

WILLIAMS ON BEWICK

A BOOK REVIEW

by Peter Quinn

Thomas Bewick Engraver & the performance of woodblocks, by Graham Williams. 2021.

Graham Williams is a publisher, printer and a sculptor. He is a member of the Royal Society of Sculptors. On his portfolio page we learn:

I left a directorship in publishing in the early 1970's to pursue my own work, printing and illustrating books by hand and, since the mid 1980's, making sculpture.

My prime interests have always been art, natural history and making things. I have written about the sculptor Naum Gabo and I founded the charity – the Gabo Trust, for sculpture conservation, in 1987.

Last year was the centenary of the *Realistic Manifesto*, and it was celebrated despite pandemic closures in an exhibition at Tate St.Ives. The manifesto was 'a set of pioneering artistic principles launched in Moscow by Gabo and his brother Antoine Pevsner. The statement declared that authentically modern art should engage with and reflect the modern age.' (TATE website) Gabo's concern with the power of art to communicate across all boundaries echoes down the ages.

We should make a full disclosure: Graham Williams is a long-time friend of the Bewick Society, he has addressed the Society on a number of occasions, contributed to the *Cherryburn Times* and as an expert is always willing privately to help with those queries we struggle to answer. Indeed Bewick Society members were lucky recently to hear him speak on Zoom. Addressing us from his study, the author took us on a lightning tour of his new book. This volume is the first in a trilogy of works to be published in 2021 from the author's imprint the Florin Press. Ahead we are promised *A Collection of Printing from Woodblocks on a diversity of papers* and *Understanding Paper assessment and permanence for artists and fine printers, with a chapter on ink*. The title under review,



Graham Williams engraving, Photo courtesy of Florin Press

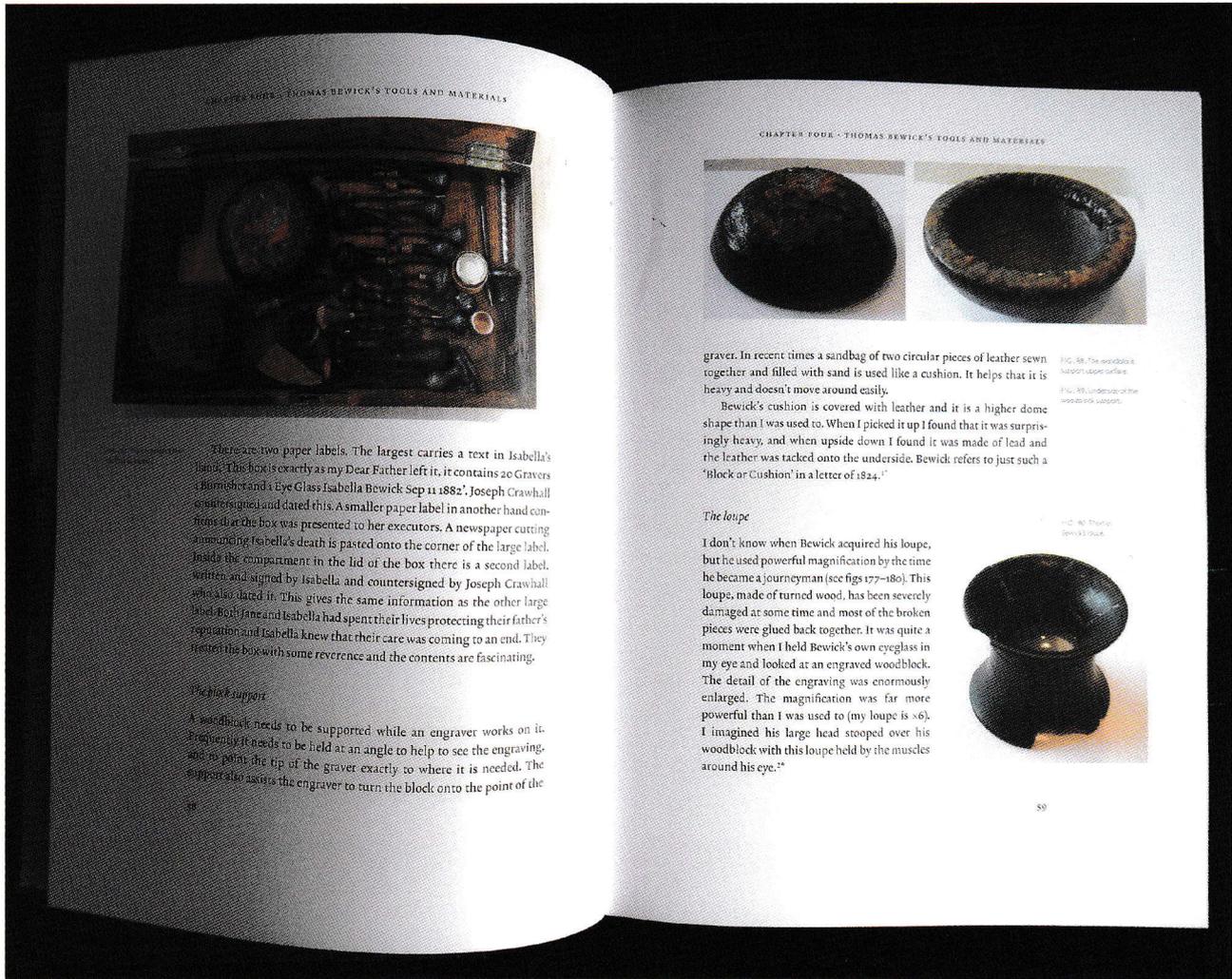
Thomas Bewick Engraver & the performance of woodblocks, comes in two forms: standard and special (listed below). The beautifully printed, cloth bound standard edition looks fairly 'special' to this reviewer

