

Times of the signs

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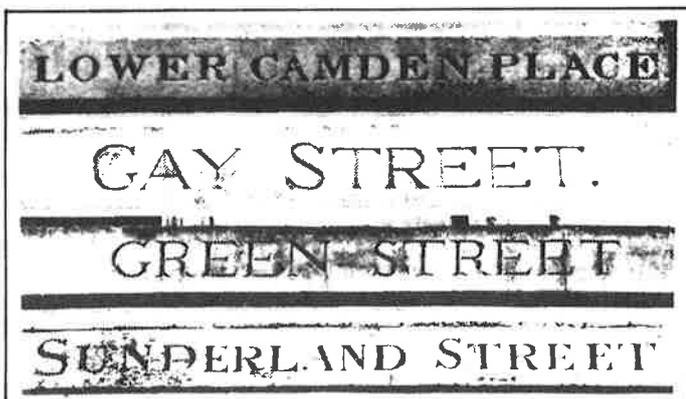
One of the most difficult questions an industrial archaeologist ever has to answer, and one which he is asked repeatedly, is 'How old is it? When was it built?' Dating buildings, structures or bits of machinery is almost always a problem in the absence of positive documentary evidence, although there are aids to identification which can narrow down the period in which a particular building or article could reasonably have been produced.

Materials and methods of construction can help in this assessment but their use requires a considerable knowledge of the subject and probably some awareness of the history of the processes involved. However, there is one fringe guide to dating which stares one in the face if the architect, engineer or manufacturer has added his mark. From time immemorial builders of almost anything have sought to perpetuate their own memory by an inscription, a name, a message of hope or vanity with, just occasionally, the date. Even if this last, and not infallible, item is missing, the lettering can sometimes be a useful guide to the timescale.

In the Western world it is generally accepted that the Romans perfected the art of letter cutting and that this perfection culminated with the inscription on the base of the column of *Trajan*, in Rome AD 114.



Consequently, what came to be known as the 'Trajan style' was used in Britain as a basis for almost all letter-cutting for nearly 1,700 years until the great periods of Regency building during the middle to end of the eighteenth century. At this time, the number of street names in, for example, Cheltenham or Bath, made heavy demands on the numbers of masons available and considerably more men acquired the art of letter cutting.



During these periods of activity the individual masons always had the last word on style, and the emergence of any new and pleasing modification tended to be copied and eventually accepted as the new standard. By 1780–90 the very formal Trajan style had evolved into a more expressive, rounder, flourishing letterform, which became established as 'English'. At the same time, the craft of type-founding was gathering momentum, particularly in the Birmingham area where *John Baskerville* (1706–1775) was experimenting with variations on Roman type and incorporating these into his own work. The importance of Baskerville on typeface design at this stage cannot be over-emphasised, nor can the fact that he was a close associate of the Lunar Society in Birmingham a tightly-knit band of enthusiasts including Boulton, Darwin, Wedgwood, Watt and Priestly and printer to Cambridge University.



Until this period the use of lettering had been confined, more or less, to buildings and monuments, incised in stone, wood or slate. At this time, however, Britain was entering the age of the large-scale use of cast-iron when it was relatively easy to add a name or inscription with the cast component. The English letterform was not suitable for casting in metal because of the difficulty of incorporating the delicately pointed serifs into wooden patterns. Some alteration was essential and, the letterform known as *Egyptian* came into use, with strokes of even width and fairly massive slab-serifs



Egyptian first appeared in a type-founder's specimen book in 1815 but by this year there was another important letterform design in existence.

Although the men who were responsible for producing cast lettering were pleased with the improvements in the Egyptian form, there was still a considerable body of opinion in favour of the traditional Roman/English designs and the undoubted aesthetic appeal of the earlier forms. This feeling resulted in the appearance of *Clarendon*. This letter combined the variation between thick and thin strokes, even though the thins were thick enough to cast well, and the bracketed serifs (admittedly truncated) of the Roman/Baskerville era with the width of the Egyptian letter. The result was ideal for industrial uses.

