

# SPREADING

## BOOKSELLING AND PRINTING BEFORE 1800

John Hinks

The middle decades of the seventeenth century saw a remarkable growth in the production and distribution of print – and towns and cities across the Midlands were leading the way in embracing the opportunities this presented.



© Birmingham Museums Trust

Freeth's Coffee House was home to the Birmingham Book Club – and radical politics. Freeth is seated second from left.  
*John Freeth and his Circle or Birmingham Men of the Last Century*, by Johannes Eckstein, 1792.

### Restrictions on Print

**B**efore and during the Civil War, a flood of books, pamphlets and proto-newspapers made political arguments of all persuasions more accessible than ever before. The restored regime under Charles II, recognising that the printed word could be a useful ally or a powerful enemy, passed 'An Act for Preventing the frequent Abuses in Printing Seditious, Treasonable, and Uncensored Books and Pamphlets; and for the Regulating of Printing and Printing

Presses'. The Act – usually known as the Printing or Licensing Act – came into force on 10 June 1662. Its main effect was to restrict printing to a limited number of presses, mostly in London, where the Stationers' Company worked with the regime to control the production of printed matter. With the exception of Oxford, Cambridge and York, printing was forbidden in provincial England. This restriction remained in place until the Printing Act was allowed to lapse in 1695, freeing printers to set up presses in provincial towns.

# THE WORD

## Printing and Bookselling outside London

Although London continued to dominate book production and distribution, there was a steady growth of printing in the provinces. By the middle of the eighteenth century, a typical provincial town of any importance enjoyed the services of at least one printer, one newspaper and several booksellers.

The West Midlands became an important area for printing, the most celebrated printer being John Baskerville (see Caroline Archer's article in *History West Midlands* Issue 1) who began printing in about 1750.

Booksellers and stationers – unaffected by the restrictions on printing – were already trading in many West Midlands towns before 1695, being particularly well established in Birmingham, Coventry, Lichfield, Shrewsbury and Worcester. There were also bookshops in Alcester, Burton upon Trent, Chesterfield, Derby, Evesham, Hereford, Stratford, Tamworth, Warwick and Wolverhampton. Although some of these were short-lived, many book-trade businesses survived through several generations of the same family.

An early bookseller in the West Midlands was Michael Johnson (1657–1731), who had served his apprenticeship in London and was made a freeman of the Stationers' Company in 1685. His bookshop was in Lichfield, but he also traded regularly at markets in Uttoxeter, Birmingham and Ashby-de-la-Zouch, sometimes assisted by his son Samuel. In later life Dr Johnson (1709–1784) was proud of being 'bred a bookseller' and learning to bind books. He recalled having treated his father's shop as his personal university, reading widely from the classics and other literature.

