

## **Collections within collections:**

### **Conservation of Bindings of Multiple Manuscripts at the College of Arms Library, London**

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The College of Arms is the foremost centre for heraldry and genealogy in the UK.

Heralds were first mentioned in Western Europe about the time of the First Crusade, and from the 12th century onwards they were attached to the households of rulers and greater magnates. They acted as messengers, diplomats and army staff officers. The last duty required them to be expert in identifying army commanders by the devices painted on their banners, shields and surcoats because facial identification was impossible when the head was completely covered by a great war helmet. Heraldry also organized tournaments, and thus gradually became experts not only in coat armour or 'coats of arms' but also in ceremonial matters, which led to them organizing the great ceremonies of State.

Through their work over the centuries, the Heraldry have built up a unique registry of armorial and family records. The College itself is one of the few remaining heraldic courts in Western Europe and is now the oldest existing such college in the world.

The library and archive a constant source of reference have been developed over centuries since the College's inception in 1484. The working library collection is particularly noted for its significant manuscript book material. The location of the College of Arms within The City of London, close by the historic centre for printers, stationers, and bookbinders in the St Paul's churchyard area, with the banking and insurance district towards the east and legal establishments to the west, holds a significant influence on the record keeping formats and binding styles found within the collection. Many of the systems of manuscript format within these volumes were devised centuries ago, a number remain in daily use and continue to be the preferred methods the heralds use for record keeping. Today these processes maintain traditional craft techniques of scrivener, calligraphy, heraldic painting and bookbinding and support the production of hand-made parchment and paper making. The working library presents many significant challenges to the conservation department, particularly in balancing the requirements of maintaining reference access whilst also meeting those needs of the preservation of text, structures and bindings. A working library provides an exceptional insight for a book conservator into what techniques, structures and materials prove durable in regular use.

The paper will briefly present how the gathering and creation of 18th century volumes gives insight towards the collecting of historic manuscripts by the heralds and the perception of value. The bindings also present a significant development in the idea, understanding and organizing of a collection towards that of a modern library, together with the provision of a physical form of protection for manuscripts. Heraldry were often significant scholars and collectors, several were notable contributing Fellows of The Society of

Antiquaries of London and were involved with the development of national museums and libraries in Britain.

The study centres on the conservation of a number of historic manuscripts within two volumes documented as being bound in 1786. M13 bis, 16 bis contains two manuscripts, an early 16th century Ceremonial and a Heraldic and Historical Miscellany and Precedents also from the 16th century. M5b, 6bis, 14 & 18 comprising four manuscripts, M5b 'German Roll of Arms: The Hyghalmen (High Almaine) Roll' ca. 1450, M6 bis, M14 both Ceremonial and Miscellany, early 16th century, M18 Medieval Heraldic Treatises, late 15th or early 16th century copies.

The manuscripts are on paper of various heritage and dimensions, with the edges untrimmed. There are several examples of secondary use parchment endleaves and binding covers deemed of value to be kept and bound with their related manuscripts.

The texts throughout are in iron gall ink. The M5b 'German Roll of Arms: The Hyghalmen (High Almaine) Roll' is a significant historical document painted in colour. It comprises of 43 folios in two large gatherings of significant European coats of arms. This manuscript is the main point of interest within that volume's collection and has significantly contributed to the handling and subsequent wear sustained over the centuries.

The bindings have been repaired on several occasions since the 18th century, the most recent being an early 20th century re-back to the cover and the use of paste applied 'onion skin' tissue paper repairs to manuscript folios. Before treatment the two bindings and their manuscripts presented aspects of physical deterioration resulting in the volumes being considered too delicate for reference and exhibition.

An outline of the management, documentation and collation of the two volumes will be discussed. The remedial treatments that were evaluated and applied for each of the constituent manuscripts will be presented, including the consolidation of pigments, the sewing structures applied and repair of leatherwork. The paper concludes with a brief evaluation of conservation treatment processes and the development in materials and techniques applied to such manuscript material since the completion of the projects.