

Grading (and describing) numismatic books de-mystified for the beginner...

Grading numismatic books is much like grading coins. Some people, however, manage to turn something nice and easy into a mystical exercise full of jargon. To describe books offered for sale here I use very simple rules. Unfortunately, numismatic book grades, although they use much the same words as coin grades are not really comparable, which may result in confusion, so they need clarification, hence this article. These days there are also differences in nomenclature between our descriptions and those in use in the USA.

Remember that the description is firstly to give you the information you may need about a book, and then to enable you, the customer, to decide whether its quality is acceptable to you, or not. Remember that our objective is to make you, our customer, as happy as we can. We have endeavoured to do this for nearly 50 years, by honest, conservative descriptions of our goods, whether coins, or books.

Going through the website, I have realised that we use a lot of bookseller's jargon terms, which largely derive from binders, or printers. I am sorry about this, but there is no way around it. But read on, you may learn something and even find interesting information about how books are made.

NUMISMATIC BOOKS

We tell you, usually in this order:

The **author**

The **publisher**

The **edition** number, or the publication date of the book, and if it is a reprint, when it was reprinted, and by whom. Sometimes here we say "(unaltered)". This means that even though it is a later date than the previous edition, the content has not changed.

HB or **PB** Whether the book is a hardback, or paperback. Hardback is abbreviated to **HB**, paperback to **PB** (US soft back). Hardcover books with a **dw** (dustjacket) sometimes have the condition of the book and the **dw** listed separately. This is normally shown as good/very good, quoting the jacket grade first and the book second. The book is almost always in better condition than the jacket.

Hardback books have covers, these are known to the binder as "boards". They are usually made of stiff cardboard covered with a material to protect, and ornament them so that they attract and delight the eye of the purchaser. A numismatic book should not only contain useful information, but be a work of art. The best material to cover the board is traditionally leather. If the boards are covered all over then the words "full leather" are used. Most, however are covered with cloth, so they are described as "cloth", which seems to confuse some people because cloth is soft ! There are several types of cloth: a particularly hard-wearing type is known as buckram, there is also rexine, which is plasticised. Then there is leatherette, which is fake, or reconstituted leather, which is sometimes difficult to tell from real leather. Boards may also be covered with paper, which may have printing on in, in which case it may be described as 'pictorial' if the printing is a photograph. See also "half and quarter bound" below.

Number of pages, etc. We express this as xxii + 145 pages + 45 plates. This tells you that there are 22 pages of text before the main section of 145 pages, which is then followed by 45 plates. In Victorian books this may be followed by advertisements, which can sometimes be as interesting and informative as the book itself !

Size: We don't use the old-fashioned measurements such as folio, octave, quarto, etc, but give you the size in millimetres, **the width first, then its height**. The size quoted is *page* size, not the size of the cover.

Then there is an image of **the actual book being offered for sale**. Sometimes, if we have more than one copy, we give the description and photograph of the worst (not the best), so what you receive may be something better than you think.

Incidentally, there is an exception to this: auction catalogues are always **PB** (unless otherwise described) and never have a dust jacket. Paperbacks very rarely have a **dw**, though there is the odd exception.

Next we tell you how well or badly preserved the book is.

In the old days we used to say at the beginning of our listings that all of our books were in **good, clean condition** unless otherwise described. This is still true, however, these days, many people get to a page on our website via a search engine, so that information is missing, so we have to say that for each one. We carefully describe even tiny faults, so our descriptions may make the book sound worse than it is.

New This is a book that no one has previously owned apart from us as retailers. It is exactly as we received it from the publisher. Sometimes, in the case of Indian publications, we find it necessary to state that the book is new, and Indian, and mention the binding and printing faults.

As new, virtually as new. Sometimes we buy books from other dealers who are leaving the trade. They are technically new, but just in case, we describe them *as new*, or *virtually as new*, or *almost as new*.

New, but slightly shop-soiled How do you describe a book that has been on a shelf for 30 years ? This is not 'soiled' as one would describe a baby's nappy (US diaper), there may be *slight* marking or the odd minor blemish on the cover, or some other very minor flaw, otherwise it is **as new**.

