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Introduction

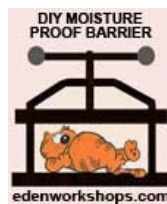
This is the second of two humorous monographs concerning the Book Arts.

These monographs were inspired by the people of the Yahoo bookbinding Forum who regularly ask questions that pass under my nose here in France.

The first monograph called Feral Fun drew hate mail from cat lovers everywhere. In fact I adore cats and have three pussies of my own.

"Feral Fun"

or How to Make a Moisture Proof Barrier from Freely Available Resources.



This the second monograph

Monograph 2

"Bookcloth and Ashes"

or How to make a Starch Filled Heavy Weight Art Canvas from Freely available Resources.



It occurred to me one afternoon as I was slowly chewing my way through a Cornish pasty during my lunch break. How many craftsman bookbinders have to endure the dreadful choice of modern bookcloths there are available to binders nowadays?

I got up and wiped the crumbs of pastry from the side of my mouth and placed the Oggy down on the paper bag it had come in, and walked over to the wash basin to wash my hands, I dried them on my apron on the way to the shelf containing all the backcloths we had in stock.

We had a lovely stock of classic old Winterbottom bookcloths that positively oozed character and charm, we also had several old buckrams, pure close weaved linen with a starch filled inner. But these were bookcloths over 50 years old some of them anyway.

You could see the stark difference between the old bookcloths and the new on every single shelf, I found it quite depressing to consider how the state of the bookcloth industry had declined over the last 50 years. The bookcloth manufacturer Winterbottom & Co Ltd had been a great source of wonderful quality old style bookcloths for many, many years I remember?

But they had gone to the wall, leaving only the legendary Bill Tomlinson and his wife Dorothy to carry on selling remnants and part rolls of this old bookcloth to anyone who wanted a small amount. Indeed we had bought quite a large amount of this old style bookcloth from Bill many years ago, and we still had a lot of it on the shelf...thank goodness! The old style Winterbottom bookcloths came in a bewildering range of styles and colours and even many different forms of embossed finish, indeed, further it was these very same embossed old style bookcloths that were to become so valuable as time went by, and people began to realise that these old style bookcloths were never going to be made again.

I fondly looked at the watered silk embossed finish to several of the bookcloths we had, Winterbottom had become past masters at the art of embossing starch filled cloths of all kinds and weights.

I unrolled an almost full roll of Defiance bookcloth.

This linen grained light weight damp proof buckram was the first to be introduced into the British Library in 1933...so I was told anyway by the late Bill Tomlinson.

This old style cloth took me straight back to my very earliest memories as a baby, the smell of this old bookcloth was exactly the same as the smell of the material used to cover the inside of prams and pushchairs of the late 1950's?

All of these old bookcloths had tons of character and a wonderful feel to them, even the simplest starch filled bookcloth from Winterbottom was a very nice cloth indeed, just a quick look at the warp and weft of the fabric would tell you were dealing with a quality bookcloth, it was so tight and even, almost to the quality of a fine linen handkerchief.

Then I looked with considerable gloom at the assorted modern bookcloths we had in stock at the time, despondency and melancholy filled my heart as I looked at the range and styles now available.

Gone were all but the plainest and most clichéd embossing.

Now bookcloth was man made out of rayon, viscose and good old polyester.

Most of these cloths were flat and garish colours; many were backed with a thin tissue paper that made the cloth hard to work and led to many other problems during the covering of a hand bound book.

Even the traditional starch filled bookcloths distributed by the likes of the well known and fairly high profile company of J.Hewit & Sons Ltd of Edinborough England, looked uncomfortable and plain by comparison with the similar style of Winterbottom cloth?

Finally I picked up a heavy **Winterbottom Art Canvas** and looked very closely at the cloth, being of a general age when my bits start falling off, and my eyesight is failing, as well as being bald and poor, and constantly criticised by **Denis the menacing moderator of the Yahoo Bookbinding forum**...I had to find my glasses which enabled me to peer very closely into the weave of the heavy cloth.

