

My 60-yr addiction to ink & paper

2019 marks my 60th year in printing so here is a retrospective look at my connection to the trade

FOR ME the art of printing was a hobby and an interest before it became my trade. At the age of about 13, I awoke on Christmas morning to find a brand new Adana 5x3 printing machine at the foot of my bed. There is no doubt at all that this shrewd choice of present shaped the rest of my working and personal life. It prepared me for a vocation that would result in my working in several parts of the world, which at that time I had never even heard of.

At school I had the opportunity of joining the printing club which was attached to the Art Department. The club was underutilised enabling me to learn more about printing and avoid some of the lessons that were of less interest to me, like history. My history teacher Taffy Morgan never presented the subject in a way that engaged me but he did belong to various extra-curricular organisations as did some of the other teachers. Once or twice I offered to spend my lesson time printing membership cards, invitations and the like for these teachers in exchange for missing the lessons. This was a great arrangement as they got free printed matter and I was learning and doing what I loved.

At the earliest opportunity whilst still 14 in 1959, I left King Ethelbert's Secondary Modern school with the intention of trying to get into the printing trade. I was encouraged by my father who soon realised what a 'closed shop' the trade was and that getting in would not be a simple task. It was decided that the best way in would be to secure an apprenticeship but in order to do this I would need to take an examination set by the Joint Industrial Council (JIC). The local East Kent branch was run by a chap named Fred Pearce who happened to work in the pre-press department at the local Thanet Press (part of publishers Eyre & Spottiswoode) which is the company I had my sights set on. I took the exam along with 10 other

lads but narrowly missed a place on offer by one, which was quite disappointing.

All was not lost however for shortly after that my father received a letter from Harry Baker, the MD at Thanet Press advising that as I had just missed the chance of an apprenticeship, I might like to consider the position of copyholder which had just arisen in the company's reading department. I jumped at this and in a short time was working in the Reading Department.

Although I had done well at English in school, as a young school leaver I still had a minimal grasp of the English language but I found myself sitting with a qualified reader whilst I read aloud customers' copy for such periodicals as "*The British Journal of Industrial Medicine*", "*GUT*", and "*History Today*" etc., all riveting stuff. The reader would correct the letterpress galley proofs appending them with all sorts of heiroglyphics many of which I picked up myself. I found this interesting at first but the subject matter was extremely boring and many of the technical and medical words unpronounceable and often had to be spelled out letter by letter and I remember being chastised by a very formidably tall lady reader named Joan as I spent a lot of time yawning. However, this department also gave me the opportunity to learn about such things as impositions (pagination), type-faces known as fonts, widows, orphans and ligatures! These aspects of printing were invaluable later on in my career.

The Head Reader was Mr. Cliff Brown (everyone was Mr to me then out of respect) and 'Rolly' Buck, an almost retired devout churchgoer who always took his weekly pay packet home for his wife to open. When Rolly heard that I was engaged and about to enter into a mixed marriage he took me to one side and passed on the advice that his mother had given him, ie., that east and west should never meet. Such marriages were a rarity in Thanet at that time but if he were still alive now I would let him meet my 3 fabulous granddaughters!

Whenever possible, I would escape from the Reading Room to look elsewhere in the printshop especially downstairs on the machine room floor. Although there was an 'upstairs and downstairs' culture in the building it was downstairs that I yearned to graduate to, not vice versa. This is where I felt I belonged and where my addiction to ink and paper really started.

Six months after I started in the reading department I was delighted to be offered an apprenticeship as a Letterpress Machine Minder and on my 15th birthday I attended Harry Baker's office together with my father where he signed my legal indenture papers as a guarantor; this would commit me to the company for 6 years.

The company had the distinction of being "The Queen's Printers" which meant that they were the only printer in the UK who could print the Bible without the Queen's permission, although I never saw a Bible whilst there. However, whilst rummaging in the office one day I did discover some proofs of a Playboy-type magazine called "Razzle" which really opened my eyes to colour printing.

I joined the Typographical Association (later to become the National Graphical Association) as this was mandatory and a very strict trade union. As a new apprentice I started work downstairs on the ground floor with my first mentor Arthur Corden in the platen department which he supervised. Equipment consisted of a Victoria Autovic platen, a large old American clamshell press made by Chandler and Price (used a lot for scoring, cutting and creasing work) and an automatic Heidelberg Superspeed platen. The Heidelberg operator was a chap in his late 20's by the name of Paul who lived at St Peters, Broadstairs. Paul was a heavy smoker and he developed cancer of the throat and sadly died at the early age of 29 whilst I was there. He left a young family and this was the first time that someone known to me had died and I found it quite distressing at the time.