Very good. This is sometimes abbreviated to **vg**. In American coin jargon "vg" is not really very good at all. However, in book language the emphasis is on the **very** good. It has been opened a few times, it shows signs of *slight* use, otherwise it is nice, bright, tight and, of course, clean. Any flaws are noted.

Good. Basically, this is nice average condition. The book is all there, no pages are missing, the covers are not torn, there is no highlighting*, no one has written anything in the pages margins, it is worn, but not heavily worn, there are no creased pages. We tell you whether there is a dw (dust jacket), or not, or in the case of some books it will say “No dw (as published)”, which tells you that there never was a dw with the book. Though in our experience, most people don’t care about wrappers (jackets) on numismatic books, where what they want is information about coins. Personally I loathe dust jackets and none of the books we publish have one. *This is rarely encountered here in the UK, but I imagine is rather common in the USA, as they seem to have a horror of it.

Fair Still all there, but in an old book, it indicates considerable wear, there may be name(s) scribbled or scrawled on the endpaper, the binding is probably shaky. Sometimes it is referred to as a *reading copy*. This probably harks back to the days when books were collected to put together as a gentleman’s library, not necessarily to be read ! Incidentally, we still have a few customers who buy two copies of a book, bless them, one for using and one for keeping, there are still gentlemen around.

Poor We usually don’t usually sell books described as poor, unless they are old, rare, or desirable in some way, so the description will tell you its major faults. Remember that a book has only got into this state because it has been used, so it must be good !

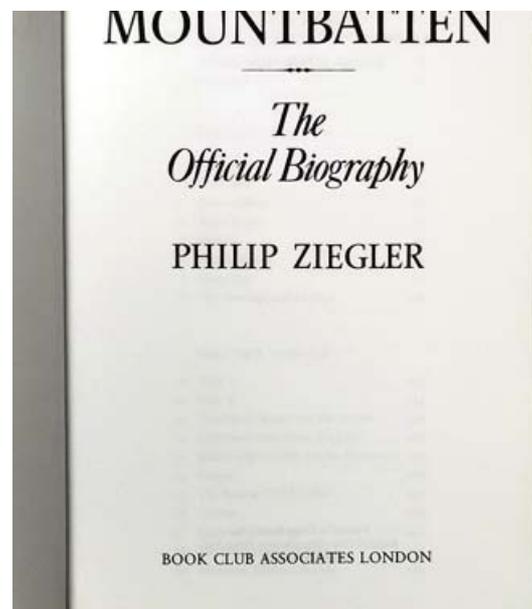
The above terms will cover the majority of numismatic book entries on our website. **In addition to the above gradings some technical descriptive terms are used which are (mostly) covered below.**

Please note that these have been gathered from our website, or from memory, so are not in any particular order.

Ex-library This refers to the book having once belonged to a public library, and is not to be confused with “*ex-libris*”. Do not be afraid to buy most numismatic books that are ex-library books. True, they will have library stamps, and often a little pocket for the ticket, and the remains of a sheet for recording the date for return of the book. However, unlike novels, most specialist numismatic books went into the reference section of the library and so had little use, so they are not worn. In the 1950s and 1960s books were often rebound in heavy library bindings so that they could stand up to heavy wear, which means that they are more than capable of standing up to the wear that the average collector could give them, so, if we say “stout library binding” it is usually desirable and something that will last for many decades of use !

Book Club Edition This is not a term that occurs with numismatic books, or books about coins, but more usually history books. For those who don’t know what a book club is, a lot of people in the sixties and seventies signed up to receive a book each month, or quarter. In return for this they got their monthly book much cheaper than buying it from a book shop, though such editions, especially in the USA, were printed on paper that was often smaller, or lower quality than that used for the regular edition books.

You will, of course be able to get a good idea from the accompanying image of any faults that are described.



book club edition

Smells and Smoke. If the previous owner of a book was a heavy smoker, the smoke in the air fell on the books of his library, and, like a kipper, it became lightly smoked ! Leaving the book open in a clean, dry atmosphere will often cure this.

