

THE AGE OF PRINTING

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Before the age of printing all books were copied out by hand. This was not only a long and expensive process, but it also meant that every book was different. The more times a book was copied the more mistakes were made.

For centuries the Chinese had been printing using carved wooden blocks, but the idea of moving individual letters around to create various pages of text was revolutionary. In the middle of the 15th century, Johannes Gutenberg, of Mainz in Germany, introduced movable print to Europe. The metal letters were arranged in trays to make up the words and lines of text, inked and put on the press. Although it might take 50,000 separate pieces of type to create a large book, such as the bible, once set it could be reproduced thousands of times. At the same time, expensive parchment was being replaced by paper, which could be made more cheaply from linen rags. This, together with the new printing process, made the mass production of relatively cheap books possible for the first time.

The effects were dramatic: reliable maps could be printed for explorers, musicians could reproduce their work for others, and scholars could spread their new ideas. The great religious revolution of the early 16th century, the Reformation, was only possible because ordinary people could now buy their own Bible and read the Scriptures for themselves.

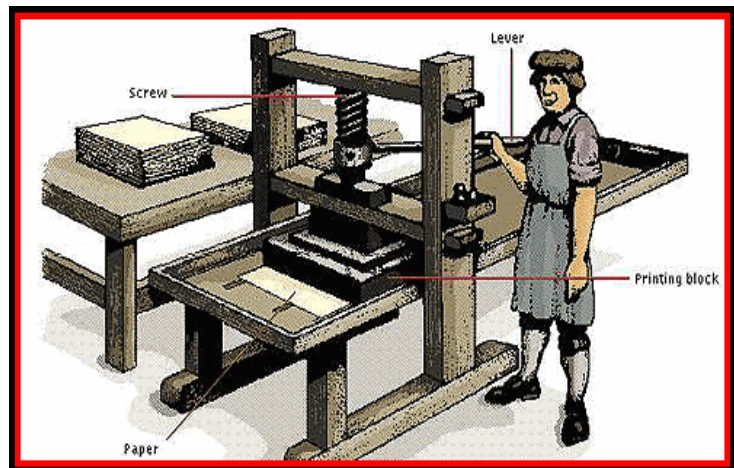


Figure 1

William Caxton published the first book in English in 1474 from Bruges in Belgium. He later set up a press in Westminster where he printed more than 90 titles including Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. The age of printing had begun – the printed word would soon prove to be one of the most powerful forces in history.

Questions

Use the information above to help you answer the following questions:

1. How were books produced before the age of printing?
2. Describe some of the problems that this method caused.
3. What was so revolutionary about Gutenberg's printing process?
4. Which new product, together with printing, enabled books to be mass-produced cheaply?
5. Who was the first printer to publish a book in English?
6. In your own words, write about the effects that printing had on medieval society.