My Time At Letraset, and Beyond

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Letraset was formed in 1950 originally producing wet ‘water-slide’ transfers. In 1962 they pioneered their dry transfer products and soon become market leaders. They expanded the range outside of type to include coloured films, tones and special order full colour transfers; then later markers and drawing pad etc. Their aim was to be a complete graphics arts materials supplier to professional graphic designers

In the very early days, Letraset was busy establishing its core typeface catalogue, often from old metal type. We used a crazy machine called a 'Chronapress'. This incredibly noisy box would produce a negative of the metal type that had been chased-up and a pressure sensitive film placed over the type. Then hundreds of steel ball bearings would pound the film against the letters. The resultant ‘negative’, when processed, was enlarged to 152.5 mm (or larger) film positives, for cutting over. Some fonts were even cut at 200 or 300 mm cap heights then.

Many designers worked in our type studios over the years. The reason that many of the studio's designers are not well known, is because the company had a policy of only crediting outside designers on the products. We got very little mention, especially as the Type Studio was spilt between Ashford in Kent and London in the UK. The London studio seemed to get more time to be creative whilst we handled the huge amount of cutting, and in later years, the digitising of other designer's creations.

I joined Letraset in 1969, and most of my 25 years there were spent in the Type Studio. I remember my first week when I started in the Waterloo studio. It spent the whole week cutting 152.5 mm heights in Rubylith. These were then checked by a designer with a magnifying glass and ruler! Well....I certainly learned about accuracy. My main role was as a stencil cutter at first, later training to be a type designer. I created my own typefaces and also designed a huge number of weight variations over my years at Letraset. Whilst there I also cut and later digitised a huge number of Arabic, Greek, Farsi, Cyrillic and Hebrew fonts.

Most of my time in the type studio, the senior type designer, later Type Director, was Colin Brignall. Colin was, and is, well known in the industry for his type design skills. So it was a great source of inspiration to work alongside of him over many years as well as Alan Meeks and others.

By the way ‘Rubylith’ was a clear film that had a photo-red layer which could be cut into. It was the trade name from the Ulano company in the USA. The unwanted film would be peeled away to leave the letter. Earlier designers at Letraset had devised a unique cutting tool too! A short lathe of wood like a ruler that had a piece of printer’s lead taped to its top edge. Below the weight a single edged razor blade would be taped in place. The artwork (drawing or photo enlargement) would be taped to the back of the Rubylith. Then the designer would rotate the Rubylith whilst keeping the blade almost stationary. In other words, the blade would cut as the Rubylith was dragged below it. All geometrical circles could be cut with compass cutters and of course straights with a steel rule. However for the vast majority of the curves, they would be cut freehand. This took a steady hand and really helped us to appreciate the subtle curves of the varied letterforms. It was possible to trim tiny amounts off the film to make corrections, and we could also patch-on pieces too, but that was much more difficult. Also trimming and patching could easily result in ‘tram lines’ in the clear substrate, and these were a nightmare for the photo studio to retouch later in the production stage. Someone had the brainwave of using a blue filter that when used to view the Rubylith letters through, turned them black. That was a great help when checking their weights and shapes etc.

(Hand cutting master artwork) (from a publicity brochure)

When all the letters were cut, they were mounted onto large sheets of ICI Melinex film that had registration holes punched in it. We spaced the letters and added the spacing bars. Polaroid shots were taken of the letters on a large light box for proofing prior to the sheets being taken to the photo studio to be reduced down. After a series of stages there, a sheet positive was produced. This then went to the stencil making area to be made into a screen process stencil, and eventually printed by screen process using Letraset's own unique dry transfer inks. For those of you too young to have ever used Letraset sheets, basically you carefully aligned the letters and gently rubbed them through the back of the sheet to transfer them to your artwork or whatever. For most sheets there were spacing marks to help you.

