

# PERSPECTIVES

UNCOVERING PASSION PROJECTS AND PERSONAL TALES

I WAS ALWAYS A BOOKISH CHILD and encouraged to have adventures. I remember my mum arranging for me to visit a pen pal in West Africa when I was 15, and reading 28 books and keeping a journal while I was there. I studied English literature at university and, after I graduated, my stepfather sent me a newspaper clipping about a bookbinder near where I grew up, outside Bath. I went for a weekend workshop, made my first book and something just clicked inside me. I loved the step-by-step process of building such an iconic form out of paper, thread, board and glue. In a small way it's about making order out of chaos. I instantly knew I was going to be a bookbinder for the rest of my life.

After training in traditional bookbinding at the London College of Printing, I realised that I was more interested in the book form as a creative medium than in restoration and conservation. Bookbinding became an all-consuming passion that has taken me around the world, including to Antarctica twice as an artist-in-residence. I started teaching in places such as the Isles of Scilly and Shetland, where I did an annual workshop in a lighthouse for 14 years. I love the metaphor of lighthouses as guiding lights. I think of what I do as showing people a new way to be creative. In 2012 I decided I was going to teach a bookbinding workshop somewhere around the world each month because I believe that everybody has a book inside them. I started in Yorkshire, then went to Napa Valley and finished in Paris in December.

The first time I went to Iona was for love. I was matchmade with a man by a mutual friend. I asked her why she was so sure I would be interested in him and she said he

had just made a bookcase out of an old boat. He lives on the north of the island and there's a farm to the right and nothing beyond it. The first time I visited, he showed me around the house and what was going to be my writing room. The next time I went, there was a writing desk looking out to sea. That was more than 10 years ago now.

I run a retreat in Iona every spring and sometimes in summer. On the evening people arrive, they get to know their surroundings and go for a walk or maybe a swim. The next morning, we start gently with some simple techniques. We fold paper and try exercises such as making a collage or a word map. It's a way of loosening up and forgetting that it can be intimidating to be in a room with other people to "make art". Then we practise some bookbinding stitches, mainly the Coptic stitch, which is an ancient way of binding used by early Christians in Egypt.

Some people arrive with a fixed idea of what they want to do and I often try to steer them towards something more fluid, encouraging them to respond to the place or spend time on the beach. They might then do some printing with a piece of rope or seaweed; or pick up a mussel shell and use it as a drawing tool. On the second day, we'll choose driftwood for the covers. Then I hand out different materials so people can colourwash the paper and cut it down to size.

We start every day at 10am and finish at 4pm, so people can choose to get up early and walk down to the



Clockwise from this image: assorted bobbins; Rachel Hazell; driftwood binding. Opposite: Isle of Iona



beach and sit on a rock with a cup of tea. And in the evening they can watch the sun set or read, or keep making. The oldest building on Iona is the Reilig Òdhrain, which is a very special place with the graves of past kings of Scotland. There was a scriptorium there too, where manuscripts, including, reputedly, The Book of Kells, were produced. On the final day, we finish all the pages and after lunch we sew them together. Bookbinding is such a lovely, meditative process. You can learn how to bind a book at your local college or online but this is different. It's about giving people time to reflect or express something significant – or simply explore and discover.

I spend half the year on Iona, running virtual retreats, and the other half based in Edinburgh, travelling and teaching. This year I am putting on workshops in Bath and Edinburgh, plus my Love Letters retreat in Paris, which is all about going to flea markets and paper boutiques. I have plans to return to Shetland in the summer, and in October I will be going back to Venice for a Personal Geographies workshop, where I take people to a library to handle 15th-century navigational books, maps and atlases. Like so much of what I do, it's about accessing a kind of magic. 📖

Visit [thetravellingbookbinder.com](http://thetravellingbookbinder.com) for more on Rachel's retreats and other projects. She was speaking to Giovanna Dunmall

## PAPER TRAILS

BOOKBINDER RACHEL HAZELL EXPLAINS HER CURIOUS PASSION AND HOW IT HAS TAKEN HER TO THE ELEMENTAL ISLAND OF IONA AND FAR BEYOND



PHOTOGRAPHS: SUSAN BELL; SARAH MASON

## OTHER CRAFTY RETREATS IN BRITISH NATURE

### WEST DEAN COLLEGE OF ARTS & CONSERVATION, WEST SUSSEX

Staying in a Grade II-listed, flint-faced manor house surrounded by woodland is pleasing enough, but at weekends this college becomes extra gratifying, with courses on everything from pottery and bookbinding to stained-glass manufacture. The South Downs make a scenic backdrop for oil-on-canvas painters, while blacksmithing enthusiasts can learn how to forge Viking-style pieces. *Bed and breakfast from £95 per night, weekend courses from around £270; [westdean.org.uk](http://westdean.org.uk)*

### CELTIC WOODTURNING, COUNTY ARMAGH

Nature and art combine at this retreat, where guests learn traditional methods to handcraft a bowl from wood. Host Pádraig Carragher leads the sessions while imparting some of the culture and folklore that's woven into this pretty landscape of heaths, forest and farmland known as the Ring of Gullion. There's a choice between private rooms in a cottage or glamping pods with fire pits, set within a circular stone wall. *Four-day retreats from £238 per person; [notintheguidebooks.com](http://notintheguidebooks.com)*

### ARVON FOUNDATION, DEVON, SHROPSHIRE, WEST YORKSHIRE

In the 55 years since its inception, the Arvon Foundation has attracted an illustrious list of teachers to its three creative-writing centres, including Salman Rushdie and Hilary Mantel. Shropshire attendees stay in rooms at The Clockhouse, which overlooks the verdant Clune Valley, where plot inspiration comes in the form of the wild orchids, redwoods and spring-fed lakes of the Shropshire Hills. *Four- to six-day retreats from £615; [arvon.org](http://arvon.org)*

### GARTMORE HOUSE, THE TROSSACHS

Margaret Morrison-MacLeod, owner of aromatherapy company The Divine Hag, has elevated candle-making to a fine art. Now, the award-winning artisan shares the secrets of her craft at Gartmore House, an 18th-century mansion set within 100 acres near Loch Lomond. Over four days, students learn how to cut wicks, mould wax and select scent combinations while being treated to three home-cooked meals a day. *Courses from £979; [gartmorehouse.com](http://gartmorehouse.com)*

### WELSH ACADEMY OF ART, POWYS

This institution near the town of Crickhowell in Wales teaches students the traditional methods of the Old Masters as well as contemporary approaches to portraiture, still life and landscapes. Guests can join structured courses or work alone in the studio, retiring at day's end to a modern stone cottage with a cosy fireplace just 15 minutes away. *Two-day courses from £275; [welshacademyofart.com](http://welshacademyofart.com)*

### THE CRAFTSMAN'S COTTAGE, WILTSHIRE

Amanda Bannister is on a mission to spread her passion for craftsmanship, which is why she invites guests to the rolling hills of the Wiltshire-Dorset border for classes including woodworking, pottery, bookbinding and the ancient art of English bulrush weaving. Even the interiors of Bannister's early 19th-century cottage in the village of Semley are a salute to homegrown crafts, from the GP & J Baker wallpaper in the master bedroom to the Pinch-designed furniture and Made in Britain ceramics. *NOO SARO-WIWA From £375 per night; [thecraftsmanscottage.com](http://thecraftsmanscottage.com)*