A Printer's Devil

'They do commonly so black

and bedaub themselves

that the workmen do jocosely call them devils'

Mark Pickering

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Publishing Details

This book was first privately published in 1995. The first edition was 100 copies and I think I sold one. It seems surprising to me that there has not been any other accounts of the traditional letterpress printers work experiences, so I thought this little booklet would be useful to recall an episode of history which has now completely vanished.

This second edition of 'A Printer's Devil' was produced in 2011. It has been set in Baskerville type, and has been adjusted to suit a pdf format, with some additional corrections being made. There is no charge to download the document but copyright law applies.

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Preamble

Very few trades have disappeared so completely and absolutely as the hot-metal process of printing. Between the years of 1975 to 1985, a trade that originated from Gutenberg in Germany in the fifteenth century and established in England by Caxton by the sixteenth, vanished in an onslaught of computer technology. 400 years of mystique, technique, rituals, secrecy and pride were shattered — and hardly anyone noticed, or recorded the fact.

Mark Pickering was trained as an apprentice compositor and linotype operator, between 1969-1974, and later worked as a journeyman printer for several years. This is his personal account of his apprenticeship training, looking at the day to day life of an apprentice 'comp', and some of the personalities that made his life interesting, and sometimes hell.

Preface

As history accelerates, the changes between each generation seem more abrupt. When I was born in 1953 there were no such things as personal computers, cell phones, faxes, compact discs, or cassette tapes. No one had refrigerators (except the very rich), air travel was for the elite, space travel had not occurred, and television was just emerging from it's infancy.

The trade that I chose to become trained in was an ancient one, some four hundred years old in European terms. Some progress had been made since Guttenburg, a German who developed moveable type in the fifteenth century (although the Chinese had pipped him by some several centuries), notably the development of the linotype machines, and in lithography, but the basic techniques of type composition, proofing, imposition and printing were really very little unchanged. William Caxton of London, a printer from the sixteenth century, would have felt quite at home in a composing room of the late 1960's.

Printing, and especially that of a compositor, was still thought of as a distinguished craft, and we considered ourselves as the 'prince' of trades with not the slightest inkling that in one short decade the art of a compositor would be thoroughly extinguished, and consigned to the museum or the art school.

This almost complete and sudden obsolescence of the old letterpress printer is remarkable, and although I know there are isolated bastions of letterpress lurking in some back streets, by and large history has swallowed it down. Once I started to write, many reminiscences and nitty-gritty details flooded back, which makes my apprenticeship years seem as if it must have taken place on the moon for all the relevance it now has in the modern world.

A 'printers devil' is an old expression, going back at least till Elizabethan times. In Brewsters Dictionary, the definition of a 'devil' was originally the printers errand boy, who had the job of taking the printed sheets from the tympan of the press. According to one commentator of the time 'They do commonly so black and bedaub themselves that the workmen do jocosely call them devils'.

However, the term was inevitably and appropriately applied to all printing apprentices, who became daubed in the dust, grime and ink of their craft. By the later twentieth century I can record that little had changed.

Indentured

My reasons for becoming a printer were not especially sound: I hated school, I desired to imitate my brother (who was an apprentice printer), and I wanted some money in my pocket.

My dad stated 'a man needs a trade', and 'a trade is safe, you'll always have a job, a skill that people will want'. 'A safe secure job' seemed like sensible wisdom way back in 1969, just as the Beatles split up, and the flower people were dazzling the ducks in Hyde Park. No one could foresee that the hot-metal process of printing would go up in a puff of smoke by the late seventies, and that the elegant pieces of machinery called Linotypes, would be hauled off to museums, if they were lucky, or more often just turned into scrap.

On learning of my intentions the Head Principal of Greenhill Secondary Modern School, Mr Wallis, summoned me in, and asked me whether I was determined to be a printer. I said I was. Had I my father's approval? I did. Hmmm, can you spell 'committee'? I screwed up my memory, and recited 'c-o-m-i-t-t-e'. He dismissed me, and shortly rang my father. 'Your son' he explained 'has brains, he was 3rd in the A-form this year. He could definitely go onto University Mr Pickering' he paused significantly 'and he cannot spell to save his life'.

Curiously, this direct approach from the school Gods, did not dissuade my father, and had little effect on me. I was blissfully ignorant of my spelling abilities, and I soon learned the irony that in printing spelling was not an actual requirement, because you were supplied with people called proof-readers, and if they didn't take sufficient blame for any mistakes, there was that most hackneyed and useful of printers sayings 'follow the copy, even if it goes out of the window'.

In mid January 1969 I signed the bottom of an impressive piece of paper, with a large red seal, and became an Indentured Apprentice Compositor for the period up to and not exceeding my 21st birthday, which meant a total apprenticeship time of five and a half years, by no means an unusual length. The document sprawled over four large pages, and was written after an archaic fashion, containing several medieval threats.

'The Apprentice [me] and the Guardian [me dad] hereby jointly and severally covenant with the Master [Kent County Newspapers] that the Apprentice will during his apprenticeship faithfully, honestly, and diligently serve the Master, and obey and perform all lawful commands and requirements, and keep his secrets, and shall not do or knowingly suffer to be done any damage or injury to the property of the master, or of his customers, nor see it done by others without acquainting him therewith, and will not waste or make away with the goods or property of the Master nor lend the said goods or property to anyone, and will not without the consent of the Master absent himself from the service of the Master at anytime during the said term of five years, and will observe and abide by the general regulations made from time to time for the conduct of the factory or works, and will and shall in all things conduct and acquit himself as a true and faithful Apprentice'.

Aside from the Old Testament language, and the sweeping provisions designed to keep the Apprentice at heel, note the reference to 'secrets'. This is surely an echo straight from the Middle Ages. The Guilds jealously preserved their knowledge, knowing that should they lose the privacy around their skills, their power would slip away. Curiously, these attempts to maintain this mystique, even occurred during my apprenticeship, for if I showed too great a curiosity in another's department's skills I would be quickly told to 'mind my own trade'.

A day in the life of 'the boy'

In the first week of my printing apprenticeship I do not remember even actually touching a piece of type; I was much too busy.

There was the morning tea and cheese bun run, the afternoon tea and smokes run, there were Harold's fags to get (the works foreman, ie God), there was Harry's fags to get (composing room foreman, a Godlet), there were windows to clean, floors to sweep, and every imaginable and unimaginable errand that fell upon me, the 'boy', the most junior apprentice in the print shop, the least important morsel on this earth, and my tasks were to obey, listen and not to get too cheeky. Food, medicines, bills to pay, and hell to pay if I didn't do it quick. In my first week an average day went something like this

Morning 6 am.