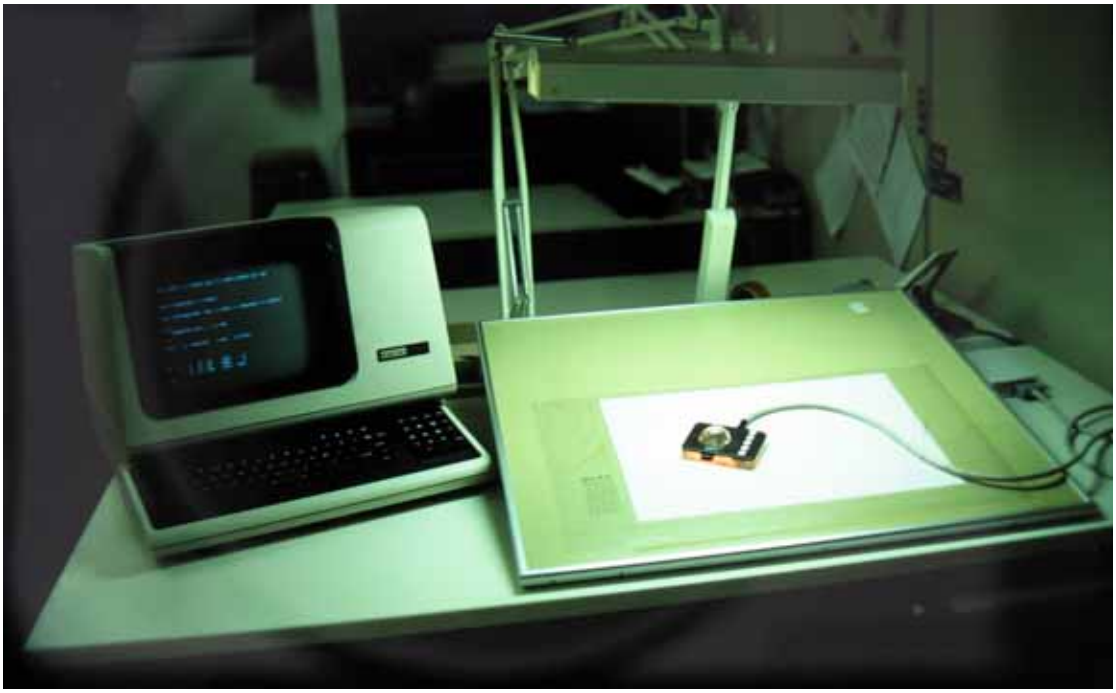
(From a publicity brochure) **(Letraset Instant lettering sheets)**

I was also called upon to work on artwork for customised 'special' instant rub-down transfer sheets. (logos and colour work)

