

My association with The Thanet Press, Margate

1959-1967

*Recollections of a letterpress journeyman
and the place where it all began in Thanet*

HAVING left Holy Trinity primary school in 1956 I found myself in Westgate at King Ethelbert's Secondary Modern school, as it was then known. This is where, in a small back room of the art department I caught my first sight of a printing machine – an Adana hand press surrounded by cases of type in the 'printing club'. Even then I knew that this was of special interest so I joined the club but soon wanted more; I was hooked on the smell of printing ink and paper and had my nose in every book I picked up. That Christmas, father bought me my own Adana and when I awoke that magical Christmas morning and found this fortuitous gift at the foot of my bed, my connection with printing had been established.

I was just 15 when I decided to leave Ethelbert's to become a printer and guided by my father – he was not in the trade – I sat the examination held by the Joint Industrial Council (JIC) organised by one of the Thanet Press staff, Fred Pearce. That year, I was competing for 9 vacancies within the print industry in Thanet. I came 10th so narrowly missed out on a place and a chance to become an apprentice. Thanet Press contacted my father and said that as I had so closely lost this opportunity I might like to work in their Reading Department as a copyholder until the following year's JIC examination. I jumped at this open door to what was still quite a 'closed shop' tightly controlled by the unions and the following year re-took the exam and secured a 6 year apprenticeship as a Letterpress Machine Minder with Thanet Press. I was now employed by the Queen's Printers!

Whilst waiting for the next exam, the first year's work as a copyholder was not wasted. I learned so much then about the trade and the many skills involved: impositions, bookwork, typefaces, fonts and of course printer's proofing and proof marks. It was a great grounding and also gave me the opportunity to get to know other staff. The material that I had to read aloud to each reader was quite technical and mostly periodical work. Medical magazines entitled *Gut*, the *British Journal of Industrial Medicine* the *British Journal of Neurology*. *History Today* was another. The galleys of solid text containing many long words which often exceeded the column width were very boring and difficult to read and often had to be spelled out letter for letter and I remember being chastised by a very formidably tall lady reader named Joan as I spent a lot of time yawning. The Head Reader was Mr. Brown (Everyone was Mr to me then out of respect but his name might have been Cliff) 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!

The layout of Thanet Press always intrigued me. It had nooks and crannies everywhere caused as a result of its evolution from many different buildings over the years. This seemed to have created an 'upstairs and downstairs' culture almost with all the offices, including the readers and composing department upstairs, and the 'engine room' where all the 'hard' work was produced on the ground floor. Underneath one of the Miller 2 colour presses were the remains of cellars and there was also evidence of horses used for delivering goods when part of the building belonged to a local department store.

Following the signing of my legal indentureship papers between my father and the then General Manager Harry Baker in Harry's office upstairs, I joined the Typographical Association (to become the NGA) and was promoted as a new apprentice to start work downstairs. My first mentor was 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 (use 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 profoundly shocking 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 to setting me on the right path in many respects.

After so much hand feeding, cutting, creasing, scoring, plus gold and silver dusting of invitations etc., I was to move on to slightly larger presses, the verticals. Thanet had 5 or 6 American vertical Miehle presses producing high quality work. '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. I also remember printing work on the vertical presses for the souvenir programme for the royal wedding of Princess Margaret to Anthony Armstrong-Jones in 1960 and the Churchill Memorial Fund when Winston Churchill died in 1965.

Dusty was a short, stern Yorkshireman who really knew his stuff but a kindly man. I also remember a newcomer in the vertical press section in the form of an ex-RAF military policeman turned journeyman. His name was Bob Bourner and time was needed before this 'outsider' was accepted. We got on quite well and my girlfriend and I even did some babysitting for him and his very attractive blonde wife.