Still dark, my dad would bring in a cup of tea. This I would absorb in slow draughts, listening to the sound of my mother getting up and starting breakfast. When I heard the bacon sizzle I would be up, dress hastily, fling back the bedclothes in a unsubtle attempt to 'make my bed', and get to the kitchen as breakfast was served. Usually it would be cooked: bacon and eggs, porridge, fish fingers, I can taste those meals now. A quick scoff then on with my duffel coat and I would leave home about half six, and trudge down the hill for 30 minutes to catch the 7.00 am bus to Canterbury.

The bus took 40 minutes, then it was a quick walk down some narrow almost medieval back streets to the back entrance of the workshop, and then through the paper storage area and into a charming garden, enclosed by a courtyard almost like a cathedral close. Then through the door into the machine room, and clock in, about 7.50 for an 8 am start.

The printshop was really a newspaper outfit, printing four papers in those days, The Kentish Gazette, The Herne Bay Press, The East Coast Times, and the Deal Herald. The most striking evidence of this was to the right of the clocking-in machine, where squatted the 'Cossar', a huge, rather sinister, weta-like beast that thundered like Zeus when it rolled off the newspapers.

Quite the most deafening and awesome machine I had ever seen. This ‘creature’, had two underlings (machine minders) working on it full time, oiling it, preening, tending to it’s needs, like two maids fussing about an imperial duchess.

The machine sat silent most of the week, only really steaming to it’s full potential on Thursday afternoon and evenings when the Kentish Gazette came out. Then it was as if the dogs of war were unleashed, for it was impossible to hear yourself think, and hard it seemed even to breathe, as the Cossar’s gigantic cogs and wheels shook the floor and the very structure of the building itself.

On the left side of the machine room, opposite the Cossar, were the various smaller printing machines, used to print the jobbing work. Letterheads, business cards, wedding invites, small pamphlets, parish magazines, order forms, invoices, nothing was literally too small. There were four Heidelberg Platens, two Heidelberg cylinders, a Kelly and various other odds and sods, but the Heidelberg’s were the mainstay.

I would walk through the machine room, past the paper and guillotine room into the newspaper room, where a long line of stones was backed by about six Intertype hot composing machines. The Intertype was a more popular version of the Linotype, though often the operators were still called ‘lino ops’

This room was the heart of the factory, and the men who worked here considered themselves the cream. The ‘lino ops’ set the news copy as it came from the reporters, and handed to the ‘comps’ who fitted it into the huge newspaper chases. These were tremendously heavy to carry and when full they usually took two men to lift, though some comps took a herculean pride in swinging the chases off the stones onto the proofing press, and woe betide any miserable apprentice who got in the way.

The proofing press itself was a curiosity, a working Colombia of the ‘winepress’ style, with a huge swing handle at the top. This was later replaced by a proper proof press, and the Colombia was painted-up in filigree colours and established on a plinth at the front entrance to the works, where it still (I believe) stands today.

The main ‘quality’ paper was The Kentish Gazette, which came out on Friday mornings, so the comp room really started to buzz by Thursday afternoon, with galleys of slugs flying back and forth, men tripping over the reporters (who had nothing much to do now, and couldn’t seem to resist the glamour of the occasion, and would hang around getting in the way) and tempers getting frayed as the eight o’clock deadline approached.

The Cossar was already going through it's training rumbles, and it might have started printing the middle pages already. Sometimes the very big boss of all, The Owner, would come down, steering one of his mates and a mini-skirted secretary into the maelstrom, to show off 'his men'. And the comps, who were now tearing around like mad things, had to try to maintain small talk, whilst not upsetting the galleys or committing heinous crimes like putting in slugs upside down. The language was ripe, and the men were proud of conjuring choice expressions of obscenity to match the general air of mayhem. The secretary would be unlikely to escape without a well-slapped bottom, for these were in days long before the words 'sexual harassment ' had ever been heard off.

Finally, on my daily journey, I would run up a flight of stairs to the comp room, which occupied a long pleasant upstairs room, slightly detached from the rest of the printshop. By pleasant I mean it would have been, if the windows were cleaned of grime, and the room wasn't stuffed full of frames, proofing presses and piles of undissed type accumulating in high, dirty, perilous piles. As an apprentice I quickly learned that one of my main missions was to tackle these grim Manhattans, the bane of a compositors life.

First job, at eight in the morning, clean the proofing press. That meant dousing the old ink with white-spirits and scraping it off. Slap on new ink, trying to get the consistency just right. Not too tacky that it splodged the paper, not too stiff that the ink didn't get picked up by the type. Printers ink is just about the most staining substance on earth, and for an apprentice, ink travels with surprising rapidity from hands to arms and into hair. The ink etches into the fingers with such determination, that like Lady's Macbeth's bloodied hands, no amount of scrubbing can get rid of it, and it needs a two-week holiday spell to leave the hands completely clean. It's probably true to say that for nigh on ten years I had ink in my fingers.

Then I'd have to polish the spacebands from the Intertype machines downstairs, using a shallow box full of graphite. Twenty spacebands per machine, six machines to do. The ops always fancied a yarn, so I'd be running late by now. Time to dash upstairs and wash my hands, and give a quick cleanout of the basins, the toilets fortunately were the responsibility of a cleaner.

The morning tea run started about quarter past nine, and had to finish by ten. Certainly the men had to have their buns and rolls by the time the tea trolley came round, or there would be hell to pay. I would take orders from the comps first in my comp room, then do the rounds of the news room comps, and the lino-ops, finally finishing off with the guillotine operator, who was

deemed to be in my sphere of influence. The machine minders had their own 'boys'. Cheese rolls, ham rolls, ham rolls with pickle ('no fucking cheese like you got me last week') cheese rolls without too much butter, fags, fags, fags (everyone smoked, and there were at least a dozen different varieties wanted each day) pharmaceutical's, sweets and chocolates.

The rules were flexible and inflexible at the same time. In theory I was only buying morning teas, ie eatables, but if I could squeeze in paying the odd bill, or get some paint from the hardware shop I would be 'prevailed' upon. However I must not be late, so in my first couple of weeks the whole affair was somewhat frantic and I made a few balls-ups. One chap wanted cough medicine and I got him laxatives.

But once I got the hang of the business, I began to realise my usefulness, and soon had mastered the round to the extent that I could deliberately take my time, and made sure I didn't get back till I could sense the rattle of the tea trolley.

The hierarchy was intriguing. Harry, as comp foreman, had control of me, and since there were not any apprentices on the news floor for a while, he had considerable influence. I could be sent out only on Harry's say-so. This was except for Harold, the works foreman who could (which he rarely did) order me out for a cigar. However the ops couldn't simply grab me at any old time, and order me to run on a mission, but had to grovel to Harry, who of course immensely enjoyed this opportunity because he felt somewhat neglected upstairs in his composing room. It was after all a newspaper place.

So quite frequently during the day I could be summoned on 'extra' missions, perhaps to the Post Office, or particularly the 'bookies' to place a bet. Highly illegal of course, and certainly not part of an Indentured Apprentices formal training, but since Harold was keen on the gee-gees, the risk of degradation to a sensitive young person by placing them into a nefarious place of gambling, was conveniently overlooked.

