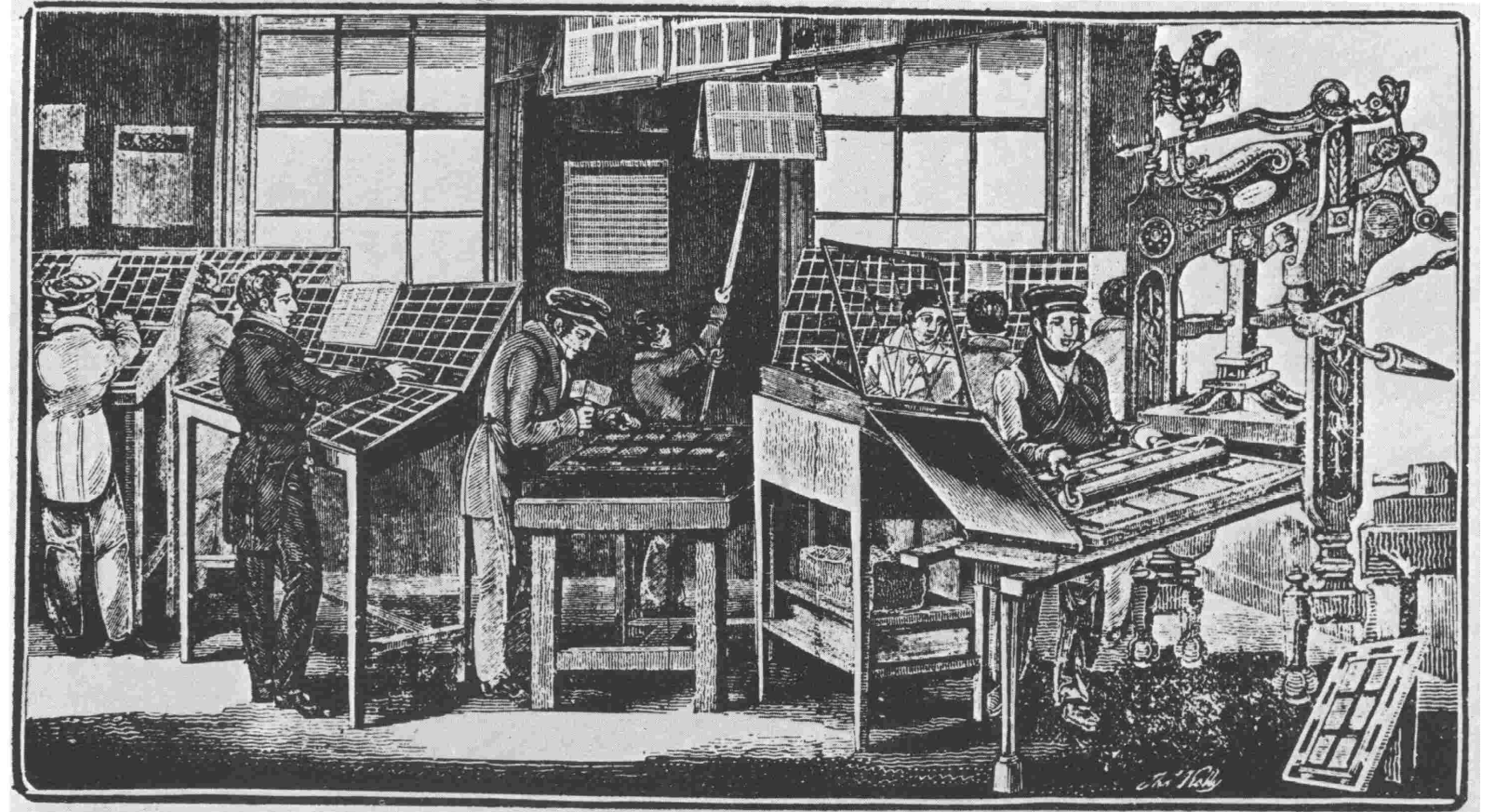
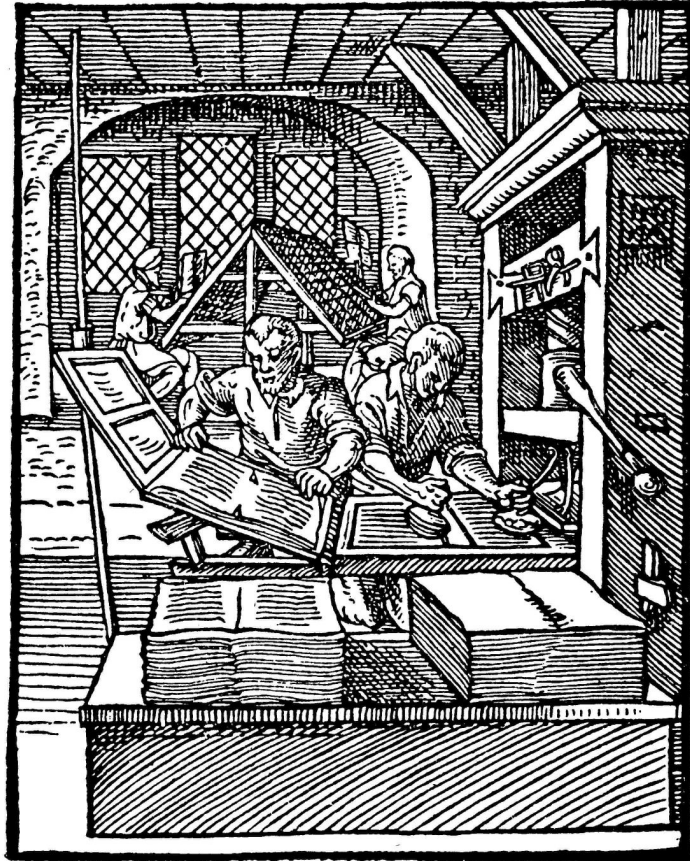


