The abandoning of the long s in Britain in 1800

Conventions in the form and application of printers’ types have changed little in the past five hundred years. There have been variations in such areas as punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, the use of catchwords and in type design itself, but the only fundamental change in the range of textual characters used by printers has been the abandoning of the ‘long s’. This resembles a lower-case ‘f’, but with the crossbar extending only to the left of the stem. The italic form of the character is likewise similar to the italic f, but generally lacks a crossbar altogether and appears on the page as an elegant snake-like curve of black. In British printing this character was abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century and, remarkably, the majority of British printers ceased to use the long s in the same year, 1800.

BACKGROUND

The two forms of s – long and short¹ – were employed across Europe from the invention of printing and, like many typographical conventions, this usage had its roots in earlier manuscript practice. In printing it became normal for the long s to be used at the beginning and in the body of words, but a final s was generally short; this too was based on conventions adopted in certain scriptoria from the twelfth century, where late Carolingian and Gothic hands were being practised. When two esses occurred together, it was usual to employ two long esses combined as a ligature. In some circumstances, and in some languages more than others, double s was rendered with the first long and the second short, a ligature of these two characters giving rise to the ‘esszet’, which is still used as a double s in many contexts in German printing. This combination of a long and short s appears to have been adopted chiefly to avoid the confusion of double long s with double f. There are a few other circumstances in which a short s can be found in early printing within the body of a word, most notably when it precedes an f, as in such words as ‘satisfy’ (this was done to avoid the still more confusing appearance of an ‘ff’ ligature).

Thus, in eighteenth-century printing, one would normally find the phrase ‘sausages satisfy grossness’ set in lower-case roman type as

¹. Throughout this article I have followed James Mosley and others in referring to the common serpentine form of s as the ‘short s’, and have used the plural ‘esses’.
‘faufages fatisy grosnens’]. One might also find ‘grosnens’, but ‘grosnens’ or ‘faufage’ are rare, and are perhaps most likely to signify a shortage of the short s in a printer’s cases. However, as James Mosley has pointed out, there were, from the earliest days of printing, a few who attempted to use these characters in a more rational manner, either abandoning the long s altogether, or using it to represent a consonantal sound different from that of the short s.\(^3\)

In Britain, the earliest work to be printed without the long s was probably the first edition of Joseph Ames’ *Typographical antiquities: an historical account of printing in England, with some memoirs of our antient printers, and a register of the books printed by them, from 1471 to 1600 …* (London: Printed by W[illiam] Faden for J[acob] Robinson, 1749).\(^4\) Its abandonment here is significant, since the intention was to distance the bibliographical descriptions from the ‘antient’ books described, and signal this as a ‘modern’ publication, by the typography of the text. Despite this apparent intention, the compositor was clearly used to using the long s and allowed a good many to slip into the text. However, it is reasonable to assume that, by the 1740s, the long s had an antiquated look, at least to the educated eye of the compiler or editor of *Typographical antiquities* (it remains uncertain whether Ames was himself responsible for this innovation, or whether it originated with one of his collaborators, perhaps the Rev. John Lewis (1675–1747), or Dr John Ward (1679?–1758), who is said by some sources to have compiled the text).\(^5\) This work was decades ahead of its time, and when the second edition of *Typographical antiquities*, edited and enlarged by William Herbert after Ames’ death, was published in three volumes between 1785 and 1790 the long s was re-introduced. The only comment which Herbert made on the typography was that ‘great care has been … taken in retaining entirely the original orthography, &c. (a circumstance greatly neglected by Mr. Ames’s printer)’ – perhaps Herbert believed his predecessor’s non-standard typography to have been the result of carelessness on the part of Faden.\(^6\)

What is probably the second British attempt to do without the long s can be dated to 1758, when Robert and Andrew Foulis printed *Publī Virgilīī Maronis bucolica, georgica, et aeneīs* (Glasgauæ: In Aedibus Academicīs, 1758).\(^7\) This is a small octavo, simply printed on good paper, recalling the pocket classics of Aldus. The decision to print this book without the long s was probably a purely aesthetic one, and something of an experiment by printers who were seeking always to improve the appearance of their books; they also experimented with a variety of papers, with new types produced by Alexander Wilson (after the model established by Baskerville), with the dropping of

\(^2\) See James Mosley’s ‘Brief history: the long s’ in *Printing Historical Society Bulletin* (31, 1992, p. 32), and the revised version published as ‘s & f: the origin and use of the long s’ in Steven Tuohy’s *James Mosley: a checklist of the published writings 1958–95* (Cambridge: Rampant Lions Press, 1995, pp. 20–2). Revised and updated versions of this text continue to be used by Mosley for teaching purposes.