After the ten o'clock cuppa tea, it was into the next round of duties. The machine chases would have to be brought up. Chases (or formes) were a sort of metal frame, whereby the type was locked into position using quoins (a sort of screw wedge). Each printing machine had a different sort of chase, small jobs like letterheads and business cards went on the platens, bigger jobs went onto the cylinders. The chase is locked onto the printing bed of the machine, the job printed, and then the chase returned, but usually only halfway to the composing room.

Obviously there had been some sort of territorial dispute between the foreman of the composing room, Harry, and the foreman of the machine room, George, and this uneasy settlement had been arrived at. Some of the machine minders brought their chases back all the way, perhaps because they fancied a walk or they didn't have much to do that day. But frequently there would be an oversupply of chases downstairs and the comp room would be running out. Harry would moan that George was 'hoarding' the chases so as to embarrass him, so muggins had to ferry them upstairs. Some of them, like the Heidelberg cylinder or Kelly were awkwardly heavy for a shrimpy under-developed five foot five boy, and although a special chase lift was provided by the stairs, it was considered poor style to use it, so I had to trundle up two short flights of stairs. I also had to deliver the new chases, with jobs to be printed, which always meant more trips through the news room where any comp or op with idle time on their hands, would give me a passing poke, or some 'witty' verbal obscenity.

The used chases had to be emptied of course. They were put on the 'stones', quite literally a flat oiled stone of some kind set in a table, the chases unlocked, and the type tied up with page cord, and a card put on it to indicate it's future fate 'Hold', 'Store', 'Dis' for distribution, ie putting the type back in the cases. These jobs would keep me happy till lunchtime, and there was still the floor to sweep, and there was bound to be at least one ciggie run for Harry. He smoked eighty a day.

Lunctime 12-1 pm.

Lunchtime was an hour, and we had to clock in and out for that, regardless of whether we left the factory or not. If the weather was fine there was a pretty garden to sit in, maintained by Bill Rogers the driver, who seemed to be a good mate of The Owner, because he did precious little else during the day except perv the secretary's legs when they had to undergo the hazardous journey through the news room. Roy Rogers, his brother (two of the stroppiest little dwarfs on the planet) was the unofficial 'king' of the comp news room. Even Harold, the works foreman, bowed to Roy, who tended to run the place pretty much as he liked. Neither of the Rogers brothers stood much more than five foot two inches in height, but they carried the day through sheer force of personality.

Both of them were kind men in their fashion, as long as you kept out of there way, and once you had got through their verbal barracking. Bill Rogers created a sensation at one time by getting engaged to the young receptionist, the

story even made the News of the World (a tits and nudges scandal sheet). He was over 60, she was 17. A case of 'January and May' people said, an allusion that baffled me, until I discovered that the actual reference came from Chaucer, in his Canterbury Tales, where a young girl called 'May' married an old lecher of the aristocracy called 'January'.

Lunchtime meant the chance to wander the medieval backstreets of Canterbury, which has remained fairly well unchanged to this day. Sometimes I ate out. Half a crown would buy a good sit down meal in the 'The Olde Cottage'. Thick soup, roast beef or pork with at least three vegetables (they advertised that on the sign outside) and a good traditional pud, like bread and butter, or treacle tart, covered in custard. Tea afterwards. I couldn't afford this every day. My take home pay on the first week was £5 10s 6d (five pounds, ten shillings and sixpence) and it remained like that for two years. £2 went to my mum for board, £1 for buses, possibly £1-2 saved aside, and the ten shillings and a tanner on spending money. My savings accumulated with painful slowness and usually went on the £50 package tour to Spain, with accommodation and meals for two weeks.

Afternoon 1-5 pm.

The afternoon was always slower, starting at one o'clock. Usually it was dissing. This was the way that an apprentice was trained to learn the layout of the case, the tray in which the individual pieces of type are stored. Thirty years on you now see these 'trays' used as wall ornaments, to hold kitsch trinkets. Each case had an identical layout, with the popular letters like 'e' having bigger pockets than the 'x' or 'y'. On the outer fringes of the case you would get the obscure characters such as ligatures 'ffi' and ampersands '&'.

The case was usually worked at on the 'frame' which was a large standing wardrobe affair, with about forty cases stored underneath in racks, and a wide sloping top where you put the case of type. The idea behind the slope was to keep the type more upright, and reduce the chance of a 'pie', where type gets knocked over. Type was set in a 'stick', a hand composing stick, line by line, and then transferred to a galley, a metal tray. Once the type had been set it was tied up and the galley placed on the proofing press for the first proof.

Of course I was not allowed to do much of this in the first few weeks. I was the 'dis hand', and had charge of the reverse process, whereby the type was taken out of the chase, put onto a galley and 'dissed' (distributed) back in the case in it's rightful place, a boring and obviously exacting task. Particularly

finicky was the six point type, especially the spacings. There was a language for them. The largest was the 'em' or 'mutton' or 'pica', half that size was the 'en' or 'nut'. Then came the 'thick' which was a third of the em, then the 'mid' which was a fourth of the em, then the 'thin' which was usually a fifth of the em. Finally, for those tiny irritating gaps in the line, you had 'hair spaces', which conformed to no particular rule. Curiously the em did not relate to the inch in any meaningful way. Six ems usually approximated an inch, but they were a bit short (or a bit over, I cannot remember which) so that by the time you extrapolated a line thirty ems or picas or so there was a noticeable difference.

The term 'pica' had a curious derivation. It is Latin for 'magpie', and perhaps comes from the notion that the early printed works looked 'pied', that is heavy black lettering on white paper. The pre-reformation books of rules for locating the correct prayer, were apparently also known as pie , though how this managed the linguistic journey into 'an upset of type', is not clear. The word 'em' clearly derives from the letter 'M' because this was most nearly the squarest character and was chosen as the basis of measurement.

Half past two was the afternoon tea run, this was usually brief, though I learned to drag it out when I could. Sweets and fags were the main order, and I was only allowed to visit one shop, run by a seedy character by name of Albert. He always wore a green waistcoat, and indeed always seemed to wear the same green waistcoat. He was ingratiating and threatening at the same time, a conflict caused I suspect because although I was only a lowly species, I did carry considerable de facto economic power. On an average day I could spend £4-5 an afternoon in his narrow shop, and twenty to twenty-five quid a week could not be sneered at, that was more than an average take home pay.

It dawned on me gradually that it was within my powers to take the men's custom elsewhere, a difficulty that Albert had realised right from the start. Of course I initially wouldn't have dreamed of going anywhere else, the 'boys' had always gone to Albert's, that was the rule, but at the back of Albert's mind must have been the unpleasant thought that it need not always be so, and that he was duty bound to keep me, on the one hand, 'on side' with greasy charm, and on the other hand implicitly threaten my existence with a growling snarl. Unfortunately he could never decide which was the best method to maintain my custom, and so alternated variously between the two methods in a arbitrary and terrifying manner.

