

History of the Book Trade in the North

Peter Isaac

The book trade in the North of England has a history of well over a thousand years, dating as it does to the Lindisfarne Gospels in the seventh century. The book trade in this region (interpreted in its widest sense) has included many practitioners, distinguished nationally as well as locally; as an example, Thomas Bewick, the engraver, comes immediately to mind. It is a region, too, with a long and proud tradition of local studies. It was very much in this tradition that the History of the Book Trade in the North research group was established in October 1965.

The relatively few enthusiasts who formed this group included historians, librarians, bibliographers, both professional and amateur, booksellers and other booklovers. Its earliest aim was to produce an authoritative bibliography of books printed and published in the region. Although many record cards were created for this project, it was soon realized that the project was too narrow and out of date in its approach. It was seen that studies of the trade in all its aspects might throw light on economic and social facets of human activity not previously explored.

The Group has from the beginning put out Working Papers in a simple format. The earliest of these were guides to sources of relevant information. At the same time work started on the compilation of what was rightly thought would be an essential reference tool for anyone undertaking serious research in the book-trade history of the area. The outcome of this combined effort saw the publication of Chris Hunt's now oft-quoted biographical dictionary *The Book Trade in Northumberland and Durham to 1860* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Thorne's Student Bookshop, 1975). The work, which took over ten years to bring to fruition, provided an overall picture of the breadth and depth of booktrade activities in the two counties for the first time, and gave the Northeast region a sound framework on which more in-depth sociological and economic studies could be based. The reviews were highly favourable, and James Moran, the President of the Printing Historical Society, in his foreword to the dictionary, expressed a hope that many other areas would produce similar retrospective book-trade guides. In total Hunt's work covered over eleven hundred tradesmen and craftsmen involved in varying aspects of the book trade, giving for each person their occupation(s), working dates, address(es) and a short biography with, where known, details of examples of their work. A very full picture of a lively free press in both a rapidly developing industrial and rural environment emerges for the two counties.

Hunt and his collaborators made extensive use of provincial newspapers, directories, local histories and collections of manuscripts and printed ephemera. If any fault is to be levelled at the compilation it is that papermakers were excluded, and it is to the credit of the Group that even as the dictionary was being printed work commenced on collecting new data and evidence. The outcome was *A Supplement to C J Hunt's Biographical Dictionary* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Thorne's Bookshops, 1981), edited by the late P. J. Wallis. It had taken the Group fifteen years to complete an authoritative biographical reference work, which was to become a model for many other provincial printing-history societies. Wallis's Supplement made great use of poll books, original imprints and the subscription lists compiled by the Project for Historical Biobibliography, of which he was the director. Between them the two volumes provide evidence for over seventeen hundred persons involved in the book trade and ancillary occupations from 1626 to 1860. The scale of activity in Northumberland and Durham, particularly between 1750 and 1860, was further attested by the fact that nearly seventy towns and villages had some involvement at one time or another with the trade. The rapid industrial and commercial expansion of the area during the nineteenth century was, therefore, very much mirrored in the work and activities of the region's printers, papermakers, engravers and newspaper proprietors.

Whilst Hunt and Wallis had been editing their compilations other members of the Group were already engaged in examining more specific topics. A series of Working Papers and the distribution of a number of offprints by members and friends of the Group on a very wide range

of topics began in 1965. Up to the autumn of 2001 over 100 Working and Miscellaneous Papers have been distributed. More in-depth studies nevertheless did begin to appear in the formative years with the issue of papers on the book trade in the Northeast, the role of the Victorian printer, and the part played by provincial stationers' companies. Many later papers have examined the contribution to the development of printing and the book trade by individuals during the nineteenth century. They include studies of Ralph Beilby and Thomas Bewick, the Mackay family of Morpeth, Andrew Reid and William Davison. More general papers have attempted to analyse and evaluate the printed output from specific centres such as Hexham, Wallsend and Sunderland, and on a regional basis the late C. F. Maidwell's extensive notes on papermaking in the North of England have been issued. The latter was complemented by the substantial A4 book by Tanya Schmoller on the papermakers of Sheffield (1992), the first of the Working Papers to go out as a book rather than as a fascicle.

