

# Printmaking **TODAY**

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Print Making Decisions by Liz Chaffin

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## Metro links from rivers to the sea

**PUBLIC ART** Hilary Paynter RE undertook the prestigious Bewick commission to create the recently unveiled wood engraved imagery for a Newcastle Metro station. Kate Dicker reports

Last year marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of the wood engraver Thomas Bewick (1753-1828), who was born near Newcastle upon Tyne and set up his workshop in the city. In celebration, Nexus, the public transport authority for the Tyne and Wear Metro, launched 'The Bewick Commission', as part of its Art on Transport programme, which facilitates the installation of contemporary artwork at its stations. Hilary Paynter RE was selected to produce wood engravings and Nexus set up a steering panel to manage the project with three partners: Northern Print Studio, The Society of Wood Engravers and The Thomas Bewick Society. The brief required that the artist reflect contemporary life and landscape of areas linked by Tyne and Wear Metro, a network which encompasses shipyards, industrial complexes, towns and villages, together with connections to Shields Ferry and Sunderland.

Paynter took eight months to complete the commission, creating 14 intricate engravings. These were enlarged tenfold before being transferred using screenprint onto 31 vitreous enamel panels. In most cases, each 200 x 200 mm engraving was scaled up onto 2 x 1 metre panels to form a panoramic mural of 22 metres long. As the closest location to Bewick's workshop site next to St Nicholas' Churchyard, Central Station Metro was the chosen venue for the work, which was installed this June on walls of the lower concourse.

### Linking past and present

Specific to the brief was to show an image on a grand scale, giving visual information about places that people could recognise in and around Newcastle. In response, Paynter paid homage to Bewick by depicting his workshop building, as it was in his time, together with mini genre narratives in the Bewick tradition. However, these are incidental to Hilary's broader depiction of the area, which she transformed into lively wood engravings involving subjects from allotments to shipyards. The work strongly evokes a sensation of journey making, of daily life on the move, and how the Metro environment creates a network for social exchange.

Paynter travelled by Metro to get a feel for the area; her research was extensive. Fascinated by how the river signified important physical and conceptual links, she had hoped to get an overview of the area from a flight to Newcastle, but cloud obscured the view. Enterprisingly, she enrolled on a flying lesson; although her purpose was to sketch and photograph, she was duty bound to fly the plane, albeit under instruction. These aerial views showed the river snaking towards the sea and its presence is strongly represented in Paynter's work. From a distance, the ambiguous silhouette of Tynemouth Priory resembles both an ancient ruin and a building shell from the industrial revolution. The ruin had a great impact on

Paynter, as did the dramatic view over the expanse of sea and the massive breakwater at the opening to the estuary. As she described: 'the breakwater thrust out towards the horizon, making a funnel for the water, as well as being a protector for the river mouth from the power of the sea.' Paynter also wished to make the link between history and the present day by showing, for example, the relief sculpture from the Roman Baths and a distant sighting of Hadrian's Wall. She also shows Bede Cross at Jarrow, surrounded by a mass of pilgrims or political marchers.

An important design consideration was how passengers would best see the work once it was installed. Paynter has created views that have impact when read from a distance, but also intimacy when seen close-up. She has included appealing details at floor level 'for kids to spot - a cat chasing a mouse and a bird pulling a worm,' she says.

Paynter sketched out the 14 compositions as her template for the entire mural. It became a vital document for all processes involved, from the engraving, through print production, to installation. In most cases, she accommodated two panels to one engraved block. To get an idea how best to maintain a readable sequence, she referred to Japanese screens to see how their designs incorporated breaks.

### Engraving and panel production

It took Paynter eight months to complete the series. All the images were engraved on lemonwood, except for that of St Peter's at Monkwearmouth - the only one on boxwood. She is a fast worker, once underway. Many engravers predetermine the entire drawing before transferring to the block, partly to see how to interpret the engraving and partly - and understandably - to avoid making irrevocable errors on the block. Not so with this artist



who is willing to engrave into the unknown and take risks, working with speed and confidence. Whilst she knows the content, her engraving process evolves as she works, starting with a key shape or subject such as Tynemouth Priory. From there, other shapes arrive from intuitive decisions. She explained: 'I plunge into the bits of the engraving I know and the rest develops organically on the block, so there's no fixed sketch to work to'.

