

## Headbands

[Cover to Cover: Exposing the Bookbinder's Ancient Craft](#)



The headband was a decorative band comprised of silk or cotton thread wrapped around a supportive strip. It was positioned between the back of the folded sections and the book covering at head and tail of the spine, its purpose originally one of function not beauty.

It provided the spine with additional support and filled the space on the back of the book that was lower than the board edges. If it weren't for the headband, the headcap (the shaped cover turn-in at the head and tail of the spine) would become crushed after the book was pulled from the shelf a few times.

Headbands were sewn before any spine linings were applied and the book covered. Whether they were created before or after the attachment of the boards was at the binder's discretion, however, their height always needed to allow for a suitable headcap to be made above them. The choice of thread colour was a personal matter but the binder was guided by the nature of the book and its contents, as well as other aspects of its binding, such as the endpapers and covering material.

A variety of materials were used to form the core of the headband. Vellum and catgut appeared frequently in early bindings, along with leather; the latter considered less suitable though on account of its tendency to catch on the thread. Hemp cord, as in that used for attaching the boards, and rolled paper were commonly used as headband cores. Once the core was chosen, two pieces were cut, each about an inch longer than the width of the book, then both were gently rounded using a pencil or bone folder to assume the shape of the book's back.

Headbands were sewn in a variety of styles, those on leather or vellum strips producing a sharper, more flat effect and those on a core of rolled paper, catgut or cord appearing quite round. Some of the more common methods of sewing headbands are described here.

### Single Headbands



*The history of Pendennis. William Makepeace Thackeray. 1849-50.  
Robust, hand-sewn headbands in brown and white.*

The desired core chosen, the book was placed in the lying or finishing press with its fore-edge facing the binder. Two different coloured threads were cut, long enough to complete the headband, tied together at one end and threaded through a needle each at the other end. The binder then passed the first needle through the centre of the flyleaves or first section from the inside to the back of the book just below the kettle stitch, pulling the thread so that the knot connecting the two colours met with the back of the section. The needle was brought over the top of the book and through the same hole such that a loop of thread was left on the top of the book. The core material was then inserted through this loop and the thread pulled tight to hold it in place. This silk thread was then brought over the core again to make a second loop, where it was held down firmly by the binder's finger. The second thread was then pushed through the inside of the book with the binder's other hand and passed to the right-hand side of the first thread, under the core and gently tightened. This essentially pulled the thread down to the book edge and commenced the 'bead' that lied in front of the finished headband. This process was repeated to create the multi-colour effect. Importantly, at short distances, the thread was taken down through the sections, just below the kettle stitch, instead of over the top of the book. This 'tying down' was done with great care because the thread would be visible inside the section when the book was opened. When the headband had been woven across the width of the book, the thread was passed through the last section twice and security tied to the second thread at the back of the book. The book was removed from the press and any overhanging core material was cut off with binder's shears.

## Double Headbands



*A select collection of English songs. Joseph Ritson, William Blake. 1783.  
Double headbands, sewn in orange, cream, green and purple.*

The method for sewing the double headband was similar to the single headband but two cores were required, one slightly wider than the other. The smaller core rested on the book leaves, whilst the larger was placed at the back of the book. The procedure for single headbands was followed until it was time to attach the cores, at which point a single colour thread was brought up from the back of the book between the two cords and inserted from the front to the back again forming a loop which tied down the wider core. The thread was then brought over from the back again between the two cores, passed over the upper core from the front and brought out between the two core pieces to the front again. This formed a figure-of-eight pattern which was repeated across the width of the book until it was time to tie down both headbands in the manner used for the single headband. This method of sewing used one colour thread only it did not create the bead effect associated with the single headband. A more complicated variation of this method was the French double headband which did employ two or more colours of thread, and which created the customary bead effect.

## Cloth Headbands

The cloth headband was less common than the silk thread headband and often lacked the strength of its counterpart. It was made using a medium-weight material, usually of a striped pattern, which was cut to size and pasted on one side with a mixture of wheat paste and PVA. A piece of thin cord or cotton string was placed on the cloth, and the top portion of the fabric folded over the string and pushed firmly into place using the bone folder. The whole was then usually glued onto the back of the book. The cloth headband served no real purpose other than decorative, but its simple construction meant that it occasionally found its way onto 19th century cloth bindings.



