



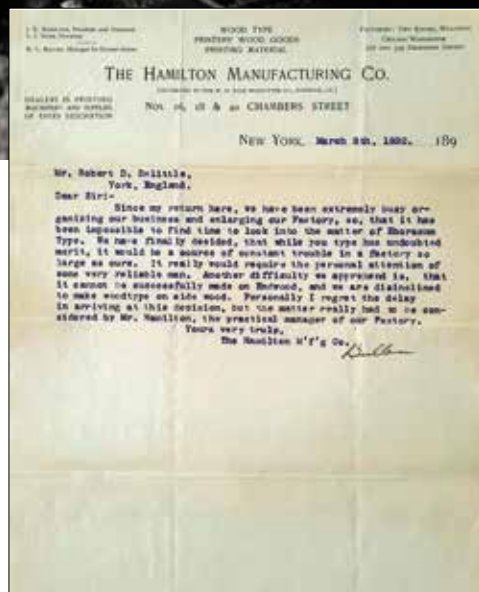
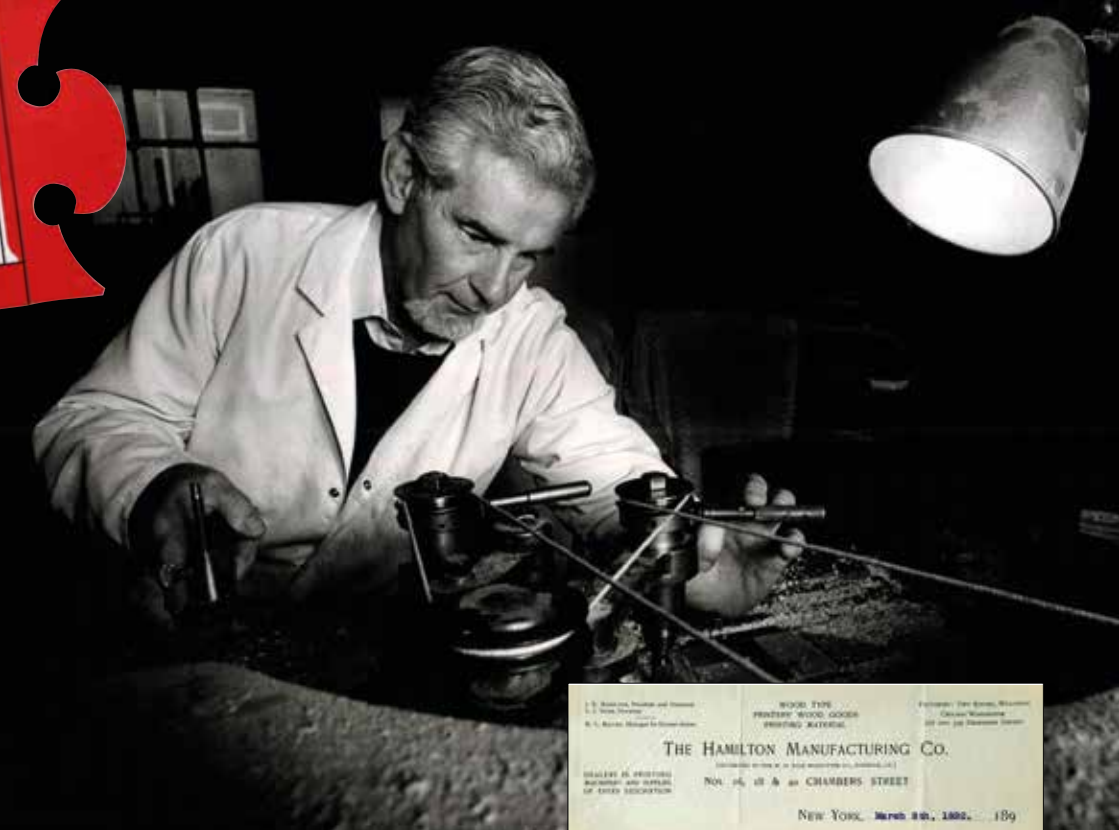
EEH-BAH-GUM, IT'S EBORACUM!

By Bob Richardson (9718)

→ Eric Morecambe often joked “You can see the join!” when teasing comedy partner Ernie Wise about his “wig” (Ernie didn’t really have a hairpiece). Hiding the join has always been an issue with reversed-out, white-on-black typeface designs too. The joins were too often visible, especially after types had been in use for a while and began to show signs of wear. Some founders made a virtue of the gaps, emphasising them as Monotype did with Gill Cameo, and Gill Cameo Ruled, both of which utilised the spaces between characters as an intrinsic part of the design. There were many metal faces which employed this solution, such as Caslon’s Guildford Groundline, Stephenson Blake’s Granby Cameo and Ludwig & Mayer’s Lucina. All of these were ‘negative’ designs which were cut to create a clear white line between characters, rather than attempting to blend them together. Woodtype makers were often more adventurous, producing designs which fitted tightly together to create solid panels—but the gaps were often evident, especially after prolonged use.