Damp Some books seem to have been stored in the garden shed, or the garage, perhaps banished there by the deceased collector’s widow. The result is that they smell of damp. The cure that we use for this is to leave the book, open, in a warm, well-aired place and the smell usually disappears. I have a particularly acute sense of smell, and being an ex-smoker, hate the smell of cigarette smoke. Any smells are mentioned.

Mildew. This is something that you will not find mentioned in our listings. It’s a nasty book infection, which, encouraged by damp conditons, can spread. It causes nasty patches in books and the reason that we do not mention it is that we never buy items that are affected by it.

Aeg, teg, gilt. Back in Victorian days, or even earlier, binders applied gold leaf to the top edge of a book so it was less affected by dust, creepy-crawlies, or whatever. So *teg* = top edge gilt. *Aeg* = all edges gilt. Sometimes the title of a book, inscribed on the spine, or the front board can be gilt, though in these modern days it is done using gilt foil rather than real gold. Gilt tooling refers to the pretty curlicue decorations sometimes embossed on the spine, the edge of the cover, or elsewhere as ornaments. These, of course, are nice, not nasty, things to say about a book.



gilt edge

Association copy This means that the book once belonged to the author, or is signed or annotated by a collector who has built a significant or at least a substantial collection. It may also have been inscribed by the author to a famous person, or owned by someone of interest.

Backstrip a very old-fashioned word sometimes used by antiquarian booksellers for what the rest of us call the **spine**). Sometimes, more technically, it is a strip used by a binder to reinforce the back of folded sheets in the binding of the spine (in the 18th and 19th centuries and earlier they often used old printed pages from books). A binder, or a seller of antiquarian books will often refer to a book that has had a worn out spine replaced or repaired as “rebacked”.

Bibliography This can refer to a separate section of the book where the author lists all of the reference works he, or she, has used in the compilation of their book. Sometimes there is a “**select bibliography**” which means that only major works consulted have been listed. A bibliography can also be a book itself, which contains a highly detailed listing of all published titles on a given subject, or the contents of a library. Such bibliographies can be immensely useful to the reader, or researcher who wants to make sure that he has missed nothing !

“**Binding Copy only**” This is a book in which the text block (the pages) is complete but the binding is in such poor condition that it is beyond reasonable repair, defective or missing. What we call the binding on most books today, is where the text block is glued to a cover by glue and some mull (a very coarse plain muslin cloth) and end sheet paper, is actually a casing, hence the somewhat puzzling term of “casebound”. Back in the good old days, the binding was actually hand sewn to the collected “gatherings” which is the old term for the bundles of pages that were sewn together to make the book.

Professionally rebound. We often get books that are old and valuable, but are falling apart, so require putting back together, or repair. We use a binder who, having served a proper apprenticeship many years ago, has had many years of experience. His co-worker wife is a dab-hand at the hand-sewing. They work to high standards. This means that he is not cheap, but then he has to earn a living too, and this guy is worthy of his hire.

Blind (in conjunction with stamped, tooled or embossed) refers to being impressed into an endpaper or binding material without any ink or gilding.

Previous Owner’s Name This tells you that the previous owner wrote his name on the ffep or the front pastedown. In some instances, this can make the book desirable rather than just secondhand. It pleases me to know, for example, that my copy of Elias’ *Anglo-Gallic Coins* was once owned by Peter Seaby, and my Latin dictionary was previously owned by Humphrey Sutherland, and that many of my books have been signed by the author. Some of my books have several signatures, or bookplates that show they have been owned by a series of (now) celebrated collectors.

ffep this is an acronym for “first free endpaper” though some people in the USA use it for first front endpaper.

front pastedown this is posh book-seller’s, or binder’s terminology for the part of the endpaper that is stuck to the verso, or rear of the front board (i.e. cover).

boards this is posh, or binder’s terminology for the front and back covers of a hardback book, nowadays this is usually a cardboard base covered with paper, cloth, or leather.

Book jacket This is a separate paper covering for the book. It is also called a “dust jacket” or “dustwrapper”, which are usually abbreviated to dj or dw.

