

INDUSTRY AND GENIUS: THE WORDS AND LETTERS OF JOHN BASKERVILLE

A tray of original Baskerville punches

Courtesy Alexandre Parre



Portrait of John Baskerville by James Millar, 1774.

John Baskerville (1705/6–75) is a local figure with a worldwide reputation. He made eighteenth-century Birmingham a city without typographic equal, changed the course of type design and emancipated printers the world over. Yet despite his importance, fame and influence, many aspects of his work and life remain unexplored and his contribution to the art of typography has gone largely unrecognised.

Caroline Archer

A Maverick and Adventurer

Baskerville was a flamboyant man with a towering personality and colourful character. An indefatigable ‘doer’ and inspired businessman he was a mercantile and industrial entrepreneur, an arch-nonconformist who excelled in a city populated by religious, political and instinctive nonconformists. A confirmed atheist who flouted convention, he lived openly with his lover, adored show and dressed like a peacock. Baskerville was a maverick and an adventurer who pursued any avenue, however bizarre, which promised fortune, fame or infamy. Yet despite his flamboyant and unconventional lifestyle, Baskerville was a respected figure amongst a coterie of Birmingham experimenters: a self-taught man who combined a passion for design and technology with a relentless quest for perfection whilst convinced of his ability to achieve anything to which he set his mind.



Slate advertising Baskerville as a stone carver.



Baskerville's type foundry in Birmingham on the eve of demolition, 1887.

Speculation About Early Life

Surprisingly little is known of John Baskerville's antecedents, and there are more questions than answers surrounding his early life. That he was born in Wolverley, a small village about three miles north of Kidderminster in Worcestershire is indisputable, but exactly when he was born is less certain.

Baskerville was welcomed into the world sometime either in early January 1706, or possibly late December 1705 and was baptized in the Parish Church of St John the Baptist where an entry in the register records: '1706: John ye son of John Baskerville, by Sara his wife, was baptised January ye 28'.

Baskerville was probably born at Sion Hill Farm (formerly Upton House) in Wolverley to fairly prosperous parents who may have come from London or possibly Herefordshire. It is reasonable to assume, but impossible to prove, that Baskerville attended the Seabright School in Wolverley and there gained his love of letters and the printed word. However, as there is no authentic information about Baskerville's life from the time of his baptism in 1706 to 1728 when he is described in a mortgage indenture as 'of Birmingham', his early life continues to be the subject of historical speculation.

A Writing-Master, Stone Carver and Maker of Japan Ware

Although Baskerville is primarily known as the creator of one of the world's most famous typefaces, his early forays into the world of work were as a stonemason, producing epitaphs for headstones, and as a writing-master, plying his trade from a school in the Bull Ring.

There are no known extant examples of either his calligraphic work or his stone carving, although records show that Baskerville gravestones once graced the churches of St. Mary, Handsworth and St. Bartholomew, Edgbaston.

A small slate, however, does survive advertising his availability as a stone carver, which clearly demonstrates his skill. It is currently held by the Library of Birmingham and bears the inscription: 'Grave Stones / Cut in any of the Hands / By / John Baskerville / Writing-Master'.

The work of teaching boys to write and the labour of cutting headstones may have been worthy occupations, but neither were crafts by which a man could make a fortune: and Baskerville wanted to be wealthy. To which end, by 1738 he had taught himself the art of japanning – a process for covering decorated metals with varnish – and earned himself an early fortune: it was a business in which he continued to flourish for the remainder of his life.

A Typographer and Printer

With his prosperity secured, Baskerville returned to his first love: letters. He designed a typeface, experimented with casting and setting type, improved the design of the printing press, and developed new processes for the making of paper and ink.

Baskerville's glossy, oily, near purple ink gained its unique colour by being mixed with 'fire-black' soot gathered from glass-pinchers' and solderers' lamps, whilst his paper's distinctive glaze came from 'hot pressing', an undocumented process probably based on a technique picked up from his japanning work.

His improvements to the printing press made his work more accurate and consistent, more precise and perfect than any printed work previously produced and were used to great advantage to display his best known creations – the typeface that bears his name and from which he printed a famous series of books, including the groundbreaking 'Virgil' and the Cambridge 'Bible', whose superlative quality places him amongst the world's greatest typographers.