Where to place this large volume on your shelves? Towering over your copy of the modern biography of Bewick perhaps by Jenny Uglow. (Uglow, J.S., 2006. *Nature's Engraver: A Life of Thomas Bewick*, London: Faber.) At first glance the reader might assume that Williams' book is simply a biography of Bewick with a special interest in his apprentice years. Chapters 1-3 and 6-7 focus on Bewick's life story, albeit a biography re-told by an author with personal experience of the printing world and an interest in the development of Bewick's style.

However other chapters in this fifteen-chapter work have a much more technical focus, encompassing specific study of Bewick technique and more generalised history of aspects of the print trade. There are a surprisingly small number of books with a focus on Bewick in relation to print history. Perhaps then this large volume should sit beside the thin pamphlet 'Why Bewick Succeeded' from 1959 by Jacob Kainen? (Kainen, J., 1959. 'Why Bewick Succeeded: A Note on the History of Wood Engraving', Kainen, Jacob, Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology ; paper 11. Smithsonian Institution, 1959. Issued with papers 1-10 as: Bulletin / United States National Museum no. 218. Bibliographical footnotes.)

Thomas Bewick Engraver & the performance of woodblocks has numerous illustrations, appendices and end pieces, all assembled with some style. Chapter Nine, A Display of Cuts, is an assembly of the very best of Bewick images, a greatest hits selection, a retrospective showing. Indeed the size of the book makes it comparable with the modern-day exhibition catalogue or the art history monograph. We might pause to remember that the last (and only) full-scale retrospective of Bewick's work was held in 1979, 42 years ago this summer. The modest post-exhibition catalogue came therefore before the present age of large-scale exhibition publications. (Bain, I. (1979). *Thomas Bewick: an illustrated record of his life and work*. Newcastle: Laing Art Gallery.)

Perhaps then, in the absence of any comparable museum catalogue, Williams' new volume should nestle beside the Ikon gallery catalogue of a few years ago or Professor Donald's study of the *Art of Thomas Bewick?* (Watkins J., 2009, *Thomas Bewick Tale-Pieces*, Ikon, Birmingham. (Catalogue of exhibition at Ikon Gallery 8 April-25 May 2009; Donald, D., 2013. *The Art of Thomas Bewick*, Reaktion Books). Applying the norms of academic research to Williams' book soon reveals weaknesses. There are certainly many gaps in the references and footnotes: this is not a work that sets out a full academic terrain for future exploration by researchers. Nor is it a full retrospective of Bewick's work: he certainly draws on all aspects of Bewick's output, however the museum retrospective



The review copy open at pages 58-9 showing the toolbox, block support and loupe.

would take another shape. Williams' focus is elsewhere, the clue is in his title: *Thomas Bewick Engraver & the performance of woodblocks*

In truth this book presents a highly individual approach to the subject matter and as such it is a refreshing new resource in our understanding of Bewick. It is worth unpicking some of the text's distinctive threads.