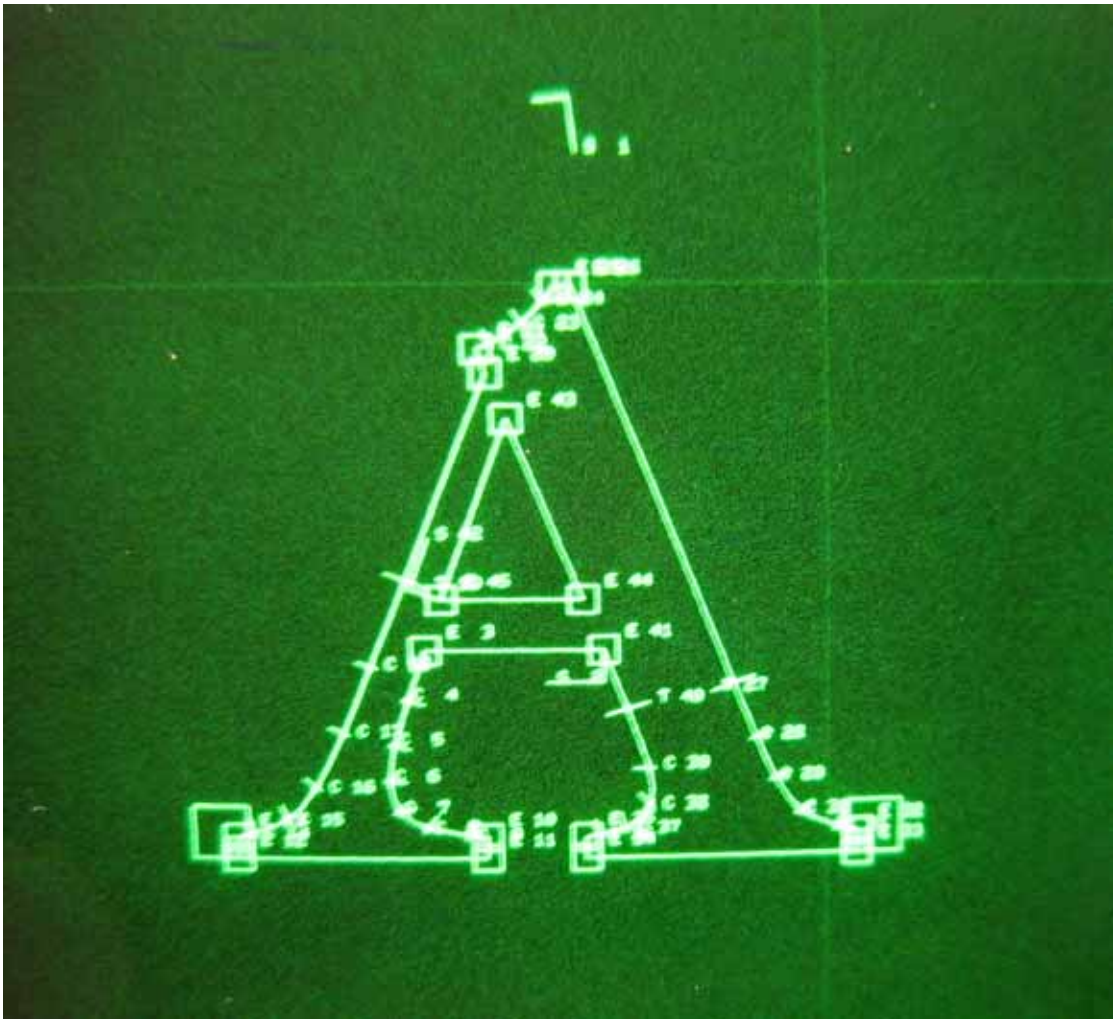
Apart from the satisfaction of completing my type design training, the biggest excitement happened in 1981 when the designers in our two studios were given intensive training to use the IKARUS software system. This suite of programs had been developed by URW in Hamburg Germany for the sole purpose of digitising letters into computer data. The digital age

had now swept into the analogue typeface creation industry and Letraset were there at the beginning. The early versions of IKARUS were a pain to use. Everything had to be entered as DOS-like commands via a keyboard only. Present day mouse users with their fantastic GUI displays would have had a shock. You only had to enter an extra full stop in the command line and the whole software crashed. The only recourse was to make saves every 30 seconds or so. The later versions did become a little more user-friendly thank goodness. However, we were stuck with graphic screens that although leading-edge huge green Tektronix monitors, could only display the letters as wire frames. This meant that we only got to see the letters solid when they were cut on a huge Aristo drafting table in Rubylith and maybe then photo printed. Any type designers reading this will know how important it is to see your letters in the solid. We were used to this with our hand-cut Rubylith letters in the past, but the technology of the time dictated otherwise. However, our skills became honed, and we were able to adjust and produced a massive range of typefaces in Latin, and non-Latin forms.