Booklet a small (in the sense of thin, i.e., not having many pages) book, or pamphlet.

Monograph This is a (usually specialist) book on a single subject.

Book plate This, sometimes called an “**ex-libris**” is an ownership label, usually stuck on the inside of the front cover i.e., the “front pastedown”. These are part of the book’s history, though those that can be purchased by the hundred with a space left for the owner to write his, or her name are usually just a pain; but even so, that person may become well-known in the coin world, so are best not removed. I’d like all of my own books to be association copies with bookplates of collectors.

Wormholes, wormed, these are the traces of the larva of an insect which feeds on the binding or pages of a book. As they eat their way through the pages of a book, they leave a trail known as “worming.” Only usually found in very old books or modern Indian ones !

Bumped This refers to the corner(s) or spine ends of a book that has been damaged by being dropped or badly handled.

Chipped This tells that one or more pieces have been broken or torn off a dust jacket, binding or the spine.

ca an abbreviation for “circa”, used to give an approximate date when actual date of publication is unknown.

Dusty. All homes, regardless of what your wife says, have dust. This settles on the tops (yes, that’s the technical word) and where books are not dusted regularly, it forms a layer. Depending on what type of dust it is, it can mark the top. If it is only slight, most people ignore it.

Coated This refers to the surface of paper that is coated with china clay and then is polished so that it appear glossy. Such paper is sometimes known as ‘art’ paper.

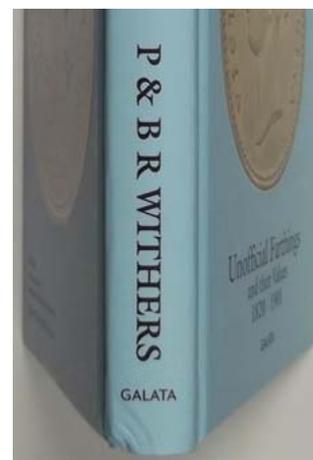
Contemporary binding: A binding that was placed on the book at the time of publication or by its owner some short while after publication. Up until the beginning of the 20th century (and continuing much later in some European countries), most books were published unbound, in plain paper covers, and the purchaser would have the book bound to match other books in his library. Some posh gents even bound their own books. A small number of people still do.

Damp-stained Stain(s) on the cover or pages of a book, from having been exposed to water.

Disbound A book which has come adrift from its binding, which is no longer present.



