

One in the Eye

RoSPA's industrial safety posters of WW2

26th March 2004

During the Second World War the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) produced a series of accident prevention posters aimed at neophyte workers in the industrial factories and workshops supplying the British war effort. These safety posters are remarkable on several counts and deserve to be a more widely known part of British graphic design history.

The posters disabuse several orthodoxies concerning propaganda and modernism in Britain. The first is that propaganda images necessarily conform to a rhetoric of aggression, masculinity and nationalism and that the content of propaganda is always duplicitous. The posters also reveal an embrace of modernist design practice that is at odds with the prevailing conservatism and banal realism of much war propaganda. The posters are proof of a willingness, not always acknowledged in Britain, to engage with modernism to promote progressive social policies and worker welfare. In fact, the RoSPA posters are the first of their type anywhere in the world and offer a marked contrast to other types of industrial propaganda produced elsewhere that address issues of productivity only by reference to effort and output. The RoSPA posters are therefore evidence of a more sophisticated form of reckoning within the industrial workspace.

The RoSPA posters give visual expression to the hopes expressed by Walter Benjamin for a socially progressive, politically engaged, mass produced and widely distributed form of graphic communication as a significant evolution of the modernist project. Furthermore, the posters recognise the radical potential of ordinary people to effect social change predicted

by Antonio Gramsci during the 1920s and 30s and espoused by George Orwell in 1941 as a necessary, but insufficient, condition of victory. More recently, Stuart Hall has identified the visual style of "Picture Post" (1938-1957) with the emerging discourses of social-democracy in Britain. The RoSPA posters are part of the visual taxonomy of this discourse.

The origins of RoSPA are to be found at the end of WW1 when metropolitan areas came under air attack and a blackout was enforced. The changed environment immediately caused an increase in accidents between motor vehicles and pedestrians and the London Safety First Association (LSFA) was formed to address this issue through education. Other metropolitan areas formed their own safety associations and these were merged to form the National Safety First Association (NSFA).

The efforts of the NSFA were directed, during the 1930s, into three areas of accident prevention. The first was road safety, the second home safety and the third was industrial safety. The models for the effective propagandising of these activities were based around a week of safety awareness events. These comprised flag days, exhibitions and safety stories fed to the local press. The co-ordination of these public relations exercises allowed for the NSFA to communicate effectively with its metropolitan and provincial audiences. An early recognition of the effectiveness of design in promoting the safety message is evident from the use of Hans "Zero" Schleger and Edward McKnight Kauffer to design graphic material for the Association. Within the context of pre-war industrial safety the NSFA made little use of visual propaganda on account of there being no structured environment for its display within the existing members' facilities.

The outbreak of WW2 altered the context of communications irrevocably so that safety issues became part of a discourse of national survival. This was especially true in relation to industrial safety where issues of war production, efficiency and victory converged. The

leadership of the NSFA were conscious of these altered priorities and Lord McGowan, President of the NSFA, expressed the importance of safety work by observing that, “an accident in the works is as much a gain to the enemy as a casualty in the armed forces.”

The leadership of the organisation acknowledged the potential significance of its activities in relation to the war effort and sought a closer association with various war ministries. A link with the Ministry of Information (MOI) was discussed before RoSPA's industrial safety activities were co-opted within the Ministry of Labour and National Service (MoL). The Ministry had been placed, in May 1940, under the leadership of the Trade Unionist Ernest Bevin who recognised the potential of RoSPA's activities in addressing the problem of safety and of advancing issues of worker welfare decisively. The circumstances of war and of industrial expansion (required to meet the requirements of the military) conspired to bring an influx of new workers, including women, into the factories. The urgency of the task, the conditions of war and their inexperience would, Bevin understood, conspire to make safety a primary responsibility of employment.

Ernest Bevin had become aware of the potential impact of graphic propaganda through a friendship with Frank Pick of London Transport. Pick is credited with creating a wholly integrated and coherent environment comprising architecture, engineering, posters and typography to project the corporate values of the new organisation. Pick's achievements at London Transport are recognised as helping to establish new benchmarks for corporate identity. Bevin realised that if he could establish a similar projection through his Welfare Division, this time based on the idea of a safe and civilised working environment, he could effect permanent change in the relations between capital and labour in Britain. The circumstances of war gave Bevin an opportunity to accelerate his project and to cement worker welfare as a primary responsibility of capital. Bevin understood that, politically, any

post-war settlement would be unable to return to the dark days of labour relations during the 1930s.

Both Bevin and Pick were from Nonconformist backgrounds. Both shared a belief in the utopian potential of industry, labour and socialism. Bevin's character was not as austere as Pick's and he understood that, for the sake of the post-war settlement, it was crucial that the war against tyranny and totalitarianism should not turn Britain into a totalitarian state. Accordingly, he was always quick to acknowledge effort with praise. The RoSPA leadership shared this view and Lord McGowan urged his membership to remember that, "a smile will often get more done than a threat or scowl."