\(^3\) See Mosley (op. cit. (1995), p. 21), who notes the experimental typography of Giangiorgeo Trassino (Vicenza, 1530s) and Pierre Moreau (Paris, 1640s). Some engraved plate–captions and lettering of the second half of the seventeenth century also display an irregular abandonment of the long s (see note 12).

\(^4\) See ESTC t142956. See also Arthur Chick’s ‘The first three books to drop the long s in *Bibliomast and Australian notes and querries* (issue 306, June 1995, pp. 39–47). Chick’s discussion of the work is heavily reliant on the entry for Ames in the *Dictionary of national biography*.

\(^5\) For the statement that ‘the history of printing published under his [Ames’] name was really written by Dr. Ward’ see the *Dictionary of national biography*, quoting Francis Grose’s *The ale* (2nd edition, London: for Hooper and Wiggard, 1796), the text of which is thought only to be partly by Grose himself.

\(^6\) Proposals for Herbert’s edition were issued in 1780, with the only typographical comment being that the work would be ‘printed with as neat a letter, and on as good a paper, as the late Mr. Ames’s Edition’ (see the Bodleian copy at Antiq. c. s.8(81)). A third edition of *Typographical antiquities*, revised by T. F. Dibdin, began publication in 1810. This was planned to be in five volumes, but progressed no further than the publication of volume IV in 1819.

\(^7\) For details see Philip Gaskell’s *A bibliography of the Foulis press* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964).
catch-words and a general simplification of typographical design, to reduce any sense of clutter on the page and enhance readability. The Foulis brothers were evidently pleased enough to repeat the experiment in at least eight further editions, and Andrew Foulis the younger retained this typographical style in several uniform works and reprints for which he was responsible (see below).

The next attempt at a rational application of the character in a British book came with Edward Capell’s *Prolusions; or, Select pieces of antient poetry* (London: Printed [by Dryden Leach] for J[acob] and R[ichard] Tonson, 1760).* Here Capell, who edited the text from a number of existing manuscript and printed sources, adopted various new typographical conventions according to the pronunciation of his chosen texts; the long s was used when the consonant was to be voiced as ‘s’, and the short when it was to be pronounced as ‘z’. In this, Capell was extending the established convention of using a terminal short s (which is invariably pronounced as ‘z’ except when it is accompanied by a second s) to similarly-voiced esses within words.

Between 1760 and 1780 several further works appeared in Britain without the long s. Those so far traced are: *Cornelii Nepotis excellentium imperatorum vitae* (Glasguae: In Aedibus Academicis Excudebant Robertus et Andreas Foulis, 1762; Gaskell 397); James Moor’s *On the end of tragedy according to Aristotle* (Glasgow: Printed by Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1763; Gaskell 420); *Marci Accii Plauti comedieae* (Glasguae: In Aedibus Academicis Excudebant Robertus et Andreas Foulis, 1763; Gaskell 424); *Georgii Buchananii paraphrasis Psalmorum Davidis poetica* (Glasguae: In Aedibus Academicis Excudebant Robertus et Andreas Foulis, 1765; Gaskell 438); James Moor’s *On the prepositions of the Greek language* (Glasgow: Printed by Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1766; two editions, Gaskell 456 and 457); James Moor’s *Vindication of Virgil, from the charge of puerility; imputed to him by Doctor Pierce* (Glasgow: Printed by Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1766; Gaskell 458); Edward Capell (editor), *Mr William Shakespeare his comedies, histories, and tragedies* (10 volumes, London: Printed by Dryden Leach, for J. and R. Tonson, [1767–1768]; estc t138599); *Τα του Πινδαρου σοζομενα ... Pindari quae extant* (Glasguae: In Aedibus Academicis, Excudebant Rob. et And. Foulis, 1770; Gaskell 513); *Ai του Ανακρεοντος οδας* (Glasguae: Excudebant Andreas Foulis, 1777; Gaskell 610); *Cornelii Nepotis excellentium imperatorum vitae* (Glasguae: Excudebant Andreas Foulis, 1777; a new edition of the volume published in 1762, see Gaskell 626); and *C. Crispi Sallustii opera quae supersunt omnia* (Glasguae: Excudebant Andreas Foulis, 1777; Gaskell 627). These fall neatly into three groups, the first being the pocket classics published by the Foulis

8. See estc t099268.
brothers (in the style of their Virgil of 1758) and later by Andrew Foulis the younger, the second being critical or linguistic works by James Moor published by the Foulis brothers, and the third being Capell’s edition of Shakespeare, in which he adopted the same idiosyncratic conventions he had used in his *Prolusions* of 1760.

