



JOHN PETERS

‘An officer and a
gentleman, with dark
hair and a beautifully
laid out moustache.’

John Dreyfus

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PETERS AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

'It is quite absurd that the Book of Light should be presented to the public in such profoundly unattractive bindings, some plain, some pig-eared, some zipped, in real and unreal morocco and a whole range of other gloomy, but eminently genteel materials.'
John Peters on the poor standards of trade Bible printing, January 1957

'Unmistakably an officer and a gentleman, with dark hair and a beautifully laid out moustache,' so says John Dreyfus of his Cambridge University Press colleague, John Peters. David Peace, glass engraver and author, described him as a 'Renaissance Man', citing his practice in stone carving, calligraphy, typography and architecture as evidence.

The work of John Peters is relatively unknown yet arguably as valuable to the history of Cambridge University Press as Bruce Rogers, Stanley Morison and John Dreyfus.

John Frederick Herbert Peters (1917-1989) trained as an architect at St John's College, Cambridge. In 1938, aware of world events, he joined the RAF training as a pilot. He was injured during his service, the results causing him pain throughout the rest of his life. In peacetime Peters was employed at the Shenval Press, became the Regional Deputy Director of The Arts Council, part-owner of the Vine Press and a Fellow of the Society of Industrial Artists and Designers. He worked at Cambridge University Press from 1950 to 1964.

Peters was recruited during a period of post-war recovery when competent staff were hard to find, paper was rationed and press equipment had deteriorated. It was a time of austerity, union uprising and innovation felt across many industries including printing.

In 1945, the Publishers Association reported that 'publishers contributed over 5,000 tons of metal standing type'¹ to the war effort.' Brooke Crutchley, University Printer observed that the Cambridge University Press printing staff was 'still only 296' after a fall to 180 in 1944.

In April 1946, the six printing unions which represented different skills at Cambridge University Press demanded improved working practices of 40-hour weeks and two weeks' paid holiday. By September of the same year,

secretaries of the unions instructed members to strike after failing to reach an agreement.

Crutchley saw a solution to the strikes in payment-by-results, allowing the printing staff to earn 'the extra money they so badly needed.'

The trade looked to technology to speed up work and generate sales lost due to both World Wars. The Monotype Corporation were testing a new method of printing based on film photosetting which promised quicker results than letterpress, the chosen method of Cambridge University Press. The influential Kerr Report on American University Presses published in 1948 concluded that 'the purchases of the printer will, when considering his specialized scholarly book or periodicals, be able to select one of several adequate methods of production other than letterpress without incurring the ire of his author or resistance from his publishers.' [Kerr, 1948].

