

ON THE HISTORY OF THE BOOKMARK

by Georg Hartong

Bookmarks before 1830

A reader has always needed something to mark the place, where he ceased reading. That happened already in the early Middle Ages: an Irish monk, Coloman of Elo, ordered a fly, who always was running on the pages of his book during the reading, to sit down on the last line he had read, until he would resume his reading. And the fly obeyed!

The German Online-database 'Manuscripta Mediaevalia', containing the description of 62.500 manuscripts, has 200 hits at 'Lesezeichen'; the online-catalogue of incunables at Tübingen has 135 hits out of 46.000 entries.

Karl Heinz Steinbeisser depicted many mediaeval bookmarks in his recently published, still available work: 'Lesezeichen sammeln' (see special leaf).

On the paintings of Jan van Eyck(15th century) occasionally bookmarks in books of hours are to be seen. Richly decorated. More modest copies also did exist, of course.

Hand-made paper bookmarks, heart- or arrow- shaped, to put at the top of a page, have also been found, to be dated 16th – 18th century. From the last quarter of the 19th century on silver bookmarks for the same purpose are used.

Finally, silk ribbons attached to the back of the book are used for many centuries, even these days, but also in the 17th century.

In the Netherlands no research is known on the subject: mediaeval bookmarks.

In 1584 Queen Elizabeth was presented with a fringed silk bookmarker by Christopher Barker who had acquired a very profitable patent as Queen's Printer in 1577 which gave him the sole right to print the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and all proclamations. The British and Foreign Bible Society owns a bookmarker with plaited silk cords, silver knots and silk tassels which appears to have been made for use in a bible of 1642. In 1906 The British Library owned a bookmarker, stored in a Case of Psalms (London 1633), woven of purple silk and silver cord with fringed ends, the design - being duplicated on the two halves of the marker - representing a portrait of King Charles I, set between the words: FROM PRISON BRING YOURE CAPTIVE KING. On behalf of that information this bookmarker can be dated 1647 or 1648. In 2006 this remarkable bookmarker had disappeared from the Case!

In the 18th century people used, besides the ribbons and put-on-top-of-the-page-bookmarks, also devotional pictures, made of paper or vellum.

Although reading became very popular at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, due to the popularity of novels and the improved educational possibilities, there was no change of bookmarks.

Perforated board

Around 1830 there was a real change; people started to use perforated board, from London or Bristol ('Bristol Board'), made it into rectangular shape, and embroidered text, mainly religious or personal. This board was attached on silk ribbons, mostly with fringed ends. This was the origin of the detached, put-in-bookmark, to be used in several books.

About 1855 a more elaborated type with embossed edges and one or two cut out scenic pictures was produced by i.a. Dobbs, Mansell, Windsor and Wood, with a registration mark, diamond-shaped. After 1870 the simple board type revived and was used until the twenties of the 20th century.

Silk bookmarks

In 1860 Liberalism dominated English policy and protectionism measures was abolished in favour of 'free trade'. That decision was disastrous for the silk industry of Coventry: French silk was brought to the English market in huge quantities and the Coventry silk industry collapsed. One of the new ideas was to make silk bookmarks – a very innovative thought! – using the Jacquard-weaving-machine. Thomas Stevens of Coventry became the main manufacturer of these silk bookmarks, with texts and designs for all seasons and occasions. Since 1862 Stevens used about 900 different designs, thousands of bookmarks were made until the devastation of the factory in World War II. These bookmarks are much sought after these days, are very expensive and in England and the USA are special societies of Stevengraph-collectors. Other famous manufacturers are Cash and Welch & Lenton at Coventry, and Bollans at Leamington. In the USA Patterson, New Jersey, has become 'silk city': many woven silk bookmarks originate from Patterson!

The woven silk bookmarks are often called 'stevengraphs', but that is not quite correct. Stevengraph-bookmarks is more justified: Stevengraphs are the woven silk scenic pictures and portraits, made by Stevens from 1879 on.

In the first part of the 20th century memorial silks, to commemorate the deceased people, came into use, sometimes with printed photograph. After World War I they disappeared.

Paper bookmarks

The American 'Reward of Merit', a paper reward for progress and good behaviour at the primary school, goes back to the beginning of the 19th century. Its appearances are manifold, but from about 1870 on we can see the rectangular shape so characteristic for bookmarks. And to be used further as bookmark, apart from the reward, was certainly meant. One or two lithographed pictures are mounted. Soon, from about 1880 on, the double function, is expressed: 'Reward of Merit' and 'Bookmark', followed later by just the mentioning of 'Bookmark'. Further investigations have to be done, but it seems that the Reward of Merit is the origin of the paper bookmark with lithographed pictures and rectangular shape, having text for all kind of occasions. Louis Prang at Boston, USA, who produced his first chromolithographic picture in 1866, and Raphael Tuck & Sons in England are famous for these products.

Also from 1870 on, coincidence or not, the first rectangular paper advertising bookmarks were published, in the USA mainly by booksellers and stationers, in England a.o. by biscuit-manufacturers. Very soon, about 1880, insurance-companies also discovered these cheap but effective promotional articles.

In the Netherlands these bookmarks are hardly found before 1890.