**The Beginnings of Change on the Continent of Europe**

Between 1781 and 1784, in Paris, François Ambroise Didot designed what are generally said to be the first of the ‘modern’ typefaces, perhaps more usefully identified as ‘didone’, which were intended to be set without the long s (although the character was still cast and used with some didone fonts). During the 1780s Giambattista Bodoni of Parma designed a series of similar, and similarly famous, faces, and his abandonment of the long s can be traced to the beginning of this same period.10 Recent research suggests, however, that these typographers may have been influenced by changes that had already occurred in Spanish printing. In Madrid, from the early 1760s, some printers dropped the long s from their books; by the 1770s this was common practice, and at this same period some Spanish typefounders experimented with proto-didone types (see Fig. 1).11 Another possible early influence was the appearance of lettering on certain etchings and engravings, prepared in Italy, notably in Rome, between around 1650 and 1720 (see Fig. 2).12 However, the degree to which these innovations

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1. Title-page of Juan de Arfe y Villafañe’s *Varia commensuracion para la escultura, y arquitectura* (Sexta Impresion, 1773), an example of the dropping of the long s, and appearance of proto-didone typefaces, in Spanish printing of this period. Original size 290 x 197 mm. (Margins reduced)


10. Bodoni used the long s in G. L. Campi’s *Corona di sonetti dedicata a S. M. Maria Carolina d’Austria* (Parma: Bodoni, 1779), while it is entirely absent from Francesco Milizia’s *Memorie degli architetti antichi e moderni* (Parma: Della Stamperia Reale [i.e. Bodoni], 1781), suggesting that he abandoned the character around 1780. However, Bodoni’s use of the long s has not been fully investigated, and at this date the typography of his books may have been dictated by his ecclesiastical and private employers. He included the character in only two of the specimens in his *Manuale tipografico* of 1788 (specimens 68 and 78), although earlier proofs and trial sheets of the same work, produced from around 1781, include the long s in other specimens (for a recent description of the *Manuale*, related proofs and Bodoni’s other specimens see James Mosley’s ‘Sources for Italian typefounders’ in *La Bibliofilia* (CII, 2000, pp. 75–81). Bodoni cut a version of the long s for his didone type of 1790, presumably to satisfy any customers who wished to include the character.

11. I am grateful to James Mosley for drawing this early Spanish adherence to the short s to my attention, following references in Jeff Cooper’s *unpublished Printing and the book trade in the United Kingdom and Ireland, 1780–1800: a chronology* (1999; copy on deposit in the Saint Bride Printing Library). The earliest example so far traced is *Compendio de los diez libros de arquitectura de Vitruvio* (Madrid: D. Gabriel Ramirez, 1761), a Spanish translation of a French abridgement of *Vitruvius’ De architectura* (see Nicholas Savage, et al., *Early printed books, 1478–1840: catalogue of the British Architectural Library Early Imprints Collection* (3 volumes, London: Bowker-Saur, 1994–), IV, 3542). Ramirez may have been responsible for this change in Spanish printing (he still used the long s in 1760), and was quickly followed by other Madrid printers, notably Joaquín Ibarra and Antonio Marin. The effects of these Spanish innovations were felt in Mexico by the 1780s, but appear not to have influenced Portuguese printing until the end of the century.

12. In the lettering of many Roman intaglio plates of this period the long s was not used, or used irregularly. This was particularly true of plates prepared for members of the de’ Rossi family of printellers. Much of this lettering was incised in a sloped or pseudo-italic hand, sometimes in a true italic, and the use of the short s was probably chiefly a practical response to the difficulties of incising long esses pleasingly and consistently at an angle and at speed (to judge by the quantity of work produced in the second half of the sixteenth century, the lettering-engravers who worked for Giovanni Giacomo and Domenico de’ Rossi were probably required to produce work very quickly). This practice seems to have died out in the 1720s and 1730s, when the long s began again to be used consistently by Roman lettering engravers. Between around 1650 and 1720 it also became common for title-plates to be incised using what appear to be proto-didone letterforms. This probably developed naturally in the etching or engraving process; when a stylist or graver was used to reproduce capitals in the manner of classical inscriptions, the calligraphic nature of the medium gave rise to stronger-than-usual contrasts between thick and thin strokes, and the abrupt intersections of those strokes. Examples of intaglio works in which
were known to, and became an influence on, later French, Italian and British typographers remains uncertain.