From the first Williams is keen to make his reader aware of his own background and experience. Indeed you can read the book as a memoir of his life in Bewick. On page 13 he tells us he has worked on this text for 40 years or so. He takes us back further: to London in the 1950s and his own beginnings in the print trade on an informal apprenticeship (p.17). Although at that time Williams may not have identified with Bewick (a beard suggests Bohemian tastes) there are echoes in the restrictions imposed on him of the control exercised over the apprentice boy in the eighteenth century.

The author's recollections are scattered through the text although he rarely shares details of date or place with us. Williams looks through Bewick's loupe (p. 59); he tries lowering a wood block (p.79); he discusses inks and rollers with Iain Bain (p.163); he experiments with overlays to print a Monica Poole engraving (p.204) and searches for new ink when in the early 1960s Lawrence's Black Proofing Ink changes (p.237). It is a constant refrain: Williams has hands-on experience at every turn.

He also has intimate knowledge of Bewick artefacts. Early in his account (p. 25) we are introduced to examples from Jane Bewick's Scrap Album. Searching for the footnote we discover that this is in the author's possession, bought at auction in 1995. Whilst the text is informed by hands-on encounters with items from collections across the globe (Newcastle, London, Oxford, Nottingham, New York, Cambridge Massachusetts) and from well-known private collectors (listed p.8), the book owes much to blocks, prints and books in the author's own possession. This is especially evident in Chapter Eight, The Blocks Themselves in which the text is informed by a close examination of the blocks, literally from all sides.

Thomas Bewick Engraver & the performance of woodblocks is an awkward title. It is much to the author's credit that he manages to avoid the pitfalls of an overly technical manual on the printing of historic wood blocks. Indeed those who wish to use the book in that manner will be disappointed as they will have to dig deep in the footnotes (p.267 for example) for the technical information they may need. Graham Williams' outlook is related to that of the late Iain Bain. From the nineteen seventies onwards Iain Bain emphasised the importance of understanding how a block is engraved and printed. This shaped the 1979 retrospective and later the layout of the Thomas Bewick Birthplace Museum at Cherryburn. For the general reader or museum visitor a print demonstration may be a moment of revelation. Williams'

fifteen chapters can be consulted by that reader to add substance to their print knowledge. But his primary audience is the printer. That is apparent from his 'Afterword'

'To do justice to his engraving printers must first immerse themselves in Bewick's masterful technique and understand how the blocks were intended to perform. Only then should they address the printing. Those who will never print can improve their looking by better understanding what Bewick accomplished.' (p.252)

In essence the printer must realise the three-dimensional space that the exceptional engraving technique of Bewick creates within the block. The discussion of lowering, make-ready, dampening and inking all tends to one end: the revelation of space in Bewick's block.

At the end of the book there is a Notes and References section. Williams uses an asterisk to highlight extra information in his numbered footnotes. No less than seven appendices allow the work to include hard-to-find documentation such as the wording of Robert Bewick's indenture, an 18th Century description of paper-making (whistle at the right time and four or five men appear) and how to boil linseed oil (dipping in a piece of bread is recommended). Appendix Two is a list *Things engraved in the workshop 1766-69*. In alphabetical order it runs from Argyle to Winkers with many oddities in between. Coal Tickets and Dog Collars we might expect but Marrow Scopes, Guglers and Hair Pieces suggest a lost world of consumer culture

waiting to be explored.

