

IN DEFENCE OF THE ROMAN LETTER

BY DR JOHN R NASH

The Roman letter was one of the few aspects of Roman art which was truly their own, not borrowed from the Greeks. Like their roads and aqueducts it was beautiful because it did its job supremely well. It is one of the most enduring legacies from the Roman period; it formed the basis of our Western writing and printing; we couldn't do without it if we wanted to. One may well ask why it – or, more precisely, Roman lettering produced by hand in the twentieth century – needs defending.

In fact, the survival of the Roman letter, at least in its most subtle and enduring form, has been a rather precarious affair. Its history has tended to be one of ebb and flow, deterioration and regeneration, eclipse and revival; in this country, no less than in others, it has periodically been given a bad time – not least by those who admired it and wished it well. A good deal of this perpetual motion has been due to a constant struggle between two tendencies, summed up by Eric Gill in the definition: 'Letters are things, not pictures of things' – the first being the craftsmanlike point of view, which considers the letter first and foremost as a thing: a useful tool whose beauty comes from its usefulness; the second being the artistic or self-expressive point of view, which sees lettering in terms of form and texture, to be looked at rather than read (pictures of things.) The craftsmanlike point of view, whether in typography, calligraphy or lettering, is now somewhat out of fashion, to say the least.

Lettering (as opposed to calligraphy) was defined by Father Edward Catich as 'A method of making letters in which each essential part is made by more than one stroke' – letterforms constructed or drawn rather than written directly with an edged or pointed pen. We're concerned here principally with applied or 'public' lettering – that is, informational lettering on signs, memorials,

buildings; lettering which is intended to be a part of our daily lives, and which I see as still being best served by the traditional Roman capital and its relatives, an amazing family capable of infinite subtle variations, which no one has yet come to the end of.

The Roman inscriptional capital thrived particularly during three periods: in the Empire of the second century AD; in sixteenth century Italy (principally Rome); and in early twentieth century England, during the revival of calligraphy and the general restoration of high standards in printing and lettering which was associated, in its early days, with the Arts and Crafts movement. The first of these periods is symbolised in most people's minds by the inscription at the base of a column in Trajan's Forum in Rome, which still survives though very much worn by merciless cleaning – six lines of dedicatory text V-cut on a marble slab around 113 AD by a master craftsman (fig. 1). Splendid as it was (and is) it was only one of many magnificent inscriptions among many, most of which, unfortunately, only survive in fragments; it's one of the very few examples of the highest level of Roman lettering craftsmanship of that period to survive in place and more or less intact, and as such has attracted the attentions of scholars and enthusiasts down through the ages. From 1935 to 1939 Father Edward Catich, an American priest, teacher and lettering craftsman who had been trained as a Chicago signwriter in his youth, made intensely detailed studies of the inscription and discovered many interesting things, not least of which was the fact that each letter contained subtleties which weren't immediately apparent. In 1968 he published *The Origin of the Serif*, in which he proved to his own and others' satisfactions a theory suggested by only a few before him: that the basic forms of 'capitalis monumental' do not arise from the action of the chisel alone, but from being 'written' beforehand on the stone



Fig.1. Inscription at the base of a column in Trajan's Forum in Rome c.113 AD. Fig.2. Painted lettering on wall at Pompeii c.79 AD.

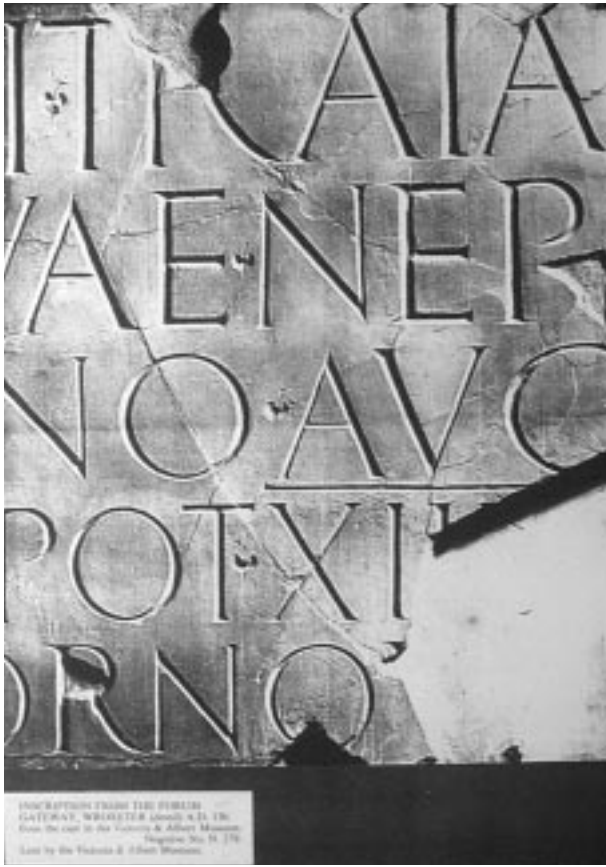


Fig. 3. Roman inscription at Wroxeter, England. c. 129 AD

with a flat brush producing thicks and thins, itself influenced by the edged reed pen writing of the time. The theory is reinforced by large brush lettering – ‘signwriting’, in effect – to be found on the walls of houses along the main thoroughfare of Pompeii, publicising political candidates and advertising gladiatorial combats, many probably done the night before the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD which buried the town, none meant to last more than a few days, let alone nineteen hundred years (fig. 2). In one of these (unfortunately mostly destroyed by American bombing in 1943) we see two forms of capital letter in use at the time – one which we now think of as ‘rustic’, written quite directly with a flat brush as if it were an edged pen, the other a compressed form of ‘quadrata’ or square capital, written rapidly but more carefully, also with a flat brush but with much more manipulation, and showing a very close relationship with the forms of the Roman inscriptional capital at what Stanley Morison was to call ‘its highest development.’ Catich, using his own brush lettering skills, was able very convincingly to re-create the likely stroke sequences which, for example,

mean that the broad stroke of the A is serifed only to the right, not the left (the Trajan inscription’s A does the same) and the tail of the R has a wonderfully natural and vigorous quality which simply cannot be duplicated with compass and straight-edge.

The point is reinforced by an inscription from Wroxeter, England, dated 16 years later than the Trajan inscription (fig. 3). In spite of the technically skilled carving, these letters were laid out geometrically; and it shows. (Perhaps there was no ‘ordinator’, or brush-lettering layout artist, available in second-century provincial Wroxeter?) The serifs on the As are carefully formed, without spontaneity; the Os are contained religiously between head and base lines, with the result that they look too small; straight strokes are dead straight, so that they tend to look fat in the middle; the curves and tails of the Rs are stiff and mechanical; letters tend to follow a near-identical pattern; and far too little attention is given to spacing, so that tight clusters of narrow, vertical letters contrast uncomfortably with spaced-out wider ones. It seems evident that the whole inscription was governed by compass and straight-edge, rather than by eye.

A marvellous contrast is offered by a tomb inscription some distance outside Rome on the Appian Way – more fragmentary than the Trajan, but in some ways more remarkable (fig. 4). It follows the same logic, incorporating the same optical subtleties; but the more you look at it, the more different it is. Most obviously, the tops of A, M and N are cut off, not pointed; less obviously, the letters have more weight and are more deeply cut than the Trajan, and have a very pronounced ‘waisting’ of straight strokes to avoid the optical illusion of thickening. The Rs are nothing short of marvellous. The spacing is done with great precision; as Stan Knight points out in his *Historical Scripts*, ‘Without abbreviation or word-splitting at the end of lines, each of the sixteen long lines has been accurately centred.’ Great care with form and spacing is also shown in an inscription on a large semi-circular seat which forms part of a tomb at Pompeii – the big eleven-inch letters are impeccably placed, and show every sign of having been made by hand and eye (fig. 5). The craftsmen who worked on the Trajan inscription were certainly not unique, and they travelled and worked throughout the Empire – witness the splendidly unfussy examples to be seen in the Musée Gallo-Romaine in Lyons, or the noble remnants of the Julius Classicianus monument in the British Museum. But for every skilled lettering craftsman of the Roman period, there were whole armies of incompetent ones, as a visit to the Wolfson Gallery of inscriptions at the British Museum



Fig. 4. The Memorial to the Children of the Freedman Sextus Pompeius – on the Appian Way in Rome and dated the 1st or 2nd century AD.

Fig. 5. Inscription on a large semi-circular seat which forms part of a tomb at Pompeii.

will swiftly show. It's as well to bear this in mind, and preserve some sense of proportion, since in Renaissance Italy—the next period we have to deal with—the scholars and craftsmen of the ancient classical world tended to be revered uncritically, en masse.

In the fourteenth century blackletter, or 'Gothic' held sway. The straightforward Roman inscriptional idiom was virtually gone by the dissolution of the Empire, disappearing behind forests of ornamentation, surviving only in deteriorating fragments wherever the Romans had been. Scholars became restive and began increasingly to make efforts to regain what they saw as the superior standards of the classical age. In lettering and calligraphy the mood was set by Petrarch himself, who wrote in a letter to his friend Boccaccio 'That he objected to the intricate forms of Gothic, saying that it was attractive to look at but hard to read, produced by artists rather than scribes, and that he aimed at a clear script'.

In the case of the Roman capitals as such, Renaissance scholarship took a rather unfortunate turn, based on excess admiration. Taking it that those who produced such splendid forms must have been possessed of a special secret, scholars and artists took it by turns to publish alphabets of Roman capitals laboriously constructed according to formulae which, they were convinced, the Roman craftsmen must have used. From Felice Feliciano's *Alphabetum Romanum* in 1460 to Ferdinando Ruano's *Sette Alphabeti* in 1554, at least half a dozen of these alphabets were published (including one by the otherwise admirable Albrecht Dürer, fig. 7), each different, some more complicated and ingenious than others, each of consuming interest to historians, each dead as a doornail in comparison to the originals which the Italian authors, at least, could presumably see all around them. It remained for Giovan Francesco Cresci, the writing master who was 'scriptor latinus' to the Vatican Library from 1556 to 1572, to follow the revolutionary procedure of actually going outdoors, studying the antique inscriptions in situ and drawing the letterforms directly from them rather than simply formulating theories about them. For this he was ridiculed by his arch-rival Palatino, but the capitals he came up with were the only ones known to me from that period to approach the spirit and subtlety of their ancient models (fig. 8). The 'Treatise on the Most Excellent Ancient Roman Majuscules' which forms an important part of his first writing manual, *Essempiare di piu sorti lettere*, published in 1560, still makes very sensible reading (e.g., 'the perfection of these curves is obtained more through the continual exercise of judgment and by the eye rather than by compass measure-

ments'). The ending of his treatise is both poignant and timely:

But above all take pains to choose intelligent workmen who are well-grounded in these Letters, because nowadays there are few lettercutters who understand them and can cut them correctly, clearly and with patience; consequently there are even fewer who realise the difficulty, effort and time involved in cutting and drawing; and so it comes about that, because the pay is so bad in these miserable times, there are few who take up the occupation of drawing and cutting letters properly.

The Cresci tradition survived for some while. Its actual use in public lettering was mainly confined to Rome, where it had great influence – notably on Luca Horfei, priest and scribe in the Vatican Library, whose dates are not known but who reached the height of his career under the patronage of Pope Sixtus V (1585–1590) (fig. 6). He designed and carried out many inscriptions on fountains, churches, public buildings and obelisks erected through the Pope's energetic building programme, the culmination being the great circular mosaic inscription around the base of the inside of the cupola of St. Peter's (1590). But his capitals, although graceful, already lack some of the vigour of the ancient models – even those of his master Cresci. James Mosley, in his *Trajan Revived* – the authoritative account of this period in the history of the Roman capital – notes: 'In subsequent writing books,



Fig. 6. inscription from the base of the Obelisk in the Piazza S Giovanni in Laterano, Rome, erected by Sixtus V in 1588, designed by Luca Horfei.

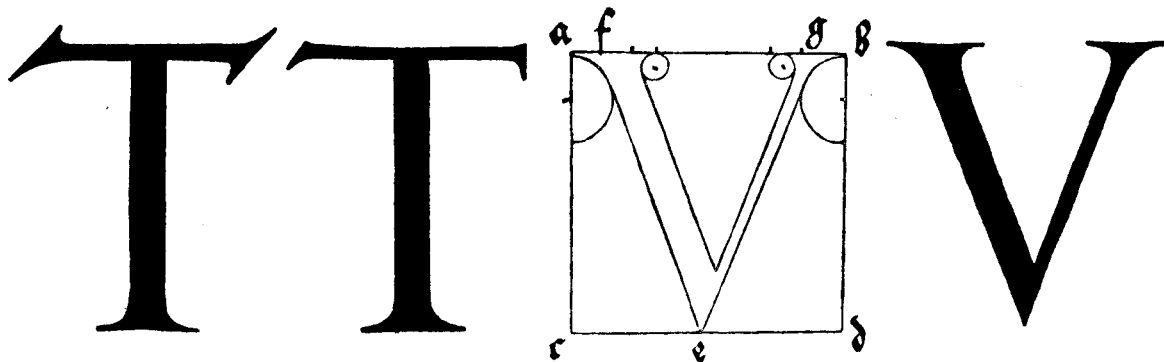
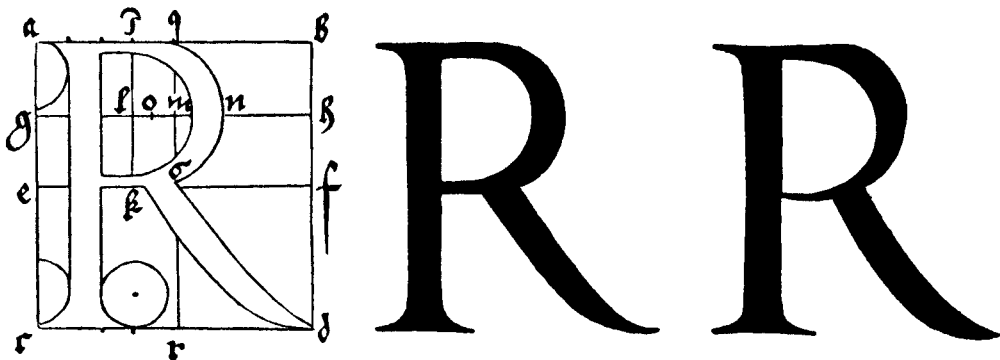


Fig 7. Page from *Of the Just Shaping of Letters* by Albrecht Dürer 1535.
 Compare the stiffness and clumsiness of Q, R, and S with the Cresci caps opposite.

D E F

K L M

Q R S

Y Z

the Cresci capitals lasted well into the 18th century before succumbing to the more modern French and English styles'; but when the Roman lettering tradition did fade away in Italy, it went for good – even the Fascists, with their enthusiasm for the grander aspects of Roman culture, couldn't revive it for long. The Trajan column still stood in Rome, and now and then attracted attention – not, however, for its lettering, but for its sculpture. Napoleon III, whose troops occupied Rome for a time, went to the length of having an electrotyped facsimile made of the whole column; in 1864 he presented plaster casts made from this electrotype to museums in London and Berlin. The London cast went into the Architectural Room at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and was forgotten about for forty years.

'By the end of the nineteenth century all lettering in England had sunk to a very low level.' (So wrote the calligrapher MC Oliver in 1945). 'Alphabets became mixed, poor medieval forms became grafted on Roman, fancy excrescences abounded in the printed initial, printers' types were known as 'crazy', and all was chaos, as the lettering books of the period will show.' Oliver's opinions reflect those which were beginning to make themselves felt at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1899, when Edward Johnston was given his first lettering class at the old Central School in Regent Street, lettering was already on its way to being considered a very important part of the Arts and Crafts movement, thanks not least to William Morris's involvement in calligraphy in the 1870s, and in printing at the end of his life. However, the man generally credited with perceiving the true importance of the ancient Roman inscriptional letter as the soundest basis for study was not a letterer at all but an architect and educator – William R. Lethaby, who was first Director and then Principal of the Central School, and who saw to it that classes were taught, not by art theorists, but by practising craftsmen. By all accounts he was a man of remarkable intuitive understanding, with a habit of coming to quiet and seemingly groundless conclusions (for example, about Johnston's potential as a teacher) which were later proved right. It was almost certainly he who discovered the Trajan column and its inscription languishing in the V & A and introduced it to Johnston and to Johnston's pupil Eric Gill. According to Oliver, on or about 1901, when Lethaby was appointed Professor at the Royal College of Art, he had separate casts made of the inscription, to be available for students at the College to examine and draw. The demand for these casts grew until most art schools in the country seem to have had at least one.

It must be stressed that neither Lethaby nor Johnston and Gill after him made any claim that the letters of the Trajan inscription represented perfection – the sort of 'ideal' letter for which a Renaissance scholar might have striven. The inscription offered two main advantages: being fairly complete, it provided clear models of nineteen letters of the alphabet, and it was readily available not only in the flesh (or rather, plaster), but in the form of photographs and additional casts which the V & A were ready and able to provide, at a time when authoritative reproductions and exemplars of any kind were very difficult to come by. If, however, the Appian Way inscription (for example) had been available in equally clear form, it would have been greeted with equal enthusiasm. In the section on 'Inscriptions' which closes Edward Johnston's *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering* (his immensely influential manual, first published in 1906), no fewer than four additional examples of Roman capitals are illustrated. However, Johnston had to depend on rubbings and on outline drawings from Emil Hübner's *Exempla Scriptura Epigraphicae Latinae* (Berlin, 1885) – much better than nothing, but far less satisfactory than photographs; so his letter-by-letter analysis of Roman capitals is based on the Trajan model.

We know that Johnston's classes were immediately successful, that he took on another class at Camberwell in 1900 and, in 1901, at the Royal College of Art in South Kensington, where he was to teach for the rest of his life. From the start the classes attracted students who were to be important in carrying out his and Lethaby's ideas, but two who were particularly influential in carrying the Roman letter into the public domain were Eric Gill (who was in the Central School class almost from the first) and Percy Smith, who joined the Camberwell class in 1901. Each became familiar with most lettering disciplines, including type design, but for our purposes their importance lies in the concentration of Gill and his workshop on letter-carving, and of Smith and his workshops on brush-lettering and signwriting. For Smith, the effect of Johnston's teaching was undoubtedly of the greatest importance; to Gill, as we know from his own words, it was nothing less than a revelation. In 1899 he was a bored trainee architect who was becoming increasingly interested in carving and had already tried his hand at letter-cutting; by the end of 1903 he was a full-time lettering craftsman with 29 jobs on the books and a contract to design fascia lettering for the booksellers W.H. Smith, which he did on the Roman model, with great effect. Smith took over the Camberwell class when Graily Hewitt resigned it, produced his own portfolio of teaching alpha-

bets in 1908 (causing a rift with Johnston, who considered that he had plagiarised), and set up his own flourishing workshop, first as the Roman Lettering Company, then after the first world war as the Dorian Workshop and Studios. Like their contemporaries, they were very aware of being part of a resistance movement which had very ancient and straightforward principles at its heart. Gill wrote of those days in his Autobiography: 'And what was fine lettering? It was in the first place rational lettering; it was exactly the opposite of 'fancy' lettering. That was the new idea, the explosive notion, and, you might say, THE SECRET.' Lethaby summed up the prevailing attitude very succinctly: 'Nothing done for the LOOK looks well.'

Johnston's book was undoubtedly the first to publish the V & A photo of the Trajan inscription, but James Mosley states, in *Trajan Revived*, that in 1903 Batsford had published *An Alphabet of Roman Capitals* by one G. Wooliscroft Rhead, which claimed to provide letters which had been 'carefully enlarged from the inscription on the Trajan Column, Rome,' and which would serve as the best models for a lettering examination newly required by the Board of Education. So the Trajan message was already reaching the authorities. A year before that, in Boston, an American architect, Frank Chouteau Brown, published *Letters and Lettering*, in which an analysis of classical Roman capitals takes pride of place. The Trajan inscription itself is not mentioned, but this book furnishes the first example known to me of a curious tradition which has prevailed in how-to-do-it lettering books ever since. Brown presents carefully detailed drawings, from rubbings done by himself, and even two or three photographs, of well-proportioned historical examples from the great period, praises them... and then pays little or no attention to them, presenting an alphabet designed by himself which is best described as picturesque. The same pattern prevailed through the twenties, thirties and forties. With the success of Johnston's book, lettering manuals proliferated, each with its V & A photo of the Trajan letters, or fulsome praise of them, or both, each proudly showing an alphabet supposedly based on them which sprang wholly or in part from the author's imagination. As one looks through these books – and it must be noted that the tradition persists right up to the present day – he comes to the inevitable conclusion that the author hasn't read his own book, or at least hasn't looked carefully at his own illustrations. This is surely an all-too human phenomenon. But it did not do much by way of furthering the cause of genuinely accomplished Roman lettering among the general public.

Both Smith and Gill, however, seem from the start to

have thoroughly digested the principles behind what one might call the 'design success' of the Roman capital at the height of its development, and made use of these principles to develop their own highly subtle forms – similar at first glance, different in detail – following their teacher Johnston's dictum: 'One may lawfully follow a method without copying a style.' Where letterers with less perception were claiming to copy the style of the letters in a particular inscription – generally the Trajan – and failing to a greater or lesser degree, Smith, Gill and a handful of others, once they had sufficient grasp of the method and spirit which lay behind the Trajan letters, were careful not to set up these or any other single alphabet as a model. Smith's first published Roman capitals (in the portfolio already mentioned) are simply headed 'Pen-made Roman capitals founded on second-century incised inscriptions'; his two later lettering books pay homage to the Roman capital but make no mention at all of the Trajan inscription. Gill's early letter designs for W.H. Smith did not copy the Trajan letters, no matter how much they undoubtedly depended on them; nor did his later alphabets.

I want now to trace the influence of these two men on the fortunes of the classical Roman letter as used in public lettering in twentieth-century England – Smith in the field of brush-lettering and signwriting, Gill in letter-carving. I start with signwriting, the most ephemeral of the lettering crafts. Signs have no rights. They can be taken down, painted over, burned and smashed with impunity; unless made picturesque with Victorian gilt and gingerbread they, and the work and knowledge which may have gone into them, tend to escape notice, and when their functions end they end too. At the beginning of the twentieth century, therefore, signwriting, though often a highly skilled craft, was definitely lower-class and undervalued. The mood of the new movement in England (and in Germany, where Rudolph Koch established his Offenbach workshop) placed great emphasis on such principles as forthrightness, return to basics, appropriateness of tools, materials and techniques, precision of craftsmanship, and good workmanship placed on a equal footing with fine art; as such it militated against snobbery – in lettering, at least. It also turned against the English 'vernacular' capitals which had come to prevail in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with their mechanical sameness of proportion, exaggerated thicks and thins and absolute disregard of good spacing; and it limited ornamentation and historical 'quoting' to specialised fields where these were thought to be justified – advertising, for instance. In 1937 *The Studio* issued, in the form of a special autumn number, a pictorial survey entitled

Lettering of To-Day, with sections on calligraphy, lettering in book production, advertising, and (not least) 'Lettering in Association with Architecture', selected by Percy Smith, who stated at the beginning of his introduction:

The greater part of this lettering is mostly used for modest service, e.g. to announce or direct. For the sake of efficiency, that is of good service in preference to mediocre or bad service, it will surely be agreed that this should be done as clearly as possible. For most purposes, such clarity appears to be best obtained by the use of forms which have won a common focus of understanding. Architectural lettering should thus be classical rather than romantic.

In other words, capitals were to be based on the generally recognised Roman models from the great period. Minuscules were more of a 'design problem' being based on Carolingian and Italian Renaissance pen-made forms as a foundation over which the 'Roman character of design' was introduced according to the perception of the individual craftsman; some, such as Smith, Gill and their associates, were continually refining and improving their

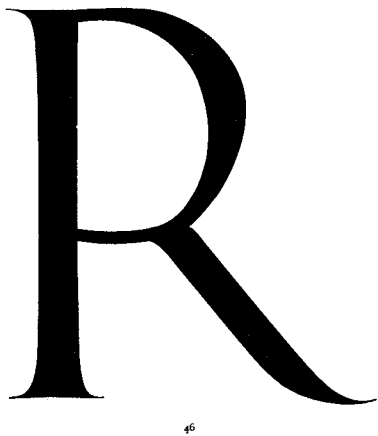
alphabets, hence were more successful than others. (The development of an appropriate italic was the knottiest problem of all, but doesn't come into the present story.)

The beauty, simplicity, practicality and lack of 'Art nonsense' shown by most of the work in *Lettering of To-Day* had considerable influence and was a showcase for talents now much better known, such as Berthold Wolpe (still working with Koch in Germany at the time), Gill, Gilbert Ledward, Milner Gray, Norman Ball, David Kindersley, Smith's former partner George Mansell, Arthur Ayres, and Smith himself. Its impact was reinforced the following year (1938) by LC Evetts' *Roman Lettering* (see fig. 9) which (again) reproduced the V & A cast, but then broke with tradition by making a careful examination of the letters one by one, in a way which still makes the book a very useful one – by a limited use of compass and straight-edge to form the underlying construction of the letters, then superimposing the optically corrected forms on this geometric framework, so that the subtleties are clearly illustrated (the elegant flattening, top and bottom, of C and G, the concavity of the serifs, the slight 'waisting' of the vertical strokes.) Some liberties are

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ROMAN R

The junction of the loop and tail is a feature which clearly distinguishes the Roman R from others. In order to avoid the appearance of too wide a curve just before the intersection of the tail, the loop of the letter R is considerably straightened, forming almost a right angle with the tail. The loop, continuing, turns slightly upwards towards the perpendicular stroke, so that the junction of the loop and tail is somewhat like the letter Y in shape. (See also the diagram of the letter B.)

The angle at which the tail is placed is in a direct line with the uppermost serif. The tail extends below the line a little, and branches from the loop in a manner similar to that of the letter Q.



CONSTRUCTION OF THE LETTER R

The width of two wide strokes is measured below the base-line, and the line *AB* is bisected, giving *XY*, indicating the depth of the loop. From *A*, *C* is drawn the width of one stroke away, and *D* the width of two and a half strokes away. From *D* a vertical line is drawn, which meets the line *XY* at the point *J*. From *D* and *J* diagonal lines are drawn at 45 degrees, which give the point *E*, the centre of the outside of the loop. At an angle of 15 degrees from the horizontal a line is drawn through *E*, and a stroke-width is measured to give *F*, from which centre the inside of the loop is described, the radius being the same as that of the outer circle described from *E*. With this same radius the compass point is placed on *G*, and the outer circle is cut at *H*, thus producing the point at which the tail begins. From *D* a line is drawn through *H*, giving the angle of the tail.

With the compass point on *A*, concentric arcs are described which connect the loop with the upright stroke, the lower arc touching the line *XY*, while the upper one is one-third of a wide stroke away.

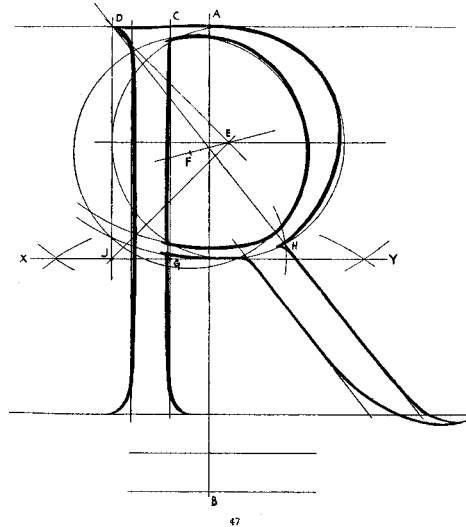


Fig. 9. LC EVETTS *Roman Lettering* (pp46/7). Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd., London, 1938



Fig.10 WILLIAM SHARPINGTON Alphabet designs.



Fig. 11. WILLIAM SHARPINGTON Signpainted lettering at Kenwood House, Hampstead.

taken (for example, the R, whose tail droops below the line in a way the Trajan R never did); but by and large it was rightly admired, went into a second printing in 1948 and undoubtedly influenced the further establishing of what was beginning to be called the 'Trajan letter' as a basic form to be taught to art schools, manufactured commercially, and eventually issued as a guide to signwriters under contract to the Ministry of Works.

Smith's workshop thrived – first in John Street, Adelphi as the Dorian Workshop and Studio (1918–1935); then, after parting company with George Mansell, from 1936 to 1943 in Grays Inn Place, with 'Dorian' changed to 'Dorno'. (He died in 1948). Throughout the lives of both workshops there seem seldom to have been fewer than four assistants staying for varying lengths of time, of whom the best known was William Sharpington (fig. 10).

Sharpington joined the Dorian Workshop around 1920 and left in 1935 to set up on his own, first in Kennington, then (after the war) in Balham. From 1945 he carried on the workshop at the City and Guilds of London Art School, two floors above the lettering classes which he had begun there in 1930 – an ideal situation for training, since

an especially promising student might find himself proceeding from practice to actual work by climbing two flights of stairs. His alphabets were essentially those learned during his years with Smith, but continually refined and improved until they were truly his. The counters of his caps were upright from the beginning, like Smith's Dorno Bold, and the distinctive tail to his Rs and the 'pointy' look of the thick strokes of his round letters made his work identifiable from a long way off (fig. 11). Throughout the forties and fifties the workshop produced some of the more distinguished examples of public lettering in the London area; and a contract gained in 1950 from the LCC to write boards for schools and immunisation clinics throughout Greater London enabled him to take on various assistants and helpers, some of whom stayed with him for years. Of these, perhaps the most accomplished was Kenneth Breese (fig. 12), who improved on Sharpington's caps as Sharpington had improved on Smith's.

Of course, the Sharpington workshop was not the only one producing fine brush-lettered work throughout that period. Tom Bamford, in Cambridge, established his own distinctive idiom throughout a long working life and

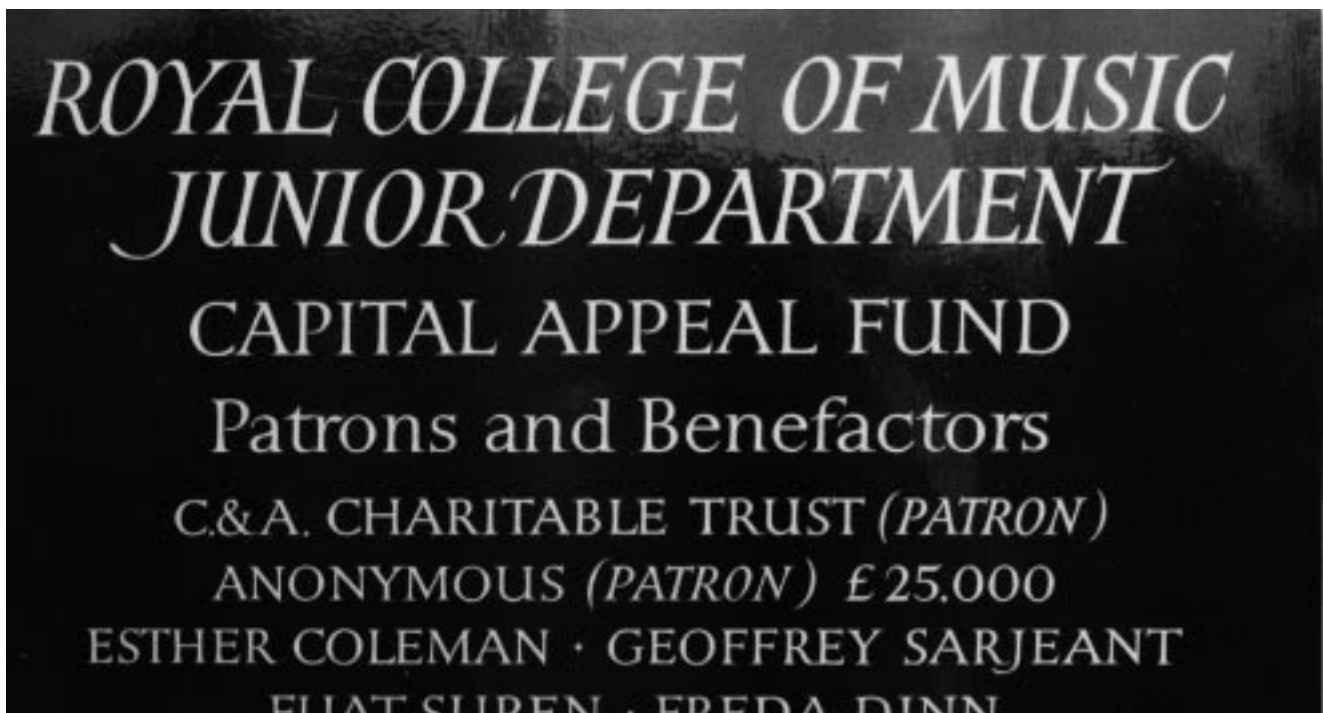


Fig. 12. KENNETH BREESE Signpainted lettering for Royal College of Music.

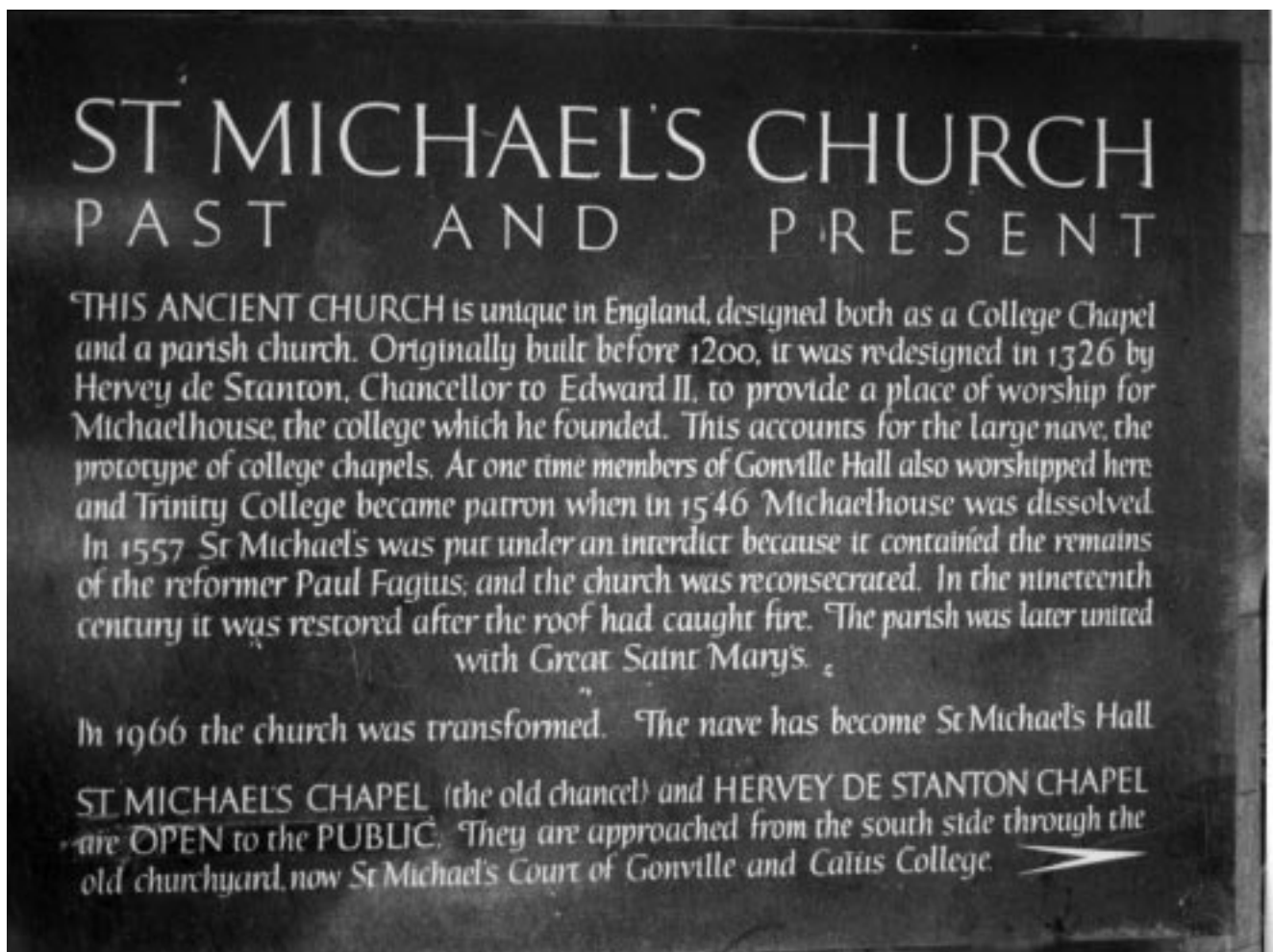


Fig. 13. TOM BAMFORD Signpainted lettering at St Michael's Church, Cambridge.



Fig. 14. Near the Museum of London; awaiting demolition.

many of his signs survive there (Fig. 13). In London a number of fine examples by anonymous craftsmen of Roman lettering on boards and fascias survived into the seventies (fig. 14); but almost all were eventually overtaken by plastic.

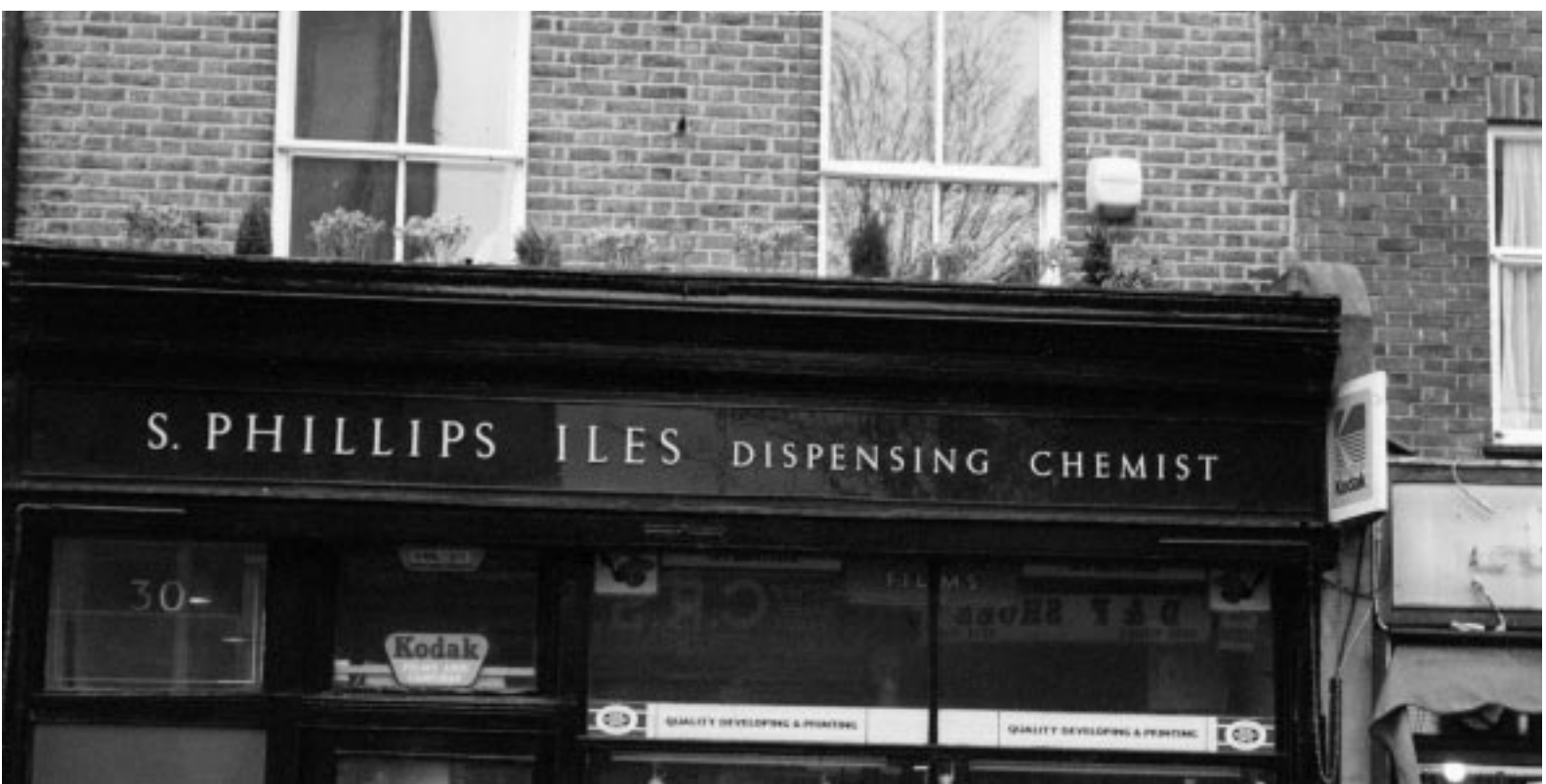
To turn to lettercarving, and to Eric Gill (fig. 15): his life has been so thoroughly chronicled that it's only necessary to note that he worked in Ditchling from 1907 to 1924, at Capel-y-ffin in Wales from 1924 to 1928, and at Pigotts, near High Wycombe, from 1928 until his death in 1940, four years before Johnston's. Eric Gill's inventory of the inscriptional work lists some 27 pupils and assistants during those years, including Joseph Cribb who was his first apprentice and worked with him until the move to Wales, and Joseph's brother Lawrence who worked with him thereafter. After the move to Pigotts, helpers included Ralph Beyer (who soon went his own very individual way), David Kindersley, and Gill's nephew and last apprentice John Skelton; both of these last trained numbers of additional carvers in their own workshops. If you include visitors such as Reynolds Stone, who stayed only a fortnight at Pigotts in 1932 but was influenced by that visit all his life, you begin to see how a tradition of fine classically-inspired carved lettering which virtually didn't exist at the beginning of the century could, under the influence of Johnston and Gill, be firmly established in England by the 1940s (as well as being represented in the US by John Howard Benson.)

Note that I say 'classically-inspired', not 'Trajan-inspired'. Gill did supply a careful drawing of capitals from the V & A cast as Plate 12 of Johnston's teaching portfolio *Manuscript and Inscription Letters* (1909), but the 'house style' which he developed had a quite different



Fig. 15. ERIC GILL Inscribed lettering on stone. Memorial to AR Orage, St John's Churchyard, Hampstead.

look to it – upright and slightly narrow, with a drooping D, a simplified U whose stems are of equal weight, and a small-bowled R whose tail flourishes slightly when space allows and bends gracefully downward when it doesn't. Like the work of those who came after him, his caps have their ancestry firmly in second-century Rome, but are distinctively his. He even went so far as to write in his *Essay on Typography* (1931): 'In inscription-carving, while we may remember Trajan lovingly in the museum, we must forget all about him in the workshop.'



16

Micellaneous examples of applied lettering in London



17



18

This advice, as we've seen, was not followed by the Ministry of Works, whose adoption of the 'Trajan' capital as a modelled, admittedly, to a certain amount of weedy and indifferent lettering in parks and public buildings, but more often produced public lettering of real grace, distinction and appropriateness (see opposite and below). For a considerable time during the postwar period even much of the mass produced applied lettering used on shopfronts and blocks of flats showed great attention to the subtleties of classical Roman capitals and – perhaps just as important – awareness of proper letterspacing (figs 16, 17 and 18). As the fifties progressed, the Johnston-Gill tradition still prevailed; in 1954 Studio Publications brought out a 'sequel' to *Lettering of To-Day*, entitled *Modern Lettering and Calligraphy*, in which the section on Lettering in Association with Architecture (introduced by George Mansell) included work by himself, George Friend, Joseph and Lawrence Cribb, Arthur Ayres, Sharpington, Breese, Kindersley and Skelton. The tide, however, was already beginning to turn. Many designers, historians, educators and typographers were increasingly impatient with what they considered to be the backward offspring of an increasingly discredited Arts and Crafts movement. (Gill, who spent much of his life scorning that very movement and considered himself nothing if not forward-looking, would have been most irritated.)

To make a brief but relevant detour: in 1961 Father Catich published his *Letters Redrawn from the Trajan Inscription in Rome*, the result of his exhaustive researches. Through photographs, rubbings and exact drawings he proved that the V & A cast which had been so highly revered through the years was in fact highly distorted in various ways. The cast itself was none too sharp, having been taken not from the inscription itself but from Napoleon III's metal copy; furthermore it had been made in three sections and joined together, producing inevitable distortions which the workmen then patched up according to whim. Since the original, like most incised Roman inscriptions, had been painted in order to make it more legible, the V & A cast was also painted, but with considerable addition of details (such as left-pointing serifs on the right feet of the As) which it was thought should be there, though they weren't. Finally, the casts which were supplied to the art schools were even more unclear, being copies of a copy of a copy, while the photograph which had served as a focal point in so many books suffered badly from barrel distortion, most obvious in the bottom corners. This discrediting of the model which had the approval of authorities from Lethaby onward undoubtedly did little to help the general reputa-

tion of the Trajan letter.

In 1960 Nicolette Gray, lettering historian, authority on modern art and teacher at the Central School mounted an attack on the Johnston-Gill tradition in her book *Lettering on Buildings*:

The first half of this century has seen a revolution in monumental lettering, one which for several decades has also dominated architectural lettering. It has been a purely English movement, and one sees no traces of it on the Continent. Its supporters have, however, been very confident and have proclaimed that they have returned to absolute standards and reintroduced good taste into an art which had been debased; which the lamentable vagaries of nineteenth-century commercialism had diverted from its true nature and purpose. The effect has been the introduction of an almost uniform letter for every sort of use, from tombstones and painted Ministry of Works notices to pub fascias and public buildings. The same letter has become the sole type of capital taught in art schools, and included in every textbook on lettering... The letterforms are based on those of the inscription on the base of Trajan's column.

She admitted that this type of letter does have merits; it is 'very legible, unobtrusive and often very well designed, and has much improved the appearance of many types of notice, particularly small-scale notices...' However, her criticism lay in its claim to be 'the perfect kind of letter,' leading to sameness and standardisation, and its inappropriate use in many situations where a more colourful or picturesque letterform (such as one of the immense variety of nineteenth-century forms) would work better. So far, so true; what is harder to justify is her tendency to associate Johnston, Gill and their associates with the blinkered 'Ministry of Works' approach. She presented a beguiling artistic and philosophical viewpoint which sees letters as individual shapes, to be selected from source books and handled freely with little reference to standards handed down from the past – in fact, in her next book, *Lettering as Drawing* (1971) she spoke approvingly of the coming emancipation of the modern student from the 'dead hand of conventional skill.'

The general reaction against the 'Trajan trap' was reinforced by James Mosley's rehabilitation, in the 1963–4 issue of *Motif*, of 'English Vernacular'. His definitive article, *Trajan Revived*, followed the year after, and in fact hailed the demise of Trajan as prescribed by the Ministry of Works. Ralph Beyer, after a spell working with David



Fig. 19. DAVID KINDERSLEY WORKSHOP Inscription in stone. Mercury House, Theobald's Road, London WC2

Kindersley, broke away from the second-century idiom to use early Christian catacomb inscriptions as the inspiration for his influential lettering in Coventry Cathedral. In Volume 50 of the *Penrose Annual* (1956) John Brinkley, then tutor in Graphic Design at the Royal School of Art, presented a short but pungent essay, 'On the Teaching of Lettering' in which his attitude to the traditional teaching approach was summed up as follows: 'A painful study of the Trajan forms, plus hard labour with a flat pen, followed by the grateful realisation that a collection of suitable type specimens would solve all further difficulties.' He went on to modify his stance somewhat:

Of course the training in Roman forms is essential, particularly as incised forms, but the realisation that the majority of their inscriptions bore little relation to the Trajan ideal and yet were most satisfying in their freedom and gaiety gives new interest to the study of the classic model.

In 1964 he edited the 'survey and reference' book, *Lettering Today*, which contained a section on lettering in architecture compiled by Ken Garland in which lettering by hand played little or no part. 'Incised lettering in stone,' Garland wrote with breathtaking complacency, 'is now used for little other than foundation stones and monuments. In the main it is a lifeless tradition depending on the weedy and unsuitable model of the carved letters on Trajan's column.' Alan Bartram's *Lettering in Architecture* (1975) and Jock Kinnear's *Words on Buildings* (1980) were both basically collections of photographs from which classical Roman was almost entirely banned. In 1986 Bartram published *The English Tradition from 1700 to the Present Day*, but he was quick to point out in his introduction that for him 'English' meant English Vernacular only. '... I exclude the lettering of the craftsmen working broadly within the Arts & Crafts movement. For the first

sixty years or so of this century, this group had its own slightly rarefied tradition, preferring to look back to historical forms... in a mood of emulation rather than inspiration.' Gill, the most English of letterers, is never mentioned; you'd never know he had existed.

In short, a common trait of post-1960 publications dealing with public lettering is their seeming refusal to admit the existence of a continuing tradition of craftsman letterers building on, developing and imaginatively transforming the Johnston-Gill tradition. (William Gardner's *Alphabet at Work*, published in 1982, is an honourable exception.) Fine signwriting is, alas, an increasingly limited and specialised profession; but in the field of letter-carving a flourishing body of craftsmen exists, each coming directly or indirectly out of that tradition, each distancing himself or herself from it to some degree, each producing a distinct 'flavour' of the traditional Roman capital without feeling the need to destroy it in the process. Some of those who work in one or both disciplines are: David Baker, Sidney Bendall, Pieter Boudens, Kristoffel Boudens, Brenda Berman, Sally Bower, Lida Cardozo Kindersley Beck, Charlie Creffield, David Dewey, Jon Gibbs, Richard Grasby, David Holgate, Mark Brookes, Ben Jones, Eric Marland, Sarah More, John Neilson, David Peace, Ieuan Rees, Nick Sloan, Chris Elsey, Raf Staiano, Annet Stirling, Caroline Webb, Jack Trowbridge, John Shaw, Paul Wehrle, James Salisbury, Rory Young... the list goes on. An illustrated selection of distinguished 'caps' over the past fifty years might include the following:

The David Kindersley workshop in Cambridge. A carved and painted inscription on an office building in Theobald's Road, London (fig. 19), carried out by Keith Bailey, Kevin Cribb and David Parsley: legible, graceful, unweedy and absolutely suited to its location. Now replaced by a faceless portico.

Will Carter, a master printer as well as letter-carver, designed his own distinctive alphabet with long square serifs, compressed asymmetrical Ws and cut-off mid-strokes on Es and Fs. Somehow, it seemed to work in almost any situation (fig. 20).

John Skelton, Gill's nephew and his last apprentice, enjoyed experimentation, but was quite at home with straightforward inscriptions, though his style remained very much his own (fig. 21).

Michael Harvey has also done much experimental work, but his traditional caps reign supreme (fig. 22).

The John Stevens Shop, in Newport, Rhode Island, was first run in its revived form by John Howard Benson (1901–1955), then by his son John, and at present by John's son Nick. Its practice differs from most workshops in that letters are brush-written onto the stone before carving, instead of being drawn only (figs 23 and 24) The result is an added fluidity of movement. Benson once stated that

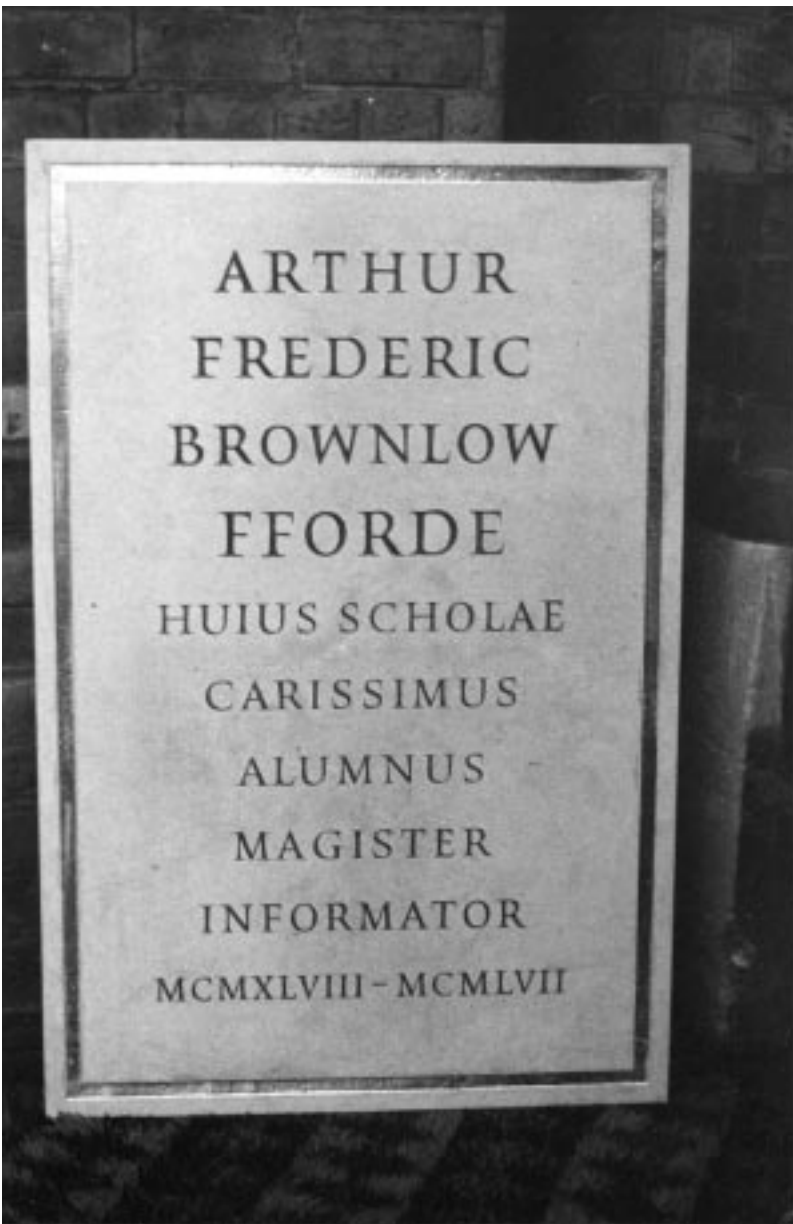
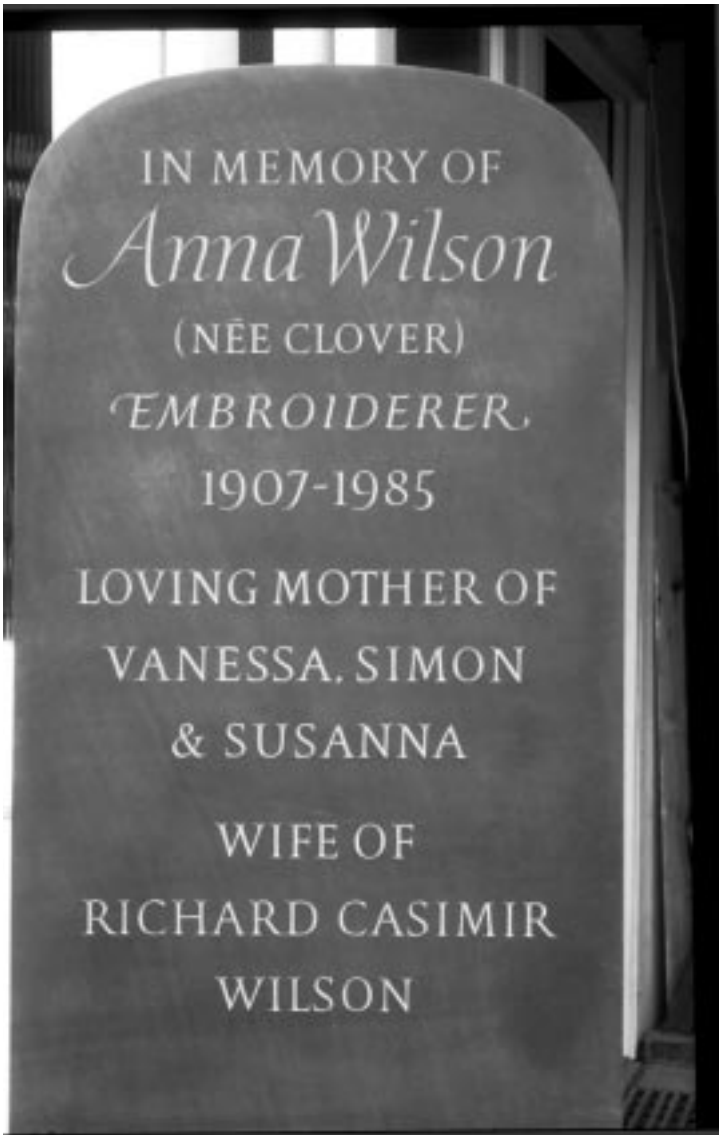


Fig. 20. WILL CARTER Inscription in stone at Rugby School.

Fig. 21. JOHN SKELTON. Inscription in stone. Gillian Jason Gallery.



22



23



24

Fig. 22. MICHAEL HARVEY A slate gravestone using italic for the deceased's name and profession, contrasted with Roman capitals given generous line spacing.

Fig. 23. JOHN BENSON at work.

Fig. 24. An example of the work of the John Stevens Shop.



Fig. 25. THE JOHN STEVENS SHOP. The Shaw Memorial, Boston, Massachusetts.

his aim was ‘an absence of style’ – as shown in the beautifully clear, deceptively simple inscription on the Shaw Memorial in Boston, Mass (fig. 25).

Tom Perkins has studied and thought about Roman caps more than most. Thanks to a solid calligraphic training, he has been able to develop elegant and ‘different’ capital forms without tormenting them beyond endurance (fig. 26).

Michael Renton was a master wood engraver as well as designer and lettercarver. His brush-lettering for the Martello Bookshop in Rye shows the vigorous caps he used throughout much of his life; but he also developed more experimental, yet eminently legible, lettering for Winchester Cathedral (figs 27 and 28).

In 1960 Nicolette Gray asked this question: ‘Why did

this movement, which started with ideas which were flexible and practical, lead in the field of architecture and monumental lettering only to sterile imitation?’ The simple answer is: it did not. The Roman inscriptional letter which in its various forms reached its highest point of sophistication in the second century remains a most graceful and efficient means of providing those modest services: to announce and direct; and far from automatically imposing uniformity, it is capable (as shown above) of infinite subtle modifications. It seems to have an almost mystical ability to rise above the modern tendency to tolerate (even admire) lack of knowledge and bad workmanship in the name of personal self-expression. Johnston wrote, ‘When in doubt, use Roman capitals,’ and this is still true.

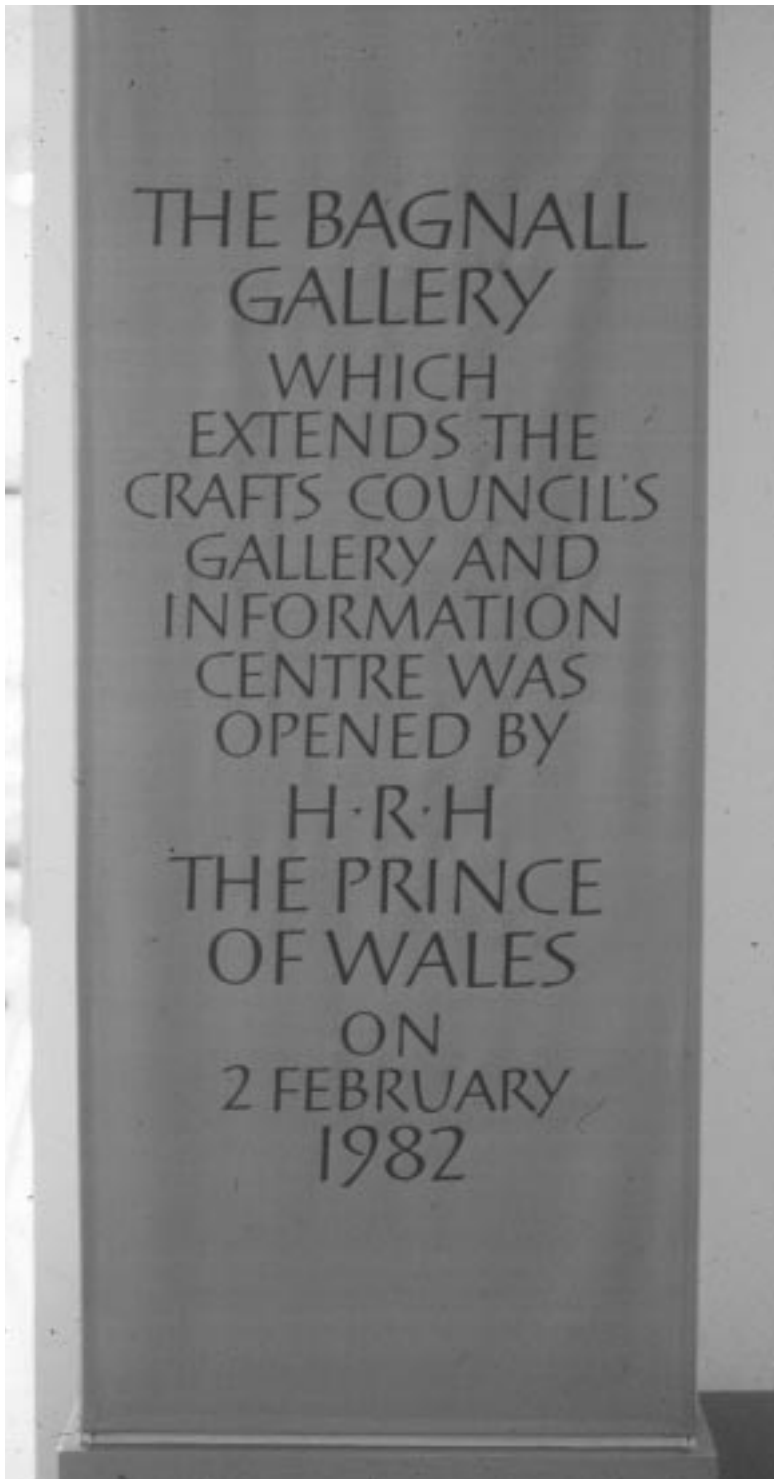


Fig. 26. TOM PERKINS Painted lettering on silk for the Crafts Council's Bagnall Gallery, London.



Fig. 27. MICHAEL RENTON Inscriptional and relief lettering in stone. Winchester Visitors' Centre, Hampshire.

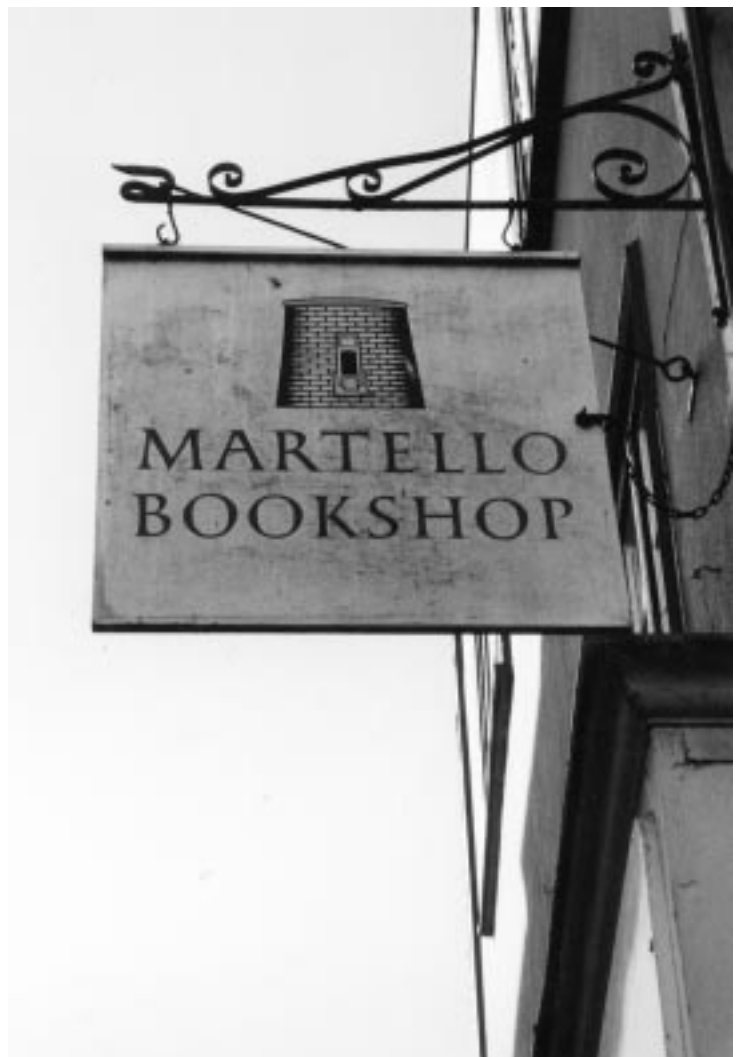


Fig. 28. MICHAEL RENTON Painted shop sign. Rye, East Sussex.