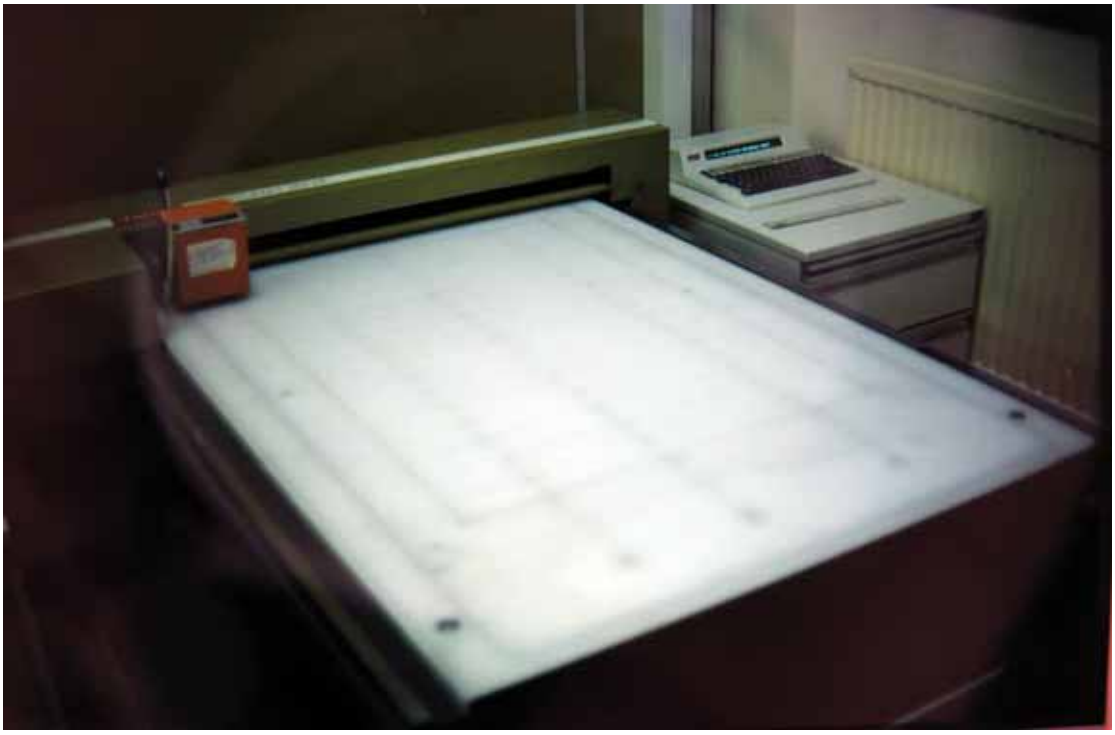
The computer that ran IKARUS was a large DEC that was the size of a small car and lived in an air conditioned room next door. We also had to get used to loading magnetic tapes and sometime even hard discs which were housed in huge circular plastic holders.



(Digitising board, points entering device and non-graphic monitor)



(Large Tektronix graphic display)



(Aristomat drafting table - huge and built like a tank)

Below: My own designs completed at Letraset:

Ea1

Croissant

Ea1

Cortez

Ea1

Impress

Ea1

Emporium

Ea1

University Roman

Based on an old 19c font.
Designed under Colin's art direction.
Later, other designers created variations
on the weight.

Ea1

Spritzer

Pump Triline

Designed under Colin's art direction

Magnificat

Not designed by me.
However, it was one of the hundreds that I hand cut at the time. It was probably the most difficult typeface that the studio ever cut.
The project was shared, and I did most of the caps I think.
I do remember that one capital letter took over a day to cut!

Gillies Gothic Extra Bold Shaded

Both designed by me under Colin's art direction.

Here are some excerpts from Letraset publicity brochures and announcements over the years:

"*Originally founded in London in 1959, Letraset has been manufacturing and supplying innovative media to the design industry for over 50 years.*
When our Dry Transfer Lettering system was first launched in 1961, designers called the process 'a revolution in the studio' and Letraset went on to become a household name in the field of commercial design.
Dry Transfers (or 'Rubdowns') enabled commercial artists to produce high quality headlines quickly and easily by transferring pre-printed letters directly onto artwork.
This simple to use and efficient system lives on today, and still remains the best way to apply professional lettering by hand.
When computerisation made its huge impact on the design world in the mid 1980s, Letraset continued to adapt, investing in new technology and converting our extensive typeface range into digital format.
We also went on to develop our range of professional markers for designers, which soon became adopted as an essential studio tool for quick visualisation and concept work.
With an ongoing commitment to innovation and quality of choice, Letraset has continued to evolve, increasingly recognising the common ground between commercial and amateur design. As a result, we've been able to develop our product range in many new and exciting directions, bringing professional standards of quality and performance to the wider creative community.
Today Letraset supplies a broad range of creative media for commercial designers, students, Manga artists, illustrators and crafters.
Our motto is Creative Opportunities and that simply means, whatever your design interest or skill level, we aim to provide all the tools you need to maximise productivity and enhance your creative expression."