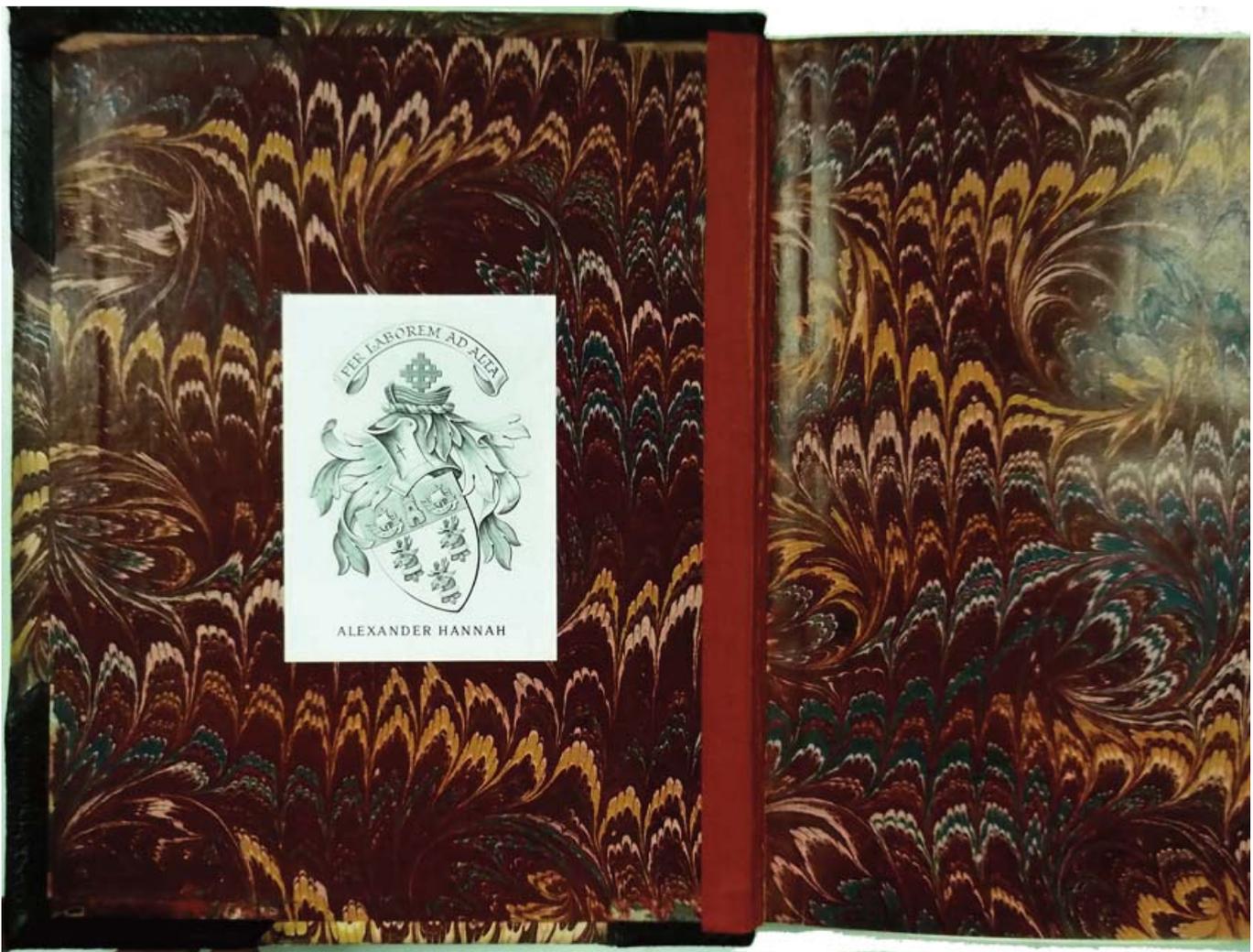
blind stamp



bumped spine



chipped spine



marbled endpapers, bookplate, repaired hinge

Dog-eared usually refers to the corners of the cover of a PB, or the corners of the pages of any book. Some unthinking people, usually with short memories bend the top corners of pages over, like a dog's ear, to mark their place, while reading.

Edges The three outer sides of the text block (pages) when a book is closed: these are the top edge or head, fore-edge, and bottom or foot. It seems somehow illogical that the fore edge is actually the back edge of the book... but then it has to be called something.

Endpapers These are the double pages added to the book by the binder that become the pastedowns and free endpapers inside the front and rear covers. They are often heavier and thicker than the paper used for the body of the book. Sometimes, if the book has been 'designed' they can be of a matching or contrasting colour to the colour of the cloth used to cover the boards.

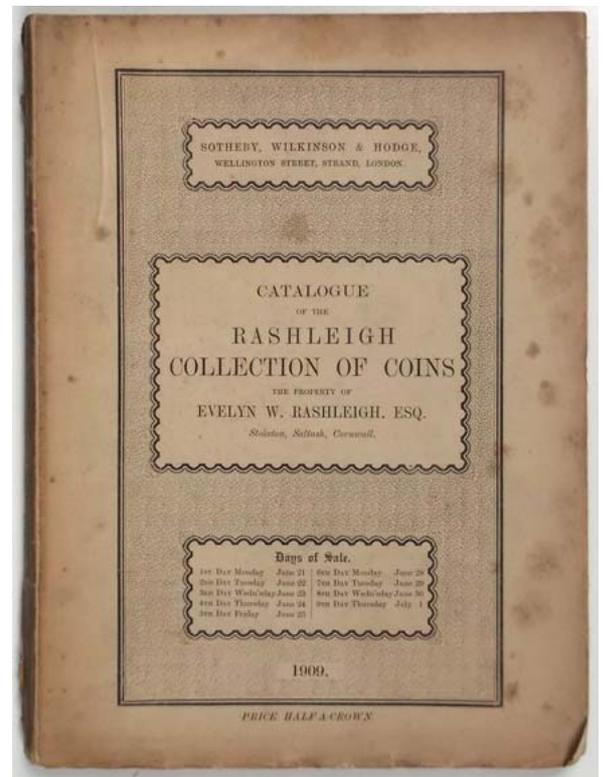
Ex-libris From a private library, as opposed to a public library, usually having a bookplate or a stamp, so a bookplate (see above) is sometimes known as an ex-libris.

