

The Iron Press

Earl Stanhope's was obviously one of those hyper-active Victorian characters whose restless inventiveness fuelled the age. Among his ideas he proposed typesetting using logotypes—groups of characters cast as one piece of type—to speed production. This got as far as practical trials, but was never widely adopted, possibly because of opposition by workers (who feared job losses), but probably because the gains are not significant. He also introduced two-thirds size cases for small fonts.

However, his main claim to fame must be his promotion of the iron press as a replacement for the wooden Common Press. The idea may have been obvious, but the consequences were significant. Wood has several limitations relevant to press-making: it has a limited strength, & the strongest kinds are slow-growing, so limited in production. It doesn't have a uniform strength, due

to natural variations from growth. It comes in limited sizes, & making intricate shapes is difficult. It reacts to its environment, with significant alterations in size. Wrought iron had long been used for certain parts of the press, but the new cast-iron allowed an all-metal press, with huge gains in strength, & much cheaper manufacturing processes.

The new presses worked on the same general (flat platen) principle as the old ones, but they allowed greater pressures, & thus could print a bigger inked area. Wooden presses were limited in their maximum size by the forces the wood could stand. Iron presses could be made much bigger, & thus increased productivity greatly. They also allowed for much bolder lettering to be printed, & the consequence was a sudden change in lettering styles with Fat-faces & Slab-serif faces used for the brash new commercial publicity that accompanied the industrial revolution in production. The sedate notices of the Regency period turned into the raucous "Stackbill" posters that are everyone's image of Victorian advertising.

The most successful iron presses in the traditional style were the later Albion & the Columbian, both of which were made by several manufacturers, & remained in use throughout the 19th century, but even while Stanhope introduced his press, others were working on a completely different approach, & the cylinder machine was to offer even more productivity & scope for automation.

Right: A later version of the Stanhope Press (1820s).

Far left: Poster of the earlier style (1810)

Left: A Stackbill-style poster of the 1830s.

