

EDWARD JOHNSTON

by Eric Stuart

Edward Johnston was born on 11 February 1872. His family, who had previously lived in South America, travelled there in 1873, but came back to the UK in late 1874. The family moved about fairly frequently, but his mother died in 1891 and his father subsequently married again.

In his teens, Edward was employed by his uncle, who worked for the Essex County Council. After his father's re-marriage, Edward moved with his sister and an aunt to a house in Woodford, near his uncle's home, where he entered university. He subsequently moved to Edinburgh.



Edward had become interested in illuminations. (In this case, the word does not refer to what one can see at Blackpool (!), but the colourful additions added to letters in manuscripts). He had traced some illuminations when he was in his teens. When he was aged 22 and still living in Edinburgh, he saw an article in *The Artist* magazine, following which he determined to become an artist.

Johnston left university and went to London. He met the author of the article he had read in *The Artist* and was introduced to W.R. Lethaby. Lethaby was the Principal of the Central School of Arts and Crafts.

Lethaby was an English architect and architectural historian, whose ideas were highly influential on the late Arts and Crafts and early Modern movements in architecture. He had been acquainted with William Morris, another leading member of the Arts and Crafts movement, who also hailed from the area east of London, as he was born in Walthamstow.

The aim of the Arts and Crafts movement was, in essence, to make what could be utilitarian items look good.



Johnston, Johnston, everywhere – even in a French supermarket!

Photo: Eric Stuart

Railway', as the LNER was sometimes called. William Lethaby wanted to introduce a class for lettering at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, and recognised Johnston's gift for calligraphy. Johnston taught the class and began to further study the art of lettering. One of the students in the class was Eric Gill, whose 1927 design of sans serif type or font was adopted by the LNER for signage and many of the company's posters. Subsequently, the font was used by British Railways, until their new signage was introduced in the mid-1960s. But, whereas British Rail abandoned Gill's type for a (to me) uglier style, Johnston's has survived and even thrived, although it has been revised several times since.

Johnston was awarded the CBE in 1939 and he died at Ditchling in Sussex in 1944, whence he had moved in 1912.

Many people have an epitaph on a lump of stone. But, of Edward Johnston it can be said, as of Christopher Wren: 'LECTOR, SI MONUMENTUM REQUIRIS CIRCUMSPICE', which is translated "if you want a memorial, look around you". That's certainly true in and around London today.

Following the aims of the Arts and Crafts movement, to produce attractive signage, Johnston began to design type fonts. He later worked with Eric Gill, who was involved in the early stages of a typeface for the Underground. However, it was actually Johnston's design that was commissioned by Frank Pick. Johnston's typeface became the standard for use on London Transport and is now, of course, familiar throughout the area.

Johnston also redesigned the solid 'roundel' used on the Underground into the design we know today and which is now familiar throughout the world.

Johnston's typeface became known in London, but the work of his student, Eric Gill was then more widespread – if only because his font was used by the 'London and Nearly Everywhere