

St Bride Foundation: Where Fleet Street Learned to Print

by Ursula Jeffries

St Bride Foundation is a Fleet Street survivor. Built at the time when the newspaper industry was gearing up for the successes of the twentieth century, the Institute building still stands not just as a record of the Victorian era but as a resource for today's researchers, theatre goers, event organisers and London enthusiasts. Although there are many historic links to its famous neighbour, Wren's church of St Bride, the Foundation is in fact almost entirely independent of the church. The site is a strange shape which was dictated by the crowded streets near Ludgate Circus and, following the many changes of the last 130 years, is closely surrounded by an extraordinary mixture of ancient and modern. Bride Lane, which connects New Bridge Street with Fleet Street, has a sharp corner; this according to legend reflects the route taken by pilgrims to a holy well. Modern visitors will find the entrance to the Bridewell Theatre nearby and steps leading up to the Foundation's front door. The door opens onto a small piazza overlooked by the famous church spire and leading to Salisbury Square.

Origins of the charity

The 1890s made a significant contribution to the establishment of modern Britain. The expansion of education, literacy, transport and communication, supported by new technology and outstanding acts of philanthropy, combined to create a world we recognise. This was the time and place inhabited by the governors and original members of what was, in effect, a mechanics' institute for printers.



The amalgamation of many small charities and legacies across the city in the second half of the nineteenth century had produced funds for the benefit of the community. This led to a scheme to provide a technical printing school with facilities for education and recreation for both students of printing and the local residential and working community. A trade paper of 1891 explained that the parish was "at the very heart of the printing world of the metropolis. Most of the great morning and evening journals are issued within its precincts, periodicals are printed by the million, books are manufactured by the ton. There is probably no place in the universe of the same size wherein so much printing is done. Fleet Street – or 'Brainstreet' – runs right through the centre – wherein are engaged day and night the journalists and correspondents who by means of the telegraph are hourly speaking to all ends of the earth."¹

The building

The design for the institute had to incorporate the aims of the charity and to be practical and accessible. There were, therefore, large, light rooms for the printing students with floors strong enough to bear the weight of the machinery. In addition to offices, teaching rooms and library areas there was a gymnasium, an elegant boardroom, a beautiful meeting hall and a dignified reading room. Best of all there was a swimming pool and baths – a real bonus for workers in a grimy industry in a grimy city. Equipment was installed for hiring, washing and drying swimming costumes and towels and the plan was, from the start, to board the pool over in the winter to use the space for concerts and events.

The Prince of Wales unveiled the foundation stone in November 1893 and noted that City of London printers were "a class of workmen who, I am told, have for many years been generally considered as among the foremost in intellect, skill and progress." He added "I can imagine no better recreation after poring over the 'case' than to come [here] for a swim or for gymnastic exercise." The next year the Foundation was opened for business and the Lord Mayor was there to celebrate and welcome the facilities for the whole parish.

Visitors are usually astonished to find many of these elements are still in place and it is possible, with the help of early photographs, to imagine the original life of the building. The larger rooms now accommodate the St Bride Library; the gymnasium has become the

¹ *British and Colonial Printer* May 21, 1891

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Print Workshop; the pool is a theatre and the laundry is now the theatre bar where the original equipment can still be seen.

St Bride Library

It had been decided that the student printers should have the advantage of both a technical and a lending library. While at an early stage of planning, the governors were shocked to hear of the death of their colleague William Blades and that his collection of early books was to be auctioned. The purchase of the Blades library was, to them, essential to preserve a unique personal achievement; Blades had become the expert of the time on Caxton while running his own business. A special room was built to house the volumes so carefully collected and catalogued and this was to become the basis of the library as it is today. The library has been growing ever since and now holds some 50,000 books, papers and artefacts on the history of printing and its allied trades. Constantly updated with new works on subjects ranging from the earliest printers to the most up to date digital design, this is a unique reference library which is open to all.

Print Workshop

The printing school was so successful that it outgrew the building and moved to Stamford Street in 1922. The building continued as an educational and recreational centre with lively debating and sporting clubs but although many presses and a large collection of type remained, there were few times when they were demonstrated. In late 2010 it was decided that it was time to bring printing back to Fleet Street with a revival of letterpress teaching. The former exhibition room was developed into a teaching area and there are now courses being run on the arts of composition and printing, bookbinding and related crafts. Small presses have recently been added to the collection as has a Heidelberg machine with the capacity to reproduce large quantities of prints.

St Bride Foundation today still delivers the original obligations of its charitable status but the staff like to think that these reflect our own times. Just as the halls echoed with events, music and lectures between the world wars when Fleet Street was the centre of journalism, so they do today, even though the great newspaper presses have moved away.



One of the historical presses used in the Print Workshop.

About Ursula Jeffries

Originally trained as a copywriter, Ursula's career has given her extensive experience of both the private and public sectors. Some years ago, because of her interest in Fleet Street history, she was recruited as a volunteer for St Bride Library and while continuing in that role she is now also a freelance writer and researcher for St Bride Foundation. She recently took a major part in the publication of 'The Compositor in London' by Cyril Cannon which is coming out this month and is the library's first new title for twelve years. Her current major ambition is to write the biography of William Blades, Victorian printer and benefactor.