

5.3 The Closure of the Printing House

Angus Phillips

<Image 7.01> The closure of the Printing House in 1989 was a momentous decision in the history of OUP, and marked the end of an era. After all, when the Press had recently celebrated its five hundredth anniversary, in 1978, it was actually the first printing in Oxford which was being celebrated. The Walton Street site was substantially given over to printing, although since the move of most operations from London in the mid-1970s, the publishing divisions had taken over an increasing amount of space. Being published by the Press had for a long time meant being printed there as well and the reputation of the composition and printing was high. A conversation in Dorothy Sayers's novel *Gaudy Night* (1935) has Harriet Walter remarking, as an accepted fact, that the Press was 'accustomed to deciphering the manuscripts of scholars'. Authors, printers and publishers had all seemed bound together. The closure of the printing operations was devastating news to many loyal employees, some of whom could trace a history of working at the Press over several generations.

Cyril Cox was the third generation of his family to work at the Press. His grandfather has been a hand compositor and his uncle worked in the bindery. He joined the Printing Division as an apprentice at sixteen, and remembers how 'some of the old craftsmen were the nicest people – rough at times – but the nicest people you could ever wish to know'. The highlight of working in the Division was 'the spirit, the humour and the comradeship' amongst the workforce.¹ This was reflected in the communities, in Jericho and Jordan Hill, who not only worked together but played together: for example, team games of cricket, football, tennis, and putting at the Jordan Hill sports ground, with an annual winter Olympics in the Pavilion. Most of these activities came to an abrupt end with the closure of the Printing Division.

In 1970 few could have foreseen the end of the printing business, which at that time employed over 900 people, three times as many as the publishing operations. Working as a printer was seen by many as a secure job for life. On leaving school, a boy could become apprenticed at the works, and there was a coming-out ceremony called 'banging out', at which boys would have to run the gauntlet of their department. A variety of objects were used to make a terrific din as apprentices made their way to collect their indentures. Training compositors could lead to their becoming highly skilled in setting languages in which they had no formal education. Graduates were employed as readers, where they

¹ Interview, Cyril Cox, 14 July 2010.

joined a department full of academic talent. Women were employed throughout the workforce, from the bindery line to the Reading Department. As well as carrying out work for the publishing divisions, the Printer did work for external customers. The inflated wages earned by newspaper staff in Fleet Street led the outside world to believe that every printer was rolling in money.²

Being the head of the Division was a prestigious role, formally described as the Printer to the University. The incumbent, Vivian Ridler, had left school to be apprenticed to a Bristol printer and joined OUP first in 1936, and again in 1948 as Works Manager. He had designed the Bible used at the Queen's coronation in 1953, and was a president of the British Federation of Master Printers and a Professorial Fellow of St Edmund Hall. Printing in Oxford was important within both the University and a much wider world. <Image 7.02>

The decline in the printing operations can be charted over a number of years, and even in Ridler's time (he retired in 1978) the stresses were apparent. When it was suggested to him that after dealing with the day's business, he could then relax and spend the rest of the day designing books, he responded with some irritation: 'no, I'll tell you. Half my time is spent arguing with unions and the other half negotiating the purchase of machinery with banks.'³ Various reasons lie behind the failure of the printing operations, including a growth in international competition, a lack of competitiveness in the market, technological change, failures in management, and the often fraught relationship with the publishing operations. In the end the worsening financial deficit of the Printing House could no longer be ignored.

Why have a printing operation? This question was to exercise the Press over many decades, and at its heart was the strategic issue about whether a publisher need have its own printer. In the 21st century this is highly unusual, and in 2004 that of the only major publisher, Cambridge University Press, still in this position, looked increasingly questionable.⁴ In the areas of typesetting and printing, publishers are happy to use a range of suppliers. The Waldock Report of 1970 explicitly asked, 'should the Press continue to have as part of its organization a printing works?' It did go on to support the modernization of the Printing Division, and the strategic question was perhaps answered by the level of profit attributed to the printing operation – on sales which represented 12 per cent of the turnover of the

² See Mick Belson, *On the Press: Through the Eyes of the Craftsmen of Oxford University Press* (Witney: Robert Boyd Publications, 2003).

³ Nicolas Barker, 'Vivian Ridler: Printer to Oxford University from 1958 to 1978 and founder of the Perpetua Press', obituary, *The Independent*, 13 January 2009.

⁴ The printing house was created in Cambridge shortly after the first University printer was appointed in 1583.

Press, the Printing Works were responsible for 17 per cent of the pre-tax profit. The Printer made money, and retained within the overall group the profits to be made on printing up to 50 per cent of the books published by the Press. Indeed someone who joined OUP in 1971 recalled that it was the Printer who made the money, and the Publisher who lost it.⁵ As the Table...demonstrates, however, that was scarcely accurate then and, as time passed, certainly ceased to be the case.