Back from the shop, I dumped my various loads, trying not to muck up the change, sometimes of course finding myself out of pocket but far to scared to

say so, and it was time for the afternoon tea. The charlady was a traditional and grim figure known as 'Mrs B', who Harry seemed to rather fancy, though even in her better days she would have looked formidable, and nowadays played the part of the ferocious elderly arbitrator of culinary matters. A sniff from Mrs B about the new fangled 'cafe machines' destroyed their credibility for ever. However tea-ladies come and go, and later versions seemed more cheerful and unfortunately adopted the apprentices with motherly concern. The tea however never changed. It was strong, hot and sweet. We wouldn't have accepted it any other way.

Between three thirty and five was perhaps an opportunity for me to handle some type, perhaps even to set a line or two, though in the first two weeks I do not believed this happened. In the third week I made a business card and a letterhead. Progress. By ten to five there was a queue at the clocking out machine, and frequently one person might hold a whole swag of other peoples cards. Occasionally an order thundered down from The Owner that such practices were abhorrent to the efficient running of the factory, and that it must stop, which it did, for a few weeks, and then the men resumed the practice, for there was something immeasurably precious and heartwarming about winning those stolen minutes of company time.

Bang the card into the clock, shove it into it's slot and with a bit of a run I could make the Number 7 bus back to my home in a neighbouring town called Herne Bay. This wasn't the quickest route, the main road Number 6a buses were faster, but the number seven followed the back roads through gentle Kent countryside, and provided a soothing contrast from the grey factory. Tiny villages, handkerchief village greens, meandering hedgerows over misty brooks, gradually softening into twilight. During the winter it for almost five months of the year I travelled to and fro in virtual darkness and I maintained this regime for three years, till the jobbing side of the business was transferred to Herne Bay.

I'd get home about half-six, and there would be a hot meal on the table. A bit of tv, perhaps a trip down to the Constitutional Club (which had nothing to do with fitness or health, but where there were snooker tables and a bar) and then to bed by ten. It seemed, on the whole, a very good life, and innocent, but perhaps the past always looks like that.

Type Faces

To a boy straight from school a factory environment was quite an eye-opener. There was a daily barrage of obscenity that passed as wit, crude by-play, put-downs, asides, jokes and outbursts of male temper. The men, by and large, were not unkind, but it was thoroughly a man's world and thoroughly adult. The playground had been no preparation for this and in a muddled way, it was as if everyone considered the crude cut and thrust of the factory floor was all part of the 'training'. You learned to cope, you quickly learned new words, and learned to fling witticisms back at the older men, so they would snarl affectionately 'cheeky young beggar'.

Cheek was the apprentices only real defence or weapon, and in an unfamiliar hierarchy, where you were the lowest of the low anyway, it was surprising how quickly you sussed out the various power structures; who was worth bothering about, who was worth making that extra effort, who you could ignore. And it did not always relate to the formal position of the person. George was machine foreman, but I could give him cheek because I wasn't responsible to him (he had his own apprentices) and once I realised that Harry didn't think that much of George, I could increase the cheek factor. Harold was the works foreman, and should have been feared, but I noticed quickly that the other men treated him with genial indifference, so that although you did not insult him directly, you could poke some fun at him privately, and by and large ignore him. Roy Rogers was the force in the news comp room and you kept on his side by running extra errands. On the linos the fastest and 'cleanest' op got the most respect.

My relationship with Harry, the comp foreman was complex. He was a man in his late fifties, who drove a tiny Austin car, nicknamed the 'ashtray' by everyone because of the disgusting state of the interior. He smoked seventy or eighty a day. He bryll-creamed his hair flat and parted it exactly in the middle, the only person I have ever known since to adopt such a sartorial style. He was a ladies man, and any woman obliged to visit Harry on business dreaded it. Harry would smarm his way over, slick back his hair with one hand, and put on his face which he must have considered his most seductive smile, which however, resembled a lecherous leer. The girls called him 'the lizard'. He had

a laugh, difficult to describe, but composed of low soft ‘hmmms’ run together, and sounding like a low-throbbing moped.

These were the days of the mini-skirts and Harry took full advantage of that. If he saw a woman heading up the stairs he would patter after her, but not too close, so that a sly glance upwards might reward him with a flash of knickers. It was a blessing for Harry too that the composing room was on the second floor and that underneath was the driveway tunnel to the main carpark, so that every vehicle that went in and out had to go under the comp room. The windows being generous, it was quite possible to peer down into the car and get a ‘bit of leg’ from a mini-skirt rucked up far too high. Harry kept one eye on the cars all the time and if he spotted a female driver he would hurtle across the room to get the best vantage. On one occasion he lurched back smitten as if by a blow. He swung round to the comps and muttered in an idiotic yet triumphant fashion ‘she had no knickers on!’ It was a moment of peace.

As composing room foreman Harry could run matters as suited him and he was forever doing ‘perk’ jobs for his mates, like small business cards and the like, and would even get me to do them. Quite a network of ‘perks’ existed in the factory, and arrangements were made with the machine minders that ‘if you print my perk job I’ll run up a type job for you when you need it’. On my first week one of the comps spent most of the time doing his own wedding invites and silver dusting them behind a pile of discreetly piled dis.

Because we did a considerable number of Government Order jobs, mainly bureaucratic forms and such like, many of these were kept standing, but charged as if they had to be made up each time. So it would take Harry ten minutes to get a type job out of the store racks and he would then estimate that to comp it fresh would take him 5 hours and charge that down on his docket. This outrageous practice meant that Harry had a considerable amount of spare time, that could be usefully employed in plotting against George, making totally unnecessary ogling trips to the secretary’s den, and generally gossiping throughout the factory. There was always plenty to talk about, and since everyone else seemed to be evolved in this creative charging system, plenty of people to do the ‘gos’ with.

To his credit Harry was an excellent comp, but he’d just got lazy. His skills however, when he chose to use them were first rate, and undoubtedly I learned a considerable amount from him. But it was a constant power struggle, which reached boiling point after a year when I refused to do ciggie runs for him outside of the morning tea and afternoon tea times. I suppose it was my

statement of adulthood, my coming of age. Harry raged at me, but I dug in my heels and to my surprise, because I fully expected to be taken upstairs and shown into the room of The Owner for my disobedience and shot on the spot, he calmed down after a while and started being very nice to me. It was rather puzzling.

'Dai' Relf, real name David, was a comp about forty, paralysed down one side at birth by the drug thalidomide. He maintained a puckish, naughty sense of humour, and because he always seemed to smell of curry, I thought there was something 'Indian' in his manner at times. He loved to play tricks on Harry, like raiding his cigarette pack and lighting extra fags around the room so that Harry would suddenly find six or more ciggies going at the same time, and everyone would have him on for being a stupid old fool. If Harry wasn't available for a practical joke, Dai would send me down to the machine room to get clear ink to print blank proofs.

