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VALUATIONS**

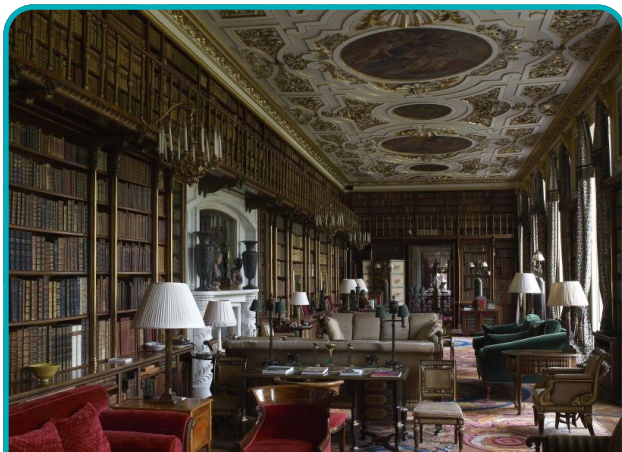


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## THE CARE OF BOOKS

### Space

Libraries great and small suffer from a shortage of space — there is never as much room on the shelf as one would like. This is a permanent problem for the collector, but the desire to squeeze on an extra volume has to be resisted. Give your books enough space and ensure they are kept in a room with a free flow of air, preventing mould and dampness. Shelving should not be erected on exterior walls, and it must be of sufficient strength.



Chatsworth, the library-living room with upper gallery (Country Life)

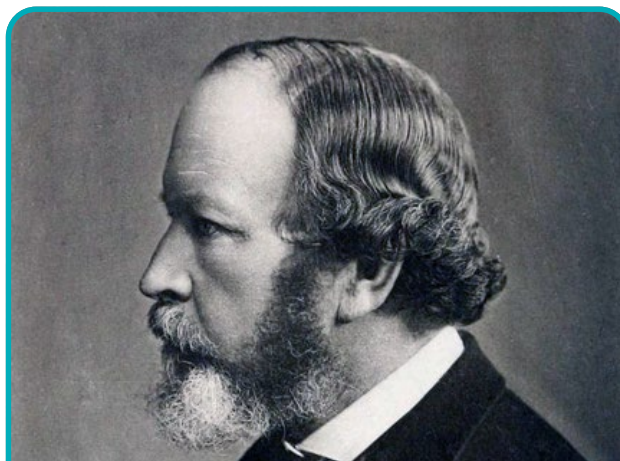
### Size

The size of books dictates their natural pecking order; the place for heavy folios and quartos is on the lower shelves, octavos of standard size and smaller are traditionally shelved at eye level or above. The top shelf of a grand library is usually the place for the smallest and least interesting volumes only accessible with a high ladder.

At the other end of the spectrum, large volumes with magnificent plates are happiest when safely placed in a bottom shelf or cupboard; they may alternatively be kept flat on a library table, easing pressure on the spine. For a free flow of air and absence of direct sunlight, there is no better environment than a draughty Scottish castle with few windows, thick stone walls and no heating.

### Conservation history

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century bibliophile William Blades first published *The Enemies of Books* in 1880 (the second edition of 1888 is now available online through the Gutenberg Project). A short monograph, it went through many editions and has long been the classic work on the subject. In his opening chapters on “Fire” and “Water” (“liquid” and “vapour”), Blades gives an account of the terrible conflagrations and inundations which have resulted in the loss of so many books over the centuries.



William Blades (1824-1890), printer and bibliographer, protested against the mistreatment of books

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## Damp

Many would consider “damp” to be the greatest enemy of books, and Blades describes the “irreparable injury” which it can do. “The substance of the paper succumbs to the unhealthy influence and rots and rots until all fibre disappears, and the paper is reduced to a white decay which crumbles into powder”. He has a surprisingly modern remedy to suggest for the damp atmosphere that produces spotting and visible staining to blank margins or the text itself. On the basis that “our worst enemies are sometimes our real friends”, he suggests having hot water circulate through pipes under the floor. However, he believes this heating system cannot be allowed to supersede “the open grate”, going on to argue the case for coal and even (frightful thought) asbestos fires.

## In the event of spillage

The antiquarian book with its thick rag paper and durable binding of leather or vellum is nevertheless a resilient object and minor blemishes are easy to tolerate providing a book is complete with no missing pages or hiatuses in the text. Should you spill an entire glass of water over an important volume, the situation may be retrievable. Stand the volume upright, and fan out the leaves allowing any liquid to drain off. A hair drier is an effective tool for supplying an air flow from a distance. With the right treatment the unhappy accident may leave no trace at all.