Baskerville's use of type was exemplary; his pressmanship remarkable; and his page layout revolutionary in its simplicity. It was a defining moment in English printing, ridding it of the irrelevant decoration beloved of Baskerville's contemporaries. The repercussions were felt not only in Britain, but also across the world. Baskerville's typeface spawned imitators across Europe, his layouts were copied around the world and his pressmanship set new standards for printers everywhere.

According to one writer, Stanley Morison:

It was the letter and, above all, the style of John Baskerville's books, which emancipated our printers from the habit of imitating, albeit corruptly, the current heavy Dutch fashions in typography. Now, for the first time, English printing became an influence in Europe. Baskerville was the first who not merely freed himself from that tutelage to Continental printing which had been our characteristic since the time of Caxton, but was himself to influence profoundly the whole course of subsequent typography, both English and Continental [...] his work astonished his English contemporaries and immensely interested his foreign colleagues [...] and thus Paris was at last surpassed in typographical prestige by Parma if not by Birmingham.

A Prophet Without Honour

Despite his influence and importance around the world, Baskerville remained a prophet without honour in his own land. He was snubbed as a gifted but provincial amateur with questionable morals (he lived with a married woman) and his typeface found scant favour at home.

In 1762 Baskerville tired of the printing profession. Disheartened by the poor pecuniary returns for his work, the unfriendly criticism of his work and life, and the suspicion with which English printers viewed his work, Baskerville offered his type foundry and printing office to the French Court for a sum of £8,000, but the offer was declined.

In 1769, however, Baskerville returned to printing. The chief reason seems to have been jealousy of a Birmingham printer, Nicholas Boden, who proposed to print a folio Bible. The two printers carried on a war in the pages of *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* with respect to their rival editions. Between 1770 and his death in 1775, Baskerville produced an exemplary series of classics which bear the marks of his ability even in his declining years.

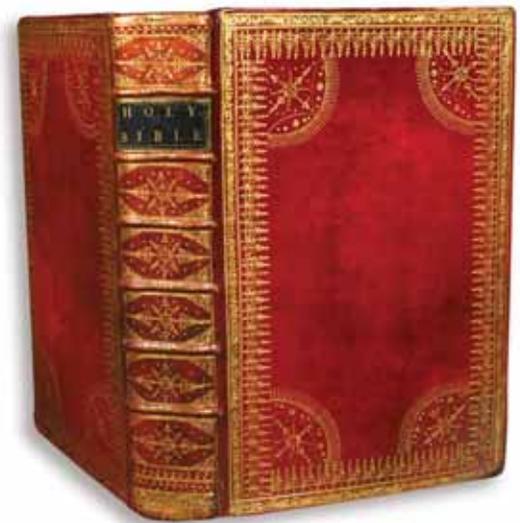
Spurning a Christian Burial

On his death his fortune, estate and printing business passed to his widow, Sarah Baskerville. As Baskerville professed a total disbelief of the Christian religion, he ordered that his remains be buried in a tomb in his own grounds, prepared by himself for the purpose, with an epitaph expressing his contempt for the superstition, which some called religion:

Stranger – Beneath this Cone in unconsecrated ground / A friend to the liberties of mankind directed his body to be inhum'd / May the example contribute to emancipate thy mind / From the idle fears of superstition / And the wicked arts of Priesthood.

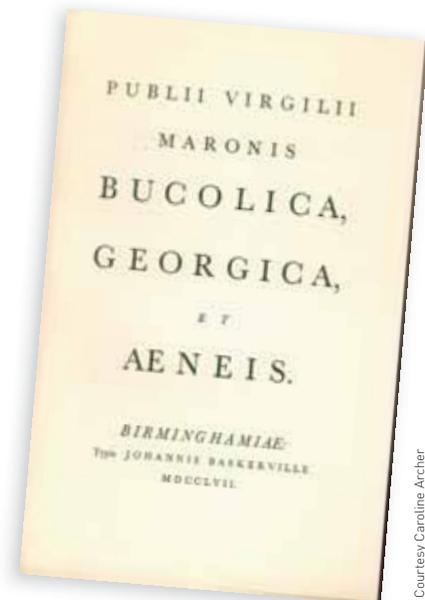
There, accordingly, his body was buried upright, and there it remained, although the building that contained it was destroyed by the Birmingham riots of 1791.

In 1826 his body was exhumed and exhibited for some time in a shop in Birmingham. In 1829 it was placed in a vault at Christ Church, where it was rediscovered in 1893.



