

## From the Chair

The Society's new season has got off to an encouraging start with, so far, three excellent and well-attended talks. John Woolley's talk on the Great Train Robbery in November was so well-received that we have invited him back next year. Mind you, it is sobering to think that events well within the lifetimes of some (well, all right, nearly all) of us are now 'history'. The committee is working on plans for summer events. It occurs to us that if we arrange a visit that requires travelling for more than, say, half an hour, people might prefer to share a small bus. We shall take soundings.

Our regular appeal for members to contribute to 224 has produced outstanding results recently. Last September, for instance, we published Alan Maddison's admirable article on 'The Friends Over 60 Years'. In this issue you will find Marianne Elsley's fascinating piece on Utility Furniture. If you don't have a large piece of research for the magazine, Colin is always in need of shorter pieces (perhaps some additional information, or a response to an article) and he will be delighted to hear from you.

A Happy Christmas and best wishes for 2004 to our members.

Chris Day

## Our winter programme

**14 January:** Paul Sanders 'The occupation of the Channel Islands in World War II'

**11 February:** Hugo Brunner (Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire) 'The Oxfordshire Lieutenancy'

**10 March:** David Vaisey 'Shopping in Victorian and Edwardian times'

*Our meetings take place at 7.30 at the Windmill Centre on the second Wednesday of the month.*

## Utility furniture

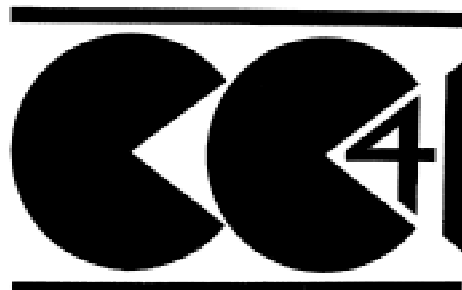
*I am most grateful to Marianne Elsley for this article on a more recent aspect of our history than we usually cover. And, for local interest, one need look no further than the names given to the furniture, reflecting the tradition of furniture-making in the area.* CC

Someone mentions Utility and at once a whole set of modern furniture springs to mind. One can't pretend that it is always a flattering concept, but 'Utility' had a definite meaning for people of my age who lived through the forties in this country, especially those who married at that time or couples who were bombed out of their homes. In 1943 this design of furniture and a whole range of household goods came under the aegis of the Government, and it therefore had a guarantee and it stood for a certain standard of quality and workmanship.

The idea of a utility object or piece of furniture originally sprang from a high-minded group of designers and artists who were longing for what they felt were better designs, for plainer things, for absence of gratuitous decoration. Let useful things be just that. Scrolls and pretty ornamentation were not needed. But purely functional objects have to have some sort of beauty in their own right, some compensation to make them attractive to the purchaser. And here one thinks of fine craftsmanship and first-class material, wood which is attractive as well as being seasoned and suitable for the job. William Morris, at the end of the nineteenth century, had this in mind and his ideas were based on first-class work, on the artisan becoming more important. In Germany in the twenties new styles became available for people with taste and money. One thinks here of Bauhaus and Biedermann. In England the war was the right time for plain designs to be accepted.

For a time this idealism caught on: the Government, in the early forties, presided over the scheme for good furniture and adopted it. And so Utility furniture started. The Government decided to include it in its range of rationed goods and devised a scheme of issuing dockets to newly-married and bombed-out couples. The design was plain, too plain for some; one designer who was drawn into the scheme was Gordon Russell, who already owned a furniture factory, another well-known name was Christopher Heal whose family had the big store in Tottenham Court Road. But to have famous designers like these on the job was one thing. To get hold of their creations was another, and one had to wait one's turn. We, in the provinces, took what was offered from the range.

Gordon Russell presided over the scheme and thirty approved pieces of furniture were designed. They all matched in style. In fact there were two types of design, the 'Cotswold' available from 1943 and the 'Chiltern' (1945). Slight variations marked them out as being different from each other. A newly-married couple was issued with enough coupons (or dockets) to buy a dining-room table and four chairs, side-



board and two easy chairs, which were either completely upholstered or had wooden arms. We chose one of each, 'His' and 'Hers'. There was a choice of light or dark wood. The material used for these came in a small range of prescribed colours. It was a durable, pleasant but fairly ordinary furnishing rep [for our younger members, a furnishing fabric, distinguished by its corded surface]. We decided on an orange/brown and were very happy with it. For the bedroom one could get a dressing table, a small wardrobe and two beds. By juggling with the values of the docketts one could vary the list a little. One dining chair less and two arm chairs with wooden sides might entitle you to a small cupboard. We chose to forgo the beds and buy second-hand ones instead. The price of all this was fixed by the Board of Trade and a list like the one above would have cost about £100. [At today's prices it might be some 20 times more. Ed]

