

The Art of Print

Anthony Eyre and Kate Rous's printing business, The Letter Press, was established in Cirencester in 1986 and began with traditional printing techniques. It has grown and developed in a highly competitive market while successfully maintaining its original principles. At a time when the Arts and Crafts Movement is receiving renewed interest and attention, Anthony Eyre discusses how the roots of their business can be traced back to William Morris's own printing presses.

It might be that I had no choice about becoming a printer. The house I grew up in had been used by William Morris when the Kelmscott Press printed *The Complete Works of Chaucer*, and next door was Emery Walker's home, Sussex House, opposite No. 15 Upper Mall, where he and his partner T J Cobden-Sanderson set up the Doves Press, producing work of possibly even greater beauty than the books of the Kelmscott Press. The passions at the press ran equally high, ending with a famous falling out between the two, leading Cobden-Sanderson to throw all their type into the Thames. As a youth I would search the riverbed at low tide below their garden wall just in case, after sixty years, any type was still to be found.

Hammersmith had many other ghosts associated with the world of typography: the calligrapher Edward Johnston and the artist Frank Brangwyn, as well as Eric Gill and Eric Ravilious, had all lived locally. But my own introduction to print was to take place in Lancashire, at Stonyhurst College.

Stonihurst has a well-earned reputation for bracing outdoor activities; but it was in fact possible to spend one's years there avoiding a large majority of these: indeed, it is England's second largest residential building under one roof, after Hampton Court. And under that roof the treasures are inspiring: we grew up amidst paintings, prints and books of an exceptional quality, artists such as Dürer, Rembrandt and Piranesi surrounding our daily lives. Stonihurst produced two greats associated with the arts and crafts of the Cotswolds – the typographer and scholar Bernard Newdigate, who worked with Sir Basil Blackwell at the Shakespeare Head Press at Stratford and Oxford, and the artist Paul Woodroffe, who became a committee member of the Campden Society and worked extensively as a book illustrator and stained glass artist.

The college had a small printing press for use by the Upper Syntax (lower sixth) year. It was here that I entered the world of

pica and nonpareil, of leading and letter-spacing; type catalogues became an entrancing distraction and from sans- to slab-serif I would memorize typefaces and designers. It was not all so dry, though; there was a healthy market under that huge roof for all sorts of jobbing printing, and the press was able to meet this demand on a very sound commercial basis: all jobs were charged, and all bills sent to the bursar, so our turnover became our net profit. We never looked back.

Back in London, after university, print again beckoned, and whilst working in publishing during the day in the evenings I took on the mantle of committee member of the William Morris Society with responsibility for the three printing presses in the basement of Kelmscott House. Here a small team of us printed for the Society: mostly ephemera, but there was one reasonably sized project, *William Morris's Printing Press* (1983). In articles by Sir Basil Blackwell and Ray Watkinson it told the story of the Albion presses used by the Kelmscott Press: how one in particular had gone to C R Ashbee at the Essex House Press, moving with the Ashbees from East London to Chipping Campden. After Essex House the Albion was taken on by Ananda Coomaraswamy and used by him at the Norman Chapel, Broad Campden, to print *Medieval Sinhalese Art* in 1908. Coomaraswamy left England in the First World War and the Albion made its way to Stratford, where it became part of the Shakespeare Head plant. There it was used under the aegis of Newdigate and Blackwell

Right: One of the original copperplates engraved by Rubens in the early 1600s



the Press has been able to thrive in the Cotswolds



until, after its commercial days were over, the latter donated the Albion to the William Morris Society, and it returned to Kelmescott House in Hammersmith. And it was on that Albion that we printed the booklet.

What goes round comes round: the worlds of

Hammersmith and the Cotswolds seem somehow linked, and as Morris's *News from Nowhere* shows are in fact linked in the physical reality of the Thames. So perhaps it was not too surprising that when the time came for a career change – my marriage in 1986 – my wife Kate Rous and I moved first to Wiltshire and then to Gloucestershire. She luckily had a secure job – with W H Smiths in Greenbridge, Swindon; and this provided the essential security to establish a printing business. This was established in the only way I knew how: letterpress, looking backwards to the world of the private presses. This was archaic; any business-minded person would have been horrified at the prospect. Yet it worked. It worked mainly because of the strengths and quality of good letterpress printing; and the fact that such a tiny business was obviously able to offer a very personal service.

In the context of what The Letter Press aims to produce – personalized stationery of one sort or another – and the methods adopted to produce it – traditional printing – people often ask, What about computers? Surely they have undermined your business? Well, not really. On the one hand, they have focussed it: everyone can produce laser printed headings on white A4 80gsm photocopy paper in black Times Bold, but this is quite a different product to fine die-stamped or letterpress-printed stationery on quality papers in the traditional sizes; and this is obviously what we aim to produce, seeking out the typefaces, often quite obscure, which lend a distinctive elegance to the work in hand. And here computers, on the other hand, come to our aid: many of these typefaces are no longer commonly available, and we have commissioned a number of digitized versions for our own exclusive use. Thus the Press is able to print stationery that in modern parlance would be seen as a 'life-enhancing' product, giving pleasure through its tactile and visual quality.

So much for that; the next question is, Does such an enterprise find a large enough local market to thrive? In this the Press was lucky in two ways: first, in 1987, I was able to get a workshop in the Brewery Arts centre (at the time,

the Cirencester Workshops). The importance of this for a young craftsman – or even printer – should be stressed. You have immediate exposure to the public, the support of a background organization and the company and stimulation of other craftspeople. The Press was at Brewery Arts for over ten years until its move in 1998 to its present site on Cripps Road at the other side of the Brewery car park.

The second way in which I was very lucky was the decision by my wife Kate in 1988 to leave W H Smiths and join me as a partner in the printing business. She brought with her an understanding of marketing which was essential to the growth of the Press. Under her initiative we developed sample albums for personalized, social and wedding stationery, with the intention of placing these with retail outlets around the country. Whilst the idea was not new, it had never been applied to the top end of the market, a fact quickly appreciated by many small retailers. The big impact came when it was also picked up by the John Lewis group, and the albums went into all the stationery departments of their chain of department stores. The Letter Press was able to offer John Lewis a product aimed precisely at their market base, and a level of service far greater than that of bigger companies. John Lewis on their part have always distinguished themselves by the support they give small companies, a fact that was emphasized in our minds after a brief and unsuccessful trading relationship with another national department store chain.

It is on this basis that the Press has been able to thrive in the Cotswolds, reaching both a national as well as a local market, and specializing in stationery printing as well as in more bespoke publishing work. We are proud to print for the Society of Wood Engravers and artists such as Simon Brett and Miriam Macgregor. And, perhaps in recognition that it might be pay-back time for the bursar at Stonyhurst, the Press is helping to produce a prestigious limited edition set of Rubens engravings for the College, using the original copperplates engraved in the early 1600s on a hand-press to produce the edition. Thus the Press aims to continue, hopefully bringing something unique to carry on the traditions of the Cotswold Arts and Crafts scene.

Top: Letter press
Below: Engraving of Kelmescott House by Rosalind Bliss