Foxing Brown spots or patches caused by impurities in paper reacting to light, exposure to damp, etc. Foxing is more likely but not always encountered in older books.

Frontispiece (or sometimes "frontis") Usually, the illustration facing title page.

Gatherings This is a technical expression used for the printed sheets, after folding, which are put in order and bound in sequence. Also known as signatures.

Gutter This is not where the rainwater flows, but refers to the inner margins of two facing pages.



dog-eared cover with some foxing

Half bound A book which has had its spine covered in one material, usually leather, and the rest of the front and rear covers covered in another, such as paper or cloth. This in contrast to a book which is “quarter bound,” which has a spine and corners covered in one material, and the boards covered in another. So **quarter leather/cloth**.

Half-title (sometimes known as the ‘fly leaf’) This is the page, preceding the title page proper, normally listing only the title of the book with no other information. Usually present in modern books, it is sometimes lacking in older publications because it was designed to be removed before custom binding.

Half-tone A photographic printed image formed of minute, closely-spaced dots.

HC American term for hardcover (hardback).

head this is not an American euphemism for the lavatory, but the top edge of the text block.

Head band this is a strip of silk or cotton, sometimes prettily bi-or multi-coloured. They are affixed to signatures, to give them strength when sewn together to form a text block; though these days, they are, more often, a decorative feature of the spine ends. Just remember that superior books always have a headband, just as the best wines and single malt whisky always come in bottles stoppered with a real cork.

Hinges These are where the sides of the binding, or the endpapers meet the spine on the interior, or exterior of a book. After much use they can split, or break. Internally they are easily repaired by a tape. Externally, it means that the book has to be “rebacked”

Illustr. Abbreviation for illustrated.

Inscribed This is when an author of a book signs a dedication, for example: “To my friend John who has helped in the preparation of this book The Author.”

Signed This means that the author has signed the book. Sometimes a book can be signed and inscribed.

ISBN = International Standard Book Number. This is a unique numeric code used to identify a modern book. Like most publishers, we have our own number, but we rarely use ISBNs because most of the books we sell are second hand.

Joints This has nothing to do with the type of whacky-baccy some folk smoke, but is where the spine joins the sides of the book.

Laminate A thin plastic, or cellophane layer covering the dust jacket of some books, which can sometimes come adrift from its base layer. Remember this word and you will never again have to say “the thingy film is coming off the dust whatsit”.

Limited edition A book is sometimes produced in a stated number of copies to encourage people to buy it quickly before it goes out of print. Such books are usually numbered as “8/150” meaning number 8 of an edition of 150. For a numismatic book any edition of more of 1,000 may be regarded as large.

Marbled Paper, edges. A process of decorating paper, usually for endpapers, which the results in a monochromatic or several-coloured sheet with a pattern resembling marble. Marbled paper comes in several grades, the best is hand-made and therefore every sheet is unique (and expensive), or so my binder tells me !

N.d. No Date; no publication date is supplied in the book, sometimes conveniently forgotten by certain publishers of reprints. Some publishers even forget to say where their book was published. Sometimes this may be because they are/were amateurs, sometimes it may well be that they did not want to acknowledge their place of abode.

Anon. This is short for anonymous. This is, in some instances, because the author was truly humble. In other cases, the charitable view is that the keeper of the department or museum may have wanted to keep any credit accruing from the publication to all in the department, so the name of the junior who actually did the hard work is ignored. In other instances, particularly some French and Italian museums, who have managed to achieve Euro- or regional funding for a book, the name of the minister of culture, the name of the local political chief, regional bribe-taker, and Lord High Everything Else, seem to come first, long before the name of the actual author, which is almost always in small print, if it is there at all.

