



Four Sheets to the Wind



Four Sheets to the Wind is an international collaborative book arts project involving six geographically distant printers, who all have a research background in the history of printing and rebuilding historical presses.

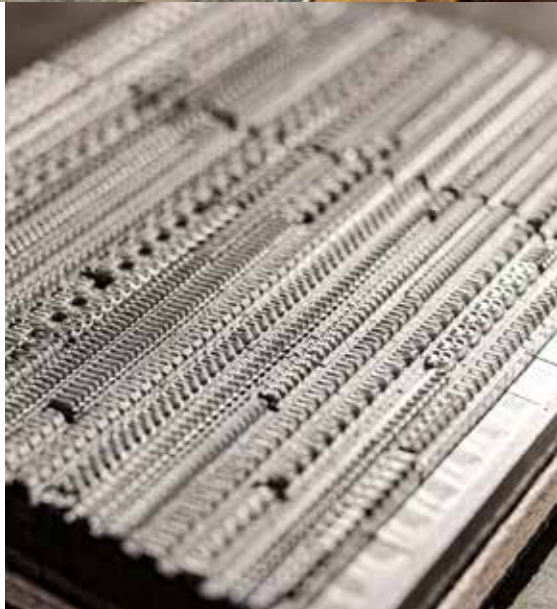
The project was initiated by Rhiannon Daniels, Jenny Batt and John McTague, at Bristol Common Press in 2021. Rhiannon, Jenny and John are historians of early modern European print culture in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Bristol. Bristol Common Press (BCP) was established at the University in 2021 when they managed to secure funding to buy the contents of The Tom Paine Press, a print shop run by Peter Chasseaud in Lewes. The print shop was complete with a replica eighteenth-century common press, built in 2009 by Alan May, who also built the replica press for *The Machine that Made Us*, the 2006 BBC4 film about Gutenberg's Press. Prior to establishing the press, they had all done a small amount of hand setting as part of their graduate training, so they were still very much learning on the job.



In 2021, BCP secured further funding to set up and coordinate the Four Sheets to the Wind project and contacted a group of fellow printers who all also work with, or are building, replica wooden presses of the era. Jorge Lar (BPS member 10991) who many readers will remember from Small Printer in February 2021, says 'When I was contacted by Rhiannon in November 2021 about the possibility of a collaborative project, I jumped at the chance to be involved, as I really enjoy collaborating with other printers. I believe that we can learn loads from each other's experiences and knowledge.'

Also involved in the project is Victoria Barton, the sole proprietor of Press Genepy. Like Jorge, she came to printing through historical re-enactment. Press Genepy was built using plans of the Franklin press held at the Smithsonian in Washington DC with the slight modification that it comes apart for transportation. Members of the BPS Essex branch may know Victoria as she has taken her press to events at Barleylands and Thaxted.

The final partner taking part is Thin Ice Press, the in-house letterpress printing workshop of the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York. The press was co-founded by Helen Smith and JT Welsch in 2017. They have been building a wooden common press since they established a copy of an eighteenth century press held by Scarborough Museums Trust. This is nearing completion and will be used during the project. In the meantime, they teach on a range of presses including two Albions, a Columbian, an Arab, a Golding Jobber, Adanas and a small proofing press. As well as being a resource for teaching and research, Thin Ice Press also produces printed ephemera and chapbooks and is in the process of printing their first two longer books. They are ably assisted by Printer in Residence, Nick Gill, who many readers will know as Effra Press. Nick has been further involved in the project by casting some 12pt Bembo especially for the printing, which has been distributed four ways





between the partners. Bembo was first used in Cardinal Bembo's *De Aetna* in 1495, the first book printed with a roman fount by Aldus Manutius, and so is an historically accurate face as well as being lovely to look at.