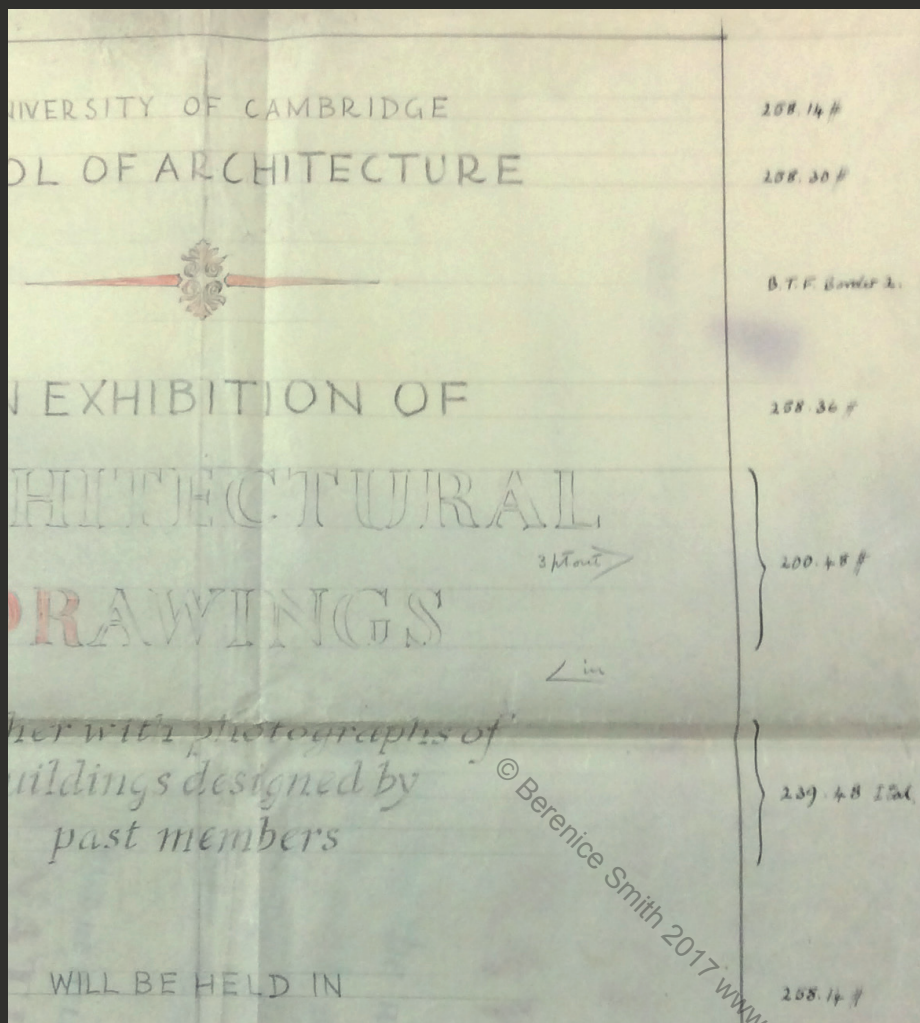
In Cambridge, Crutchley reviewed the report and recorded that the printing staff 'were unsurpassed in letterpress work' and proud of their reputation as a liturgical printer, 'built up by Morison... becoming still more impressive.' Space was also a consideration: there simply wasn't room to adopt several printing methods in the limited space at the Pitt Building.

In 1949, John Dreyfus, typographer and designer, was appointed to the post of Assistant University Printer by Stanley Morison after coming to recognition as a graduate trainee². At the same time, the Press began to subcontract work to printers including the Shenval Press of Hertford where John Peters was working following his marriage to Margaret Shand, whose family owned the firm. Said to be 'impatient' by Dreyfus, Peters left the Shenval Press after a falling out with his father-in-law. Peters began work at Cambridge University Press in 1950 after moving to Hilton.

¹ Standing type which would have been used for reprints was taken down and melted for essential war equipment. [Stevenson, 2010].

² Dreyfus met Brooke Crutchley in 1940. They started to curate an exhibition which was curtailed by war. They resumed in 1963 with *Printing and the Mind of Man*, Olympia, London.

³ *Fine Print: The Review for the Arts of the Book* published between 1975-1990 and dealt with contemporary book arts, history of books, typography, book binding and related areas. Contributors included Martin Antonetti, John Dreyfus, Paul Hayden Duensing, Colin Franklin, Steven Heller, Janet Ing, Paul Needham, Stan Nelson, and Benjamin Vorst.

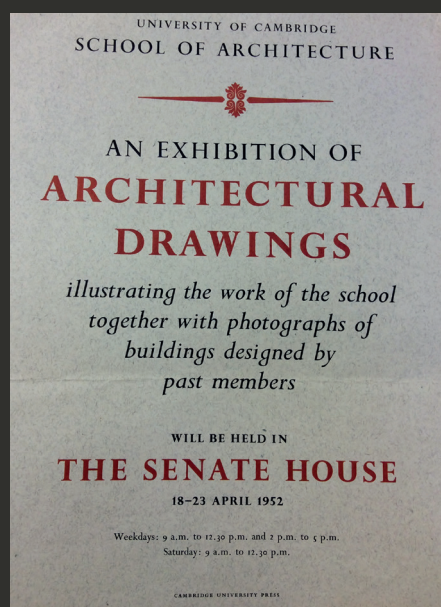


With an emphasis on high standards, the new production department was tasked to ensure that compositor tasks and the process of proofreading became straightforward. Dreyfus and Peters had principal responsibility for the design and physical specifications of the publication list following Stanley Morison's departure to Monotype.

