

‘Strength in Weakness’: the life and times of a rare book at Chawton House Library

In the eighteenth century, when the novel as we know it today was quite a new phenomenon, there was a vogue for fiction narrated by speaking objects. Pets, furniture and articles of clothing all took a turn in this role, each describing the adventures of his or her life. In this article Dr. Helen Cole, who has researched the collection at Chawton House Library extensively, becomes one of its rare books. If you would like to know more about the conservation project at Chawton House Library, please take a look at the Library’s website on www.chawtonhouse.org.

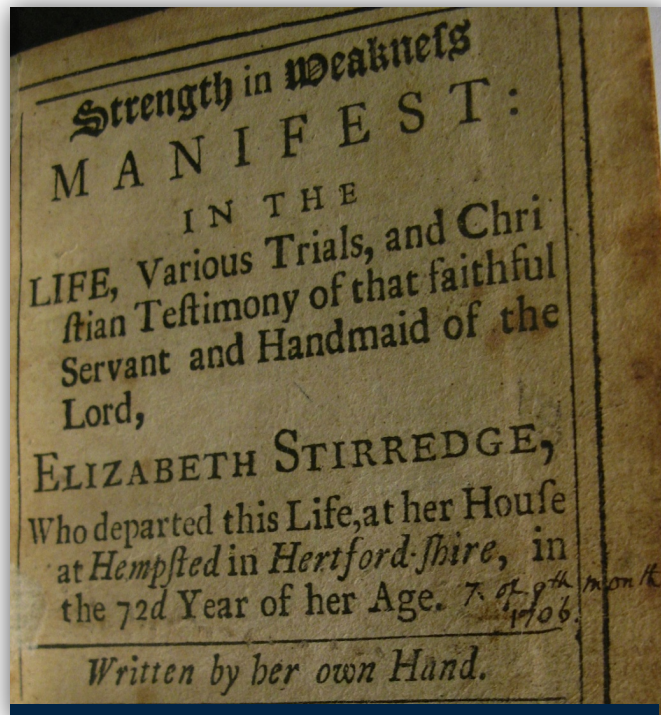


Among the notable examples of ‘it’ novels at Chawton House Library is the anonymous *Adventures of a Black Coat...related by itself* (1760). An early reader, acquiring a print dated 1789 that satirises the sharp practices of a tailor in London’s Monmouth Street, has had this bound in with the novel (in which the eponymous coat does indeed find itself languishing unsold among the stock of a Monmouth Street tailor). This is an instance of ‘extra-illustration’ – the pairing of text and image at a reader’s own initiative. Pictured here, the print has torn along one of its folds and now needs repair and strengthening.

Dear reader, in the lines that follow, I – an old, old book – set out to tell you the story of myself. If this seems whimsical to you, please bear with me: after all, who knows as much about me as I do myself? Who better to explain my circumstances? I and many like me have entered a new phase of life in comfort and safety at Chawton House Library, read by those who wish to do so but at the same time handled with great care, kept clean and stored in just the right humidity. Nevertheless, we’re all getting on a bit – I’ve been around since 1711 – and if we’re to last for centuries more, quite a few of us need minor surgery to put right the wear and tear we’ve suffered over the years. This is my opportunity both to glance back over my life and to suggest what the future holds.

This is an excellent time to be an old book, if you happen to be well looked after. Until recently I was starting to lose heart. People can read modern editions of old texts and even see thousands of facsimiles of old books reproduced page by page on their computers: in the future, I wondered, would anyone think me worth keeping? Then people started to realise that there is more to me than even a digital reproduction can reveal. If you look at individual copies of old books and feel their paper, examine their bindings, work out how expensively or cheaply they’ve been printed, assess how they’ve been put together and consider the ownership marks and notes that readers have made, you can begin to work out how people felt not only about specific texts but also about books and reading in general. So that people in the future can continue to explore the place of literature and of reading in their past, a conservation project is being launched that will make each volume at Chawton House Library as fit as we can be for the centuries ahead.

The reason why I can never really be replaced by a modern edition is that a book like me tells at least three stories, only one of which may be found in the words printed on my pages. In my case, the nature of my text fits me, I hope, to come forward to address you! I'm a Quaker book, and I'm familiar with the idea of speaking out when I need to. If by any chance you've imagined mine to be a man's voice, I think you should change it to a woman's, for not only was my author a woman – Elizabeth Stirredge – but so too were my printers, Tace Sowle and her eighty-year old mother, Jane. My title is *Strength in Weakness*, and my subtitle explains that this paradoxical strength was *Manifest in The Life, Various Trials, and Christian Testimony of that faithful Servant and Handmaid of the Lord, Elizabeth Stirredge*. My pages give an account of Elizabeth's life that was 'written by her own hand' for publication after her death: five years after she died in 1706, a would-be buyer could enquire for me at the premises of the Sowle family, nonconformist printers, in London's Gracechurch Street. My pages carried a powerful message of resilience in the face of religious persecution in seventeenth-century England that continued to interest readers far removed in both place and time, for further editions include one published in Philadelphia in 1726 and another published in London in 1794, when Jane Austen was a young woman. Readers still discuss *Strength in Weakness* online today.