By the time Gill Cameo appeared in 1935, type founders had been producing reversed-out (white-on-black) designs in metal for well





over a century. Thorowgood's Pica Tuscan Reversed appeared in 1828 and Bower and Bacon's Four-Line White continued the trend two years later. The popularity of these reversed types was relatively brief and by the 1870s they had largely fallen out of fashion and would not be revived until the 1920s.

In 1826, two years before Thorowgood's Tuscan Reversed appeared, Frederick Robert DeLittle was born in Dublin, and as cameo typeface designs began to disappear from founders' specimen books, he set up as a lithographer and bookbinder in York in 1873. DeLittle Fenwick, as the firm became known, was established in Bell Yard, Micklegate and traded in the city in various forms for 125 years.

Frederick DeLittle had 15 children and one of his seven sons, Robert Duncan DeLittle, set up a small business of his own at his father's premises as a manufacturer of wood printing types for poster work. In 1888, soon after the wood letter business was established, the works moved to Railway Street. The printing business was wound up in 1965, but wood

type manufacturing continued for another 33 years.

Robert Duncan DeLittle tackled the problem of 'white letter' wood type in 1887 during a short period of residence in Australia, registering a British patent (No. 9991) for a design which aimed to conceal the joins between letters in a unique way. Even



Roman name for the city of York. He was so proud of his invention that he named his works The Eboracum Letter Factory. While there is no doubt that the patented Eboracum type was very effective, there were considerable complications in using it and distributing it after printing. In the diagram alongside showing the word Eboracum, the black

vertical lines represent the joins, concealed within the 'white' portion of each letter.



A number of pieces of Eboracum survive at the Type Archive in London, including several work-in-progress examples which illustrate the complexity of DeLittle's concept. Each finished letter carried a stamp on the edge to show which component the often hard-to-identify shapes

brand-new types, poorly inked or with inadequate make-ready, could reveal their modular construction and the 1828 Thorowgood specimen book shows a few flecks of white paper peeping through the joins of the foundry's early metal example.

Robert DeLittle solved the problem of visible gaps by concealing the joins within the letters rather than between them, but this made it an extremely complicated typeface to use. Each unit comprised multiple half-characters, or even one-third of a character, so the spaces between were always solid wood without joins. Letters were assembled from components and a further benefit of the curious design was that spacing material could be used to extend the new face to produce expanded versions. DeLittle called the new face Eboracum - the old

represented.

America's largest and most successful maker of wood poster types in the late 19th century was The Hamilton Manufacturing Company and Robert DeLittle believed they could market his new type in the USA. He supplied Hamilton with a sample fount and diagrams showing how it was to be used. The response was perhaps not what he had expected. Hamilton was not enamoured of Eboracum. Their reply, dated 8th March 1892, is one of only a small number of documents to survive a serious fire at the DeLittle works in the 1950s. Manager Henry Lewis Bullen replied on behalf of the American firm, informing Robert DeLittle that Eboracum was so complicated that one 'very reliable man' would have to be trained in its production. Bullen didn't much

like the idea of cutting the letters on the plank, rather than traditional end-grain, and tactfully declined any further involvement.

Around 1900, Robert De Little relocated his factory to Vine Street, quietly dropping the Eboracum reference and renaming the business R. D. DeLittle Wood Letter Works.

With over 300 designs in its portfolio, DeLittle became Britain's most successful maker of wood poster types. Six letter-cutting double pantographs, each capable of producing two sizes simultaneously, worked flat-out for many years. In 1940, the company assumed the manufacture of Stephenson Blake's wood letter, stamping each finished "A" with SB&Co. A stock of despatch notes and Stephenson Blake address labels was held in York, so customers were often unaware that wood letter was sub-contracted. An export agency distributed DeLittle types worldwide. Other type-foundries also transferred their business to DeLittle and they were the last commercial producer of wood type when the firm closed its doors in 1998.

The output of the York manufacturer was so prolific that their products are still giving good service to printers 25 years after the pantographs were switched off and thousands of founts survive. Eboracum — the curious white-on-black patented design — is never seen, having quietly faded into obscurity long ago.

From a workforce of 28 in its heyday — including five apprentices — DeLittle had only a single member of staff at the end of the final shift in 1998. Machinery, patterns, stock and surviving documentation was acquired by the Type Archive at the close of business and much is currently stored in Stockwell.

With the impending closure of the Type Archive, plans are well underway to return the DeLittle material to York and some items have already made their way to a new exhibition at 29-31 Coney Street.

Street Life York includes the pantograph from the Type Archive, patterns and examples of DeLittle types. The exhibition is open until the end of July 2023 and details can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/2p8stdyf> Please check social media before visiting (@streetlifeyork) as the exhibition occasionally closes for special events.

Robert James "Jim" DeLittle, former owner and sole remaining 1998 employee, died on 2nd January 2014.