By 1975 there were rising concerns within the publishing operations over the prices being paid to the in-house printing operation. A tied operation meant that the Printer's profits could be generated through the prices charged, rather than through high levels of productivity. Although there were no doubts regarding the quality of work produced, there was the complaint from Eric Buckley, then Head of Publishing Services and based in Neasden, that 'in many cases the difference between the figures quoted by the Printing Works and those quoted for the same operations by other printers is quite substantial. It is unlikely that this is always due to these printers' and binders' desperation for work.'⁶ By 1979, when Buckley had moved over from the publishing operations to become the Printer, the Printing Division was now seen to be working on the terms of an arm's length relationship. He told managers within the Division that, as a profit centre, it was expected to produce work at competitive prices and give a satisfactory standard of service.⁷

The financial difficulties faced by the Press in the late 1970s and early 1980s were to raise further questions about the relationship between the publishing operations and printing. The Publishing Divisions needed to cut costs and this required seeking out the best prices for typesetting and printing, wherever that might be in the world. By June 1981 the Educational Division was requesting full discretion to place work outside the Press, and for the directive to be lifted which required all work to be given to the Printing Division.⁸

In truth, what was wanted by the divisions outside the Academic Division was ceasing to match what the Printing Division provided. <Image 7.03> More colour work was being created but the Division was set up for monochrome printing. It could handle the books coming from the Academic Division, whether dictionaries or monographs, but here the search was on for lower costs and higher levels of service, both for typesetting and printing. Robin Denniston, the Academic Publisher, said that the most significant savings were made

⁵ Leofranc Holford-Strevens, quoted in Belson, 104.

⁶ Memo to George Richardson, 11 June 1975, OUP/S/8.

⁷ Memo, 13 February 1979, OUP/S/8.

⁸ Memo, Michael Morrow to George Richardson, 25 June 1981, OUP/S/8.

in composition 'which at £20 to £30 per page was often more than 50 per cent of the production costs of a scholarly monograph. There were those on the Finance Committee who thought we should continue to keep the Press's own compositors busy, whatever the cost. But costs were dramatically cut by using lady graduates with IBM typewriters who could set (and often correct) scholarly matter for £4 per page; and compositors in India and elsewhere in the East whose wages were one-tenth of their British counterparts.'⁹ In the 1980s the Academic Division also moved away from employing in-house copy-editors towards using freelance copy-editors and proof readers. This was a more flexible and cost-effective approach, now standard in publishing. By 1982 the share of work carried out by the Printer from the publishing divisions had fallen to 35 per cent. There had been a steady decline in the staffing of the Printing Division and in only the two previous years the workforce had declined by over 170 people, down to a payroll of 470. Handling the relationship between the divisions was a fraught business, with direct memos flying between managers on both sides of what was becoming a big divide. Representatives from the publishing divisions sat on a Printing Review Board, looking at the operations of the Printing Division, yet the printers complained that they had no representation within the publishing divisions.

It was in these circumstances that one of the graduate readers in the Printing Division, James Fettes, wrote to the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Geoffrey Warnock in 1982 airing his concerns for the future. He could foresee that printing might be abandoned altogether. He questioned a strategy of trying to be 'like any other printing house' and thought sending more work to external printers was damaging to the reputation of the Press: 'most of the public and some reviewers are not alert enough to distinguish between the publishing and the printing activities of the Press, and so the Printer gets blamed for the work of other firms.' The letter was a *cri de coeur* at a time when the Press was trying to get a grip on its costs in all its operations.¹⁰ Warnock replied that 'the outlook is not altogether bleak, nor is closure contemplated, but there is undoubtedly very great pressure to reduce costs and take other steps to ensure that the Printing Division can at least support its operations.'¹¹ Buckley commented that Fettes's letter 'made me think of Chekhov – there are those who hear the axes at work in the cherry orchard less clearly than others.'¹² There may be no connection with this correspondence but Fettes was asked to take early retirement soon after; and of course Buckley himself left in 1983.

⁹ Robin Denniston, 'Repositioning the Press: OUP from 1978 to 1984', *Logos* (1997), 8/3, 151. Denniston revealingly simply assumed graduate typewriter operatives would be 'ladies'. The cost savings, however, did not accrue simply because they were female rather than male.

³⁵⁰ James Fettes to Geoffrey Warnock, 23 March 1982, OUP/S/8.

¹¹ Warnock to Fettes, 29 March 1982, OUP/S/8.

¹² Buckley, memo to Richardson 26 March 1982, OUP/S/8.

Gerard Frost, Finance Director, urged greater coordination, citing the example of a web offset machine, which was ordered in 1978 and built specially by Timsons of Kettering. The machine, costing £0.25m, was delivered in 1980 and the intention was for it primarily to handle the printing of mini-dictionaries. However, the format of the dictionaries changed, resulting in the machine standing idle.¹³ This example typified the difficulties of running a tied printing operation: publishers had to be flexible and imaginative over formats, not simply produce to the specifications of a certain machine. The needs of the market were more important than feeding work to particular machines. It was also highly unusual in the industry to have machinery specially built, and most printers would opt to buy standard machines. As the Publishing divisions regained profitability in the 1980s, their view was that the Printer had to be encouraged to cut costs and raise productivity and levels of service. Gone was the idea that he should automatically be offered the books from in-house operations. Only when properly exposed to the market would the division become profitable and competitive and it found itself competing for work with many companies keen to have OUP amongst their customers.

