



Bitten by what we do

Paul Wright, the General Manager of William Cowley, the world's leading parchment and vellum makers, greets the Hon Editor with a cup of tea and leads the way across a lawn besides a brook to the works gazebo where we bask in the warm spring light and he introduces himself and the firm. 'I am basically an engineer, an atomic engineer, as it happens' Paul says 'and the great, great, great grandson of the founder recruited me. How he picked on me I have never found out, but I fell in love with the craft and the business the day I first came and here I am today.'



Momentous Day. Graduating from four arduous years at West Point and being commissioned in the Regular United States Army is a mammoth achievement acknowledged in... vellum. Vellum from Newport Pagnall.

Our tea reluctantly finished, we climb the steep narrow creaking steps in the early Victorian farm cottage which leads to the small general office. Paul bids me to watch my head as he fluently explains the unique role his firm has in the world of heraldic art, of calligraphy, of illumination, furniture and drum heads.

'We trade with virtually every country in the world and are a critical part of any mechanic of real recognition. If you are about to become a Regular Officer in the US Army from West Point, the evidence is on our vellum. A knight anywhere in the Commonwealth? A peer? A judge? Every major national library, every law from every parliament in the Commonwealth? Higher degrees from the most prestigious universities, certificates of appreciation, recognition and, of course, achievements awarded by heraldic authorities around the world, not to mention heraldic library pictures all beautifully painted, letters into art, calligraphy crisp and proud and, even the sound you hear from bass and snare drums. All require vellum or parchment. Our vellum invests any form of artwork with longevity and a real regard for the recipient. If there were ever a material more than fit for purpose, it is vellum. This is what is so exciting about what we do.' We reach the top and walk into his Dickensian office. 'It is a burden of honour' and he means it. 'We are bitten by what we do.'

So what does he make of this dumbing-down idea from a House of Lords committee to use paper to record laws on. 'We cannot understand it and neither can almost anyone else. Vellum lasts thousands of years. See this map of the Caribbean? It is 16 more times more durable than the highest quality rag paper you can make or buy. Based on its predecessors, this

map will still be as fresh in 6016 as it is today. The Dead Sea scrolls are as readable today as when the Essenes buried them 2,000 years ago. If Magna Carta of 1215-17 had been written on paper absolutely no original copies would have survived beyond the reign of Henry VII.'

'With vellum you can dispense with microbiological or insect control. There are no harsh chemicals needed in its preparation. It is non-combustible and requires minimal care. It is one of the reasons that no country on earth has as many mediaeval records as Britain does. Not because people took loving care of them, but because everything was recorded on a medium which would last, a medium that was trusted. A medium you could not easily erase or alter: vellum. Resilient vellum.'

Paul's small office teems with rolls ready for mailing that day to chanceries, libraries and artists all over the world, and anticipating my next question, he points to a small photograph of the founder. 'We have been producing vellum here, on this site, for almost 150 years. Our business philosophy is to produce a superior product at an affordable price, no more. You will meet Lee and Steve. They are highly skilled, as you might imagine, working with tools which would have been recognisable a thousand years ago. We do not do staff turnover. Our succession planning is in place (Julia Visscher, great, great, great granddaughter of the founder is in the next room completing orders. We briefly say hello and leave her as she swims through a sea of stiff milk-white sheets of all different sizes and purposes carefully marked order by order).

I wonder if it all gets too much. 'No' says Paul. 'Our saving grace is that we cannot work any faster than nature allows. Basically when a hide is at the right state of decomposition, which we can only tell by smell, then and only then do we take it to the next step.' Nothing is rushed. 'Once when I first came', Paul said, 'I suggested to Wim Visscher (Julia's father) that we could increase our output if we worked on Saturdays. He held up a finger and said "No. Weekends are for family."'

Over the last few months, Namila, who shares Paul's office and now has her own computer, has become used to a seemingly never-ending stream of television crews from all over the world.

'They can never understand why anyone would want to throw over this priceless heritage' she says. 'And, thankfully, many members of Parliament agree. We shall see.' Paul is grateful for the support of this Society, but at time of writing another battle looms, this time on the floor of the Commons. Will this be it? Not sure.

Time to leave after a fascinating visit and Paul escorts me to the boundary line between his measured world where time is of little value and the outside world of rush and bother populated by Know-Nothings. He says he is glad to stay on his side of the line and I told him that I, and I suspect, all our members wish we could too.



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