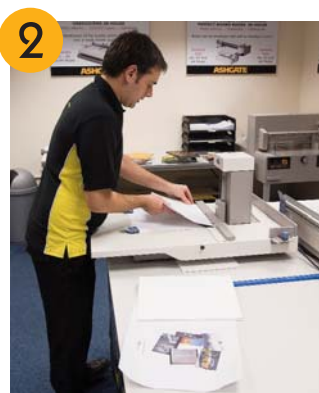


# Hands-on: Fastbind FotoMount & Casematic

Simon Eccles visits Ashgate to see one of its revolutionary Fastbind FotoMount open-flat photobooks being made in its showroom. High margins look tempting.



We printed 12 photographs on Super A3 size paper on an Epson inkjet. Coating or laminating is recommended for protection and appearance. The first stage is to crease each sheet and fold it in half, print side inward.



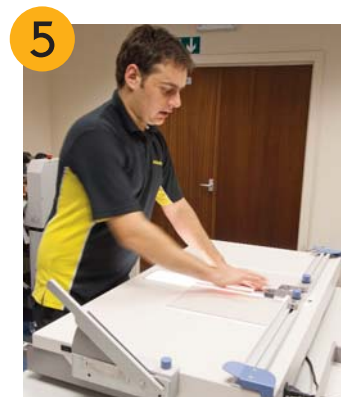
Lewis Price puts a folded page under the FotoMount Mountinglift bar. The backing layer is peeled off an adhesive sheet, which is placed face down with its leading edge on the bar, aligned to a stepped guide.



The adhesive sheet is smoothed down onto the page below. The top backing layer is then peeled off the adhesive and the next folded page is aligned over it on the bar, then smoothed down to attach it to the page below.



After all the sheets are assembled on the FotoMount they are trimmed on a guillotine. Now the printed cover and grey boards are prepared. Here they are being checked for fit on the Casematic table.



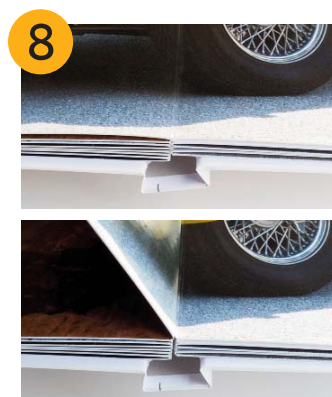
The backing sheet is peeled off the cover, which is placed print side down on the Casematic table, whose light strip makes the tick marks visible. The grey board backs and spine are positioned and smoothed into place.



The corners of the cover sheet are trimmed off at 45 degrees using the hand guillotine, then wrapped around the edges of the grey boards. A roller on the front of the Casematic helps achieve a perfect folded edge.



Back on the FotoMount, the block is attached to the cover by an adhesive sheet. Another bar is used here as a stop. End papers can be added if required, though our book opens straight onto the first photograph.



Close ups of the finished hinge and spine area. Every page opens completely flat as in the top photograph. The secret is the lack of spine gluing, and the wide hinge areas around the case's spine, that flex as the pages are turned.

Ashgate has been selling finishing kit including short-run book binding systems for years: 2009 was its 20th anniversary. It's always worked closely with the Finnish company Maping to distribute its innovative Fastbind manual and semi-automated binding and case making tools. Ashgate supplies the equipment, the consumables and the training.

The core of the Fastbind range is its manual and semi-auto perfect binders, ranging from the £2475 Secura to the £4050 A3 Elite XT and £4490 A4 Optima with spine roughening. There's also BooXTer, a £1345 wire stitcher.

If you need hard covers, Fastbind also developed Casematic, a versatile multi-purpose table that makes it easy to make custom-sized hard cases for books, ring binders, CD/DVDs and more.

Ashgate found these ranges to be ideally positioned for the rapidly expanding photobook market. This is usually short-run but big margin work. A typical wedding photobook might sell for anything from £100 to £250 or more, a school yearbook perhaps £50 (but with bigger orders), yet the cost of materials is a few pounds. Labour is measured in terms of perhaps five minutes for something simple, or ten or 15 for a more complex book. With runs of a standard size, you can get the times down further. Profit margins of 500% to 1000% do sound rather tempting.