What was also required was industrial expertise to run the Printing Division, and head-hunters were organized to find a successor to Buckley. <Image 7.04> David Stanford was brought in from William Clowes, part of the McCorquodale group, with the brief to develop a new strategy for the Division's future. (Exactly one hundred years earlier, Horace Hart had also arrived from William Clowes to become Printer.) He took on a highly difficult job since earlier that year a firm of consultants pronounced the performance of the printing operations to be below that of all other competitors it had examined. Productivity, as measured by added value per employee and by the use of plant and equipment, was lower than that of any other company in their sample. They commented that the task ahead of the new Printer was truly enormous, as without the work secured in printing exam papers, the plight of the business was 'parlous'.¹⁴ Which direction should the Division take over the next few years? The economist John Wright of Trinity College reflected to George Richardson on the task ahead. Should there be investment in colour presses or some other technology? 'If we are not willing to contemplate that sort of development...should we not acknowledge (at least to ourselves) that what we are looking for is a "fighting retreat" to a port of evacuation.'¹⁵ A few months earlier, *The Clarendonian* reprinted a cartoon from a previous edition in 1945 in which some visitors were being shown round the quad. A sole compositor was at work on trays of type by the fish pond, underneath the tree, whilst the guests were told: 'it's all offices now'. The 1983 caption read: 'one of our readers noticed the cartoon we reprint below. If the artist recognizes his work the Editors would be grateful if he would come forward and start filling in our football coupons'. In March 1983 the financial position

¹³ Memo to Richardson, 31 March 1983, OUP/S/9.

¹⁴ Tony Bell to Eric Buckley, 1 June 1983, OUP/S/8.

¹⁵ John Wright to Richardson, 13 June 1983, OUP/S/9.

of the Printing Division was such that some consideration had already been given to disposal of the operations. (The Printing Division was to post a loss of over £0.5m in 1983). Points in favour of a sale were the wishes of the publishing divisions to operate a purely arm's length relationship; the different management skills required to run publishing and printing operations (senior management did not feel equipped to run a printing business); and the likely costs of further contraction in the business. Put against were a variety of points, most notable being that they would be unlikely to find a buyer. Richardson wrote to the Group Executive Committee: 'I am inclined to think the last point decisive. If we cannot sell the business we have no option but to try very hard to make the best of it.'¹⁶

A backdrop to the worsening business position of the Printing Division was the change in typesetting and printing technology. Once the industry moved from hot metal setting to filmsetting, publishers were increasingly free to place typesetting and printing at different suppliers. The final output, or camera-ready copy (CRC), would arrive at the publisher from the typesetter and then be sent on to the printer for the film to be prepared. On reprint the CRC could if desired be sent to a different supplier. Typesetting was bought on a price per page and as computing power became cheaper and more available, authors would begin to write on word processors and typesetting could move to smaller businesses with lower overheads. The 1983 edition of *Hart's Rules* (the bible of OUP house style) made no concession to computerized typesetting but, only the following year, the Academic Division was experimenting with using disks from authors and issuing guidance in the form of *Oxford Rules for the Preparation of Text on Microcomputers*.¹⁷

Desktop publishing opened up the prospect of a cottage industry in people's front rooms. PageMaker software, for example, allowed word-processing files to be read on an Apple Mac computer without the need for authors to enter special codes. James Mosley sees 24 January 1984, the launch of the Apple Macintosh, as 'the beginning of the digital revolution in printing and publishing. ...the design and assembly of a publication's parts – originally the printer's responsibility and, during the 20th century, increasingly shared with a design or production department in a publisher's office – could now be performed by one person with a small computer on their desk.'¹⁸ Speed of communications also brought foreign competition, and Macmillan had opened up a computer-aided typesetting operation in India in the mid-1970s. If the publishing divisions were seeking lower costs for book production, the answer was to go overseas for typesetting, in particular to Hong Kong. This would also

¹⁶ Memo to Group Executive Committee, 10 March 1983, OUP/RJE/C/31.

¹⁷ Paul Luna, 'Texts and Technology 1970-2000', in Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, (eds.), *A Companion to the History of the Book*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 381-94.

¹⁸ James Mosley, 'The Technologies of Print' in Michael F. Suarez and H.R. Woudhuysen, (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, (2010), 103.

apply to other publishers in the UK – they might come to the Printing Division for highly specialized work, but for most general work the prices would be cheaper elsewhere. The paperback revolution had not reached the Printing Division and most printing jobs were for cased work or for hardbacks. The printer had web machines suitable for longer runs, which could handle dictionaries and bible work. This did fit the needs of the Academic Division but they were in turn seeking lower prices overseas; and the Printer could only produce sewn books. Dictionaries, for example, could be printed in the USA at advantageous rates and on larger machines that could produce unsewn books which lay flat on opening.¹⁹ For the other divisions, increasingly wanting low-cost colour work, Hong Kong again provided a significant financial advantage.

