

THE WOOD-ENGRAVINGS AND WOOD-BLOCKS OF THOMAS BEWICK. Bearing an impression of Thomas Bewick's wood-engraving of a barn owl – the classical symbol of wisdom – on its cover, *Thomas Bewick Engraver and the Performance of Woodblocks* by Graham Williams (Charing, Kent, The Florin Press, 2021, 286 pp., 437 ill., £125, special edition £585) is the most substantial account of the master by a practising wood-engraver since Reynolds Stone's handsome but inconsequential quarto of 1953. Williams is also a sculptor and fine printer – as pointed out by Simon Lawrence in his preface – so that the augury of wisdom is auspicious, especially since Williams introduces original Bewick blocks and associated material from his own collection, assiduously built up over many years and here deployed to advantage.

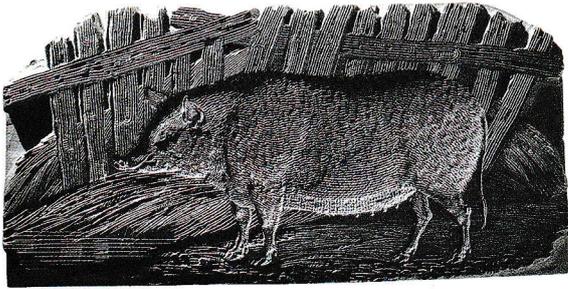
Bewick's own *Memoir* (London, 1862) recounts many details of his life and work, but was written late in life from his position as the country's unrivalled engraver on wood, an artist-craftsman who had transformed 'slovenly stamps' (as Horace Walpole called the woodcuts of the day) into things of beauty. Bewick could now afford to dismiss everything that preceded his acclaimed *General History of Quadrupeds* of 1790 as 'not worthy of note'.

Although Williams reaches back to Bewick's roots as an artisan and illustrator in seeking the seeds of his achievements, this is not a Bewick book for the uninitiated but a painstaking, near forensic investigation into the many factors that shaped his engravings and their appearance in print. Wood-engraving will not be hurried; each mark is of consequence and the pace of this book reflects that. Accordingly, the importance of the traditional seven-year apprenticeship within which Bewick laboured and grew to maturity is properly brought to the fore and the significance of his work during that time (such as the decorative *culs de lampe* devices largely overlooked by previous commentators) placed under the microscope. Considerable attention is rightly paid to his early work for children's books and books of fables (considerable overlap exists between the two), the majority carried out in the traditional 'black line' style of engraving; the 'white line' for which Bewick is renowned today was still a gleam in his eye. Although he is famed for his natural histories, fables marked the beginning and the end of Bewick's long career as a pictorial engraver, from his illustrations to the *Moral Instructions* of 1772 to his *Fables of Aesop* of 1818.

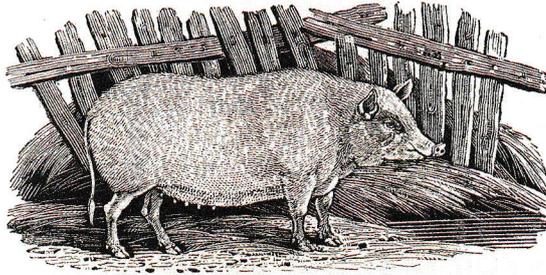
One of Bewick's duties as a young apprentice would



60. Thomas Bewick's Toolbox, wood, c. 254 x c. 470 mm (Newcastle City Library, Special Collections).



61. Thomas Bewick, *Sow of the Chinese Kind*, 1799, woodblock, 40 x 50 mm (Private collection).



62. Thomas Bewick, *Sow of the Chinese Kind*, wood-engraving, 40 x 50 mm (Private collection).

have been to prepare engraving tools for cutting both on wood and metal. His master, Ralph Beilby (1743–1817), ‘fitted up & temper’d his own tools’ and taught Bewick to do the same. This was a handmade world in which the boundaries between an artist-craftsman and his tools became indivisible, the tool merely an extension of the hand. One of Bewick’s toolboxes, complete with gravers (Charles Dickens called them his ‘slender means’), whetstone, leather-covered engraving cushion, eyeglass (at least 10 x magnification) and other accessories, still survives (fig. 60). One of the gravers has five points yet is only one millimetre wide, highlighting the need for a loupe. The previous literature on Bewick often illustrates this box as a curiosity and passes on without further ado, but for Williams it is as much a treasure as one of the original woodblocks; the contents are itemized and described, allowing us to feel as though we are looking over Bewick’s shoulder as he rummages through it.

