

St Bride Foundation

VOL. 1 - No. 25

THE HERITAGE of FLEET STREET

LONDON 2022

Amidst the dirt, noise and overcrowding of late-Victorian Fleet Street, the idea was formulated to create a foundation providing social, cultural and educational amenities for the local community, with printing at its heart. In 1894, St Bride Foundation was founded as a print school, library and community facility, tucked behind St Bride Church, away from the bustle of the ‘Street of Ink’.

The new Foundation was a purpose-built hub for all that was new in the print trade and reflected Victorian sentiments for nurturing both mind and body. The latest printing machinery and gymnastic equipment, a lending and technical library, and the City’s first indoor swimming baths were now on offer.

The print school provided technical training for those entering the trade and was furnished with cutting-edge equipment, including the revolutionary Linotype machine. The earliest classes catered to compositors, machine minders’ pressmen and lithographic and collotype printers. These evolved to meet the technical developments and demands of the trade. By 1920, the school had expanded to serve 1,300 students with 45 distinct classes. Having outgrown its origins on Bride Lane, the print school was transferred to larger premises in 1922 to become what is now London College of Communication.

Alongside the printing classes, the Foundation was a hive of activity, with facilities spanning a washhouse, laundry, gymnasium, free lending library and a variety of sporting and arts clubs. For a few pennies, local workers and residents could avail themselves of the swimming pool, which was patronised by 40,000

people a year at its peak. Today, the pool remains intact beneath the seating of the Bridewell Theatre and the original tiles, pumping equipment and changing rooms can still be seen.

Sport was an important part of the Foundation, with teams in athletics, cricket, swimming, gymnastics, rowing and table tennis. The latter saw the introduction of the St Bride Vase, which to this day is awarded to the world men’s singles champion. Cultural entertainments included dances, concerts, exhibitions and lectures, and there were societies for chess, photography, debating and drama.

At the heart of the Foundation was the technical library. Originally aiding the practice of print school students, the library is still used today by a global audience of printers, designers, students, academics and creatives. The library collection began with the purchase of a personal library of 3,000 books belonging to Victorian master printer William Blades and has since been supplemented with type specimens, archive collections and objects such as presses and type-founding equipment.

Where the original gymnasium stood, there is now a functioning print workshop, housing a unique collection of printing presses including an early Stanhope, a Columbian and two Albions. The Foundation continues its legacy of print education through a programme of workshops in printing, wood engraving and related crafts.

St Bride Foundation maintains a significant role in the cultural life of the local community through its theatre, exhibitions and talks programme. The building acts as a venue for an array of activities, from weddings to workshops, conferences to choir rehearsals. The library and print workshop remain at the heart of the Foundation, which exists to tell the story of print, providing

creative inspiration for the communities of designers, researchers, printers and the public who bring life to the building and collections.



The Foundation from Bride Lane



The Foundation from Bride Lane