The deep recession of the early 1980s brought difficulties for all sectors of the economy but in particular for manufacturing. With monetary policy directed at controlling inflation, the economy suffered heavily under high interest rates and a high exchange rate. There was falling domestic demand and no salvation for manufacturing in the exchange rate, with the pound reaching high levels. Manufacturing output fell by one-fifth between 1979 and 1981. Whilst the rest of the economy recovered from 1982, manufacturing continued to decline. Overall the economy performed well with Britain's productivity seeing spectacular gains in the 1980s, third only behind Japan and France, but critics attributed this to the growth in the service and finance sectors alongside the virtual disappearance of manufacturing as a major part of the economy.²⁰

In the Printing Division the worsening economy turned a surplus of over £0.5 m in 1980 into losses in both 1981 and 1982. In January 1981 *The Guardian* reported the Printing Division to be working at half its capacity with the bindery, capable of handling 100,000 books a week, on short time.²¹ The same day *The Times* reported that over 200 jobs were going at the printing machinery plant of Linotype & Machinery in Manchester. The managing director, Peter Cope, blamed the recession and a fall in exports caused by the high value of the pound.²² It is estimated that in the early 1980s one-third of British printing went overseas.²³ Surveying the scene in June 1982, Buckley saw greatly changed conditions compared to the late 1970s: 'Dependence upon physical skill has diminished and far fewer people are needed to carry out the kind of typesetting and bindery work that customers want. Competition from cheaper sources of production is considerably more serious, and recessionary pressures have reduced demand. British print-buyers place more work abroad

¹⁹ Interview, Barry Townsend, 27 August 2010.

²⁰ Eric J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 32.

²¹ *The Guardian*, 17 January 1981.

²² *The Times*, 17 January 1981.

²³ *The Times*, 24 August 1985.

than those in any other major country, and UK book printers have suffered in circumstances that have forced publishers to cut production costs dramatically.²⁴ If the UK print industry was to survive, the challenge was to raise levels of productivity and meet the challenges of foreign competition. <Image 7.05>

Economically the survival of much manufacturing in the UK looked dubious but the balance of power between the unions and management looked set to change. The print industry had a complicated union structure and at OUP there were dealings with both SOGAT and the National Graphical Association (NGA). Rising unemployment and a government determined to take on the power of the trade unions were to weaken organized labour during the course of the Thatcher government. At OUP there were agreements in place with the print unions which were regarded as restrictive by the management regarding, for example, the necessity to rekey work in composition and a refusal to accept work from non-unionized businesses. Wage settlements were negotiated nationally for the printing industry. How long could such agreements hold with the growth of new technology and international competition? John Wright had written to Richardson in 1979: 'when I start work on my new book later this year I may well type it onto the new computer that the College has acquired (cost £5,000 +) for its accounting. It is not a specialist word-processor but it has an editing program (which cost us £30) which permits insertions, displays, and rearrangements on a television screen and the text can be stored on discs each of which will hold one million characters. ...soon only the unions will prevent the disc produced by the author (or his secretary) being automatically processed by the printing industry. ... How long can the unions prevent this happening? We can see that they can obstruct in the newspaper industry.'²⁵ Shown this letter, Buckley responded that it was unlikely that union members would handle input from an author's tape or disc, although there were probably some printers who would, and over time union attitudes might be forced to change.²⁶ Writing in June 1982, he discussed using direct reproduction for some University work, i.e. simply photographing exam papers as prepared by the faculties. This was likely to reduce production costs by a fifth. 'Because there is an NGA national ban on handling work not set by NGA members, a case was put up to union headquarters giving cogent reasons why this ban should not be applied. This met with a flat refusal. A further approach, with support from our own chapel members, resulted in special dispensation being given in respect of work from this University. This change of attitude came as a relief.'²⁷

²⁴ Report to Finance Committee, June 1982, OUP/RJE/C/31.

²⁵ Wright to Richardson, 29 May 1979, OUP/S/8.

²⁶ Memo to Richardson, 8 June 1979, OUP/S/8.

²⁷ Report to Finance Committee, June 1982, OUP/S/8.

On the publishing side of the business, ingenious solutions had already been found to circumvent union control. Barry Townsend, Production Director of the Academic division, recalls how in the 1970s 'the NGA started to twig that people were sending stuff abroad and they didn't want their members in the printing business to handle printing from non-recognized sources abroad.' Camera Ready Copy (CRC) was required to be stamped by an NGA recognized supplier before it could be handled by the domestic printers. To source typesetting work from India, the completed jobs would be stamped by a friendly local supplier in the UK, which had joined the NGA.²⁸ In the following decade, as across the industry much printing work was moved abroad, the NGA would find itself bypassed completely.