## Heat and sunlight

The desecrators of books denounced in Blades' subsequent chapters are: “Gas and Heat”, “Dust and Neglect”, “Ignorance and Bigotry”, “The Bookworm”, “Other Vermin”, “Bookbinders”, “Collectors”, and finally “Servants and Children”. While Gas has long ceased to be used for lighting, its ill effect may still be seen on grimy books; it was the sulphur in the gas fumes that caused bindings on the upper shelves to deteriorate. The problem of “desiccation” also persists today, whether ascribed to the open fires and gas lighting of the past or to the natural power of sunlight. Blades defined the process as “the leather losing all its natural oils by long exposure to much heat”.

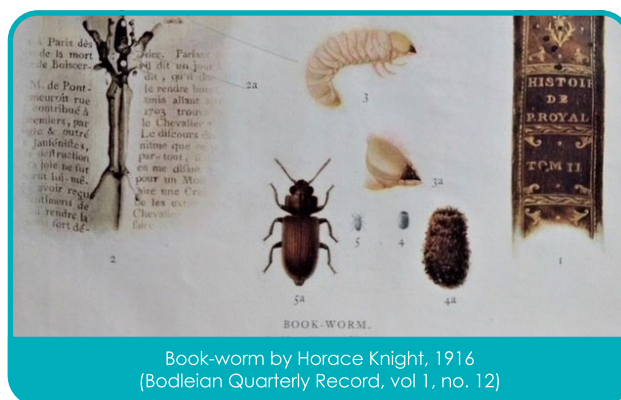
The sun can do damage we may easily be unconscious of. Leather and cloth spines and invaluable dust-jackets will all fade as a result of regular exposure to sunlight, leather becomes brittle, condition is altered for the worse and value plummets.



Franciscans burning book scrolls and other Indian artefacts after the Mexican conquest (Hunter 242)

## Worm holes

The chapter on “The Bookworm” is one of my favourites. Blades observes the fascinating manner in which a worm hole, far from being of even size, can slowly grow as the pages of a folio are turned, and then just as gradually diminish and disappear. Although the cataloguer has to count these holes as defects, watching their growth and disappearance can provide a welcome diversion from the collation of a lengthy text. Modern books don't suffer in the same way. Blades comments wryly on “the scarcity of edible books of the present [19<sup>th</sup>] century”, observing that “one result of the extensive adulteration of modern paper is that the worm will not touch it. His instinct forbids him to eat the china clay, the bleaches, the plaster of Paris, the sulphate of barytes, the scores of adulterants now used to mix with the fibre ... the worm has a bad time of it”.



Book-worm by Horace Knight, 1916 (Bodleian Quarterly Record, vol 1, no. 12)

## Bookbinders

There is no chapter on book dealers but there is one on "Bookbinders", placed after "Other Vermin", revealing the sorry practices of the book trade in the late 19th century. As Blades states in fury, binders not only cut away book margins and any annotations on them with utter ruthlessness; they also destroyed old bindings to make new ones, and habitually washed books leaf by leaf, perhaps adding hydrochloric acid, oxalic acid or caustic potash to remove every mark. Fortunately, today's binders have higher allegiances and are very much on the side of the conservation rather than the desecration of books.

The attack is taken to collectors themselves, "two-legged depredators" who indulge the habit of cutting out illuminated initials and engravings from books, and making separate collections of them. The one obsessive collector to be mentioned by name is the celebrated Sir Thomas Phillipps of Middle Hill who lived in 'a mansion crammed with books; he purchased whole libraries and never even saw what he had bought'. Phillips possessed one of the greatest bibliographical treasures in the form of the first book printed in English, "The Recuyell of the Histories of Troye", translated and printed by William Caxton. But it was a volume "he could never find" among so many others piled on his shelves.



Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872) failed to protect his unrivalled collection of manuscripts

## Dust

Blades' final chapter, "Servants and Children", instructs the former how to dust books with due care. Recommending the simple use of a duster, without any cleaning agent, might seem old-fashioned. Today we have a tendency to believe that leather bindings require some form of polish or wax to restore them to full bloom, and a large number of such products are available on the market. But Shelly Smith, as head of New York Public Library's Conservation Team, takes the same view as Blades, writing: "Don't use oil or leather dressing on your leather bindings ... it can actually cause deterioration to the volume as the oil or leather dressing ages. Simply wiping leather bindings with a plain soft cloth is best" (NYPL Newsletter, August 2020).



The spacious conditions of Pepys Library, Magdalene College

It is a cardinal rule never to take a book from the shelf by pulling at the top of the spine. Blades comments on the tendency of home helps "to fill the shelves too tightly," which only made extracting a volume safely that much more difficult. Once safe in one's hands, a rare book can be read but should never be fully opened — a big risk to the binding. This does not mean that, like Sir Thomas Phillipps, one should ignore one's collection. Books are to be admired. Whatever the hazards, an important part of their care is to handle them at least occasionally. This lets fresh air penetrate the pages while the oil occurring naturally in our fingers is enough to keep calf or morocco bindings nourished.