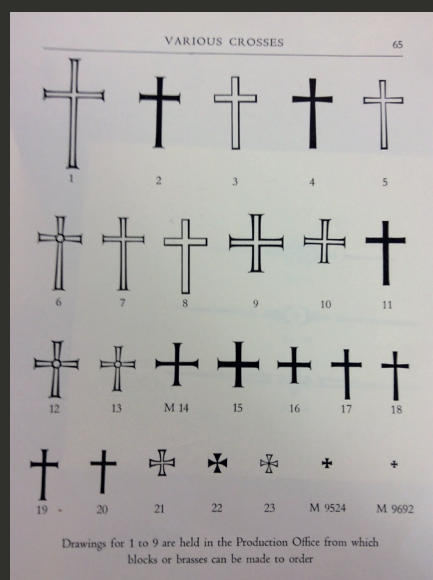
To Be A Printer, Crutchley's autobiography published in 1980, reveals the University Printer's frustration over poor record-keeping which caused delays when recalculating reprints and managing type specifications. From 1956 to 1964, John Peters records the details of his work on 'Type Specification Sheets'. These are sheets are bound into notebooks, each volume contains a sheet for each title with the date, works number, Monotype series number for each fount and the typeface sizes. The records are a fascinating insight into the range of typography available at the Press.

John Dreyfus and John Peters

Dreyfus worked with Peters at Cambridge University Press. The John Dreyfus Papers held in the Cambridge University library contain correspondence that indicates a respectful friendship, also apparent in the care taken by Dreyfus when writing a tribute to Peters which was published in *Fine Print*³. John Dreyfus notes that Peters would 'approach the problem... from an aesthetic point of view, instead of following the fashion'. Dreyfus pays tribute to the design philosophy of Peters noting that 'there has been no uniformity of typeface, format or binding; each work received the form and treatment which was thought to be appropriate to its content' [*Fine Print*, 1990].



All printed papers required detailed mark-up for the compositor by John Peters. The archives cover a wide range of jobs including work for other University faculties.



Designs for brass crosses which would have been used for embossing Bible covers.

THE LUNATIC FRINGE: VINE PRESS 1957-1963

To understand the skills of John Peters, it is necessary to look to his personal work at the Vine Press (1957-1963), run with his neighbour and an architect Peter Foster, CBE, MA, FSA and Surveyor Emeritus of Westminster Abbey.

Private presses, run by individuals produced luxury books. Emery Walker's talk of 1888 on 'Letterpress Printing and Illustration' is said to have inspired William Morris to establish his own press, the Kelmscott Press⁴. Peters and Foster wanted to produce a high standard of work pairing published writers with unknown artists. The Vine Press published 6 books and two pamphlets, though perhaps not always paying attention to regulations. In 1959, in response to forgetting to register the Vine Press, Peters writes to his lawyers, 'Many thanks for your efforts to get us certified. Bruce Rogers, an eminent printer, considered private presses were in any case the lunatic fringe.'

Using innovative techniques, the Vine Press quickly established a reputation for quality printing. Each pull (the term that describes printing on one sheet of paper from blocks and type

on the press) involved 'two dampings [of the paper] and making 'three sets of press point holes' to ensure that the paper stretched equally when drying.

Book publication list

Vitas Vera, an anthology of verses from the Vulgate Bible hand set by Peters in 13pt Perpetua, 40 copies bound by Grays of Cambridge, published in August 1957. Peters notes that he and Foster built in as many problems to test the 'eccentricities of the press' and realised that 'if we were to produce even one book a year by hand composition, we would have to yield to trade [type] setting' For future titles suppliers, including Cambridge University Press and The Shenval Press type-set mechanically.

