Prologue: then, and now

This book is partly based on *An Atlas of Typeforms* (which James Sutton and I wrote in 1968), abridged and mostly rewritten; to it is added a parallel story of architectural and vernacular lettering. That book came out in a world unlike today's. The intervening forty years have seen major changes brought about by technology; changes in society and the economy which encouraged the dominance of profit over 'worthwhileness'; and changes in commercial preferences that effectively brought an end to my parallel story. Much of this present book is history; but for a full understanding of type today, we need to know that history.

The *Atlas* was published in the very sunset of metal type and letterpress printing. The types shown here are those metal types, for they are often historically more revealing than today's digital designs derived from them. Many of the post-1750 types I show are either from the original punches or matrices, or very close copies of the originals. Thus, when I compare these with the lettering of my parallel story – architectural or vernacular forms – any relationship is a valid one; for the new technology and digitisation created problems which had to be overcome by some modification of the metal form. I discuss this and show some such changes at the end of the book.

That changing technology was initially – it is generally agreed – a disaster. Types were badly adapted for filmsetting – as it was then – and print quality was generally dull and flat. The printed type was grey and insipid, lacking the sparkle and richness of good letterpress, and halftones were drab. It was, on the whole, not a happy episode in printing history. The story today is different. Illustrations are rich in tone and colour; detail is retained, allowing (if need be) illustrations to be quite small without loss of meaning. We now take it for granted that illustrations and their related text are placed together, and forget the time when pictures were bunched up in a distant part of the book, as so often happened, for technical reasons, in the days of letterpress. Type is now

properly black and crisply printed, although unfortunately, as I explain later, some old friends were digitised in a form that often makes them too light, especially in smaller sizes. Recently, some 'second generation' versions have appeared, aiming to be more authentic. Yet it matters not how faithful they are to the originals: they merely need to be usable.

But against any disappointments can be set the control a knowledgeable designer has over the typesetting itself. AppleMacs and their kin allow all Geoffrey Dowding's *Finer Points in the Spacing and Arrangement of Type* of 1954 to be implemented following the designer's personal preferences and idiosyncrasies, of which most good typographers have a sackful, bitterly upheld and contested, with zero tolerance for alternative views.

Previously, the designer was to some extent at the mercy of the compositor, who might have been both ignorant and careless. But more often, in the book trade, he was not. He not only set the type, but made a contribution that today should be done – but is often not done – by a publisher's house editor – an essential member of the production team who frequently seems to have gone missing. That compositor of yesterday would correct punctuation, grammar, spelling, and even query facts, for they were highly trained craftsmen, having served a six-year apprenticeship in a trade that jealously guarded its skills. Many authors today, because they own an AppleMac, believe, in their ignorance, that they can design and set their own books, which they can, of course, but badly.

Today we have to work as if we had undergone the long years of apprenticeship that those men in the printer's composing room had experienced. If a designer restricts himself or herself to a few typestyles, enough accumulated knowledge is gained to enable informed decisions on the optimum letter fit, letterspacing and leading for particular sizes to be made. Who needs more than five or six typestyles? A thorough knowledge of and

casual encounters purely for the sake of originality.

When the *Atlas* was published, the designer had to use whatever type the printer or typesetter (usually, then, the same firm) held. Most reputable book printers would hold a workmanlike range of a dozen or so usable types. Not only was type much more expensive than today, each size had to be bought in – or as many sizes as the printer felt he was likely to need. A trade typesetter might hold the hundred or more, in all available sizes and weights, that advertisers demanded. Today, any designer can personally own far more styles than he is ever likely to use. And, of course, sizes can be varied from the one master to an infinitesimal degree, unlike the restrictions imposed by metal type. Yet no-one worth his or her salt then felt constrained by this: imagination or ingenuity, professionalism or good judgement carried you through. You never feel Tschichold or Schmoller, for instance, wished they could change a type size by 0.1pt, or even 0.3pts. Limitations concentrate the mind.

As I say later, the very method of creating a design rough – the tracing off, the tracing down, the painting in – meant that you gained some knowledge of different typeforms as a matter of course. Mere theory and staring at a computer screen, or even at typesheets, are no substitute for a pencil (that outmoded tool) and paper. Creating a paste-up from galleys supplied by a typesetter meant you worked, with paper, at the same size as the final result. We all know those reduced examples of award-winning designs which look so wonderful, but which, seen in real size, are disappointing. With the computer a designer can produce a dozen minutely different variations of a design in seconds; but this would reduce me, who doesn't use one, to a dithering indecisive wreck.