Arthur Corden and I were to spend quite a lot of time together and he was responsible for my training at that stage. Like many machine printers he had a finger missing but this did nothing to reduce his passion for taking snuff. One of my early tasks was to nip to the tobacconist in the mornings to buy his Hedges snuff in little round tins. His handkerchief was always orange and he smelt of this spicy, potent mixture that he would sniff up his nose from the back of his hand. A forerunner of other less pure chemicals used by some people today perhaps. You can still buy this brand of snuff but it now carries a government health warning. Outside of work and his 'addiction' Arthur was a keen horticulturist and a champion dahlia grower. I would often help him on weekends as he attended flower shows with his prize

blooms. He was a master at this and highly respected. He lived in a bungalow on the Westwood Road not far from the East Kent bus garage and the relationship between apprentice and journeyman was, in our case, quite close and Arthur was in his way responsible for setting me on the right path in many respects.

After the smaller platen machines I moved up to vertical Miehles to produce quality colour work under the guidance of a kindly but quite stern Yorkshireman. 'Dusty' Miller was my mentor here and took over my training in producing full colour process work. In the main this was material for the Josiah Wedgwood potteries. Colour matching was paramount, with each colour being printed in a single run. Yellow, Magenta, Cyan and Black. A blue glass was used to check the quality and ink coverage of the yellow plate as this was almost invisible on white paper without the other colours. Sometimes, a piece of Wedgwood pottery would sit on the bench to aid colour matching. As a prestigious London-based printer and publisher, Eyre & Spottiswoode attracted some interesting work and I remember printing the covers of the souvenir programme for the royal wedding of Princess Margaret to Anthony Armstrong-Jones in 1960 and material for the Churchill Memorial Fund when Winston Churchill died in 1965.

I then had the opportunity to operate the more complex two-colour Heidelberg presses which incorporated both flatbed letterpress and rotary flexo units printing from rubber plates, then the larger Dawson, Payne and Elliott rotary press, but the day that Thanet Press received a little machine called a Rotaprint was when things started to change both for the company and for me. Offset lithography had arrived and this was the future.

The Rotaprint offset machine was tiny in comparison to its bigger letterpress cousins. It was flimsy and not as heavily constructed as the giant American-built Miehles and German-made Heidelbergs. Almost as if management were afraid of the implications that lay ahead, the little machine was sited out of the way on the new mezzanine floor at the rear of the main building. It was brought in to solve one problem: the accumulation of enormous quantities of standing lead type. This was becoming too much to handle and was tying up a lot of money in expensive metal. By this time all the used metal type was being stored

in the crypt of the church opposite the press due to lack of space. The lengthy task of taking 'repro' (reproduction quality) proofs from the standing galleys of type began in order that the type could be dissed and melted down. This process gained momentum as new jobs were printed then repro quality proofs were taken. These were predominantly secure examination papers for University of London and the ACCA or Association of Certified Corporate Accountants. The type could then be disposed of almost immediately and when subsequent reprints were necessary, they would be produced by the 'new' offset process on the Rotaprint. When the first Rotaprint operator indicated that he was about to leave, I volunteered to take over his position and was able to commence my journey into the world of lithography.

Towards the latter end of my spell at Thanet Press the method study or time and motion boys had moved in to put in place a production bonus scheme. This was to make the company more profitable and at the same time reward those who worked hardest. There was a lot of opposition to this from the shop floor but to no avail. The scheme itself generated a lot of paperwork especially forms (all printed on the Rotaprint!). Management had awoken to the fact that they were running a business and things would never be the same again.

By the time I left Thanet Press in 1967 I had received a training in printing as good if not better than I could have got anywhere. There is little doubt that being able to put on my CV that I had been trained by Eyre & Spottiswoode carried a lot of kudos and being trained in both letterpress and offset was an added bonus and gave me a firm footing career-wise.

After my parents discontinued running the family home as a Margate boarding house, my father started his own insurance agency dealing mostly in car insurance. He got to see a lot of people and was in a position to bring home orders for small printing jobs. He then became a Royal Automobile Club Road Patrol which resulted in even more work coming in as he was a great networker.

These orders would start with business cards; sometimes a run of 100 sometimes 200. As time progressed, orders for thousands were being received. I found myself printing during the day at work and at

home in the evenings. This was kept quite low profile as it may have been seen as a conflict of interest for me although I was never serious competition for such an organisation as the Thanet Press. I would set the type meticulously by hand - a task that was prohibited for a Machine Minder by the trade union whilst I was at work - and print the items one at a time, sometimes late into the night. If I got behind then my father would step in to help. Some of the orders were quite complex, involving numbering and perforating and multicoloured line work. Initially, all the supplies were purchased from the Adana Printing Machinery Company in Grays Inn Road, East London, but it was soon discovered that we could save money by buying larger quantities from other companies and obtaining card and paper offcuts from local printers, often for free.

