

Gill Sans

Stephen Skelton

Arthur Eric Rowton Gill (1882 – 1940) was a supremely talented – yet controversial – artist. His achievements, the Stations of the Cross in Westminster Cathedral, the statue of Prospero and Ariel over the front door to Broadcasting House and his typeface, Gill Sans, to name but three of his most enduring, are there for all to see. But his failings as a human being are also well known. His unconventional views on religion, the wearing of trousers (he preferred a loose, belted smock), underwear (he typically wore none) and man’s ‘most treasured possession’ (there are 130 exquisite drawings of his own genitalia in the British Museum) set him firmly apart from the crowd. To these though, must be added the incest he committed with his own daughters and at least one of his sisters (my grandmother Angela) – and his ‘experiments’ with his dog (today we would call it nothing more than bestiality) – all of which he recorded in his diaries and which he knew would eventually see the light of day. Whether Gill should be admired for his talents or ostracised for his failings, there is no doubt that his sans serif typeface remains his most widely seen achievement.

(This essay, except where examples of other typefaces are used, is set in Joanna, a typeface Gill designed in 1930-31.)

In October 1926 Gill took his family to live in Wales in a small hamlet called Capel-y-ffin, near Abergavenny, and was invited by a friend, Douglas Cleverdon, to paint a fascia board for the bookshop Cleverdon was opening in Bristol. On arriving there, Gill developed ‘a slight attack of influenza’ and had to retire to bed. Thinking that Gill might be bored, Cleverdon took him a



blank sketching book for him to draw ‘a couple of alphabets, in roman and sans-serif, which I could use as models for notices in the bookshop’. After a day in bed, Gill got up and made a start on the

fascia and after a morning working on it, stopped to go to a matinée at the theatre, returning to draw the alphabets that evening. The fascia he finished the next day. Five months later, Stanley Morison, a friend of Cleverdon's and an admirer of Gill's work, came to stay for the weekend. Morison, who had already commissioned Gill to produce a serif typeface which would be released as Perpetua in 1929¹, was greatly impressed by both the shop front, the alphabets and a metal name-plate which simply said **CLEVERDON** ².

Morison, a largely self-taught typographer, was the 'Typographical Advisor' to the Monotype Corporation who were developing the most advanced form of typesetting machine that the printing world had then seen. The Super Caster, released in 1928, could house a wide variation of fonts which could be expanded to 72 point size in a large number of different formats. Monotype also allowed printers to hire matrices for the Super Caster, an innovation in the printing world³. It was, in all senses of the word, a super typesetter and needed a new super-type, especially one adapted to the requirements of the display and advertising printing community, who valued modernity over tradition. Morison decided it needed a modern sans serif typeface and that Gill was the man for the job. In June 1927, the forty-three year old Gill started work on the designs, which Morison (to Gill's amusement), said ought to be known as 'Gill Sans'.

Although it may have been the shop front that Morison admired and which prompted him to commission Gill Sans, Gill had already been experimenting with a bold, block-letter type. Gill had used 'free sans-serif lettering more or less derived from the type designed for the London Underground Railways by Edward Johnston'⁴ for painting directional signs – 'This way to the Church' etc – in and



¹ Perpetua, with its original punches hand-cut by the great French punch-cutter, Charles Malin, became one of Monotype's most successful typefaces and after Times New Roman and Gill Sans, its third most widely sold font. Monotype Recorder, 1958, p.10.

² Monotype Recorder, 1958, p.15.

³ Personal communication James Mosley 12 March 2012.

⁴ Gill, *Autobiography* 1941, p.229.

around Capel-y-ffin (and it was probably these that Cleverdon saw and liked and wanted for his shop fascia)⁵. Johnston, whose classes in ‘calligraphy and illumination’ Gill had attended in 1899-1902, was a close personal friend of Gill’s, had lived in the same Sussex village of Ditchling as Gill and had employed him in the early stages of the development of his Underground typeface. Exactly how much Gill Sans owes to Johnston Underground is still a much-debated topic in the world of typography.

Gill was taken on by Monotype on a salary and the first part of the commission was to produce a set of ‘titling capitals’ which were first shown at the Annual Meeting of the Federation of Master Printers held in Blackpool in May 1928. Morison gave a talk entitled ‘Robbing the Printer’ in which he warned printers that if they didn’t watch out, some of their work would be taken by advertising and publicity agents who were very much more in tune with modern trends in design and display. Gill’s lettering had been used by Morison to title a programme cover for part of the annual meeting. The cover stated:

PUBLICITY AND SELLING CONGRESS

in a somewhat bold, startling way, guaranteed to get the printers off their seats. On being asked whether the programme was ‘beautiful’ Morison said he couldn’t say what was beautiful, but said ‘I think my programme had its uses. I saw Mr Hazell kill a fly with his copy’⁶ (Hazell was a leading printer of the day). Gill’s designs did not meet with universal approval and Morison said that ‘an insolent and truculent section’ of the Master Printers had described them as ‘typographical bolshevism’⁷.

Many printers thought that fashion should play no part in typefaces and that there were already plenty available. Manufacturers of typesetting machines however, thought otherwise and knew that if they could create a demand from book designers and publishers for ‘modern’ typefaces (especially if they had a hand in producing them and – of course – owned the rights to them) then nothing but good could come of it. Monotype employed its own

⁵ Monotype Recorder 1958, p.14.

⁶ Moran, 1971 p.118.