Such chatty intimacy is extraordinarily revealing, complemented as it is by exemplary photography and reproduction. This is brought into sharp relief when original woodblocks for the *Quadrupeds*, *Birds* and *Fables of Aesop* come under the spotlight – literally, as they have been photographed under a raking light – and reveal telling details. For example, Beilby’s workshop received numerous commissions for seal engraving, work in which he ‘was accounted clever & in this I did my utmost to surpass him’, recalled Bewick. When it came to engraving the figures for the *Quadrupeds*, the skills Bewick had developed as an intaglio seal engraver came to the fore, especially when lowering parts of a block so that it printed more delicately and could supply perspective. This is clearly seen in the block of the *Sow of the Chinese Kind*, in which the belly of the animal has been scooped out and detail worked into the surface of that depression to form the texture of pigskin when a careful impression is taken (figs. 61 and 62).

The printing of Bewick’s woodcuts must have tried his letterpress printers’ patience, let alone his perfectionist presence at their side. Accordingly, presses, paper and

ink (historical and modern) are the focus of the second half of this book, heralded by its subtitle. The wooden press of Bewick’s day, ‘often braced to keep it steady’ as Williams notes, was far from an exact instrument and extracting the best from a woodblock – which itself may have rocked slightly in the forme – demanded compensatory measures.

Additionally, in the proto-industrial world of Bewick’s time there was little certainty either in the rag-made paper or the printing ink. The former – which is as much a part of the image as the marks printed upon it – required dampening in order to receive the ink sympathetically. (In the eighteenth century, as Williams remarks, ‘printing was a soggy business’.) The latter had to register across the tonal scale (Bewick called it ‘colour’) from delicate grey to full black and demanded careful application lest it clog the detail of a block. In between, endless fiddly adjustments came into play. The vellum tympan was packed with finely woven blankets to compensate for irregularities and press the paper onto the inked type and blocks; thin paper underlays to blocks and overlays between the tympan added pressure to emphasize specific areas and reach lowered detail. For the fine printer, this is as relevant today as it was in Bewick’s time. Modern science plays its part in this publication. Numerous samples of paper from Bewick’s publications were despatched for expert analysis by laboratories, often with intriguing results. For example, in Bewick’s ‘showcase’ editions of the *British Birds* and *Quadrupeds* (of 1817 and 1818 respectively) the locally milled paper is identified as one hundred percent hemp fibre, raising the tantalizing prospect of its origins as fishing nets and ropes discarded by Tyneside mariners.

Ink receives equal scrutiny. Black is rarely just black, but contains tinges varying from warm brown to a cooler bluish hue; the eye may not immediately register this but the brain picks up the hints. In the search for excellence, Williams scours the works of past master printers such as William Savage (1770–1843) for recipes and grinds away with slab and muller. Fast forward through 40

THE WOOD-ENGRAVINGS AND WOOD-BLOCKS OF THOMAS BEWICK. Bearing an impression of Thomas Bewick's wood-engraving of a barn owl – the classical symbol of wisdom – on its cover, *Thomas Bewick Engraver and the Performance of Woodblocks* by Graham Williams (Charing, Kent, The Florin Press, 2021, 286 pp., 437 ill., £125, special edition £585) is the most substantial account of the master by a practising wood-engraver since Reynolds Stone's handsome but inconsequential quarto of 1953. Williams is also a sculptor and fine printer – as pointed out by Simon Lawrence in his preface – so that the augury of wisdom is auspicious, especially since Williams introduces original Bewick blocks and associated material from his own collection, assiduously built up over many years and here deployed to advantage.

Bewick's own *Memoir* (London, 1862) recounts many details of his life and work, but was written late in life from his position as the country's unrivalled engraver on wood, an artist-craftsman who had transformed 'slovenly stamps' (as Horace Walpole called the woodcuts of the day) into things of beauty. Bewick could now afford to dismiss everything that preceded his acclaimed *General History of Quadrupeds* of 1790 as 'not worthy of note'.

Although Williams reaches back to Bewick's roots as an artisan and illustrator in seeking the seeds of his achievements, this is not a Bewick book for the uninitiated but a painstaking, near forensic investigation into the many factors that shaped his engravings and their appearance in print. Wood-engraving will not be hurried; each mark is of consequence and the pace of this book reflects that. Accordingly, the importance of the traditional seven-year apprenticeship within which Bewick laboured and grew to maturity is properly brought to the fore and the significance of his work during that time (such as the decorative *culs de lampe* devices largely overlooked by previous commentators) placed under the microscope. Considerable attention is rightly paid to his early work for children's books and books of fables (considerable overlap exists between the two), the majority carried out in the traditional 'black line' style of engraving; the 'white line' for which Bewick is renowned today was still a gleam in his eye. Although he is famed for his natural histories, fables marked the beginning and the end of Bewick's long career as a pictorial engraver, from his illustrations to the *Moral Instructions* of 1772 to his *Fables of Aesop* of 1818.

One of Bewick's duties as a young apprentice would



60. Thomas Bewick's Toolbox, wood, c. 254 x c. 470 mm (Newcastle City Library, Special Collections).