It wasn't too long before a second, larger Adana machine - an 8 x 5 was purchased to cope with the large amount of work, although I could only use one at a time! An office area was built in our sitting room and it was here that the work was carried out. Business cards, invitations, billheads, holiday brochures, the list of work was endless and seemed to continue for ever. The second Adana that was bought in the late 1950's continued to be used for business cards until 1975. It proved to be the easiest and cheapest way to produce small letterpress orders and as the machine only cost about £20 new, must have paid for itself a thousand times.



The Adana 8 x 5 proved to be a real earner

We registered our business as "Greenacre Graphics" and devised a back to back 'G' logo. The choice of name was rather prophetic in that some years later,

my parents sold our ex-boarding house and moved to a property in the country known as "The Acre" due to its size. Many years after that, my parents finally retired to a coastal cul de sac in Walmer, Kent called Greenacre Drive. All coincidence of course but it feels as if the name had lived on.

As time progressed, my father became well established at the RAC and being a person who never liked to see things thrown away especially if he could foresee a use for them, we inherited a couple of unwanted blue exhibition caravans and one of these became our new printing workshop. The letterpress Adanas were supplemented with a Multilith 1250 offset press and a large rotary guillotine. We had a Varityper to produce our typesetting (in retrospect, this was not very good), a diffusion transfer platemaker and all in all, were virtually self sufficient. Typesetting and platemaking for quality work was bought in from trade houses.

My father maintained his link to Thanet Press by setting up a group RAC membership for all employees there through their Car Club and there were car insurance deals to be done as well so he became a regular visitor there.

The Caribbean

I married at 19 then emigrated to Trinidad to work in printing and production management at the ripe old age of 22. Although I had a contact there in the capital, Port of Spain, having previously written to the Managing Director of the largest printers on the island before leaving the UK, his reply to me was less than encouraging but at least he replied and it was quite a long and helpful letter. Despite this I went with my gut feeling and, shortly after arriving at my destination, knocked on Leonard Maynard's office door. Ironically, he told me that he had started his schooling at Margate College, close to the Thanet Press where I did my time.



Caribbean Printers, Arima, Trinidad West Indies

Leonard managed Caribbean Printers and made the decision to help me so took me on, initially without a job title. There was no shortage of machine operators in Trinidad but he thought that production planning or an office job of some kind might be suitable. Due to my very limited experience of supervision, planning, costing, estimating, sales and customer liason work, he thought it would be advisable for me to have some familiarisation of these aspects so he sent me to another of the companies in his group of three printeries. Guyana Lithographic was a big letterpress and litho establishment located next to the Demerera river in Georgetown, in the north of South America just a 2 hour flight from Trinidad. I spent 3 months there with a spell in each of the administrative fields. After which I re-joined Leonard at his Caribbean Printers plant in Trinidad as an assistant production planner and customer liason officer. I worked closely with Yorkshireman Gordon Cowbourne, the works manager and found myself doing a variety of different jobs such as method study (time and motion) with a view to streamlining workflows, and at one time supervising a night shift of bindery workers completing the Island's telephone directory having been involved in the Yellow pages section of the job at pre-press stage. Finding Gordon at Caribbean Printers was a surprise as I had previously met him in London when he interviewed me for a position as a colour printer a couple of years earlier. I was totally unqualified for that particular post but I did get to meet the lucky candidate much later. A villain from Essex who stole my beloved Pentax camera!

After two years in Trinidad, my wife and I made the decision to return to England, turning down a last minute job offer as a graphics arts representative for a certain Harry Walker. Harry had just about every agency worth having in the field of printing and graphics and wanted someone to travel for 6 months of the year between his Caribbean offices including Jamaica and Trinidad. It was an amazing offer and although I had no job to go back to, I missed my brother in England who was ten years younger than me and I felt somewhat guilty that I had just left him, especially as the family had recently moved into the country where there was no social life whatsoever.

So, back in Blighty I continued to print for a living, Initially securing a seasonal job as a bus driver then as a printer in a small local printers and stationers (Boulanger Bros., Ramsgate). Whilst there I received

a letter, forwarded by the Thanet Press. It was another job offer from Harry Walker to return to the Caribbean this time to the island of Antigua. A politician and prominent lawyer J. Rowan-Henry QC had aspirations of becoming the next president and was about to launch a new bi-weekly tabloid newspaper which was to be called the “*Antigua Times*”.

I became a printing consultant on this project for Rowan-Henry on a 6 month contract and was sent air tickets to New York and some expenses in order that I could visit the manufacturers of some of the equipment in New Jersey. The decisions on what to buy had already been taken so my job was to simply co-ordinate the freight handling etc., to get everything from the States to Antigua by air. I then flew on to Antigua to await the arrival of all the equipment which was then installed in a large steel-framed building with a corrugated iron roof, making it very hot indeed. I then sat in on interviews with local printers with recruitment involving an element of poaching from another opposition paper enabling us to get the newspaper off the ground as soon as possible.

