

# ‘Send us Printer’s ink’

Peter Frost takes a walk back into communist history and gets some ink on his fingers.



# Send us **P**rinter's ink'



***“Send us printer's ink, we do not know how to get it”*** wrote Lenin in 1901.

Lenin always understood that however wise and politically important the message you needed printers to get it over to the people who mattered – the working class.

It's not a very inspiring place, the scruffy trading estate behind Watford Junction Railway Station. When it was built, however, it must have had very high expectations. The developers picked some grand names to reflect Britain's Royal heritage and their pride in Empire.

My guide in Watford today is John Preston, a communist printer who worked here between 1967 and the 1980's. The Communist Party asked John and his family to come down from his employment in Norfolk. They had an important job for him to do.

John leads me down Balmoral Way. Into Imperial Way and we find the junction with Colonial Way. John smiles with recognition. Today the site is occupied by G4S Security – desperately struggling to find enough people to guard the Olympics - but John remembers a prouder time when this site was the Britain's hotbed of Communist Propaganda.

This was the printing works of the Communist Party. Lenin knew just how important it was for any Communist Party to have the ability to print its pamphlets, leaflets, posters, and journals and so did the CPGB.

John struggles to adjust his brain to compare today's site with the factory complex as it was when he worked here. Gradually through half open eyes he rebuilds the old printing works he remembers. “There were a number of firms in the buildings here” he recollects,

“Farleigh Press was the main one but also Northline Litho, London Caledonian Press, and one or two others whose names I've forgotten.

“It was a bit of a tax dodge but also important to have a few different imprints because of course we had lots of commercial work to help make the presses pay for themselves.

“Perhaps the oddest job we did was printing the Royal Command Performance Programme every year. We printed the normal run and then a very few specials for the Queen and the royal box. Her copy was printed on hand made paper and bound with purple silken cords.

“We left the adverts out of her copy; just blank spaces. I bet the big companies who paid to sponsor the royal event didn't know her majesty never got to see their ads.” He chuckled.

“London Caledonian Press handled that particular job but it still makes me smile. What would the Queen had made of the fact that the board of directors of the programme printing company included such prominent subversives as Johnny Gollan, Reuben Falber, (much later to become famous as the man who accepted the ‘Russian Gold’). International Brigade hero Bill Alexander was another director and so was Len Cook who was General Manager at the Daily Worker and then at the Morning Star.” said John, who was himself Company Secretary on the board.

“As well as this surprising work for the respectable establishment we printed our share of alternative stuff too in the swinging sixties and seventies. We printed early copies of Oz magazine before our rather shocked communist lawyers

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suggested perhaps we shouldn't. We helped launch Tony Elliot's Time Out.

"The most important work we did of course was all kinds of political publications for the Party and for other organisations and groupings.

"The list is a long one. Comment, Country Standard, Challenge for the Young Communist League, Marxism Today...

...there are just too many for me to remember.

We printed holiday brochures for Intourist and the British Communist Party's own travel agent Progressive Tours. We printed programmes for the Morning Star events and bazaars.

"Some stand out. We printed Labour Monthly. I often took the van to Ballards Lane, Finchley to collect copy or proofs from Rajani Palme Dutt himself.

"We printed for the peace movement, for CND, for all kinds of Trade Unions.

"Big jobs came along at election times. We printed large numbers of manifestos and individual election addresses for communist candidates all over the land.

"We printed the English Language editions of World Marxist Review. The content came from Prague and when we had printed it copies went to embassies and to liberation movement offices, large and small all over London, Britain and the World.

"Soviet News was a regular print job for us although Soviet Weekly was printed by a bigger printer on one of the then new colour web offset presses that Labour MP Woodrow Wyatt had imported from the USA.

"On the international front Farleigh printed Cuban magazines, magazines for SACTU the Confederation of Trade Unions in South Africa and many other jobs for progressives all over the world.

We printed for Communist Parties large and small, some legal some working underground and for fraternal organisations like the British Soviet Friendship Society.

"We even printed stuff for the Chinese. They would come to see the presses and leave packets of foul smelling Chinese cigarettes for the workers. Sadly we never got the contract for Mao's Little Red Book – that would have been some print order.

"We printed materials for the Greek Communist Party at the time of the Colonels and for Cypriots fighting for the liberation of Cyprus. In time we helped them set up their own Greek language print shop called Hermes Press in London's Caledonian Road.

"Work like that was often illicit and so were some other jobs we did here in Watford.

"The recent publication of Ken Keable's wonderful Book London Recruits, the secret war against Apartheid reminded me of the jobs we did discretely for the ANC.

"But sorry Ken; one fact in the book is wrong. You say that the materials, leaflets and pamphlets those brave young volunteers smuggled into South Africa in their false bottomed suitcases were printed in the German Democratic Republic.

"Well at least some of them were printed in Watford at Farleigh Press. I know I organised it.

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"I well remember the four page leaflet illustrated on page 329 of your book. It has details of how to make a Molotov Cocktail. Len Cook at the Morning Star organised the printing and pledged me to secrecy.

"We printed thousands of copies all on a very thin Onion Skin Airmail Paper.

"It was a bugger to run – like printing on Rizlas – we used a Vertical Meile printing press that still used metal type.

"I had to ensure that every scrap of waste and every spoiled copy was destroyed. I took them home and burnt them in my garden.

"The finished leaflets I delivered to Len Cook at the Morning Star building in Farringdon Road from where they went straight to the ANC to be smuggled into South Africa.

"I was always proud to be a printer" John continued as we made our way back to Watford Junction Station."

"I had a sign that hung over my desk. It was written by Beatrice Warde who Alan Hutt, award winning designer of the Daily Worker declared was one of the best typographers ever. Her words sum it all up for me.

***This is a printing office.***

*This is a printing office...*

*Crossroads of civilization...*

*Refuge of all the arts against the ravages of time...*

*Armoury of fearless truth against whispering rumour...*

*Incessant trumpet of trade.*

*From this place words may fly abroad,*

*not to perish on waves of sound,*

*not to vary with the writer's hand*

*but fixed in time having been verified in proof.*

*Friend, you stand on sacred ground...*

*This is a printing office*

"I was proud of all the work I did for the Communist Party and for the World Communist Movement working for Farleigh Press in Imperial Way at Watford.

"Forty years on it is great to discover what happened to some of those important printing jobs we did. They helped to change the world. I think Lenin would have been proud and of course we had the printer's ink."