"Letraset bridged the old world of metal with the new world of offset printing, without the cost and problems associated with lead type and phototypesetting.
A graphic designer producing artwork for a litho print job would go to a letterpress printer and

buy a pull of a lead typeface, which was then taken back to the studio and cut and pasted onto paper in preparation for filming.
The choice was limited and the lead setting might not be as clean and sharp as it should. A sample could also be obtained from a phototypesetter, but time was a problem and there would be a minimum charge of £15.
Letraset's sheets of type in transfer form were cheap, easily to hand and could be ordered in a huge range. The typeface Shatter, for instance, was of limited appeal, but was produced for the market in horror films and for glaziers.
The letterforms were cut by hand on film. Staff used pieces of wood, with a razor blade attached and weighed down by lead. The work piece was moved while the hand stayed steady, the weight providing all the pressure to the blade.
The film was then reduced in size and added to the layout of the sheet. The sheets were printed web fed silkscreen with a photosensitive gelatine and Letraset's own inks.'"

"From the hands and minds of the world's best type designers, Letraset display faces have travelled through time and changing technology to bring more than thirty years' worth of type designs to today's publications, ads, packaging, brochures, corporate identities, multimedia and now cyberspace! Letraset has propelled designers through the 1960s with geometric display faces like Compacta and Premier Lightline, through the 1970s with unique faces such as Shatter and Frankfurter, through the 1980s with casual letterforms such as Van Dijk and Freestyle Script, and through the 1990's with outrageous and fun designs such as La Bamba, Mo'Funky Fresh and Party. Letraset was formed to exploit the invention of transfer sheet lettering in 1956. The company led this industry from their introduction of dry transfer lettering in 1961, until the rise of the Apple Macintosh and the wide availability of digital fonts brought about its inevitable decline. Letraset has always run an adventurous letter design program, yielding a distinctive display library of varying quality. In the late 1970s Letraset started a digital type group, TSI, which was closed in 1983 after developing a number of typographic series using URW's Ikarus system. More recently, under Letraset's new masters Esselte, a new digital program has produced the Fontek range of display fonts. Since Esselte's acquisition of ITC, the Letraset fonts are often marketed along with ITC's Fontek Fonts - An exclusive collection of classic and innovative typefaces. Available for Macintosh and Windows users. The satirical television show Spitting Image was having another bash at Margaret Thatcher. A seemingly endless list of discontents ran ticker-tape fashion across the bottom of the nation's television screens. Among them, from the show's graphic designer, was the complaint: "Why is Letraset so expensive?"
Such occurrences demonstrate how strong the Letraset brand once was. In the late 1970s and 1980s the company was at its height, producing 11 million sheets of dry transfer type a year, with a turnover in the hundreds of millions of pounds and providing employment for more than 300 people at its factory alone."

Leaving Letraset:
In 1994 I left Letraset with my 25 year service gold watch in my pocket and went to work at Signus doing very similar work. I carried out much of the hinting for the NatWest TrueType fonts, and also digitised many Arabic fonts. At Signus (which later became A.I.T.) I continued to work on the designs from leading type designers as I had at Letraset. Whilst there I was able to use the later IKARUS M for Mac. This was a major step forward in user friendliness being a Mac application, and at last we could see the letters in solid form on the monitor. Then I was introduced to the wonderful type applications of Fontographer and a very early form of FontLab. Signus was also the name of URW's specialist sign-making software, and I got to learn some of its complex uses there. It was quite a change from Letraset as Signus also sold sign-making software and hardware in addition to its typeface production services. However, it was run by ex-Letraset people, so there was a form of smooth transition for me. I may have learnt the craft of type design at Letraset, but at Signus/A.I.T. I was introduced to a wider range of software for type production and the wonderful Adobe applications for graphic designers and photographers.

In 1997 I left to work independently. To see what I have been doing recently, please see the pdf portfolio available on my web site.

I hope that this has helped you learn something of my background, in type. In fact I first

became interested in letters and calligraphy whilst at school, around about age13 I think. Later I almost went to work at a local sign writers in Folkestone, Kent in the South East of the UK where I am from.