

α

THE ALPHABET

β

The English language uses the Roman alphabet. There are a surprising number of other alphabets used around the world (hundreds at least), but many are dying out of use with the rise of global communication. Several other alphabets are well-known to us: the Cyrillic, Russian being the best-known user, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek and Indian alphabets. In letterpress printing in the UK, these are all known as *Exotic*, and important as they all are in their own ways, only rarely met unless in specialist printers working for overseas trade. Hebrew and Greek founts were the commonest ones, both being used for theological & classical reference works (religious printing being a major area until the twentieth century), and the latter in mathematical works. The word alphabet comes from the names of the first two letters in the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *beta*.

The idea of communicating speech by symbols to represent the individual sounds, rather than by pictograms that represent whole words or concepts, seems to have evolved in many places independently. Even the best-known pictogram writing, Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics, uses characters that can represent sounds rather than words, and has an alphabetic element. Our alphabet has evolved from ancient symbols used in the Middle East about 3000 years ago, and which started out as pictograms, came to represent sounds associated with those words, and then were distorted in shape by the various methods of writing until they became the shapes we recognise today. The evolution and change has not stopped: our alphabet is still changing—we recognise letter shapes that would be unrecognisable to readers a hundred or even possibly fifty years ago. Modern letter designs based on liquid crystal displays, for example, add a new twist to the distortion/evolution process. (In Hebrew the first two letters were *aleph* and *beth*—illustrating the evolutionary link to Greek *alpha* and *beta* and our *a* and *b*.)

Of our present alphabet, the upper-case characters came to us from the earlier Middle-eastern alphabets through the Romans: Hebrew and Greek alphabets came from the same sources, but developed distinctly. The Roman Writing and carved inscriptions used the basic shapes of our present capitals, but lacked U, W and J, and many printing types have attempted to go back to Roman letter-forms as an artistic example. When the Roman empire broke up, the Cyrillic alphabet evolved through Byzantium and the Eastern European cultures, while in central & Western Europe, the church as the chief publisher evolved variations in writing styles that can be seen in books such as the Book of Kells. Our present alphabet resulted from the combination of the original Roman shapes (as our Majuscules or Capitals) and the rounder monastic shapes (our Miniscules or Lowercase). This combination continued to evolve different writing styles in different regions or in different contexts, and what we now call *Black Letter* was the alphabet in use in Europe when Gutenberg started casting type. His first type copied the Textura style of writing, so called because its vertical emphasis was reminiscent of woven cloth, and ‘Black Letter’ because the writing it copied had thick strokes done with a broad-nib quill.

Italian printers introduced letter shapes more reflective of the old Roman letters, and these lighter, more open letters became the dominant *Roman* alphabet we use today. Manutius, the Italian printer-publisher, first combined the sloping letters based on Vatican clerical writing with upright Roman type, giving the *Italic* variation still used for emphasis or contrast today.

Writing manuscripts was a tedious and time-consuming business, so writers adopted abbreviations whenever they could, (and Latin texts with frequently occurring identical word endings encouraged this). Early printing copied some of these symbols, and one has survived: the Latin word *et*, meaning *and* survives as the ampersand. *Et* evolved by the bar of the *e* carrying on across the *t*, giving *&*. When children learnt the alphabet in school, they recited the twenty-six letters, then “and *per se* and”, which became ‘ampersand’. (*Per se* is Latin for ‘by itself’.) A second survivor is the question mark, which evolved from the “qu” at the beginning of the Latin word for question, and a third the apostrophe. The standardisation that printing encouraged also led to the adoption of U for the vowel uses of V, W for double-U and J for the consonantal uses of I. (Thus Ian or Iuan is the same name as John, for example.)