

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2023

# Archiving as a Tool for Rural Jobbing Printers in Late 1800s Great Britain Through the Lens of the C. Armstrong/E. Pruddah Collection



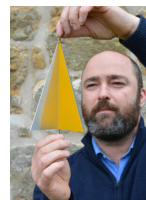
## INTRODUCTION: PRINTING IN THE UK IN THE LATE 1800S

Throughout the history of type design the scale of letterforms has been linked directly to the constraints of reading texts in books. In the 1800s the idea of the crystal goblet<sup>1</sup>—typefaces that were purely in the service of reading and designed not to be noticed in themselves—began to give way to new large-scale expressive forms that vied for attention. These letterforms no longer needed to address the confinements of reading line-after-line, page-after-page, that had fundamentally shaped typeface design since Gutenberg. Instead, they were created to present short sharp messages leading to ‘the growth of non-linearity in graphic design’<sup>2</sup> away from the printed page.

The origins of this new typography—defined both by its scale and bold appearance—were first seen in book designs in France around the 1780s and later in large ornate copperplate printed posters in England in the early 1800s. However, it was the introduction of letterpress advertising posters and handbills<sup>3</sup> appearing around the 1820s that kick-started a period of experimentation in type design.

Developments in print technology (for example new iron presses, new techniques for producing wood type, and new papermaking processes that produced cheaper paper) allowed for the introduction of large display typefaces. Type specimen books of this period (from founders such as Robert Thorne, William Thorowgood, William Caslon IV, and Vincent Figgins) allow us to date the first appearance of many styles that

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are still seen in contemporary design; such as fat face designs, shaded/drop shadow, outline, Tuscan, Egyptian/slab serif and the first sans serifs.

### **SERVING THE COMMUNITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE C. ARMSTRONG/ E. PRUDDAH COLLECTION**

By the mid-1800s in the United Kingdom, the Industrial Revolution had moved much of the production of food and household goods out of local businesses and into large faceless factories. Where once the person making a product was the same person selling it, now these items were mass-produced elsewhere and shipped to cities, towns, and villages for sale. From this grew a need to brand and advertise goods— eventually developing into slogans and product mascots that featured on mass-produced posters shown throughout the country.

As the popularity of street posters and bills continued—and the styles of type they featured were developed and copied—an industry of small regional print shops thrived. Outside of urban centers, the needs of the rural economy differed from large-scale industry and this created varied and unique work for the local jobbing printer. An increasingly literate population got their news, notices, and announcements from postings in the street or in shop windows. By commissioning the local printer they also had the means (for the first time) to post their own communications.



Fig 1. Hexham, early 1900s (19 Market Place is the second building on the left)

In 1851 the market town of Hexham, in the English county of Northumberland, had a population of 6,537, by 1901 it was 7,071. In the 1800s Hexham was situated between two industrial centers; Newcastle,

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then a thriving shipbuilding port, and Carlisle, known for its textile industry. Historically, the surrounding villages and towns had supported various small industries; from woolen mills to rope making. However, with the advent of rail transportation and the ease of which goods could be distributed throughout the country, many of these rural businesses were in decline. Conversely, the most prominent industries in the region—perhaps benefiting from these rail-links and new transportation systems—were those linked to agriculture and farming.

In 1889 Christopher Armstrong and Sons opened a printing business at 19 Market Place—positioned prominently in Hexham’s main shopping square—that continued to trade there until 2003. An archive of work produced here from 1885 to 1904 was recently discovered in its loft space. The collection allows us to gain insight into the content of rural posters and handbills and to gauge the impact of typeface styles (being produced and showcased more widely in urban areas) in this smaller rural setting.

The collection consists primarily of posters announcing the sale of livestock, furniture sales, church services, religious lectures, and playbills for the local theatre. But it also contains unique examples of village life in Victorian England. For example, there are posters announcing afternoon teas and fêtes in the surrounding villages to celebrate Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee (1897). There are also ‘reward’ and ‘lost item’ handbills that give us an insight to how everyday people—not just local businesses—might have used the services of a printer in this period. One example offers £1 for information leading to a conviction for trespassing on a local farm (fig. 2) while another offers a reward of 10 shillings for the return of a brown paper parcel containing knives and forks left on a train between Newcastle and Carlisle (fig. 3). One small card lists the ‘rules’ for people attending a local dance (fig. 4).