Now if you ever have the good fortune to look at a piece of genuine **Winterbottom Art Canvas** under a x 10 magnifying glass or linen tester, you will be truly amazed at what you see!

Even from a distance an experienced binder can tell he is looking at a **serious** piece of bookcloth, this type of heavy bookcloth was usually reserved for account books or other very large and heavy books, which had to stand considerable daily use throughout their lives.

As I peered through the linen tester I saw the individual threads of the close woven heavy cloth, now ok, I was looking at them through a magnifying glass, but still the effect of seeing row upon row of threads the thickness of telegraph cables, perfectly evenly spaced and looking as though a single thread could tie up a full grown gorilla...well you simply never forget such a sight.

To say this was a heavy cloth would I feel, be a severe understatement, it was very flexible though, you could easily bend it between two fingers, it seemed almost soft to the touch because the threads were so closely woven....and the colour of this particular cloth was a wonderful shade of walnut brown, with slight off white flecks caused by the light falling on it in such a way.

I was frankly mesmerised by this wonderful quality heavy bookcloth, I had used it several times when a client bought in a very heavy book and wanted it rebound to stand the test of time.

I turned the heavy Art Canvas over in my hands, admiring it frankly as a minor work of art, it seemed to me a shame that nothing like this was available any more?

I pushed the rolls of bookcloth back into place on the shelves, and decided to take a stroll through the Abbey gardens that were close to our workshops in the grounds of the monastery where we both lived and worked.

It was quite a hot day I remember and the apron I was wearing began to chafe my neck, I took off the apron and left it hanging on the railing by the entrance to the Abbey Gardens.

Now as I may have mentioned before, my wife and I spent 20 years living and working amongst a community of English Benedictine monks.

These monks were part of a very ancient order that could trace its origins back to the 7th Century AD. Among other things this order of monks was famed for its frugal and severe way of living.

In very particular the new novitiate monks, those brethren new to the order who aspired to rise through the monastic ranks and become wise old men close to God, as well as useful members of the religious community, were subjected to a regime which may appear very severe to the outside world.

Novitiate monks, or Brothers as they are properly called, were not only not allowed to watch television or read daily newspapers during their early days as new recruits, they also had to bath naked in cold water every single morning and before they went to bed!

This ancient monastic tradition stemmed from the earliest examples of hermit monks living in the mountainous regions of the Biblical Holy Land.

As one might logically expect, even the most fervent monk might fall victim to the earthly passions, so a freezing cold shower was just what the Deity ordered in that respect at least?

So a thoroughly pious and penitent spirit was instilled in these new Brothers to the order and no distractions were permitted to interfere with this procedure, such as television or world affairs in the form of daily newspapers.

As if this were not enough, these new novice monks or Brothers were asked to look back to the earliest Biblical times of the past, to the time of Daniel for example.

For those who are not familiar with the origins of the term Sack Cloth & Ashes, let me enlighten you as to its original meaning.

Daniel 9

3 And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes:

TO WEAR SACKCLOTH AND ASHES - "To be contrite, penitent or chagrined over something one has done. It was an ancient Hebrew custom to wear sackcloth dusted with or accompanied by ashes as a sign of humbleness in religious ceremonies.

This then is the origin of the term, these new Brother monks were encouraged to adopt this attitude in their daily lives.

Sack cloth woven by Trappist monks in Belgium, belonging to the Cistercian order, arrived every month by train from **Shepton Mallet** railway station.

Shepton Mallet being a very rural market town in South England, famous only for its rather Victorian Prison?

These were hand made sack cloths mind you, not the mass produced variety manufactured for holding potatoes, these hand made sack cloths were made from pure hemp fibre, unbleached of course and of archival quality as well, the monks who made this sack cloth introduced a calcium carbonate buffer into the hemp fibre, in the form of hand ground Ashes, the ashes of course to be used in conjunction with the Monastic Grade Sack Cloth & Ashes Kit.

