

Camfield Press as remembered by Duncan Forbes (E 62-66)

At a distance of 60-ish years my memories of the school press are not as sharp as they might be. I do recall that when I first encountered it, the move was being made to change - under Mr Wiseman's direction and at his initiative - from the very basic tiny press with a couple of "Adana" hand-presses into something much more like a small commercial printshop of the time. There were two rooms in the [Kings] basement that were used. The first was where all the machinery was. In the centre was the "Bremner" treadle-operated press used for small jobs. I got quite adept at using it - one had to stand on one foot whilst treading with the other, and at the same time using both hands to load and unload each piece of paper or card.

The far corner contained the awesome ancient hand-operated guillotine, used for cutting the large reams of card/paper to the size needed for each job. This had a blade about 2' 6" in length, which was fearsomely sharp. I remember that once I accidentally cut in half a large screwdriver without even noticing. There was no guard on the machine at all to prevent fingers being severed!

Pride of place just inside the door was given to the elderly and rather worn German-made "Heidleberg" automatic press. A few examples of this once ubiquitous machine now survive, know as "windmills" through the action of the gripper-arms used to pick up the paper and swivel it round into the printer. Switching the electric motor on resulted in the lights in the room flickering for a second or two, such was the load it placed on the wiring. These machines made a very distinctive hiss and thump as they were working, and like the other press, required a degree of know-how and practice to obtain a well-finished print job.

The second and inner room of the press was the composing-room where the type was kept and set up by hand. I feel privileged to have learned a few of the skills associated with "letterpress" printing, essentially unchanged since Gutenberg, just at the point when it was about to be swept away by the new technology of offset-litho. Our type was obtained from the Cambridge University Press by some backdoor means - Mr Wiseman never divulging his contact there and saying that we should never say anything about it because the print unions would put a stop to it if they knew about it. From time to time when the type became worn it was sent back to CUP in a clandestine manner for recasting. We had three fonts, I think - Times Roman, Bembo Italic, and Gill Sans.

The many hours I spent in the press were partly due to an administrative error by the school. In those days at the beginning of each term notices were displayed on the school notice-boards listing which team each of us would be in for that term. I hated the compulsory games every afternoon. At the commencement of my final year I scanned the lists and to my joy my name had been omitted. This was a gift from a benign providence which I exploited to the full. Each afternoon I would slink down to the press and get on with one of the many jobs that always awaited - typesetting, papercutting, "dissing" (distributing - returning the type to its case once a job was finished), designing a piece of work, and so on.

All in all I owed the press a good deal, including an appreciation of design and print which has stayed with me ever since and a knowledge of the old vocabulary of the trade some of which survives into the electronic age (e.g "upper and lower case", or "font").