A Bristol Printing House: Edward Everard’s Monument to Gutenberg, Morris and the Printer’s Art

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In the later decades of the nineteenth century, Bristol became home to a large and dynamic printing industry. Many letterpress firms responded to the opportunities offered by the rapid growth of the book and periodical market, whilst firms such as E.S. & A. Robinson, now part of DRG, and Mardon, Son & Hall, a subsidiary of Imperial Tobacco, came to dominate the market for advertising, packaging and wrapping materials. But though many Bristol printing firms responded to the lure of the market, and some were technically advanced, few were influenced by the example of those who, like William Morris and Emery Walker, sought to elevate the printer’s art to its former high standards.

An important exception, however, was Edward Everard, a founder member of the Bristol Master Printers’ & Allied Trades’ Association, who saw himself as continuing the traditions of a long line of master printers stretching from Gutenberg and Aldus Manutius down to Morris and the Kelmscott Press. Around the turn of the twentieth century Everard’s business was flourishing, largely through his connections with Bristol’s business and commercial elite. His brother-in-law was Sir George White, one of the pioneers of electric tramways and railways in Britain and the founder in 1910 of the Bristol Aeroplane Company. Everard obtained commissions from many of the enterprises with which they were involved, ranging from illustrated timetables and guide books for tram and bus companies to pilots’ logbooks. He was also official printer to the Bristol Stock Exchange, and described himself in his advertising material as a catalogue specialist. Everard sought to integrate the best qualities of modern technological advances with those of the Kelmscott Press and its late nineteenth-century emulators. He designed his own founts, and his work was strongly influenced by Art Nouveau, often enhanced by page decoration in spot colour. The colours used were often soft pastel shades.

In 1900, when Everard’s business had outgrown his existing premises, he determined to build a state-of-the-art printing works in the city centre, which would be a monument to the history of printing. The building was at 37–38 Broad Street; a narrow, cramped site next to the medieval St. John’s Gate, with a long side and rear elevation on John Street. It was designed by Henry Williams, a Bristol architect. The rear of the building was striking enough, if somewhat outmoded by 1900. Gomme, Jenner and Little, the authors of a major book on Bristol’s architecture, describe it as “an exercise in the old arcuated mode, with two superimposed arcades and a third well recessed behind a battlemented parapet”. It was constructed in bright red brick.
from the Cattybrook Brick Works to the north of Bristol, which was used for many industrial and public buildings in late nineteenth-century Bristol. The side and rear elevations of the building also made extensive use of moulded terracotta decorations. The surviving part of the building retains a terracotta dragon (formerly one of a pair), clinging on to a drain-head. They were probably supplied by the Bridgwater firm of Barham Brothers, which specialised in this kind of decorative work.4

Rear view of the Everard building.

But if the rear of the building was quirky enough, the entrance façade on Broad Street was even more extraordinary. Here, the architectural details, striking though they were, simply provided the ground for a dramatic scheme of faience decoration by Doultons of Lambeth. Julian Barnard, in his history of Victorian ceramic tiles, describes it as the first serious attempt to use polychrome ceramics for external decoration.5
As noted earlier, Everard’s own artistic preferences had something in common with continental Art Nouveau. His interest in medieval art had also led him to the study of Celtic and Byzantine art and design. Underlying all, however, was the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Like Morris, Walker and Ashbee, he was concerned to revive the art of printing; hence the decision to create a memorial to his predecessors. The fundamental idea was to reconcile the craftsman tradition with the demands of the modern commercial world; to symbolise this, a building devoted to industrial art should bear the symbols of the craft and its origination. Everard asked whether the memory of such great men as Gutenberg, Caxton and Morris was only to be recognised through books and statues: “is there not enormous scope in England for industrial houses to beautify our streets with architectural trophies to the originators of industries, arts and sciences? And if so then why not in colour ceramics as well as in stone or castings?” He continued:

having in mind the century linking 1400 and 1500 together and especially the middle part of that century, when the daybreak of a new era was dawning out of the creation of Gutenberg, I elected to raise in Bristol a trophy contemporary with that period and with that genius. It was therefore necessary to pass beyond the Renaissance and into the region of the Middle Ages, where the atmosphere was warm with the homeliness of pure and thoughtful handicraft; and from there to view the architectural features from the Gothic away into the mist of the Celtic and Byzantine periods.6

