

Printing with moveable type, as we know it, is the art of combining separate letters and taking an impression from them. This craft was developed in Europe in the mid fifteenth century. We can trace the landmarks leading up to it from the earliest writing: from runes and engraving on clay, stone and wood through the invention of paper and the works of the calligraphers and copyists who created ancient manuscripts.

Many cultures with their different alphabets and customs sought ways of communicating and illustrating the words of their philosophers and scientists. In Europe a demand, arising from a thirst for knowledge combined with manufacturing techniques already known to coin and medal makers, finally resulted in the breakthrough which was to revolutionise Western Society. The separate letters of our alphabet were grouped and regrouped in the almost infinite kaleidoscope of words; arranged in lines, and reflecting the style of the manuscripts. They were fixed together, inked and pressed against paper and then distributed back into the typecase ready to be used again. Each part of the process needed great skill, exact measurement and even physical strength when it came to operating the press.

It is generally thought that Gutenberg was the first printer and creator of moveable type but many others were experimenting at the same time. His great work, the Gutenberg Bible of 1455, is still regarded as an extraordinary achievement but like many inventors he did not make his fortune. With only a few changes over the next few years his process remained much the same until the early nineteenth century. Not everyone was pleased. The rich and powerful were concerned that information and new ideas would become available to all – what would the consequences be? The skilled manuscript workers also feared the end of their industry and their control over the production of books. But the tide could not be turned and the new craft of printing spread rapidly across Europe carrying ideas, knowledge and stories to all who could read.



It was William Caxton who first brought the press to England and set up his business next to Westminster Abbey in the late fifteenth century. Caxton had to choose just one dialect from the many spoken in England and he wrote that it was difficult to please everyone because of the diversity and changing nature of the language. He played a crucial role in establishing Standard English at a time when fixed national languages with conventional spelling were a new idea in Europe. Wynkyn de Worde, who had worked with Caxton, set up his own business in 1500 'at the sign of the Sun' in Fleet Street where printing of books and newspapers was to be a major industry for nearly five centuries.

For many years the content of books and pamphlets was affected by official regulation. By the time of Shakespeare books looked very much like they do today. Even the processes of printing hardly changed until the industrial revolution began to mechanise the presses and made mass production possible. During the twentieth century new technologies introduced many more improvements especially in colour and illustration but when the computer developed in the nineteen sixties few imagined a digital world for all. So what comes next? Books, magazines and papers are read in their millions and 150 years on Dickens would still find their look quite familiar. Now the electronic revolution is likely to bring changes as seismic as those following the invention of the press and typographers and book designers are adapting their crafts to the new media.

The roar of the printing presses has left Fleet Street but if you want to learn more about our printing heritage and the latest developments in style and technology why not visit St Bride Library? You will have the chance to see what has changed since 1480 when Caxton wrote about printing that the 'craft is multiplied throughout the world in many places, and books be had great cheap and in great number by cause of the same craft'.