

CAMBRIDGE PANEL – NICK COWLISHAW

For those fortunate to be present Nick Cowlishaw got the Conference off to a sterling start by reviewing the classic design of the Cambridge Panel. In a few opening remarks he sought to place it in context – emerging in about 1690 and establishing dominance up to 1730. He confessed reliance upon David Pearson in saying that the name was a misnomer, that it was very widely used but possibly favoured by the binders of Cambridge in that period.

The elements of the design are widely known – 3 concentric frames of decoration on a full calf binding. Proportion was stressed and the accurate preparation of the card template. The Cowlishaw method was to use an 11th part as the measure, with the width ratio being, 2:2: 3 (inner). Card of 180gsm the size of the book was cut, with prior to separation a pencil line through a corner of each frame to aid replacement. Sprinkling was done with an old toothbrush against a knife, the latter repeatedly wiped to avoid drips of the spirit dye, irremovable and a potential disaster.

Sprinkling completed, the tooling involved a double line border of each frame. Nick used a tool called a creaser, a small handled tool with an almond shaped head of two plates with a screw through them, allowing the width between to be varied. As an aside Nick's old trade instructor, who can now be named and immortalised, Arthur Lloyd- called this tool a 'jigger', quite possibly because of the forward and backward motion of the hand action. Nick used a piece of card as a guide to tool up the spine edge, but said it was acceptable to tool elsewhere by eye relying on the edge of the sprinkled area. The creaser was useful in that it could be tipped at the corner of the panel to give definition.

In blind tooling Nick did not use any moisture to cause the leather to darken but applied quite a lot of pressure. He was not in favour of the use of carbon paper on the basis that this could smudge. Although Nick put on a pre-prepared gold blocked label the race against time, all too familiar to demonstrators, was duly joined. The book was finished off with some leather cleaning wax on cotton wool which Nick explained pulled out the loose gold, but left the dye unaffected. Lastly the book was buffed up with a duster.

Finally, Nick explained that the Cambridge panel style had evolved, with the shape of the panels changing and gold tooling being introduced, but it remains a staple, and once the time consuming step of preparing the template has been completed it can be re-used on books of almost equal size. All felt heartened and better equipped to renew acquaintance with the style, thanks to this expert refresher.

Alan Isaac