristics combine to influence the nature and extent of damage. As a binding material, parchment exhibits probably more variation in structure and behaviour than any other. It is produced from animal skins, as is leather (although the process is distinctly different chemically), and natural variation in the animals themselves (species, age and weight, scars, pigmentation, habitat) as well as the manufacturing process all contribute to the physical qualities of parchment – thickness, opacity, handle (i.e. stiff and brittle or flexible), surface texture and hygroscopic nature (ability to absorb and react to moisture). Factoring in all these characteristics, plus the nature of the damage and the repair materials selected to place on/within the binding, requires substantial knowledge and experience and sensitive handling for a successful outcome. The course emphasised the need to adapt treatment procedures and equipment to tailor them specifically to the object in hand. This may be as simple as creating a bespoke shape to insert on or under a repair to give the required support whilst drying, but requires continual assessment of the object throughout the process, and adaption of the treatment to suit. It is never a fixed set of procedures; rather a dynamic and changing process.

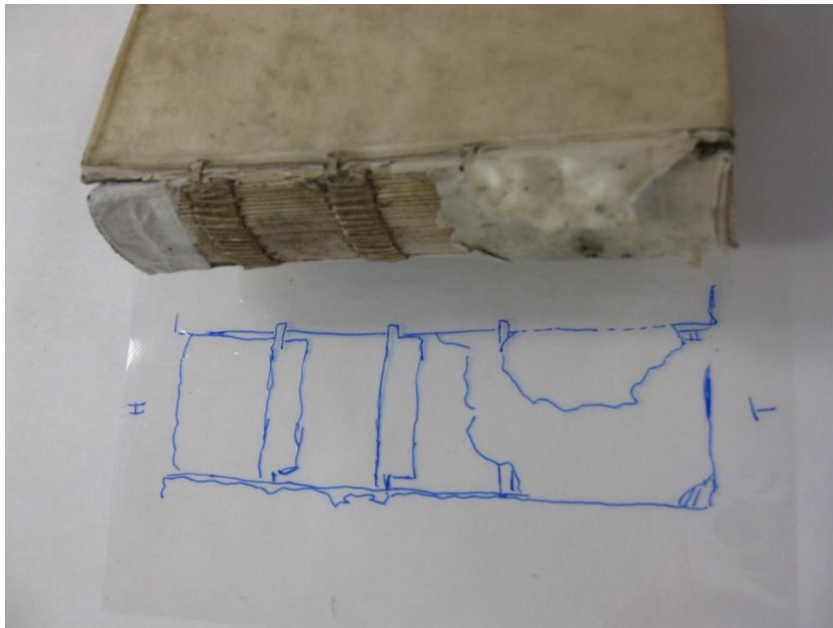


Figure 15: *Fastorum Romanorum*; drawing a template of damage and loss on the spine



Figure 16: Colouring selected new parchment for repairs





**Figure 17: *Dispregio Della Vanita del Mondo*; clamped front board drying after adhesive applied to counteract delamination of board layers**



**Figure 18: *Dispregio Della Vanita del Mondo*; corner repair made with new (lighter) parchment; further colour toning is normally done in-situ**

Much of the basics covered were familiar to me, but very quickly the course moved into new territory both in theory and practice. The two weeks, initially seeming a very long time, seemed to collapse into mere moments. It was an intense wave of incoming knowledge and was in equal parts absorbing, challenging and exhausting.

The daily practice of downing tools for a brief coffee break in one of the lakeside cafes mid-morning, gave us (course participants and teacher) a respite from the intense concentration, and the chance to chat sociably and share some of our backgrounds.

The middle weekend brought a welcome pause to explore Ascona and surrounds, rest and reflect on the experience so far. There are extensive walking and hiking trails criss-crossing the hills adjacent to Ascona, and I spent a satisfying day tramping through forest and along the lake edge enjoying the natural beauty of the area. I also ventured into Locarno, the neighbouring town across the river, and made sure to take time to sample some of the local, delicious Italian-influenced food.

The second week focused primarily on physical treatment of the objects, with time taken to make a quick visit to the Bookbinding and Design department, where a workshop was underway on making bespoke and beautiful clamshell boxes and slipcases to house fine bindings. One evening we went to a small, local theatre to a clever and charming performance by Gardi Hutter (see Fig. 19), a woman who combines modern clownery i.e. non-verbal comic theatre, with deft storytelling and endearing wit. On the penultimate evening, we celebrated the successful end to the course at a local restaurant.



**Figure 19: Gardi Hutter**  
[http://www.clownin.at/hutter\\_e.php](http://www.clownin.at/hutter_e.php) (Accessed 18/02/12)

I made steady progress on my two bindings (see Figs. 20 and 21), and although I did not complete them, I left with the treatments well under way, and the experience and confidence to continue work on them back in the UK.



Figure 20: *Dispregio Della Vanita del Mondo*; parchment loss in-filled at top of spine



Figure 21: *Fastorum Romanorum*; new parchment spine in place, clamped between boards to dry



## **Conclusion**

Centro del bel libro is a specialised technical school which more than lived up to its excellent reputation, and I would certainly recommend it to other conservators looking to extend or broaden their repertoire. I found the course extremely useful professionally, equipping me with knowledge of not only how to recognise and assess various types of damage on historical parchment bindings, but also a variety of treatment materials and techniques, and some experience in their selection. Since returning to work at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, I am consolidating the knowledge and experience gained on this trip by beginning work on a seventeenth century parchment binding in the collection, and am also giving a more detailed and technical presentation of the course content to my colleagues.