There is no doubt that today the designer, and the printer, have the equipment to create work as good as, and in many ways better than, could ever be achieved in the 'golden

always so golden. But other aspects of that past were undoubtedly conducive to the creation of more satisfying work. For the response to the cut-throat situation today shows a depressing assessment of the general public's visual preferences.

Marketing. That is the ogre that stalks publishing today. Marketing, men in suits, the bottom line, the moneymen, the bookshop; with Amazon chewing away at them all. It is a battlefield out there. Life is rough and tough. By 2007, nearly 200,000 new titles a year were being published in the UK alone. Somehow, somewhere, someone hopes all these will be sold.

In 1941, Allen Lane was looking at a potential Penguin (*Living in Cities* by Ralph Tubbs, a vision of how blitzed towns and cities could – and should – be rebuilt). He said: 'Our cost of production will amount to almost exactly twice the amount we will receive from the trade, but so convinced am I of the "worthwhileness" of the venture, that this causes me no qualms.' Or, in 1949: 'Quite frankly I don't think we shall make a profit on this book. This does not cause me the slightest concern ... as I feel ... it is a new landmark.' (The book was *The Archaeology of Palestine*.)

Reading *Penguin Portraits. Allen Lane and the Penguin Editors* by Steve Hare, I was struck by the enthusiasm of these overworked and underpaid people in publishing. (Actually, all three characteristics still exist.) Just after the war, even during it, was an idealistic age: 'we are building a new world'. That was not a hope, but a belief; and publishers played a crucial role in attempting to make the aspiration a reality. 'We fitted into a time of very high idealism – and a wish to share a kind of explosive creativity which was so evident in all the writers and editors who themselves had so much to express, and who needed us as a forum' (Eunice Frost, a Penguin editor).

The designer Colin Banks described Ralph Tubbs, the architect and author of *Living in Cities*, as speaking to us 'with shining eyes, brimming with optimism for a new world

to us at them'. The mid-1940s was when 'commercial art' became graphic design. The seminal typography course of the 1950s at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London run by Herbert Spencer and Anthony Froshaug was a major force, teaching the New Typography (new in Britain). While Gill Sans was the type of choice (it was readily available), and grotesques – reflecting the Swiss preference – were also popular, a knowledge and awareness of more traditional faces was always considered part of a typographer's essential kit.

The belief that good design made for a better society motivated many designers here and abroad until disillusion set in during the 1960s, by which time it became clear that society had other priorities, despite all the educational and promotional efforts of the Council of Industrial Design (COID) and later bodies. Today such offspring of the 'nanny state' are slagged off; but I have never had a problem with them, or it, believing personally that such nannying is one of the duties of the state. Without this conviction, how could I write books urging a knowledge of design I believe anyone working in this field, or even the general public, should be required to have? One might say, *especially* the general public.

In 1947 the COID suggested to Penguin (that name again) a series of books called *The Things We See* 'to encourage us to look at the objects of everyday life with fresh and critical eyes. Thus, while increasing our own daily pleasure we also become better able to create surroundings that will give us permanent pleasure.' The subjects included houses, furniture, pottery and glass, public transport, ships and printing – subjects 'in which many of us are unaware of the subtle variations in excellence or even the difference between good and bad'. Even if the very concept of 'Good Design' had not become out-of-date, a phrase from the past, I could not imagine such a project being considered today by any of the conglomerates that have each swallowed up four or five once-independent publishers.

In contrast to those takeovers and groupings, the new technology has allowed the setting up of tiny publishers willing to chance their arm (or their money), sometimes rather iucautiously. Such kitchen table adventurers, admirable though they are, can be horribly ignorant of the subtleties of typeforms and typography. It would be nice to think that, once the initial excitement has worn off, they feel a desire to know more about type, that versatile tool with which we work. It is not knowledge that simply happens: it requires some effort to attain. If the lack of it becomes the norm, the beginning of a slippery slope beckons. Conversely, the work of just two men, Tschichold and Schmoller, at Penguin from 1947 onwards, *raised* the standard of design and printing for the whole of British publishing, even of printing generally. That happened within the context of a particularly lucky combination of circumstances, a context this Prologue has tried to depict.