## Machine-made Headbands



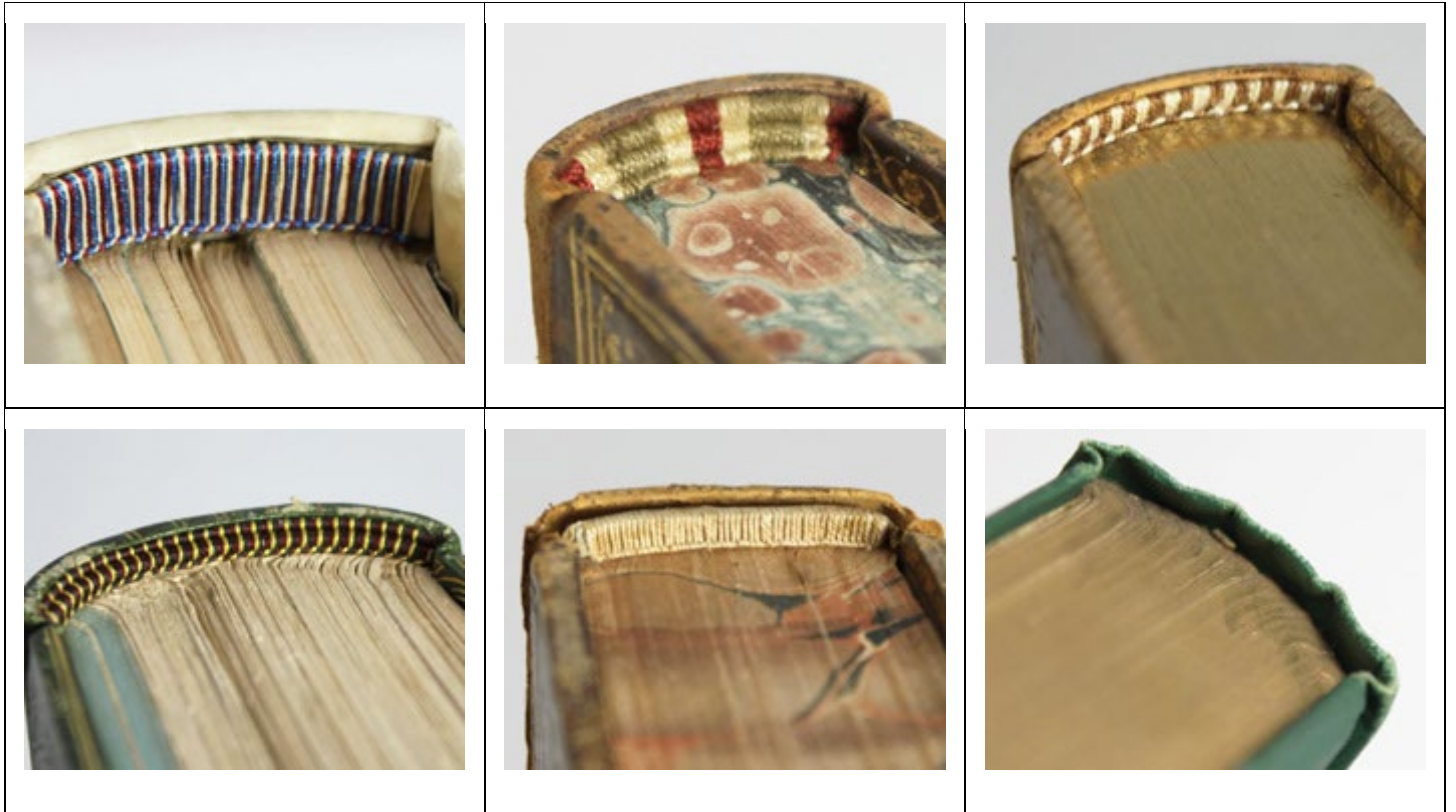
*Sir Gibbie. George Mac Donald. 1879.*

*Faux headbands, the ends of which exhibit the telltale scissor snips.*

A dime a dozen, the machine-made headband was introduced as early as the 1850s and has been widely adopted ever since. Its decorative pattern was machine sewn, usually around a piece of cane, onto cotton or linen tapes. Frequently made with a different width of pattern on either side, they could be used on books of varying sizes. They were simply cut to the correct width, shaped to the back of the book, glued on and rubbed down firmly. Although enormously cost-effective, they had no functional value; purists even questioned their aesthetic appeal. Today, they can be purchased in a plethora of sizes and styles, in woven silk, cotton and lurex and yet one wonders, whether this convenience can ever compensate for the visible frayed ends and detachment from the spine or cover that will inevitably follow.

Also on display in this cabinet were the following headband styles:





Examples of modern headbands and silk threads:



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