type

The SECRET HISTORY *of* LETTERS

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Part of the task of a graphic designer is to establish a style, a 'look', and to apply it consistently throughout the project in hand. In corporate terms this is the identity, the house style, and type plays a crucial role in this. The designers will produce a logo, an accompanying set of colours, and create or select a typeface or two, which will be used throughout the organization. For the house style to work effectively, it has to be applied everywhere, with unsparing thoroughness, from the exterior of the company headquarters down to the business card of the lowliest sales rep. When a new house style is implemented, a user's manual will usually be produced to accompany it, showing exactly how it should be used, filled with ferocious admonitions against any incorrect application or abuse.

All this is as it should be. However, I suspect I'm not alone in having the desire, once a style has been created and has been used for a while, to want to start tinkering with it or to subvert it – occasionally just for one's own amusement, but sometimes from what I would like to think is a more laudable desire to see what creative variations on a theme can be produced. Linked to this impulse is an odd affection for any piece of signage or graphic which has managed to escape the blanket application of a current house style.

Often in London, as with so many things of interest in the city, you have to turn your eyes upward to see these 'style survivors'. Although raincoat and leisure-wear company Burberry's headquarters in the Haymarket carry their new sleek identity wall to wall at eye level, an earlier generation of letters can be seen higher up on the building (albeit clumsily truncated to conform with the new name styling). And so it is with London Underground. Sitting on the upper deck of a bus waiting for the lights to change at Oxford Circus, you more readily notice on the façade of the station entrance, above the more recent projecting canopy, the lettering of an earlier era. It's still beautiful, despite the unavoidable accumulation of city grime around the gold relief lettering, possessing

40 Edward Johnston: he started with goose-quill pen in hand, but his most celebrated work was to be a major corporate redesign, an inescapable part of London's visual fabric.

an elegance and sense of permanency in stark contrast to most of the plastic shop fascias below.

The lettering at Oxford Circus and at some other surviving sites on the Bakerloo line, the Baker Street to Waterloo Station link built at the start of the twentieth century, is itself part of a 'house style', that of the Yerkes Group. The company of American financier Charles Tyson Yerkes, it built the stations on this section of the line. The exteriors are clad with dark red glazed tiles, and have the same name lettering, in a gold relief serif face, which has some of the fluidity of Goudy, or the art-nouveau-tinged lettering of the period. Forming as they do part of the fabric of the buildings, the letters actually have more intrinsic permanency than the celebrated corporate redesign which was to follow, and which was applied in various types of easily removable panelling.

The lettering of the Yerkes Group was consistent, but it was an exception. The signage of the London Electric

41 Pre-Johnston lettering still lingers around the London Underground system; a crude but powerful grotesque above an abandoned entrance on The Strand.

Railway Company (as it was then called) was an often vigorous but totally uncoordinated pot-pourri of styles. There are still copious examples of these earlier letters around the Tube system. Until a few years ago Covent Garden station still retained the original art nouveau frontages to its ticket desks, and although these are now gone, the massive lettering of the station name on the ceramic tiles that cover the walls of the platform still survives, as does some directional signage. Aldwych station, on an odd appendix to the Piccadilly line, was finally closed in the mid-1990s, but two styles of sans serif lettering, one of them definitely a 'grotesque' in its brutal assertiveness, still survive over its old entrances.

Although not the first example of a custom typeface, an alphabet produced to meet one immediate, specific need (Linn Boyd Benton's Century, for one, had been designed twenty years earlier for the magazine of the same name), the lettering created in 1916 for London Underground, the British capital's by then already extensive network of subterranean railways, stands out as a landmark corporate commission. The book that Colin Banks, whose partnership Banks & Miles redesigned and extended the family of the original face in the 1980s, wrote about its development was entitled *London's Handwriting*, and it's an apt description. London Transport themselves clearly considered the subject matter of such significance that the book was produced in 'stun-an-ox' dimensions, with a page size of 510×375 mm. Not a volume to just slip into your bag for some leisurely reading on the Circle line.

