LETTERING

The Alphabet – writing based upon symbols that represent key sounds of spoken language, as opposed to concepts or objects within that language – was invented around 2000BC, probably in Egypt, by migrant semitic workers.

The earliest physical, archaeological evidence for the use of the alphabet dates from letters inscribed in rock outcrops along one of the major trade routes. Though fragmentary, they probably signify names and jobs –

They recorded and communicated IDENTITY. From the time of its birth, lettering in stone was identified with posterity – the basic human urge to be remembered, and to remember those they loved or admired.

The inventors of the alphabet took Egyptian symbols and adapted them to their revolutionary purpose, incorporating a tiny fraction of the range of the cuneiform.

The alphabet is economic and immensely useful. It may be adapted to any language. It quickly was. Phonecian, Hebrew, Etruscan, Greek and Roman cultures adopted the alphabet. And, whilst it may have taken many years to realise its potential, and it remains the case that not everyone in the world can read, in the moment of its invention, the alphabet democratised knowledge and communication and wrested the power of the written word from the hands of the elite : or, at least, provided the key to this possibility.

The basic forms of the letters and the sounds they represent has remained remarkably constant in evolutionary terms. Between 22-30 letters, remaining generally in the same sequence, some falling into disuse (but remaining); the frequency of use of one or another varying with the nuances of whichever language has adopted them, or even within the same language, as it evolved over time.

For our purposes, alphabetic form – the combination of aesthetic letter-forms and the skilled realisation of these forms in 3 dimensions – was achieved by the Romans.

Letters were no longer scratched or stabbed with rudimentary setting out and minimal finesse, but were endowed with beauty of form, and were cut in the way that skilled letter-cutters continue to cut them today. Lettering became the domain of dedicated craftsmen and women.

Yet, however letters were, or are cut, their basic power to communicate exists, and to communicate is their fundamental purpose.

What Roman lettering demonstrates is that this power is only enhanced by following the rules and methods adopted by Roman craftsmen.

Early alphabets – and early roman alphabets – comprised only what we now call ‘capital’ letters.

In lettering, form has followed function. Capital letters were appropriately and efficiently created using a flat chisel.

As writing – using a brush or other flat-edged and relatively soft tool – became the dominant medium for lettering, so scribes evolved their own efficiencies. TIME became a major factor. The library in the Muslim caliphate of Cordoba, Spain, contained some 6 million books, each of them hand-copied. The drive to record, accumulate and to communicate knowledge put a premium upon speed. As did the increasing need for administration and bureaucracy.

Roman, ‘rustic’ letters, applied with a brush, were the handwriting of their day. As the Roman period progressed, so letterforms became more varied. Uncial and half-uncial alphabets appeared – combining in one alphabet letterforms that we would recognise today as being either upper or lower case.

The first truly lower-case alphabet was the administrative script of the Carolingian period – the hand of the scribes under Charlemagne of France, around 800AD. It was possibly the invention of Alcuin of York.

Printing revolutionised lettering and was the critical realisation of the democratising, popular potential of those first fragments of graffiti on the rocks of the Egyptian desert. The development of printing ran parallel with the rediscovery during the Italian Renaissance of Roman letterforms – so-called ‘humanitarian’ letters and alphabets. These twin tracks define letters as we understand and use them today.

The Renaissance asserted the importance of form – of the exquisite, controlled and subtle design of each letter – its shape, size, proportion, as well as variation of serifs and stroke-thickness. These forms were imposed by the tool – whether brush, chisel or type-block (itself handcut, as a raised letter, in wood), but also simply by the movement of the human body; the arc formed by the movement of the arm or wrist.

The expansion of typography shifted the priorities of letter-cutting once more. Paper was not stone. Craftsmen had access to many more examples of alphabets. Most letter-cutting since has been informed – but not determined – by typography.

The long history of letter-cutting in stone means that the craft has always drawn upon both calligraphic and typographical sources. Carving letters in stone has existed as long as letters themselves. It has been a tradition that has existed in parallel with all other forms of lettering. This has been a craft tradition, passing from one generation of craftsmen to another, almost seamlessly, although no two letter-cutters are the same.

This tradition informed typography as much as it was later informed by it. Type-face designers were often themselves letter-cutters – John Baskerville, in C18 England, for instance, whose type-face is still commonly used.

By the mid- C18 in Britain, there had emerged from this tradition a letterform, a fully articulated upper- and lower-case alphabet that could be found across the country employed with only minimal variation by craftsmen living at either end of the country. What variation there was was due mostly to the skill and/or aesthetic/craft sensibilities of the craftsman, the quality of his own craft education (as opposed simply to his training).

This letterform was the English Letter.

We continue to live everyday with something very similar – it is the basic pattern of the majority (and certainly of the most legible, most comfortably read) of newspaper and book fonts. But it was not originally a type-face. It is hand-drawn with a pencil; hand-cut with a chisel. It displays minute variation and imperfection. Each time it is used, it is set-out on the stone; the spaces between each letter and each word are specific to the inscription, to the combination of the words. It is non-mechanical.

Type-faces were hand-cut onto blocks, they too possessed imperfection, idiosyncrasy and variety, but were then used time and time again. Modern, computer-generated letters have lost even these imperfections; have lost all touch of the human hand, have lost all flaws in their repetition; have lost all essence of that human striving for perfection, without ever quite achieving it, the process of which frequently produces something more beautiful yet than perfection could ever be.

The English Letter reached its peak in the hands of the masons that were born in the Eighteenth Century. As they died, the confident simplicity of the English Letter – which had spread across the British Isles, and had been carried to America and elsewhere by British stone-cutters, so that it appears in even the smallest and most apparently isolated corners of Britain and New England – became diluted and diminished by the brashness of Victorian lettering. Here was the final ascendancy of typography – a restless, eclectic superabundance of letter-forms, squabbling, competing for attention on every gravestone. One can find maybe 10 different letterforms to a single stone – shadow- letters, 'gothic', all manner of fonts, deriving their inspiration no longer from a quietly confident craft tradition, but from sign-writing; advertising, newspapers.