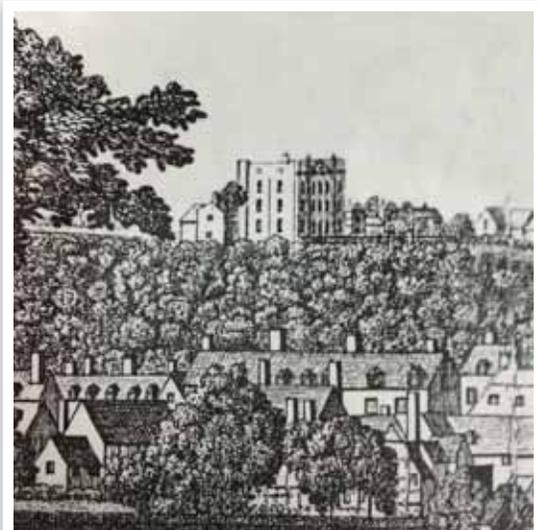
Matthew Boulton's copy of the Baskerville Bible.

Courtesy Birmingham Assay Office



Title page of Baskerville's edition of Virgil, 1757.

Courtesy Caroline Archer



A view of Easy Hill, Baskerville's house in Birmingham, from Bradford's map, 1758.

Today Baskerville lies in an unmarked catacomb in the atmospheric – if somewhat neglected – Warstone Lane cemetery in Birmingham’s stylish Jewellery Quarter: a pilgrimage to Baskerville’s resting place is a must for any visiting typophile.

The French Connection

Sarah Baskerville declined to continue the printing business, although maintained that of letter founding. However, she made many attempts to dispose of the foundry, offering it to the universities and the London booksellers. The stock lay dead, until 1779 when the whole was purchased by Pierre Beaumarchais – French politician, publisher, and revolutionary – for the Société Littéraire-Typographique for the sum of £3,700. The punches, types and printing presses were also transferred to France, from where the original Baskerville punches were used to print, in their entirety, the banned works of Voltaire. Baskerville’s French connection persisted with the typeface being used to produce the printed work of the Revolution.

Following the Revolution, Baskerville’s punches were passed around various French type foundries until they found their way to the Parisian firm of Deberny & Peignot. Almost 150 years later, Stephenson Blake in Sheffield started a Baskerville revival, triggering the release of new Baskerville fonts by almost every type manufacturer in the world thereafter, thus making it one of the most enduring and popular typefaces ever known.

A Complete Printer

Unlike anyone before or since, John Baskerville was the complete printer, who spent a fortune in carrying to perfection one of the greatest of all human inventions.

He not only designed a typeface, he also experimented with casting and setting type, improved the construction of the printing press, developed a new kind of paper and refined the quality of printing inks: his typographic experiments placed him ahead of his time and did much to progress the industry of his day.

John Baskerville was a man who had something individual to say, the courage to say it, and to say it persistently; and by doing so he gave the world one of the most useful, beautiful and long-lived typefaces it has ever seen. ●

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Further Reading

William Bennett, *John Baskerville, the Birmingham printer, his press, relations and friends* (City of Birmingham School of Printing, 1937).

Josiah Henry Benton, *John Baskerville, Type-Founder and Printer, 1706-1775* (Privately Printed, 1914).

Stanley Morison, *Four Centuries of Fine Printing* (Ernest & Benn, 1924).

F.E. Pardoe, *John Baskerville of Birmingham: Letter-Founder and Printer* (Muller, 1975).

Ralph Straus & Robert K. Dent, *John Baskerville: A Memoir* (Chatto & Windus, 1907).



INDUSTRY AND GENIUS

'Industry and Genius' is a sculptural tribute to John Baskerville and is probably the world's only civic monument to a typeface.

Baskerville lived and worked at Easy Hill, Birmingham in a mansion then on the edge of the city. 'Industry and Genius' stands on the site of the original mansion outside the current Baskerville House on Centenary Square in the heart of the city. The monument comprises six columns of Portland stone each representing a printing type, and on the face of each stone is a reversed bronze letter which in combination spell 'Virgil', the Roman poet whose works were printed in 1757 by Baskerville in the typeface that bears his name. The words 'John Baskerville' and 'Industry and Genius' are carved at each end of the monument. The name of the sculpture is taken from the title of a poem written in praise of the printer and which appeared in *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* in 1751.



The Baskerville Society

The Baskerville Society is an international society dedicated to the study of the eighteenth-century typographer, printer, industrialist and Enlightenment figure, John Baskerville. For more information and a membership form, please visit: <http://www.typographichub.org/baskerville-society>