

Contribution to the Letterpress Reimagined Project

Contributed in October 2014 by Ken Burnley, Silver Birch Press, Irby, Wirral.

Brief biography: Born 1949. Apprentice compositor C. Tinling & Co. Ltd 1966–71; journeyman compositor 1971–74; Lecturer in Composing Subjects and Typography, Liverpool College of Printing 1974–99; freelance book designer and typesetter 1999–2012; recently helped set up letterpress studio Juniper Press at Liverpool Bluecoat Arts Centre; currently letterpress tutor at various letterpress studios and workshops in northwest England and the Welsh borders.

What encouraged you to get involved in letterpress printing in the first place?

First, you need to understand that 50 years ago, when I started as an apprentice in the printing industry, the word ‘letterpress’ would not have appeared in a question such as this, for most printing in those days was by letterpress.

I set my first type when I was just 13, back in 1962. I attended Wallasey Grammar School but, not being good at rugby or studying, felt totally out of my depth until, one day, my Physics master, who also ran the School Press, brought into the classroom a forme of type and some freshly printed sheets ‘hot off the press’. I loved the smell of the still-wet ink, and was fascinated by the type. I also loved the line-block on the back of the sheets of a medieval printer pulling the handle of an ancient hand-press – the Press’s emblem!

I asked the master if I could join the Press, and three weeks later found myself nervously but excitedly about to enter the old brick air-raid shelter in the far corner of the rugby pitch.

I entered for the first time a world that thrilled me then, and still thrills me to this day whenever I enter a traditional printing shop. First was the smell – of paraffin, of ink and other unidentifiable scents. Several small boys were studiously picking up type from cases and dropping the letters into wooden composing sticks. Someone shouted across the room for ‘a handful of ten-point quads’. And from the far corner came the rhythmic clickety-clack of the treadle printing press. It was a magical, mysterious and yet friendly place. I knew at that moment that this was my kind of world: forget Latin verbs, differential equations and rugby scrums – this is where I wanted to be, among the types and the ink and the presses, assembling letters into words, words into lines and lines into pages. I wanted to be feeding paper into the marvellous press and taking out those same sheets with beautiful type-images printed on their surface. (Added to which was the attraction of a roaring fire in one corner of the room!)

On that first day the master of the press gave me my first job to set – a dance ticket in 10 point Verona and Gill Sans. And then – my first catastrophe! I placed the case of 8pt Gill Medium on the frame, turned around and heard an almighty crash behind me – the case had slipped from the sloping surface of the frame onto the floor! Blushing to my roots with embarrassment, I swept up the heap of dusty type into a bucket and spent my summer holidays laying it back into the case – a great way of learning ‘the lay of the case’!

I spent four years as a member of the School Press, moving up the rankings from Novice, to Apprentice, then Journeyman. By the time the moment came for me to choose a career, I knew

exactly what I wanted to be – a compositor! I wanted to spend the rest of my life handling type, and printing from it. So I left school at 17 and entered the printing industry as an apprentice compositor in a large and well-established Liverpool printers called Tinlings.

I still have my ‘Indenture of Apprenticeship’ document – a very precious possession – in which I was bound to ‘faithfully, honestly and diligently serve the Master, and keep his secrets . . .’ Hallowed and ancient words indeed, especially when one remembers that the year was 1966 and we were in the midst of the ‘swinging sixties’!

There were about 60 compositors employed in the composing room, of all ages, and during my first year I was put under the charge of an older and very experienced journeyman who kept an eye on me and showed me how to work.

Life as an apprentice was a mixture of learning, doing – but with some drudgery thrown in. One moment I’d be hand-setting a complex magazine page; the next I’d be cleaning the presses – a daily chore for first-year apprentices. But I loved it all, especially my visits to the press room where the mighty machines were rumbling away, delivering beautifully printed sheets (some with my own composing handiwork) under the watchful eye of the pressman.

Pranks were, of course, played on us in those early days – we were told to bring along our prayer book to the chapel meeting, or go to the engineers for ‘a tub of elbow grease’ for the proofing presses; worst was being told to set a job in Gill Light when I complained that the case of Gill Bold was too heavy for me to lift!