Then quite unexpectedly, he got married. The whole affair was conducted with a ferocious secrecy, and no one from the factory was invited (though he had worked there ten years or more) and no wedding photos of the happy bride and groom were published in the Kentish Gazette. Needless to say, rumour had it that his new wife was a perfect fright, though no one seemed to know, or if they did know, they didn't tell.

Other comps came and went, and one I remember caused quite a rumpus. Bernie Benge, a colourful character, stocky, big, red-faced and full of anecdotes of his years as a military policeman in Berlin just after the Second World War. I couldn't get enough of his stories about brains splattered against walls. He had worked as a printer before, but didn't have a union 'ticket' and so needed to work for some six months in order to get one. When he applied for his 'ticket' at the union meeting, he was opposed, by Dai. Imagine the situation, two comps working side by side, and one opposes the others nomination. Dai argued that Bernie wanted a ticket so he could go to London, where he had a job jacked up in Fleet Street. This was in all probability perfectly true. It was a running sore to the provincial comps that it was virtually impossible to get entrance into the lucrative London jobs unless you were blessed with a relative who worked there, or you knew a union man who could pull some strings.

In theory we were all in the one union the 'National Graphical Association', but there seemed to be two sets of rules, London and out-of-London, and the provincial chapters didn't much like people riding on their coat tails just so as to get the 'cushy' jobs on the newspapers. The outcome was inevitable of

course, Bernie got his ticket, as there was no proof that he didn't deserve it, but shortly afterwards, as Dai predicted, he left and we heard he went up to London. Dai was virtually ostracised for a while, which seemed unfair, because he was only making public what many printers had had private grizzles about for years. Of course Rupert Murdoch and new technology eventually ended those London 'cushies' and I suspect that many disgruntled printers in the provinces gave a small, discreet cheer.

George Savage's position in this kerfuffle was equivocal. He was the Father of the Chapel, the union rep. Each print shop was designated a chapel, with a chairman or 'father' in charge. The strange religious language seems to have originated from the very early days of unions, when there was often a close association between unions and such radical religious groups as the Methodist chapels. The FOC was not an exacting job by any means, since the printing industry was a 'closed shop' and all people who worked there were (whether they liked it or not) union members. Sometimes the factory would deduct the amount of union subs from our wages but in our case George came round to collect the subs every week and fill in the little card. A time-wasting episode that kept him pleasantly occupied for an afternoon. These were gentle days.

George had a somewhat sly, if charming way of operating. At sixty he was near retirement, a short, grey haired man, who had been a batman during the war and told the most delicious dissembling tales about his military career, stories that could involve two hours (this is in work time) of mimicry, elaboration and gesticulation, and the normally quiet machine foreman becoming animated as he evolved his story, leaving the comps in fits. Here was a man who had missed his vocation.

Of the other machine minders (notice the derogatory title, the comps were the 'kings', at least they believed themselves to be so) two stand out. Ossie was one of the handmaidens to the 'Cossar', and he spent his days oiling his beloved machine, till the oil virtually dripped from his hairy ears. He was an extraordinary emaciated figure, about sixty, and resembled an advert for famine relief. He had the habit of making the rounds of the factory on Thursday afternoons with his small box of snuff.

Thursday was payday, the money (no cheques thank you!) which came in brown envelopes, with rustling notes and clinking coins. What each person was paid was a fiercely protected matter and Harry gave me this old and sacred instruction on my first day: 'There are three things you do not talk about with the other men, religion, politics and your pay packet'. This cult of silence was deeply entrenched and it was something of a shock when I arrived

in New Zealand where people openly talked of pay rates. I couldn't believe my ears! Would the universe collapse on this heresy? Only considerably later did I learn of 'wage rounds' and 'wage rates' that were publicly stated so there was no need for a secret conspiracy. Not so in England then. No one really knew one way or t'other what people were paid, so men became furtive when they received their brown envelopes, and slipped behind their frames and cautiously counted the amount.

Then Ossie would arrive. He offered snuff, and it was considered poor spirited to refuse, though the apprentices hated it, because it made them sneeze. But Ossie was not to be dissuaded, and each in turn were given an amount on the back of our hand and instructed to 'sniff it all up lad!' Of course one half-hearted sniff didn't do the trick, so you needed a second sniff, which tended to meet the fall-back from the first sniff somewhere in the unfathomable part of your nasal passages, to the result that you steamed, flushed, and eventually let out a huge sneeze that echoed around the comp room. Ossie looked on gravely. 'That should clean you out' as the apprentice was bent double with another titanic sneeze. Ossie would then demonstrate the correct, and proper way to take snuff. He would run a line of snuff from the tip of his outstretched index finger, over the hand and sometimes halfway up the arm. Then with the efficiency of a vacuum cleaner, he would place one nostril next to his hand and remorselessly suck the snuff into his cadaverous nose. He then repeated the performance for the benefit of the other nostril.

The second machine minder that it is worth discussing, is a man who went under the most intriguing nick name of 'chopper'. Stanley was a podgy, forty-ish-man, balding, with a roly-poly gait, who had gained his nickname, it was said, by exposing himself to a schoolgirl in a telephone booth. A 'chopper' was slang for penis. He always strenuously denied this, but rather weakened his case by stating that the girl was 'willing' anyway. Possibly she was, since the women that Chopper tended to find were undoubtedly some of the most unholy 'slags' to be found in the ecclesiastical city of Canterbury.

His life was ruled by these women, either in getting one to bed (or wherever) and they in turn extracting yet more money from his generous if very shallow pocket. The truth is Stanley couldn't harm a fly and he was obsessed by sex, so he made an ideal target for 'working girls' who probably got the better end of the bargain. Stanley would blow fifty quid on a trip to London for one squirt with a 'pro'. Fifty quid was two weeks wages. He often carried pictures of himself and his 'successes', usually taken in those small photo booths, where Chopper had persuaded (he had charm undoubtedly) the beaming woman

to display her ample bosom beside Choppers bald head. The effect was like viewing three moons and Choppers head glistened as if he had oiled it.

Some of these women would visit him in the factory, causing him considerable embarrassment. One of them, demanding some sum of money, actually made her demand for Chopper to the first person she met in the door, who, as luck would have it, was The Owner. Chopper was summoned. This must stop. Yes sir. One's private life must be kept separate from one's factory duties. Yes sir. Stanley was always polite, and of course things didn't change much. Every Monday morning it was the same joke 'laid any birds this weekend Stanley?' and some mornings we got a story.

'I met this bird in the supermarket, tits like melons, fuck I fancied her. So we got chatting, and I pushed the pram for a while, till we came to this field and I said, what about sitting behind this hedge here? And she was willing and I got my hand up her and in a jiffy I was screwing the arse of her and boy did her fanny smell, I reckon she'd only had the kid that morning, anyways and then the baby started yelling so we had to stop and we got dressed and started to walk back to the shops and I turned to her and said 'whats yer name luv?'

