An Early College Bookbinder

The names of men employed by medieval institutions to bind books are sometimes encountered in the records, but being able to point to surviving examples of their handiwork is less straightforward. While we may have the names of many stationers and bookbinders from, say, London in the final quarter of the fifteenth century and some distinctive early London bindings, being able to combine the two streams convincingly is rarely possible. Instead, some later fifteenth-century binders have become familiar by modern nicknames, men such as the Bat Binder, the Fishtail Binder, and the Scales Binder, named for distinctive patterns in the tooling found on stamped bindings, and allowing that the brass stamps and rolls that made them were wielded by one man (which, of course, is not a given). The problem of matching extant bindings to names is complicated by the fact that the artisans are frequently referred to in institutional records by what look like occupational surnames, such as Ralph Scrivener or Thomas Bokebynder, but which are in fact bynames or administrative shorthand. Municipal records of the sort that allow business premises to be identified use the men’s surnames.

The stationers’ trade in the fifteenth century is richly attested for Oxford. Graham Pollard was the pioneer in this territory. He offered some plausible identifications of binders with men named in documentary sources. The focus of this essay is one of these, Thomas Bokebynder, alias Thomas Hokyns, who died in 1465 but is first found mentioned in 1438 when he and his employer, the stationer John Dolle, had to find sureties to keep the peace towards a skinner named Richard Gymlyn. A business disagreement marks a suitably turbulent beginning to a career which is told in other, similar scrapes. In 1447 he was imprisoned for having said that the mayor and townsmen should no longer have to take the oath to the university. In September 1448 he had to find a surety that he would henceforth live peaceably in the university and among his neighbours under penalty of ten marks. In 1462 Master Robert Egebury stood guarantor that Thomas Bokebynder of Cat Street, that is Thomas Hokyns, would appear in court to answer the plaint of a chaplain of Hert Hall about a book of decretals, the bargain for which was written into the back of the book. Thomas’s wife Margaret seems to have been equally uncollegial. As Pollard tells it, ‘in January 1447 she was imprisoned for breaking the peace; in July 1448 a jury of neighbours presented her as a habitual scold; and in February 1464 she was banished from the town of Oxford and its precincts as imprisoned for breaking the peace; in July 1448 a jury of neighbours presented her as a habitual scold; and in February 1464 she was banished from the town of Oxford and its precincts.

Pollard was incorrect to say that at this date Hert Hall was occupied by New College men.


5 Pollard, ‘Names of Some English Fifteenth-Century Binders’, pp. 202–3. Pollard was incorrect to say that at this date Hert Hall was occupied by New College men.

inventory was made of his goods, then in the keeping of John More, the university stationer, at his
premises on the east side of Catte Street (the site of what is now the Codrington Library).\footnote{Registrum cancellarii Oxoniensis, ii, 233–5. On John More, see M. B. Parkes, ‘A List of Medieval Oxford Stationers’, The Library, 7th ser. 17 (2016), 167–78, at pp. 176–8.} It is the
earliest known inventory of the equipment of an English binder.

From a record of employment at New College and Winchester College it is possible to add
a few details to Pollard’s report of Thomas Hokyns. Of more significance, it may be pointed out
that there survives at Winchester, in pristine condition, one of his bindings. It makes of him that
rare thing, a named fifteenth-century binder whose work we can inspect. Indeed, it makes him one
of the earliest binders to be firmly identified.