Parallel lines never meet, and my two parallel stories of typeforms and architectural/vernacular lettering do not get seriously entangled until the beginning of the nineteenth century. That entanglement seemed to stop coincidentally about the same time as metal type died out, and the world just described became a memory; although there is no suggestion of a causal link. Nonetheless, no continuation of a similar relationship is detectable today, not least because the tradition of vernacular lettering, and the architectural use of lettering, has unfortunately more or less died out.

Perhaps we are too close in time to detect any pattern in contemporary type design, amongst the welter of new forms, yet alone relate them to any parallel story. From today's perspective we can easily see the earlier interaction of different traditions, and their creative consequences. The caps of early typeforms derived ultimately from Roman inscriptions, the lowercase from Renaissance calligraphy which itself had a convoluted

history. Such an inheritance broke down in the beginning of the nineteenth century when it was jolted off course by a combination of industrial requirements, and somewhat naive ideas about the Noble Savage and rugged antiquity, which was how the intellectually fashionable Greek world was regarded. But today there is neither a consistent influence of carved or pen forms, nor the intellectual backing of a historical theory. Those 'outside' influences had a reinvigorating effect on type, and type design was an equally beneficial influence on those other forms of lettering. The lack of this happy interaction is impoverishing to both. Looking at it from our close-up viewpoint, there seems now an individualistic free-for-all, not a steady development, on a broad front, of inherited forms or traditions. Such a situation rather reflects the aggressive and competitive society in which the design and publishing worlds now operate. Yet there is a contradiction here, for that aggression seems to be strangely conservative and afraid of the individualism, or the belief in 'worthwhileness', that characterised the small publishers in their calmer world of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

This is a history book. Many new types (far too many) have been produced in the last thirty years, which can be examined in the plethora of type books now available. But one strand of my dual story has disappeared from the scene. The long and vigorous tradition of vernacular lettering in England had been dealt a blow in the early twentieth century by the reverence for Trajan roman initiated by Edward Johnston and some of his disciples. This form was widely adopted in varying degrees of accuracy or sensitivity by organisations – banks, commercial firms, municipal authorities, the Ministry of Works – who felt it conveyed good taste and dignity. The tradition was further weakened by commercial sign-producing firms who could supply the increasingly brash high streets with cheap products in modern (that is, plastic) form, normally using a debased typeface.

The self-employed journeyman, creating many different styles of his own, travelling the country, shouting at the top of his voice, as one voluble Irish signwriter put it, that he is happy with his existence, is no longer in demand. And the rare architect with an interest in lettering is not usually bold enough (or is not allowed by local planning authorities) to design or commission innovative forms.

The English lettering tradition crossed the Atlantic seemingly as early as the mid-eighteenth century, if not earlier. As Paul Shaw has suggested, in the journal *Forum*, emigrating lettercarvers could have been partly responsible. There are tombstones dated between 1750 and 1800 in Manhattan that suspiciously resemble some in the Vale of Belvoir and Nottinghamshire carved less than ten years earlier. For whatever reason, the English style took vigorous root in America, where it became part of the scene, including type design.

The only other country where external influences affected type design appears to have been Germany, where a healthy tradition of inventive (that is, non-Johnstonian) calligraphy has had an almost subliminal effect on type design, not least because some practising calligraphers have designed types distantly reflecting the personal style of their pen forms. In England, professional lettering craftsmen such as Michael Harvey (who works in all forms of lettering, in all media) likewise bridge the gap between the different disciplines. But that is one designer transposing his own styles: a different form of interaction than the one I have tried to pursue here.

