



William Cowley's current owner Wim Visscher MBE, the founder's great great grandson, and great great great granddaughter Julia Kainth, pictured with Milton Keynes North MP Mark Lancaster when he visited the firm's Newport Pagnell factory.

“

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Theo Chalmers



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‘Last firm standing’ is in a fight for survival

EVERY month as I sit down to write this column I genuinely try to find a positive subject. Yet the rolling tide of ill thought out planning decisions apparently determined to destroy every last remnant of that which we, its citizens, find most attractive about Milton Keynes, conspires to invade my thoughts.

This column will be different, I swear. I have found a fascinating, uplifting topic and one which I am convinced will be both entertaining and illuminating.

The last surviving manufacturer anywhere in the world for vellum and parchment is here in Milton Keynes. William Cowley was established in 1870 and still operates today in Newport Pagnell. It exports vellum and parchment to every continent except Antarctica and its products are in use by major governments and major religious orders worldwide. It is the material upon which the historical records relating to centuries of UK Parliamentary activity - including Acts of Parliament - are documented.

Vellum is formed from a complete animal skin such as goat or calf, by-products of the meat industry that would otherwise likely be incinerated. The skin is salted for up to six weeks, then soaked in lime, shaved, scraped, stretched and the fibres are realigned in a highly skilled process known as ‘reading’ the skin. They are then dried under tension.

Parchment is split skin, generally from sheep.

These products, unlike paper which fades, breaks up, rots, is eaten by insects or rodents, burns, washes away or disintegrates, can last for 5,000 years or more. Both parchment and vellum are widely recognised as the most reliable storage systems for writing; they are fireproof, waterproof and insects or rodents won’t eat them. Even tombstones deteriorate faster.

So those who regard their writings as a part of history can use nothing else. Why wouldn’t, for instance, an author like J.K. Rowling insist on limited runs of her books on parchment?

According to noted conservator the late Chris Clarkson, of the Bodleian Library in Oxford: “Had early civilisations not used vellum that we can still read, our understanding of man’s time on the planet would be greatly diminished because you don’t learn as much from half a broken sandal and a pot.”

Even though William Cowley is the ‘last man standing’, its business is not without issues. It once employed 52 vellum and

■ Indulge me, ever so briefly...

It seems that Milton Keynes Council is seriously considering some appalling modifications to transport links in plans for land at Caldecote Farm east of the M1 motorway next to Willen Road.

Willen Road north and south carriageways either side of the Marsh End roundabout will require the national speed limit of 60mph to be reduced to 40mph.

The carriageways on Monks Way H3 - one of the busiest roads into and out of Milton Keynes at the junction with the Marsh End roundabout - will require the national speed limit of 70mph to be reduced to 40mph.

The Marsh End roundabout will become a fully five-stage signalised junction with massive delays.

Unbelievably, this will include a Toucan crossing on both of the east carriageways of H3 Monks Way to facilitate a new ill-thought-out redway crossing Monks Way.

I truly despair.

parchment makers and now it’s down to just two: general manager Paul Wright and his apprentice. The decline in its fortunes and the demise of every other vellum and parchment maker is likely because people are simply not aware of its products.

For instance, as recently as the mid-1970s graduates from top universities would get a parchment scroll upon graduation. Even today these are often called parchment ceremonies. Today for their minimum £25,000 student fees they get a piece of paper, often rolled up in a plumber’s polypipe with a red ribbon round it. Great. Not.

Yet for less than £50 local universities such as the OU, Buckingham, Cranfield, Bedfordshire and the new MK:U could offer beautiful illuminated parchment scrolls that any graduate would be proud of and which could literally last for lifetimes.

Come on OU, Buckingham, Cranfield, Bedfordshire and the new MK:U... let’s start a ripple in a pond that can travel worldwide. The survival of the world’s last parchment and vellum maker is something of which Milton Keynes should be proud and support.

Cheerio.

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