Union power in the UK was also weakened in the 1980s by the rise in unemployment together with the reforms brought in by the Conservative government. Union membership fell in the 1980s, dropping by over 2 million between 1979 and 1985. With the Employment Act of 1980, the government acted to limit union powers with a number of measures including limits on the closed shop and the removal of the burden of proof from the employer in unfair dismissal cases. Further legislation followed at the end of the 1980s but the stage was set for conflict between the government and the unions, typified by the miners' strike of 1984 to 1985. In the print industry there was to be a climactic battle between management and the unions around new working practices for newspapers. Unlike in the book industry there could not be a switch to overseas suppliers, and the power of the unions was legendary. The advent of computerization offered a way to cut costs, and move away from hot metal setting. News International, the owner of *The Sun*, *The News of the World*, *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, built a new printing plant in Wapping at a cost of £80m. The original plan was to move printing of *The Sun* and *The News of the World* there, but a new idea emerged: moving not just the printing of all four newspapers, but also to take the journalists there and start up computer typesetting. Journalists would key in copy directly – existing agreements with the unions insisted that all copy should be rekeyed. The new plant was put into operation in January 1986 and all employees who opposed the new plant and working practices through strike action were promptly dismissed. The key to the victory of Rupert Murdoch's News International group lay in careful planning. A separate union agreement was secured with the (Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbers Union (EEPTU), excluding both SOGAT and the NGA, and the extent and capability of the computer system was kept hidden.²⁹ The Wapping dispute lasted over a year and involved the sacking of 6,000 newspaper employees. Once it had ended, the News International papers had secured much higher levels of productivity and ended the dominance of the print unions. There was also a clear-out of staff within the production

²⁸ Interview, Townsend, 27 August 2010.

²⁹ Charles Wintour, *The Rise and Fall of Fleet Street* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 220.

management: Rupert Murdoch commented, ‘they could not get it into their heads that there was no departmental chapel to talk to. They were used to having a long lunch with the FOC [Father of the Chapel] to negotiate something.’³⁰ By the end of the 1980s most newspapers had moved out of Fleet Street and embraced new working practices.

At OUP in 1986 there were still disputes over the sourcing of text for composition, with a union requirement that disks read automatically should come from a unionized company – they had to bear an NGA sticker or stamp.³¹ In response there was some fighting talk. In discussions around the composition business and its future, George Richardson wrote of the need to change the way it was organized: ‘Other people can make money in composition, so we also should be able to do so. ... It is likely also to require that the NGA accept the new system of payment and that they do not press for more holidays as a condition for taking work from non-union sources. If by their unwillingness to meet these conditions we are prevented from making composition viable, then we shall reluctantly have to close it down. The NGA and our own workforce will have to be told that failure to co-operate will have this result, redundancy arrangements being on terms appropriate to this situation. It may be that industrial action would be taken in other parts of the Printing House. It should then be made known that complete closure would be considered.’³² <Image 7.06>

Joining as the Printer in 1983, David Stanford tried to bring about consistent and profitable change in the Division. The view of Michael Morrow, head of the Education Division, was that it needed £8m of profitable sales to survive.³³ This it struggled to do, as can be seen from the table below.³⁴

Table 5.2 Comparative performance of the UK publishing and printing operations

	1970	1975	1980	1988
Sales (£m)				
UK Publishing	6.5	9.9	22.3	56.1
Printing	1.9	3.1	6.1	7.2
Profit (£m)				
UK Publishing	0.4	(0.3)	(1.5)	6.2
Printing	0.2	0.3	0.5	(0.5)

³⁰ Wintour, *Rise and Fall*, 222.

³¹ Minutes of Printing House Management Committee, Personnel Director’s Report, 30 July 1986, OUP/PH/86.

³² Memo to Printing Review Committee, 16 April 1986, OUP/S/9.

³³ Memo to Richardson, 2 March 1983, OUP/S/9.

³⁴ Memo from the Secretary to the Finance Committee, 26 January 1989, OUP/S/9.