There was also one piece that many people will remember with affection: the kitchen cabinet. It was a tall 'all-in-one' kitchen cupboard. There were two doors at the top, behind them shelves to hold flour and dry goods. The middle was a pull-out flap, the place to prepare food and roll out pastry. Below there were three stacked drawers on one side, and another cupboard on the other. It was a compact piece and much liked, but then there wasn't much else in a kitchen in those days. Not quite the American dream kitchen, but that was the best that could be done.

We were delighted with this furniture for our first home and felt that the style was suitable for the then post-war conditions and would not date. We were also convinced that pieces designed so carefully and made under the best conditions would last. But this was not quite the case.

It was not long before the public wanted something a little more fancy. Some decorations, some individuality was beginning to be preferred. People who cared for their home didn't want to have exactly the same things as their neighbour. None the less it has to be said that the general style has lasted, and in essence a shop like Habitat to this day stocks plain unadorned pieces of furniture which are surely direct descendants of Utility.



It was disappointing that the quality was not quite good enough. It might have been another matter if we could have gone to one of the top London shops. As it was, drawers began to stick, and cupboard doors swung open. The change from Utility was gradual. Danish furniture became popular, especially for the top end of the market, teak was used more rather than oak. Fumed oak went out of fashion. The quality of upholstery fabrics improved. One by one these pieces left our household. Built-in wardrobes and fitted kitchens became the norm. An extendable dining room table was needed and four chairs were not enough. Our last

Utility chair left the household not so long ago, having progressed from dining room to a bedroom, and from there, painted white, to the kitchen.

None the less people who were married in the post-war years did develop an affection for Utility furniture and were proud and pleased to have it. Even now one comes across stout little cupboards housing children's toys. In his editorial of the July issue of 224, Chris Day, reporting on an outing to the Chiltern Open Air Museum, says "The highlight for many members was the restored 1940s prefab, fitted with Utility furniture." So the memory, and it is a pleasant

memory, lingers on.

Marianne Elsley

*The Utility mark on page 1 is from: Utility furniture and fashion 1941-1951, Geffrye Museum. London, 1974, while the Utility label in an Aylesbury Grammar School cap, from the Bucks County Museum, their 'Object of the Month' for November is at [http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/object\\_of\\_month/museum/nov2003.htm](http://www.buckscc.gov.uk/object_of_month/museum/nov2003.htm).*

*The images on the facing page of a kitchen, dining room and sitting room are all from the Web site 'Designing Britain 1945 - 1975' at [http://www.brighton.ac.uk/designing\\_britain/html/crd\\_desref.html](http://www.brighton.ac.uk/designing_britain/html/crd_desref.html)*

## Cheney's of Banbury and the Rusher types

In June this year an item appeared in catalogue 28 from Questor Rare Books of Brackley as follows:

'JOHNSON, Dr. Samuel. *New Mode of Printing. Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia. By Dr. Johnson. Printed with Patent Types in a Manner never before attempted.*

Banbury, Printed for P. Rusher: Cheney Printer, 1804. 8vo, pp.

[4],135,[1], contemporary - probably original boards, with early black leather backing; boards rubbed and rather knocked at corners, leather backing a little basic, sl. spotting to endpapers, else a nicely unsophisticated, full-margined, copy with edges untrimmed. Very scarce. Rusher patented his "new mode of printing" in 1802, but this is the only book printed in what Bigmore &

Wyman call "about as ugly a specimen of typography as can be conceived. His plan is to abolish all descending letters ..." A specimen page 'Comparative view of the Old and New modes of Printing', nicely contrasts the former with the latter. Perhaps it was awareness of the aesthetic limitations of his development, that caused Rusher to note at the end of his 'Advertisement' that "Since part of the book was printed, it will be seen that a material improvement has been made in the legibility of the new letters." Bigmore & Wyman, Vol. 2, p. 280.' It was priced at £595, and oddly, a similar item appeared in an American specialist dealer's catalogue at the same time for \$875.00, described as 'Very scarce'.