The lettering is everywhere, an unobtrusive but quietly distinctive feature of this particular urban landscape. It's sometimes called Johnston Sans, after its creator, Edward Johnston (1872–1944), although its original designation, Underground Railway Block-letter, is probably more apt, as Johnston never contemplated designing a typeface, with the implications the word carries of a family of different weights, of roman and italic. The London Transport Museum recently licensed a version for commercial use, which has been plainly entitled London Underground.

Two aspects of the lettering are remarkable, before one even begins to consider it in terms of its design. First, that it exists at all. As a nation, Great Britain has made considerable progress since the 1980s in taking into account the visual appearance of things – not just whether they work (for at least part of the time) and meet budgetary requirements. But there is still enormous room for improvement. In and around Leicester Square in the heart of London, an area crossed and recrossed by thousands of foreign visitors, the lettering and design of the frontages of many of the shops, cafés and restaurants is an eyesore, a defacement of a city that too often just doesn't seem to care enough about its appearance.

London Transport itself has not been above criticism. Sitting on a bus at night while the glare of the internal fluorescent lighting bounced off the yellow, orange and brown of the seating upholstery made me wonder on more than one occasion just what fabric designs were rejected in favour of the chosen one, or whether any sort of selection process had been involved at all.

This is all part of the attitude that what is part of the public environment, what ordinary people have to look at on a day-to-day basis, and from which no extra profit can be accrued by its providers, is of no importance, and it doesn't matter what it looks like. But it is finally being realized that it does. It costs no more, and takes no more effort, to choose a seat fabric that isn't visually oppressive. And there can be a subsequent cost in disregarding the nature of the environment that's been created. Looked at in economic terms, happier people are more productive; it is ugly architecture and cityscapes which get vandalized and graffiti-covered.

Fortunately, Edward Johnston didn't subscribe to this attitude, and his typeface has been rightly held up as a

superb product of the belief that even the least significant member of society deserved something that was both functional and of beauty in his or her everyday life.

The second surprising factor about the lettering is the date of its inception – in the middle of the most cataclysmic conflict yet to engulf Europe. Not the obvious time to decide to design a radical new style of public lettering, perhaps. There is, however, no written reference to the ongoing conflict throughout the whole process of the design of Johnston's lettering apart from an early, unfinished poster using the new alphabet, recommending the Underground as a means of travelling without fear of enemy bombs.

In some respects, though, his lettering could be seen as a contribution to the war effort. Johnston was being urged by 1911 to design a typeface to counter a perceived typographical invasion from Germany. The Klingspor Type Foundry had introduced a series of faces which they had called 'Wren' – to some the use of this English word seemed a particularly underhand move, an attempt at clandestine infiltration of British industry – and the designs were considered to show the influence of Johnston's own ideas. Johnston spoke in a letter of being asked to counter these new faces with something of his own, so that the Germans would not 'invade' – an emotive and significant word.

Ever since 1871, when through force of arms Bismarck had united the various German-speaking states and principalities in northern central Europe into a new superstate, Britain had been keeping an anxious eye on its neighbour. Whatever the British rhetoric about the glories of its empire, which reached a territorial peak towards the end of the nineteenth century, economically the nation had been slipping ever since the Great Exhibition of 1851, which Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert (a German himself) had helped organize, to celebrate the cultural achievements of the civilized world, and Britain's dominance of it in particular. First into the Industrial Revolution, for a while Britain had leaped ahead, but others were now catching up – or in Germany's case getting ready to overtake.

As well as increasing productivity on the domestic front, Germany was competing for the few remaining areas of Africa that hadn't already been grabbed by the

other imperial nations. It wanted its 'place in the sun', and if that meant squaring up to the British Empire, and building a navy (traditionally Britain's stronger defensive arm) to accompany its already all-conquering army, then so be it.

