

February-18



Time Travellers Club

Dear Club Member,

Five hundred and fifty years ago Johannes Gutenberg died in Mainz, Germany. His great invention, the movable-type printing press, had revolutionised book making. The greater availability of books was one of the key driving factors of the Renaissance. Arguably it was one of the first marker points of the modern period of human history.

One of Gutenberg's big step forward was to create a system of movable type. His background as a goldsmith led to him creating small metal blocks cast from lead, tin and antimony. These could be created in bulk using moulds, each letter was designed to fit in to a grid type pattern, which meant that letters could be selected, and slotted together in any order to form the text.

His other great improvement to the existing presses was to change the way the press worked. He put in a movable table under the section providing the pressure. This meant that a team of men could work at speed, with different men carrying out different tasks on the press to speed up production.

Prior to this books were hand copied, usually in monasteries. This meant that books were expensive, and the preserve of the aristocracy. It also meant that they were often of a religious nature. The printing press meant that books could be made more cheaply, and also meant that it controversial ideas could be communicated far more widely.

It was the beginning of the era of mass communication, and led to huge social changes throughout Europe. Without the printing press it's possible that the Protestant Reformation, which began in the early 1500's, wouldn't have occurred. The Protestant writers used printing presses to spread their ideas, the printers themselves were often part of the early Protestant congregations, That link between printing and radicalism continued throughout the centuries, one of the leading Chartists was also a printer.

Cheap books were also made possible by the arrival of paper from China, though Gutenberg did still print on Vellum, the animal skin traditionally used by scribes, as well as paper.

With our European centric view of history it's easy to overlook the technological leaps happening in East Asia. They had been using movable type long before Gutenberg. In the 11th Century Chinese printers were using wooden, and ceramic type, with bronze metal type invented in the 12th century. What makes Gutenberg unique however is the addition of a printing press, to that movable type. Asian printers were still hand embossing the paper to make an impression.

The most famous book that Gutenberg printed was the Bible. This was the first mass produced printed book. Between 158-180 copies were made during this first edition. They were sold for around 30 florins, 3 years wages for a clerk. This however was still vastly cheaper than manuscript Bibles. Around three quarters were printed on paper, and the rest on vellum. In keeping with the traditional style of hand lettered books they were printed with large margins, allowing them to be illuminated (though not all were decorated, the British Library owns a plain copy).

And those decorations provide a hint of our colour inspiration this month. I've chosen to emphasises the almost pink tones of the vellum, the black of the printers ink, and the rich reds and golds from the hand illumination.

Happy Spinning,
Katie

Further Reading-

James Watson, a printer, and Chartist radical

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Watson_\(radical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Watson_(radical))

Video of a working replica of a Gutenberg press-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLctAw4lZXE>

History of printing in East Asia-

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_printing_in_East_Asia

The Gutenberg Bible, and a list of all the surviving copies-

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gutenberg_Bible

More about the Gutenberg bible-

<http://www.history.com/news/7-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-gutenberg-bible>

Casting movable type-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwsraXmNeCY>

Printing using Chinese creamic movable type-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UpwOtb7yh0>

Online copy of the Gutenberg Bible-

<http://www.themorgan.org/collection/Gutenberg-Bible>