Fig. 2: Reward poster relating to criminal activity (1.15" x 17.5")



Fig. 3: Reward poster for lost property (11.5" x 17.5")



Fig. 4: Card for display at local dance (6" x 9")

All examples are damaged, ripped and stained from over 120 years of being left in the loft-space of the premises. They are labeled with a pencil (contemporary to their production) with the exact date and often the number of prints produced. Each shows evidence of being on a spike (fig.5)—small examples have one hole directly in the middle, larger posters have two holes, after being folded before placing on the spike. Storing printed matter on spikes was common amongst printers at this time as a way of archiving their work for future reference and within the collection there are many examples where the ability to reference previous work has been useful, with old posters been used as templates for new designs.

Often we see dates and times crossed out in pencil with the addition of fresh information for the following years events, perhaps suggesting they were also kept as reference for future adaptation or used when a client moved business from one printer to another (fig. 6 and 7).



Fig. 5: Printed material from the collection on a spike.





Fig. 6: Corbridge flower show poster, 1898 (22.5" × 34.5")



Fig. 7: Corbridge flower show poster, 1898 (detail).  
Example of a design being used as a template for future version.

Several examples are credited: ‘Printed by E Pruddah’ and slightly predate the business of C. Armstrong (fig. 8). Edward Pruddah—a bookseller and printer who had occupied the premises on Market Square before Armstrong—died at an early age in 1879. His wife Elizabeth, continued operating under the imprint “E Pruddah” until 1886 and it is examples that she produced at this time that appear in the collection, as she eventually closed her business and clients moved to Armstrong. Evidence that this transfer was a formal arrangement can be found in the local publication *An Historical Guide to Hexham and its Abbey*, from 1899, where Armstrong advertised his business as:

Christopher Armstrong (successor to E Pruddah), Printer,  
Bookseller, Stationer, Bookbinder, News & Advertising Agent, 19  
Market Square.<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth Pruddah’s seven-year tenure—owning and running the business—is unusual, but not unheard of. Opportunities for women in the print industry at that time were extremely limited. Female apprentices did not exist and therefore there was no way for them to become a journev(wo)men. join a printing union. or progress to the

position of master printer. “Deprived of the opportunity to gain formal recognition for their skills, women lacked the credentials that defined a working person’s virtue. However, this did not stop many a wife who inherited her husband’s print shop from successfully running and maintaining the business”<sup>5</sup>

The approach to ‘design’ from both Armstrong and Pruddah—with wildly contrasting typeface styles, weights, and sizes, stacked on top of each other and justified or centered to fill the poster—was typical and commonplace throughout the UK by the late 1800s. Although rural literacy rates were lower than those in large cities at this time, the message these street posters conveyed was often dense with information and relatively sophisticated in their visual hierarchy.



Fig. 8: Poster produced by Elizabeth Pruddah, 1885 (11.25" × 17.5")

Bold and large type is used to highlight words within, often long and run-on, sentences—creating two distinct ways of ‘reading’ the message. One typical example, promoting an upcoming auction of livestock (fig. 9), can be read as a fragmented list of slogans, in order of their size and placement: Horsley North Farm; Messrs Iveson; Thursday, May 11; farm stock (perhaps as a way of quickly getting the essence of the message across and drawing a viewer into the poster). However, it can also be read as a continuous sentence; Messrs Iveson, favoured with instructions from Mr Thomas Johnson, will sell by auction on Thursday, May 11 the whole of his valuable farm stock. This non-linear technique—using very large/bold type to attract attention—was to become the norm in advertising and is still prevalent today.

Although this method of highlighting specific ‘trigger’ words permeates the collection, not all examples adhere to this approach. For

permeates the collection, not all examples adhere to this approach. For example, in the ‘lost knives and forks’ poster (fig. 6) the hierarchy of the words that are highlighted seems at odds with its overall intention—with the word ‘forks’ given such prominence.