Ours was a typical printing factory of the time, though probably more advanced and ‘modern’ in its workings than many. It had a design department, so we compositors often were given fully specc’d layouts to work from when setting; but I much preferred those jobs which I had to ‘design’ and work out appropriate typefaces and sizes.

There were some extremely good journeymen employed by Tinlings, and I learned much from watching them work; I also learned much – perhaps more – from watching how the job should *not* be done. Compositors in those days were reasonably well paid, but worked hard for their wage; each job had been estimated beforehand in the office as to how long it should take – and woe betide any compositor who went ‘over the limit’ when completing his daily docket of hours spent on each piece of work. This did sometimes lead to sloppiness and the taking of ‘short cuts’ – a practice that I abhorred, for I knew that minutes saved in the composing room could add hours to the job later when on the presses, through ‘rising spaces’ and pied type.

Tinlings was a good firm to work for; they especially looked after their apprentices, who were given the opportunity to spend time working in other departments to see how the job was done there. I loved being given this opportunity, though was always glad to ‘get back to my frame’ in the composing room. However, trade union rules meant that we were not usually allowed to do the skilled work of another tradesman; so, for example, compositors were not allowed to operate the presses (though we could work the proofing-presses).

I served a five-year apprenticeship, and, as was the custom, was ‘banged out’ on the day I became a full journeyman. This ancient ritual involved me having to stand on the ‘stone’ (the flat imposing surface) at noon on the last day of my apprenticeship, when all the men in the

composing room banged hard on the nearest surface with a large galley side-stick for five minutes. The noise was deafening, and I recall blushing to the colour of a beetroot! But it was soon over, and I was carried down from the stone around the composing room, and then every compositor came and shook my hand. Then the Managing Director and Personnel Officer came down and handed me my Indentures and wished me well.

Soon after becoming a journeyman I was ‘promoted’ to the office where I became a project manager who handled clients’ work for the composing room and pressroom. I didn’t enjoy this work, and several years later left and became a Lecturer in Composing Subjects at Liverpool College of Printing, a career which filled most of my middle years, for I was there for over 25 years. During that period, I experienced the transition in the printing industry from hot-metal typesetting and letterpress printing, first to pasteup from photoset and filmset images; then the introduction of the Apple Macs and ‘desktop publishing’ (awful name!); and latterly the introduction of digital printing. And so I ended up more of a typographer than a compositor, though I still have my Indentures to prove that that is precisely who and what I am – and always shall be!

During those transition years I kept up my ‘letterpress’ passion through the building up of my own ‘private press’ in my garage – a place of delightful recourse after a day working in front of an Apple Mac screen! How lovely to handle real type after clicking a mouse all day.

How would you say the craft/business has changed over the past 30 years?

During the 1980s, type, presses and most letterpress-related equipment and materials were thrown out with the advent of the computer. Between the mid-eighties and the early 2000s the craft and skills of letterpress looked as though they were completely dying out, with only a handful of ‘hobby printers’ keeping the traditions alive. However, a few years ago it was becoming apparent that letterpress was starting to rise again from its ashes, like the proverbial Phoenix. Perhaps it was the recognition that modern printing processes had little ‘texture’ about them, and that letterpress offered a more tactile experience. Perhaps it was the feeling that craft skills were something to be treasured, and that hand-setting and printing offered a unique ‘hands-on’ experience to those who wanted to be more creative. Perhaps it was a perception that the old craft-skills would soon die out if the next generation did not act quickly to learn and acquire them from the dying generation of compositors and printers. And much more besides.

But to relate the letterpress scene of today to that of 30 years ago is difficult, for back then it was the mainstream of the way most printing was done: there was little mystique about it – it was simply another part of British industry. Every High Street had its traditional printer, who had a few cases of type, a couple of small presses, and could print letterheads, business cards and handbills and posters for all the small organisations in the community. Then there were the fewer, larger printers, such as Tinlings, who could print magazines, brochures and books; finally there were the very big printing companies – specialist magazine, book and packaging printers – who employed tens of thousands across the country. And of course there was the newspaper industry, also mainly letterpress and employing tens of thousands.