Everard’s initial intention was to follow a Celtic treatment in a biscuit colour – for technical reasons, ceramic tiles for exterior use were generally of a more or less uniform yellow-brown – but whilst discussing the project with Doultons he came into contact with W. J. Neatby (1860–1910), who was in charge of the department of architectural ceramics. Neatby had joined Doultons in 1890, and, like Everard in his own way, he was seeking to bridge the gap between art and industry – between craft tradition and industrial process. Though he worked for a leading commercial manufacturer, his experimentation with new glazes and techniques bore comparison with the work of De Morgan. As Barnard has remarked, “although he was working for a commercial enterprise and was limited by time and money, he succeeded in producing results that were artistically attractive. He was a complete master of his material and supervised every stage of the process of design and manufacture.”7 Contemporary critics were equally impressed with his talents. Aymer Valance, in a review in the Studio, remarked that “it is the strength of Mr Neatby’s work, that he is no mere theorist, but at once a designer, vivid in imagination, and a handcraftsman who has thoroughly mastered the ways and means of his material”.8 In this, of course, Neatby typified many of those who, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, were responding to the ideas and example of Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Neatby was responsible for the development of polychrome tiles for architectural use, and his best-known work is probably the ceramic decoration of Harrods Meat Hall and the Winter Gardens at Blackpool.9 However, as a result of his experiments, he was also able to produce glazed tiles of all colours which could resist the weather without discolouring, and the Everard building was his most important exterior project.
The façade, as illustrated in Everard’s book *A Bristol Printing House*
At Neatby’s urging, the proposed biscuit colour was abandoned, and the whole of the façade was done in decorative ceramic tiles. The background was of an ivory tone, broken irregularly by deeper shades which were produced by natural firing in the kiln. It was named Carrara Ware by Doultons because of its claimed resemblance to the famed marbles of the Carrara district of Italy, though it was not intended to imitate that material closely, and of course had characteristic qualities of its own. A slightly glossy opaque glaze, it was extensively used in architectural work. Against this background, Neatby made full use of the opportunity provided by his new technique to create an arresting design in rich, deep colours. As at Harrods and Blackpool, he was personally responsible for designing and painting the tiles, thus combining the roles of artist and artisan.

Since Everard saw himself as a craftsman-printer, the façade of his printing works is dominated by the figures of Gutenberg, the father of printing, and William Morris, the leading figure of the craftwork revival. They appear to either side of arches which were intended to echo those of the medieval St. John’s Gate, which stands just to the left of the facade. On the left is a life-sized figure of Gutenberg pulling his press, surrounded by his name and the letters of his alphabet. To the right, a similarly-sized figure of Morris is at work, with his Golden alphabet also decorating the wall. The design was intended to emphasise how little difference there was between the work method of Gutenberg and that of Morris. Between them is a winged figure with open book in hand, representing the Spirit of Literature. The three spandrels were thus to typify ancient and modern printing, presided over by the Spirit of Literature.

Above the first floor level, there is a battlemented cornice, and the upper wall is set back about three feet, allowing room at either end for a decorated octagonal turret, surmounted by domes and finials. “The upper part of the building”, to quote Everard himself, “is finished with a gable of quaint form with a large semi-circular arch covering a tympanum, on which appears a heroic-sized figure in slab mosaics, bearing a lamp and mirror in uplifted hands, signifying the literary symbols of ‘Light and Truth’.”

Beneath the arches and the main figures is Edward Everard’s name, in white on a blue background, in an Art Nouveau typeface which he himself designed, over a frieze of flower and tree forms. The open vestibule was decorated in the same manner as the façade, and enclosed by massive wrought-iron gates with a central heart-shaped shield carrying the initial E in bold relief (Figure 3). Inside, the theme of the history of printing was continued. Cartoons in oils covered the walls of the principal offices – portraits of leading printers such as Gutenberg and Morris (again), Caxton, Dürer, and Senefelder (the inventor of lithography).