Some of these bookmarks are specially designed, but most of them are so-called 'half-fabrics': the bookmark is ready, but the advertising message has to be added by overprinting at front- and/or backside by the potential user. The last type of bookmark was frequently used between 1895 and 1925. Their use is almost global: the same bookmark, with different advertising, can be found in Sweden, Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Argentine and the USA.

French bookmarks, almost all specially designed, flourished in the Inter-Bellum-period in the Art Deco-style, issued by Railway Companies (for the tourist-business), car-factories, cigarettes-factories and producers of strong alcoholic products. These French bookmarks, mostly made of thick cardboard, could be used as bookmark and as paper-cutter. Louis Muller et Fils at Paris, using the firm-name 'Clarital' issued sets of 2 rectangular bookmarks, connected by a piece of cellophane, to be used as book-cover. Detached they could be used as bookmark and paper-cutter. The designer is R. Girard.

After World War II the popularity of bookmarks went down, but from the Eighties there is a revival of the bookmark. Bookshop-chains like LIBRIS, De Boekelier and BLZ very regularly issued bookmarks. The Dutch Book- and Literature Centre (NBLC, now called 'Biblion') issued via the public libraries between 1998 and 2000 their 'Pagerclippers', with all kind of advertising, in about 200 different copies, after the Danish 'Bog-card', with over 700 different copies.

All kind of humanitarian institutes, like Amnesty International, International Fund for Animal Welfare and World Wildlife Fund, use bookmarks these days. But also the public libraries try to increase their funds by issuing bookmarks with advertising.

Celluloid

The Brothers Hyatt were the first to use celluloid in Newark, New Jersey, about 1870. From about 1880 on the Germans also produced celluloid for the making of bookmarks. The celluloid was often perforated to embroider a text like: So far, Don't forget me, God is Love etc. Celluloid was very popular till World War I, because of the resemblance to ivory. Not all materials in use for the making of bookmarks are listed here. Copper, iron, bronze and plastic are used, but also leather, very popular for souvenir-bookmarks.

Series

Most collectors do like large series: it keeps them busy, additions are found regularly, to stimulate the hunting. Bookmark-collectors do have their own large series:

Between 1890 and 1914 the Scottish Widows' Fund issued about 150 bookmarks in two large series: one with reproductions of paintings and one with the 12 month of the year, designed by the 'Art and Craft'-artist Walter Crane. This last mentioned series has two varieties of the front with three and four different backsides, altogether 84 bookmarks!

The German publishing-house Bruckmann at Munich issued six series of 15 bookmarks each, showing painters, writers and musicians in the Twenties.

The Belgium-biscuit-manufacturer Victoria issued a series of 50 modern, European writers in 1923/1924, followed by one of statesmen and politicians.

The Austrian producer of cigarette-paper, Olleschau at Vienna, is the real champion: literary writers of all ages and countries were brought together in a series of 1000 bookmarks, issued in the middle of the Thirties.

In Italy, FILA-pencil-manufacturers at Firenze, has issued many thematic series, before and after World War II, in total far more than 100 bookmarks. Ink-factory Aug. Leonhardi at Bologna, Italy, is well-known for their series 'Mastri Antichi' and 'Maestri Moderni', in total 88 bookmarks. In 1937 Leonhardi also issued a series of Monuments in Italian cities, including their colonies in East Africa. Each bookmark has also a quote from a well-known writer, but Mussolini is most frequently cited!

For Pagerclippers and Bog-card, see above!

Apart from the official bookmark people of all ages have been looking for other possibilities to mark the place where he ceased reading. Already in 1344 Richard of Bury, in his 'Philobiblion', draw attention for bad habits of readers: don't make dog-ears at pages, don't use your nails to mark the place and don't insert straws!

J.H.Kruisinga has written a very interesting chapter: 'Vondsten in boeken' (What was found in books) in his booklet: 'Tussen Papyrus en Paperback' (Between Papyros and Paperback), mentioning a quote from Dickens: 'Vele mensen steken meer in een boek dan ze er van opsteken (Many people do insert more in books than they get out of it). Kruisinga lists a.o. the following objects apparently used as bookmark: a slice of ham; cheques; a last will; an envelope with a month-salary; a slice of bacon; shoe-lace; an empty cigar-box; matches; a driving licence; biscuits; all kind of tickets; photo's; postcards; letters; paper-money; blotters;

cuts from newspapers; bills; calendars; devotional pictures; feathers; and that certainly is not all The British Library has issued a series of 4 bookmarks, depicting objects found in books: a slice of bacon; a slice of cheese; a sandwich jam; a stalk of vegetables. Advice for proper book-treatment and book-hygiene was added.

Something similar of course also exist in the Netherlands: in the Twenties Soap-factory 'De Hamer' of T.P., Viruly & Co at Gouda printed the following text at the backside of their bookmark: 'This book wants to be treated properly. Take the book only with clean hands. Don't eat during the reading. Beware of coffee-, tea-, and oil-stains. Don't lick your fingers when you turn over the pages: you can get tuberculosis and other contagious diseases that way'.

M. de Kan issued an own bookmark in the fifties, with about the same advices, but also some new ones, in total 16 points!

4. Don't fold the book

6. Don't make dog-ears at pages

11. Don't eat while reading

13. Don't cough or sneeze into your books

16. Don't insert other objects as bookmarks than real bookmarks into your books.

And that brings us back to the advices of Richard of Bury in 1344: apparently people are incorrigible