

Cloth

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



One of the single most important developments in the history of bookbinding is the development of bookcloth. Its invention is generally attributed to London bookbinder Archibald Leighton who, in 1823, collaborated with a dyer to transform plain cotton fabric into a material suitable for covering books.



The autobiography of a super-tramp. W. H. Davies. 1908

Cloth pattern: Winterbottom (Calico)

This particular version was in use from the early 20th century.

The first book cloth was a dyed calico, prepared with a type of filler so as to make it impenetrable to glue. Though initially basic and characterless, cloth played a significant role in the rapid expansion of the wholesale bookbinding industry. It was easy to work with, simple to decorate and so much cheaper than leather. The fact that cloth books were almost always 'cased in', a practice whereby cover and book were prepared separately, only coming together at the very end, allowed binders to keep pace with the increasing demands of not only individuals and booksellers but also those of publishers.

In the beginning it was the binder's role to purchase the calico and arrange to have it dyed and finished with fillers. A desire to camouflage the threads, however, led a number of them to work with textile finishers who had access to rolling presses or ribbon embossers capable of creating patterns or 'grains' in the cloth. It's not clear which pattern was first employed; some suggest it was the moiré, or watered finish, whilst others remain certain it was the straight grain morocco. The former was undoubtedly inspired by watered silk which had been used to cover books from approximately 1828.



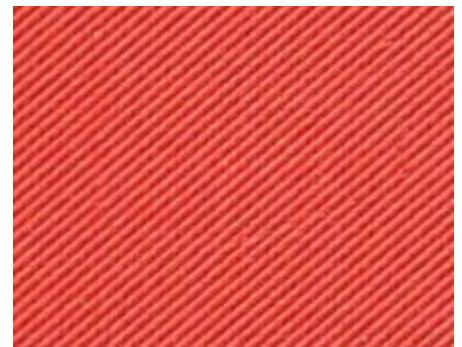
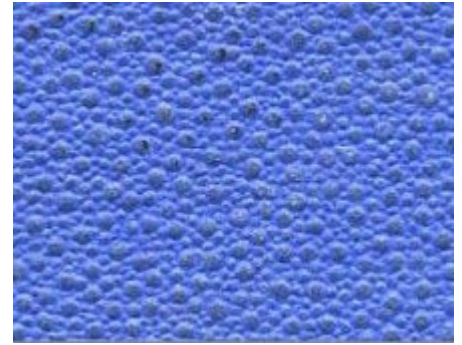
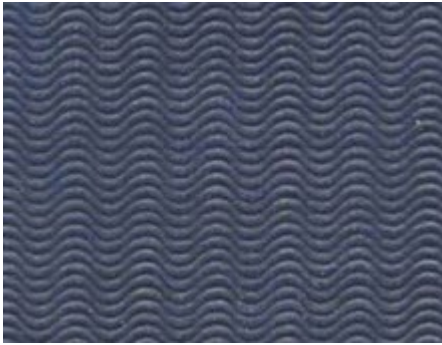
Chapters on churchyards. Caroline Bowles Southey. 1829. Cloth pattern: Ribbon embossed. Half-bound calf with ribbon-embossed sides in a 19th century floral textured pattern.

By the 1840s the manufacture of bookcloth had become a separate business. It was around this time that binders began to abandon the large-scale, ribbon-embossed designs of the 1830s in favour of simpler patterns such as diaper (a small repeating geometric design) and rib. In her 2008 publication, *Bookcloth in England and America: 1823-50*, Andrea Krupp suggested this transition towards smoother, simpler grain patterns could well have been the result of interference of the textured ribbon-embossed cloth with a book's stamped cover title and design. It was another example perhaps of the binder's necessity to adapt to new materials and to work faster to keep up with new machines.

Through [The Library Company of Philadelphia's Database of Nineteenth-century Cloth Bindings](#) we now know that hundreds of bookcloth grain patterns exist; more than 100 of these are ribbon-embossed alone. Others, such as 'bubble', 'hexagon' and 'honeycomb' are equally beautiful and hide the uniform blandness of cloth threads exceptionally well. There are other reasons why cloth grain is important though. Understanding the process of graining and the development of various patterns enables us to date bindings. Many of the grains are one-of-a-kind and cannot be copied; some are hand-engraved with a rare pattern. In the future, this uniqueness may allow us to attribute a specific bookcloth grain to a publisher or individual binder and thereby track its use and distribution.

On display in this cabinet were the following cloth covers:





Note: the cloth patterns displayed here have been enlarged for ease of viewing. Some of the patterns, including 'pebble', 'fine diagonal rib' and 'patterned sand', are so small that they are barely discernible without magnification.

Also on display were these modern cloth samples:

Binder's Buckram

In use as early as 1860 but not common until 1880, Buckram cloth is designed to withstand heavy use in libraries and offers strength, moisture resistance and mildew resistance. The examples here are 100% cotton and starch filled with a slight polished appearance. Buckram cloth is easy to work with and is also ideal for stamping.



Kennett bookcloth

This is a natural finish, 100% cotton cloth with a starch coating. It is very lightweight which makes it perfect for repair work. It can even be used to create the 'hollow' for cased books. Kennett cloth accepts blind and foil stamping but offers only a moderate scuff resistance. Its colour also tends to run when made wet.



Iris bookcloth

This 100% rayon cloth has a silky sheen and offers excellent durability. It has many applications in bookbinding and will accept blind and hot foil stamping, offset, and screen printing and die cutting. One side is lined with acid-free paper which ensures the cloth responds exceptionally well to folding.



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