This calcium carbonate buffering agent was obtained from the solidified ashes that were daily thrown out from the wood fires used in the Kitchens.

The calcium carbonate was extracted from the potash by a basic chemical process.

Being of another very severe order of monks, the Trappist chose to instil discipline and self control into their own novitiates by insisting the new monks crush the rocks with their bare feet!

This might sound impossible to the layman, who cannot comprehend how it could ever be possible for a naked human foot, to crush quite hard rocks containing potassium carbonate?

But the layman does not understand, could not ever understand how the power of the Bible can affect a fervent soul raised in supplication to the Lord?

These Trappist novitiate monks, ablaze with missionary zeal, literally ran with joy to the task of crushing these rough hard potassium bearing ash excretions with their bare feet, in the same way as grapes are traditionally trod by people in bare feet.

The sight of a group of young Trappist monks feet pounding in rhythm like a group of red Indians dancing round a totem pole, occasionally raising their heads to heaven to sing snatches of Latin psalms, all the time their naked feet pounding the rocks to dust beneath their feet, with clouds of fine grey/white ashes and dust rising all around them, like clouds carrying them up to heaven, well this is a sight once witnessed and never forgotten.

I hasten to add I did not witness this site myself at first hand anyway, I took this information from a tourist brochure issued by the order of Trappist monks concerned, who invite tourists to their monastery under their vow of Hospitality.

I go into such fine detail in this description of the process's involved in the making of this sack cloth, as it should be of great concern to any conservator, that the origins and provenance of materials being considered for use within say for example a museum heritage arts department, be subjected to considerable scrutiny, as many cheap conservation materials are now being imported directly from China.

It was not only the way the calcium carbonate was extracted from the surrounding ash excretions by being crushed to powder by young Zealot Trappist monks that amazed me as a traditionally trained craftsman, it was also the way the monks grew their own Marijuana in quite large plantations that surprised me?

Of course everyone knows the effects of smoking Marijuana, I will not personally condemn its use, as I feel that there may be medical grounds for its consumption, which have not been fully explored by the authorities yet.

However it is well known I believe that there are different types of hemp plant, one of which can do you **no harm at all**, and is simply grown for the hemp fibre it produces.

Unfortunately, it was **not** this harmless type of Marijuana that was favoured by the Trappist community for the production of its sack cloths.

Rather it was the very potent variety locally grown in Jamaica by Rastafarian monks that the order of Trappist preferred.

Fortunately in Belgium at least, the use of cannabis is quite legal, and therefore the monks could legally grow this powerful and potent variety of Marijuana without fear of prosecution.

Trappist monks do many things very well indeed I feel? They are renowned for making beer for example, and are very keen herbologists as well.

Thus they well knew how to grow this powerful narcotic, but remember they were not growing it for the effects of the drug, very far from it, they were only interested in the quality of the hemp fibre found running up through the central stem of the plant, and it was this raw fibre that they prized so very highly.

However with the best will in the world you cannot harvest a mature crop of Marijuana without feeling the effects of this **powerful** and sometimes **hallucinogenic** narcotic?

Thus although the Trappist monks took great care in the harvesting of the crop, by wearing face masks and gloves etc, none the less, by the end of the day most of the monks would be completely stoned and reeling from the effects of inhaling the pollen from the female plants!

Also some of these monks were hallucinating very strongly indeed, it is hardly surprising the output of visionary inspired poetry and verse, rivalled that of the early Gnostic communities of the 1st – 3rd Centuries AD.

I find it hard to imagine what this must have felt like, as the only times I have ever smoked Marijuana, many years ago as a young man, I remember going to sleep quite quickly and laughing to myself as I did so about something I can no longer remember?

How the monks managed to harvest the crop while stoned out of their monastic minds and hallucinating I cannot imagine?

But harvest it they did, and when the crop was in, the task of sorting the raw fibres began in earnest, it took weeks to do this all by hand, sorting the finest and longest hemp fibres for use in the making of their famous **Monastic Grade Sack Cloth & Ashes Kit**.