Worrying stuff for the British. Traditionally proudly isolationist in its attitude to its neighbours in mainland Europe, Britain started looking around for allies, even coming to an 'entente', an understanding, with the traditional enemy France. There was a small but significant thread in the arts which used and played on fears of a military invasion on the part of Germany in the years from the turn of the century until the actual outbreak of conflict. Guy du Maurier, the brother of novelist Daphne, had a huge stage hit in 1909 with his play *An Englishman's Home*, in which a British Everyman meets his death heroically defending his house against foreign invaders. The play became a national talking point, provoking calls in the newspapers for compulsory military training. Erskine Childers' 1903 thriller *The Riddle of the Sands* featured two amateur yachtsmen stumbling on the German infrastructure for a future seaborne invasion from its North Sea coastline, and called for alertness and a reorganization of the nation's defences. In 1913 the humorous short story writer Hector Munro (Saki) published the unhumorous *When William Came*, which imagined the state of the nation after German annexation, following a short, disastrous war for which the British were hopelessly unprepared.

Johnston's work forms an unlikely link in this chain. In 1915, with the conflict now under way, the Design and Industries Association was formed. Already there were worries that Germany was producing better-designed and better-marketed goods than those made in Britain. Once again, it was suggested that the German type-founding industry was using the ideas and methods of William Morris, Thomas Cobden-Sanderson and Johnston himself. In essence, Britain was coming up with the ideas, but other people were exploiting them.

Who was Edward Johnston? If we picture a Kiplingesque imperial warrior, we will be far from the truth. He was born in Scotland in 1872, and came to London in 1898, having already been an office boy and a medical student in Edinburgh. His daughter Priscilla wrote

an affectionate biography of him in the 1950s; in it she relates a childhood incident in which 'some rowdy boy cousins, no doubt regarding Edward as a "sissy", threw him into a cold bath. From this he emerged gasping and, between chattering teeth, exclaimed "How glorious!" and thereafter had a cold sponge-down every day for the rest of his life.'[1]

This was no mean feat in a climate as frequently unforgiving as Britain's. But the story gives a clue to the inner resilience and determination that were to gently guide him through what, until his mid-twenties, seemed to him a directionless life. While staying with friends in London, Johnston was startled to discover that they knew personally Harry Cowlishaw, an architect whose illuminated pen lettering in an issue of *The Artist* had impressed him a year earlier. Johnston had experimented with pen lettering while still in his teens, and now felt it was something he wanted to pursue seriously.

Cowlishaw gave him advice and encouragement, and Johnston made his way to the British Museum to study early manuscripts. But he was soon formulating ideas on using what he considered the best examples as a springboard for his own scripts, rather than just copying them. Calligraphy had fallen very much out of favour by the end of the nineteenth century; one of Johnston's relations, on hearing what he was doing, exclaimed: 'But that's dead, isn't it?'[2]

Cowlishaw showed Johnston how to properly cut a goose quill to make the essential broad-nibbed pen, and, in what Johnston later came to regard as an event of almost unbelievable serendipity, introduced him to William Lethaby, principal of the Central School of Arts and Crafts. Lethaby wanted to start an illuminating class at the Central School, and offered Johnston the job of teacher. The classes started in September 1899, and quickly grew in popularity. Priscilla tells us: 'There was no question of his playing the expert; he told [the students] how little he knew, and how much there was to discover, and enlisted their help.'

Johnston proved an inspirational and highly influential teacher, although he would have fallen foul of the systematic ticking off of attainment targets according to which British education currently runs. One planned series of three half-hour talks, intended to cover the

1 Priscilla Johnston, *Edward Johnston*, London, 1959.
2 Ibid.

whole alphabet, ran to twelve sessions, by which point he had just started on the letter C.