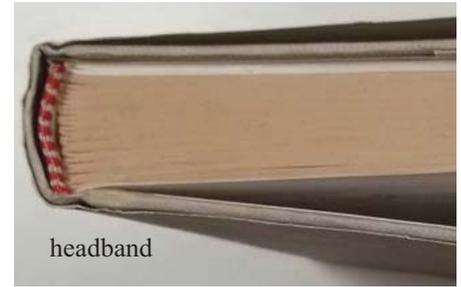
Out-of-print usually abbreviated to **o/p** or **op**. This means that the book is no longer available from the publisher and no copies are available for sale.

Plate(s) often abbreviated to **pl.**, a plate is a page with illustrations, often printed on glossy art paper. Sometimes, authors confuse plates and illustrations.

p. or pp. abbreviations for page and pages.

Price clipped This means that the inner corner of the lower corner of a dust jacket has been cut off to remove the price, usually when the book was given as a present.

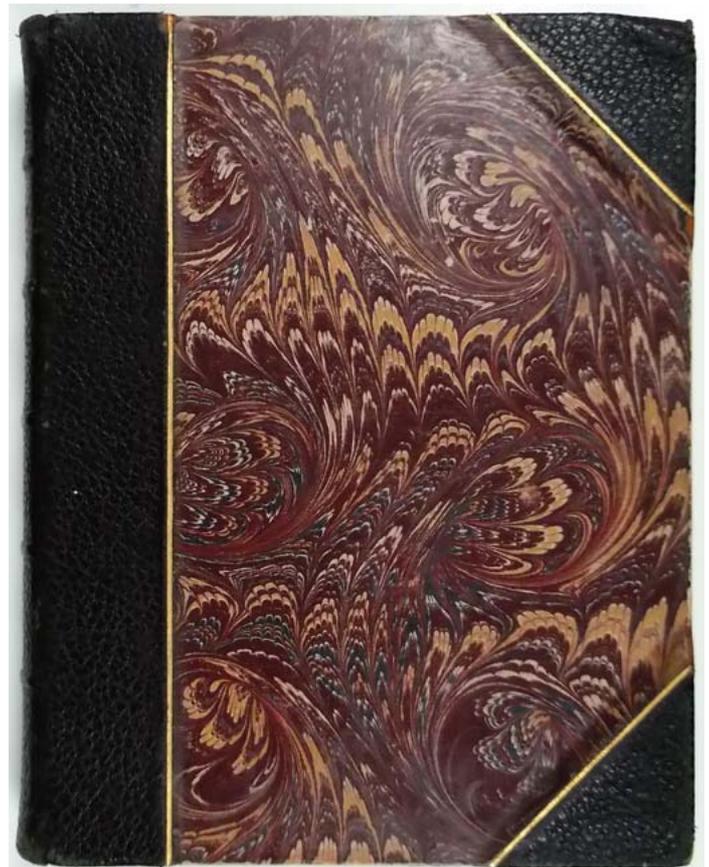
Quarter bound A book with its spine and corners bound in a different material than that used for the boards (e.g., a leather spine and cloth- or paper-covered boards).



headband



marbled edges



quarter leather binding with marbled boards

Crease A crease down the spine of a PB book, usually caused by a book being opened to read it. Creasing also occurs on auction catalogues when a catalogue is rolled or folded, usually when the owner went to lunch and put the catalogue into their pocket ! (Yes, I'm guilty.)

Rebacked A repair to a book, where the original spine has been replaced. When the original spine can be saved, it is glued to the new spine. We usually say "Rebacked, retaining the original spine."

Rubbed This is where the colour, or material has been worn part of the binding or dust jacket

Shaky The text block is loose in its binding, but not detached.

slip case A box built to house and protect a book, leaving the spine exposed. Sometimes, for special presentation copies, these can be decorated exactly as the cover of the book and incorporate medal ribbons, photographs etc.

