

Introduction

THIS BOOK CONSIDERS the changing appearance of British and American printed ephemera over a period of two hundred years and discusses the part played by *design* in the thinking of those who created it.

Produced to meet the needs of the passing day, in content and form ephemera are wholly part of the culture within which they are created. This has nowhere been better expressed than in Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger*, where the author evokes a picture of old Clayhanger's printing shop, its dusty ephemera of old jobs hanging from the rafters and proof sheets of current work scattered here and there below:

These printed things showed to what extent Darius Clayhanger's establishment was a channel through which the life of the town had somehow to pass. Auctions, meetings, concerts, sermons ... bill-heads, hand-bills, addresses, visiting-cards, society rules, bargain-sales, lost and found notices: traces of all these matters, and more, were to be found in that office: it was impregnated with the human interest; it was dusty with the human interest; its hot smell seemed to you to come off life itself.¹

Though separated from Bennett's Five Towns by close on six thousand miles of land and ocean, the Ohio print shop that novelist T. B. Howells remembered from childhood turned out much the same range of work; but it was the craftsmen who did the printing that formed Howells's earliest recollections: 'the compositors rhythmically swaying before their cases of type; the pressman flinging himself back on the bar that made the impression ... the apprentice rolling the forms, and the foreman bending over the imposing stone'.²

These were letterpress printers, but though the ephemera that one studies and collects today are as likely to have been printed from an engraved plate or a litho-

graphic stone as from type and blocks, the ambience of the workshop will have been much the same.

The *Encyclopedia of Ephemera* contains well over five hundred separate articles, covering subjects as diverse as: ballad sheets, 'at home' cards, billheads, dance programmes, funeralia, inn tallies, posters, sheet-music covers – everything from 'ABC primer' to 'Zöetrope strip/disc'.

3. Letterpress printing, almanac of 1747 printed in black and red by A. Wilde, decorated with a wood-engraving of Queen Anne in whose reign the almanac was first published. The overall horizontal and vertical stress of the layout is characteristic of the letterpress process. (82%)

4. Engraving. Reward of merit awarded to Charles Lawrence by his teacher Miss Ames, c.1840, enlarged to show the fine detail. The integration of the vignette and the curving lines of lettering into one unified composition are typical of the

process. The greater part of this design has been left at the etched stage, with firmer lines here and there showing where the graver has been used. Rewards of merit were a far more common form of ephemera in America than in Britain. (150%)

To consider the design of each of these individually is scarcely feasible, and would indeed be repetitive, for the factors that have affected the design of each of them are those that have affected all. It is therefore these factors, and the part they have played in the changing appearance of printed ephemera, that are the subject of this book. The factors are three: function, process and period.

Function is self-explanatory, for it concerns the purpose for which an item of ephemera was produced. Illustrated writing paper intended for private correspondence was naturally presented differently from commercial stationery; and a circular was graphically different from a poster, the one small for leisurely perusal, the other larger, and more boldly displayed to attract attention in the busy street.

Process relates to the means by which ephemera were printed. In the period under discussion these would chiefly be letterpress, engraving or lithography, and their related media and methods, e.g. wood-engraving, engine-turning, printing in gold, lace-paper decoration, etc. Each of these had its individual qualities and thus, either clearly or with subtlety, each had its effect on the look of what was printed. The letterpress printer could set several hundred words for a leaflet or programme in a fraction the time it would have taken an engraver to etch them in copper, and this would be equally so with ephemera utilising more limited copy, such as a trade card or a ball invitation. Yet

letterpress also imparted a characteristic horizontal and vertical stress on printed matter that was not easily disguised, while the engraver suffered no such limitation, leaving him free to create designs as complex and elegant as he could wish or his customer would pay for.

Period concerns the historical period in which an item of ephemera played its brief part in the historical record. Here the effects on design are expressions of both commerce and culture. Improving communications in the eighteenth century brought the large typefaces needed for the printing of easily seen mail- and stagecoach bills, while tradesmen's cards were tricked out with the Rococo detail that elsewhere found expression in contemporary domestic furniture; and on ephemera also, the purveyors of hardware, patent medicines and other goods once household names presented their wares, and vaudeville and music-hall stars now long forgotten enjoyed their floreat days.

The design histories of ephemeral printing in Britain and America are inextricably woven. Colonial printers and engravers imported British type and equipment, took instruction from the same manuals, drew inspiration from the same exemplars. In 1798 the establishment of the first successful American type-foundry gave American printers a source of type nearer home, but those types were cast with strikes from British founders' punches; and though American punchcutters were to be at work early in the following century, the forms of their bold new display

5. Lithography. Allegorical vignette from the billhead of Italian lithographer Scipione Lapi, shown in the London-based *Printers' International Specimen Exchange* 10, 1889, illustrating stages in the lithographic process. The boy represents the artist/designer, here making a drawing of a factory in his sketchbook. On the right, a child artist draws on litho stone watched by another carrying an ink roller. The goddess

Minerva with her attendant owl displays an album of Signor Lapi's work. On the left a putto plays with a pair of ink dabbers, as used by both lithographers and letterpress printers prior to the introduction of rollers in the 1820s. As is clearly indicated here, the nature of the lithographic process gave the printer a freedom in design equal to that of the engraver. (90%)

letters would be closely modelled on those of Britain.