⁷ Cleverdon 1987 p.10.

type designers and much of the development work of Gill Sans was done to Gill's original drawings or based upon guidelines that he drew up. Gill often visited Monotype's London offices in Fetter Lane, just off Fleet Street in the heart of the newspaper printing area, and the sight of him striding up the street, dressed in his trademark beret, belted smock and knee length thick knitted socks, was much prized.

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London and North Eastern Railway

The first major breakthrough for Gill Sans came in 1929 with the decision by the L.N.E.R. to unify all printed material, advertising, station signage and – much to Gill's pleasure (having been a train enthusiast since he was a young boy) – their locomotives and rolling stock. The L.N.E.R.'s advertising manager was William Teasdale who was much influenced by Frank Pick, London Underground's publicity manager, and followed a similar path with publicity material. Teasdale's assistant, C. C. G. (Cecil) Dandridge, who took over when Teasdale was promoted, decided that Gill Sans would suit their purposes very well. Some ninety printers – who between them printed 40 million handbills, leaflets, timetables and pamphlets a year⁸ – had to install Gill Sans. The adoption by the L.N.E.R. also afforded Gill one of his proudest, if least likely, moments of pleasure. In 1932, with all the lettering changed, Dandridge decided that there had to be what today we would call a 'photo opportunity' and got Gill to pose besides their best-known service, the Flying Scotsman. The sign on the front of the train had actually been hand-painted and affixed by Gill, for which pains he achieved a lifelong ambition – a ride on the footplate. He travelled from Kings Cross to Grantham and wrote an account of it for the London and North Eastern Railway Magazine⁹. By 1935, the typeface was 'the largest related series of types for modern composition and display ever based on a single design'¹⁰. Gill Sans remained the L.N.E.R.'s standard typeface until 1948, when Britain's railways were

⁸ 'L.N.E.R. Standardization', Monotype Recorder No. 32, Winter 1932.

⁹ MacCarthy 1989, p251.

¹⁰ Moran 1971, p 120.

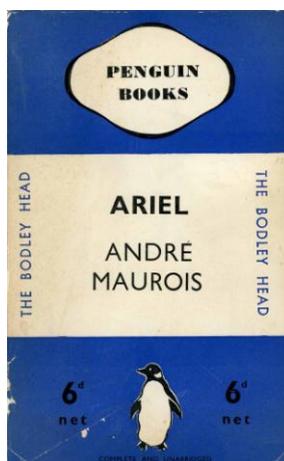
nationalised, and then Gill Sans was used throughout the whole of British Rail's extensive transport system that encompassed not only trains, but hotels, ferries, buses, and freight haulage companies. Only in the 1960s was a new typeface – New Rail Alphabet – introduced. Vestiges of Gill Sans can still be found hidden around the UK's railway system.



Gill, left, wearing his customary beret and smock beneath his overcoat.

adopt Gill Sans was The Bodley new paperback line, Penguin 1935 and modelled unashamedly on imprint Albatross Books which also typeface for their front covers and first book *Ariel* by André Maurois Gill Sans Bold for cover and spine.

Publishing



One of the first publishers to Head with their Books. Founded in the German used a sans serif spine, Penguin's used Gill Sans and The designer was

a 21 year-old office junior, Edward Young, who was also sent out to sketch a penguin! 'My God how those birds stink' he commented when he returned from London Zoo¹¹. Gill Sans survived the period (1947-8) that noted German typographer and book designer Jan Tschichold spent at Penguin. In the 1950s, Penguin's dependence on Gill Sans lessened and although it can still be found on some of today's titles, it is a rarity and Futura is the preferred sans serif typeface.

British Broadcasting Corporation

¹¹ Baines



Despite Eric Gill's association with the BBC – he carved the statue of Prospero and Ariel over the front door to

Broadcasting House in 1932-3, as well as a statue called The Sower in the entrance lobby – the choice of Gill Sans for the corporate typeface, used for almost all its printed output as well as its on-screen graphics, its ident and its websites, stems from 1997. Patrick Cramsie, author of *The Story of Graphic Design* felt that the popularity of Gill Sans was because of: '(i) the typeface's inherent qualities, (ii) its extensive range of weights and styles (very light to very bold, etc., which means it can be used in many situations: posters, railway timetables, etc.) and also, importantly, (iii) its familiarity (to British eyes, at least)'. He also stated that its: 'familiarity has bred strong national preferences for particular fonts. Often it stems from a rank, but entirely logical or appropriate, nationalism. I'm sure the BBC, for example, were persuaded to use Gill Sans partly because 'a British institution should use a British typeface'¹².

The Church of England



When the Church of England updated their *Common Worship Services and Prayers* they selected the designs put forward by Derek Birdsall from his Omnific design studio who wrote: 'It is appropriate to use an English type design and obvious candidates were the types of Eric Gill, namely Joanna, Perpetua and Gill Sans. Trial pages were prepared in these types together with Univers, Bell and

News Gothic. As a clear distinction was required between the words spoken by the priest, the congregation, and from the instructions, the ideal typeface would have equally clear distinction between the Roman, bold and italic.

Early research and trial proofs showed Gill Sans to be by far the clearest: this is partly because it is designed on humanist lines (particularly the rather cursive italic) and because there is the clearest distinction between

¹² Personal communication with Patrick Cramsie 20 March 2012.

roman, italic and bold; indeed they are distinct but obviously related typefaces.’

Gill Sans, designed 85 years ago, remains one of the world’s best known and used typefaces, not only in the printing world, but also on business and home computers. Although based upon a geometric grid, it has a personality and humanity which lift it above other sans serif typefaces.

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