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Ruthven Todd

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by Ruthven Todd

The printing of intaglio plates was never a driving impulse with William Blake, despite *The Book of Ahania* and *The Book of Los*. During the years of his apprenticeship to James Basire, 1772-1779, he undoubtedly learned how to pull a proof of any plate upon which he happened to be working, in order to see what further work was needed upon the plate, but such a proof did not have to be more than competent. He was trained as an engraver, not as a printer.

The copperplate-printer served an apprenticeship of at least five years and, like all indentured and trained craftsmen, was naturally most protective of his trade and his skills. It is, perhaps, noteworthy that the only two published works for which William and Catherine Blake actually printed the plates, *Designs to a Series of Ballads*, 1802, by William Hayley and the first two volumes of the same author's *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper*, 1803, were provincial productions.

Although William protested otherwise, in his letter of 30 January 1803 to James Blake, anyone who has had the opportunity of examining several copies of either work alongside one another will at once see that the prints do not exhibit the mechanical, and often deadly, production-line perfection of those pulled by a professional plate-printer.

"The London section of Pendred's *Vade Mecum* of 1785 lists thirteen plate printers, fourteen engraver-printers, and one rolling-press-maker."¹ Such a listing, from a generalized work, can only be taken as a sampling of the actual total. London being a comparatively small city at that date, however, it can be accepted that it shows that there was always a plate-printer near at hand for Blake, except when he lived in Lambeth and at Felpham. The natural thing for him to do would be to take any plate upon which he was working round to the nearest plate-printer and have a proof or two pulled. The cost was little and was far outweighed by the trouble of setting up the press and all the paraphernalia to do such a tiny job at home.

The Longman accounts referring to Flaxman's *Dante*, 1807, and *Hesiod*, 1817, show that the plate-

printers Cox & Barnett received 3d. a pull for proofs and 5s. per hundred prints, in a run, in 1807, and 6d. a proof and 6s. a hundred in 1817.²

Paper for the various classical designs by Flaxman, between April 1805 and 1817, all of it "medium plate," varied from as much as £6.10s. to as little as £4 a ream. As a ream consists of five hundred sheets, this breaks down to as little as about 1½d. to about 2½d. a sheet. Of course, these sheets would be smaller than those required to print "The Canterbury Pilgrims," but an estimate of 1s. a sheet for paper of the requisite size does not seem out of order.

The firm of Dixon & Ross, c.1835, charged 1s. 1d. an impression or £8 per hundred in a run in Double Elephant folio, i.e. 20 x 27 in.³ The smallest paper upon which "The Canterbury Pilgrims" could have been printed is about 19 x 42 in. I know that paper was made which was about 40 x 54 in., although I cannot recollect what it was called in the trade. Such a sheet would provide for two prints.

There was no difference for a shorter run than that of a hundred, and, allowing for a general increase in prices between 1810 and 1835, it seems likely that a proportion of £8 per hundred would still apply.

Copper has always fluctuated in value, so it is difficult to decide what the plate would have cost. The plates for the *Hesiod*, bought through Blake, averaged just over 7s. each. But it seems likely that Blake brought down the price by buying secondhand plates of which he would use the back or plane off the previous design with a snake-stone.

The top price for any of the plates for *Illustrations of the Book of Job* was 3s.10d. I think that the price of copper, as always during wartime, was high around 1810, and it is likely that the *Job* plates might have cost 4s. at that time.

As the plate of "The Canterbury Pilgrims" measures 35.5 x 97.5 cm., which is roughly seven

times that of the *Job* plates, 22 x 17 cm., it may be assumed that the large plate would have cost about £1.8s., or, even if Blake had used a thicker gauge of copper in view of the size of the plate (I am trying to find out the gauges of the *Job* and "The Canterbury Pilgrims"), as much as £1.10s.

Although I doubt whether Blake produced a printing of the first state of "The Canterbury Pilgrims" of as many copies as 25, I have made an estimate based upon that number:

Cost of copperplate	£1.10s.
Cost of paper(1 sheet, 2 prints)	£0.12s.6d.
Cost of printing 25 copies	£2.00s.

total £4.02s.6d.

Allowing for extras, including perhaps a pint of porter for the pressman, the price might well be leveled off at £4.4s., which was the price of one subscription, paid in advance, and it seems more than likely that Thomas Butts, who bought the tempera painting of "The Canterbury Pilgrims," would have provided this.

(I have never seen a copy, and no such copy is mentioned in Sir Geoffrey Keynes's *Separate Plates*, but it would seem from the Linnell accounts⁵ that some proofs, presumably of the fourth state, were printed on India paper, since John Linnell, on behalf of Catherine Blake, sold one, so described, to a Mr. Flowers of Islington for £2.12s.6d. on 29 September 1827.)

The above *jeu d'esprit*, of course, takes no account of the immense amount of work which went

into turning 30s. worth of copper into a most impressive work of art. An impression of the final state, given to me by Charles Sessler in Philadelphia in 1947, faces me across my room as I write and makes me feel rather ashamed at having pointed out that the material base of the work cost so little. But the same can be said of the materials with which any artist works, and the costs are the same for the bad artist as for the great one. The limbo of forgotten engravings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contains many larger and more pretentious plates which cost about the same to fabricate. It is the work of art upon the plate which makes it memorable.

I hope that these notes will be of some interest in giving a part of the economic background of a poor artist during a difficult time, and also hope that anyone who has any information about the costs of commercial plate-printers during Blake's lifetime will pass it on to me.

¹ Iain Bain, "Thomas Ross & Son: Copper- and Steel-plate Printers since 1833," *Journal of the Printing Historical Society*, 2(1966), p. 4.

² G. E. Bentley, Jr., *The Early Engravings of Flaxman's Classical Designs* (New York Public Library), 1964.

³ Iain Bain, p. 9.

⁴ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press), 1969, *passim*.

⁵ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, p. 594.

Blake, "The Canterbury Pilgrims"



CHAUCCER'S CANTERBURY PILGRIMS