The 'Bigmore & Wyman' referred to is *A bibliography of printing*, compiled by E C Bigmore and C W H Wyman and the original three-volume edition was published in London from 1880-86. When they call it 'about as ugly a specimen of typography as can be conceived' they were not exaggerating! However they wrongly say it was the only book produced in this type. In 1852 the late William White of Shutford's *A complete guide to the mystery and management of bees* was republished in London and Banbury using the same horrid typeface: it is our fifth illustration.

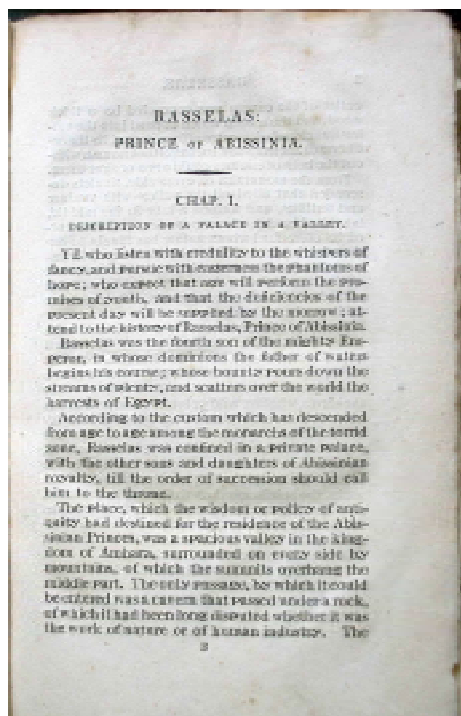
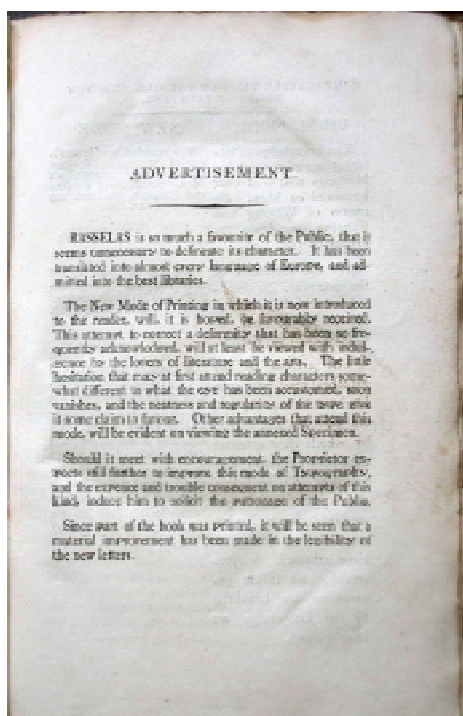
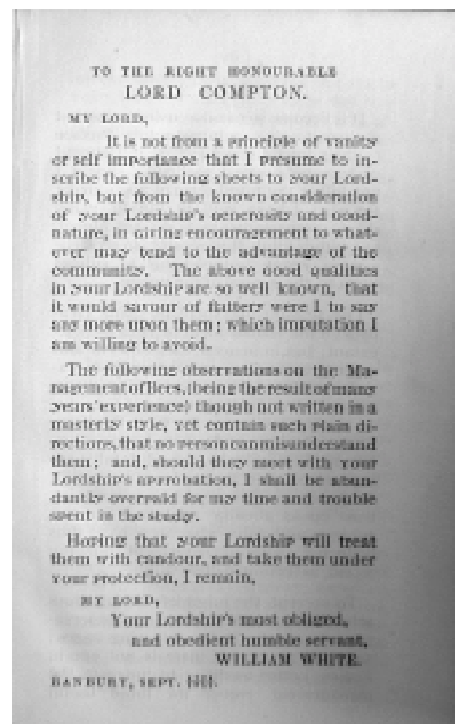
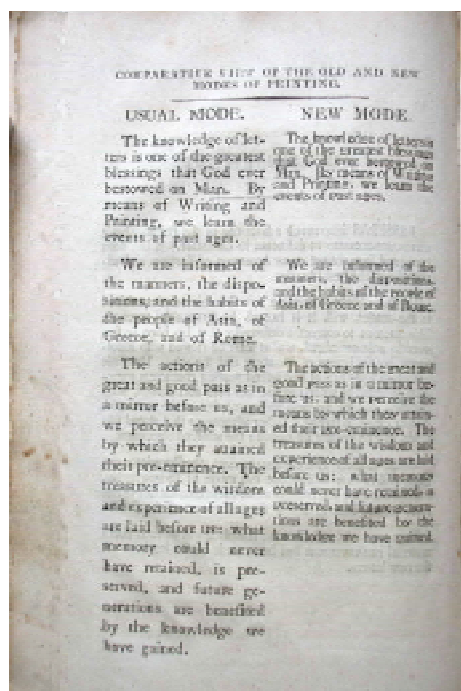
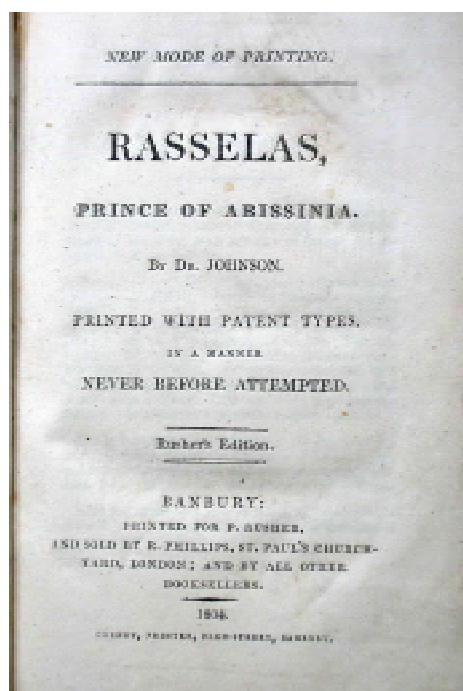
The blame for this typographic horror (to be seen in detail at the foot of the page) must, in fact, be split three ways. Cheney was, in many ways, the blameless printer, while it was Rusher as publisher who commissioned the design. What is perhaps most astonishing, and does not seem to have been

