

FORMER PRESIDENT ALAN DOMVILLE CONTINUES HIS REMINISCENCES AS A MOTORING WRITER & LIFELONG GROUP FRIEND.....

The finest piece of newspaper journalism ever written would look pretty ordinary without a little display - and with a little effort even the dullest of tomes can be "sold" quite effectively by a page designer.

When I first took responsibility for the motoring pages at the *Guardian* I had completed two years as a sub-editor and had become keenly interested in the art of design even though I couldn't draw for toffee. With the blessing of the then editor I began to revamp both the motoring pages and all of the other features content of the newspaper for which I had responsibility.

There were two problems to surmount: this was the time before computers when pages were created in metal - and when most of the production staff (compositors) were accustomed only to "shovelling" (their word) the lines of type into the page frame, known as the forme, without any fuss.

Using as much guile as I could (free cinema tickets were useful) I was able to obtain the support of two of the comps and we put together pages that were revolutionary. The most memorable was a page featuring a steering wheel and into each segment between the spokes were pictures of cars. Not everyone was impressed, however. The design guru of the day was a chap called Allen Hutt who regularly won the national award for his pages. I decided to copy exactly his winning page for that year and I thought the end result looked terrific.

It attracted only one comment - from a sidelined veteran editor who entered the production department and while gripping his ulcerated stomach he cast his eye over the page. He frowned and said: "b***** h*** Alan. Don't do this anymore - everyone will want to do it."

I hope I offered more encouragement to new recruits later in my career!

When pages were completed they were hammered tightly and then transferred to a trolley and taken away for further processing - but on one occasion the comp pushed his frame a split second before the trolley was in place and most of the type crashed through the gap and down on to the floor. In those days journalists were not allowed by the powerful unions to touch the type but all that went by the board that morning. The overseer gave instructions that everyone around should get on their hands and knees and put everything back together again. We all worked with the stricture that it cost the company £36 for every minute we were late getting the page away and we reckoned the delay cost them more than £2,000.

Only a week later, the same thing happened at the *Scottish Daily Express* and they solved the problem rather more sensibly - they simply re-set all the type again and were up and running in 20 minutes.

Nowadays the production process is carried out on a computer screen and transferred at the click of a button to the printing press. Quick and efficient - but completely soulless. Back then, a comp would start to whistle "Elizabethan Serenade" and within seconds more than 40 of his colleagues had joined in. And when one of their number retired they would be "banged out" by the comps with their hammers. And I would leave the office with my hands and shirt sleeves covered with ink. Happy days!