



Graham Williams, *Thomas Bewick engraver & the performance of woodblocks*. Charing:

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illustrations, many in colour.

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Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) was not only a skilled craftsman, but also a very fine original artist and keenly observant naturalist. It was his insightful understanding of his subjects, as well as his exquisite technical ability, which were to form the basis of his lasting success. Loved and admired by many, his life and wood-engravings have been intensively researched by academics and enthusiasts. Bewick contributed to the widespread adoption of end-grain wood-engraving in the early nineteenth century and his sensitive and skilled approach to his craft raised expectations of the quality and standard of printed book-illustration during his lifetime and well beyond.

This book does not seek to replicate previous research. It is the first of three connected publications by the author concerned with the hand-printing of wood-engravings. The narrative provides a thorough contextual description of Bewick's life and times, but the focus of the book is the development of his technical mastery and the performance of his woodblocks. This story is recounted through examples of his engraving, presswork and prints, and is underpinned by the extensive knowledge and experience of the author Graham Williams. Both Bewick and Williams are wood-engravers and hand-printers, each with a lifetime spent in the production of print. Williams understands Bewick's life in a way that only someone who has trodden the same ground can. He does not attempt to offer simply another biography of the man – he is well aware that others have covered that topic amply – rather, his subject is the development of Bewick's skills as an artist and an artisan and his own, decades-long, research into how Bewick's woodblocks can still be brought to life, through the application of a carefully considered approach to their printing.

'Perfection' and 'excellence' are two themes that pervade every aspect of this book. Williams sets out his views on these words and their meaning in an appendix to the text. This book models both perfection and excellence in its beautiful design and production (by the Libanus Press and Hampton Printing (Bristol) Ltd respectively), and in the human and technical story it tells. It allows for imperfection, but also seeks to analyse, in forensic detail, methods to improve and enhance the process of printing wood-engravings, by uncovering the complex working practices of printers past and present. The section on the woodblocks themselves is a fascinating exposition of Bewick's work and considers how his engravings also illustrate the many political, artistic and technological changes in society during his long professional life. Williams' comparisons of different Bewick prints plainly demonstrate the writer's proposition throughout the book, that 'whatever skill goes into the engraving of the block it is still completely dependent on the understanding and skill of the printer'.

A direct writing-style draws the reader in, to share in Bewick's skill and the author's knowledge and practical experience. This is a book for printers, wood-engravers, bibliophiles and indeed anyone interested in learning more about Bewick, his woodblocks, book-production and illustration. The author sets out how the blocks were intended to perform and how a modern hand-printer might approach their use. His aim is to do justice to Bewick's artistry. Readers who do not print, will certainly gain a better appreciation of Bewick's astounding achievements.

The book begins with an introduction to Bewick's time as an apprentice and his early development as an artist, illustrator and engraver. In his youth, the wood-cut had been used chiefly as a cheap and easy method of illustrating chapbooks. Bewick, however, was to radically change this through his expert use of a graver as a cutting-tool and as a great exponent of the white line method of wood-engraving. The ensuing chapters set out the range of work undertaken by Bewick during his apprenticeship and illustrate the tools and materials he used with contemporary images of the contents of his toolbox. The structure of the book is iterative and each chapter builds on the previous one, enabling the narrative to unfold and evolve. There is necessarily a sense of a 'gallop through history' at times, to set the scene, provide context and inform readers about the techniques of cutting and engraving as well as the development of

paper, ink and presswork. These are significant subjects in their own right and the author notes that the choice and assessment of papers in particular, will be covered in a future publication.

The central section of the text describes Bewick's method of 'lowering' woodblocks, with examples from his original blocks used to demonstrate his tonal techniques. Bewick experimented with numerous processes to improve his woodblocks and their printing. His great skill lay in his use of the finest engraved lines of differing lengths and widths to produce a variety of textures and particularly subtle tones. He scraped down parts of the surface of his blocks, so that these areas received less pressure during printing, thus achieving a paler tone when required. These and other methods were employed to make adjustments during printing to vary the tone in different areas of the illustration. Williams illustrates how the blocks were corrected and finished, and explains the importance of Gay's *Fables* to understanding Bewick's development as an artist and engraver. The aim is to increase the viewer's comprehension of these printing practices and to enable readers fully to appreciate the subject and purpose of the illustrations and recognise their increasingly realistic style.

The latter part of the book is concerned with aspects of presswork, from the evolution of the hand-press and associated equipment, to the history and technique of paper production, as well as the application of different printing inks. It focuses on the modern printing of Bewick's blocks and provides a unique characterisation of Bewick's achievements. In tandem it also describes Williams' own professional journey, his research and experimentation as he sought to improve the printed quality of wood engravings.

Williams has tested different inks and various high-quality hand-made papers throughout his professional life. He has scrutinised the endless possibilities different combinations of paper, ink and hand-presses can yield. Experiments to print lowered blocks in a press with dry tympan include trialling the use of carpet underlay, plastic foam and the material used to make fishing flies. He also describes his re-discovery of an old printing technique using damp vellum tympan, which form themselves to the contours of the block, to achieve 'tonal delicacy' in the production of high-quality prints.

The final chapter considers the work of Robert Hunter Middleton and his production of modern prints from Bewick's original woodblocks. It discusses the survival

of the blocks, notes experiences of testing printing methods with Ian Bain and presents information on the production of some finely-printed twentieth-century proofs. An afterword and appendices amplify many of the points made and add further context. The text is fully supported throughout by explanatory notes and illustrative figures. Many of the images presented are illustrations from the author's own collection of blocks. The figures are closely integrated with the text and printed in colour to demonstrate the various tints of paper, densities of printing ink and tonal qualities of the proofs and prints selected.

The particular strength of this book is the author's account of his own presswork which weaves through the text. He explains where and how he began his printing life, his search for the right ink, and provides his opinions on handling, drying and pressing paper. He clearly demonstrates how and why the printed result varies and shows that for all Bewick's ability in the interpretation and preparation of his blocks, the printer was and is instrumental in achieving what the artist intended and the engraver envisaged. The techniques described could equally apply to modern wood-engravings, as well as to historic woodblocks.

Williams acknowledges that ink and paper are in his blood and his writing conveys a strong sense of someone who has spent many enjoyable years working alongside Bewick, following a similar professional path. This is an important, indeed definitive, work on the performance of Bewick's woodblocks. It is a perceptive narrative of Bewick's life and skills, resulting from many years of dedicated and meticulous research. The book is beautifully produced in terms of content and design. It exemplifies the experience and interests of the author and successfully conveys his views on Bewick and his woodblocks. This is the story of an eighteenth-century master wood-engraver and his woodblocks which will inspire and inform the contemporary reader.

*Jau Conway*