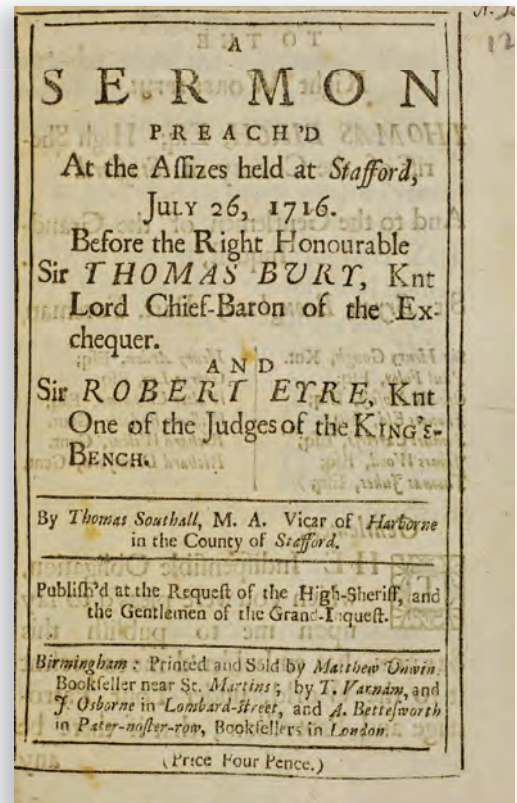
## The Demand for Books

As the eighteenth century dawned, a new and diverse market for the printed word began to emerge in provincial England. Ordinary people were starting to become more literate than their forebears and many of them wanted to put their reading skills to use on something more than the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Higher up the social scale, both men and women needed books about practical matters – estate and household management, accounting and business skills, gardening, sporting and social accomplishments – as well as books for entertainment. The continuing importance of religion in many people's lives was reflected in a steady demand for books of sermons, prayers and meditations. Many educated people began to take an interest in political matters and were keen to read the latest news and ideas in books, pamphlets and newspapers. As education slowly improved and was accessible to more people, though still a minority, a market began to emerge for books suitable for children, both at school and at home.

## The Supply of Books

Although there was now a wide-ranging demand for books, they were still expensive and only those with a degree of surplus wealth could acquire their own books. The typical scholar's or gentleman's library was small by modern standards and there was much reliance on borrowing books from friends and sometimes from a local library. The practice of 'commonplacing' flourished, as readers copied extracts from what they read (rather than annotating borrowed books), planned their future reading and made other notes in a personal commonplace book.



The first book printed in Birmingham came from Matthew Unwin's press. Thomas Southall, *A Sermon Preach'd at the Assizes held at Stafford, 1716.*

During the eighteenth century, bookshops, printing shops – some doubling as newspaper offices – and subscription libraries became a feature of most towns of any size in provincial England. Many towns aspired to modern 'improvements', including a rudimentary policing system, street lighting and cleansing, assembly rooms and theatres. Bookshops and printing offices were recognised as key contributors to this wave of improvement in the quality of urban life.

In an age when most household items and personal effects were home-made or locally produced, books were one of the few commodities (along with patent medicines and luxuries like tea, also sold by many booksellers) which had to be transported to the Midlands from London and elsewhere by packhorse, later by carrier's wagon, and sometimes – if urgent – by coach.

Books were still usually bought in sheets and then bespoke bound for the individual buyer, rather than being ready-bound. Gentlemen sometimes shared the cost of books by forming reading clubs.



## Street Literature

**T**hose further down the socio-economic pecking order were not excluded completely from the developing culture of print. If they could read even a little – and a surprising number of them could at this period – they could buy the small printed penny books later known as ‘chapbooks’ and now studied by historians as evidence of the culture of ordinary people.

Almanacs, chapbooks, ballads, broadsides and other ‘street literature’ were usually bought from a stall at a fair or market, or from travelling vendors or ‘chapmen’. Because much cheap print was illustrated, often quite crudely, it could be enjoyed up to a point by illiterate people.

Ballad-mongers could be heard singing their wares in the street or market-place, while taverns and ale-houses displayed ballads and other prints on their walls for singing or reading aloud.

Few people remained untouched by print culture. Living at some distance from a town was no great disadvantage: newspaper proprietors ran networks of ‘news-men’ who delivered the paper and other goods on horseback to rural dwellers.