'The historical sense involves a perception,' wrote T S Eliot, 'not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer ... has a simultaneous existence.' Similarly, book designers working today should feel the presence of the past; they should be aware of the whole of European printing since Jenson.
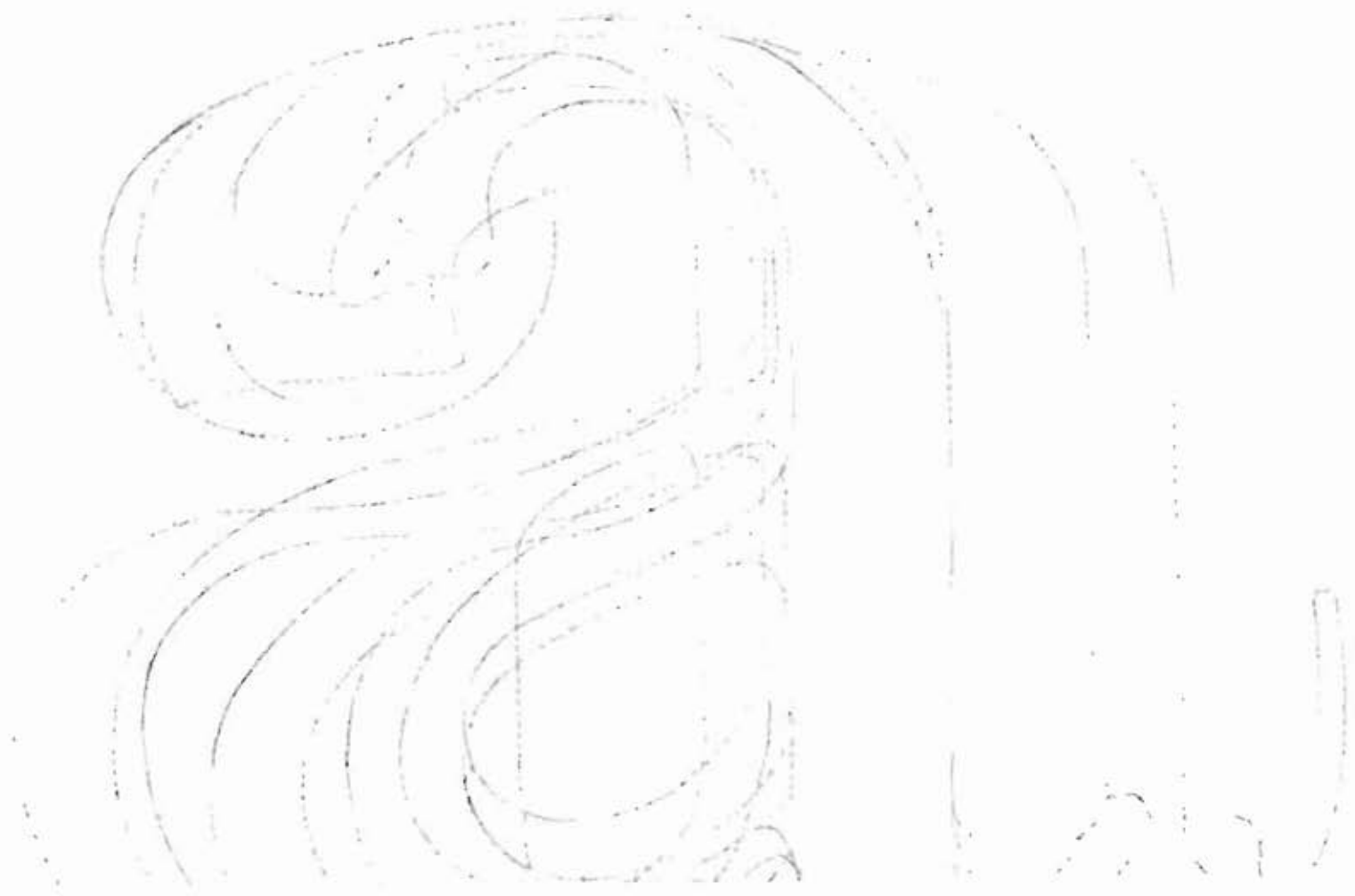
Introduction

William Morris wrote of Nicholas Jenson's roman: 'This type I studied with much care, getting it photographed to a big scale, and drawing it over many times before I began designing my own letter.'

So opens the introduction to *An Atlas of Typeforms*, published in 1968. Today the idea of *drawing* letters probably seems bizarre to students and younger designers; but in 1968 it (or Letraset) was still the only realistic way of presenting lettering on your design. Tracing letters off a type specimen sheet, tracing them down, painting them in (continually checking with the original): this laborious process taught you a lot about typeforms and the differences between the styles. Even rubbing down Letraset taught you something. How much real knowledge do you gain today by staring at the computer screen?