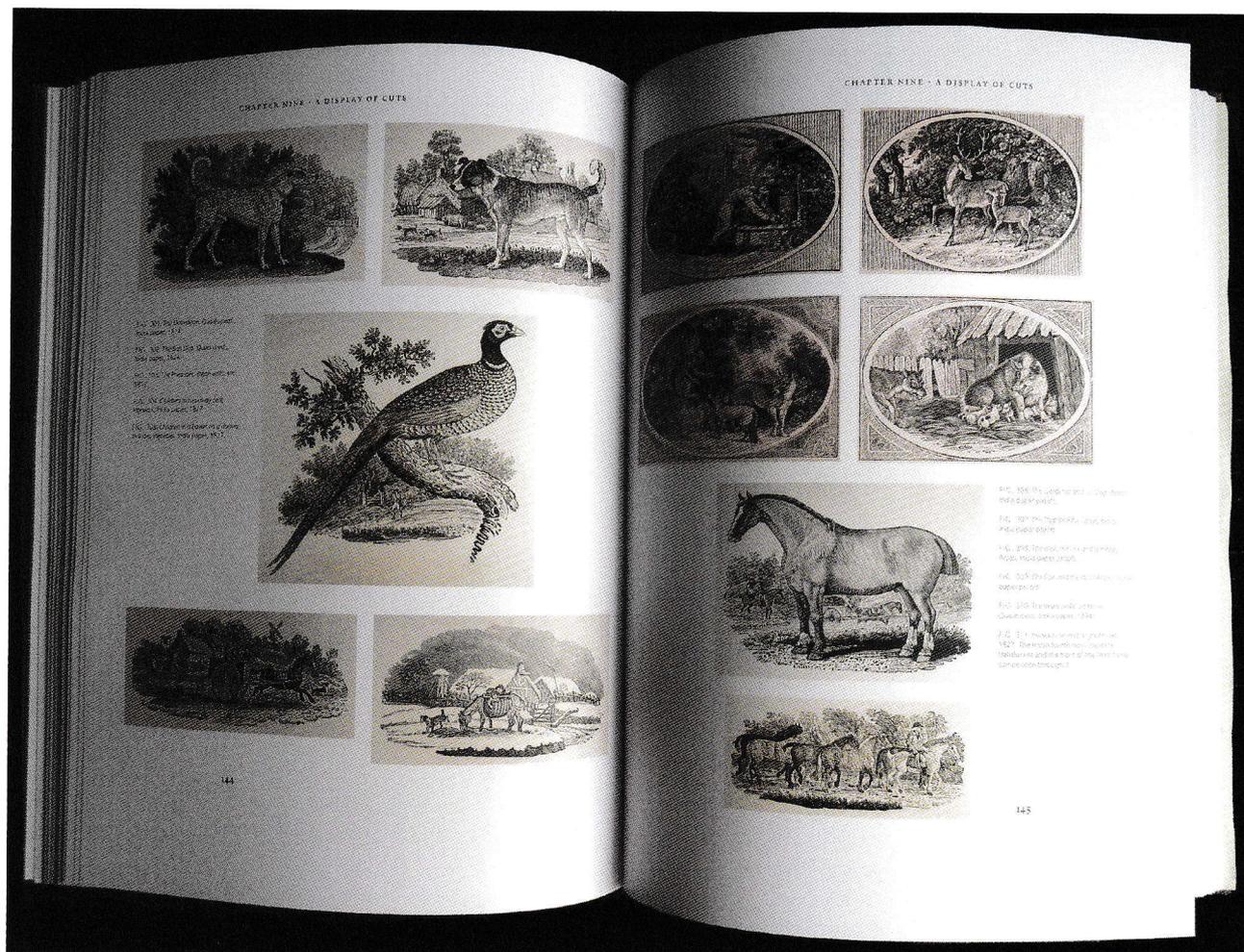
The seventh and final Appendix 'Of Excellence and Perfection' operates as a manifesto afterword: displaying in the final two pages of the book the philosophical under-pinning of Williams' appreciation of Bewick. In his commercial art days of the 1950s he eavesdrops on an argument between two unnamed commercial artists over some hand-drawn lettering. One example is perfect however another example, far from flawless, looks better. That lettering was excellent as its form followed function. Williams, the young bearded 50s modernist learns a lesson he now sees applies to Bewick's wood engraving: the marks may be less than perfect but the result can be wonderful. Gabo (unmentioned in the book's 286 pages) would have nodded in acknowledgement.

Thomas Bewick Engraver & the performance of woodblocks, by Graham Williams. 2021.

Standard edition (first 400 copies) 286 pages with 437 illustrations, 297 x 215mm. Designed and typeset at the Libanus Press. Printed in colour throughout by Hampton Printing (Bristol) Ltd. Bound in Brilliantia Fawn book cloth with a titling label on the front board

Also

25 special copies. The standard edition text with additional leaves tipped in, including a print of the Snow Bunting printed from the original block. Half bound by hand by the Abrams Bindery in brown morocco with paper marbled by Alberto Valese in Venice, and hand sewn headbands.



