

Bewick Bookplates – a Late Harvest

A Supplement of Drawings, Additions & Amendments to Bookplates by Beilby & Bewick

by Nigel Tattersfield

The Florin Press and The Bookplate Society. 2024. Hardback 244 × 172mm. 64pp. Standard edition £19.50. Special edition £58.50

IAN CORFE-STEPHENS

Having recently struggled through *The Radical Print* (Esther Chadwick) it came as a blessed relief to read this new book by Nigel Tattersfield. Instead of a protracted, wandering rigmarole leading nowhere in particular here we have a text, built on similarly thorough research, but set down succinctly and with the greatest clarity. A pleasure to read.

My copy, a special edition, contains two tipped-in Bewick bookplates printed from the wood. The first is that of Robert Southey (one-time Poet Laureate) which had been printed by the late, great Iain Bain. The second is that of the re-worked bookplate of the Reverend Henry Cotes/John Murray printed by the still-with-us great Graham Williams. Both are a joy to have, and serve to underline the difference between the real thing and a reproduction.



Bookplate engraved on wood by Thomas Bewick, 1802

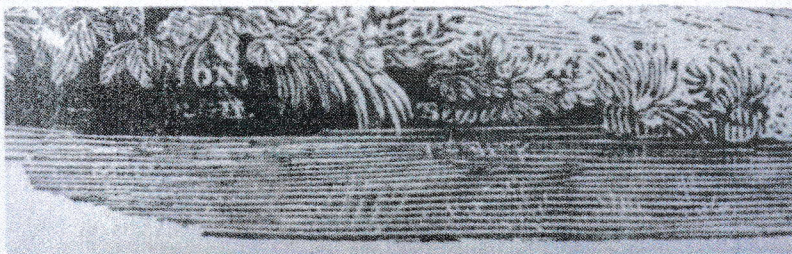
Having said that, however, like its 1999 companion volume (*Bookplates by Beilby and Bewick*) this splendid book is generously illustrated with very fine reproductions of both intaglio and relief-printed bookplates, preparatory drawings and tracing-paper transfer drawings. These last show the very familiar creases made when a drawing has been folded round a block for transfer. Some drawings are marked with dabs of watercolour indicating the size of copperplate or wood needed to fit the image.



Joseph Gurney's bookplate engraved on wood by Thomas Bewick, 1807

Seeing these images en masse helps to realise how many matrices had been in some way recycled, either as repeated imagery or more physically by plugging a woodblock or scraping down and burnishing a copper plate to allow a change to the wording or imagery. This helps to emphasise the scope and pace of jobs going through the workshop in Bewick's day necessitating taking the odd short-cut. Much as a modern day studio might re-use or adjust an existing idea where there is no time to come up with a new answer to a commission needed yesterday. Entries in both books record examples of this re-cycling practice on both relief and intaglio matrices.

The print of Robert Southey's bookplate, mentioned above, has 'TB Sc' cut into the shaded part of the always useful rocky outcrop. This outcrop is so often used that it, and its surrounding boskiness, becomes a sort of trademark, typifying a workshop product. Using the rock face on which to engrave the words or other design elements proved to be a useful and versatile idea, rather less morbid than the tombstone motif often used previously. Also mentioned earlier is the bookplate for The Reverend Henry Cotes which was re-worked for John Murray, by which time the initials 'TB' appear on the familiar bosky rocky outcrop. This block was further altered to partially erase the wording and was then used as a tailpiece in the 1821 edition of Bewick's *Birds*.



Detail from a vignette to the 1821 edition of Bewick's *Birds* showing partial erasure of the wording

The extent of Mr Tattersfield's research over many years is extraordinary. Delving into all manner of documents, drawing together snippets of information from the likes of workshop notebooks, cash books, day books and so forth; plus a myriad of other sources, some of which have only

recently seen the light of day. Typical of this is the recent acquisition of a large collection of various literary and other items from the library of two Rochdale brothers. This collection had been inaccessible to public view for over a century and was 'saved for the nation' by Friends of the National Libraries thanks to many generous donations, notably that of Sir Leonard Blavatnik. The collection is now known as the Blavatnik Honresfield Library and was divided among libraries, museums and other institutions around the United Kingdom. The arrival of Bewick related items at The Natural History Society of Northumbria triggered the need for this book.

New material was now available to clarify, add to or even correct entries in the original, 1999 edition of *Bookplates by Beilby and Bewick*. It is quite likely that this type of event will occur in the future as private, thus 'invisible', collections emerge into the public domain.

Such may be the case of another book in my possession. Some years ago I acquired an 1800 edition of *Quadrupeds*; in it are the bookplates of former owners. Dawson Turner (key patron to John Sell Cotman) has an intaglio armorial bookplate, with a typeset 'Turner' label pasted over its foot margin, on the inside front cover and a facsimile signature book stamp on the reverse of the title page. According to Mr Turner's many annotations he had acquired the book, among other Bewick related items, from the son of Admiral Mitford. There is, on the front endpaper, a typeset (Blackletter) label for C. Mitford Heriz-Smith. From both the 1999 book and '*...late harvest*' I learn that Admiral Mitford took engraving lessons at Bewick's workshop and may even have contributed blocks to later editions of both *Quadrupeds* and *Birds*. Whether these contributions were complete works or some minor involvement is as yet unknown. Being able to track this information whilst at home here in Brixworth is only possible thanks to all the hard work and research of Nigel Tattersfield, and means my puzzling over the provenance of my *Quadrupeds* can be consigned to the 'case closed' file.

Bewick Bookplates – a Late Harvest and its 1999 companion piece with their fine scholarship stand as important, even priceless, research tools in their own right: treasure troves of imagery backed by a text brimming with lucid and insightful comment, with fact rather than opinion.