There was a great deal of contemporary interest in the building, and the police had to control the crowds in Broad Street for two days when it was opened in 1902. Everard was immensely proud of his achievement. He was on hand to explain his intentions to anyone who cared to listen, and he produced a large-format book to celebrate the opening of the printing works. As well as describing the building itself and the influences that had inspired it, Everard went on to consider the future of the printing industry, and the relationship between master and man. He revealed himself as a strong supporter of trade unionism – or at least craft unionism – emphasising that both employer and employee had rights and responsibilities. Other sections dealt with type making (in which Everard had a particular interest), the opportunities
provided by modern technology, and the relationship between artisanship and up-to-date automatic machinery.

More recent opinion on the Everard building has been divided, to say the least. Pevsner, for example, described the Everard works as: “only two bays wide, but in the wildest Art Nouveau. White faience with gaily coloured friezes and long figures. Angle turrets above with squashed columns à la Harrison Townsend.” Indeed, Pevsner had hardly a good word for any of Henry Williams’s work. His Bristol Stock Exchange in nearby St. Nicholas Street is described as “one-storeyed, of ornate debased Italian form, as shockingly late as 1903”, whilst his “near-Renaissance”
alterations to William Paty’s Christ Church, at the far end of Broad Street from the Everard works, are equally deplored. Gomme, Jenner and Little add that though Williams was a highly skilled architectural draughtsman, “as an architect he was completely without stylistic principles or tact. On occasion his irrepressible delight in combining the uncombinable could end in a design whose naive pertness is quite winning, but as often the effect is very much the reverse: his alterations to Paty’s Christ Church are of an insensitive crassness remarkable even in a provincial Victorian.”

Others, however, have been more positive in their comments. Crick, in her survey of Victorian buildings in Bristol, has concluded that “the result was an exceptional one; for Neatby it was triumph in the reconciliation of art and industry in the best spirit of the nineteenth-century craft revival, and for Everard it represented the fulfilment of a personal and commercial ambition.” Continuing on a positive note, photographs reveal that Williams did make effective use of a very awkwardly shaped site, and created an interior which was spacious and well-lit. Moreover, the building’s importance in the history of ceramics is undoubted. Neatby’s work is little known today, but he was a leading figure in his chosen field. Nor was the use of exterior ceramics quite as idiosyncratic as one might think. The Everard building provides a reminder of a time when glazed tile seemed a possible contender as a suitable finish for industrial and commercial buildings. As the stone and brick of the surrounding buildings were blackened by the soot and grime of a major industrial city, a tiled façade would stand out ever clearer; each squall of rain would clean it, leaving it brighter than ever. But, despite the advocacy of Halsey Ricardo and Walter Crane, amongst others, the use of ceramic tiles for facing buildings never really caught on. The only other examples which come to mind are the house in Addison Road, London, which Ricardo built in 1906 for Sir Ernest Bebenham, and the Michelin Building (1909) in Fulham Road. Maybe the “wildest Art Nouveau” of the Everard building was too much for English taste.

The print works survived Everard’s death in January 1916 by almost half a century. When the firm finally closed in 1967, proposals were put forward to demolish the building and replace it with a large office block, hotel, restaurant and car park. However, following vociferous objections from city planners and local residents the proposal was rejected. In the event, it was decided to retain the façade and the front hall of the Everard building as the entrance for the new complex, known as National Westminster Court, which was completed in 1972. The building still comes as something of a surprise as one walks around Bristol’s commercial centre; certainly, nothing could be further removed from the nineteenth-century neo-classical architecture and the new office blocks which surround it. Though some restoration work has had to be carried out on the structure, the ceramic decoration has lasted well thanks to its resistant glaze, and the colour is as bright as ever. It continues to provide a demonstration – if any were needed – that over the years many people have drawn inspiration from Morris’s example; though the results might not always have been to his liking.
NOTES


13 Ibid., pp.388–9, 424.

