

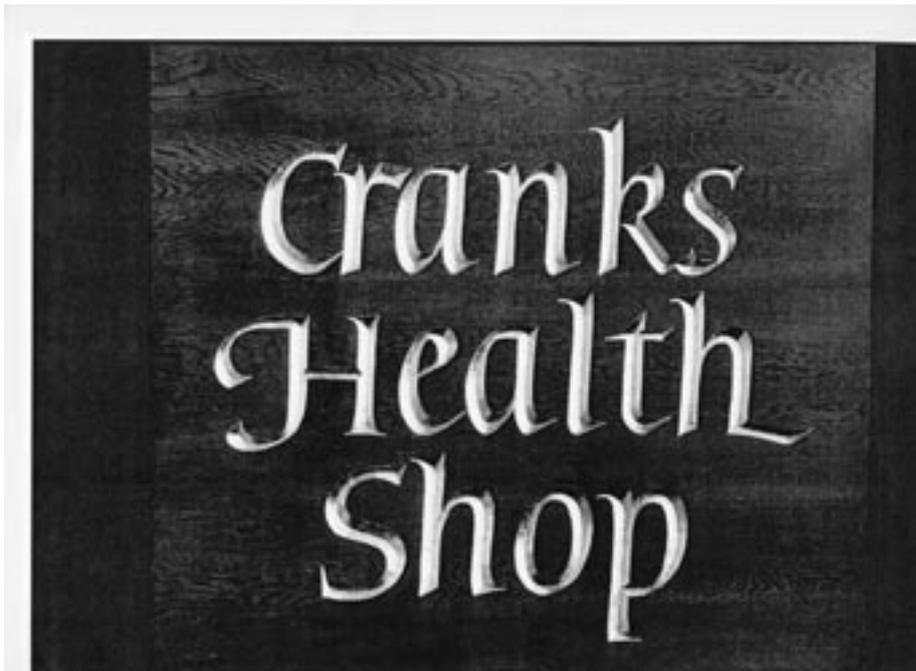
SIDNEY BENDALL: LETTERING CRAFTSMAN

BY DR JOHN R NASH

One of the many happy results of the work of the pioneers of the crafts revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century was the establishing, in the field of lettering and typography, of a solid pedagogical tradition based on practical training which resulted in a generation of lettering craftsmen skilled in various disciplines, and prepared to turn their hands to whatever job might come their way, whether it involved signwriting, brush lettering, pen lettering, one-off calligraphy, type design, engraving in metal or carving in stone and wood. The principles laid down by Edward Johnston in his writing and teaching were carried on by his pupils Eric Gill in the field of letter-carving and Percy Smith in the field of brush lettering; and other pupils such as Graily Hewitt, Irene Wellington and Mervyn Oliver saw to it that few art and architecture schools in the land were without some sort of sound training in lettering and writing. Throughout the kingdom there was a conviction (difficult to conceive of nowadays) that good lettering was really important, and that it was better to read it than feel it.

One of the most able, and among the most self-effacing, of this generation has been Sidney Bendall, as expert with brush, pen and graver as with a chisel. He was born on 6th October 1925, in East Ham, London, where his father worked for the Gas Light and Coke Company; he went to primary school there, then to Ravenhill Elementary Junior School in West Ham. His interest in lettering began very early. 'We had a teacher who was very interested in mental arithmetic and writing, and he had the habit of entering the whole class in competitions for good handwriting sponsored by the newspaper. So it began there; and when I went to Plaistow Secondary School after getting my eleven-plus (which was called a "scholarship" in those days) we had a teacher who was appointed to take us for one free lesson per week; and his particular hobby

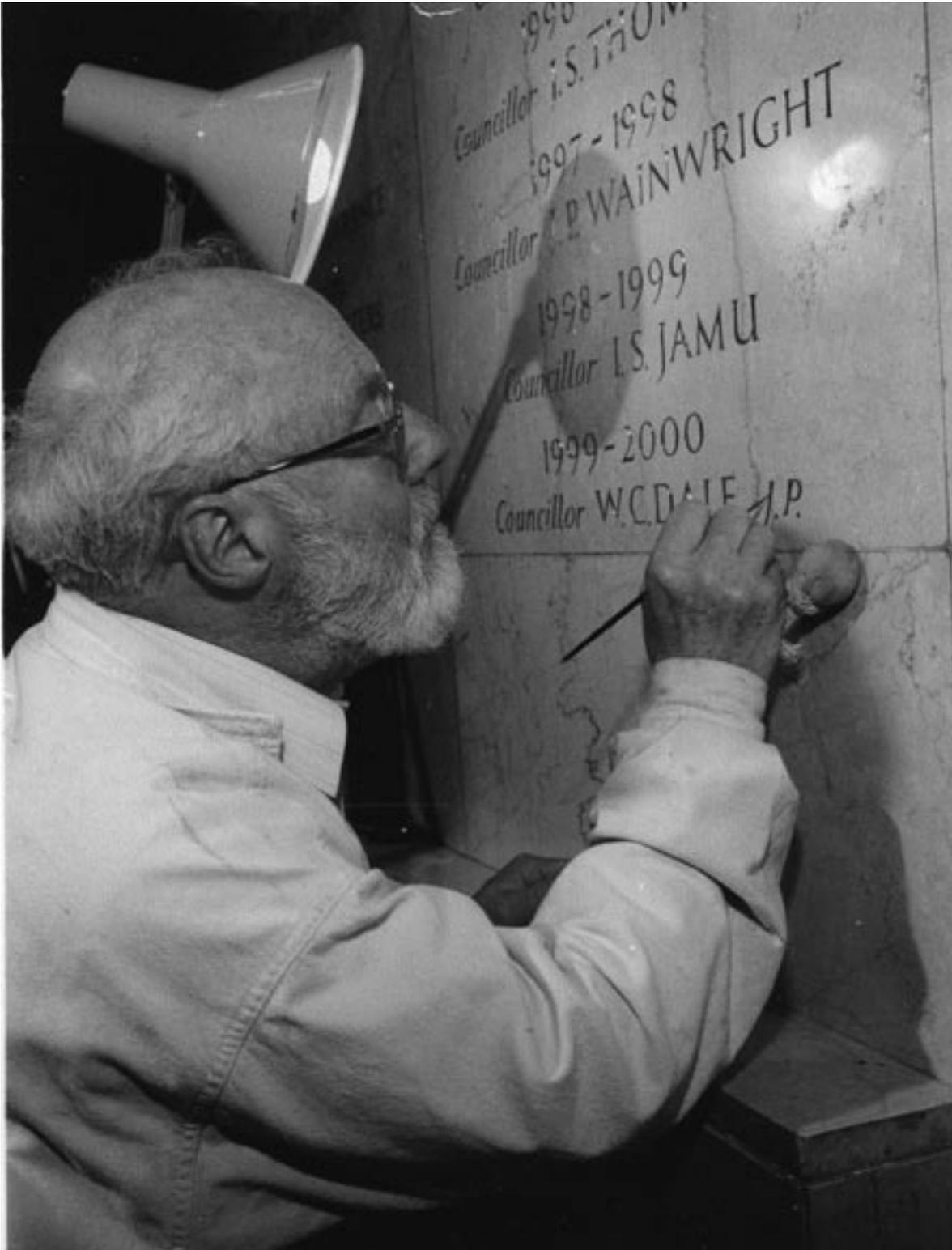




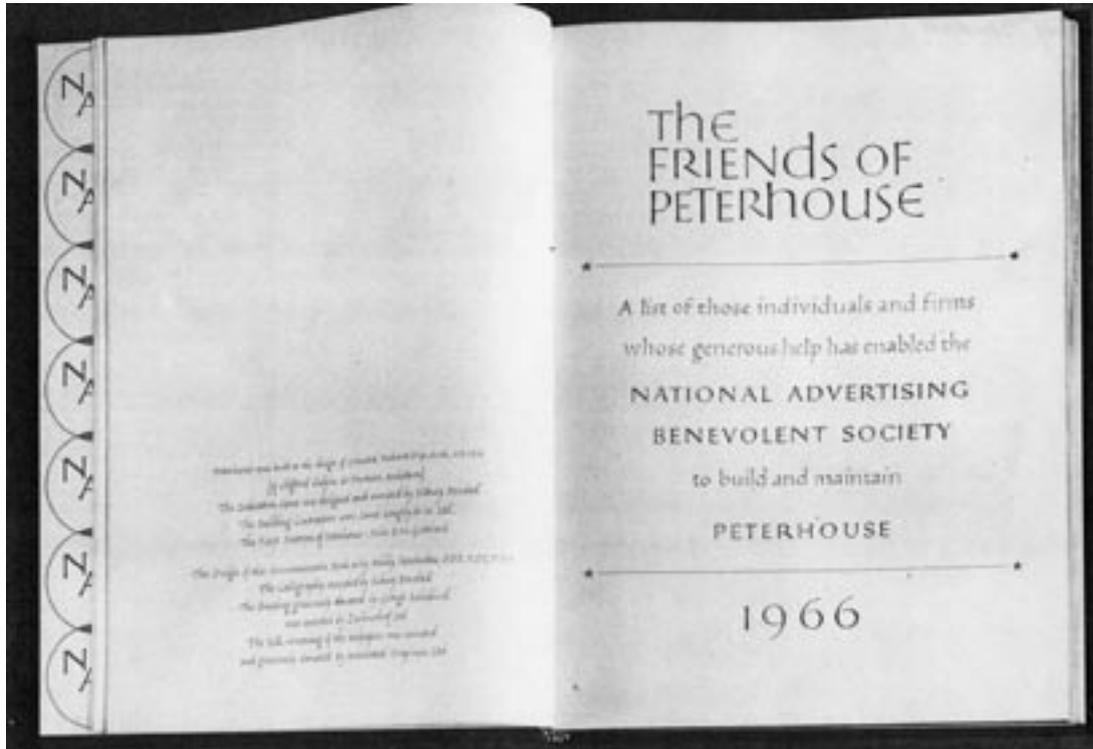
Crank's Health Shop sign, carved and gilded in wood (1982)

BELOW Inscription in Central Library, Kensington ('Wisdom is the principal thing...')





Sidney Bendall at work painting in incised lettering 2001



was italic handwriting... I naturally gravitated to the art department and used to get extremely good marks in drawing and composition. And (not least) I did a lot of working with tools in the handicraft department.'

At the outbreak of war, in September 1939, his formal education was (as he puts it) 'much interrupted'—not least because, when he reached the age of fifteen, his mother insisted that he should get a job. He found employment in the office of the Brooke Bond Tea Company until 1943, when he joined the RAF as an air crew trainee. Thanks to an injury during training he left the RAF in 1945 with a disability pension and went back to work in the Brooke Bond office.

There, if he had been born thirty years later, he might have had to remain. However, in 1945 the Sir John Cass School of Art, in nearby Jewry Street, near Aldgate, offered high-quality evening classes, and young Sidney began going there five evenings a week after work, studying painting, wood engraving, anatomy, architecture, life drawing, modelling, casting—and calligraphy, taught by Elizabeth Foulds, a former pupil of Edward Johnston. In 1947, thanks to a grant from the Ministry of Education, he was able to begin study at the Cass School full time, with a flat in Notting Hill thrown in. After passing the Intermediate examination he prepared for the National Design Diploma (concentrating on lettering) at Camberwell School of Art, where the course was directed by Vernon Shearer:

'We got on very well, and under him I had a yearly engagement at Camberwell for thirty years. He was a Scotsman, extremely erudite, very, very versatile; he had studied under Edward Johnston at the Royal College of Art. He was left handed, and he took great pride in proving to the people at the College that you didn't have to be right handed to produce good lettering. He'd had a lot of experience in commerce, because he had worked for very large exhibition and design concerns as a freelance designer and maker of all kinds of additional things for stands and focal points, and lots of these things were fairly 'way out'. For example, I remember him making a whole display out of pieces of discarded iron and tin cans. What

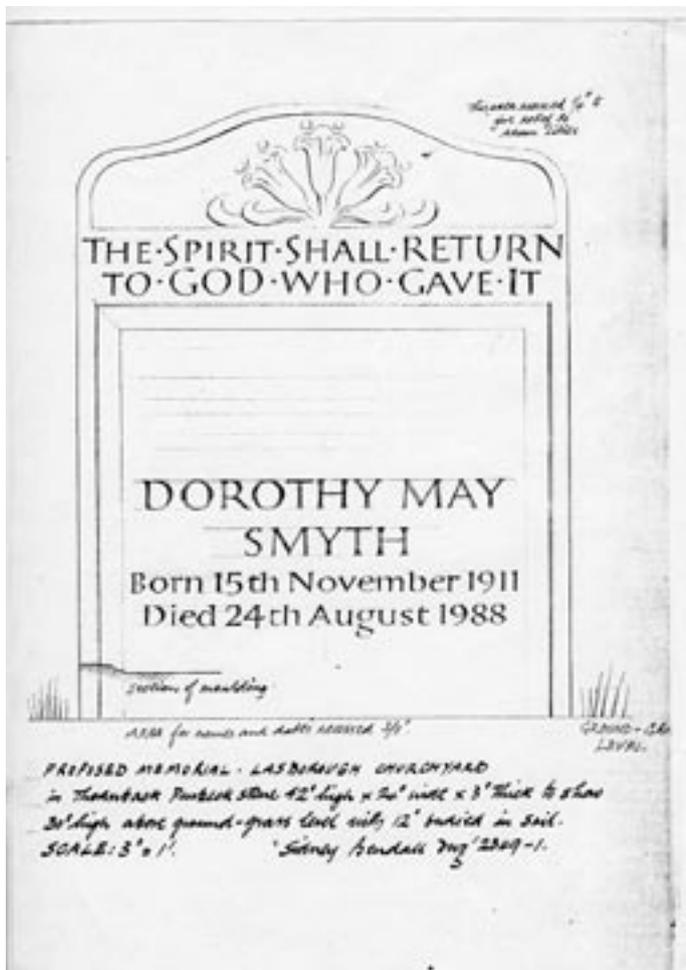
OPPOSITE: Calligraphy: bound volume of list of names of The Friends of Peterhouse, a home for retired people attached to St. Peter's Church at Bexhill-on-Sea (1966)
'Golden Boy of Pye Corner' inscription, Giltspur St., London (1996)

THIS PAGE: Brush lettering on outside pillar of Royal Society of Arts, John Adam Street, Adelphi, London (mid-1960s)

he did was rather like Picasso, you know?—one thinks of the bull's head made out of the bicycle seat and handlebars... He did a lot of work for the Festival of Britain, and I worked with him for the Coronation as well, in 1952... We did a number of displays for the interior of a fish restaurant in London, Madame Prunier—lettering on various backgrounds having to do with the glamour and gold of the Coronation... He was an extremely good teacher and a good and efficient head of department; everyone liked him.'

Study of a second craft was required, and Bendall chose sculpture. Since his interest lay in carving, and the new head of sculpture at Camberwell taught only modelling and casting, he was allowed to study with H. Wilson-Parker at Goldsmith's College two days a week. For a blissful period his week consisted of these two days at Goldsmith's, one day's reflective study at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and two days learning lettercarving at Camberwell from Betty Hart, wife of Barry Hart (a sculp-





Photocopied scale drawings for lettercarving jobs: Dorothy May Smyth headstone (d. 1988)—caps; Ninian Johnston headstone (d. 1990)—caps OPPOSITE: Jack Schaffer memorial plaque (d. 1988)—italic, Hebrew

tor who did the lettering on the First World War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner, and whose lettercarving work can be seen in the Studio publication *Lettering of Today*, published in 1937).

Bendall obtained his diploma in lettercarving in 1950, and straightaway was offered a position as tutor at Camberwell one day a week, teaching calligraphy at first, then lettercarving—a job he was to retain for the next thirty-eight years. He also married, and set up as a freelance craftsman, living and working in Essex. His contact with Wilson-Parker (he had been the only lettering specialist in Parker’s class) proved useful. Parker, a sculptor involved in many jobs requiring lettering, gave him steady employment as a ‘journeyman’—an arrangement whereby Bendall would receive through the post specifications for a certain job, travel to it and carry it out in situ. (Bendall

estimates that between 1950 and 1976 he carried out some fifty-two commissions in this way.) He was also employed on the same basis between 1950 and 1966 by Percy Smith’s former partner George Mansell, completing 380 commissions: ‘I met him because I’d read his contribution to *Lettering of Today* and I very much liked the display of different kinds of work by different people. I simply wrote to him and told him I’d just finished at Camberwell. I sent some photographs to him and asked him: Do you think I could be any use to you? And he wrote back very politely and said: Well, you know the work is likely to be sporadic, but if you’d like to meet me perhaps you could come to my club (the AA, in Bedford Square). So we met, and he looked at my photos again, and commented on them. He had taught at a number of London art schools as a part-timer, so he knew the art school scene... And he finished the interview by saying: Well, yes, I think you could be useful, but I’ve taken on young men like you before, and frankly I’ve found they haven’t played the game—they’ve ended up stealing some of my clients. How do I know I can trust you? I said to him: Well, I’m afraid you don’t know; you just have to find out from experience. So that’s what he did, and we got on very well, and I worked for him for a number of years... We didn’t actually need all that much