The water used to wash the fibre was **pure alkaline spring water** of course, which was fed to the monastery in the valley by a gravity fed aqueduct the monks had built themselves.

Thus the materials and process involved through out the making of this **Monastic Grade Sack Cloth & Ashes Kit** was of the highest standards of museum grade purity available.

The manufacturing process ensured that through frequent washings in pure spring water, no trace of the narcotic remained in the fibres, thus it could be freely exported to other countries where the law concerning Marijuana was more stringent than in Belgium for example.

The **Monastic Grade Sack Cloth & Ashes Kit** is now famous throughout the world, at least the world of the Roman Catholic Clergy that is, these pious and Holy gentlemen hold this sack cloth in very high regard indeed, after all it has become a traditional Christmas gift from one Priest to another over the centuries it has been produced.

After the sack cloth had arrived at Shepton Mallet Station, it was collected by a group of more experienced Brothers from the community at Downside Abbey.

These older more experienced monks, dressed all in black as is the tradition among the Order of St Benedict, carried the bundles of bound sack cloths, together with the brass urns which contained the ashes, back to the hand drawn carriage they had arrived with.

As is the tradition among the monks of Downside, at least those assigned to the task of bringing the sack cloth and ashes back to Downside Abbey, to wear **no shoes or sandals** of any kind as they pull and push the carriage all the way up the many winding hills on the way from Downside Abbey to Shepton Mallet railway station.

This is done in a spirit of genuine penitence of course, and sometimes they feel the necessity to push themselves very hard indeed, by running up the hills and pushing the wagon as fast as they can.

This takes considerable effort of the part of these monks of course, little wonder the group of monks regularly assigned thus duty, have such large biceps and thigh muscles?

Finally when the wagon containing the sack cloth and ashes is returned safely to the community at Downside Abbey, it is ceremoniously unloaded and the sack cloths carried with reverence inside, to be placed in dark chambers set into the walls at regular intervals for this purpose alone.

So this has told the story of how the sack cloth came to be made and delivered to the community at Downside Abbey.

It also shows why this material was held in such high regard by myself, being a partly trained professional paper conservator, if there can be such a thing? I respected this material very much indeed; of course it was quite expensive being made solely by hand by Trappist monks.

But none the less I could intuitively see how such a material could make the basis of a very fine **Heavy Weight Art Canvas!**

It was this material I had spied on the shelf in my workshops and admired so much the quality of the material and its inner strength and beauty, so very fit for the purpose for which it was intended.

As we now know this **archival quality sack cloth** was not cheap and to be had just anywhere, I suppose from my memory of prices, which is scant enough, as I was not a monk you understand, merely the book binder in residence you might say for nearly 20 years or so.

I think an archival quality sack cloth non sleeved jacket cost about £25.00 apiece, and a full three piece suit about £42.00 or so, of course the tradition among the Benedictine order at Downside preferred to make long flowing robes from sack cloth, as the larger body coverage provided the maximum discomfort possible, remember among many monastic orders there prevails the idea of spiritual penitence, so the more uncomfortable the sack cloth the better, spiritually speaking at least.

I believe, though I cannot be sure, as many monastic orders tend to be slightly secretive, I think at one time there existed a set of sack cloth and ashes "Y" Fronts and Briefs set for men only of course, these monastic accessories were highly sought after at one time during the 1970's & 80's.

Now this sack cloth and ashes underwear was uncomfortable in the extreme, as you may well imagine it may have been?

The edges of the sackcloth had to be turned over and sewn so that the edges would not fray of course, as is the case with the use of any material for such purposes.

These hems were at least double thickness sack cloth, and sewn with very coarse hemp twine, which was triple sewn over and under the edges. As you may imagine this sack cloth underwear was hideously uncomfortable, it chafed the skin terribly you see?

