

Beautiful craft of bookbinding



Antiquarian book binder Murray Simper: books are like being surrounded by friends.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] I
[/dropcap]n an age of Kindles, tablets and iPads, there is something wonderfully romantic about binding, preserving and restoring old books.

Murray Simper is in the same league as cobblers, tailors, botanical artists, knife-sharpeners and fine furniture makers in that he sustains a dying art – or is it a craft – that dates back centuries and is built on a philosophy of preservation and longevity, rather than the cheap and disposable.

It has been almost 30 years since Murray, who was born in Cobden and trained in Melbourne, opened his first antiquarian book binding business in the garage of his Warrnambool home. He later moved to a small shop next door to Ron Rauert's shoe

store, in Fairy St, and, most recently, into the former Fletcher Jones training room at 17E Lava St.



Where the magic happens: Murray in his workshop with a set of century old newspapers.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] T
[/dropcap]he Harry-Potter-esque sound of 17E is the perfect address for an antiquarian bookbinder and the two-roomed shop is exactly as you would hope it would be: full of teetering stacks of books, both fat and thin, their yellowed pages like sets of old teeth smiling from between their well-worn covers.

In the middle of all these words stands Murray, who resembles author Bill Bryson without the beard, and who talks in the quiet tones of somebody who is used to long hours of concentration.

“We get all sorts of books to be repaired. It might be a secondhand book that has been picked up at a market, not worth much, but it means something to the owner, or it might be a family Bible that has been in the family for generations,” he said.

Indeed perhaps the oldest book Murray has ever restored was a large Bible from 1525

that had a cover made of solid oak and, naturally, weighed a tonne.



The 130-year-old guillotine once used by the Port Fairy Gazette.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DDCE8D;"] T
[/dropcap]he restorations take place in the second of the two rooms, where an invisible line separates the 21st Century from the 19th.

One end of the workshop is dominated by a 130-year-old cast-iron guillotine that stands over a metre tall, was built by Chandler & Price of Cleveland, USA, and used for many years by the now defunct *Port Fairy Gazette*. Murray still uses it to trim book pages.

The other end houses wooden drawers full of metal typeset, also bought from the *Port Fairy Gazette*, and an assortment of gorgeous hand tools with smooth, wooden handles and metal heads that perform a variety of tasks. What little space remains is taken up with glue pots, cutting tools, paintbrushes and fragile booklets containing delicate sheets of gold.

It all serves as a reminder that books can be works of art.

"I think books will go the way of LP vinyl records. We have seen the shift to digital, but now people are turning back to LPs because you can hold them, open them up, read the covers: they are special," Murray said.

"I have a room full of books at my house and I love to just sit in there, sometimes, and look at them. It is like being surrounded by your old friends."



Intricate leather and gold work transforms this exquisite antique Bible into art.

[box] Simper Bookbinders and Booksellers, 17E Lava St, Wbool. (03) 55 616499. Visit the [website](#). Please note Murray is not taking new repair orders until January.[/box]

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