



Rare Find

Book conservator helps Keeneland Library, others preserve historic works

By Rena Baer | Photos By Bill Luster

Alex Brooks repairs and preserves old books in his "half studio/half house."

Conserving and preserving old books seems like an occupation for someone with at least a few wrinkles and a vast appreciation for the way things used to be done. But Lexington's lone independent book conservator, Alex Brooks, only fits half that bill. His wavy hair shows no sign of gray, and his baby face has nary a crevice, unless dimples count. He is in his early 30s and seems slightly bemused by the preconception of book conservation being a stronghold of the more senior generations.

"Being raised in a digital world is giving some of us more appreciation of things that are physical and lasting," he said. "It's easier and cheaper to go to Michael's and buy a new frame rather than try and conserve an antique one, but some people know the value of saving these things and with others, it's a matter of education."

The same holds true for books, said Brooks, who works from his "half studio/half house" on Martin Luther King Boulevard, which also falls under his purview of restoration projects. And though he restores and conserves a multitude of antiquarian objects, Brooks finds breathing lasting life into old books a good fit, though not necessarily his life's only calling.

"A calling is like love: You can love a lot of people depending on the situation," he said. "I'm interested in so many things, and book conservation is multi-faceted. It feels like the right place for me to be."

Brooks is very busy trying to get his business off the ground. While most book conservators go to work for large institutions such as universities, museums, or libraries, he is trying to make a go of it on his own. Regular work from the Keeneland Library is a big help.

"Keeneland is my security," he said. "They are a great client and are willing to invest in their books and their library."

Brooks has known its director, Becky Ryder, since his days as a college student at the University of Kentucky, where Ryder was previously head of preservation services for UK Libraries. Brooks apprenticed at UK's King Library Press, learned about printing, and became interested in book binding. That interest led him to a student job with UK Libraries, repairing circulating books and piquing his interest in book restoration and conservation.





Clockwise from left, tools of the trade, a damaged book about to undergo Brooks' ministrations, a historic horse book that has been repaired

His talent and aptitude caught Ryder's attention.

"He was so careful, skillful with his hands, and wildly intelligent," Ryder said. "And he understood the reasons why we were doing this and had respect for the artifacts. He is a real Renaissance person."

Though Brooks originally had started out on an engineering trajectory, his love of learning led him eventually to change tack to something he felt gave him more freedom.

"I enjoyed problem solving, but it began to feel rote and like memorization, so I switched to humanities-based coursework," he said.

After he graduated with a double major — math and English — from the UK Gaines Center for the Humanities, he was unsure of his next step. In the meantime, he went to work for Lexington chef and restaurateur Ouita Michel and did printing and binding jobs on the side.

"I learned as much as I did in college," Brooks said. "I learned about running my own small business and about interpersonal communica-

tion in the restaurant business. I also saw how happy Ouita was. Here she was a national debate champ who could have been the quintessential 'professional,' but she didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer. And she really likes her life."

Inspired, Brooks began working full time with his side business but soon felt stagnant, realizing he'd have to do more commercial work to keep things going financially.

He began looking at graduate school, a master's either in English or Fine Arts. He came across a book conservation program in England at West Dean College and applied for and received a Fulbright Scholarship to attend. The small school had 80 students learning different types of conservation work, with a low student-to-staff ratio and guest lec-

turers from around the world. Brooks' education included learning not only the art and science of book restoration and conservation but also several other hands-on skills he said he could never have taught himself, such as pottery and woodworking. "It really enriched my life to learn these skills," he said.

He also learned "you can't fix things unless you understand how they were made" and that every step has to be reversible.

Before he returned to Lexington, he realized that his chances of finding a position as a book conservator were slim to none and he'd have to create his own job. He contacted Ryder and said she was very positive about the possibilities and said she'd have some work for him.

"I lobbied for him, and it has been a

perfect match," Ryder said. "The work he has done for Keeneland has been outstanding, and his documentation is impeccable."

Ryder explained that much of conservation is not about bringing a book or object back to its original form, but instead respecting its natural aging and stabilizing the book or artwork so it can be used without further harm.

"The first tenet, though, is to do no harm," she said. "Everything needs to be appropriate and suitable. If the only tool you have is a hammer, then everything starts to look like a nail. That does not work in conservation. We have a code of ethics, and Alex is extraordinarily ethical."

Brooks has worked on books from the Keeneland Library that have dated as far back as the 17th century, such as



Broken Vow



Cowboy Cal



Sky Classic



*Multiple GSW • Millionaire
Alternation*

Broken Vow
*Unbridled – Wedding Vow,
by Nijinsky II*

Cowboy Cal
*Giant's Causeway – Texas Tammy,
by Seeking the Gold*

Sky Classic
*Nijinsky II – No Class,
by Nodouble*

New for 2014

Alternation
*Distorted Humor – Alternate,
by Seattle Slew*

Pin Oak Stud
Versailles, Kentucky
www.pinoakstud.com



Brooks has worked on “some very obscure books about horse racing” as well as some more familiar volumes.

The Compleat Jockey (sic) from 1688. His handiwork also can be seen in *The Gentleman’s New Pocket Farrier* and *The History of British Turf* (volumes one and two), both from the first half of the 1800s. “I’ve worked on some very obscure books about horse racing from the 19th century,” he said. “Not titles many people have heard of.”

In addition to Keeneland, Brooks’ work also comes from individuals, people who own books that have been passed down in families from a previous generation, such as a family Bible. The dilemma for a lot of people, though, is spending \$300 to restore something that might only be worth \$100.

“It’s a difficult decision,” Brooks acknowledged.

He is hoping to raise more awareness of preservation and conservation. “A lot of education goes into people making these choices,” he said. “And that’s fair. I am asking people to invest their money.”

In England, historic preservation is part of the economy. History is a cornerstone to the culture, and conservation is vital to keeping it alive. Brooks is glad to see places such as Keeneland recognize its importance, and he hopes businesses, such as the bourbon industry, will want to come to him for help in preserving their storied pasts.

“I’m at the point in my life where I need to get serious about building my business,” he said. “I dream of one day having my own shop, and I look at vacant lots as I’m walking the dog and think, that would be the perfect spot.” 