This underwear finally went out of vogue for good, when at a mass at St Peters in Rome one of the Cardinals ran screaming from the choir, furiously scratching at his crotch.

It was the long flowing robes however, of archival quality sack cloth that held my attention for a while?

How much Heavy Art Canvas could you make out of a robe about 4 feet wide and six feet long I wondered to myself as I walked through the Abbey Gardens?

Then I remembered something, it was quite commonly known amongst other people who worked at Downside... and certainly among the community of monks anyway, that quite a few of the young novitiate monks could not stand the very strict regime demanded by the older members of the religious order.

Remember, no television, no news papers, freezing baths and sack cloth robes, including the very uncomfortable monastic sack cloth and ashes underwear range, not to mention obligatory rugby practice on Sunday afternoons wearing no shin guards or protective "box's".

It is hardly surprising that many young aspirants decided they could no longer take the strain of monastic life, and in the dead of night, escape to freedom.

The path to freedom lay along a winding country road which ran from the Abbey at Downside to the public house called the "**Ring o Roses**" which lay in the hamlet of Holcombe about a mile or two distant from the Abbey, which passed through green fields with ditches along the side of them.

The old Ring o Roses public house was a legend in its owner's lifetime, the owner kept a large parrot in a cage in the public bar which hurled abuse at anyone in earshot, with a distinct Somerset accent.

The owner of the Ring o Roses public house was also arrested for threatening a Tax Inspector with a shotgun.

It was a real spit and sawdust pub in those far off days I remember? But the point is this was the only signs of life and alcohol for miles around, and any monk deserting the monastery for new found freedom always headed for this particular pub, the older members of the community at Downside also drank at this pub, the pub echoed with Latin psalms of a Saturday night I believe.

As I have said, there were ditches along the side of the road between the Abbey at Downside and the Ring o Roses public house, I decided to travel this lonely country road and gather up the discarded sackcloth's thrown off by frustrated novice downside monks who grew tired of the regime of frugality and non ownership, subservience and obedience, and cast there sackcloth's into the countryside ditches as they ran to the public house for alcohol and new found freedom.

I found several by the wayside as I walked along the lonely country road; in the end I had four quite new sack cloth robes with which to further experiment.

They needed very little preparation, as they had been so lovingly made along the way, I merely soaked them in fresh water to remove some of the dye that was left in the fibres of the sack cloth, and then hung the cloth up to dry in our old loft space.

But then I was faced with the problem of a suitable starch to fill my new **Starch Filled Heavy Weight Art Canvas from Freely available Resources.** with?

Then a familiar smell wafted past my nose and I began to think to myself?

No one who had endured the horrors of primary school dinners will ever forget the smell of gravy, it permeated the very fabric of the school, and the dining room always smelled of it I remember.

It was gravy I had smelt wafting from the school kitchens, there was a large public school attached to the Abbey at Downside by the way.

I considered the fact that starch had to be used in the making of this gravy?

Also the gravy was a pleasing brown colour?

I wandered over to the kitchens and looked around outside, I noticed straight away, the large cauldrons of prepared gravy bubbling over the open fires in the kitchens.

I had a friend in the kitchens and I asked her if I could "borrow" a gallon of gravy to use in my experiments, she obliged and I exultantly carried a gallon can of gravy back to my workshops.

I decided to boil the gravy down in order to remove the starch from it; I hoped that the brown colour would remain, as it was a very good basic colour for a bookcloth after all?

After boiling for an hour and stirring continuously, the gravy had reduced to a thick brown sludge; I scraped this brown sludge onto a sheet of brown paper and lay it out in the sun to dry. Later I returned to find a crumbly brown substance which I could crumble to dust in my fingers.

The dry powder contained large amounts of starch, I was sure of that, but I mixed a little with water and put it in a pan on the gas ring to warm slowly over the heat, I watched and stirred the mixture and waited with some anticipation.