Much of the ground floor pressroom was occupied by larger Miehles and being American made, they required a special set of spanners. I was required to buy my own set which may still be around somewhere but they fit almost nothing else. These flatbed quad demy machines were used to print all the material that I had previously been proofreading upstairs. Deadlines for periodical work were always quite stringent and in order to meet these there was an almost permanent night shift and from time to time I worked as an assistant (a Natsopa) on night shift loading paper these bigger presses. They were very pedestrian by today's standards printing just about 3,000 sheets per hour on one side; only at a later date did the company install a perfecter – a Dawson Payne and Elliot rotary press that printed from plastic plates. This was a new and interesting development, a British built rotary letterpress unit producing 10,000 sheets per hour, mostly catalogue work: it was probably the last innovation at the press before the introduction of offset lithography which I also participated in. The big advantage of the DPE was that it was located next to the big windows in Union Crescent. These were painted out to stop the public from seeing in but we could see out and watch the summer visitors in their hotels opposite.

Almost all letterpress work produced was originated in the composing department upstairs. This had its own hot metal production by means of Monotype casters and supercasters. These noisy, hot, alien looking

machines were housed separately in a bid to soundproof them. They were fed rolls of punched paper produced by the Monosetter keyboard operators. The automated typesetting was supplemented by the very large composing section with its many compositors and their composing sticks and there was a pre-press and proofing section run by Fred Pearce (the JIC man) which also controlled and supplied the copper halftone plates and zinc line plates for illustrations. After galleys of type were made up into pages these were in turn made up into signatures in chases and the resulting formes were transported down to the pressroom in a rickety old lift. Nerves of steel were necessary to ride in this death trap surrounded by large, very heavy formes of type that had taken days to put together. On one occasion I can remember, the lift plummeted to the ground and everything in it (I think it was unoccupied) was converted into 'printer's pie'. Many years after I left, there was a natural progression from hot metal setting to filmsetting and this would have meant the demise of much of the composing room. And the lift!

Around the corner from the lift station on the ground floor was a hidey hole that housed the caretaker. I think his name was Tom but that may have been the name of the presses very large smelly black cat that skunked around, I am not certain. Anyway, this is where I would come to get clean wipers, carefully counted out and exchanged for soiled. This was an Aladdin's cave and a very hot and noisy one at that as it housed the boilers and air compressors for the presses and was in the bowels of the building.

At the opposite end of the press to the offices was housed a second paper store. This part of the building was new in the 60's and it had a mezzanine area that continued around to the back of the press and the rear entrance on Princes Street. Into this paper store was installed the first two 2 colour Heidelberg Letterpress/ Letterset presses in the UK. They were specialised in that together with a flatbed letterpress unit was a rotary unit utilising rubber or plastic stereo plates. As with the plates needed for the larger DPE rotary press, origination started with a forme of letterpress type from which were moulded the rubber or plastic plates. This kind of process was really the last opportunity for the trade to make use of the investment in cold and hot metal type before the advent of offset litho at Thanet Press. I spent a lot of time on the new Heidelberg not only producing vast quantities of numbered and perforated overseas travel vouchers on self-carbonised NCR paper for the Automobile Association but also in the testing and research into new water-based inks on two conventional Heidelberg presses. This was done in collaboration with the ink manufacturers such as Lorilleaux & Bolton and Coates (later to combine) and some of the material used in tests was lifted from the Beatles and Rolling Stones monthly magazines that were in production then in large quantities. These new 'eco friendly' inks were unprecedented and permitted presses to be washed up (rollers cleaned, etc.) using soapy water instead of volatile and costly petroleum-based solvents. The green revolution had started!

Our ink and technical wizard at this time was Sid Higham, a very knowledgeable fellow and right hand man to the pressroom supervisor, the very tall Ernie Livick. Ernie followed and took over from his father as so many staff did at that time. His father used to visit frequently, clearly missing his work since his retirement and wanting to remain a part of the place. Ernie lived in a modest little house in Durban Road, Margate.

Other presses in use included a couple of Kelly machines. These were inevitably tied up with one job for most of their working lives and most memorable was the large run of bright red Belling cookery book covers which were printed with a full solid red then varnished. After varnishing it was a major problem to keep the stock from sticking together in one lump and entailed airing up the piles from time to time to separate the sheets before letting them go to the bindery for completion. I recall that eventually this job was interleaved and the varnishing was replaced by lamination.

