

Gutenberg & Caxton



GUTENBERG has much in common with Shakespeare: famous, obviously important, but with very little verifiable information really available about him. As a result, most of the biographies are just like the portrait reproduced here, speculative and probably far from the truth.

What seems to be fairly certain is that he came from a well-off family involved in the fine metal trades—coin making and goldsmithing. It seems likely that he therefore had expertise in metal working. His printing project took several years to develop, starting about 1438, and involved employing craftsmen, providing premises, and buying substantial amounts of materials (paper was then very expensive), and he borrowed large sums of money to finance it. In the end, this lost him control, and the printing was taken over by his creditors, just as production of the first work, the massive 42-line Bible, neared completion in about 1453.

Printing and type had already been used in the Far East centuries earlier, but whether knowledge of this had any connection with the West is unknown, and there is no evidence to link them. Printing from wood blocks was in use well before Gutenberg, and may well have provided him with some ideas for both his presses and inks, though blocks could be printed by rubbing without a press. His crucial contribution was the introduction of cast type, enabling far faster, cheaper and more flexible production of texts than before. He also managed to match the standards of the day in book production, a luxury market, ensuring immediate acceptance of the new technology.



CAXTON, on the other hand, has much more known about him, although his portrait shown here is just as fictitious as Gutenberg's. A London merchant with trade connections to the continent, he saw the commercial potential of the new printing, went to Belgium, and learnt the trade for himself. Returning to London, he established his printing and publishing business, and produced a series of secular books much more like the list of a modern publisher.

Apart from introducing printing to Britain in 1476, he was not actually an inventor or innovator. He does seem to have learnt the craft personally, but more as a means to an end than because he was a practical man. His contribution is rated much more in his literary interests and ability, the choice of what he printed, and for being instrumental in standardising English. Many of his books were translations, and he wrote the introductions as well as the translations themselves. Where Gutenberg's market was limited by the idea that books were so expensive, only the rich could afford them, and only the most precious works were likely to be produced, (and the influence of the Church biased that judgement towards religious texts), only a couple of decades later, Caxton was already looking to a wider, more secular market made possible by books at prices the affluent middle-classes could afford.

While Gutenberg had the revolutionary idea that broke free of the old, Caxton typified the many who followed him and put the new technology to work and made the revolution a reality. Apart from anything else, they lit the fuses for both the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution by democratising reading & the written word.