Production of the panels was undertaken, on the Isle of Wight, by A.J. Wells & Sons of Newport, an established company with wide experience in sign printing for companies such as London Underground. The company has worked over the years with Nexus; and Guy Wells, project leader, and David Gatrell, General Manager, have a personal interest in specialist projects such as the Bewick Commission. The core of a vitreous enamel panel is made of sheet steel (in this instance it was cut to Nexus's specifications). The enamel is a compound formulated from careful mixing of various raw materials, the most significant of which is glass or 'frit' suspended in water. This liquid is sprayed onto the steel, then dried and fired where the glass melts and chemically bonds to the steel, providing an extremely durable surface. This stage provides an initial coating followed by a second spraying and firing to establish the cream base colour.

An early meeting gave A.J. Wells sight of the first wood engraving, from which they assessed the appropriate method of reproducing the artwork to maintain its range of detailed marks and tones. Not only were there fine areas but care also was needed to maintain the richness of the solid blacks. Each engraving underwent high resolution scanning to produce a computer-generated film with print size to match its vastly enlarged screen size. The scanning resolution was set at 5,166 dpi to

give a pixel-mapped image that was converted into half-tone to print quality laser prints at 600 dpi on film. Each enlargement took four hours to scan and output. (For screenprinting, the films are positive images, giving a right reading, with emulsion side up for photographic transferral to the panel-size screens.)

At A.J. Wells & Sons the 31 large screens were coated with liquid photo-sensitive polymer emulsion. The emulsion is dried and then exposed to ultra-violet light. The film positive artwork is placed between the screen and the light source. After exposure, the areas blocked from the light by the positive film remain soft and are washed away to create a negative stencil ready for printing a positive image. The print workshop is geared for industrial scale printing and is adjacent to the furnace. Paynter had chosen cream as her base colour on which to print the black, enlarged engravings. The inks used are blends of fine enamel 'frit' (glass particles) and pine oil printed through fairly coarse thread diameter screens - 55 threads per inch mesh - which are open enough to allow the ink to make a deposit, without under or over-printing the detail.

After printing, the pine oil is dried off at a slow heat. Without doing so, it would expand too fast in the furnace and either blister the black printing or, in extreme cases, ignite and burn. The panel is carefully inserted into the furnace and fired for six minutes at a high temperature of 770 degrees centigrade, to allow the glass to melt and fuse the print permanently with the cream ground colour.

#### Installation

Wood engraving is known for its fine tone and detail, made possible with end grain wood and incising tools. These relief prints show a wealth of texture and silvery tone, for which Paynter mostly uses a No.

8 spitsticker and occasionally the round and square scorpers. What is impressive is the way in which, after huge magnification, these engravings retain the characteristic tool-marks special to wood engraving. Tonal areas have been expanded and the viewer's eye is given freedom to roam between the main themes whilst enjoying intriguing details such as the World War I acoustic mirror embedded in a hillside near Souter Lighthouse!

These epic panels were officially opened in late June. Not only is the result of this commission a significant tribute to Thomas Bewick, but its architectural presence is uplifting and, down at Metro level, offers the viewer many sights of familiar landmarks with the added excitement of views over miles of land and sea.

Limited edition prints from the series *From the Rivers to the Sea* are available from Northern Print Studio, 42-7 Fish Quay, North Shields, Tyne & Wear, UK. Tel: +44 (0)191 259 1996. E-mail: enquiry@northernprint.org.uk www.northernprint.org.uk

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Wood engraving blocks printed by: Ian Mortimer and Julia Horsfall at I.M. Imprint, Victoria Park Road, Hackney, London E9, UK. Tel: +44 (0)208 986 4201

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The Society of Wood Engravers www.woodengravers.co.uk  
The Bewick Society www.bewicksociety.org

#### Images, left to right

Hilary Paynter and Ian McLuckie at the print workshop at A.J. Wells & Sons discussing the template of finished engravings. Ian McLuckie printing the panel of the St. James football stadium. Both photographs by Kate Dicker.

*From the Rivers to the Sea* panels by Hilary Paynter at the Central Station Metro, Tyne & Wear Metro network, Newcastle upon Tyne. Photographs © Mark Pinder 2004