From the title page of Chawton House Library's first edition of *Strength in Weakness*. An early reader has carefully added the date of the author's death ('7th of 9th month, 1706').

And the other stories I tell? Every component of a book published in the eighteenth century was made entirely by hand. By the Regency period, innovations were beginning to appear – not long into the nineteenth century, there were steam-driven printing presses for instance – but the essential processes were little changed. I come from a fume-filled printing workshop in London where a wooden press clattered all day long, and printing ink bubbled on an open fire. My print was compiled from lead type, set in place by a compositor who worked at speed, unwittingly poisoning himself through daily contact with the metal. I come from a thundering water mill in France where linen rags were pounded to make paper, and from a reeking tannery where calfskin was soaked and scraped to fashion my binding material. People of many trades crafted pages of print that they themselves could neither read nor afford to buy. Wordlessly, my small, slight, single volume tells the story of their labour.

More than this, I bear the traces of the people who have read me. The record of their readership is particularly precious because in my young days people rarely kept a written note of what they read, and even those who did tended not to describe their response to their reading. Sometimes intentionally, sometimes without even realising it, they left clues to this on the pages and covers of their books. Two early readers carefully inscribed their names on the blank sheets before my text begins, deliberately leaving a record for posterity. But there is more to discover: pick me up and feel how light I am, for I'm tiny, only about 10cm wide and 16cm tall. There are books in Chawton House Library that are almost too heavy to lift, but I was

small enough to be carried in a pocket and consulted whenever a quiet moment allowed. I have been read in bedchambers, in gardens, and on coach journeys that lasted for days. And have you sometimes suspected that pious books were owned without being read? My binding tells you otherwise. Modest and serviceable, with just a minimum of gilt in simple ruled lines, I still look almost as I did when first bound, but an expert can tell that not many years later my spine was repaired when frequent reading had started to break me.

So here I am, a tiny book that is fragile and yet defies the years. I have had a number of enemies over the centuries: after all, my author endured hard winters in prison for her beliefs, and my printer's family put their livelihoods and even their lives at risk for handling nonconformist material. But these days, my enemies are of a different kind. Mould, dust, insects, rough handling and even gravity are the things I most fear. Most of these can't continue to harm me now that I'm at Chawton House Library and under the expert care of Dr. Darren Bevin, librarian. But I'm already weakened by the life I've led, and gravity is exerting its pressure, making my pages twist within my covers and causing my joints to split. Like many of the other volumes in this collection, I need relatively minor intervention to help me face the next few centuries. Dr. Bevin tells me that Caroline Bendix, the conservation expert who looked at me and my companions last summer, recommended repairs that in many cases may well take no more than a few minutes to execute, after which our materials and structure will be very stable. But I know Dr. Bevin is worried that without these minor repairs, bindings will be permanently scarred and, over time, a greater amount of damage caused than is necessary. The future couldn't look brighter for me personally – the Cadbury Foundation has generously come forward to sponsor my repair as well as a training day for our volunteers, who will then be able to carry out remedial work here at the Library. For the other rare and treasured volumes on the shelves around me, I wish the same good fortune.

The fatigue of standing up too long

Rare books in the Library's collection need attention and repair in a number of different ways, but a common problem is caused by the simple effect of gravity. When the book first evolved in the physical form we know today, volumes were usually laid on shelves horizontally, a practice that had already fallen out of favour by the time that the majority of the books in Chawton's collection were made (1600 to 1830). A trace of this past lingered in the practice of writing a book's title along the long edge of its pages when closed, rather than on its spine: titles marked this way can just be seen on the shelves behind Sir Kenelm Digby in the detail from a portrait of the courtier and scientist here (from *The Closet of the eminently learned Sir Kenelme Digby Kt.*, 1671).

The hard covers of most books are larger than their pages (the 'textblock'), so unfortunately when a book stands upright its textblock doesn't make contact with the surface the book is standing on and gradually sags. The front and back covers then typically split, eventually breaking away. This is what has happened to the bound collection of *La Belle Assemblée; being Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine* (1816) pictured here. To prevent deterioration to this degree, many of the books at Chawton House Library need to be housed in a special box – a book slipper – with a raised platform built into it on which the textblock can rest.