His students were to include Harold Curwen, who went on to design his own sans serif face in the 1920s and ran the Curwen Press in east London, German-born Anna Simons, who translated Johnston's *Writing and Illuminating, and Lettering* into German, and returned to Germany to spread and teach his ideas there, Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, and most significantly Eric Gill, who we will look at in detail later.

Although Johnston's stance was a deeply held belief in the tenets of the Arts and Craft movement – a profound opposition to what he termed 'industry', and the whole concept of mass production – the jump from being a teacher of calligraphy, using a pen made out of a feather, to designing corporate lettering for an urban transport system was not such a great or illogical one as may be supposed. As early as 1906, in a talk he gave to students at Leicester School of Art, Johnston criticized the prevalent styles of public signage. One of the aims of the Arts and Crafts Movement was that craftsmen should not produce items that were beautiful but expensive, but should aim to bring higher aesthetic standards to bear on objects in daily use by the mass of the population.

Walking home one evening with Gill and another student, Noel Rooke, he found himself admiring the lettering on some tradesmen's carts: 'Here on their covers, in one small backwater of the lettering trade, tradition had preserved an otherwise extinct species; a really good block letter.'[3] Johnston had already revived calligraphy; he was soon to raise another alphabetical Lazarus.

In 1911 Johnston designed an italic face for a private press in Germany, and in that same year met Gerard Meynell, owner of the Westminster Press, who printed posters for London Underground. Meynell helped launch a magazine, *The Imprint*, whose mission was to extend the boundaries and outlook of the printing trade. Through one of his former students, Johnston was brought on board to design the masthead and assist with the creation of a modified form of Caslon, called Imprint, as a text face. Crucially, in 1913, Meynell introduced Johnston to the commercial manager of the London Electric Railway Company, Frank Pick.

Frank Pick (1878–1941) worked for London Transport

3 Ibid.

(as it became in 1933) from 1906 until 1940. He was, to use a modern term, a design supremo. One of his assistants observed that with Pick there was no need for a committee; he had the vision, and also the 'people skills', to get any committee to do things the way he saw it. And luckily, the way Pick saw it was impressive – very impressive indeed.

The idea for some sort of integrated design scheme to be applied to a transport system wasn't a new one. The Great Western Railway in England had used a slab serif lettering on its engines and carriages, and a 'livery', a colour scheme for painting the carriages, had been in force since the 1840s. The Budapest underground railway, the second oldest in the world after London's, had its own distinctive lettering for its station names, and the Copenhagen Tramway Company had unified the design of its interiors, tickets, livery and buildings through the hand of one designer, Knud Engelhardt.[4]

This is also what Pick wanted, and was steadily implementing through the railway system that was in his charge. The strong visual identity, the blue bar through a red disc, and later a red circle – the 'bull's-eye', also designed by Johnston – and its application throughout the network, the graphics of publicity materials, often with beautiful illustrations by MacKnight Kauffer, the care taken in the design of platform furniture and the detailing of station architecture – all this was down to Pick. He didn't design them, but he found the people who could. And what Pick needed in 1913 was a typeface.

He had clear ideas about the kind of thing he wanted; the typeface had to 'belong unmistakeably to the times in which we lived', must be capable of being read quickly and without difficulty by passengers on a moving train, and each letter should be 'a strong and unmistakeable symbol'. He had already played around a little himself with the idea of an alphabet based on squares and circles. He took into account the quality of the lighting in different locations, and also stressed the need for the lettering to be clearly different to that of any surrounding wording on advertisements or shopfronts.

It may have been this last stipulation which made Johnston decide to design a sans serif letter that was monoline, all the strokes having the same thickness. There had been a recent vogue for Trajan-style lettering,[5] and

4 Colin Banks, *London's Handwriting; The Development of Edward Johnston's Underground Railway Block-Letter*, London, 1994.

5 Inspired by the stone-cut capitals on the Trajan Column in Rome.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUŁ
VWXYZ

42 Johnston's Underground Railway Block-letter, as originally titled; he imposed classical Roman proportions on the debased form of the nineteenth-century grotesque, and paved the way for the twentieth century to become one of stylistic dominance for the sans serif.