Nor has the social impact of the printed word been neglected by the Group. The importance of reading rooms and libraries in both Northumberland and Newcastle has been the subject of five papers, and the survival of early locally printed materials has formed the basis of two Miscellaneous Papers. The development of the provincial newspaper press in Sunderland, North Shields, Cumbria and Newcastle has also merited a number of detailed articles; many of these were revised and collected in the second book (B5 this time) *Newspapers in the Northeast: the Fourth Estate at work in Northumberland & Durham* (1999).

Membership of the History of the Book Trade in the North Group has slowly expanded over the years. Individuals from the contemporary printing and bookselling fraternities, academics from the Universities of Newcastle upon Tyne, Durham and Northumbria, together with local librarians and archivists, formed the nucleus of the Group in 1965. They are still the driving force although the numbers have grown from the initial twelve to over fifty, and include many institutional members, and the Working Papers are now taken by many individuals and institutions outside the region.

Our definition of the North has 'developed' over the years and recent Working Papers have dealt with booksellers, in Manchester, Sheffield and York; the third major book, going out in the autumn of 2001, includes three historical studies of the Leeds Library, the oldest proprietary subscription library still in existence in England, founded in 1768.

The Group depends for its finances on its minuscule subscription income. At present the Group is usually able to put out three fascicles or a more substantial book each year. Anyone interested in receiving these regularly is invited to subscribe to the Group; subscription details may be obtained from Professor Peter Isaac, 10 Woodcroft Road, WYLAM NE41 8DJ, UK (e-mail: peterisaac@britishlibrary.net).

British Book Trade Index: Development and Progress

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In the 1960s and 1970s several of us -studying the English provincial book trade developed a network among ourselves, which was brought to a focus in 1980 at a meeting in Leeds University, called by Drs. John Horden and Frank Felsenstein. We met again at Loughborough University in 1983. Following the Oxford meeting two years later, these gatherings have become annual two-day seminars.

It was felt at the earliest seminars that the book-trade material being assembled was of wide interest – not only to historians of the book trade itself but also to economic and local historians, and to those studying the spread of culture and the development of literacy and education more generally. Following the Loughborough meeting, therefore, a committee was formed to investigate means of making the dispersed information more widely available. From this grew the proposal to create the British Book Trade index, which I led starting in 1985. At the outset the project was envisaged as an index of the trade outside London, but this was soon seen to be unrealistic because of the many interconnections, and London is now included.

The British Book Trade Index (BBTI), at first under the aegis of the Robinson Library of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, is a computerized index of the names and very brief biographical and trade details of all those who worked in the book trade in England and Wales and started work by 1851. For our purposes 'book trade' is very widely interpreted. It includes not only printers, publishers and booksellers, but also stationers, papermakers, engravers, auctioneers, ink-makers, pen and quill sellers, and so on. As far as space allows in the constricted database record all the various trades practised by the person concerned are included – and there are some strange combinations (bookseller and patent-manure seller, for example). We are doing our best to include all the workers, apprentices and journeymen, as well as the masters, with whom records mostly deal. Our approach to entry in the index is allinclusive, rather than exclusive.

Originally data were fed into the index in two ways: on standard forms and on computer disk. The forms were edited before being 'keyboarded' by the data-preparation service of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The data from the resulting computer disks were then edited once again and appended to the main database. Some collaborators, who have ready access to computers, submit their information in a suitable form on disk; this is particularly welcome since it obviates the necessity of one stage of editing.