Like the Foulis brothers in Glasgow, Bodoni and the Didot family wanted to raise standards of typographical design and printing, and to bring a certain clarity and freshness to their publications. Their typography was known across Europe (rather more widely than any Spanish influence), although its impact was limited in those countries which had developed some sense of national typographical identity, such as Germany, where fraktur and other ‘black letter’ types held sway. The last two decades of the eighteenth century were a period of particular isolationism in Britain, however, largely attributable to the deterioration of relations with France, and the Revolution and wars which ensued. The influence of the best French and Italian typography must therefore have been limited on the English side of the Channel, although the changes that were stealing over European printing houses must have been noticed by British printers and publishers, many of whom were no doubt impressed by the lucidity of Didot and Bodoni’s work, to say nothing of the British examples which continued to appear from the presses of Andrew Foulis the younger.13 In London, the typefounder, printer and publisher John Bell cast the first British typeface with a distinct didone appearance during 1787.14 However, by this date he had already dropped the long s from several publications, including his newspaper The world (first published 1 January 1787). The first book in
15. This was at least the third edition of Shakespeare’s plays to have been published by Bell. A first had appeared in eight volumes in 1773–1774 (STC 268260), and a second in five volumes from 1774 (STC 118849). The John Johnson Collection at the Bodleian holds a prospectus for the second edition, which announces the publication of the first play ‘on Saturday the 30th of September’ at sixpence, with copies on ‘large fine Royal Paper …’ with additional plates and a proof of the frontispiece at one shilling. The series would be published weekly ‘till the Work is entirely compleat’ (see John Johnson Collection, John Bell box). The prospectus is undated, but was presumably issued in mid-1774.

16. This confusion is common today among those unfamiliar with the long s and was the premise for Restoration piece, a farcical sketch by ‘Alan Melville’ (William Melville Caverhill, 1910–1983), in which the humour is generated by the substitution of F for S. The sketch was first included in Melville’s revue A la carte in June 1948, with Hermione Baddeley in the leading rôle, and was published by Samuel French in 1949. At rehearsals Baddeley extended the joke into azure by including a rendition of ‘Where the bee sucks’.

17. See The gentleman’s magazine (IV, September 1734, pp. 489–90). Here a correspondent, who signs himself ‘B.T.’, writes ‘Against publishing Books Piece-meal’ (i.e. in parts). He says that the Bible has been made easy and familiar to Porters, Carmen and chimney-sweepers; but how, why, by scraps taken out of Grotesque, Hammon and what an age of wit and learning is this! In which so many persons in the lowest stations in life are more intent upon cultivating their minds, than upon feeding and clothing their bodies … I used to think, that in 20 of the species were designed by Nature for trade, and manufactures; and that to take them off to read books, was not the way to make them wiser or better, but impertinent, troublesome, and factious. He complains that James Knapp proposed to make between eight and ten thousand pounds from his popular edition of Paul Rapin de Thoyras’ History of England (1732–1733), despite the fact that it was very carelessly translated. To meet public demand the poor founder and hackney are hurried on by the booksellers thro’ thick and thin, and for to perform their stage within the time prefixed, the detriment of literature and social order.


19. The long s required additional ligatures, not necessary with f. Most English fonts included ‘fb’, ‘fl’, ‘ff’, ‘hk’, ‘il’ and ‘it’ combinations. The convention of using a second short s when two esses appeared together avoided the need for some further ligatures, although these were still cast for many fonts. Thus, ‘ff’ and ‘fl’ are common, and ‘ffl’ is occasionally found. The combination ‘s’ was also sometimes rendered as a ligature, although this was more common in italic fonts than in roman. I have traced examples of no other long s ligatures, although it is possible that other combinations of double s with an ascending letter, and even of esses with fs, may have been cast on occasion.
from his cases was therefore partly an attempt to improve the accuracy (and thereby the speed and cost) of composition and proof-correction, and partly a genuine attempt to make his text clearer for the reader. He also perceived, perhaps as an afterthought, having seen the effects of this change throughout the Shakespeare series, that the absence of the long s aided legibility in other ways, improving the 'regularity' of the text, and rendering the line 'more open'. This was achieved 'without really being any additional distance', thus causing no expansion of the text, which could have resulted, over twenty volumes, in a significant increase in paper and printing costs. Bell's innovation was mentioned by Leigh Hunt in the second edition of his Autobiography, published in 1860. Hunt describes Bell as 'a speculator in elegant typography' and adds in a footnote:

An intelligent compositor (Mr. J. P. S. Bicknell), who has been a noter of curious passages in his time, informs me, that Bell was the first printer who confined the small letter s to its present shape, and rejected altogether the older form ... He tells me, that this innovation, besides the handsomer form of the new letter, was a 'boon to both master-printers and compositors, inasmuch as it lessened the amount of capital necessary to be laid out under the old system, and saved to the workman no small portion of his valuable time and labour."

Overall, Bell seems to have been very pleased with this departure 'from the common mode' and, by drawing attention to the advantages for the publisher and printer as well as for the reader, he may have hoped to inspire others to follow his example.

A few did. William Bulmer, who began printing in 1790, was among those to follow Bell's lead, in this case as a direct result of his influence, Bell having been among the first to employ Bulmer as a printer. But Bell, Bulmer and a few others were exceptional, and the generality of printers continued to use the long s until 1800. Then, within the course of this one year, the character was removed from most printers' typecases. This is the phenomenon which I intend to examine here. Why should it be that so many printers threw off the irksome long s and its necessary ligatures in this year? Why did so few feel able to do so before 1800? And what use, if any, was the long s put to after the turn of the century?