The review copy open at pages 144-5 showing some of the 'Display of Cuts'.

A GRAHAM WILLIAMS BEWICK BIBLIOGRAPHY

Thomas Bewick's Fables of Aesop and Others, 1980. Introduced by Iain Bain, with appendices – The Croxall Connection by Graham Williams and *The Preliminary Drawings* by Iain Bain. Standard ed. 50. (122 x 183mm) 40pp. Four Bewick wood engravings printed from the original woodblocks, plus eight reproductions of cuts in the text, printed by Graham Williams plus three drawings reproduced lithographically, on Barcham Green RWS watercolour paper. Bound in full cloth with a paper titling label on the front board and spine titled in gold over a foil panel.

Also *Special ed. 80*. (122 x 182mm) 40pp. The standard edition text bound in quarter speckled calf with glazed canvas boards with a paper label, titled in gold on the spine. With a suite of 19 proofs printed by R. Hunter Middleton from the original Bewick woodblocks on Japanese style papers, at his Cherryburn Press in Chicago, individually mounted in green Ingres paper over card and titled (120 x 181mm). Contained in a cloth covered presentation box with a printed spine label (141 x 204mm).

Bewick and Printers, by Graham Williams. 1983. Ed. 16. (96 x 83mm) 16pp. Four wood engravings by Thomas Bewick and one by John Bewick, printed from the original blocks in Iain Bain's collection on Barcham Green handmade Chester. A demonstration to Iain Bain of a method of printing Bewick's blocks using damp vellum tympan, the text was written and added later. Marbled paper by Alberto Valesse in Venice over card stiffener, with a paper titling label.

A Bewick from Barcham Green, by Graham Williams. 1985. (150 x 106mm) An original woodblock from *Thomas Bewick's Fables of Aesop and Others*, 1818, the text and block printed on Barcham Green handmade Chester, in a plain Renaissance II paper wrap. Published by Barcham Green.

Supercastings. A Celebration of a Small Event, a type specimen by Graham Williams celebrating the first casting of a few 24pt characters by Michael Passmore and the printer on a Monotype Supercaster. 1988. Ed. 22. (315 x 200mm) 8 leaves. Seven sheets of an old mould-made paper printed in black and colours. These include a Bewick engraving of the *Mona Monkey*, the first publication of a poem by Elizabeth Bewick, *A Question of Carelessness*, and a flurry of printings from a typecast leaf decoration in various colours using a circular chase. Notes 'fine-keyboarded' and 'fine-photocopied' on Barcham Green handmade Chester. Held in a portfolio made by Clare Skelton with a canvas spine and corners, boards covered in Hahnemule laid paper, decorated by the printer with a riot of rubber stamps.

Double Crown Club Dinner 313 menu, 1992. (188 x 124mm) Michael Renton on The Last Trade Wood Engravers. With three prints from original woodblocks – An initial 'D' from the Ashdene Press, an outboard motor from the Sander Wood Engraving Company, Chicago and *Figures Fighting* probably by John Bewick for *Robin Hood* (but not

used) published in Bewick's *Memoir*, 1862. Printed in black, blue and green on an old wove mould-made paper with a printed card cover. For the Double Crown Club.

TO FOLLOW LATER IN 2021

A Collection of Printing from Woodblocks on a diversity of papers.

Understanding Paper assessment and permanence for artists and fine printers, with a chapter on ink.

Please email info@florinpress.com if you are interested in either of these publications.

GRAHAM WILLIAMS IN THE CHERRYBURN TIMES

Thomas Bewick's Coloured Quadrupeds. A Gift to his Children, and a Bag full of Mysteries. *Cherryburn Times* Volume 7 Number 1, Summer 2017.

Iain Bain, in celebration of his 80th Birthday *Cherryburn Times*: Volume 6 Number 4 Winter 2013.



THOMAS BEWICK ENGRAVER

& the performance of woodblocks

Graham Williams

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*The White Owl (Barn Owl). Thomas Bewick,
History of British Birds, 1797.*