We asked the group to describe the project and tell us more about the projected outcomes. Rhiannon says, 'The aim of the project is simple: to make Books - Beautiful Books! We're working collaboratively to produce an anthology of texts about early modern printing. The texts themselves are great fun. The finished book should give a lovely insight into printing in centuries past, as well as our own adventures in print. The books will also feature a large woodcut print by Prelo, a copy of the famous "Dance of Death" scene from 1499, and several original linocut prints by Press Genepy.'

To address the issue of the name - it turns out that despite our initial thoughts, it had nothing whatsoever to do with the demon drink. John from BCP explains

'The main text of the book will consist of four sheets. It looks like our format will be 'octavo in fours,' so eight pages per sheet. Each of the four presses is producing one sheet, before dispersing them to the four winds-i.e. national and international delivery services-so that more or less identical books can be assembled in four different locations. The name also captures some of the abandon necessary to enter into a project like this. It's also true that some of the people written about in the book-which consists of contemporary accounts of early modern print shops, their practices, and the practices of the wider book trade - were drunk or at least were accused of so being - so you're continuing in a venerable book-trade tradition by making that assumption.'

This might sound like a very modern way of working, but 'shared printing' was well known in the 16th - 18th Century. If print shops got a particularly urgent, or large job, it was common practice to share the job between two or more local printers. This project seeks to recreate that process, in the spirit of experimentation, to see what happens



when four geographically distant presses attempt to produce one hand-press book, predominantly using historical methods and materials. There are obvious differences between this group and four experienced print shops in the same area of early modern London working together to print a large book at speed, but the hope is that some things will be similar enough to enable them to think about some of the challenges and advantages of working in that way.

Logistically challenging, indeed. The group still doesn't definitely know whether or not they will manage to produce a functional book. For obvious reasons, there is some trepidation about the 'joins' between the sheets. John says 'There is currently one such join where one press will start a sentence and another will finish it, so we are going to be doing some very careful mocking up and proofing before we get the nice paper out!'

It's also possible that there won't be quite enough type to have the whole sheet in standing type, so that is going to put extra pressure on casting off/mocking up and proofreading. They might have to print then diss the majority of the pages from one side before setting the other. However, the group feel they are now at a point where they have a pretty stable copy text and layout, and the materials needed to typeset and print the text and they have started working from digital mock-ups in metal. Each press is going to set a page of type before swapping proofs, to check consistent results. What is absolutely certain is that they will discover a great many things that are yet to be resolved!

Nevertheless, all the participants are looking forward to the challenges. The printers at Bristol Common Press are excited about setting and printing multiple pages of prose, four-up, on both sides. Indeed, this is the first time anyone at BCP has printed a book of *any kind*! Up until now the press has generally been producing fairly small single-sided things. This is an opportunity at last to use their replica Common Press for the kind of thing it is designed for.

Helen Smith at Thin Ice Press told us 'I'm really excited about the prospect of getting our common press in working order, and seeing what it can do! We're keen to spend some time experimenting

with the differences between a wooden press and our iron presses, and seeing how good a print we can get, given all the variables in printing with a wooden press.'

Jorge of Prelo Press

is no stranger to printing books on his reconstruction 15th-century wooden printing press. But he's particularly curious to see the result of printing with the very small Bembo 12pt on his wooden press, having so far only printed with much larger type, 16pt and upwards.

All of them agree that seeing the book come together is the most exciting part of the project. 'It should be a lovely thing!' says Helen.

Alongside the printing there will hopefully be workshops and seminars where the printers can reflect upon the process, and what they have learned along the way. This will be both what has been learned about the historical practice of shared printing, as well as what they have learned themselves as printers. There is also the opportunity to give academic experts in early modern books the opportunity to see if the new book tallies with their experience of examining original copies in rare books libraries. Finally, the group hopes to co-author an article for an academic journal reporting on the project's findings.

Small Printer hopes to catch up with these intrepid printers as the project progresses and, of course, feature the finished book. In the meantime you can keep up with all of them individually via Instagram.



Instagram: @bristolcommonpress, @preloprints, @thinicepress, @press.genepy