THE IMPORTANCE OF 1800

The significance of the year 1800 can be established by taking a 'snapshot' of books published in this and the following year. A representative sample of thirty books published in London in 1800, and thirty published in 1801, was selected from the holdings of the Royal Institute of British Architects's Library, the British Library and the

20. See The autobiography of Leigh Hunt (new edition, London: Smith Elder, 1860, pp. 149–50). The footnote continues 'My informant adds, as a curious instance of conservative tendency on small points, that Messrs. Rivington having got as far as three sheets, on a work of a late Bishop of Durham [Shute Barrington (1734–1826)], in which the new plan was adopted, the Bishop sent back the sheets, in order to have the old letter restored, which compelled the booksellers to get a new supply from the typefoundry, the fount containing the venerable I having been thrown away.' The work referred to is probably one of Barrington's 'Charges' which were printed in 1792, 1794 and 1797 (see ESTC t010671, t011695, t053326, t076655 and t080936). Most of these were printed by Thomas Rickaby.

21. Although Bulmer was keen to eschew the long s, he used it in double s combinations in his editions of Shakespeare and Milton (printed for John and Josiah Boydell, and George Nicol, in 1791 and 1794–1797 respectively; ESTC t202170 and t135450). See also Ian Maxted, The London book trades 1775–1800 (Folkestone: Dawson, 1977, p. 17) and H. R. Plomer, G. H. Bushnell and E. R. M. Dix, A dictionary of the printers and booksellers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1726–1775 (London: Bibliographical Society, 1968, p. 22).
3 Frontispiece and title-page of *The governoress; or, Evening amusements at a boarding school* (1800). Note the presence of the long s in the engraved caption and imprint on the frontispiece, but its absence from the letterpress title-page. Original page size 130 × 84 mm.

22. The technique of selection was that books were chosen randomly by using the electronic catalogues of the libraries in question; however, when a book turned up which was very similar in kind, or had a similar imprint, to two works already on the list, that book was rejected. Thus, the list of examples was an attempt to choose thirty volumes from a reasonable range of different kinds of works, from a range of London publishers, with no more than two similar titles or imprints being represented.


26. George Prettyman’s *An introduction to the study of the Bible* (London: Cadell and Davies, etc., 1801; British Library copy at 843.1.8).

Bodleian. Of the books dated or datable to 1800, all but three employed the long s. Of those dated the following year, only seven used the long s. An examination of these seven books reveals that one was published in parts from 1800, and one, although published in London, was printed in Hereford. Another, Thomas Pennant’s *A journey from London to the Isle of Wight*, was intended to be uniform with a series of eighteenth-century tours by Pennant, and may have been printed using the long s for an editor who ‘spared neither pains nor expense to render this Work in all respects equal to Mr. Pennant’s former publications’ (I, p. viii). Another work was the thirteenth edition of Louis Chambaud’s *A grammar of the French tongue* (London: Andrew Strahan for Joseph Johnson, etc.) and, as will be seen, such new editions lagged behind other works in their typographical style; in this case, the typography follows that of the previous edition of 1797 word-for-word. One of the remaining works was printed by Luke Hansard who was among the conservative printers of his day who resisted the change from the long to the short s (see below); and another was Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of modern philosophers* (3 volumes, London: Printed for G[eorge I], G[eorge II] and J[ohn] Robinson … by R[obert] Noble). This last is an extensive work which must have been printed over a period of some months and, while the main text has the long s throughout, the author’s ‘Advertisement’ includes only the short s and is dated 28 November 1800, suggesting that this was printed last, and that the remainder of the work may have been composed and struck off.
earlier in 1800. Thus, on the evidence of this representative sample, around ninety percent of the books published in London in 1800 still included the long s, while in the following year, this was true only of some twenty-five percent, and many of these were, in some sense, 'throwbacks' to the previous century.