Chopper could not keep a secret and would say anything about his life that he thought people would be interested in. He lived in a single men's boarding hostel called 'The Cheery Cafe', because, in Chopper's succint phrase 'it was the most miserable fucking place on earth'.

Interestingly, Chopper had little in the way of pornographic literature, which always seemed to be hoarded by the married men. One lino op had the best collection, kept locked up in a draw by his machine. If I'd done some special errand, he might, as a treat, frisk out a few magazines, which seemed mostly written in Danish, though I must say the text was of minor interest only. The pictures showed the full gamut of copulation possibilities, including anal sex, queer sex (gay was a word invented later), sex with beasts (one woman was clasped improbably underneath a horse with a bucket between her legs) and multiple sex. It was of course enlightening to a fifteen year old, and I thanked my mentor accordingly. It formed, I suppose, a necessary aspect of my training into the adult world of men.

The Font

The apprenticeship system has been criticised as cheap labour, and there is some truth in this. My pay was a pittance of a journeyman's, yet within three months I was perhaps as sixty per cent productive as a skilled journeyman. Within a year I was doing most comp jobs that Harry or Dai could do, and getting paid a quarter for it.

But on the other hand the apprentice had a secure environment, and a disciplined one. You could be a rebel, a bit thick, a troublemaker, but in the end the system would tame you, and support you, and the young person would emerge with a genuine skill that would enable them to find and keep work throughout their lives. My term of five and a half years was too long, but not exceptional, and most apprentices I knew had similar times. Perhaps I should count myself lucky, for my father had to do a six year apprenticeship, and my grandfather seven years.

But of course in such a long apprenticeship there was a lot of farting about, a lot of time wasting, that would not be tolerated today. Most of the older men in the trade had seen hard times in the Depression, and knew the value of a guaranteed job and trade. They didn't want things changed much. As they remarked knowingly, and it's still true, 'depressions can come again'.

It was a secure system in an insecure world. Apprentices were almost impossible to sack, so the slow learners had time to get their act together. It suited a slower world perhaps, a world with more time, and as the world speeded up the system became too cumbersome, and it's inefficiencies started to show up. In many ways the craft system was a social one, teaching indirectly the skills of communication, getting on with people, managing people, accepting the diversity of human type. Whatever it's faults, it gave a worthwhile start to a generation of young people, who today faced with the rapid shrinking of trade opportunities, can step straight from school into the drab boredom of unemployment and the dole queue.

The Matrix

After I had been working about three years in Canterbury, the organisation got a shakeup, and I was dispatched to Herne Bay, where it had been decided that all the jobbing work would be located. Looking back I can see now that the re-organisation was a less than subtle way to prune some of the dead wood from the factory floor. Several people retired or moved on, like Harry, and Chopper. George shifted to Herne Bay but lost his position as machine room foreman — and it made him bitter. Since I lived in Herne Bay my daily travelling became less onerous, and my status leapt, for I had now completed my first training on the Intertype machines and could now operate one on my own. I did less and less actual comping for the last two years, spending most of the time tapping away at the keyboard as 'the slugman'.

The new work place was quite a comedown. A dingy, low ceilinged, muddle of buildings, that stretched from one street to another. At the back was a grubby yard, then came the comp room, then the machine room, then up some steps into the paper and guillotine area, where Ruby was in charge of Bindery. Women were nearly always and exclusively hired to work in this area, because it was not considered a 'skill'. Toilets and washroom, then down a few steps, and into a clutter of rooms that held the proof-reader Jim (and his female assistant, again a 'no-skill' job) and some rooms for the reporters on the Herne Bay Press. Finally the front office, where people could write up their classifieds. About 30 people all told.

The men were a different bunch of characters. Ron liked to breed dogs and was the efficient if stressed foreman (comping and machine room), Fred and John were the machine minders, with a dour unhappy George. John was the Father of the Chapel and liked to wash out his handkerchiefs and dry them on the radiators. He was forever doing perk jobs, usually running at the rate of one 'real' job to one 'perk' job at a time. He appeared to have a lot of 'friends'.

Fred was loud and boisterous when he was happy, otherwise he was bitter and depressed, smashing a steady proportion of jobs with the platen arm. He was a sort of 'heart on his sleeve' chap, and totally readable. Herb and Alf were the two lino ops, but they moved on quickly, and Nathaniel was an old timer

compositor, muttering to himself and emerging from behind his frame to tell some story of the Depression.

Nat carried around in a little match-box examples of four point, and even some pieces of three point, type. Incredibly tiny, especially when you remember that generally six point was the smallest we ever used, and comps complained bitterly if they had to set large amounts of such microscopic stuff. Three point was half the size again, and a capital letter would be about the height of the top bowl of a 'g' in this size.

Being the 'op' gave me a good deal more freedom, and exercise of power. My weekly wage was now about £12, and went up to £18 in the last six months. The final journeyman's wage was £28 a week. So my wages were still small, but with the judicious use of 'perk' jobs I was (by my standards) doing quite comfortably. I was growing too, and from five foot four when I started I reached a prodigious five foot ten at the completion of my apprenticeship, a fact which no doubt explained why my mum took £10 in board a week. I must have been a monster to feed.

It's almost impossible to adequately describe an Intertype. It was a magical, delightful machine, composed of many whirring cam wheels, and swinging arms, that seemed to compose itself like a ballet of fine engineering. The machines were almost entirely mechanical, so repairs could be easily made, and broken parts either mended or replaced with pieces specially made. It was not uncommon to see Intertypes and Linotypes operating perfectly satisfactory even though fifty years old. In my days at Kent County Newspapers I became entranced by these elegant beasts, and Harold, the works foreman, noticed my addiction, and suggested to Harry that I'd make a good 'lino op' one day and maybe I should be trained up. So this was done and after two years I was pretty well able to operate a 'lino' on my own.

The full name of Intertypes were 'line composition machines' so that instead of having a compositor patiently put together individual characters to make a sentence, this operation was transferred to a keyboard, which produced the line as a single entity called (for a reason I never discovered) a 'slug'. Comps mainly restricted themselves now to setting major headings, the bulk of text was made up of slugs. A line (as you are reading now) was composed of individual letter matrices, called mats', and the spaces were made by the spacebands, which seal the joint of the line, so that when the hot lead is pumped against the letter matrices a tight seal is made. The spacebands themselves were thin sliding wedges. Each line emerges as a 'slug', still hot, though rapidly cooling. If the seal of the mats and spacebands has not been complete,

then hot metal would whoosh! out of the gaps as the pump came down hard. The operator invariably detected a fraction of a second before the 'splash' that something was going to happen and made shift to get out of the way. Splashes were the bane of an op's life. The hot metal chilled almost immediately, as it was designed to do and nothing short of a hammer and chisel could get the glutinous mass off.