There is no doubt about the date upon which this new lettering received its public inauguration which led to subsequent acceptance. The glorious sweep of Thomas Telford's Waterloo Bridge over the River Conway at Betws-y-Coed in 1815 carries along its span the legend, 'This arch was constructed in the year the Battle of Waterloo was fought'. It is cast in an elegant, well-proportioned Clarendon lettering.



After this introduction, Clarendon was adopted, with minor local variations, as the most suitable and aesthetically pleasing form for casting in metals; a state of affairs which continued throughout most of the next hundred years. Probably the most notable local user was the Great Western Railway but there is a splendid example on the Stothert and Pitt Fairbairn steam crane.

The letter forms mentioned so far have all been seriffed. Nowadays we are subjected from all quarters to a barrage of sans-serifed lettering and one might be forgiven for thinking that the serif went out as the twentieth century came in, but this is not so. As early as 1816 a sans-serifed letterform appeared in the British typefounders' specimen books, whilst in the Vatican Museum there are examples of sans-serifed letter-cutting on the tombs of the Scipios, Roman generals and statesmen! In spite of early examples of the sans-serif form there are two main reasons for the serif letter retaining its over-riding popularity until this century.

1. Until inscriptions were produced by mechanical means such as casting, all letter-cutting was done by chisel and the natural way to finish a letter stroke tidily was with a chisel-shaped serif.
2. Seriffed letters designs had been refined for centuries whereas the early examples of sans-serifed letters, such as the nineteenth-century forms, were crude and heavy looking, awkward and compressed. In fact, they became known from their start in this country as 'grotesque'.

There are lots of Grots

Nevertheless, sans-serifed letters came slowly into use during the mid-nineteenth century by organisations such as the police, and the railways, station name signs. Anywhere where authority wanted to give an impression of stark and efficient utilitarianism. As an aside it is interesting to note that the biggest single source of sans-serif inscriptions, during the early nineteenth and even the late eighteenth centuries, occur amongst the non-conformist chapels of Wales, where perhaps, there was a reaction against the origins of Clarendon and English letterforms. The Post Office started to use a sans-serif face during the mid-nineteenth century and if you can find a pillar-box bearing the insignia of the Victorian era

you will also find a good example of raised sans-serif lettering cast above it. But until the period between the wars of the twentieth century, nearly all the examples of true sans-serif lettering were of Grotesque faces. Following the golden period of Clarendon and its derivatives, letter and type design, and therefore public inscriptions, were at a low water point.

As is quite often the case, this apparent period of mediocrity concealed a great deal of hard work and occasional glimpses of what the future could bring. For example in 1916 Frank Pick, the then advertising manager of the London Passenger Transport Board, commissioned Edward Johnston to design a new alphabet for the exclusive use of London's Underground system. This new sans serif typeface was so successful that it has been used ever since for all Underground publications. A few years later Edward Johnston's pupil Eric Gill began experimenting with sans-serif designs and in 1927 the Monotype Company issued their first founds (cast type faces) of *Gill Sans Serif*, a face which was later used by very many household names including Penguin Books.



The 1951 Festival of Britain finally led typographers and letter designers out of the shadows. Men who are now world leaders of the graphic design profession were given the opportunity to use the many typefaces newly available in Britain and on the continent of Europe and soon British designers once more led the world. Now thirty years after, the way ahead for anyone feeling inclined to erect a sign is wide open and utterly confusing. A 1981 catalogue from one of the several 'instant lettering' manufacturers contains over 400 different typefaces and using modern profiling equipment any collection of these designs can be permuted ad infinitum. However I feel the general theme of this article is still true. When in the early 1960's it was decided to adopt a specially designed sign alphabet for London's Heathrow Airport, Colin Forbes and Matthew Carter based this on Akzidenz, a sans-serif face produced in 1898 by Berthold and their new design became known as *Airport*. It is unique, and industrial archaeologists of the future will be able to date this design, if not the buildings, by a careful study of the letterforms.

airport →

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