The turning point is marked by a very few books published in 1800 in which the long s was remarkably dropped during the course of printing the text.27 Two such volumes will serve as examples. Both have been found, like many bibliographical curiosities, in the realm of children's literature. The first is a cheap anonymous volume entitled The governess; or, Evening amusements, at a boarding school (London: Vernor and Hood, and E[Elizabeth] Newbery; see Fig. 3).28 The collation is curious (18°: [A]: B–D18 E–N6 04), and further examination makes it clear that gatherings B–D were printed first, but that the printer was unable to complete the work, and gatherings E–O and [A] were struck off by Tegg and Dewick of Aldersgate Street. Not only does their imprint appear on the title-page, but it also marks the beginning of their contribution, at the foot of E1r, page 109 (see Fig 4). As yet, no comparable example of this use of a printer's imprint, inserted part way through a text to indicate the beginning of a particular firm's contribution, has been traced. It is not unknown for two printers to produce different parts of the same book, although this is most commonly explained by the reissuing of sheets printed by one firm with new matter produced by another.29 Thus, the example of The governess is clearly an aberrant
The most probable explanation for the printing of the book is that it was printed on the same press as a previous title. As Figure 4 shows, the unidentified printer of the first part of the book used the long s of the text instead of the short s of the text, reproducing the same typographical difference and showing that the printer of the first part of the book was the same as the printer of the long s.
change style was made at a distinct point during composition, when the cominator was instructed to end page 101 with the long s, and to begin page 102 without it. Another possibility is that two compositors were involved, one taking over from the other at the end of what was to become page 101, with the new hand being conversant with the modern style (it is just possible that this change was made at the galley proof stage, although this seems unlikely, since the cominator would presumably have set enough pages for at least one gathering before proofing, and any subsequent decision to alter the typographical style of the text would probably not have affected only some pages of a particular quire). As with The governess, the catchword is significant, that on K3r (page 101) being ‘pection,’ while the first word on K3v (page 102) is ‘pection’.

In retrospect it seems curious that so few printers cast off the long s before 1800. There was no logical reason to continue with such a convention. Bell, Bulmer and others had shown that a book did not need to include the character in order to be a commercial success. Indeed, those books with the ‘modern’ look of Bell’s Shakespeare series were among the most popular of their day, despite the possible perception of didone types and short esses as ‘foreign’ innovations. Also, by the end of the century, it appears that the long s was perceived, especially by the newly-literate working classes, as a confusing and old-fashioned character. It was, in the end, the profoundly conservative nature of the British booktrade and the printing industry that prevented all but the most courageous and forward-looking
printers and publishers taking the logical step of ‘modernising’ the appearance of their books by dropping the long s. Why then did they succumb to change in 1800?

This was a period of upheaval and innovation in the printing industry. The first iron hand-presses had just been invented, and the finest typographers of the age were making new type designs which looked markedly different from existing models. However, perhaps the most vital event was the passing, on 12 July 1799, of the ‘Seditious Societies Act’. This Act was passed in a climate of rebellion in Ireland, upheaval in France, and the appearance of various revolutionary groups in England. One of its main purposes was to prevent the anonymous publication of seditious or revolutionary material by regulating the printing industry. Among the provisions of the Act, printers and typefounders were required to register their presses with ‘the Clerk of the Peace acting for the County’, and to keep proper accounts and file-copies of all their publications. But the most important provision for our purposes was that every printer ‘shall print upon the front of every … paper, if the same shall be printed on one side only, and upon the first and last leaves of every paper or book which shall consist of more than one leaf, in legible characters, his or her name, and the name of the city, town, parish, or place, and also the name of any square, street, lane, court or place, in which his or her dwelling house or usual place of abode shall be’. There were severe financial penalties for those who printed books and broadsides without including their names and addresses, or with false or inaccurate imprints. One of the unintentional effects of this law was that every book became an advertisement for its printer. This was, I believe, a profound influence on many London printers who, faced with this enforced publicity, wanted to make their wares look somehow different, better, ‘modern’ for the new century, and were inspired to bring about what Michael Twyman has called ‘the only lasting change to be made during the past 200 years in the actual range of letters used’.

The dropping of the long s was therefore partly a gimmick, a way for printers and publishers to signal their modernity and set themselves apart from the anonymous fossils of the previous century, and it would have required only a few of the leading names to make the change for most of the others to have followed suit, in order to remain competitive. The printing trade is often said to be immensely conservative, and this is certainly true, although it was evidently prepared to move radically and with some speed when competition was the spur. It is likely that the change was encouraged by the majority of typefounders (many of whom were also printers),

34. An excellent summary of the changes that came about in this period, and of the ‘Seditious Societies Act’, can be found in William B. Todd’s ‘London printers’ imprints 1800–1840’ in The library (5th series, XXI, 1966, pp. 46–62). See also the preface and introduction to Todd’s A directory of printers and others in allied trades: London and vicinity 1800–1840 (London: Printing Historical Society, 1972, pp. vii–xxiv), which is based in part on the earlier article.


36. See Twyman, op. cit. p. 78.
since the dropping of the long s would have simplified and reduced the costs of casting complete founts. A few founders had tried to introduce didone types in the closing years of the eighteenth century, but the essential change from the long s to the short was almost certainly led by the printers; the founders were no doubt happy to supply their new needs.  

THE PERIOD AFTER 1800

Just as a few printers and publishers had been adventurous enough to anticipate the change, a few were not convinced of its benefits. Some wanted to continue to make use of the type-stock they already held, and used the long s for certain cheap or ephemeral publications. A good many chapbooks and popular pamphlets were printed after 1800 with the long s, and the great architectural publisher Josiah Taylor continued to use the character in his catalogues until at least 1806, although this was chiefly due to the practice of keeping some of the type standing, with new books added and others removed as each new catalogue was published.  