Spine The backbone, or back, of the book where the title is usually displayed when it is standing upright on a shelf. It is ironic that the spine of the book is at the front. (see above)

Sunned Browning, yellowing, or fading of paper, dustjacket or binding as a result of exposure to sunlight.

Sellotape marks Marks of transparent tape that remain on the cover, or jacket of a book as nasty brown stains or have even transferred to the endpapers. It is a wonderful material for attaching labels to jam pots, or for children to use in school. But please don't put the stuff anywhere near a book or coins ! A repair to a book with sellotape looks good for a short while, but becomes a mess after a decade or so.

Tipped in Paper, photograph, or extra page glued down by only a narrow strip at one edge.

Title page This is usually the first, second, or third page of a book bearing typically the title, the author(s) names, the publisher's name and where the book was published, and, finally, the date.

Tooling Decoration on the spine, or boards of leather bindings.

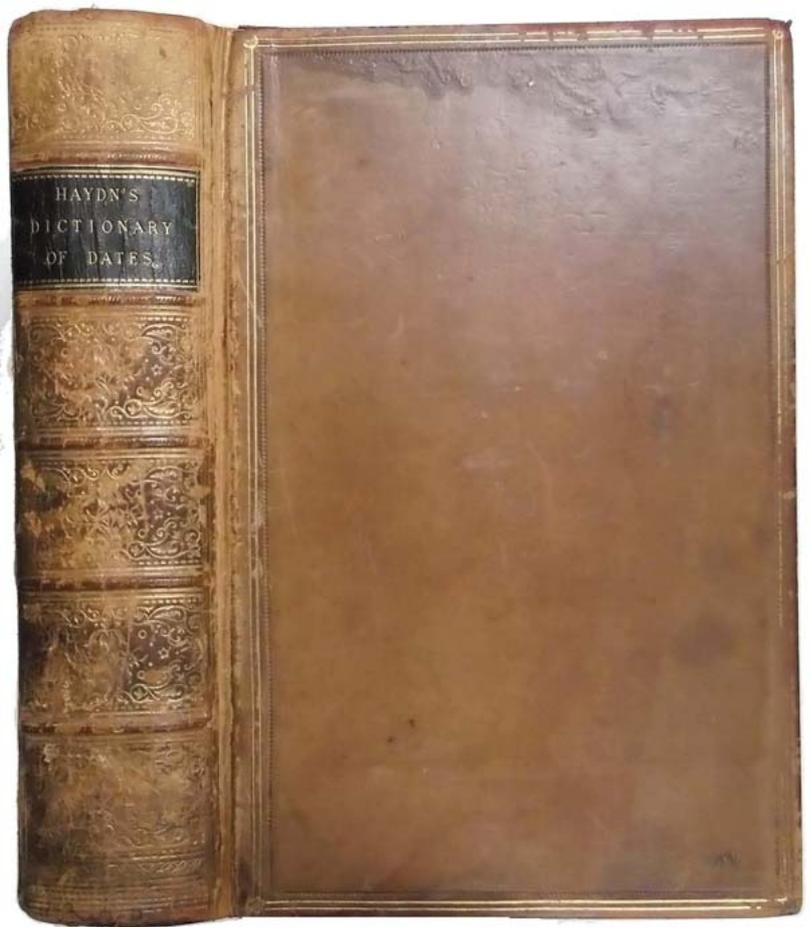
Unbound A book that was never bound into covers. Usually these "unbound sheets" are either a review copy, or were sent to another collector for comment, and thus escaped being bound by the publisher. This term is not to be confused with **disbound**.

Uncut The edges of the page block have not been guillotined, so those folded edges remain. In other words, it has not been read, or even opened.

Vol(s) an abbreviation for volume(s).

Self-published This means that the author and the publisher are one and the same.

Vellum A thin sheet of specially prepared untanned, but de-greased calfskin which is for used binding.



rebacked, retaining the original, tooled spine

There are probably things that I have missed, or forgotten, if there is something you do not understand, I'll do my best to answer any questions.