

The Composing Room

Compiled from input provided mainly by Vernon Maldoom, with additional comments from Jack Clarke

Type composition is the first manufacturing stage in the printing process. During most of the twentieth century, the composing of type for books, magazines, newspapers, advertising, and other printed matter involved a labour-intensive and mostly manual series of complex operations, performed by highly skilled workers collectively called ‘compositors’ or ‘comps’.

At Sun Engraving and then Sun Printers, the Composition Department was large and always busy. Each new job started into production in the Composing Room, where the comps worked from sometimes handwritten but mostly typewritten copy couriered to the Sun by the customers’ head-office editors and sub-editors. After mark-up for style, the copy was re-keyed by the comps, using either Monotype or Linotype keyboards to produce metal type for the printing stage.

In the case of Monotype, the keyboard operator’s keystrokes generated a perforated paper tape containing lines of text, each of which ended with justification codes that were determined by the operator, who decided how much word spacing was to be applied to each line (within what was called ‘justification range’) and where the line was to end. This tape, usually restricted to a ‘galley’ of output, was fed into a Monotype caster, starting at the end and working backwards. Thus, the end-of-line codes for justification – entered by the keyboard operator to control whether the type was to be justified or not, and, if justified, the value of the wordspace that was required in each line to justify it – were read first by the caster, before the text. All the lines of type could thus be justified by the machine before the line was deposited onto a galley, a long metal tray designed to hold type in columns. The Linotype, on the other hand, was usually an all-in-one machine¹ on which each keyed line of text was directly converted into a line of solid metal type (a ‘slug’), as opposed to the Monotype’s setting of individual loose characters. Large headings or display type had to be set manually. The loose metal (or sometimes wooden) letters, having been sorted into special type cases beforehand, were selected and positioned, letter by letter, in a hand-held composing stick.

Once all the type matter had been composed, it was made up into pages, with the columns and chunks of text type, hand-set headings, and engraved blocks (for illustrations, photographs, and other graphics) all incorporated. Readers carefully checked page proofs against the customer’s copy, errors were corrected by the comps, new proofs were pulled, and the readers checked these revised proofs against the first set of proofs. Once signed off as error-free, the composed material was locked up in chases and routed to letterpress printing, or processed photographically in preparation for the engraving of photogravure cylinders.

Efficiency was paramount, needless to say. Especially in a composing room as busy as the Sun’s, where high volume and rapid turn-around were the daily reality of a firm serving the demanding weekly magazine industry.² To maximize efficiency, the Sun’s comps were divided into groups called

¹ A teletype-tape-driven version of the Linotype was commonly used in the industry, mainly in newspaper offices. We do not know whether the Sun’s Linotypes were tape-driven.

² *Farmers Weekly*, which contained market prices, and so on, that had to be published on a very timely basis indeed, the publication was, in effect, a weekly newspaper in magazine format, .

‘boats’, the name very possibly deriving from the ‘ship’ part of an old collective term used in the trade – a ‘companionship of compositors’. We don’t know whether ‘boats’ were so called in other firms, but they were a longstanding feature in the Sun’s Composing Room.

Each ‘boat’ received its work from a ‘clicker’ – the equivalent of the chargehand on a printing press – or from a ‘deputy clicker’, who normally did the same work as the other comps but took the reins whenever the clicker was dealing with a problem or with customers’ queries. (Sometimes, layouts, usually provided by the customer, had to be modified to avoid technical headaches later in the process.)

Big and regular jobs, such as *TVTimes*, *Woman’s Own*, and *Farmers Weekly*, would have their own boat. Other boats, responsible for smaller projects, would handle more than one title.

Disassembly of formes was called ‘dissing’. The inked surfaces of used formes had to be carefully cleaned with solvent before they could be ‘dissed’, as some of the type would be reused by the hand comps for subsequent issues of the same magazine. Bill Jeal became known as the Grand Old Man of the Sun compositors’ ‘Diss ship’, having, for some 20 of his 30 years at the Sun kept the boat of the very demanding *Farmers Weekly* ‘supplied without a hitch.’

All compositors were journeymen, having completed a rigorous 5- or 7-year apprenticeship. Vernon Maldoom was apprenticed at the Sun in 1965 as a hand comp, and worked with various boats as he learned the trade. As part of his apprenticeship he also spent time in the Rinco, Foundry, and Monotype Casting rooms. After he qualified, he found himself assigned to one or another boat when he reported for work each day. Once the clicker of a boat no longer needed him, he would report back to an under-manager for reassignment.

Vernon also trained on a machine called a ‘Typositor’ (housed in a little darkroom in the Composing Room), which produced photographic lettering for headlines. He recalled that his training “caused a bit of friction between us NGA workers and the Retouchers, who claimed that, being a photographic process, this was their preserve!”

Jack Clarke’s father Ron had, for many years, been a night clicker on *Woman’s Own* magazine as well as Night Composing Room manager on the Friday night shift. As Jack recalls it, the compositors always seemed to look down on the machine minders, so Ron Clarke hadn’t been pleased about Jack’s doing an apprenticeship in the Machine Room. Whenever Jack was obliged to go to the Comp Room with a question, he sensed that his father felt ashamed of him and his greasy overalls. He recalls how the comps were always known as the kings of the press. But perhaps it’s not surprising. In their line of work they weren’t required to wear boiler suits; indeed, they generally wore suits and ties, which alone must have made a difference to their sense of self and to their perceived position in the company hierarchy. They were also working with ideas and words, not with solvents and ink. The comps saw themselves as the intellectuals of the industry.

At its peak, the Sun’s Composing Room was the third largest department in the firm and a force to be reckoned with. The Comps consisted of administrators, readers, Linotype keyboard operators, Monotype keyboard operators, Monotype caster operators, foundry workers, hand compositors (who also did page assembly and page imposition), diss-hands, apprentices, and boys. The workers were split into two shifts, the day shift running from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., the night shift from 6 p.m. to 5:30 a.m. The night shift was itself split into two shifts, the first working from Monday to Thursday

night and finishing Friday morning, the other running from Tuesday night until Saturday morning. This rather odd arrangement was maintained until 1984, when a new, continuous pattern was introduced to align shifts in the Comps more closely with those in the Machine Room.

In the first five or six decades of the twentieth century, the main stages of type composition, from setting and proofing to reading, correcting, and page assembly, remained much as they'd always been. As late as 1964, the Sun employed 396 people in the department. But with the arrival of computers, the equipment and mechanics of the process would begin to change ... eventually out of all recognition. The Composition Department, which in its heyday had numbered many hundreds of highly skilled compositors, began to shrink in 1970 with the slow but inevitable death of letterpress. By 1980, when the Sun, rather late in the game, made the move to photocomposition, the staff doing that work numbered fewer than twenty. A short time later, because of technical trends in the industry, such as customer-supplied input material in machine-readable form, all typesetting ceased at the works.