Books set before 1801 and reprinted later from standing type (or, in a very few cases, from stereotypes), represent other examples of the long s surviving the turn of the century. The provinces were slower to change than the capital, although many printers in small towns followed the example of London almost at once. The more conservative newspapers and magazines held to the long s for a while after it had been dropped from most other publications: The Times retained the character until 1803, The gentleman’s magazine began to abandon the long s only in the spring of 1808, when for a few months the two esses vied uneasily for supremacy, and the Society of Antiquaries’ journal Archaeologia only made the change in its sixteenth volume, dated 1812.

Several printers also seem consciously to have resisted change. Perhaps the best example is Luke Hansard (1752–1828), printer to the Houses of Parliament from the late 1790s and a conservative with both sizes of ‘C’. Although there was no practical reason for him to continue with the long s, he appears to have been determined to avoid change. He printed the Parliamentary Journal for both Houses, and various other official papers, and clung fast to the long s until 1809. Thereafter he allowed the short s into his printing only as his use of typefaces dictated (most new founts were not supplied

37. Even the forward-looking type-founder Edmund Fry (1754–1835), who cast several pseudo-didone faces, made little effort to reform his customers’ use of the long s. The main text of his Pantographia; containing accurate copies of all the known alphabets in the world (London: Printed by Cooper and Wilson, for John and Arthur Arch ... John White ... and John Debrett, 1790; estc t1 17578) is largely printed without the long s, although the preface is one of those texts in which the long and short esses can be seen side by side; this was due, no doubt, to compositorial unfamiliarity with the new conventions which Fry was attempting to embrace, and perhaps to a certain carelessness on the part of a proof-reader (Fry himself?) who took more pains with the text than with the preface. However, although Fry was keen to eschew the long s in his own study of the alphabet published in 1790, Fry, Steele and Company’s A specimen of printing type issued in 1800 (estc no21701), includes the long s and its ligatures throughout. In this respect, the specimen represents no advance on a very similar series of volumes published in 1787, 1788, 1790, 1792, 1794, 1795 and 1798. It has not been possible to compare all these specimens, and it is likely that some sections of text were kept standing and reprinted without change; it seems, however, that each new specimen contained at least some newly-composed matter.

38. See Savage et al., op. cit. (IV, 3265).

39. An interesting example of this is Henry Dixon’s immensely popular The English instructor; or, The art of spelling improved, which was first published in 1728. From at least the 23rd edition of 1760 (estc t43564) to the 64th of 1818 this work appears to have been reprinted from standing type, with only the title-page reset. Thus, in 1818, children learning English spelling were faced with a distinctly eighteenth-century textbook, with antiquated ornaments and the long s present in the text and in the preliminary synopsis of the alphabet. This may have been somewhat offputting, when virtually all other printed matter at this date was set without the character.

40. The printers of York appear to have been particularly slow to adopt the new typographical style of the capital. For example, the new edition of Edward Hoppus’ Practical measuring, printed by Thomas Wilson and Robert Spence in 1806, and Joseph Halfpenny’s Fragmenta vetusta, printed by George Peacock in 1807, are examples of York books retaining the long s.


42. Although Hansard printed Parliament’s Journal, Acts, Bills, official Reports and numerous other documents, The Parliamentary debates which first appeared in 1812 and now bear the name ‘Hansard’ were not printed by Luke but by his son Thomas Curson Hansard.
7 Opening page of William Stukeley's Stonehenge: a temple restor'd to the British Druids (1740 [i.e. 1837]). A type facsimile of the 1740 edition, which includes the long s in the main text and has fooled some librarians. However, the types are clearly nineteenth century, no long s was available for the italic used for the text following the chapter heading, and the compositor was evidently unfamiliar with the character and often forgot to use it. Original size 336 x 208 mm.

(Margins reduced)

33. See Maseed, op. cit. (p. 18), who also notes that Bensley was 'interested in technical progress'.

44. An examination of ten randomly-chosen books printed by Bensley between 1800 and 1810 revealed that three with the long s. One probably began to be printed in 1800 or earlier, but the other two are dated 1806 (John Wood's A series of plans for cottages or habitations of the labourer ... (New edition, London: Printed for [Joshua] Taylor) and 1807 (Thomas Hope's Household furniture (London: for Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme)). Both are distinguished by being set in relatively large sizes of type, and there is no reason to suppose that the archaic typography was requested by the publishers; Hope's work in particular aimed at great modernity, depicting radical neoclassical furniture designs, and making early use of san serif letterforms on the engraved plate used to print the paper wrappers in which the book was issued. See Savage et al., op. cit. (II, 1547 and IV, 3705).


middle of the nineteenth century' (see Fig. 8).