Working in the Past in Printing

Jobs in printing hardly changed over four hundred years, until machines for typesetting, and steam, then electric, power worked the printing presses.



The **Master Printer** was the owner of the printing firm. Most firms would be divided into three sections: the *Composing Room*, where the type was set, the *Press Room* where the work was printed, and the *Warehousing & Bookbinding Room*, where the paper was stored, cut, and jobs were bound into books or hand finished in other ways.

The **Compositors** 'composed' (put together) the type, which was then given to the **Stone Hand** who 'imposed' it - assembled it with the furniture (large spacing) and quoins (wedges) to lock it into the chase (metal frame) - ready for printing. A 'proof' (trial print) would then be made, and a **Proof Reader** would check for mistakes, before the job went to the press room.

Compositors were considered the top job in printing: they had to work very quickly and accurately, and of course had to be able to read and write, which not everyone did then. They worked standing all day, and often had to work in poor light (using candles if it was dark) even when setting very tiny letters.

The **Pressman** was in charge of the printing press, and would put the 'forme' (the chase with all the type in it) onto the press, and set the machine up to print, checking for even printing and accurate position on the paper. He might have one or two Press Hands or assistants, who would ink the type, and put the sheets of paper into the machines. If a child was an assistant, known as a '**Printer's Devil**' possibly because they probably ended up black with ink, they might be in charge of spreading the ink on its plate ready for use, and taking the printed sheets away to hang up to dry. When powered machines were used, the assistants would also have the messy job of cleaning off the ink at the end of the day, otherwise it would dry overnight.

In the warehouse, the **Warehouseman** would be in charge of making sure that the right amounts and kinds of paper and ink were available for the work, and cutting the

paper to size, and after the job was printing, trimming the edges to give a neat clean finish. If a book was being printed, the **Bookbinders** would fold the printed sheets to make the 8, 16 or 32-page sections of the book, and then sew them together and add the covers of card covered in paper, cloth or leather.

Like most industries in Victorian times, all the best-paid and important jobs were for men only. **Women** might be employed to feed the paper into the presses, and were nearly always the ones in the bookbinding department doing the folding and sewing. They were expected to work very quickly, (it was thought that women were better at fiddly jobs than men) and paid less than men. **Children** were also used widely for simple jobs, because they were cheap.

To become a printer, boys of 12 or 14 would sign an 'indenture' to become an **Apprentice**. This meant they worked for a printer for seven years (with almost no pay), and were trained by him in return. At the end, they became a 'craftsman', a qualified printer, but often the master would not give them a job, as they would now be due full pay. Many printers 'tramped' (walked from town to town) to get work, usually being helped with food and a place to stay for a day or two by the local workmen while they looked for work.

The different jobs in printing were all kept separate. Each craftsman knew (and was only allowed to do) only his own skill, and would do the same job all his life. The secrets of their skills were very important to them, and they seldom let outsiders know exactly how they worked. The different crafts in a firm (especially the compositors and the pressmen) were like different football team supporters—they each thought themselves much better than the others! Very few workers ever changed jobs, and most did the same jobs as their fathers.

Pictures of printing workshops in the 1500s (left) and 1800s (right). Workmen doing the same jobs the same way can be seen, and the only changes are the look of their clothes, and the printing press being metal instead of wood, but the same basic design. One other change is that the pressman is using a roller to put on ink, not press balls.

A 'printer's devil' can be seen in the picture on the right, hanging up the printed sheets to dry, and a 'stone hand' tapping the type level with his mallet on the stone imposing slab, in front of him.