
THE WIPERS TIMES *(Adventure with my Arab)*

WHEN THE PHONE RANG I answered it with hesitation, in the expectation that it could be a nuisance call. However, I luckily listened long enough to hear a female Irish voice asking if I had a pre-First World War printing press – and if so how much would I charge for the transportation to Belfast and hire of it to the BBC for five weeks. It seemed that this might – but might NOT be a hoax call!

It soon transpired that the BBC had been looking for a “Liberty” Press for a good two weeks. They had contacted museums throughout the UK to no avail. Their trail had led them to John Easson who suggested that an Arab Press would be just as appropriate as a Liberty Press, and knowing that I had an Arab, gave the BBC my number. The BBC were all set for the production of a documentary about printing a newspaper behind the World War 1 trenches, but from where could they get a suitable treadle press?

It was clear that once I had explained the lineage of my Arab Press they were relieved that I would consider hiring it to them for five weeks. I had a very short time, to agree a price for the use of my Arab, arrange the shipping of all half a ton of it to Belfast and get myself over to Belfast to meet the press on arrival, set up of the press and subsequently instruct on how to print from it.

The British first entered the Belgian city of Ypres in October 1914. The name baffled them; the Tommies did not know how to pronounce it and the name that was taken up, both at the front and at home was “Wipers”. So when in 1916, a treadle press was found abandoned in a barn, behind the lines, along with some battered type, the “Wipers Times” was born. The first edition of Saturday 12th February 1916 says:



“ having managed to pick up a printing outfit (slightly soiled) at a reasonable price, we have decided to produce a paper. There is much that we would like to say in it, but the shadow of censorship enveloping us causes us to refer to to the war, which we hear is taking place in Europe, in a cautious manner. We must apologise to our subscribers for the delay in going to press. This has been due to the fact that we have had many unwelcome visitors near our printing works during the last few days. Any little shortcomings in production must be excused on the grounds of inexperience and the fact that pieces of metal of various sizes have punctured our press. Should our effort come to an untimely end by adverse criticism or attentions by our local rival, Messrs Hun & Co, we shall consider it an unfriendly act, and act accordingly.

Ian Hislop, had got really interested in the story. The newspaper laughs in the face of death, is very rude about senior officers, the home front and the organisation of the war, but is also a spontaneous record of life in the trenches portraying the cheerfulness and camaraderie that prevailed in spite of the horror. In many ways it is a forerunner of "Private Eye". Ian Hislop has written:

"This extraordinary magazine was written, printed, and distributed and read by British soldiers, serving in the trenches of the Western Front during the First World War. It was produced on an abandoned printing press, salvaged from the ruins of Ypres – hence the title with the classic British mispronunciation – and was an immediate success from its first edition. It continued to appear throughout the war and was subsequently re-issued in the following years of peace. Its extraordinary mix of jokes, sarcasm, black humour and sentimental poetry make it a unique record of the period. I think that the Wipers Times has often been unjustly ignored and that it is firmly in the great tradition of great British comic literature. The authors would probably have laughed at that idea too"

This was the essence of the story that BBC2 were commissioning a production company in Belfast to make for general viewing.

I now moved my press from the back of my garage, where it had lain unused



for ten years, and made sure that it printed well. My Arab was made in 1900 and had the original open design of flywheel. It was also marked with "WD" (War Department) so it was an authentic press of the correct era. It transpired that it was only surmise by the BBC that the "Wipers Times" had been printed by a Liberty Press. Thus I suggested that the script be changed to say "Arab" rather than "Liberty" – as someone watching the documentary would recognize that the Arab was slightly different to the Liberty, and would be bound to ring the BBC and complain!

The next few days were spent in trying to find out what else the BBC would need to set up their 'printing shop' depicted in this Ypres farmhouse behind the lines. They seemed not to understand that composing sticks, type cases, quoins, galleys and chases etc, etc, would all have been needed by the film crew actors (One of whom would be Michael Palin) to make the set look authentic and show the 'print shop' in action. So a large suitcase printing artifacts – and my Model 3 Victorian Hand Press – were dispatched with the Arab on a back loading transporter to Belfast. I also managed to get the Block Shop to make three zinc blocks of reproductions of the "Wipers

Times", so that we had some way of actually printing a page of the newspaper after we had set up the press on the set.

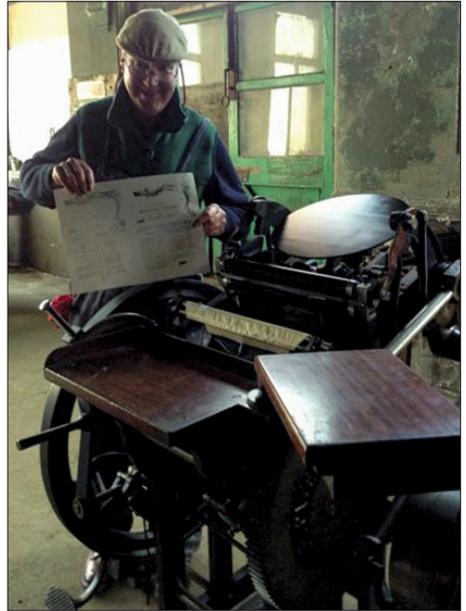
It was with great excitement that, having flown from Inverness

direct to Belfast, I met the transporting lorry in Ballyclare, just south of Belfast where an old disused linen mill was being made to look like the 'print shop' in Ypres. The owner of the mill led me through the sad looking factory and showed me where bomb craters would be made and where dead horses would be strewn around to add atmosphere. (Coming with the Horse Meat scandal he joked – we actually cannot find any dead horses!) The site seemed perfect to me and we offloaded the presses and got them positioned to the producers' satisfaction.

The next day I was very much on stage myself, having to show off the presses to the Director and his production staff. It amazed me just how they were all intrigued by the mechanics of the Arab and how they genuinely marvelled at all the moving parts worked in harmony. The press was filmed from every angle and I hope that a number of these shots will appear in the production. I had three days to instruct a young man called Ryan on how to be a letterpress printer and compositor. He was very enthusiastic and a fast learner. I think the general initial feeling was that once the press was on site, it would just print without any further ado. But once packing, lays, inking, feeding paper, treading, and the general "make ready" skills had been shown to them, they were even more appreciative of the press – and my instruction!

(The producer had some 80gsm paper that he considered the newspaper might have been printed on. (But is there anyone out there who can print 80gsm on an Arab – for I certainly cannot! – we settled for 120gsm!))

It was good to find out that the production team were very keen that everything should be authentic for the period. I had taken over some Cornerstone quoins and mentioned that these were post 1916 in design. "Oh dear", they said, "the phone will never stop ringing when we show these to all those know-all



printers out there" So luckily John Easson came to my rescue and sent over some cast iron quoins.

After four days my apprentice Ryan was confident to be left with my press and in turn show Michael Palin how to use it for the real filming. I returned home having had a most unusual 'adventure' and proud that in the documentary, *my Arab Press* was to be the star player. I am glad to say that the press has now been returned to me unharmed and I await the showing of the documentary/production with great interest. I have been told that this will be in June/July of this year. I will certainly let you readers know when I have more information on time and date.

Tim Honnor