It was in the years of stability and enterprise following the Civil War that American graphic design established its own identity. In Britain printing in colours was achieved by a variety of means but in America colour printing meant essentially chromolithography, and the focused development of this process in the latter part of the nineteenth century resulted in an efflorescence of colour-rich trade cards, cigar-box labels, rewards of merit, calendars and other ephemera that was essentially American. In Britain from the 1860s, typeface design stagnated, but from America a wealth of inventive new types now crossed the Atlantic en route to printing offices in London, Edinburgh, Dublin and elsewhere. Yet *ideas* travelled in both directions, for the development of expertise in designing with these new typefaces (and other innovations of the period) depended on jobbing printers learning from each other, and the scheme of specimen exchange that achieved this was set up in and administered from London.

The art of the printer relates as much to artifice – the making of things – as it does to Art, but while most printers of ephemera would not have claimed to be fine artists (though some in the later nineteenth century would do so) it is self-evident that many did exercise aesthetic considerations when laying out their work. The difficulty is – whether concerning visual qualities or adherence to particular conventions – printers rarely put pen to paper

regarding why they did what they did: their work was too much an everyday activity to warrant record. A case in point is the long, narrow Victorian playbill, discussed on pages 37-41: the reasons for the development of this format must have been common knowledge in the trade, but in the absence of written record we can now only surmise. One has to glean what one can from the early manuals and – fortunately in rather more detail – the occasional articles in the trade journals. As to why a particular printer chose this type or letter-form rather than that or one arrangement rather than another, we cannot know; though we may realistically surmise.

It was in the 1720s that the young Benjamin Franklin worked for a period as a printer in London, before returning home and starting his own business in Philadelphia. All then was grist to the printer's mill – books, newspapers and general jobbing. A century or so later those three aspects of the one trade would become separate fields, with jobbing printers large and small undertaking the endless miscellany of trade cards, playbills, music covers, posters and other classes of ephemera now so avidly studied and collected.

6. (*Above*) Compositor setting type. Capitals were stored in the upper of the two cases and small letters in the one below, from which derives 'lower-case', the term still used for the small letters today. (*Left*) Forme ready for printing, showing how the shape of the type and the rectangular chase that enclosed it imposed a characteristic horizontal-vertical stress on letterpress setting. Type and spacing material are here locked in place with *mechanical quoins*. These were a nineteenth-century invention, earlier quoins being simple beech-wood wedges. Reproduced from: Howells, 'The Country Printer', p. 543; and *Printing World*, n.s. 4 (1893), p. 176.

I

The wooden press

WHEN BENJAMIN FRANKLIN was working in London in 1725 there were, in both England and America, but two methods of printing: letterpress and copper-plate.

At its simplest the principle of letterpress is akin to that of the fingerprint: the image is in relief, higher than its background, and the impression is achieved by inking the image and bringing it in contact with paper. Today the same principle is employed in the pictorial linocut – though when illustrations were needed in the eighteenth century they were cut in wood, as will be discussed. The chief business of the printer however was not pictures but words: words in books and newspapers, words on ballad sheets, on playbills, on reward notices and other ephemera; and for all of these *type* was required.

Type consists of small square-section columns of lead alloy of standard height, each with a letter or other character cast in reverse on its upper surface. Type was available to the printer in a range of sizes to suit everything from a footnote to a broadside.

Franklin learnt typesetting as a twelve-year old apprenticed to his half-brother James in Boston. When setting type he would have before him two shallow cases positioned one above the other, containing all the characters and spaces that English-language setting called for (6). In his left hand he would hold a *composing stick* into which, following hand-written copy, he would transfer the type letter by letter. When sufficient copy had been set, the lines of type would be locked into an iron *chase*, the whole then constituting the *forme* (6), which Franklin would pass on to the pressmen.

The printing press was still much as it had been when invented close on three centuries earlier. It was built of

wood and printing was effected by pulling on a bar acting directly on a screw (1). The size of the *platen* or pressure plate which the screw forced down averaged around 18 × 12 inches (456 × 304 mm), and as paper was made in sheets around twice this size and the power of the press was dependent on the strength of a man's arm, printing a large broadside or the leaves of a large-format book would require two pulls on the bar, the pressman raising the platen and advancing the forme between impressions. Printing was a two-man activity, one inking and the other laying and taking off paper and working the press. It was hard, physical work but, depending on the size of the sheet and the care required, a printing rate approaching 200–240 sheets per hour could be achieved.¹

7. Proof of a trade card by W. J. White of London, c.1820. The proof has been taken on a slip of thin tissue laid over a coarser, more robust paper, thereby ensuring a sharp, finely detailed print. The image is surrounded by a prominent plate mark – the shape of the copper plate impressed in the paper surface – which would be trimmed on the cards printed for the customer. (100%)

8. (*Above and below*) London tradesmen's signs on billheads. The street number on John Vetch's heading is clearly an addition, showing that the plate was originally engraved before the Act of 1766 prohibited trade signs extending over the street and house numbering was introduced. On Deacon & Wilkin-

son's heading the number is wholly integrated with the script, indicating that this is a later engraving. In both cases the script, whether engraved or hand-written, is English round hand, combined in the Deacon & Wilkinson design with elegantly decorated roman capitals. (87%, 91%)