The accounts of each institution combine to tell that in 1443 Thomas Bokebynder was paid
5s. 11d. at New College for binding into the graduals quires in which new masses had been written;
he then went to Winchester to do precisely the same job.\footnote{New College Archives, 7407, Bursars’ Roll 1442–3, Custum capelle, Winchester College Muniments [WCM], 22119, Bursars’ Roll 1443–4, Custum capelle. He presumably carried out the work at New College during the summer of 1443 and then travelled to Winchester around Michaelmas to do the same, so that the expenses at Winchester were carried into the following year’s account. (The accounting year began at Michaelmas at both foundations.) The following account of his work at Winchester is expanded in James M. W. Willoughby, The Libraries of Collegiate Churches, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues 15, 2 vols (London, 2013), pp. 610–11.} He was in fact already a familiar face at
Winchester; in 1439–40 Thomas Bokebynder had attached clasps to the great legendary and
repaired its binding, and for that, and for new binding a processional and mending a gradual, he
had been paid 2s. 4d.\footnote{WCM 22115, Bursars’ Roll 1439–40, Custum capelle.} The following year he was paid for a number of jobs on the chapel books,
including the repair of the great breviary bequeathed by the fellow John Yve (d. 1432), and the year
after that he bound it.\footnote{Willoughby, Collegiate Churches, p. 698 (SC335. 29).} In the latter end of 1448, he was summoned to Winchester for a major
overhaul of the chapel books, which he worked at for eleven weeks at the rate of twenty pence per
week. Associated expenses included the purchase of many skins of vellum, sheepskin and goatskin
for book coverings, as well as five pence for ‘le joyntynge lether’ and leather for fore-edge straps,
latten for clasps and bosses, needles, thread and glue. On that occasion it is stated that he worked in
the chapel itself where, in the late autumn light, he was helped to see by candles bought for the
purpose.\footnote{WCM 22123, Custum capelle.} He was given commons in hall at the cost of one shilling a week, the same sum that was
allotted to each fellow. Two years later he was called back for further repairs to various chapel
books, including an old legendary, a diurnal, and two antiphones, one small and one old. Of course,
the name Bokebynder is not uncommon and it is impossible to be certain that we have identified
the same man. But the fact that a man of the same name worked for the sister colleges over a similar
period says much; certainly, it must have been the same man who bound new masses into the
graduals at both places in 1443.

The chief call on any binder’s craft was the repair of chapel books such as these, used several
times daily in choir and frequently encountered in visitation records with the description ‘worn
out’, ‘useless’ or ‘defective’ (the last more often a comment on the quality of the text). None of
these service books detailed in the accounts is known to survive, which can be no surprise given
the destruction of copies of the old rite at the time of the Reformation.

But one other book does survive, a book of college statutes, which was repaired and bound
by Thomas Bokebynder in 1451–2. It is still in the binding he made for it, still in superb condition;
it shows him to have been a meticulous craftsman. The book happens to be the oldest surviving
copy of Winchester College’s statutes (WCM 21470).\footnote{The statutes were printed by the University Commissioners (1855) as The Statutes of Winchester College; also by T. F. Kirby, Annals of Winchester College (London, 1892), pp. 455–523.} It had been made fifty years earlier, in 1400
or 1401, at the charge of ten shillings.\footnote{WCM 22086a, Bursars’ Account Roll for 1400–1401, Custum librorum.
The scribe may have been Peter the Scribe, *alias* Peter of Chesil, clerk of the neighbouring parish, who had been given various jobs around the books in this and previous years. The scribe was a fine penman, using here a steady and stylish Anglicana Formata. He was paid a further 6s. 8d.
Page 1, Founder’s Statutes of Winchester College, Winchester College Archives, Winchester, WCM 21470
© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of Winchester College
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Page 1 [detail], showing the fine penmanship of the scribe of WCM 21470
© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of Winchester College

for binding the book. The book is mentioned against the total sum of 16s. 8d. in a memorandum aggregating extraordinary expenses in the early years of the College’s existence (which includes the very large total outlay of £43 10s. 1d. on books).14 Perhaps it had been given some sort of limp or makeshift cover, and it was decided fifty years later that something of greater dignity was required; perhaps it was simply through continual handling that the binding stood in need of repair by the middle of the century. Whatever the reason, Thomas Bokebynder, the College’s normal choice of binder at this time, was brought in to bind it anew. According to the Bursars’ Roll for 1451–2, a skin was acquired for the work along with silk for the ‘garnishing’.15 The binding is a reverse skin, perhaps pig, over pasteboard, with a wrap-around flap and three ties of plaited red silk. The stitching is very fine. The seal of the Founder, Bishop Wykeham, is pendant from the spine-fold on a thick plaited cord of red and green silk. The cost of the work, totalled with repairs to a great legendary and a small antiphoner, was 11s. 4d.

