

## **Blue Plaque for Vivian Hughes Ridler (1913 –2009), 16. 9.16**

I commend to you Mick Belson's book, *On the Press: Through the Eyes of the Craftsmen of Oxford University Press* (2003). It's an irreverent but affectionate account of life in the printing works. Some sharp things are said about the bosses over the centuries, but a photograph of Vivian forms the frontispiece and Belson describes him as "the finest Printer in living memory. He really cared for his staff and all the employees at the Press had deep respect for what he stood for and his unquestionable knowledge of the gentle art of printing." That opinion is endorsed by Nicolas Barker, who wrote the article about him in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

I first really met Vivian in the late seventies. Even now I hesitate to refer to him as Vivian. In 1958, when he became Printer and I first joined the Press, I would have known him as Mr Ridler. Our children knew him as Vivian Ridler, the man who, to their annoyance, occasioned interruptions to family car journeys as we called at his home for some Perpetua Press business. In 1977, we were both members of the working party which planned and managed the Quincentenary celebrations of OUP. Five or so years later, I began to work with him as publisher when a group of poems about Christmas by George Mackay Brown of Orkney (one of the places where Squadron-Leader Ridler served as an Intelligence officer in the Second World War) had to be dropped, for reasons of space, from a volume of his work I was publishing at the Hogarth Press. Those poems, illustrated with wood-engravings, were published by the Perpetua Press in 1984. It was an enormous pleasure to be associated with this skilful, meticulous, humorous, creative man.

Born in Cardiff in 1913, he was five years old when he moved with his parents and older sister to Cotham, Bristol, following his father's appointment as superintendent of Avonmouth Docks. The young Ridler's interest in printing was stirred by the master in charge of the magazine at his school, Bristol Grammar. Before he left school in 1931 to become an apprentice at ES and A Robinson (specialists in printing for packaging, employing 4,000 people), his father had bought him an Adana printing machine. This was the basis of a five-year partnership with David Bland, later production director of Faber & Faber. Ridler and Bland named their Press after Eric Gill's Perpetua type-face which appeared in 1925. Ridler had met Gill at Douglas Cleverdon's bookshop in Bristol.

That period of the Press saw the production of thirteen books, including *Fifteen Old Nursery Rhymes*, which was chosen as one of the “50 best books of the year” in 1935 by the First Editions Club (its co-publisher was only 22 then), much ephemera, and the parish magazine of St Matthew's Church, Kingsdown. All were printed on a series of machines in the basement of Bland's father's vicarage. The last one was so large that it caused the floor to sag dangerously and made such demands on the house's five-amp circuit (its fuse strengthened with a nail) that the street lamps dimmed when printing started up.

In 1936 John Johnson, Oxford University's Printer, gave a lecture on jobbing printing in Bristol. Ridler met him after it and that led to his being taken on by Johnson as his assistant. But not for long. He soon fell foul of the spirit of the Press as described much later by his wife in her *Memoirs*, as being “like life in a monastery without the consolation of religion”.

This was no place for the man who published, and humorously illustrated *Willie, whispered little Nellie: Being a Selection From the Sublime Works of the Most Excellent Poet P Gabbitass* (Perpetua Press, 1933). Ridler occasionally asked to leave the works 20 minutes early (for which his pay was docked) to go to London to visit his fiancée, Anne Bradby, whom he was to marry in 1938. Anne was the niece of Humphrey Milford, who was appointed to the post of London publisher of OUP by Charles Cannan, Secretary to the Delegates, and he was John Johnson's father-in-law. That was held against him too. So he was fired. Fortunately, while he worked out his notice, Theodore Besterman offered him the job of managing his new printing venture in London, the Bunhill Press. Its factory was completely destroyed in the Blitz. Ridler was then called up for war service. On demobilisation he became first tutor in typography at the Royal College of Art, and typographer to Lund Humphries of Bradford. In 1948 John Johnson's successor, Charles Batey, invited him to return to the Press as works manager.

Subsequently, for 20 years until 1978, Vivian served as Printer to the University. His experience and skills suited the role perfectly. He knew his business. He may not have relished the pressure put upon him by Batey's annual enquiry of him: “I'm not having a holiday this year, Ridler. What do you have in mind?” But he worked hard, usually at his desk by 7.30 am. Proud to serve the University of Oxford, he satisfied Archbishop Laud's grand ideal for the Printer to the University, Architypographus

Academicus. He didn't, however, take himself too seriously. The imprint he put on a menu for a Wynkyn de Worde Society dinner read "Vivian Ridler, smooter [a casual worker in a printing house, late 17<sup>th</sup> century] to the University". He was President of the British Federation of Master Printers in 1968–9 and was appointed CBE in 1971.