As recently as 1995 William F. Taylor of the Palliser Press printed a chapbook with the long s, illustrated with simple cuts, in the tradition of such publications (see Fig. 9).

Some fonts of foundry type can still be supplied with long esses, as can some of the available digitised fonts, to allow for the publication of bibliographical, historical, atavistic or humorous texts.

THE CHANGE IN EUROPE AND AMERICA

My intention here is to discuss only British typographical conventions in any detail. However, it is worth noting that elsewhere in Europe a very similar change came about at the same period, although in France and Italy the tradition of typographical innovation was strong, and other forces were at work. In France the Revolution had a similar effect to that of the Seditious Societies Act in Britain, and Didot’s influence was fully felt in Paris from 1789, when most printers embraced the ‘modern’ look of the short s, while in Italy the influence of Bodoni and others was also felt in this area of typography by the late 1780s. In Spain too, as has been noted, there were moves to rationalise the use of the long s from the 1760s. In Germany and Austria, and to some degree in Scandinavia, the use of fraktur and other black letter types in preference to the roman letter meant that the two forms of s survived for many decades after 1800. In the United States at this period printers tended to follow the lead of Europe, and most abandoned the long s in the late 1790s and early 1800s, although the transition was more gradual and irregular than in Britain. In late 1789, towards the end of his life, Benjamin Franklin remarked in a letter to Noah Webster that:

lately another fancy has induced some Printers to use the short round s instead of the long one, which formerly served well to distinguish a word more readily by its varied appearance. Certainly the omitting this prominent letter makes the line appear more even; but renders it less immediately legible; as the paring of all Men’s Noses might smoothe and level their Faces, but would render their Physionomies less distinguishable.

8 Opening page of Henry Noel Humphreys' The art of illumination and missal painting: a guide to modern illuminators (London: H.G. Bohn, 1849). An example of the mid-nineteenth-century revival of the long s for its picturesque or anti-quarian connotations. Humphreys has also designed wood-engraved ornaments, somewhat in the manner of the medieval and renaissance books from which he took his inspiration. Original size 173 × 114 mm. (Margins reduced)

48. William F. Taylor, A withe stone for dull wits (Harrogate: W. Taylor, printed in the present year [i.e. 1915]). In this chapbook the cuts are made on vinyl rather than wood, and the main typeface is Times New Roman. Taylor manufactured his long esses by physically breaking the right hand crossbar from some of the fs in his fonts of Times and Old English type.
49. The letter from which these sentences are extracted was published in The Massachusetts magazine (II, no. 6, June 1790, pp. 353–5) and was quoted at greater length by Stephen O. Saxe in ‘Benjamin Franklin: innovator – and typographical conservative’ in The American Printing History Association newsletter (95, May/June 1990, pp. [1]–2). In the same letter Franklin laments other contemporary linguistic and typographical fashions, such as the feeling against italics for emphasis and the capitalization of nouns. This attitude to the long s is rather at odds with the more liberal views attributed to Franklin by D. B. Updike, who quotes him as saying in 1786 that ‘the Round s begins to be the Mode and in nice printing the Long f is rejected entirely’ (see Updike’s Printing types (2nd edition, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), II, p. 229 note). The original source of this quotation has not been traced.
It must not be forgotten that the manuscript tradition did not cease with the invention of printing, and the use of the long s in handwritten documents presents a rather different story, albeit one inevitably linked to the fortunes of the character in printed matter. Likewise, the appearance of ‘s’ in the captions and lettering of intaglio plates is a separate story of innovation and conservatism. I intend to discuss neither of these aspects in detail here, but it is perhaps fair to remark that, generally speaking, the style of the lettering of plates was quickly, but not comprehensively, influenced by changes in letterpress typography, while existing manuscripts betray a wide variety of different usages, conventions and inconsistencies in their writers’ attitudes to the alphabet. The long s was abandoned completely by some writers from the sixteenth century, while others, when writing personal letters and diaries, continued to use the long s for many years after it had been swept from virtually all printed material; L. H. Stickland, who was born in 1905, noted in 1989 that he recalled his aunts having used the character in their correspondence in his youth, showing that some Britons continued to write with the long s well into the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

In summary it may be said that, in books and jobbing work printed in Britain, the long s suffered a gentle decline in the eighteenth century, and was comprehensively routed in or around 1800, due to a number of commercial and practical pressures, deriving at least in part from the terms of the Seditious Societies Act of 1799. Thereafter, the character remained in use only in a few corners of the British printing industry – where conservative opinions held sway, where the cheapest and most ephemeral pieces were in production, at a distance from the London centre of the trade, or where an antiquated typographical style was consciously chosen. It is remarkable how quickly most printers abandoned the character, doing so, in a few cases, in the middle of printing a particular book.

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