

REPORTS OF SOCIETY MEETINGS

THE USE OF JOHNSTON AND GILL SANS TYPEFACES IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

by Mark Ovenden

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Clubhouse
on Tuesday 13 December 2016

According to Wikipedia: a sans letterform is one that does not have extending features called 'serifs' at the end of strokes. For example, this A is a sans-serif, whereas this A is serif.

The Industrial Revolution drove changes in lettering. Before then, the only typefaces in use for printing were all serif. William Caslon IV created the first sans typeface in 1816 with his "Two Lines English Egyptian". This was only available in a very small size type so was not widely used. Vincent Figgins in 1832 produced a version in a variety of sizes which was more popular.

Many examples of sans lettering can be found at preserved railways. These signs were built from wooden blocks and thus were much easier to cut in sans-serif than serif.

The expansion of the Underground and Frank Pick's desire to give it a cohesive and memorable image led to him looking for a specific graphic design. He knew of Eric Gill's work for W.H. Smith Newsagents and Pick liked the clarity of this typeface and wanted a similar authoritative look for the Underground. Edward Johnston was friends with Gill and they had worked together on their "Writing & Illuminating & Lettering" block letters of 1906. Gill was not available in 1913 so Pick contacted Johnston (who was at that time better known for his calligraphy) and asked to meet him. Johnston's first lettering submission was not at all what Pick wanted and he sent him off with "a flea in his ear"! Johnston returned in 1916 with a number of design sheets which showed Pick a variety of sans options. These were experimented on by the Underground's team and by the next year, sheets of the finalised designs and specifications were distributed to all sections of the system.

By 1923, Johnston's typeface was in use for all new signage. One of these remains in place on West Brompton station but it does feature a rather strange version of the typeface (especially the Σ)! This is rather difficult to explain because the Engineers' Department had produced very detailed, almost Technical Drawing standard, descriptions of the specifications to be followed.

Bus signage was particularly unclear and used a lot of abbreviations (some of which were so difficult to read they could have been mistaken for other words). A new version of the typeface in which Johnston lifted the centre points of letters such as P and B meant that letters remained legible, even if in a small point size.

By the mid-1920s/early-1930s the "Look of London" had been defined but was attracting copyists. Therefore, Frank Pick took steps to limit those printers who could use the Johnston typefaces; which led to several imitators such as Granby and Curwen.

Around this time, Gill had moved to Wales and was working with the Monotype Company on their Supercaster machine which could produce long strips of type. Gill's sans serif – which closely resembled Johnston's – was adopted by Monotype but was not popular with printers until it was spotted by Dandridge, graphic designer for the London & North-Eastern Railway [LNER] who used Gill Sans for all their signage and the "winking eye" logo.

During World War 2 Gill and Johnston Sans typefaces were used extensively by the British Government, and especially the Ministry of Information. However, this led to the typefaces becoming associated with authoritarianism such as ration books, notices, British Railways, the BBC and ITA (the forerunner of ITV) who all used Gill Sans; whilst the new National Coal Board and British Road Services used Johnston. The country seemed saturated with Sans type. The adoption of Gill Sans by the newly nationalised British Railways Board in 1948 led to it being seen at thousands of locations and in millions of posters and ephemera to the point where by the 1960s the country seemed saturated and it fell out fashion, apart from on LT printed matter where it was substituted for Johnston so much that it nearly disappeared from use altogether! It was saved in the early 1980s by the Banks & Mills agency and their designer Eiichi Kono who surveyed all the forms of Johnston type and redrew it to form the New

Johnston typeface. Johnston was proving unfit for modern design and print as it was not available in enough sizes. Around this time, the use of Gill Sans also came back into fashion with its use on album covers by Elton John and O.M.D.; City Limits magazine; Channel 4; John Lewis; Cunard Cruises, the Church of England and the BBC.

As the use of computer technology expanded, a problem emerged with existing Johnston type in that it didn't work or look good when digitally produced. This led to the development in early 2000s of "TfL Johnston" which was also used for all Olympic and Paralympic signage, both in and outside of London. A new Design Manual was also published but some Gill Sans still "slips through" such as at Euston and occasionally on some bus stickers and notices.

Johnston typeface celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2016 with the introduction of the new "Johnston 100" typeface which includes a hairline narrow width version and the @ and # characters so prevalent in modern communication technology. Gill Sans will celebrate its 90th anniversary in 2017 so both typefaces are looking good and prepared to continue into the future.

The meeting thanked Mark in the usual manner and then concluded with a Q and A session and the drawing of a raffle for a copy of Mark's latest book "Johnston and Gill: Very British Types".

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