



Hello and welcome to this month's Bookbinders Digest.

In particular to the 75 people who signed up for the Digest during January.

A couple of months or so ago I got a mail from a lady in America, she was a young Mum who wanted to be able to work from home so as to be able to be at home with her kids, she loved books, She asked me if there was any way I thought she could earn a living from home and be some way involved in books or making books.

In a nutshell I turned her on to Longstitch Binding and selling on the Etsy website, she mailed me a couple of weeks ago to say that she was now making books and selling them, And that she felt more optimistic in her goal of working from home. Nice story, hopefully with a happy ending.

There are its true, a lot of people on the Etsy website who are making and selling basically longstitch binding journals. To make a mark you need to have something original about your work, but it can be done, I know several people who are kept very busy making this type of journal and apparently making a reasonable living from doing so.



Regular subscribers to the Digest will know I have a passion for sheepskin and regularly try to sell binders on the idea; Well, I would like to have a little rant about this leather this month.

About 20 years ago I came across an unusual undyed, vegetable tanned sheepskin skiver, it was unusual because it had not been stripped with acid to make the skin receptive to dyes, it was full of natural oils I had been sceptical about sheepskin, it had been hammered into me at college that sheepskin was an inferior leather, and not durable compared to calf or goatskin.

But as the renowned conservator, Don Etherington said, "Sheepskin can be a reasonably durable leather, provided it is properly prepared"

And what do we mean by reasonably durable and properly prepared?

As a book restorer for an Abbey library I came across countless examples of 18th /19th Century sheepskin bindings in need of repair, the sheepskin used then was much thinner by comparison with the sort of weight skins used these days, but they had still lasted 200 years plus, and got through huge atmospheric pollution during the industrial revolution.

I would say a well prepared, vegetable tanned, good quality skin, such as the undyed skiver I mentioned, should easily be good for 250 – 300 years, and maybe longer as atmospheric pollution is no where near as severe as during the industrial revolution, when these early books were bound, so decay due to acid degradation will not be as acute.

Also in recent times it has become the custom to use a thicker leather than that used on many general quality early books, another reason it will last longer than its forbears.

One reason sheepskin got a bad reputation is because only a small percentage of skins are passed as being grade 1 skins, the rest of it ends up either coated with a pigment or glazed to hide surface blemishes, many of these inferior quality skins are also elastic and full of air, which makes it a monster when it comes to paring, and a skin full of air is not going to age well., particularly with regard folding and abrasion resistance.

Another reason sheepskin got a bad reputation was its reluctance to accept a stain evenly, being so full of natural oils, so acid was used to strip the leather of its oils to make it mordant, or receptive to colour, this could only be bad for the leather.

The same practice is still used today, though now the tanneries make great claim to wash all the acid out again and re-introduce oils into the leather in a later process, I still think it's a dubious practice, and be aware that unless it is specifically called an archival quality leather, your goatskin costing £18.00 per sq ft will probably have been subjected to this treatment.

I am frankly dubious of a lot of the leather manufactured in the UK, without naming names as I don't want to start 2012 by being sued.



We have huge quality undyed sheepskin skivers, that are not stripped with acid, and are still full of their natural oils.

They are dense and quite un-stretchy, they pare smoothly and predictably, being undyed they have no surface finish of any kind; they are flawless grade 1 skins of the highest quality. From 0.3mm to 0.9mm in substance.

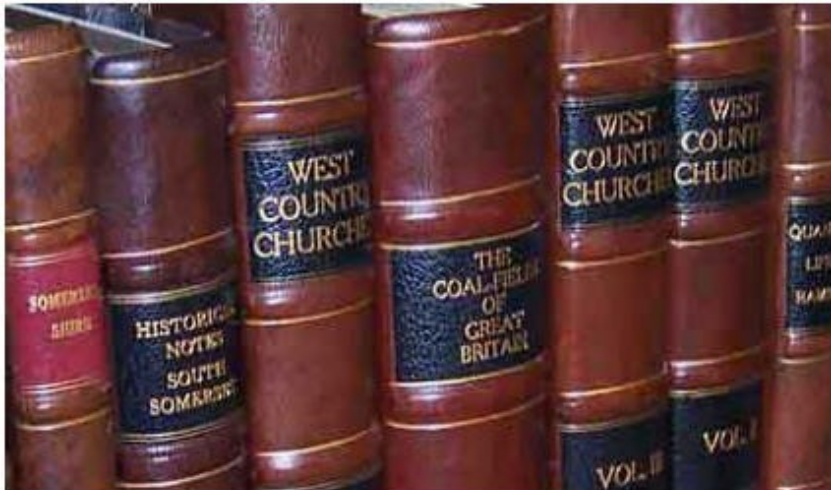
The 0.3mm leather is perfect for when you want the inimitable look of a hand made label, stained and tooled in gold leaf.

Finding very lightweight leather for making labels can be a problem, most lightweight skivers are around 0.5mm, and that is a bit thick for a label I think.