Even in 1968 James Sutton and I felt the need for a book drawing attention to the shapes of letters we all take so much for granted. By enlarging selected letters of types then in general use, and relating them to historical examples, we hoped to demonstrate the development of typeforms over the centuries, to provide background under-standing to the types we use today, to show how and why the forms changed. As our introduction explained:

This atlas is an attempt to show by illustration, rather than by explaining in words, the main changes in type forms over 500 years of printing. We have enlarged many of the most important types in the history of printing so that their shapes can be seen clearly and compared. We also show, only slightly reduced, an original use of the type, which further demonstrates its qualities; then follow enlarged letters and full alphabets derived from or in the manner of the same historical original.

We have used the broadly chronological headings of Old Face, Transitional, Modern, etc. rather than more sophisticated systems whose virtues are still being debated. Many types today have no very clear ancestry as under modern conditions the use of old type face designs is only possible after drastic revision; but when learning about types the authors found it helpful to look at the designs of the past in their historical setting. There seemed to be a continuity in the changes in letter forms which made them easier to understand and identify, and comparison with modern faces gave a useful insight into their nature.

This present book omits both the illustrations of somewhat 'distressed' enlargements of historical types, and the books showing these types in use, which made such an impact in the *Atlas*; for we reproduced these huge tomes full size or nearly so, and that necessitated our own book being of monstrous size too, much to the dislike of bookshops, and presenting storage problems to the purchaser as well. But in those days publishers relied on their personal judgement, or hunch; ours barely blinked at a request for a book 405 × 255 mm. Despite the size, or perhaps because of it, the *Atlas* became a classic. Yet it almost immediately became out-of-date; for while the book was splendidly printed by offset, all the types shown were metal, to be consigned to history a mere year or two later and replaced by early filmset types, far inferior both to the metal forms and to today's PostScript types. It is these metal forms that are shown here, for reasons explained earlier. The enlargements still demonstrate what amazing shapes these taken-for-granted symbols are, and which the human mind can turn into sound, thoughts and ideas.

This is emphatically not a type specimen book, and any attempt to use it as such could produce dismaying results, even though most types shown are available in PostScript form. What it sets out to do is relate, clearly and succinctly, the how, why and what of type development. There are far too many new types today; but most merely continue the story along the same lines while being governed by the requirements of new technology. If types are to function they cannot change form too drastically. The changes in the nineteenth and twentieth

The oblique stress of rounded forms seems to aid readability, subtly playing against the straight verticals. While the outside form of both the lowercase o and the capital is usually more or less a circle, the inside is oval. Such inside shapes are as important as the outer forms, and were something one becomes aware of when tracing off and drawing letters.

Printing never developed in isolation: the culture behind it was always a powerful influence. The skills of punchcutters, the inventiveness of press builders, the improvements in manufacturing methods which turned that inventiveness into reality, the developments in papermaking, in ink formulation: all contributed. The whole society in which printing was embedded is reflected, century by century, in the overall appearance of the printed result, and in the types which form such a crucial part of it.

The significant stages in the development of the classic serifed roman face can be illustrated by the eight examples opposite. Relating them to their background culture, it can be said that the Venetians supplied Renaissance intellectuals; Kerver, Garamond and their fellows, French noblemen; the Dutch printers, the rising mercantile classes; Caslon, English commerce and down-to-earth commonsense.

A radical change occurred in France, reflecting the haughty brilliance of Louis XIV's court and academic intellectuality of the time. John Baskerville softened this to print, amongst other things, classic texts for the cultured 'Grand Tourers'. Soon his innovations were accentuated by others to create glittering types for English poets and writers, and which reflected a brilliant society and the high technical craftsmanship available. Bodoni continued this trend, perhaps slightly overstepping the mark, with type and books for the sophisticated aristocrat, losing in the process the subtle rhythms of pen forms.

RENAISSANCE SCRIPT. From a Florentine manuscript of 1455

inducit. Aristoteles magister omnium idem plane & aperte asserere & confirmare non du- bitauit quem porfirius in eandem sententiā secutus est sed & quosdam antiquiores & ce- leberrimos uiros hoc idem sensisse constat nā & commemoratus hermes ex duabus diuer