## 224, no 16, September 2003

'The Friends over sixty years': Alan Maddison apologises for the slip on page 2 of his article that led to a photograph of the Independent Chapel (the top photo) appearing instead of the Friends' Meeting House (now reproduced below). The editor would like to correct our own error: for 'Bray Doyley', read 'Bray d'Oyly', as in the Bray d'Oyly Housing Trust, Banbury.' Our apologies to readers.







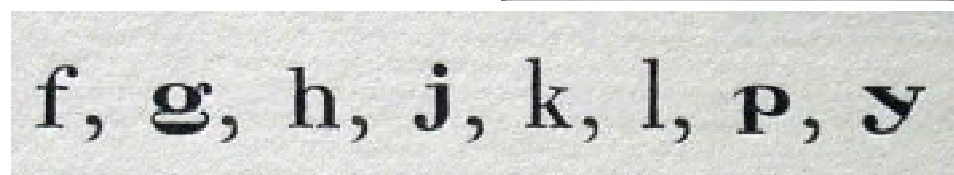
lisher or printer have cheated by actually adding space [leading] between the lines of the normal type. It is also very obvious that the way in which the descenders have been removed from each character varies and the result is that the page is very patchy. Caslon, who *should* have known better, did not give the special characters equal weight. It is not surprising that the idea did not catch on!

The history of Cheney's was most interestingly recounted to members of the Society by Deddington resident John Cheney in March 2001: it is a sad footnote to the company's interesting history that during the autumn the firm with which the modern Cheney's had merged went out of business—a sad end to a distinguished printing line.

At the time of writing it is not known what has become of the company archive, including the punches from which the 'Rusher' types were made

*I am grateful to John Walwyn-Jones of Questor Rare Books for allowing me to photograph his copy of Rasselas.*

Colin Cohen



commented on, is that the design was executed by Caslon who were probably the most celebrated type foundry of the period—it must have been a very bad day for the Calson

punch cutter!

While it can be seen from the top right illustration that considerable savings in space can be achieved by removing the 'descenders' the pub-

*If undelivered please return to:* Deddington & District History Society, c/o 37 Gaveston Gardens, Deddington OX15 0NX. 224 is the newsletter of the Deddington & District History Society, published three times a year and distributed free to members.

The Society meets on the second Wednesday of the month during the season, normally at the Windmill Centre in Deddington. Membership £8/14 pa single/couples, or £2 per meeting at the door.

Editorial address: 1 South Newington Road, Barford St Michael, OX15 0RJ. e-mail: c.cohen@europe.com