The mats and spacebands were re-circled automatically around the machine, back to their holding places, where they can be used again, and again. The sound of the matrices clicking and dropping back off the distributor bar into the magazines, was the distinctive noise timbre of the machine. Mats were made of brass and almost indestructible, so if they did get bent you could straighten them with a pair of pliers.

The metal for the slugs came from ingots that were fed slowly into a large bubbling pot of metal at the back of the machine. A timer preset the metal pots to be molten hot by eight o'clock and the pots were popular place to hang around on black winter mornings. Sometimes I ran through a number of slugs quickly and used them to keep my toes warm whilst my breath frosted in the air.

The whole point of the hot metal process was that it was recyclable. At one side of the backyard there was a small hut, about the size of a garden shed with a door and grimy window. This was the smelting shed, and the room was mostly occupied by a large metal pot, fired by gas. The used slugs were dumped into this pot and melted down at high temperatures into a liquid again. Some small 'rechargers' of purer metal might be added, to keep the mixture a reasonable quality. The slugs were composed of about 80% lead (for pliability and rapid cooling), 15% tin (for hardness) and 5% antimony (for God knows what). If the lead content was too high the slugs would crumble, particularly once on the printing machines. If the tin was too high the metal might become sluggish in the pot and would not form the characters probably. So a lot depended on the accuracy of the boil up, but I do not remember there was much science in it. The apprentice just chucked in what he thought the mixture needed and scraped off the crusty scum with a large metal spoon. Once everything was mixed up a lever was operated down at the bottom of the pot and the hot liquid metal drained into ingot moulds, which, once the metal had cooled, the ingots were tipped out onto the floor and the moulds were ready for the next liquid dose.

This process incorporated so many elements of a medieval version of hell that Dante himself would have approved. The shed was full of acrid smoke

from the congealing scum mixture and the heat was tremendous. Needless to say this thoroughly necessary, but obnoxious task, was reserved for the junior apprentice, who was incarcerated into this tiny shed, breathing an alchemists brew of lead fumes and stirring the bubbling contents as if a servant of Beelzebub himself. God knows (for He stayed well clear) how much lead was absorbed in a days smelting of forty ingots. Pellets of shiny molten metal would stick into the fabric of your clothes and splashes of metal occasionally burnt your skin. I'm sure the working conditions did not meet any real safety or health requirements, but that was how it was then. We did not complain because we didn't know any different, and the job did not come round too often, for forty ingots would keep the Intertypes going for a fortnight.

An Intertype operators day had plenty of variety. Since the 'boy' had to clean the spacebands, I could usually get a quick run through the newspaper in the first half-hour. Then there was a steady parade of 'jobs' such as business cards, letterheads, invoices, pamphlets, wedding invites, all of which had to be measured up, with the various type faces chosen. Sometimes Ron would mark up the copy if a customer wanted a particular font, but usually the op chose whatever he thought best, which was usually whatever was easiest. The magazines holding the matrices were heavy and changes frequent. In the middle of any job there was a constant stream of interruptions from machine minders who had crunched a slug and needed a replacement, or comps who had dropped a slug and needed a new one. Then a belt might break, and that could take half hour to fix. Since a proper lino mechanic was expensive and had to be brought from out of town, the ops were encouraged to fix whatever we could. We did our amateur best.

Lunchtime might entail a fast cycle trip home, or a circling of the nearby bakers shops. Sometimes I went to my grandmother's, who had a fund of traditional sayings for every occasion. 'As sure as eggs is eggs', 'save your breathe to cool your porridge', 'a little bit of what you fancy does you good'. If you giggled immoderately she would ask 'found a giggle's nest have you?' and would often comment on someone unfavourably with the expression 'handsome is as handsome does'. She made an excellent and apparently continuous supply of cakes and soups that 'warmed the cockles of your heart'. Since I associated 'cockles' with the shellfish that we occasionally gathered from the mud flats, I had a lot of difficulty with this statement as well.

She had a big box of sepia photographs, some of which showed her as a young girl in the hop fields of Kent. Like many Londoners, her whole family came down for the hop-picking season, a sort of 'busman's holiday' Later she

married Jack, 'a man of Kent' ie anyone born south of the Medway, north of the Medway meant you were a 'Kentish Man'. Grandfather was a 'bit of a lad' 'a real brick' and the pair of them, seemed to me at least, to be rather a timeless couple, rooted in the traditional ways.

I spent two years pretty well fulltime on the 'linos' and this, together with my skills as a compositor, rounded off my apprenticeship. My 'CV' (if people had ever heard of such things) was impressive, though most of the 'qualifications' could hardly be printed. In the formal sense I had two City and Guild certificates in 'Basic Craft' and 'Advanced Craft', but in the informal sense I had developed other useful life skills.

A fast and at times ferocious wit, quite able to score off the older tradesman. I had mastered a goodly repertoire of obscenities, and could make a passable conversation on any of the topics that most adult working class men considered essential to their culture: football (including the pools, which practically everyone gambled some quid on each week), conversant with a reasonable number of car makes, a knowledge of alcohol and it's flavours and a surprising confidence about life. Surprising, because I knew little about life outside a provincial print-shop, but I thought I did.

So armed with these many qualifications, I sallied out into the world.

Journeyman

It must have seemed to me at the start of my apprenticeship that the end would never come. Five years represented a quarter of more life, and taking into account the various stages of schooling, I had been learning, learning, learning all my life, I was sick of it, it was time to spread my wings a little.

I was not unduly fearful of any initiating ceremony on becoming a journeyman. There had been some talk of it, but initiations of apprentices when they finished their time had largely faded. Lots of journeymen liked to tell gruesome stories, along the lines of being tied up outside the workshop and getting genitals smothered in printing ink but I never met anyone who had suffered this fate.

Of deeper concern was where was I to go when I had finished. There was a tradition, a strongly held one, that an apprentice should not remain at the factory where he served his time. He should, even for a short time, move on, otherwise he might remain the apprentice in men's eyes, 'once the boy always the boy' was the frequent advice given. This interesting concept led me to ruminating on where such an idea had come from and whether beyond the commonsense of it, it reflected an older practice, whereby it was necessary for the journeyman to travel about for his work.

During the Middle Ages the authority of the craftsman rose to it's highest position, unmatched before or since. The craftsman had always enjoyed an honoured position in the community, his skills enabled people to live in his houses, use his tools, his ploughshares, his weapons.

The medieval world was in expansion, and trade that was once, suspicious and local in character, began to flow more freely about Europe. Merchant caravans carried the crafted wares through all countries, setting up lively markets, where, if the custom grew habitual, a small town might develop. The craftsman was well placed to take advantage of this trade, after all it was his skills that fashioned the wares that sold so profitably, and he therefore became a sort of crude businessman in what were the beginnings of a capitalist society that we would recognise.

Craftsmen formed powerful guilds that collected together to protect their own interests and to dominate the local communities (in other words, with true

capitalist fervour, they established monopolies). As the wealth and authority of the individual craftsman increased, so they personally began to relinquish practising their own skills, leaving the actual manufacture to lesser folk, and concentrated on trading the merchandise — they became merchants. Later still, these merchants would find it unnecessary even to possess craft skills, and the authority of the craftsmen slipped, and sank to that of a mere paid employee.

