

UNDER THE HAMMER by Alan Isaac**A Note on the Bookbinding and Conservation Equipment Sale held at the British Library Bindery on – 13 March**

This was in many respects an historic occasion; the 'last rites' for the museum bindery, where work has continued since the present building was erected in 1885 – as the introduction to the catalogue by Bernard C. Middleton explained through the trial of the air raids of the Second World War, the dispersal of a large quantity of Chivers finishing tools, occasioned by that company's recent amalgamation with Period Bookbinders, and less momentous, the first 'off-site' auction conducted by the specialist book auctioneers, Dominic Winter.

The sale was well put together by Colin Meays, himself an established bookbinder, and the catalogue generally reliable and showing many useful images of the items offered, particularly of the finishing tools. Although it got off to a slow start the sale was conducted with wit, verve and the expected professionalism of Dominic himself in front of a large and mixed gathering of well known binders, ubiquitous dealers and a good number of aspiring young binders. There were over 340 lots listed in the printed catalogue and over 80 additional items, including some pieces of equipment both to examine and, in some cases, covert. Perhaps most striking was an assembly of some twenty or more nipping presses collected together which, with their balled arms looked a little like a miniature indoor wind farm – a sight not likely to be repeated. Prices for these increased throughout the session with the brave early bidders securing one for under £100, a telling lesson in the psychology of the auction room. Almost last to go was a gleaming reconditioned press by Hampson, Betteridge & Co, which went for a not excessive £270, the most expensive item being a large vacuum table that almost doubled the estimate at £1,000.



Many of the fixtures, benches, work stations, sinks and fume cupboards, for understandable reasons laboured to attract interest – large, heavy items, relative to their value were always likely to struggle for interest, and despite Dominic's gentle cajoling a conservation work bench with integrated light box failed to attract a bid of £10 – superb value for someone starting out with room to accommodate it. Disappointingly, and perhaps fatally, there was no carrier on hand to give estimates of the likely charge for conveying the heavier items. Perhaps some present had already had structural engineers reports and had to give the backing machines, large standing presses and board cutters a wide berth. However the Shimanek machines sold at over double the estimate and must be reckoned a bargain at less than £1,000 each.

The Chivers finishing tools, which 'on paper' were the highlight of the sale, were in the event a disappointment, although over 700 tools were put up, usually in bundles of between 10 and 20 the designs suggested that they had been commissioned for particular jobs and that their future usefulness would be limited. This did not dampen interest and they consistently achieved prices above estimate. One lot of 10 tools contained two small pairs of corner tools one by Seare of Holborn (known 1810-43) and the other by E. Sherry & Co, stamped St Dunstons/Fleet St (not listed in Conroy) and another tool stamped Morris & Co, fetched £125. A carton of about nine decorative rolls (not Chivers), which must have lain neglected for some time and which were severely corroded, with an under-layer of assorted handle letters, which included tools stamped Royle-London (likely to be George Royle & Son 1831-1906), Morris & Co and Paas, Holborn (Paas & Co, Holborn 1782/18330, despite its condition realised £410, the best price for hand tools. There were also bundles of fillets, pallets and gouges (at intervals engagingly offered up as 'gauges') which all made good prices.

The occasion provided the always welcome opportunity to talk to binders seldom seen. For one, Bernard Middleton, the day was naturally a poignant one – the sale being conducted in the room in which he had stood and worked – the vision of the place as it was fresh in his minds eye, now far distant from the diminishing spectacle before him, as piece by piece it was sold, soon to be dispersed and carried away. There were, however, two counterpoints; several items were bought by young binders clearly jubilant with their economical acquisitions who will, it is hoped, go on to give further long life to the craft, and secondly, a newly equipped bindery and conservation workplace will be open at the British Library site on the Euston Road, giving heart to bookbinders every where, which doubtless B.C Middleton will be invited to tour soon and perhaps many others of us too at latter date.