Part of the Sugar Mill Hotel (owned by my employer) where I lived for 6 months



I dealt with Harry Walker for all the supplies that would be needed such as paper, ink, plates and chemicals and although I only recall meeting him a couple of times in the 6 months I was on Antigua we kept in touch and he was updated as to progress with my contract.

I made many friends in Antigua including the Government Printer Frank Bowers from E. Sussex and his Austrian wife Betty. The social life was very good and an American family was befriended which enabled me to sail and join in with barbecues. However, back in England I was saddened to hear that in 1975, just 5 years after my departure, my employer J. Rowan-Henry together with his wife had been murdered

by their gardener using a machete. Antigua was quite a lawless place at times.

After my Caribbean wanderings I returned to the UK and remained quite close to home, working in Canterbury, Kent as a Print Manager for a large shipbroking and insurance group by the name of H. Clarkson (Insurance Holdings) Limited. With their main London office based in the City near to Lloyd's of London, I was responsible for transferring their inplant printing department out of London to a new office building in Canterbury. Planning the new printing and office services related functions was right up my street and I remained at Clarkson's for 7 years during which time I also became involved with the editorial side of the Company magazine, naming it “*Clarkson Compass*”. My photographic hobby became an integral part of my work enabling me to get out and about shooting anything of local interest for the house magazine with insurance and PR related photography also playing a part.

The Middle-East

Whilst at Clarkson's I replied to an advertisement in the Daily Mail for a Print Specialist with British Aerospace (now BAe Systems) as part of their Al Yamama contract with the British and Saudi Arabian governments. I would be working in Saudi Arabia with the Royal Saudi Air Force to whom BAe had sold a military aircraft package, which included not only the aircraft, but also an English language training course together with all the support needed for the Saudi Air Force personnel to fly the aircraft. My 'Printing and Reprographics' department was already in existence within a Training Institute located on an air base but the person I was replacing had already departed under a bit of a cloud. He was known as 'Eric the Red'.



Bahraini Bin Ali Farid on Polar guillotine

So, I had my department and a staff of about a dozen

English-speaking individuals of various nationalities including Sudanese, Pakistani, Saudi and English. The equipment, all offset litho, was adequate but the space was somewhat limited and it was clear that the department was far from perfect. In my spare time I set about designing new premises in the form of a purpose-built unit filled with state of the art equipment. Whilst my existing department printed all the training material needed for the Institute at my air base, it would be necessary to provide material for other bases as well and to include full colour to enhance the material which was currently in black and white. Hence the need for larger premises with updated equipment. After 3 years of preparatory work, my proposals were submitted to the Royal Saudi Air Force hierarchy to await their approval.

I then took time away from the desert for 2 years, returning to London where I worked as a Training Officer for an American-based instant print and copying master franchise company known as PIP. This was an enjoyable post but entailed a lot of travel and a frequent daily commute to London from my home in Kent. I was therefore quite pleased when British Aerospace contacted me and asked if I would be interested in returning to my old job in Saudi. This was very fortuitous and perfect timing and I leapt at the opportunity to spend a further period in the heat and to my surprise, when I arrived back at my office, my desk was still in the same place and on it was my earlier proposal duly approved and rubber stamped.

Heidelberger Druckmaschinen AG were the main equipment provider for my project and the local Saudi agent sent me to DRUPA in Frankfurt, Germany, one of the biggest printing trade exhibitions on the world stage. I also got to spend time at Heidelberg's headquarters, at their expense. All the newly-procured equipment was installed but with printing technology advancing so very quickly, much

of the camera and darkroom equipment became obsolete as it was being installed. The digital age was arriving and we found ourselves being overtaken by technological developments in the printing trade due to the two year wait whilst my proposals were being evaluated plus an additional delay whilst the new facility was being built. Due to contractual restraints, I found it impossible to revise or update any of the the original specifications but despite this shortcoming, I eventually had my new building, it was full of some quite nice equipment and it was functioning. More importantly, the customer was very happy!

Learning of the Thanet Press's closure in April 2011, I have to say that, although saddened, I was not surprised. Many similar companies were in the same position, unable to adjust to the lightning changes in marketing, information management and distribution or cope with the immediacy offered by the internet. Generally in Britain, the trade unions, especially in the printing world, were guilty of keeping the brakes on for far too long with their archaic restricted practices and this has in the past hampered progress and creativity and stifled the industry. A great pity, but advances in electronics and technology are inevitable; accepting and adjusting to them is more difficult.

Some years after getting that most unusual of Christmas presents I have now semi-retired but whenever I pick up a new book, I poke my nose into it, close my eyes and smell the paper and the ink again . . .

*Tony Withers, November 2018 - Margate, Kent
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