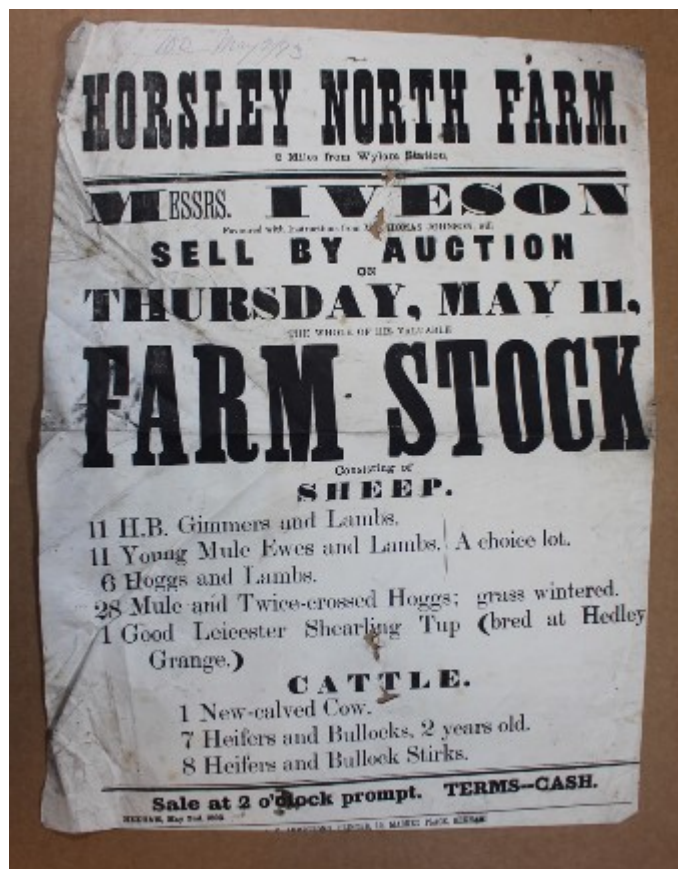


Fig. 9: Poster announcing the auction of farm stock (15" x 20")

#### INDUSTRY STANDARDS AND LIMITATIONS

“During the nineteenth century, printing unions would become remarkably robust organizations that fought against the decline of formal apprenticeship by urging employers to consider their responsibilities to the future of both craft and industry.”<sup>6</sup> It was common practice at this time for printers to take on young boys as apprentices (often from the age of twelve years) who would complete their training and become a journeyman at age eighteen. This commitment to passing on the skills and craft of their work—and the formalization of industry standards forged by union membership—suggests that master printers took a certain level of pride in their work and individual approach. However, the constraints of the printing process prohibited the level of creative freedom we might associate with today’s graphic design<sup>7</sup>

Aside from the arrangement of certain words that might affect the message, other aesthetical choices were limited. The vast majority of the collection consists of black ink on white paper—the most cost-effective approach—and occasionally coloured paper. When Armstrong does use



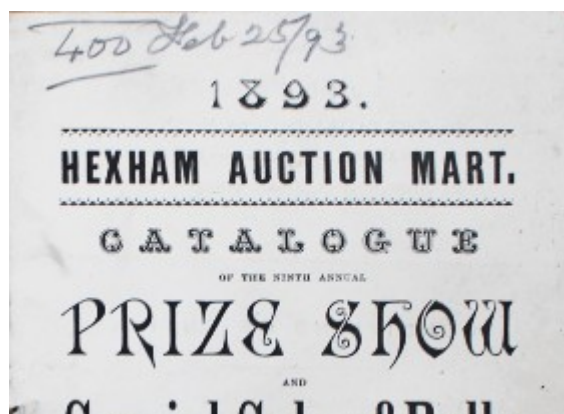
colour ink it's limited to red and blue as a single press. Throughout the collection there are only two examples where both colours appear on the same design—both of which are large-scale posters for annual village shows.