The first phase of the work was to enter information from such published sources as the *Dictionaries of the Printers and Booksellers who were at Work in England, Scotland and Ireland 1557-1775*, issued by the Bibliographical Society between 1907 and 1932, Charles Ramsden's *Bookbinders of the United Kingdom (outside London) 1780-1840* (Batsford, 1954), and W. B. Todd's *A Directory of Printers and Others in Allied Trades. London and Vicinity 1800-1840* (Printing Historical Society, 1972).

Some tens of thousands of such records were submitted and entered into the index by the middle of 1989. Many required revision as a result of more recent research. The second stage of the first phase, therefore, was to bring the records for the eighteenth century up to date by having access to the English Short-Title Catalogue (ESTC), compiled by the British Library with US collaboration. The Library generously allowed us direct online access to this.

There was a further surge of submissions from a growing number of collaborators, many of which were based on the investigation of local material, rather than on published work – and here, it goes without saying, new ground was being broken. The contribution of the British Library to the index has been considerable, encompassing both the use of the card index of members of the book trade formed in the early days of ESTC and direct access to the very large computerised catalogue.

There have been so many changes recently in the boundaries of local-government areas that we have had some difficulty in relating town to county. We have, therefore, adopted J. G. Bartholomew's *The Survey Gazetteer of the British Isles* (London: Newnes, 1904) as our 'bible' for this purpose – and for the spelling of placenames.

By mid-2001 BBTI holds some 74 000 records; how are these to be used? The index, still growing, offers a quarry from which may be hewn a whole series of questions and answers about the trade.

While adding and editing entries as they come in, I am using the index to pose and answer questions about members of the book trade and their role changing with time. For example, it is clear that at almost all times women have played an important part in the trade, working alongside husbands and carrying on the business after their deaths, but often the women were the sole or lead traders. The exact picture is only slowly unravelling, but by the nineteenth century women were clearly leading bookbinders; were they also active 'pressmen' or compositors in the printing shop?

Several of the trades covered were pursued by itinerant workers, examples being papermaking and bookbinding. Papermaking, for example, was an activity that historically employed more women than men – mainly for finishing, sorting and packing.

By the Printing Act of 1662, and under the London Stationers' Company's Charter of 1557, printing in England and Wales was concentrated in London (and the learned centres of Oxford and Cambridge) under the control of the Company. The Act did not lapse until 1695, and

printing, therefore, is not found in the provinces before the early years of the eighteenth century, but in no sense is this the beginning of the provincial book trade: books were made and sold outside London long before Caxton introduced printing to Westminster.

We wish to use the index, for example, to assess the role of women in the trades and the change of this role with time and place. Further, we shall try to determine and analyse the combinations of trades practised; here we shall be hindered by the change in the nature of the trades carried on under the same name. For centuries the bookseller was the publisher, and it was not until the late eighteenth century that the two activities began to be clearly separated. Nor are directories, newspapers, etc. always consistent in their usage.

At all times in England London has been the main centre for book production, and it is desirable to elucidate the distribution networks. In this connection it is worth remembering that bookselling and pharmacy were very commonly combined; both books and patent medicines were products nationally distributed – is this the reason for the combination? It is doubtful whether the index will be of first importance in tracing the networks, but connections in individual cases may come to light. It is to be hoped that book-trade historians may find answers to some of their questions with the assistance of the index.

Since addition of data depends on the assistance of voluntary collaborators not all parts of England and Wales are equally well covered, nor all periods. Further, it is probably impossible to expect anything approaching completeness with journeymen, apprentices, women assistants, etc. The index especially lacks much very local data – wills, parish records, newspapers, census information, etc.

Over the sixteen years since its inception this project has received much financial assistance: initially from the Robinson Library of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (through the generosity of the late Dr. Brian Enright), from the Sir James Knott Charitable Trust, from the British Academy and from the Leverhulme Trust. It is desirable to make the results of this collaborative work widely available, and it is proposed to install it on the web, after more detailed editing. The School of English of the University of Birmingham has agreed to undertake this task and is currently seeking the necessary grant.