Employees				
UK Publishing	250	306	610	600
Printing	930	775	640	265

Early in 1986 an estimate was prepared as to the costs of closure, and the overall figure was around £3m.³⁵ In April Richardson commented: ‘perhaps slow death is what one must rationally expect, and it would not ruin us.’³⁶ Sales did reach £8.5m in 1987 but fell back in the following year, whilst the profit of that year can mostly be attributed to the sale of machinery. At the same time the publishing divisions came out of recession and went on to produce significant, and profitable, increases in revenue. By the time of its closure in 1989, the Printing division represented only 6 per cent of OUP’s group turnover. Over a period of nearly thirty years, its workforce shrank whilst the publishing divisions increased their head count. There were attempts before the closure in 1989 to revitalize the mix of work in the printing division, improve procedures, and promote efficiency. From 1985 to 1986 the management negotiated a new incentive scheme, the Saleable Output Scheme. Anyone reading Mick Belson’s book, *On the Press*, will have been both amazed and bemused by the intricacies of the previous scheme, which worked on an individual basis and was ‘paid for at time saved against a standard’. The new scheme, designed to encourage teamwork, was based around group performance, and required considerable negotiation. Each section had to agree to the new scheme and this took some time to agree with the involvement of the unions. Internal documents show considerable unease in the Printing Division about the management of the factory and the systems in place for giving estimates to potential customers, communication with customers, speed of invoicing, financial control, and general administration. These echo issues expressed by the publishing divisions in the early 1980s about the level of service offered. Prices continued to be offered at rates well above the competition, and as the typesetting capacity had shrunk, the speed of service was well behind external suppliers. Typically it would take only a month to obtain proofs from an external typesetter whereas, as Barry Townsend remembers, ‘if you sent a monograph to the printing division, you might start seeing proofs in about three months, if you were lucky.’³⁷

Further retrenchment took place after 1983 with more losses of staff. In an attempt to present a more independent image to outside customers, the division was renamed the Printing House. Two web presses were sold in 1987 as the Printing House effectively withdrew from long-run printing, which was work actively pursued by other printers, at

³⁵ Memo, D. C. Moody to Richardson, 16 February 1986, OUP/S/9.

³⁶ Richardson to Sir Martin Jacomb, 9 April 1986, OUP/S/9.

³⁷ Interview, Townsend, 27 August 2010.

keen prices, in order to keep their presses running. At the same time new investment was announced of £1.8m over two years, to buy new typesetting, printing and binding equipment with the aim of printing a mix of hardback, paperback, journals and examination papers. <Image 7.08> The investment ended a period of considerable uncertainty, as reflected in this anonymous handwritten note to the Secretary in January 1987: 'many composing employees at OUP have had a miserable Christmas because of the rumours that the closure of the origination areas is certain. Many children and homes depend on retaining their jobs. What is going on? Please *issue* a statement.'³⁸

The report recommending the injection of funds, presented to Finance Committee in January 1987, declared the option 'commercially unattractive. However, for reasons of history, sentiment, and social responsibility which prevent us from considering complete closure [this] is recommended as the best plan to pursue.'³⁹ Regarding the injection of capital, George Richardson said: 'I saw the writing on the wall, but that doesn't mean you shut the shop.'⁴⁰ In the light of the closure in only two years from then, the investment can be seen as a questionable decision, but it did offer the benefit of making the works more attractive to a potential buyer, if one could be found. Discussions were in hand with Robert Gavron, chairman of the St Ives Group, at the beginning of 1987, about the future shape and scope of the Printing House.⁴¹

The report of 1987 had been commissioned in response to the loss of the contract in 1986 to supply examination papers to the West African Examination Council (WAEC). This was a significant blow to the business of the Printing House. Confidential printing had a long history and gained fresh importance during the Second World War.⁴² The printing of examination papers required a high level of secrecy and the printing division maintained a market lead. Examination of the print jobs invoiced in October and November 1982 shows that the printing division lost money on a range of work for the publishing divisions, including the *Oxford Mini Dictionary* and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Jobs carried out for outside publishers included the *Masonic Year Book* and, for Fontana, *Two Tales of Basil Brush*; extraordinarily these titles all recorded a loss. That such work was undertaken, in effect to keep the presses rolling, suggests a level of desperation. On work for University departments, such as the examination decrees, a small surplus was recorded. Work on examination papers, in comparison, made significant profits. <Image 7.09>

³⁸ Anonymous note to the Secretary, OUP/S/8.

³⁹ Report to Finance Committee, 21 January 1987, OUP/S/9.

⁴⁰ Interview, George Richardson, 5 October 2011.

⁴¹ Report to Finance Committee, 21 January 1987, OUP/S/9.

⁴² HOUP vol. III 93, 291

Cyril Cox, Head of the Reading Department, recalls seeing ominous clouds building up two years before the closure of the Printing House. The first inkling we got in the proofreading and copy-editing area was the obvious one that the work started to dry up because the typesetting was being sent mainly to India and all points east - hence we didn't get the proofs. At that time I had something like twenty proof-readers and copy-editors in the department, 50 per cent of whom were sitting around, eventually doing nothing, literally reading the paper.⁴³ By December 1988 the financial position of the Printing House looked bleak, and no buyer had been found. Print sales were well down on the previous year and it was a thin year for examination papers, with sales again well down. In the area of composition, Stanford pointed out that composition could be bought much more cheaply from small suppliers outside the Press. He proposed a range of measures, including withdrawal from 40,000 square foot of space (the publishing divisions were looking for extra office space), disposal of the remaining web capacity, a further concentration on a smaller range of products, closure of the majority of composition, and a further reduction in the workforce by 45 to 201 employees.⁴⁴

Stanford's proposal was submitted to a special meeting of the Finance Committee on Monday 30 January 1989. The Secretary was now Roger Elliott, who had formerly been its chairman and had been closely involved in the discussions about printing over a long period.⁴⁵ Indeed a special white telephone had been installed in George Richardson's office to facilitate their private discussions without the need to go through secretaries or switchboards.⁴⁶ In a separate paper for the January meeting, Elliott recommended that 'the Printing House should be closed forthwith. It is no longer a central requirement for the continued prosperity of the Press. Its current rate of loss, estimated at £1.6m on a turnover of £6m, cannot be tolerated and is an unjustified drain on the resources of the whole operation.'⁴⁷ The decision to close the Printing House was carried with only the Printer dissenting. The meeting stressed the importance of continuing some printing, both for historical reasons and to serve the needs of the University. Authority was given to negotiate redundancy on generous terms.