The Cave: Short Stories by Marjorie Ansell paired the author with wood engraver Frank Martin. Two hundred copies printed in November 1957, set in 13pt Perpetua and Castellar used on the title page. The Morocco bindings were completed by Grays of Cambridge and cloth bound copies by Mansell Book Binders Ltd. Foster notes that it was 'important to print type and blocks separate to get an even distribution of pressure.' Peters writes, 'the type was set by Shenval and [Frank] Martin spent a weekend with us during proofing, re-entering lines and deepening white areas in his blocks to clear the sagging of the damped paper'.

The Watcher in Florence followed in 1959. Written by Florence Fitz-Gibbon (a distance cousin of Foster), the 150 run title was illustrated with a border designed by Peters and blocks created by Reg Boulton, then a teacher at a local school. The Vine Press bought a 20 x 4" two handed ink roller and devised 'a system of bearers across the frame which improved press work and production'. Peters records a complex registration process required to complete this title. 'We had long and searching discussions with Reg about the illustrations, our aim being to exploit the process to the

full. This led to his idea of etching the plate for the first colour, cutting lino for the second and superimposing a wood engraving for the third' [1966]. The book is set in 13pt Blade.

In 1960, the press published 100 copies of *A Parliament of Women* by Sir Herbert Read with wood engravings by Diana Bloomfield. Set in 16pt Centaur with three colour illustrations in a combination of lino cuts, end grain engraving and etched plates with a title page design by Peters. The book was printed on Bachelor Kelmscott paper which was found at the Pitt Building where it had been deposited by Sir Sidney Cockerell, and labelled 'William Morris paper'. Peters records that it dampened well but a fail in the ink meant the pages required interleaving by a trade binder who ignored the instructions with inevitable results. The printed batches were rescued by Grays who returned the sheets to almost pristine condition. The first 10 copies are prized as they were bound by Grays from the start and printed in perfect condition.

Peters enjoyed the company of like-minded designers and typographers including Will Carter and David Kindersley. The first printing of Octavian, Carter and Kindersley's typeface for Monotype designed in 1961 was awarded to the Vine Press for *Design and Tradition, The Design Oration of the Society of Industrial Artists* by Herbert Read. Peters ran working trials for Octavian at Cambridge University Press, using a 'generous leading and print on a coarse grained mould-made paper' [Peters, 1966]. The title presented many problems including reproduction problems with Peter Reddick's wood engravings in the title. Peters plate-sunk⁶ the pages on which the engraving was printed. He concludes that 'it proved to be an exhausting run'.

Jänecke Schneemann Druckfarben of Hanover, supplier to the Kelmscott Press, also provided ink to the Vine Press. The ink composition wasn't

⁴ Emery Walker was employed by the Typographic Etching Company (1873-1883) where he developed an appreciation of print. He met Morris in 1883 inspiring the establishment of the Kelmscott Press in 1891, considered the origination of the private press movement in Britain. The Chiswick Press established in 1811 began an earlier revival of typography.

⁵ One-pull presses printed one half of a sheet with one folio page at a time

⁶ Plate sinking is a specialist print technique that stamps out an area of paper to emphasise content.

⁷ David Gentleman is an English artist, illustrator, designer and author, born in 1930. He studied at the Royal College of Art and lives in London. His work is represented in Tate Britain, the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum, and private collections.

sufficiently thick to produce a crisp appearance on damped paper. As late as 1962, Peters was seeking a result and found it with Lorilleux and Bolton, who made an ink thicker and blacker than a commercial mix.

Hands-on experience enabled Peters to share his knowledge with the Stanbrook Abbey Press. The two presses began a generous association culminating in a joint exhibition of work at The Times Bookshop, London in 1965 with John Dreyfus writing and designing the catalogue. Stanbrook Abbey Press pay tribute to Peters, 'During the eight years that preceded the exhibition, Mr. Peters was unstinting in his help and advice on all sorts of problems which confronted the printers as they embarked on one ambitious project after another.'