After a short while the starch granules expanded and the mixture began to thicken nicely, the brown colour had faded slightly but it still remained a pleasing colour overall, I decided to try the process in full, and I mixed up a larger quantity of the starch in a double handled aluminium pan, as the starch mixture slowly came to heat, I cut out strips of the sack cloth and laid them on my bench by the side of my old marbling tray, it being of a convenient size to lay the cloth as I applied the starch filler to the cloth.

I removed the starch paste from the heat of the gas ring, and carried the pan over to the bench, where I placed it on a cloth to keep the heat in the pan from scorching the bench top. I laid a strip of the cloth in the marbling tray and poured in a small amount of starch paste.

I smoothed the paste over the cloth taking care to force the starch in between the fibres of the sack cloth, finally I removed the cloth from the tray and placed it between two of our largest pressing boards, I placed the boards in our large old standing press and applied considerable pressure to the sandwich of boards and sack cloth.

I left it for a couple of days and then removed it from the press, it was with some anticipation that I pulled the two boards apart to see what the sack cloth had turned out like.

As I pulled the boards apart I saw that the surface of the cloth had become glazed by the smooth surface of the pressing boards. After removing the top pressing board I peeled away the cloth from the remaining pressing board, and held it up to look at it, the starch filler had done its job admirably and no sign of daylight could be seen through the heavy cloth.

It seems I had achieved what I had set out to do, which was to create a **Starch Filled Heavy Weight Art Canvas from Freely available Resources.**

Overall it was a slightly mottled brown colour; I felt the result very pleasing to the eye, which is often seen as the most critical judge of all.

It was the glazed effect I was not to keen on, so I laid the cloth on the bench and I sponged over the surface with deionised water, this had the effect of slightly raising the grain of the cloth and removed the shiny surface from it completely, I reversed the cloth and repeated the procedure, then I placed it between sheets of thick blotting paper to remove any traces of moisture....it did occur to me to use one of my Moisture Proof Barriers, another of my traditional experiments, but I did not feel the need to use one as the moisture had nowhere to go but into the blotting paper.

The next day I removed the cloth and saw that it was almost perfect and ready to use, I compared it to the Winterbottom Heavy Art Canvas that had originally inspired the experiment, the two cloths were obviously very different, the base cloths were different for a start, but I could immediately see the two cloths reeked of real quality, and it was I had hoped to achieve in the first place.

I rolled the strips of treated sack cloth up and placed them reverently on the shelf by the side of the Winterbottom canvas, I have not used the cloth yet of course, though it is undoubtedly of very fine quality indeed, it is very flexible and easy to use; it takes an adhesive very well indeed.

Of course I am now waiting for a suitable book to bind it with, it may take some time to do this as I do not feel I shall be able to use the cloth on anything other than a very special book, bearing in mind the provenance of the cloth and it's very direct association with several monastic orders?

I had thought of binding a copy of the Rule of St Benedict with this cloth, I was given a copy by the nuns of Stanbrook Abbey; it was printed in Crown 4vo on English hand made paper, set in 12pt Spectrum and printed letterpress by the late Dame Hildelith, the printer at Stanbrook Abbey.

This lovely example of traditional letterpress printing was the only book that sprang to mind as being suitable to use for the book to be bound, but even so, I wait tensely in case someone brings in a first edition of The History of Monasticism, that book being a perfect vehicle for this delightful and traditional **Starch Filled Heavy Weight Art Canvas from Freely available Resources.**

Well, this therefore is the end of this somewhat lengthy monograph on how to make a **Starch Filled Heavy Weight Art Canvas from Freely available Resources.**

I do realise that in this case the resources I speak of may not be freely available to everyone, however I can be relied upon to provide small quantities of the raw materials to make this **Starch Filled Heavy Weight Art Canvas from Freely available Resources** to anyone who writes to me at my address in the Bahamas.

Richard Norman

Le Pignoux

France 2006

Other monographs are available free of charge at the www.edenworkshops.com website now!

I have a lot of time on my hands, so if you would care for a chat about books and things I would be happy to hear from you.