Before the advent of dry powder anti-setoff sprays, the presses mostly used wet sprays using a liquid gum Arabic solution which was atomised by compressed air onto each wet printed sheet as it arrived in the delivery area of the machine. This caused a thick fog throughout much of the pressroom which was not very pleasant to work in although not a health risk. The compressed air line was fitted throughout the press area and also used to clean down the presses from time to time.

I was not always a popular lad at Thanet. One Christmas I won 3 of the top 5 prizes in the annual raffle. That

was a bad time for me as an apprentice from the machine room on the ground floor, attending the draw in a crowded composing room upstairs. I had nowhere to hide! I was also looked upon as having a bit of an eagle's eye, something I guess I learned during my year in the reading department. I would often wander round and look at the work coming off the other people's presses seeing if I could spot any errors only to be shooed away by the minder I was encroaching on.

The day that Thanet Press received a little device called a Rotaprint was when things started to change course both for the company and for me although a sister company, the Grosvenor Press in Portsmouth already handled litho work, lithography had arrived at Thanet albeit in a small and painfully slow way at this particular press. I cannot remember who had this bright idea but it was a stroke of genius which although not apparent at the time, was the beginning of the end for the letterpress era at Thanet. In addition to Grosvenor, Eyre & Spottiswoode also had an interest in fine art printers The Chiswick Press which I visited once. They printed old masters etc., by the collotype process using gelatine on glass plates with a many as 15 separate colours, all without a rasterizing screen. This screenless printing produced stunningly accurate reproductions many of which were printed on hand made paper.

The Rotaprint was tiny in comparison to its bigger letterpress cousins. It was flimsy and not as heavily constructed as the giant American Miehles. 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. This was by this time being stored in the church crypt opposite the press due to lack of space. The lengthy task of taking 'repro' (reproduction quality) proofs from the galleys of type began in order that the type could be dissed or melted down. The process gained momentum as instructions were given to the letterpress minders to create a couple of repro quality proofs as each job when completed. The type could then be disposed of almost immediately and if a subsequent reprint was necessary, it would be produced by the 'new' offset process on the Rotaprint. A lot of secure black and white work such as examination papers was reprinted after initially being done by the letterpress process. University of London GCE papers were all done here as were papers for the ACCA (Association of Certified Corporate Accountants). We lost one thing in this process. Quality. Because of the limited platemaking equipment in use, our initial offset work was not as sharp and clear (or as black) as its letterpress equivalent and this became ammunition for the pro-letterpress die-hards.

The first Rotaprint operator was one of the vertical Miehle minders, Jim May, I recall. He was a miserable old character who I never saw smile as long as I knew him. I volunteered to take over his position when he departed 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 that 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 gave me a firm footing career wise. Having just learnt of its closure in April 2011, I have to say that although saddened, I am not surprised. Many similar companies are in the same position, unable to adjust to the lightning changes in marketing, information management and distribution nor 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 stifled the industry. A great pity but advances in electronics and technology are inevitable; accepting them and adjusting to them is more difficult.

Colleagues Remembered from 1959 to 1967:

Arthur Corden, letterpress platen supervisor and prize dahlia grower.

Arthur's colleague and Heidelberg platen minder Paul who died at the early age of 29.

Ernie Livick, who succeeded his father as pressroom supervisor.

His deputy Sid Higham.

Harry Baker, General Manager, succeeded by his son Doug.

Peter Beard, minder who joined at same time as me.

Tony Ball, vertical Miehle and Kelly flatbed minder.

Bob Bournier, vertical Miehle minder.

Jim May, vertical Miehle minder and first Rotaprint operator

Frank Rogers, assistant on the DPE rotary and flatbed Miehles.

Peter Baldwin, Kelly minder.

Arthur Blench, 2 colour Miller minder.

Doug Falconer, Reader.

Roland 'Rolly' Buck, Reader and very old fashioned, conservative man.

Percy Woodbridge, Method Study and instigator of bonus scheme

Bob Clark, who succeeded by his son Doug as Composing Room Manager.

Bob Anning, Production office

Mick Ford,

Harvey Lockwood, Composer.

Norman Rait and Charles Smith, Bindery managers.

Many lovely girls in the Bindery.

E & OE!

Some of the above people can be seen here on the works' outing to Brighton in the mid 60's:

