Local and regional studies of printing history

CONTEXT AND CONTENT

It seems appropriate for a conference on ‘Printing History: New Criteria’ to include some time for reflection on the history of printing in provincial England. While London, Oxford and Cambridge were always special cases and their printing history has been widely studied, there is much to be gained by further study of the history of printing in other towns. I have spent the last few years immersed in the history of the book trade, including printing, in Leicester, but I want here to explore wider issues, though I shall include a few examples from Leicester by way of illustration. Firstly I shall outline some of the contemporary historical contexts within which provincial printers worked, then I wish to explore the very important issue of the context within which we ourselves work as historians of printing. Is the context of printing history itself changing? Are there ‘new criteria’ for research into the history of provincial printing?

In terms of provincial English printing, apart from Oxford and Cambridge, there is, of course, not a huge amount of history until after 1660, when the Printing Act lapsed, allowing an expansion of printing in the provinces, though even then it developed quite slowly. The issue of when provincial printing effectively started raises another fundamental question: are we interested in the history of printing, or of the printed word? Is our primary concern with the processes of printing – developments in technology and typography for example – or are we concerned with the printed product, the book, in its widest possible sense, and its impact at different times and in different places?

Studied at local level, printing history seems inevitably to blur into book-trade history. Until the late nineteenth century, printing, bookselling, binding, newspaper publishing and other related trades were so closely intertwined in most provincial towns that it is impossible, and perhaps pointless, to try to preserve a distinction between them. A provincial printer was rarely just a printer. He or she typically ran a shop selling books and stationery, and often a range of patent medicines and household goods. Many were also bookbinders and some were newspaper proprietors.²

This paper is based on a talk given by the author at the conference ‘Printing History: New Criteria’ organised by the Printing Historical Society in Reading in January 2002.

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1. My doctoral research at Loughborough University, on the history of the book trade in Leicester, benefited from the inspirational supervision of Professor John Feather.
2. The work of provincial newspaper proprietors has recently been reassessed; see Hannah Barker, Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1691–1855 (Harlow, 2000), and Chapter 6 of Jeremy Black, The English Press, 1557–1861 (Stroud, 2003).
The distinction between the history of printing and the history of print culture is important, not least for the very practical reason that it can make a big difference in the starting date of a piece of research. In Leicester for example there seems to have been no printing carried out until a bookseller and stationer called Matthew Unwin set up his press, probably in 1740. So, if I had been studying the history of printing in Leicester, rather than the book-trade as a whole, I need not have researched anything much earlier than c. 1740. But that would mean that I had ignored nearly two centuries of bookselling and bookbinding activity in the town.

From the outset I was clear that my aim was to carry out a broad study of the history of the book trade in Leicester, ending at about 1850, to include printing as probably its most important aspect. When I first outlined my research, I planned a start date of around 1575, so that I could begin with the earliest known stationer/booksellers. That date was soon extended back into the earlier part of the sixteenth century because evidence was found for the ownership of printed books in Leicester before the earliest evidence of local bookselling, such as the inventory of William Wyggeston, an exceptionally wealthy wool merchant and benefactor of the town, which indicates that he owned eleven books printed in English in 1530/31.

There was also early evidence of book purchases in the churchwardens’ accounts of the town’s principal church, St Martin’s, which much later became Leicester Cathedral. The acquisition of books by St Martin’s throughout the Reformation period was of such interest that I began to investigate whether there were any earlier traces of the production and use of manuscript books and documents in Leicester, and a fair amount of evidence was found in both the St Martin’s accounts and the Borough Records. Leicester is fortunate in having exceptionally complete and well-preserved Borough Records, reputed to be the best of any English town.

The possibility of going much further back in time than originally planned was at once exciting and daunting. I discussed it with my PhD supervisor, Professor John Feather, and we agreed that it would be worth scanning the earlier records for traces of book-trade activity. Although concerned about the scale of the task, we agreed that since medieval evidence existed it would be sensible to make use of it to try to identify at least some of the local conditions that led to the establishment of the mainstream book trade in the late sixteenth century. I eventually went as far back as the year 1199, when the first of many parchment-makers is recorded as being admitted to the local Merchant Guild. My research, going back into the Middle Ages, is probably not at all typical, and I would not necessarily
advocate quite such an early start. Most local studies of book-trade history begin with the earliest evidence for bookselling, which is typically found quite late in the sixteenth century or in the first half of the seventeenth, with printing being introduced usually during the eighteenth century.

Of course many local studies already exist, and I am aware of several currently in progress. However, existing studies tend to vary considerably in both quality and coverage, probably because they were compiled with different aims in mind. Some take the form of lists or directories and, informative though these can be, they really become history only when someone with a sound understanding of the historical background studies them carefully, interprets the evidence and draws some conclusions about what the bare data actually signify. The historian, unlike the antiquary, is always searching for significance. We must not however be dismissive of the process of diligently identifying and listing – for example the names of practitioners in a particular trade such as printing – which is often a vital early stage in a piece of historical research, though history should always extend beyond listing, aiming not merely to describe but to explain.

Existing studies of printing and book-trade history vary not only in quality but also in accessibility. Some have been published by local history societies, adult education groups or other small organizations, while some have been only partially published in the form of journal articles or in collections of essays. Some have not been published at all, existing perhaps as theses or dissertations, including a number of Library Association Fellowship theses, and there may well be material lurking in local record offices and in private hands. Most of these forms are relatively ‘fugitive’; even tracing their existence can be difficult, let alone gaining access to a copy.

Individual local accounts of printing or book-trade history are obviously of some value to local historians and interested general readers but the specialist historian of printing or the book trade may wish to consult several separate local studies of adjacent areas and perhaps also of comparable places further afield. Local studies often come to life only when they are examined side by side, compared and contrasted, shedding light on each other. The historian may want to identify what, if any, patterns emerge, but even if it is physically possible to consult several studies together, the differences between them can make comparisons very difficult.

One aspect of the history of provincial printing that may be seen as a new opportunity is the systematic study of regional trade networks at various periods. There has not yet been a great deal of research at regional level, but I would suggest that, after many years...
of piecemeal local research, we are close to the point where sufficient information has been gathered to enable at least a tentative regional history of printing to be attempted in some parts of the country. At least as important as researching regional printing networks is the identification of book-trade links between the provinces and London. As my own research has progressed, I have been surprised time and again by the complexity of trading links between some of the printers and booksellers of Leicester and their counterparts in other towns in the Midlands and further afield and also, importantly, in London.

In addition to their links with book-trade people in other towns, a number of provincial printers and booksellers themselves traded in more than one location. John Feather’s seminal study of the eighteenth-century provincial book trade identified that it was not uncommon for a printer or bookseller to trade from a permanent shop as a base but also to run market stalls – confusingly sometimes also called ‘shops’ – in one or more towns perhaps for just one day a week. The practice of market-day trading in towns within reach of the base shop seems to have extended into the practice of running static shops in other towns for more than just market days. Matthew Unwin, Leicester’s first printer, is an example from the first half of the eighteenth century: he was based in Leicester but is also recorded as trading at various times in Loughborough and Ashby de la Zouch (both in Leicestershire) and in Derby, and he ran at least one book sale in Nottingham in 1743.

Printers and booksellers lived and worked in specific contexts. If we can endeavour to see them, and to assess their achievements, against the backdrop of their own space and time, they begin to emerge as human beings, not just as names in a list or an imprint. Professor Richard Sher has spoken of this need to humanize the study of book history... showing how stories about books are also stories about authors, readers and members of the book trade, seen as flesh-and-blood individuals with their own interests, aspirations, motives, strengths, and weaknesses.

Much recent history of printing and the book trade has been approached in this spirit of trying to identify something of the personalities of book-trade practitioners, teasing out evidence for what has been called ‘the human face of the book trade’. Professor Peter Isaac observed that

Until fairly recently many, perhaps most, book-trade studies, provincial and metropolitan, were, in a sense, extensions of analytical bibliography, dealing with the book as a physical object. But books are more than
objects; they are written by people, produced by people, distributed by people, bought by people, and possibly read by people.16

Perhaps the most recognizably human contexts in which book-trade activity took place are those related to an individual’s personal beliefs, especially politics and religion. Politics, in one form or another, was seldom far below the surface in provincial England, especially after the upheavals of the middle years of the seventeenth century, but it was to erupt again and again in a quite dramatic and sometimes violent manner in some towns, including Leicester, during the 1780s and 1790s, largely in response to the French Revolution, through the long campaign leading to the Reform Act of 1832 and on into the Chartist era of the 1840s.17

I was aware before I began my research that some of Leicester’s printers and booksellers had been active in radical politics but nothing had prepared me for the sheer scale and depth of their involvement. Three examples will indicate the nature of radical book-trade involvement in Leicester. The earliest and most flamboyant character was Richard Phillips, an eccentric and very radical printer, bookseller and librarian. He was imprisoned in 1793 for selling Thomas Paine’s The Rights of Man, though he managed to continue to edit his radical newspaper, the Leicester Herald, from his prison cell. Shortly after his release, his bookshop, printing office and library were destroyed in a disastrous fire and by 1796 Phillips had moved to London where he became a prolific author and publisher, especially of school textbooks. He became sheriff of London and was knighted in 1808.18

Another printer who was imprisoned for his radical activities was John Pares, a leading light of the Leicester Hampden Club. He was arrested three times between 1798 and 1817 for printing and distributing seditious literature and he was reported to the Home Secretary as ‘a dangerous fellow who would be better out of the way’.19 A prominent book-trade figure in the 1840s was the Chartist leader Thomas Cooper. He was in Leicester for only a couple of years but he made a huge impact on the working people of the town, not least through his radical bookshop and the several short-lived Chartist newspapers that he ran, the most important being the

19. Patterson, Radical Leicester (see above, note 17) p. 118.
2. The Brown family shop in Leicester’s Market Place. Their sign, the ‘Bible and Crown’ can be seen over the door. (From a bookplate in the John Johnson Collection. By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.)

Midland Counties Illuminator. Cooper was not a printer himself and in fact he experienced some difficulty in getting his radical papers printed.\(^{20}\) Some of these people were larger-than-life characters, for whom there is plenty of documentary evidence, including autobiographies of both Phillips and Cooper, but there were a lot of other people who left their more modest mark on book-trade history.\(^ {21}\) Something I am interested in pursuing further is the extent to which radical book-trade activity in Leicester is typical of other radical towns; enquiries so far suggest that the scale may be unique to Leicester.\(^ {22}\)

Even in a notoriously radical town like Leicester, not all book-trade people were radicals and some were probably not politically active, keeping their heads down and getting on with their work. Of course a printer who prints or sells a political book, pamphlet or newspaper is not necessarily personally committed to that particular persuasion, although given that printing or distributing ‘seditionous’ literature could, and often did, lead to arrest and imprisonment, it seems unlikely that many would knowingly take the risk without a strong personal commitment.\(^ {23}\)

Even in ‘Radical Leicester’ some book-trade people were of the Tory persuasion. One example is the Brown family, several of whom were quite wealthy and successful printers and booksellers. They traded at the sign of the ‘Bible & Crown’ – indicative perhaps of their political stance – and John Garle Brown, son of the founder of the business, was secretary of the Leicester Conservative Society and printed the Leicester Conservative Standard in the 1830s.\(^ {24}\) The Brown (sometimes Browne) family were important printers who carried out some very competent book printing for London publishers. Having been acquired by Henry Raithby and Joseph Lawrence in 1876, the Brown business – trading variously as the De Montfort Press and Raithby Lawrence – still survives in Leicester. In 1888 Raithby Lawrence began printing the journal The British Printer.\(^ {25}\)

In many towns a number of the more eminent printers and booksellers were members of the town’s Corporation, sometimes becoming aldermen and justices of the peace. Holding civic office, before the reforms of 1835, often indicates Tory politics – this was certainly true of Leicester, where the unreformed Corporation was staunchly Tory. Being elected to the Corporation and especially being selected for high office was a mark of a man’s standing in the town and a number of Leicester’s printers and booksellers over the years rose to high office including that of mayor.

Another volatile context in which people worked was that of religion. In the same way that many radical printers and booksellers
used their trade skills to further a political cause, so there were some who likewise promoted their religious beliefs. Nonconformist religious views were often closely intertwined with radical politics; in Leicester Baptists and Unitarians were particularly strong and many were very active in radical politics. A prominent Leicester example is Joseph Foulke Wins, a Baptist minister, printer and radical activist, who was publisher to the General Baptist Union and printer of several Baptist periodicals which he personally edited.26

In addition to the political and religious contexts, local printers and booksellers also operated within a local cultural context. Some of the cultural historical approaches developed in recent years can provide a helpful framework for the study of printing and the book trade – perhaps it is significant that the term ‘print culture’ is now in common use to describe the impact of the printed word. Two such concepts with particular relevance to printing history are the ‘urban renaissance’ and ‘popular culture’.

The concept of the ‘English urban renaissance’ was formulated by Peter Borsay in the late 1970s. Its emphasis on cultural change in provincial towns makes it particularly appropriate as a framework for the history of the impact of print. Borsay originally identified the urban renaissance as occurring between about 1680 and 1760,27 although in his later writings he extended it to cover a longer period of about 1660 to 1770.28 In essence the urban renaissance was a movement towards an improved quality of life, at least for the wealthier gentry and for the rising middle class. It found its visual expression in a fashionable urban landscape with tree-lined walks and squares and in fine new buildings for cultural purposes: assembly rooms, concert halls and theatres. The urban renaissance was, in Borsay’s words, an ‘idealistic quest for civility and sociability’,29 though this had an implicit downside in a sometimes aggressive pursuit of higher social status, tending to reinforce social stratification and leading to an unprecedented cultural fragmentation between the different levels of urban society.

The urban renaissance was primarily about affluence and luxury and it should not surprise us to find the printed word playing a central role. Borsay notes the prominence of printers and booksellers in provincial cultural developments:

Some of the new luxury trades cannot be classified in terms of the traditional economy. Perhaps the most important of these are the ones associated with literature and the press.30

A range of bookshops and circulating libraries played a key role in turning some towns, including Leicester, into important cultural...
4. The new Assembly Rooms, Leicester. Built 1792–1800. A fine visual expression of the 'English Urban Renaissance' (still standing, renamed the City Rooms) and a focal point of book-trade activity. (By permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

centres serving the urban and county gentry and middle classes. Newspapers were valuable not only as sources of national and local news but also in publicising local concerts, balls, horse-races, assemblies and other fashionable pursuits. Although many towns had a weekly newspaper by about 1740, Leicester had to wait until 1753 – John Gregory, the second printer to work in the town, certainly made a great contribution to the cultural life of the town when he started the *Leicester Journal* in that year.

One of Leicester’s leading eighteenth-century printers, Ann Ireland, a widow forced by the terms of a relative’s will to leave her shop in the Market Place, moved into premises opposite the Assembly Rooms, a very fashionable location for her business. It is not certain whether Ann Ireland’s shop was opposite the old Assembly Rooms or the new ones, which were under construction at the time of her move, but there was certainly a bookseller opposite the new Assembly Rooms in later years. The new Assembly Rooms included a circulating library and a coffee room where gentlemen could read the London newspapers. The success of Ann Ireland’s printing office, circulating library and bookshop, where she also sold musical instruments and fine art prints, was probably at least partly due to their proximity to an important focal point for the gentry.

Peter Borsay makes the important point that cultural change is largely about different kinds of space:

Because the town was a meeting place and transit point, it provided contact with ‘geographical space’; because it published and sold books, and housed institutions like the theatre, it offered access to ‘intellectual space’. But, above all, the town was increasingly the focus of ‘social space’, the space that separates individuals by status.\(^{32}\)
If the printing office or bookshop may be thought of as a kind of 'intellectual space', perhaps the theatre might be regarded as occupying both intellectual and social space. It was certainly well-supported by various levels of society in Leicester and a number of local printers printed playbills and sold theatre tickets. In addition to theatres, concerts, dances and suchlike, lectures were a respectable form of both entertainment and self-improvement and it is interesting to find several prominent printers and booksellers in popular demand as speakers on literary and other subjects.

The urban renaissance could never have happened if people – or at least some people – had not begun to enjoy a degree of surplus wealth. Borsay suggests that there is evidence for surplus wealth among the gentry and also among the rapidly growing 'middling sort', not least the prosperous tradesmen whose wealth derived from the growing demand for luxury and leisure. The more successful printers and booksellers are sure to be counted among their number, so they are part of the urban renaissance in two ways: as providers of goods and services and also as consumers of the new kinds of cultural activity.

Another cultural-historical approach that has particular relevance to printing is the concept of 'popular culture'. Literature and literacy have rightly formed an important part of the study of popular culture, and there is a logic to considering printing history in the same context. Popular culture in early modern England was increasingly committed to print, though the oral tradition did not decline at the same rate. Street literature – ballads, chapbooks, execution broadsides and suchlike – appealed to a wide audience comprising both the literate and barely-literate. Chapbooks were, by their subject-matter and their cheapness, aimed at the popular market. Only one Leicester printer, John Ireland the younger, is known to have printed chapbooks. There are several local examples of execution broadsides, one printed by Matthew Unwin in 1741 being the earliest known Leicester-printed item.

Another important context within which book-trade people worked was the local economy. Printing played an important part in local economic development, though much business printing – bills, receipts, posters, labels and suchlike – is by its very nature ephemeral. The printer Isaac Cockshaw offered a wide range of business stationery and also provided a specialised printing service for the local hosiery trade in the 1820s, while Ann Ireland was advertising account books and ledgers some years earlier.

Ann Ireland has been mentioned several times and she stands out in Leicester’s economic history as a very important printer, book-

5. An 1834 playbill printed in Leicester by the Cockshaw family. The theatre was an important feature of the ‘urban renaissance’ and, as in this example, performances often aimed for a broad appeal to all classes by combining ‘serious’ drama with lighter items. (By permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

35. John Ireland the younger was a cousin of Ann Ireland’s husband. There are four examples of his chapbooks in the British Library: 11621.b.46 (s), 11621.a.104 (1) and (10) and Rox.3.466.
36. The Last Dying Speech and Confession of John Ireland, …, British Library: d.11621.a.116 (1).
37. Cockshaw’s advertisement is in Cowle’s Leicester Directory, 1826. Ann Ireland’s is in her 1789 Catalogue of Books (Cambridge University Library, Manuscript Collection, d.11621).
6. A chapbook printed in Leicester by John Ireland the younger, c. 1800. Fairly typical of the genre: crudely printed with just one illustration. (By permission of the British Library [shelfmark ROX.III.406]).
seller and circulating librarian. Her achievements prove that it was not impossible, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for a widow to trade with great success in her own right. In fact it seems likely that she was very active in the business during her husband’s lifetime, probably a more common phenomenon than is sometimes appreciated. Book-trade historians need to remain alert to the evidence for women traders – no easy task since the status of married women tended to render them ‘invisible’ as far as business activity was concerned.

One of the main contributions of printing to the local economy was the local newspaper press, which provided a powerful new means of advertising to unprecedented numbers of people. In addition to

7. An execution broadside printed by Matthew Unwin in 1741. An example of a very popular type of ‘street literature’ and the earliest known item to be printed in Leicester.

(By permission of the British Library [shelmark 89.f.d.1/15].)

38. George Ireland died in 1766, aged 34. His will (ROLLR.PR/1/786/654) provides for his widow Ann to run his business during their son’s minority and then to run it in partnership with him, which suggests that she was already experienced in the trade. Even in partnership with her son, Ann Ireland was the leading light of the business.
advertising goods and services for sale, the columns of the local newspapers were an important source of information for employers seeking workers and for individuals looking for jobs, and there were advertisements for real estate, including commercial properties. Before leaving the local economic context, it is worth adding that some printers and booksellers diversified into other kinds of business. The most famous Leicester example is Thomas Cook, apparently a perfectly competent printer/bookseller, who achieved such success after 1841 in organising excursions by train that in 1854 he left the book trade and concentrated on building up his travel business.

The various contexts in which provincial printers and other book-trade people worked – political, religious, cultural, economic – were possibly replicated at regional (perhaps even national) level. That cannot be pursued here but there is surely plenty of scope for future research. There were certainly regional and national communities of radicals, which may well have had some impact on the manufacture and distribution of print. Another factor is that some printers, especially those who were also newspaper publishers, traded through regional networks of agents and newsmen. Future regional studies need to examine the evidence for these important networks.

Perhaps I might add a few other thoughts about future research on provincial printing. If we are interested in the history of print, not just printing, we might want to investigate such questions as:

- what exactly was printed in provincial printing-houses? (using evidence gleaned from imprints and from the English Short Title Catalogue and other sources)?
- what was the typical balance between book-work and jobbing printing? (printed ephemera must not be neglected)
- for whom did provincial printers work? (including printing for publishers in London and elsewhere)
- who bore the cost of provincially printed books? (the printer? the author? another?)
- at what audiences were provincially printed books aimed?
- what were the outcomes or impact of books printed in the provinces?
- what exactly was the nature and extent of multi-site trading and of regional trade networks? (and is it feasible to map them?)
- what happened after 1850? – most provincial studies end in c. 1850 – the later picture is very different, and more complex, but is surely ripe for research.

Future research – on these and other topics – needs to be complemented by further work on existing studies. Whether or not these studies have been published they need to be harnessed, evaluated and exploited, using tools such as the British Book Trade Index and groups like The History of the Book Trade in the North, both initiatives of the late Professor Peter Isaac, who did so much to further the study of the provincial book trade.  

Finally, I want to turn briefly to the present-day context within which the history of printing is carried out. The most obvious development of the last twenty or thirty years is the rise of the ‘history of the book’ as a dynamic field of study and as an academic discipline. How does this affect the history of printing? The history of the book is surely most fruitfully studied in an inter-disciplinary way – an exciting and challenging approach which opens up many avenues of exploration through which we might see more clearly the importance of the book in history. Approaching book history from a number of different angles enables a more rounded picture to be formulated of the ‘life’ of books in society, but we would do well to bear in mind John Feather’s warning that the history of the book must not neglect the ‘inky reality of the printing house’. The history of the book needs to remain earthed in the actuality of how books were designed, printed and distributed, as well as reflecting on the part that they played in the way people lived – working, learning, socialising, worshipping and passing their leisure hours.

The study of the book as an artefact, which has been designed, manufactured and distributed, forms an essential part of the history of the book. But the book is an artefact that, potentially at least, possesses significance: cultural, intellectual, social, economic, religious, political. The historical quest for the significance of the book is crucial but it really makes sense only when it is complemented by careful study of the manufacture and distribution of books. If most historians of the book now accept that the object of their study exists as both text and artefact, and I believe they do, surely this is where the history of printing comes into its own, enjoying its own renaissance within the context of a stimulating inter-disciplinary approach to the history of the book and print culture.

42. The British Book Trade Index is a computerised index of those who worked in the English and Welsh book trades up to 1832. It began in 1983 and contains some 80,000 records. The Arts and Humanities Research Board is funding a project at the University of Birmingham to develop BBTII into a website.