Litho printing had of course made inroads by the mid-eighties, and letterpress was obviously doomed, though some companies refused to acknowledge this and continued with the old letterpress ways; these were the first to die when computerisation came along.

The modern trend in letterpress, for a deep impression, was unheard of in those days; in fact, to obtain other than a 'kiss' impression on your sheet was to earn the wrath of both manager and client!

What roles would you say letterpress, and methods of traditional printing, have in contemporary society?

First, letterpress printing generally uses type, presses and equipment from the past, and that is an excellent way of preserving and conserving these lovely old artefacts which might otherwise be thrown away or scrapped.

It also helps conserve the skills and the terminology and traditions of the past, through their continued use.

Letterpress also offers to society an alternative form of printed product – one which looks different from digital printing, which has a sense of texture to it, and which also offers a feeling of individuality and uniqueness in its making. In this sense it is an antidote to the sameness and blandness of modern manufacturing, where every product is the same as its neighbour. It takes a similar place to other reviving crafts such as knitting, home-baking and grow-your-own gardening.

What's your favourite story/memory or occasion in your career (or time as a hobby printer)?

In my career in the printing industry, it was the occasion when, as an apprentice, I was asked to make a last-minute type-correction to a job on the press. This I did, without having the sheet checked before running off the job. A few weeks later my overseer told me that I had replaced a letter in the wrong place, and 2 million copies had to be pulped and reprinted, at great cost to the company. This reminded me that I must always check and check again, that printing has the power to remind one perpetually of one's mistakes, and that I should never take anything I work with for granted. And this I have kept close to my heart through all my life in printing.

As a hobby-printer, it was being asked, in later life, if I would like to buy the School Press which had started me off as a 13-year-old in my lifetime of printing . . . and this now forms the basis of my own private press – the Silver Birch Press.

What would you say has been the saddest moment in your career (or time as a hobby-printer)?

Probably the knowledge that so much beautiful old type and so many wonderful old presses were thrown out during the transition from hot-metal to computerisation and digital printing. It makes my heart ache to know that we committed so much to the scrapheap; thank goodness that so many today are trying to rescue and salvage what is left – and, more importantly, to use them again.

What one piece of advice would you like to pass on to anyone just starting out?

Very simple – try to learn from those who have the knowledge, skills and experience, and who want to share them with you. Learning letterpress on your own, or from a book, is difficult – remember that we had to undergo a five-year apprenticeship to learn the craft. Such skills will not be acquired overnight, or even in half a lifetime . . .

Something else you'd like to share?

As one who has worked in printing all his life, it is heartening to see the current revival in this ancient craft. It is good, too, to know that the skills and techniques of the past 500 years are being sought again in an era of instant digital media.

However, this also brings with it responsibilities so that the standards established in those five centuries are not only maintained but improved.

Those who use letterpress should spend time sapping up the literature of the past about printing. They will want to learn more about the great names in printing, both recent and ancient – of Gutenberg, Caxton, Rogers, Tschichold, Morison, Gill, Warde, Simon, Updike, Morris, Goudy and many, many more. They will need to study the work of the great private presses – Doves, Gregynog, Kelmscott, Golden Cockerell, Vale, to name but a few – and try to view the beauty of their work. They will have a desire to get acquainted with the characteristics of those types which add beauty to the printed page – Baskerville, Perpetua, Bembo, Imprint, Plantin and others. They will need to acquire all the knowledge they can about the crafts of composing and printing.

They should, too, use the correct and long-established terms for their craft that have been handed down through the ages, and which are rooted in ancient times; words which add colour and texture to their work, and remind us of printing's origins.

Above all, we all need to remember that words impressed into paper survive the ages and have the power to influence people's lives; it was Beatrice Warde who said:

‘For 500 years printing has stood as the gateway to the freedoms of the literate mind.’

In an increasingly digital age, when information is transient and at the mercy of the moment, letterpress printing survives to impress into paper thoughts, messages, ideas and images that will survive long after digital messages have perished and drifted away into the ether . . .