The use of colour for printing type became popular in the 1840s with circus and theatre bills and posters for advertising and festive occasions “usually red with either blue, green or black”.<sup>8</sup>

#### TYPEFACE SELECTION

The other major consideration a printer had to affect the ‘design’ of their work was the choice of typeface and its scale. Viewing the collection through a contemporary lens it's tempting to assign the traditional concerns of a graphic designer when choosing a specific typeface for a certain job. However, with the array of different typefaces used on a single poster—not obviously relating to its message—we need to ask whether Armstrong's approach was more pragmatic. Perhaps his choice of typeface was not only based on its look, but also because (remembering woodblock letters are physical and there would be a limited supply in the printer's office) they simply fitted the space needed. Therefore, we might view some of the typographic choices as an acknowledgment of the production constraints rather than a reaction to the content of the message. Again, the lost knives and forks poster (fig. 6) is an example where the logic of the message and the hierarchy of its typographic form do not seem to align.

When analyzing the choice of typefaces and how Armstrong applied them, its important to consider that many of the associations we have for specific typefaces today may not yet have been assigned in the late 1800s. For example, in an 1893 catalogue for a local livestock mart (fig. 10) Armstrong uses three distinct and highly stylized typefaces: Bourgeois no. 11 (fig. 11), Rustic (fig.12) and Mikado (fig. 13). All three have powerful connotations today (and perhaps also at that time) but they seem almost random and without context in the messages they convey.



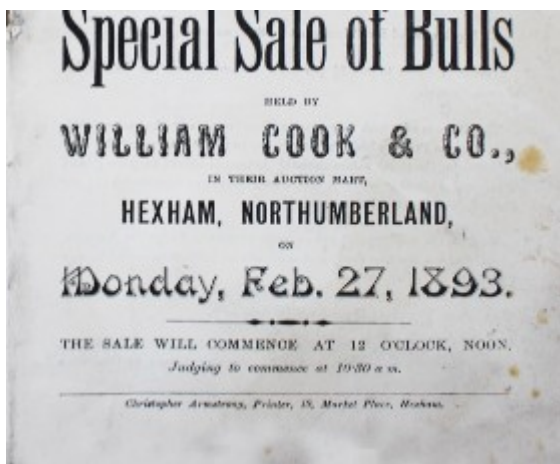


Fig. 10: Cover for auction catalogue, 1893 (5.5" × 8")

## CONCISE English Histories

Fig. 11: Bourgeois no. II, Miller & Richard, 1865. Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces*, 1976. p. 84 (100% scale)

## The Mediterranean Eastern Transit

Fig. 12: Rustic, Vincent Figgins, 1846. Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces*, 1976. p. 55 (100% scale)

# Geographical Scottish Society ANTIQUAE

Fig. 13: Mikado, Miller & Richard, 1887. Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces*, 1976. p. 101 (100% scale)

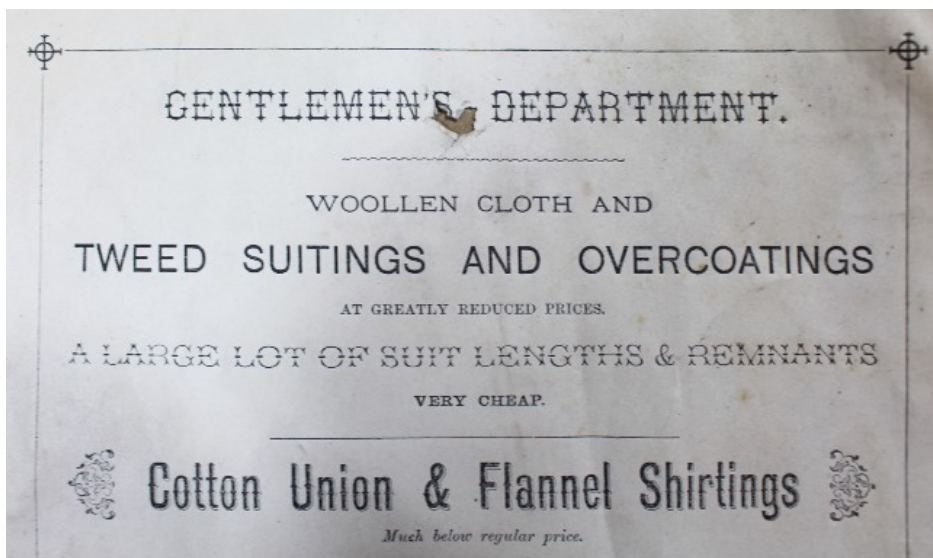


Fig. 14: Advertisement, undated (detail)