In the end the Printing House was defeated by a combination of factors, from technological to economic, and its management did not respond quickly enough to change. The printing

⁴³ Interview, Cox, 14 July 2010.

⁴⁴ Report to Finance Committee, 13 December 1988, OUP/S/9.

⁴⁵ Richardson had been asked to stay on as Secretary for another year, but declined.

⁴⁶ Interview, Richardson 5 October 2011.

⁴⁷ Memo to all Members of Finance Committee and the Delegates, 26 January 1989, OUP/S/8.

companies which survived the 1980s had to develop an effective strategy, update working practices, and raise levels of productivity to compete effectively on price and service. The Printing House could offer a Rolls Royce service but this was no longer required for the majority of print jobs, and given the diversity of OUP's publishing, it could not carry all the equipment necessary to match those operations. In truth the Press did not need its own printing operation on any significant scale given the range of cheaper options available; and hot metal typesetting had been overtaken by computerization. There are many stories about the talents of the staff, for example the reader who knew 26 languages or the compositor who didn't know Urdu but realized there was a mistake in the copy for a book when he had to make an unusual hand movement to set a page using metal type.⁴⁸ Yet most books did not require highly skilled craftsmen or knowledge of a range of languages. Despite the reduction in its size over a number of years, the Printing House could not find a profitable niche in a changed world. <Image 7.10>

By 1989 the political climate had changed also. There had been a run-in with the unions over the closure of the Neasden distribution centre but by the late 1980s the situation was different. Elliott recalls how 'the battle of Wapping had changed the power of the print unions significantly so that it was much more politically acceptable to close inefficient industries, or industries that were not operating in profit - and in particular the print unions had lost some of their teeth.'⁴⁹ He regarded the closure as 'clearly the right thing to do: it stopped the printing losses, it stopped all the amount of management time and the arguments between publishers and printers, and freed up the site ... to house all the publishing staff ... it was win all round'.

The closure of the Printing House was officially announced on Wednesday 1 February 1989. The decision was announced to staff by the Secretary and the Printer. The Finance Director, Bill Andrewes, who was standing with them on a box on the floor of the works when the news was given, said 'you could have heard a pin drop'.⁵⁰ Mick Belson also remembers that day: 'Was the end of printing at Oxford brought about by management ineptitude or by a well-executed plan by the Publishing Division? I don't know and I don't really care. I just know that something very special and precious was lost at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 1 February 1989 when I and all the other Clickers [foremen] at the Press shepherded their charges into the Lithographic Department to be faced by a grimfaced Printer and Sir Roger Elliott ... Standing on a pile of wooden pallets they simply announced the closure of the finest printing house in the world. The stunned silence could be felt. ... There were no tears or the

⁴⁸ Interview, Leofranc Holford-Strevens, 2 November 2009.

⁴⁹ Interview, Roger Elliott, 14 December 2006.

⁵⁰ Interview, Bill Andrewes, 8 June 2009.

wailing and gnashing of teeth. Everyone filed out quietly with dignity.⁵¹ There was astonishment amongst staff in both the printing and publishing parts of the business – after all, had not there been significant new investment granted only two years before? Interviewed in the *Oxford Mail*, Herby Gibbons, who had worked at OUP for 34 years, said: ‘We were expecting something, but news of a complete shutdown came as devastation. After the meeting there was hardly anything said – people just walked away in disbelief. We have had a big investment of more than £1m during the past two years within OUP printing, and we thought our future was virtually safe, but it turns out it was not.’⁵²

For many printing staff, their work was more than just a job – it was a way of life as part of a close-knit family. The general feeling was that the Publishing side of OUP had let them down and a level of bitterness about the closure exists to this day amongst the former employees of the Printing House. In Mick Belson’s final chapter, ‘Beginning of the End with Sweet Memories’, he lists a catalogue of hurts felt over the years by the printers, including the closure of the bar and sporting facilities at the Clarendon Press Institute; the award of the typesetting work for the *OED* in 1979 to one of the Printing Division’s rivals, and the printing of the dictionary in the USA; and the closure of the *Clarendonian*, the printers’ in-house magazine in 1983. There is some irony in the fact that when there was a mistake in the production of the slip cases for the *Compact OED* in 1979 it was the Printing division which worked through the weekend to mend the damaged cases and appease the wrath of an important book club customer.⁵³ Belson also points to the slow reduction of the workforce since 1970 and the gradual encroachment of the publishers into their territory. ‘Although the printers had no concrete evidence it was “common knowledge” that one day the publishers would oust them from their home.’⁵⁴ Did there also exist a ‘them and us’ attitude? Some printers felt this to be true. Leofranc Holford-Strevens, a graduate reader who ‘escaped’ to the Academic Division in 1984, recalls visiting the publishing side of the Press. ‘How did I dare? How could I venture? It was almost as if I had to take tea with the Queen.’⁵⁵