As the business established a reputation for superiority, so relationships were forged with book-dealers and collectors. Peters and Foster believed dealers to be a more grounded method of selling, cautious of relying on market trends in book curating. The early sales accounts for the Vine Press show sales from Singapore, America and South Africa. Highly collectable prospectuses, including a specimen page and illustration sheets were hand-printed and sent to selected booksellers prior to publication.

In 1961, the Vine Press was contacted by John Betjeman and illustrator John Piper who were hoping to publish an *Illustrated Selection from the Poems of Ebenezer Elliot, the corn-law rhymers of Sheffield*. Inspiration had been taken from watercolours created by Piper but these could only be printed on a press if another illustrator engraved them onto wood blocks. Preoccupied by the economic climate and a second project with David Gentleman⁷, *An Illustrated Life in Camden*, Peters and Foster were uncharacteristically cautious. Peters writes to Gentleman in 1964, the day after the bank rate was raised to seven percent, 'we both feel for the moment we must hold our hand and wait a month or two for the situation to clarify itself. I'm awfully sorry about this, but would much rather not begin and cut our expenditure on the sort of book we hope to produce'. His fears over costs were heightened by a struggle to sell the last four copies of *A Parliament of Women*.

'As to regrets about closing down - well, yes, we have wished from time to time that we could have avoided the abrupt end. It was of course all spare-time work, and as each of us became more involved in our daily chores, it was more and more difficult to find all the evenings and weekends to maintain the proper continuity in production'. In *To Be A Printer*, Brooke Crutchley mourns the Vine Press saying it was 'all too short-lived' [1980].

The legacy is a publishing list that occasionally appears in rare book sales and the acquisition of

knowledge for Peters and Foster. In 1959, Cambridge University Press were asked to print an address to Lady Spens on vellum. Printing on calf skin vellum is specialist skill and Dreyfus was unable to find a machine or minder able to print the address. Through his expertise Peters had mastered the art of printing on a mélange of materials. John Dreyfus kept one sheet in his archives, now held at the University Library. Impeccably printed with the victorious handwritten note by Dreyfus that reads: 'Set at CUP & pulled by VP [Vine Press] presentation copies on Vellum which CUP could not do!'



Cope, Sherwin & Company

Peters and Foster used the Cope, Sherwin and Company press which is on display at The University Printing House, Cambridge.

Dated from 1840, this iron press was built by Sherwin & Cope of Shoreditch, London. It uses flat springs to return the platen to its upright position unlike British Columbian and Albion presses which use spring or counterweights. Imperial presses were manufactured up to the later part of the 19th century and used as a printing press and an arming (hot foil) or blocking (embossing) press. This press would have colourful hand decorated ornamental details on the main frame with leather straps to move the bed and polished wooden handles.

Peters writes to Arthur Gray, works manager at Cambridge University Press, in 1955, to ask permission for repairs, noting that, 'The bed of this press proves to have the surface qualities of a ploughed field'. Gray gave permission to smooth the bed by '-004 inches... I agree provided that is taken to see that the job is executed efficiently'.

A RENAISSANCE MAN: TYPE AND DESIGN

“He [Peters] immediately showed great interest in drawing the characters, and did so with such skill that very few modifications were needed when the new Bible type was cut by the Monotype Corporation.”
John Dreyfus, 1990.

by the ‘printing trade’ (1960) endorsing Castellar and Fleet Titling.

Peters was asked to work on a typeface for British Rail, a private commission. The artwork for Traveller, Monotype series 629, is dated 4th March 1959 for the exclusive use of British Rail by the British Transport Commission and made generally available in 1964.

Crutchley, Dreyfus and Peters identified legibility and quality issues with Bible printing, at the time an important revenue stream. The Bible face was designed for Cambridge University Press to enable the production and print of a pocket bible containing 4 point text. Monotype’s *Specimen Book of Printing Types* (published in 1970) lists the name as Angelus and available as roman and italic. Within Cambridge University Press it was also known as Petrus.

Peters also created drawings and specimen drawings for a typeface called Bruce Rogers Titling in January 1955.