Pick had earlier admired Gill's lettering in that style for W H Smith the booksellers, although he felt it was unsuitable for his requirements. Furthermore, Smith's stalls were often to be found in Underground stations, providing just the sort of visual competition Pick wanted to avoid.

Nineteenth-century sans serif faces, or grotesques as they were then called, were by this time regarded as an ugly, debased letter form, but Johnston turned to the Roman proportions of the Trajan Column inscription to create his new letters, giving them a fresh, simple elegance. Having made this decision, with typical modesty Johnston said: 'the alphabet designed itself'. Also typically, Johnston blew his self-imposed deadline to deliver Pick some alphabets by the end of 1915. However, by the middle of 1916 he had produced an upper case alphabet, which made its first appearance on a poster in the summer of that year. The lower case followed shortly afterwards, and in 1922 Johnston completed a condensed version for use on the route boards of buses. The bold version, supervised but not drawn by Johnston, did not arrive until 1929.

How good is Johnston's lettering? Clearly, it's now impossible to fully appreciate how different it must have appeared at the time to everything around it. It still looks distinctive today, although we recognize it subliminally, forming as it does part of a strong corporate look that has become diffused into the visual fabric of London. In a sense, Pick had already created the garden in which Johnston's typographical seedlings could flourish. The typeface has so many visual links: the London transport colour scheme, the bull's-eyes, all the beautiful and humorous illustrated posters that were produced during the inter-war years, and Harry Beck's groundbreaking topographical route map which has achieved the status of a work of art in its own right. With all this accompanying baggage, it's hard not to feel a warm glow towards Johnston's letters. Normally I hate the stylistic

43 One of Johnston's beautiful bull's-eyes, high on a wall at Leicester Square station.

device, much used during the 1980s, by which in a word composed of capital letters both the first and last letters are made larger to create some sort of visual balance, but in consequence placing a nonsensical overemphasis on the latter. But when I see it on one of Johnston's surviving signs, I like it.

Looking at Underground Railway Block-letter in unadorned black on a white page, the layman would probably say that there was 'nothing to it', that the upper case in particular is as simple as the letters in a child's first reading book. But therein lies its strength, and to get a sense of this power one would have to compare it to what else was present in the visual landscape in 1916. And it's a strength which is still there. Standing on an Underground platform, I compared Johnston's letters on an original bull's-eye to the san serif capitals used on the headline of a huge Jack Daniel's advertisement which was next to it. With no disrespect to Jack Daniel's, whose ad was perfectly good in its own right, Johnston's capitals just looked clearer and more elegant. Those classical proportions are still paying off today.

The lower case brings to mind a description that the American designer Tibor Calman made of the title lettering created for the film *Matewan* in 1987: 'There is no warmth, charm or humanity in perfection. Only in imperfection. We wanted [the logo] to look like it was drawn in 1911 by someone without skill or knowledge but with an enormous desire to do it well.'[6]

Now clearly this is not a description of Johnston, but there is something in his opposition to 'industry', his confession to being 'not entirely "businesslike"', his

6 *Baseline* 11, London, 1989.

notoriety for leaving work on commissions to the absolute last minute, or even not starting them at all, which gives him the air of a gifted amateur, a dreamer, not quite at one with the world in which he found himself. In the most famous picture of Johnston, seated at his desk with quill pen in hand, there is an almost saintly, other-worldly glow about him.[7]

His lower case alphabet has a quirkiness to it that suggests, especially in comparison to later sans serif faces like Gill Sans or Futura, something of Calman's 'charm in imperfection' – the asymmetrical lower counter of the g, the long crossbar on the t, with its corresponding finial, or loop, at the bottom of the vertical stroke. The l has a similar loop, criticized by some at the time, although useful in making it distinctive, in a way that Pick would have approved, and preventing any following letter from being set too close, a sin that the printers of the day often fell into with Johnston's type, much to his annoyance. The bowls, the curved strokes, often seem to meet the verticals awkwardly, lacking smoothness and fluidity. On the w, the two inner strokes meet at a level lower than that of the two outer strokes. The diamond-shaped dots on the i and j and the shape of the punctuation clearly show the influence of the broad-nibbed pen.