Fig. 15: Advertisement, undated, 9" x 11"

## NERVOUS SYSTEMS

Fig. 16: Two-line pica ornamented no.9, Miller & Richard, 1857. Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces*, 1976. p. 71 (100% scale)

## SPARKLI

Fig. 17: Unnamed, Miller & Richard, 1860. Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces*, 1976. p. 214 (100% scale)

## Horti

Fig. 18: Unnamed, Vincent Figgins, 1870 (lowercase 1874). Nicolette Gray, *Nineteenth Century Ornamented Typefaces*, 1976. p. 218 (100% scale)

### CONCLUSION

The C. Armstrong/E. Pruddah collection is far from unique. The design and format of the posters and bills—and the rural subject matter they convey (livestock auctions, furniture sale and other local business

concerns)—are similar to those produced in rural communities throughout the country at that time, and can be seen in other well-documented historical collections.<sup>9</sup> However, it's notable that this collection spans nineteen years and then ends, even though the business continues on for many decades. Unlike other collections found on printer's spikes—that appear to be purely archival—this 'collection' seems to have been produced for a more urgent and practical reason; that of a young printer taking over an ongoing business concern. The work in the collection prior to Armstrong's involvement was produced under the name E. Pruddah—all in the seven-year period after Edward Pruddah's death—by his wife Elizabeth.<sup>10</sup> Examples become more abundant up to the point Armstrong takes over the business and then slowly peters out as he becomes more established. Therefore we can view this collection—not only through the lens of late 1800s rural business development—but also through the social, political, and gender-specific constraints of that time.

The C. Armstrong/E. Pruddah collection was only recently discovered (untouched) in the loft of the premises it was produced in over a hundred years ago. Today 19 Market Place is the home of Wardhaughs of Hexham, an electrical and antiques business. Although attempts were made to keep the collection intact—and for it to be archived by a local historical society—individual posters and bills have become available to purchase in the shop. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the designs are being purchased by local people attracted by family names, properties, villages, etc. Therefore, we might consider the collection as now having a second life, returning back to—and being cherished by—the community it was created for.

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Michael Twyman, *John Soulby, Printer, Ulverston: A Study of the Work Printed by John Soulby, Father and Son, Between 1796 and 1827*, 1966

Michael Twyman, *Printing 1770–1970*, 1970

Beatrice Warde, *The Crystal Goblet*, 1930

With thanks to Hexham Local History Society and Wardhaughs of Hexham

## NOTES

- 1 Beatrice Warde, *The crystal goblet*, 1930
- 2 Michael Twyman, “The bold idea: the use of bold-looking types in the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Printing Historical Society*, No. 22, 1993. p. 112
- 3 *Collins English Dictionary* defines a ‘handbill’ as a small printed notice that is used to advertise a particular company, service, or event.
- 4 *Hexham Historian*, 26, Hexham Local History Society, 2016. p. 50.
- 5 *Graphic Design Before Graphic Designers*, David Jury, 2012. p. 16.
- 6 *Graphic Design Before Graphic Designers*, David Jury, 2012. p. 16.
- 7 The term graphic design would not be coined for some twenty years., with posters and bills produced by printers throughout the UK at that time appearing to be very similar.
- 8 *Printing 1770–1970*. Michael Twyman, 1970. p.45
- 9 Notably the collection of rural posters from 1796 to 1827 by Ulverston-based printer John Soulby, housed at Barrow Public Library.
- 10 Perhaps helped by them sharing the same initial.

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