The late Adrian Wilson (designer and scholar considered one of America’s leading fine printers), in an oral history account, cited Peters as an influence saying that ‘at the Cambridge University Press was a genuine type designer, John Peters, who had designed a couple of types, Petrus and Castellar which Mackenzie and Harris has recently imported here. So I really had a chance to see how a type designer goes about developing his designs and rendering them and then criticizing them once they are cut and adapting them to other sizes.’

John Peters contributed to the design and composition of a Cambridge University Press shield when it was necessary to produce this in brass, and many Christmas books including *‘Italic Quartet, a Record of the Collaboration Between Harry Kessler, Edward Johnston, Emery Walker and Edward Prince in Making the Cranach Press Italic’*.

John Peters died tragically on 12th May 1989. Dreyfus writes in *Fine Print*, Spring 1990 that, ‘The delayed consequences of his wartime injuries grew increasingly worse. One leg had to be amputated but the pain worsened

as the years went by. Finally it became so excruciating that he put an end to it by shooting himself. For such a creative person to be driven to a self-destructive end was a great tragedy... In death as in life, he showed great courage. The achievements of his peacetime years will continue to enrich the practice of typography.’

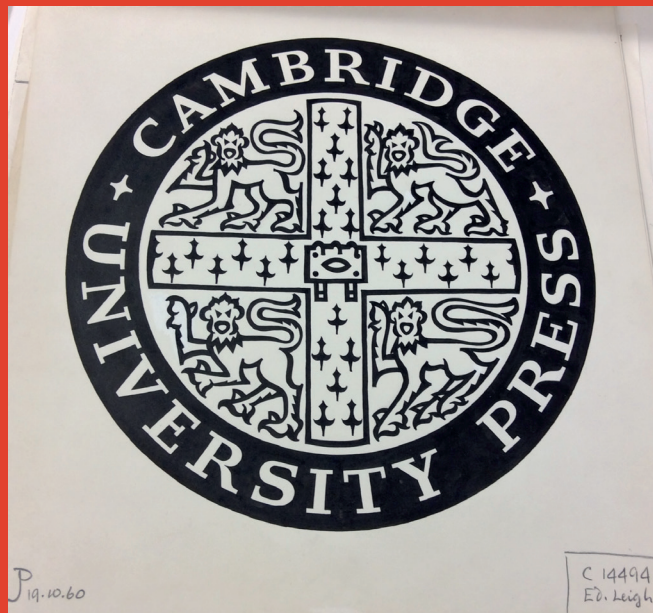
It is an under-statement of magnitude, almost impossible to follow. Better then to end with the eulogy spoken by David Peace at John Peters’ funeral, ‘His own type-face, Castellar, those scrupulous capitals, is itself a memorial of a universal kind. To me, the sight of those letters... always gives a lift to the spirits. Were it not already so well-known, [it] could be named Peters to take its place with Bembo, Garamond, Baskerville.’

The 1953 Christmas book titled *A Tally of Types* which Peters assisted in curating for Cambridge University Press reveals, ‘The solution of these problems [choice and use of type and design] is always... a rational one, dictated, not by any personal whims or fancies... let us call it a “house manner” informing the whole typographical treatment of a book, from the settlement of the type... the finest intricacies of make-up... to set all this off to the advantage’.

Peters seems to personify this philosophy whilst finding innovative ways of printing which exceeded the skills of the Printing House and mastered type design. It seems best summed up by Peters himself. In a letter to the Stanbrook Abbey Press, concerning the 1964 publication *Rituale Abbatum*, he concludes ‘the real significance of the exercise lies, as you will probably agree, in the intention and the act of doing.’

In typographic terms, Peters is best known for Castellar. Recorded as series 600 by Monotype, the final designs are dated 6th November 1955. Inspired by the Roman script ‘Quadrata’ it is identified by the quadratic characteristics of the letters mixed with circular and narrow forms. Castellar is a title font and best used over 20 point to show off the fine details. Named after the town in the Alps, Peters also designed eleven borders and seven dashes.

Book Production and Design cited Peters as a recognised designer of type



Printing from a brass of the Cambridge University Press shield, designed by John Peters, dated 1960.

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