Despite its success, by the late 1970s Johnston's lettering had reached a crisis point. The type still only existed in wooden blocks and metal in a now faster age of photosetting. Various advertising agencies were often using a different typeface for each separate campaign. The design partnership Banks & Miles had been working for London Transport for many years, designing brochures, leaflets, timetables and related promotional items. John Miles recalls:

> The advertising agency working for them at the time had become frustrated with the face's limitations, and were recommending that London Transport ditch it altogether. There was no italic, and to be honest, the lower case had never worked very well, especially as a text face. LT were considering replacing the face altogether and using Helvetica, but we persuaded them that they had a really valuable 'signature' in Johnston Sans that was worth retaining and developing to make it work for contemporary needs.

7 The impression one gets of Johnston's character is of a lovable but slightly eccentric figure, one who crammed the different pockets of his jackets with the essential items he needed to have with him at all times. The Ditchling Museum in Sussex, the village where Johnston lived from 1912, has preserved his studio door, complete with a system of string and pulleys which Johnston had devised to raise the draught excluder when the door opened. He had a habit of covering books with newspaper and then drawing his own designs or lettering on them, a treatment he extended even to books he borrowed.

44 Adapting and preserving: New Johnston modified Johnston's proportions, but maintained and extended his quirky use of the calligraphic 'diamonds'.

The Banks & Miles report concluded: 'The lettering could act like a ribbon to tie up the disparate parts of the LT business into one well organised parcel.' As John Miles adds: 'It's understandable for designers to want to change things and make their mark, but *not* changing something is a perfectly legitimate design decision. It can sometimes be better to retain the existing core and make modifications – and perhaps improvements – around the edges.'

The resulting redesign, called New Johnston, created a whole new family of weights – light, medium, bold, with condensed versions, and also a book face. It broke with some of Johnston's basic principles, sometimes out of necessity, by, for example, varying the stroke width in the bold weights. Johnston's cap height to stroke width ratio was also altered, and the x-height was increased. It offended some purists, who claimed it was a different face altogether, and although there may be some substance to this, Banks & Miles always claimed that they only used Johnston's original as a springboard for the new version. Some of Johnston's quirks were retained: the long crossbar on the lower case t, the loop at the bottom of the lower case l, and the diamond-shaped dots on the i and j, a calligraphic feel that was carried through to the punctuation more positively than in Johnston's original.

Criticized in the 1980s for removing some beautiful but now impractical art nouveau ticket windows from Covent Garden station, London Transport pointed out that the Underground system was not a museum. Although the windows would be properly preserved elsewhere, the network had to function as effectively as possible in response to modern demands. The same could be said of Johnston Sans. New Johnston looked stronger, and more contemporary. But it also helped preserve original Johnston. You can still see examples of Johnston's own 'style survivors' on older signage dotted about the Underground system, and on some bus destination blinds. Banks & Miles's update harmonized with it – London Transport had no need to rip

it all out where it wasn't necessary to do so. And his blue plaque, on Hammersmith Terrace in west London, is the only example of these London markers to use a distinctive typeface – his own, of course.

'It was with Johnston's Underground Railway block letter alphabet that the first large "corporate image" of modern design was created and the sans serif typeface acquired its dignity.'[8] In typographic terms, there can be few greater tributes than this. Johnston, who began the twentieth century with a sharpened goose quill in his hand, went on to open the floodgates for a style that was to dominate the rest of the century and make the early years of the next its own.

8 *Adventure on the Underground*, Society of Typographic Designers typographic supplement, 1993.