But then Maping got really creative. It came up with FotoMount, a method for making photobooks that open 180 degrees, ie completely flat across the fold. Each spread is formed of a single sheet (usually a photograph), folded in two so the book can close. Each folded half is attached back to back to the next half page, forming a series of hinged spreads with no spine gluing. The cover has broad flexible hinges to allow flat opening without stressing the page hinges themselves.

The effect is unique and it's immediately obvious to customers that it's more attractive than a conventional book with gutters. So they may be persuaded to pay a premium price.

What's more the books can be made to any shape or size up to 45 x 45 cm, which is pretty huge because it opens up to 90 cm wide. With smaller heights you can make wide format books with spectacular panoramas (such as the 83 x 21 cm lunar landing image on *Digital Printer's* October fold-out cover).

## Making an open-flat book

So, armed with a bunch of 12 A3 photographs, I went to Ashgate's showroom in Oxfordshire to see them made into a FotoMount book by Fastbind product manager Lewis Price.

Nearly all UK FotoMount users are digital printers or photolabs who do everything in-house, often with customers uploading via websites. Only one offers a trade service to other printers.

However, for *Digital Printer's* more hands-on experience, I printed the pics myself on my Epson Stylus Pro 3800 inkjet, using oversized 'Super A3' sheets to allow for bleed and trimming, to produce an A4 format book Ashgate can supply the PXLsoft layout software with special FastBind templates, if needed.

I used a mix of heavyweight Epson premium gloss and lustre papers in 220 and 330 g/m<sup>2</sup> weights. In retrospect thinner, cheaper grades would give a less prominent fold line. The adhesive sheets that go between the pages are available in different thicknesses if you want to bulk them up. We didn't laminate or coat the pages, but it's recommended for appearance and durability, especially on the fold line which can go white over time.

The first stage was to crease all the sheets (using a KAS Crease Matic 150) and hand-fold them. Then they were arranged in the order wanted in the book (care is needed throughout not to put one in upside down).

## FotoMount assembly

Next, the pages were assembled using the FotoMount unit. Each half of every folded spread is attached by a double-sided adhesive sheet back-to-back to the next half-spread in the sequence. The FotoMount head has a rising/falling 'Mountinglift,' that moves a horizontal positioning bar up as you build up the book block thickness beneath it. See the picture captions opposite for a step by step description.

FotoMount units are available in different sizes, with prices starting at £1795 for the 304 x 304 mm all-manual F32, up to £3595 for the 457 x 457 mm F46e used here, with electric operation and a foot switch. Normally there are three storage shelves above the head, but Ashgate removed them to give a clearer view of operations. There's also F32w, a free-standing workstation table with built-in manual guillotine and creaser.

After all the pages are assembled they are trimmed down to final size on a normal power guillotine.

## Casematic hard backs

At this point you could use a wraparound sheet to give a soft cover. Most people prefer hard covers though, which requires the Casematic unit. This is available for different cover sizes from 330 x 330 (for £1125) up to the 450 x 450 mm H46 Pro used here, costing from £3590.

Again I had printed the cover, using a self-adhesive sheet supplied by Ashgate in a choice of sizes, with versions for inkjet or laser printers. This is then laminated to give a hard-wearing finish. The Casematic is essentially a clever alignment table with guide bars and an illuminated strip in the centre. The adhesive cover paper (pre-printed or plain) is placed face-down on the table and the backing sheet peeled off. The guides allow the accurate positioning of pre-cut grey boards for the backs and spine.

Printed covers need to incorporate alignment tick marks, so the illuminated strip shines through and lets you see them.

The cover paper is large enough to give wraparound edges over the boards. A small hand guillotine on the Casematic is used to trim the corners at 45 degrees. A roller on the front of the table then helps give a perfect wraparound edge.

Finally, the book block is attached to the cover, by adhesive end sheets. Here the FotoMount is used again, with a special guide bar to aid alignment. End papers can be used if you wish, as well as fancy touches like ribbons.

That's the book finished. Ours looks great. It took longer than usual because my paper was an odd size, and because I slowed down Mr Price by photographing him and asking questions. He reckons an A4 book with five spreads can usually be made in about five minutes, at a materials cost of £2.50 plus printing.

Although our cover used conventional paper-covered grey board, Ashgate's showroom has examples of cloth, leather and canvas covers, plus, using special spine mounts, acrylic and metal. The creative possibilities are endless, the equipment is very affordable, and the potential margins are sky high. So a FotoMount system looks like a very attractive proposition. ■

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