The Printer and his people were town rather than gown, but Vivian moved comfortably within both worlds, just as he did in the worlds of management and the craft of printing. Most of the 900 or so people who worked for him lived in the neighbourhood, Jericho, which had grown up round the works. He championed and cared for them, getting involved in the many organisations in which the Press workers served in their spare time: the in-house fire brigade, sports clubs, the Piscatorial Society, St John Ambulance. Martin Slade, apprenticed to the Press in May 1961 at the age of 15 and later Director of OUP's Printing Services, paid a touching tribute to him in a letter to the *Oxford Times* in 2009: "He was held in great respect and, even when he was tough on us, and he knew how to be, he was held in great affection". Once, when accompanying an outing to London of the St John Ambulance branch, and with time to spare before the evening show, "Mr Ridler took me on my first visit to the National Portrait Gallery and afterwards to tea and ice-cream."

He upheld the austere Oxford tradition of producing a book that should be satisfying to handle, but, in Batey's words, "as we read on, withdraws itself from our consciousness, leaving us alone with the author" (Kate says that her father was not a fan of Folio Society books – far too showy). None the less he designed and produced work that can only be described as classically beautiful. Among his personal achievements were the Bible on which The Queen swore the Coronation oath in 1953, the New English Bible in 1961, Stanley Morison's *John Fell and the Fell Types* and a facsimile of *The Waste Land* that needed two-coloured printing to elucidate it. Being knowledgeable about contemporary painting he enjoyed commissioning artists for the University's almanack calendar, among them John Piper, Edward Bawden, Gilbert Spencer and Alfred Daniels. He went to town with Daniels. In April 1959 he invited him to paint some aspect of the Press at work. Daniels made many drawings and finally an oil painting, "The Machine Room", which now hangs in the Fairway in the OUP offices.

He also directed radical changes in printing techniques – from hot-metal setting to film setting, from letterpress to litho printing, from sheet-fed printing to web offset. To accomplish this modernisation he had to build a new factory of which he was justly proud.

He was, of course, deeply saddened when the printing works closed in 1989 – and troubled too: so many good people lost their jobs. If anyone could have saved them, that person would have needed the authority, expertise, shrewdness, and negotiating skills of a Vivian Ridler! Making and watching films was a life-long enthusiasm and he began his retirement by taking a walk-on part in a film, one that will live in history, “Heaven’s Gate”. Another of his retirement activities was what he called “enforced gardening”. His injunction to other reluctant gardeners was, “Learn to love the dandelion.”

And he continued to practice his craft. Even while at the Press he had used the Perpetua Press imprint for the occasional pieces he printed in a shed here. For fifteen years, a steady stream of books and broadsheets came from his Cropper Demy Folio Platen Press, some of the finest books being collections of Anne's poems or of other poets edited by her. That machine is also prominently displayed in Great Clarendon Street. Later still in life he continued to design but no longer to print books; these included the first collection of Rowan Williams’s poems, type-set by Neil Scott.

He loved company, enjoying it with visitors to Stanley Road and at lunch in St Edmund Hall - his professorial fellowship there gave him enormous satisfaction. He had a special feeling, as Brian Mountford pointed out at his funeral, for what he called “life enhancers” (mostly women!). Always an optimist, he was a model of how to grow old.

I think I should end by turning again to Vivian’s role as the Printer. The *ODNB* says of his great predecessor, Horace Hart, that “in the course of his work ... he had preserved the heritage of the press, while thoroughly updating its procedures.” That could be said of Vivian too. Brooke Crutchley, Printer to the University of Cambridge 1946–74, described him as coming “nearer to the ideal for the job than anyone I had known”. His retirement was marked by a splendid exhibition of his work in the Divinity School and there have been two Ridler exhibitions since then, one of them in the Bodleian Library. The family gave his papers and Anne’s to the library.

Vivian Ridler has left a deep impression on the world: generations will take down from shelves books that have his name on the title verso. All who knew him respected and admired him. Many, including many who worked for him, loved him.

He was a great man and a funny man. So I venture to suggest that we should remember him both as Architypographus Academicus and as Smooter to the University.

*Hugo Brunner, September 2016*