RoSPA's accident prevention posters were produced during WW2, under severe financial and time pressures. The posters were part of a package of propaganda material sent out to the member factories and workshops. The "Industrial Service" was delivered, on a subscription basis, and comprised pamphlets and educational notes along with three types of poster. The posters were of the slogan, the comic-strip and the message varieties. It is this last category that provided the most interesting scope for designers.

RoSPA recognised that their propaganda would remain ineffective without a safety structure in place amongst the management and workforce of client firms. Accordingly, they suggested that safety representatives should be chosen to initiate new workers and that, in addition to a tour of the factory, the initiation should include demonstrations and talks. These would obviously be more effective if carried out in a designated "classroom" space and it was suggested that a permanent poster display environment should be maintained within this space. Other designated display sites should also be established in the workspace and in the social areas. RoSPA suggested that their poster material should be displayed so as to alternate slogan posters with visual material. The displays should be maintained, RoSPA

suggested, so as not to become stale and to engage the workforce with a regularly changing series of messages.

Loxley Brothers of Sheffield printed all of RoSPA's industrial propaganda. Loxley Brothers were a Quaker printing firm with close links, from the beginning of the 20th century, to Rowntree's of York. Rowntree's were one of the great Quaker enterprises and were pioneers of worker welfare, stake-holding and communitarianism. Loxley Brothers were a more modestly scaled business but were able, through their skill in mechanical colour work, to produce point-of-sale and other printed matter for Rowntree's. The relationship between the two firms was further strengthened when J B Morrell, of Rowntree's, bought out the Loxley family interests and began to assemble a printing firm with national reach. Morrell's business eventually grew to become a printing conglomerate with newspaper, book and other specialist parts. Morrell was later a guiding figure in the historic preservation of York and in the founding of the University in that city.

Morrell understood that the prosperity of any printing firm was based on the extra capacity made possible by mechanical processes and by making the maximum use of personnel and plant. Loxley Brothers were equipped, after 1925, with rotary litho presses by Crabtree of Leeds. These presses were designed for two-colour work from zinc plates. The make ready of sensitised plates was, along with half-tone processes, at the leading edge of printing developments before WW2. In 1940, when RoSPA suddenly required posters to be printed quickly and in great number Loxley were able to meet the challenge.

This achievement needs to be placed in context. In Britain, before WW2, the poster industry was very carefully controlled. Outdoor poster display sites were limited and therefore expensive. The indoor display of notices and posters was not a significant requirement before the advent of the welfare state. The printing of large-scale colour poster images had

evolved as a specialised branch of the colour lithographic printing industry. This was, after, about 1860 the main process for industrial jobs such as packaging, point-of-sale and advertising work. The craft traditions and specialist plant associated with this kind of litho work made access to poster printing beyond all but the largest regional printers. A quick look at, say, railway advertising from the 1930s will confirm this as all the posters are printed by a very small number of firms. In consequence, the absence in Britain of typo-photo and other process work associated with modernist graphic design is as much due to conservative industrialists and craftsmen as with any aesthetic or political hostility to design. Indeed, when the opportunity arose, the forces of modernism were rapidly and decisively mobilised to serve the war effort.

The RoSPA posters are all double crown size (20 by 30 inches portrait). In 1951 Sidney Grummitt, production manager for RoSPA, described the constraints within which the RoSPA posters were printed. Chief amongst them was a requirement for economy that limited the printing of posters to a single run through a two-colour machine. In order for this not to limit the designer too much the split-duct process was used at Loxley Brothers to affect a four-colour printing from a single pass through the machine.

The process of split-duct printing requires careful machine minding. The inking trough along the front of the machine is divided so that two coloured inks may be fed into the press. This is typically used so as to print a two-colour background. The second plate repeats the process and prints a black key so that a four-colour design is achieved using a single pass through a two-colour machine! At high speeds the mechanical vibration of the machine will tend to spread the two coloured inks together. The use of split-duct printing is a characteristic of RoSPA posters from the post-war period of austerity.

Grummitt noted that, after 1941, the designer Leonard Cusden was retained as creative advisor to guide designers through the difficulties of the process. In addition to the technical expertise of Grummitt and Cusden the campaign was strengthened, within the RoSPA administration by the presence of Ashley Havinden and Tom Eckersley on the Publicity committee. Havinden was a pioneer advertising executive in Britain who had worked in Berlin during the 1920s where he had helped to establish an international office for the Crawford agency. Havinden became, in consequence, one of a relatively small number of English business people with any knowledge of German, Russian and Dutch experimentation in the graphic arts. Accordingly, when the political climate in Germany became hostile to this form of modernism Havinden was able to help Gropius, Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer as they passed through Britain during the 1930s.

The mythology of modernism suggests a narrative that connects Moscow, Berlin, Paris and New York whilst ignoring Britain. The movement of the stellar Bauhaus names to America might be taken to confirm this narrative. In fact, many other designers arrived in Britain and stayed. Havinden was well placed through his role of creative director at Crawford's and as a member of the RoSPA publicity committee to help these designers by providing a steady flow of jobs.