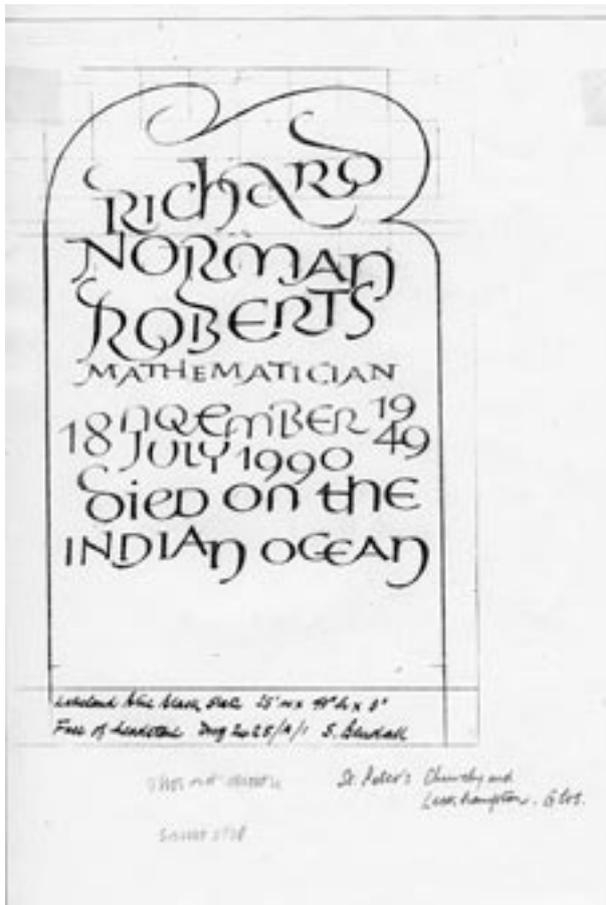


Original pencil layout on detail paper: Charlotte and Mark Levene memorial panel (d. 1986)—caps and Hebrew



contact, because as long as I had the design to work to and knew where the work was—on a building, or in a stonemason's yard—I used to just turn up with the drawing, transfer it to the stone, and get on with it. There was a good variety of work—heraldry and inscriptional work on stone, slate, marble, wood, metal; calligraphy sometimes. A nice spread... He left in his will that I should take over all his contacts, his office and administration work, his pricing system; and he also left me a sum of money, which was very nice!

A two-year spell (1951-1953) in a commercial art studio working with the designer Geoffrey Mathews proved useful when, in 1963, educational 'reforms' abolished practical calligraphy and lettering in art schools; Bendall was able to continue teaching as a 'graphic design' tutor. Among those he taught during this period was the calligrapher and lettercarver Ieuan Rees, who remembers him as teaching entirely by example—always patient, calm, cheerful and encouraging, an excellent demonstrator, and a perfectionist. 'If he set out to sharpen a pencil he'd spend five minutes at it until it was just right.' Bendall taught on Tuesdays, and



**Design (not carried out) for Richard Norman Roberts headstone (d. 1990)—round cap and design for Dylan Thomas quote on reverse
OPPOSITE: Original pencil layout on detail paper: Marion and Ronald Brown headstone (d 1987,1990)—carefully shaded caps and italic**

another excellent craftsman, David Dewey, on Thursdays; their slightly different approaches to lettercarving caused in Rees a 'delightful confusion,' but he received equal and lasting benefit from both.

In 1975 the Bendalls moved to Colesborne, Gloucestershire, and he set up his workshop there. He continued teaching at Camberwell until 1988, and from 1975 worked, again on a 'journeyman' basis, for Emms, a monumental masonry firm in Cheltenham, for whom he completed some 150 lettercarving jobs. In 1990 he and his wife made their final move, to Bourton-on-the-Water, where he set up a workshop again, on the edge of town, and continued to work as though retirement had never been invented.

He is in no doubt as to the importance of the kind of training he had. 'Vernon Shearer used to emphasise that if you're going to make a living you've got to be as versatile as possible... You were absolutely expected to take anything which came your way, and you were prepared for it. If an architect spread out a plan and said: Look, we want to put some lettering on this part of the building, or a plaque there, you had the competence to feel your way into the building just by looking at the drawing. No problem! I really think this was somehow a result of the confidence which came out of the Industrial Revolution. We could forge things; we could build the railways, and the engines, and the carriages. We could build ships and furnish them. We could go everywhere and do everything. That was the air you breathed.'