The skins don't take a stain evenly, due to the oil present in the leather, but they are perfect for when you want that mottled brown antique look. The same applies with any other colour stain you think of, it will come out mottled.

You haven't seen a hand made leather label, till you've seen a deep cherry red label, tooled in genuine gold leaf and polished, worth every scrap of effort.

Here is a picture I snipped from our website, the various shades of brown just happen due to the oils in the skin, you need no skill to stain this leather, just immerse the skin in the stain leave it overnight, take it out and lay it on newspaper or blotting paper to dry, and the mottled effect just happens, binders strive to achieve this sort of stain when using calf, by using various shades of brown stain, with this sheepskin it just happens.



It is soft and easy to handle. It requires the minimum of paring and is full of natural oils.

It also has the best "feel" of any leather.

It takes a water based stain very easily.

One thing that also happens, due to the oil in the skin, is that when dry you should see something like a fine white, whispery "bloom" on the surface of the skin, this is to be expected and is called "fatty acid spew", it is a natural effect caused by oils migrating to the surface of the leather.

Just wipe it over with a slightly damp cloth, let it dry completely, then I would apply a leather dressing before using the leather.

A genuinely fine, book quality skiver, that I am quite certain in my own mind is good for 250 – 300 years plus, and that costs a fraction of grade 1 goatskin or calf.

It has always been the most economical leather in terms of price.

It got a bad reputation much of it justified, as so much poor quality leather, poorly prepared, poorly tanned, was passed onto bookbinders and other users.



I was lucky, we get our undyed skivers from a non bookbinding supplier that I happened across through nothing but curiosity & luck, I have been using this un-dyed skiver for over 20 years to make economical leather case bindings., and we used the thin version of the leather for covering stationery boxes we used to make.

The structure of these books is very simple and conventional and enabled us to charge only about £50.00 - \$77.00 for re-binding a volume, which was attractive in price to people who might not normally think of having a book bound, and also attractive to those with small libraries to bind, and who wanted a traditional appearance.

Prices went up last year, it now costs about £8.47- \$13.22 a sq ft plus tax, not as cheap as a lot of sheepskin skiver. but it is in a league of its own in terms of its quality and durability. That works out to about £4.25 - \$6.60 per book, very economical leather really.

J.Hewit & Sons do an undyed skiver, but only in grade 2 at £7.00 - \$10.93 per sq ft, not sure if this is acid stripped or not, probably is, most un-archival quality leather is so treated.



Talas in America does not supply an undyed sheepskin, not sure where in the USA you can obtain them in such good quality.

About 4 years ago I came across a range of dyed through skivers, as opposed to un-dyed skivers, fully vegetable tanned, no surface finish of any kind, only grade 1 skins, and in a very nice range of subdued book colours from a small tannery in Hertfordshire, England.

These skins are excellent for economical case making, take gold tooling and blind tooling perfectly due to its fine, subtle grain. Pares easily and predictably, nice and dense and polishes up to a fine lustre.

The right choice when it comes to making economical leather case bindings.



J.Hewit & Sons Ltd in England do not sell a sheepskin skiver with no surface finish, all their sheepskins are given what they call a "full pigment finish" this just means the skins have been sprayed, it makes for a flat featureless leather with a strange feel that I don't like, due to the coating, rather like lino.

They also do a glazed skiver which is even worse; it's given a sprayed pigment finish, and then a glossy lacquer coat which results in a leather that looks like plastic. It is skivers like this that give sheepskin a bad name in my opinion.

Talas in America to there credit do sell a Bavarian sheepskin, which they claim is high quality and is aniline dyed, whether dyed all the way through or surface dyed I am unsure, they are asking £13.41 - \$20.95 per sq ft, so this is not a cheap leather, but Talas do have a reputation for being expensive, rather like Sheppard's in London.

Our dyed book quality skivers are on special offer, don't let there cheap price fool you, these are as good as they get. We have new stocks and are presently priced at £6.99 per sq ft.

As if that is not enough we also have a sheepskin to bring a smile to even the wintriest conservator's countenance.

An archival quality alum tawed sheepskin by Franz Hoffman of Germany.

In Germany, with typical thoroughness, EVERY skin of archival quality leather manufactured by Franz Hoffmann has to be vetted by the Bavarian Leather Institute, a very fussy group of men in white coats who literally check every skin of leather with the appellation of archival.

Some acid stripped sheepskins are so weak you can tear them in half if you wanted to.

This alum tawed sheepskin is immensely strong, bone white achieved with no bleaching of any kind, pared to about 0.8mm, a great conservation leather.

I am not really a business man, if I were I would be saying things like, this is the finest range of book quality sheepskin leathers in the world, but as I say, Ime not, so I won't.

Another thing that bugs me is the quality of alum tawed leather from the UK, but perhaps I shall leave that for another rant, another day.



Think sheep.

Baa for now.

Richard

P.S.

Undyed sheepskin skiver here.

http://www.edenworkshops.com/Undyed_Sheepskin_Skiver_For_Bookbinders.html

Dyes sheepskin skiver here.

http://www.edenworkshops.com/sheepskin_skiver_leather.html