The reaction in the wider world was of some shock and definite sadness at the passing of an era, and the closure attracted considerable correspondence in *The Times*. <Image 7.11> The Egyptologist Harry James, formerly of the British Museum, wrote: ‘may I, as one of a

⁵¹ Belson, *On the Press*, 298.

⁵² *Oxford Mail*, 2 February 1989.

⁵³ Robin Denniston wrote: ‘All the returned slip cases were mended by hand, reinforced with the finest material and rebound with matching buckram ... Calamity was averted, our future reinstated and our reputation saved by half a dozen Press workers.’ Denniston, ‘Repositioning the Press’, 152.

⁵⁴ Belson, *On the Press*, 295.

⁵⁵ Interview, Holford-Strevens, 2 November 2009.

host of scholars who have benefited from the superlative quality of Oxford printing, say a few words in a sorrow that is but a poor reaction to what the Delegates have accomplished by a single act of vandalism? ... for generations of scholars OUP has meant volumes printed at Oxford, not necessarily published at Oxford.⁵⁶ Locally, in Oxfordshire, Elizabeth Brunner, mother of Hugo Brunner, a publisher who had himself worked for OUP, wrote that 'were the Press a stately home or part of the coastline it might be saved by the National Trust. But it is a live, human part of our heritage, a place where a great craft is handed on decade by decade, and has no similar protective body to turn to in such a situation.'⁵⁷ The Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, wrote to the staff of the Printing House to express his sadness. 'I know how great has been the dedication, skill, even devotion, which working in the printing house has inspired. And I know too how much many of you will miss being part of such a close and cooperative community.'⁵⁸ Roger Woddis contributed a poem to *The Listener*, which included the lines:⁵⁹

Another chapter closes,
The trend is not unique
Only a fool composes
In Ancient Greek

Negotiations with the unions began and went through reasonably smoothly, given the generous redundancy terms. There was no real attempt by the unions to stop the closure, with more attention addressed to the terms being offered. Around 25 staff were redeployed to Oxuniprint, the in-house print unit for OUP and the University. The total cost of redundancy exceeded £3m but much of this was recouped when equipment from the Printing House was sold off as one job lot for £2m to Robert Maxwell's BPCC (British Printing and Communication Corporation). The *Oxford Mail* reported on the first casualty of the closure. A yucca plant, named 'Bill Tin' after the bonus scheme, was carried out of the front gate to be handed over to the Kilner Ward at the Radcliffe Infirmary. The name was explained by one worker, who said that whenever they asked for more money in their bonus, they were told it was 'built in'.⁶⁰ A new university crest was circulated with the inscription, *Deus Delegatos Deleat*. Genevieve Hawkins, editor of the *University Gazette* and originally a reader in the Printing Division, who wrote in the *Oxford Magazine* in 1989: 'I think of Sussex after the tempest of 1987: the great trees, that deserved a better end, lying on their sides with their roots in the air; but also, a landscape changed, that will never be

⁵⁶ *The Times*, 13 February 1989.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 23 February 1989. Hugo Brunner worked for OUP from 1958 to 1965 and again from 1977 to 1979. In the intervening period he worked for Chatto & Windus, to which firm he returned after 1979 until retirement in 1985.

⁵⁸ Message from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Easter 1989, OUP/S/9.

⁵⁹ *The Listener*, 30 March 1989.

⁶⁰ *Oxford Times*, 3 March 1989.

the same again: a barren slope where once there was a wood.⁶¹ Such elegiac sentiments are understandable, though something more than a barren slope survived.⁶² A harsher verdict would be that the Press made a substantial investment at a point when it was not going to provide a solution.⁶³ There was a fundamental problem which had to be recognized. Sir Gordon Brunton, an external member of the Finance Committee, a man with a great deal of pertinent experience, argued that it was impossible to make a success of a combined publishing and printing business as the printer was featherbedded by the knowledge that work from his publisher would always be forthcoming, while other publishers would be reluctant to give him work because they believed that the home publisher's work would always be given priority.⁶⁴ There was no way round that reality.

⁶¹ *Oxford Magazine*, Fourth Week, Hilary Term, 1989, 9.

⁶² See Whyte, chapter 10.

⁶³ See Cox/Raff, chapter 3.

⁶⁴ As recalled by Sir Keith Thomas in a communication to the editor.