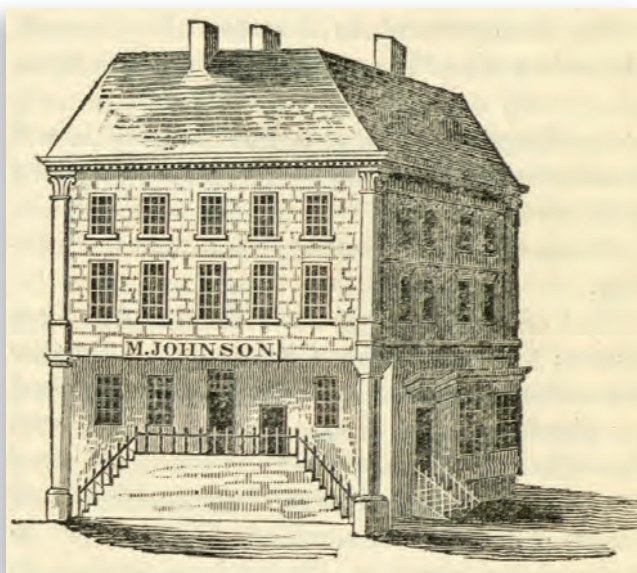
## Booksellers and Printers

The production and distribution of printed goods were generally regarded as ‘respectable’ trades and tended to attract literate and fairly well-educated people – plus more than a sprinkling of political and religious zealots and assorted eccentrics. Printing was a skilled occupation and many provincial printers, and some booksellers, had served an apprenticeship with a master Stationer in London. Later in the eighteenth century, this trend declined and the aspiring young printer was more likely to be apprenticed locally.

Bookselling was a rather less skilled trade but nevertheless required some knowledge of literature and customers’ interests. In provincial towns one man was often the leading printer and bookseller, sometimes newspaper proprietor too. The typical provincial bookshop was a family business, in which the owner’s wife and older children often ran the shop while the owner worked at printing or newspaper production.

Printers met a growing local need for business stationery, posters and other everyday items, known as ‘jobbing’ printing, but might also produce some books. Poll-books and sermons preached locally were typical fodder for the provincial press. Some printed their own chapbooks and song-sheets, while others bought them in bulk to sell on to pedlars. Most bookshops offered more than just books: patent medicines and fancy goods were common and lucrative side-lines, while some printers acted as agents for insurance, employment or military recruitment.

The best provincial bookseller-printers were intelligent and



Michael Johnson's bookshop in Lichfield. T.G. Lomax, *A Short Account of the Ancient and Modern State of the City and Close of Lichfield*, 1819.

versatile entrepreneurs who enjoyed a steady if usually unremarkable income. Only a minority became really wealthy, usually through branching out into money-lending, real estate or other ventures.

Many eighteenth-century book-trade people had started out in a different trade and, more often than not, in another town. Many printers and booksellers were public-spirited and played a leading role in civic or ecclesiastical life, developing connections with other prominent businessmen and intellectuals.

## Newspapers

Worcester, as a cathedral city, had a thriving book trade: about twenty books were printed there in the sixteenth century but there was then a long gap until 1709 when Stephen Bryan (1685–1748) set up his press. Bryan established the *Post-Man*, Worcester's first newspaper, which continued as *Berrow's Worcester Journal* and claims to be the oldest surviving newspaper in the country.

Other important early newspapers in the region were *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, which ran from 1741 until it was absorbed by *The Birmingham Post* in 1956, and the *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, one of the oldest weekly papers in England, first published in 1772. Like many early papers, the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* boasted a massive circulation area: Shropshire, Staffordshire, Worcestershire, parts of Cheshire and much of Wales. This may be an exaggerated claim although, like many provincial papers, the *Chronicle* was well connected both regionally and nationally, with agents – often booksellers or other newspaper offices – in many towns, as far afield as Bristol, Reading and London, where advertisements could be taken in.

## A Flourishing Print Culture

The eighteenth-century printers and booksellers of the West Midlands played a key role in spreading the new ideas of the Enlightenment era, as well as meeting a growing demand for more down-to-earth books of practical instruction and entertainment, both serious and popular. Literacy rates improved even further and most people soon enjoyed access, in one way or another, to the flourishing print culture of the early nineteenth century. ●

**Dr John Hinks** chairs the Printing Historical Society and is an Honorary Fellow in the Centre for Urban History, University of Leicester.

### Further Reading

British Book Trade Index: [www.bbti.bham.ac.uk](http://www.bbti.bham.ac.uk)

Margaret Cooper, *The Worcester Book Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Worcestershire Historical Society, 1997).

John Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge UP, 1985).

Joseph Hill, *The Book Makers of Old Birmingham* (1907, reprinted New York, 1971).