Tom Eckersley had begun to design posters with his colleague Eric Lombers in 1934. By the advent of WW2 Eckersley and Lombers were acknowledged as amongst the foremost poster designers in Britain. By 1939 Eckersley had already produced work for London Transport under the patronage of Frank Pick and for Jack Beddington at Shell-Mex and BP Ltd. The advent of war split Eckersley's partnership with Lombers as both entered the Services. Eckersley joined the RAF where he was employed in the cartographic section. Remarkably, Tom Eckersley became RoSPA's most prolific designer for the duration. He was able, through a process of visualising, to imagine a solution to a particular RoSPA brief

whilst working on his RAF maps. Immediately he was home he would rush to the studio and complete the artwork for submission.

RoSPA's resources were much less than those available to the Ministry of Information who were able to recruit the best of London's creative talent. Both Pick and Beddington, for example, found roles at MOI where they were able to direct the production of intelligent propaganda. Accordingly, Havinden's experience as creative director was put to use in the creation of a roster of designers and illustrators, ignored by MOI, but available for work. The roll call of names assembled includes Robin Day, Abram Games, Pat Keely, Jan Lewitt and George Him, Arthur Mills, Desmond Moore, G R Morris, Manfred Reiss and Arnold Rothholz amongst others. The list is notable for the inclusion of many young and émigré talents who might reasonably be identified as "outsiders." RoSPA's use of humour to communicate its message also gave an opportunity for illustrators such as Harry Rowntree, Peter Mendoza and F Kenwood Giles to find work.

The difficulties faced by these artists and designers during the war should not be underestimated. Arnold Rothholz, for example, had come to Britain from Germany at the beginning of the 1930s. He had studied art to prepare for a career in commercial art and design. At the outbreak of war he was deported to Canada as an enemy alien before being allowed to return and resume his work. Elsewhere, Hans Schleger was so unsettled by the advent of war that he became seriously depressed and was unable to work. In the circumstances, the lifeline offered by Havinden and RoSPA should be acknowledged as significant.

Within the address of RoSPA's industrial propaganda there are revealed several important groups of images that are evidence of a sophistication not usually associated with propaganda images. Chief amongst these are those posters that use humour to make their

point. Although not always the most interestingly designed, these posters are a significant pointer to the use of wit in design and make a substantial contribution to the development of an intelligent audience for this kind of communication after WW2. Elsewhere there are posters aimed at women workers entering the factory for the first time that urge tidiness and discipline within the workspace.

The administrators of the RoSPA campaign recognised that the use of shocking and disturbing images was unlikely to have the desired effect of changing behavior. Accordingly, they concentrated their efforts in creating a coherent framework for the visual expression of a threat minimised through education, collective and individual responsibility and by the observation of simple, commonsense rules. The visual language used to express these ideas draws effectively on that of Surrealism and of the International Left so as to create a wide ranging and sophisticated visual language that reaches beyond the immediate vicinity of the workplace and that helps to establish a sense of community unencumbered by traditional class distinctions and where capital and labour are held in relation to each other by rights and responsibilities on both sides.

The effectiveness of the RoSPA campaign during WW2 is easily judged by its success in reducing the number of accidents in the workplace. The Industrial Service was RoSPA's largest sector of activity after WW2. Subsequently, much of RoSPA's activities in this area became part of official policy and later, when British manufacturing industry went into decline and relocated abroad, the sector simply seemed to disappear. Today, RoSPA's activities are focussed on home safety, road safety and what is now called occupational health.

The significance of the RoSPA campaign can only really be judged by contrasting it to the prevailing tone of messages concerning industrial production elsewhere during WW2. In the

USA the industrial propaganda produced during WW2 is all about output and productivity. The welfare of the worker is associated with the benefits, expressed as earning power and higher levels of consumption, of working harder and longer. Bird and Rubenstein (1998) have argued that the economic miracle of American war production was expressed as the consequence of American managerial expertise, planning and efficiency. This allowed for the rehabilitation of corporate interests in which confidence had been reduced because of the 1930s slump. After the war, American productive power was recognised as a decisive element in victory and corporate America took the plaudits ahead of organised labour. The propaganda images of WW2 anticipate, suggest Bird and Rubenstein, the alignment of corporate interests and of Madison Avenue so that American graphic design evolves to serve the interests of consumer capitalism.

In Britain after WW2 the creation of the welfare state offered an opportunity for the projection of what Stuart Hall has called "Social Vision." This offered the possibility of a utopian society based around the idea of individuals configured by values as much as consumption. The post-war austerity of Britain allowed for the expression of this project to continue until the 1960s when eventually the pressures of consumer culture began to erode the platform of class solidarity and community that had supported the project. Hall has identified the social realist photographic essays of "Picture Post" as the exemplar of this type of discourse. The visual projection of "Social Vision" also found powerful expression through the industrial safety propaganda of RoSPA.

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March 2004

3000 words.