Seal from Founder’s Statutes of Winchester College, Winchester College Archives, Winchester, WCM 21470
© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of Winchester College

14 ‘Item pro scriptura et ligacione libri statutorum de nouo scripto anno Henrici secundo, xvij s. viij d.’; Willoughby, *Collegiate Churches*, p. 620 (SC328. 6).
15 WCM 22126, *Cutus capelli*. 
Thomas Bokebynder’s connection with Winchester gains some importance in respect of the developing taste for stamped bindings in England in the second half of the fifteenth century. It has long been recognised that some tooled bindings, exclusive to Oxford and Winchester at this date, show a revived taste for a style of decorative binding that had sometimes been used on Romanesque books. Between about 1150 and the early thirteenth century a small number of books were bound in polished brown calf and blindstamped. There are twelve surviving Romanesque blind-stamped bindings of English origin, three made at Winchester, three associated with binderies in London, and six of uncertain origin or provenance.\(^{16}\)

The Winchester group is the earliest, dating from the mid-twelfth century, comprising the Winton Domesday, a Hegesippus, and the Codex Wintoniensis, or cartulary of St Swithun’s priory.\(^{17}\) The group was studied by Howard Nixon, who found they shared unique tools, and on this basis he assigned them to the cathedral priory of St Swithun and dated the group to around 1150.\(^{18}\) The first tools used for the imitative Oxford stamped bindings of the fifteenth century were modelled on these Winchester Romanesque bindings. Probably the earliest identified Oxford stamped binding, and the first to use the Romanesque style, is BL MS Egerton 2892, which Pollard attributed ‘perhaps’ to Thomas Hokyns.\(^{19}\) The manuscript is a copy of *De pluralitate beneficiorum* by Richard Rotherham, who was master of Balliol College in the early 1420s and later chancellor of Hereford and then, from 1448, of Exeter.\(^{20}\) The binding was roughly dated by Pollard to not later than 1453, on the basis of allowing reasonable time to the author before his death in 1455 to revise and augment his text and have it copied again as Balliol College, MS 80.

The Egerton manuscript, the original version of the work, looks like the presentation copy to a patron: it has the arms of the see of Winchester in the opening initial. The covers of the binding are decorated with concentric rectangles of small tools showing, from outside in, a peacock (tail down) leaning over a garland, a bird, perhaps a goose, with the head of a man in a cap, a swan, and a gryphon. The first two and the fourth are all taken or adapted from bindings in the early Winchester group. Romanesque-style bindings from later in the century attributed to the university stationer Thomas Hunt (d. by 1498) use some tools that seem to derive from the same stock.\(^{21}\) But the fact that the copy of the work in this manuscript was revised by the author before his death in 1455 means that it cannot have been bound so late as to be by Hunt. The fact that it appears to have been the presentation copy with the arms of the see of Winchester in the opening initial leads in only one direction.

Pollard asked, ‘who was the arbiter of taste in Oxford bookbinding who could have known about and encouraged the imitation of Romanesque bindings?’ and by way of an answer he offered the name of William Waynflete, bishop of Winchester from 1447 to 1486 and founder, in 1458, of Magdalen College in Oxford.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{17}\) Respectively: London, Society of Antiquaries, MS 154; Winchester Cathedral, MS 20; and BL MS Add. 15350. (The covers of the Codex Wintoniensis were removed in 1961 and are now kept separately under the same mark.) The Hegesippus was given in 1948 and its pre-Dissolution provenance is not known, although its origin at the cathedral seems certain; a cathedral provenance for the other two is certain and their origin likewise.


\(^{19}\) It is illustrated by Hobson, *English Binding Before 1500*, pl. 35, reproduced by Pollard, ‘Names of Some English Fifteenth-Century Binders’, pl. 3: ‘perhaps by Thomas Hokyns’ says Pollard in his caption to the plate.


\(^{21}\) Pollard, ‘Names of Some English Fifteenth-Century Binders’, pp. 206–7, 209; M. B. Parkes, ‘Thomas Hunt and the Oxford Book-Business in the Late Fifteenth Century’, *The Library*, 7th ser. 17 (2016), 28–39, at pp. 37–8. Bindings have been attributed to Hunt on the basis of a consensus of the tools employed and the coincidence of date between the books and Hunt’s professional floruit. Parkes made the suggestion (p. 37 n. 46) that Hokyns’s tools could have been taken over by Hunt without the intermediation of Hunt’s predecessor as stationer, John More (d. 1472), and that the bindings which Pollard attributed to More may in fact have been Hunt’s.

In Thomas Bokebynder we have an Oxford binder who was a regular visitor to Winchester and who was accommodated there while he worked on the College’s books. The binding of the Egerton manuscript, with its decoration modelled on Romanesque books at Winchester and bearing the arms inside of Waynflete’s see, might as a result more firmly be attributed to Hokyns. What strengthens the case that Thomas Bokebynder or Hokyns originated the Romanesque style of blindstamped binding is the record of his work at Winchester College, of which the College’s statute book stands as a solitary witness.

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