Formerly the master was a craftsman of skill, creating the same goods that he sold. He had apprentices under his tutelage, learning the skills of the trade and working at the mundane and easy chores that were beneath a masters dignity. Eventually, the apprentice would present to the master his master-piece, or 'masters piece' which, if it was accepted, meant that the guild would declare the apprentice 'apt', and he would be admitted to full membership of the guild, and be able to establish his own 'shop'.

(The requirement for a 'masters piece' gradually became replaced with exams and certificates, proving the apprentice had reached a certain standard).

In time, it began to be apparent to the masters and guilds that if too many 'apt apprentices' were allowed membership the guild would be swamped with craftsmen. This would lower the price of their wares, and threaten the comfortable, and by now highly influential, position of the guilds. So the guilds made entry into their body increasingly difficult. They might insist that the apt tradesman provide a copious banquet at his oath taking ceremony, or demand a high entrance fee. By these means, it became almost financially impossible for all but a few tradesmen to set up their own shops.

Only an apprentice charming, guileful, or fertile enough to jeopardise the virginity of the master's daughter, might gain a place in the guild. And the stock joke of the apprentice seducing the bosses daughter goes back to a true and unenviable economic predicament.

So where did the apt person go? The guilds had created a fund of technically qualified tradesmen without the resources for opening their own workshops. This 'new' labour force became hired wage-men, employed by the masters as assistants or journeymen. The word journeyman comes from the French word 'journee', which means literally to 'travel through a day', or in the sense it was normally used, to work for a day.

Of course the master had the upper hand. The existing craft 'shops' were within the guilds, a 'closed shop', and a journeyman was forced to sell his skills here, since to go so outside of the guilds was illegal. Journeymen were hired

either by the day, or by a longer term. Any journeyman that tried to buck the system would be ostracised, or simply run out of town.

It is not hard to see that this sort of system has grown in scale until it has become one of the foundations of our modern working world. The journeyman is an 'employee', the master an 'employer'. The journeyman worked for a wage that had little relevance to the value of the object he made, whether he made it well, or averagely, he got paid the same wage. Incentives are as likely to be given for the speed of work done, as it's quality, and inevitably as the employee became divorced from the pride he may have felt in his workmanship, he became disillusioned, which is of course, the origin of the complaint that Karl Marx made, and which has still not been resolved.

This is an interesting diversion but did not solve my dilemma: where was I, as the newly trained and 'apt person' to go?

In the end the answer came from the Daily Mail, which in those days was where most of the advertisements for printing jobs were advertised, including the many overseas positions. It seems strange now in the light of tight restrictions on immigration and chronic unemployment, that it was still in 1974 easy and commendable to emigrate with your printing skill. It is worth noting however that three months after I arrived in the country of my choice, where the official unemployment rate was 'nil', the government of the day imposed severe restrictions on immigration. The glory days were gone, I was lucky, and had just snuck in.

You chose your country, in this case New Zealand, you saw a doctor, you paid over £25 in cash and a job was guaranteed for you on the other side of the world. You were bonded for two years, but you also received permanent residency as a matter of course. It was a good deal to a young lad with no money, so in this sense the printing trade had seen me very well, though I do not think that is quite what was meant by the term 'journeyman'.

The Final Proof

I well remember in 1974 when someone was passing round brochures on the new 'film-setting' methods, they called it then, and most of the comps were fairly scathing. 'It won't happen' 'just another new fangled idea' 'too expensive', and the universal assumption was that hot-metal 'would see me out'.

I suppose by the eighties, barely ten years after that brochure got handed round and thrown in the rubbish bin, every man there was either out of a job, or had been retrained in film paste-up methods.

It's difficult to describe or even appreciate the speed of change. It was not some slight wind from the south, but a hurricane of new ideas and technology, a hurricane that has maintained it's tempo with bewildering velocity. Hot metal and slugs went first, then in came machines with strange names like 'Phototron' and 'Fotoset', then they too got blown away by things called 'word processors'. On the machine floor things were no slower. Lithographic machines took all before them, sweeping out the platens and cylinders, then the lithos in turn are taking a hammering from photocopiers and laser printers which became valid printing machines themselves, requiring virtually no skill to prime and operate.

I don't regret the changes.

If I have nostalgia for my printing days, it is only a sentimental yearn for a past simplicity. In truth the old ways were filthy, crude, laborious, and arguably dangerous. The lead dust that filled every cranny of a comp room did not do too many favours for one's health, neither did the endless use of solvents.

Computers are neat, clean, tidy and flexible. The word processor and the accompanying laser printer I am using to write this story, has, and it astonishes me to realise this, within it's quiet box all the combined power of my old comp room, with four adult compositors and two apprentices, plus the machine room, with four adult machine minders and their apprentices.

I am wryly aware that I can retell the story of the decline and abrupt free fall of an ancient trade, 400 years old in European terms, without once getting my hands dirty. The printers devil is history.

It's curious to recall that we were taught in printing history that the first linotypes of the 1890's were broken up by 'Luddite-like' gangs, who saw in these new machines a threat to their jobs. We laughed. Well, we didn't even have time to form gangs to oppose the computer revolution. Yes it's true the newspaper unions in London tried, and look what happened to them.

The whirlwind still howls and the future changes in the trade may itself make the print trade obsolete. Once the printer was a sort of demi-god, he could read, and he possessed the power to print the written word, which was in itself a power to change the world. Now everyone has, or soon will have, that power.

Glossary

Case a shallow wooden draw holding a size of type font such as 12 point Times Roman etc.

Chase also known as a 'Forme', a strong metal frame that is locked onto printing machine, and holds type in place.

Comp compositor, tradesman who combines type to make a print job.

Dis slang for 'distribution', returning type to their cases.

Em & En units of measurement. An en (nut) is half an em (mutton or pica). Smaller units were known as 'thicks', 'mids', 'thins' and '????'.

Font all the type of that style ie Garamond font or Times Roman font.

Frame a compositors work bench, with a sloping top and type cases underneath.

Galley a shallow metal tray used to hold type on a frame, or in storage in racks.

Linotypes also Intertypes, line composing machines using hot metal.

Mat matrice or matrix, a brass individual character mould used on Linotypes and Intertypes.

Pagecord used to tie up loose type, to stop it falling over in a 'pie'.

Pie a mess of type, where type has spilled and needs resorting.

Point unit of measurement, 12 points equal an 'em'.

Proof first printed copy of a job.

Quoin sliding and locking wedge used to hold type in chase.

Slug a solid line of type produced by Linotypes and Intertypes.

Stick composing stick, used by compositor to make up a line of type.

Stone flat smooth slab of 'stone' used to lock-up type into chases.

Type individual characters, cast in a foundry.