

John Alston: Helping the Blind to Read

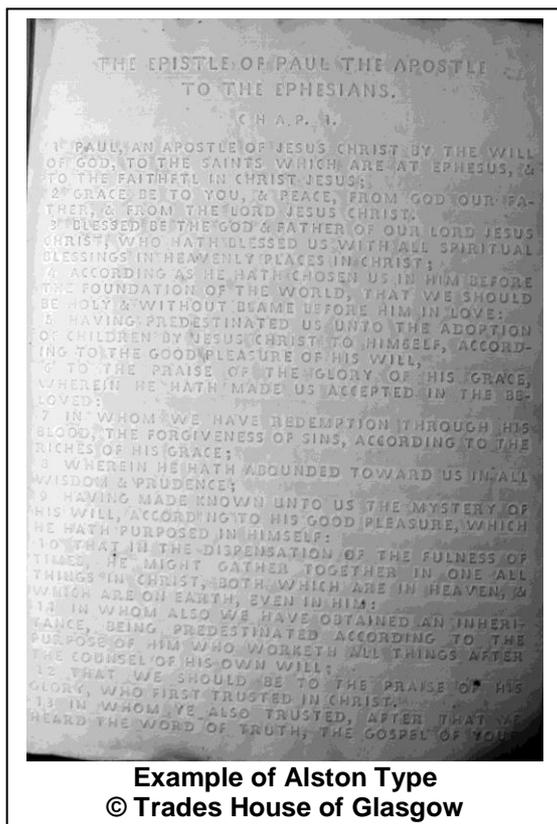


Carol Parry, Trades House Honorary Librarian

In the Trades House Library there are some fascinating volumes of the New Testament printed in raised capital letters for the blind. The type, known as Alston Type was developed by Glasgow muslin manufacturer John Alston (1778-1846). Alston had a close association with the Trades House and was Deacon of the Weavers (1810-11) and Deacon Convener (1829-30). From 1825-1846 he was Honorary Treasurer for the Asylum for the Blind in Glasgow – a place in which he took a deep and abiding interest. The Asylum building, opened in 1828, was in Castle Street, close to the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. The 1834 Report describes Alston as the “Foster-father of the Asylum” who in the evenings “is generally to be seen seated at the Asylum in the midst of his blind family”. A school was held for the children and, once their course of education was complete, they were taught to make baskets, door mats, rugs and sacking for which they earned from 9s to 12s a week. The items produced were sold to help the institution.

The children were initially taught letters by means of a string alphabet. By 1835 they were being taught a system devised by James Gall of Edinburgh formed of raised angular Roman letters. By this date there was a considerable amount of interest in producing an effective reading system for the blind and the Society of Arts for Scotland offered a gold medal as a prize for the best. In 1836 the Society sent several different alphabets to blind institutions for their consideration. It was at this stage that Alston became really interested in the subject, and started experiments of his own using a system devised by a Dr Fry of London based on the Roman alphabet in relief. Fry’s system subsequently won the gold medal but it was Alston’s simplified version of Fry’s lettering that became the most widely used.

Alston demonstrated his improved version of Fry's system at the annual examination of the blind in the Trades Hall in October 1836. As a consequence of the fundraising efforts of the ladies who attended this meeting he was able to establish a press for producing the new type at the Asylum. A special meeting was held in the Asylum in April 1837 to demonstrate the efficacy of the Alston Type to an audience of over one hundred people. The children initially read from the gospels and were then tested on unseen sentences which they read fluently. The Type proved to be very popular and by January 1839 Alston claimed that all the blind institutions in England and Scotland with one exception were teaching their children on this system.



The majority of the works produced by the Asylum press were religious in nature. Alston's great aim was that every blind child in the country should have the opportunity of reading the Word of God and he was able to complete the task of printing the whole Bible in December 1840. By 1844 the press had printed more than 14,000 volumes costing between 6d. and 13s. and Alston was able to state at a meeting of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow in April of that year that there were now "hundreds reading the books both in schools and in private families, and many are in possession of the whole Bible".

Unfortunately Alston's type did not stand the test of time and the system developed by Louis Braille (1809-1852) was universally adopted.

Before braille became widespread, however, Alston Type was a key method in helping the blind to read and, as a consequence of Alston's work, reading was now considered essential in the education of blind people.

Illustrations

1. Glasgow Blind Asylum taken from *Sketch of the History of Glasgow* by James Pagan, 1847
2. New Testament in Alston Type printed in 1838