

Ashentree Court

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THE HERITAGE of FLEET STREET

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Ashentree Court is a short alley leading off Whitefriars Street. This short court is of considerable historical interest, with information panels on the back wall of Northcliffe House on the left hand side, and the crypt of the Whitefriars Monastery down some steps on the right.

At the end is Magpie Alley with its large display of ceramic panels on the history of Fleet Street. Ashentree Court was described in 1708 as “a pleasant court on the E. side of White Friars”

The streets surrounding Northcliffe House were still in a state of flux until the early 1800's. Whitefriars Street initially started as a meandering link from Fleet Street to Whitefriars Docks which was a water way which stretched like a road in the position of the present Carmelite Street. It enabled boats to travel with their load all the way up to Temple Street which is now known as Tudor Street. Bouverie Street seems to have taken over where Whitefriars Street originally was and pushed Whitefriars Street eastwards to create a much more direct route from Fleet Street to the Thames in the early 1800's.

The stainless steel panels illustrate the printing of the Daily Mail in Northcliffe House from 1925 onwards. The pictures on these panels do not photograph at all well, so if you want to see the pictures, you will have to go to Ashentree Court. The accompanying text is far too long to fit on one information sheet, so only the first section of the text is reproduced here, and the remainder will be found on the website.

The present layout of streets was finalised in the 1860's. It was not until the Gas Works south of Tudor Street were constructed, that the printing world began to drift south of Fleet Street. They were attracted to the reliable supplies of both piped water and gas. The 'Daily Telegraph' set up on Tudor Street in 1886, followed by the Institute of Journalists, Co-operative Printing Society, Argus Printing and Marshall Printers.

Alfred Harmsworth who was later known as Lord Northcliffe bought the Co-operative Printing Society to Tudor Street in 1907. At that time it was known as 'a leading avenue of the brain world of London'. Soon after they set up their own daily newspaper which took off with outstanding success. It was called the 'Daily Mail'. The success of their second daily paper, 'The Mirror' was saved from

doom by the introduction of photographic printing in 1904. Lord Northcliffe died in 1922 after the purchase of both 'The Times' and 'The Observer' which were sold shortly afterwards. It was Lord Northcliffe's brother Harold Harmsworth who took control of Associated Newspapers and had Northcliffe House built three years after his brother's death in 1925. Northcliffe House was originally built to house the production of the very popular 'Daily Mail'.

Architects Ellis and Clarke designed Northcliffe House and by the fact that the building was purpose designed it made printing so much easier.

Many other printers soon followed in its footsteps and a proliferation of specialist newspaper buildings went up in the following years. The architecture of Northcliffe House has also been recognised as an important milestone in industrial building design. In recognition of this it was granted Listed Building Status II in 1988. This meant that when the site was redeveloped between 1999 and 2001 into a large office complex the facade was retained, as can be seen now.

Northcliffe House housed the heavy and bulk printers in the basement. It had two levels which went below pavement level which required the propping of adjoining buildings as indicated on the photographs taken in 1925. The printing of the newspapers continued in the building to the North, and the White Swan pub to the West remained open during the works. The building was constructed in a steel frame with the external elements encased in concrete to take the supports and ties for the pre-cast concrete cladding and decorative features.

The building was originally called New Carmelite House, which can be seen from some of the photo's, after the name of the building that it was succeeding. The name was changed to Northcliffe House before its completion in 1927.

At the time it was built, it was described as having an Egyptian style. It made use of the Crittall minimalist W20 section galvanised steel windows with copper-light glazing.

Northcliffe House printed newspapers until the late 1980's when production was switched to a new building in Kensington.

The printing press which commemorated by the displays in these window bays, was the press that was used in Northcliffe House and is known as the Wood Press. It is called the Wood Press as it was made by the Wood Newspaper Machinery Corporation of New York.



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Additional notes

Source: Stainless steel panels in Ashentree Court, London, EC4

Prepared by: PN, 2022

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Additional notes: (The text below continues the text on the main page)

The press is now exhibited at the Science Museum at Wroughton, and these plaques exist as a memorial at the location where it was housed and used. This display's purpose is to highlight its industrial and archaeological significance. The Wood Press was the last printing press to be in use in Fleet Street.

Lord Northcliffe based his empire upon the model set by the American newspapers and their printing presses. With the importation of American printing presses Northcliffe House led the way in the abandonment of deck type presses, and the introduction of unit type presses with magazine reel stands. These were the first to incorporate a process where production could remain continuous without the need to interrupt to change paper reels. Northcliffe House was also the first to use conveyors to transfer the folded newspapers from the basement to the ground floor. The machines were operated by the most powerful electric motors of the time producing 100 horsepower each.

It was known as the best machine with regard to print quality and lack of vibrations. It was divided into three levels. The lower level rested on the basement floor slab while the upper levels were supported on a steel frame incorporating a walkway around them. Although the actual weight of the press is not known a similar one manufactured by Wood contained 92 tons of steel and 41 tons of cast iron and other materials.

The lower level of the press

The lower level consisted of three magazine reel stands and a large electric motor. The motor turned a main shaft by means of a belt which in turn powered all the units, by a system of gearing and secondary drive shafts.

The magazine reel stands at this level provided minimum disruption to production during paper reel replacement; by a process known as 'flying paster'.