

The fine print

The Wellington Centre for Book Arts, which is part of The Printing Museum, is a facility believed to be the first of its type in the southern hemisphere.

STORY SARAH LANG

IT'S HARD TO find the Wellington Centre for Book Arts (WCBA) on Thorndon Quay in Wellington. That's because it's located in a corner of a building's interior carpark. Past the Toyotas and Nissans is a rectangular room that the WCBA has been renting for two years from an acquaintance of its secretary-treasurer Dan Tait-Jamieson. Entering the 80sqm studio is like stepping back in time into a 19th-century printing-press workshop, with its machines and cabinets full of physical typefaces and tools.

The WCBA comes under the umbrella of The Printing Museum, which refers not to a specific place just yet, but to the collection of printing presses, materials and tools that



doesn't have a permanent home. Thorndon is an interim space until a preferably historic, central-city building is found to house their treasured agglomeration and attract members and visitors. Funding is needed. For now, in Thorndon, the high heels clomping and toilets flushing on the floor above don't bother Tait-Jamieson. He, along with three key members, volunteers his time for the love of letterpress.

Tait-Jamieson calls it a working museum. "Because everything works and you can make things like cards, posters and fine editions [such as prose or poetry]. Five years ago we had 50 members. Soon we'll have 200." The WCBA is modelled on



PHOTOGRAPHY NICOLA EDMONDS

1. Letterpress printing.
2. Dan Tait-Jamieson.
3. Metal furniture – for locking up type in a chase.
4. Composing type in a case.
5. Wood type.
6. Photopolymer plate and mallet.
7. The 1852 Albion press.

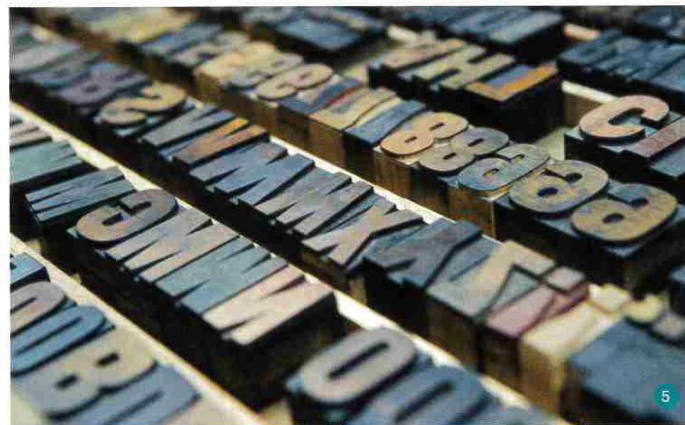
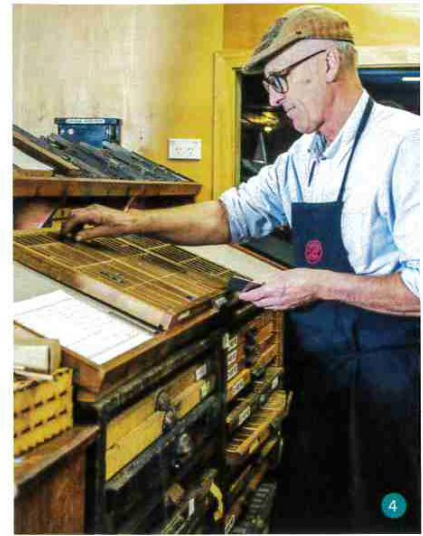
“book-arts” centres in San Francisco, Minnesota and London, whose business models centre on people taking classes or using studio space. The WCBA offers 22 courses including bookbinding, calligraphy, and letterpress, or you can take a short tour (by arrangement).

Letterpress is about, well, pressing letters. The first step, composition, is setting type by hand. Choose your “sorts” – letters (aka characters), ligatures (joined characters), and numbers – of various shapes, sizes and styles, made from metal or wood. Lay the sorts, letter by letter, line by line, in a “composing stick” (a small tray). “You have to mind your ps and qs,” says Tait-Jamieson, “because if it looks like a ‘q’ it’s actually a ‘p’, as we set type upside-down and back-to-front.” Next, your “forme” (arrangement of type) is locked in place by a “chase” (steel frame). “Then a printing press provides, at different pressures, repeated inked and slightly ‘debossed’ [indented] impressions on sheets of fine paper.”

It all began in 1983, when people from the printing and publishing industries started saving obsolete machines from the dump. Their first home was in Silverstream, then in 2011 they moved into a former army depot in Mangarua near Upper Hutt. Members did projects in both locations.

In 2013, Tait-Jamieson – a pasta manufacturer-turned-letterpress enthusiast – first visited the old, cold Mangarua depot. It’s still used as their large workshop/storage space, but members welcomed Tait-Jamieson’s help to find an interim location for the WCBA. The Thorndon space houses many machines and equipment donated by the Parliamentary Library’s former bindery department. Think heavy cast-iron presses, a foiling press (foil makes the final product gleam), and gold-leafing tools (used to apply thin sheets of gold to the bindings). There are freestanding presses, “nipping presses” (on benchtops), ploughs (edge-trimmers), paper drills (to punch holes in large volumes of paper) and fillet wheels (for decorative borders).

The Printing Museum is the only working type-foundry in the southern hemisphere.



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8. Tait-Jamieson proofing Hebrew wood type on a Vandercook press. 9. Trial page of Monotype for a fine edition. 10. Fillet wheels for bookbinding. 11. Linecaster keyboard and matrices.

On Mondays, between three and six core members meet at Mangaroa. “We cast metal type on one of our three restored Monotype Casters and sell it to printers and institutions in New Zealand, Australia and sometimes further afield.” Mangaroa hosts open days on the first Saturday of the month. Between the two locations, there are 30-plus printing presses including the 1.5-tonne, 1852 Harrild “Albion”, which printed *The Evening Post’s* first edition in 1865. It’s one of several machines registered as Protected Objects by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage; they can be used, carefully.

The members buy, restore, sell and trade machines, and receive donated items. Sometimes they do solo projects, sometimes they collaborate. “We’ve just cast a Centaur Italic typeface for an unpublished letter to Māori politician Sir Maui Pomare.” There are occasional commissions. “One chap wanted a card to match a Japanese print for his wife. Also, my son and his wife designed their own wedding invitations, and printed them on the Vandercook, turning the handle 300 times.”

Tait-Jamieson reckons letterpress is having a renaissance. “It particularly attracts young designers and artists curious about typography and bored with flat print.” Why does he love it? “Letterpress has an intangible quality with its extra dimension and aesthetics. There’s nothing quite like it.” theprintingmuseum.org.nz

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