Footnote 38

April 2021

↵ re/discover **Fenland** for the new decade

What sets this type apart?

When Fenland was published in 2012 very little was mentioned about its design. This was intentional to see what people made of it without the distraction of background material to support its reasoning. On one hand it's simply a sans serif typeface of 14 fonts with a character set that allows it to do its job – to set text. On the other hand it questions the conventions of how letter shapes are made. This issue of Footnote takes the opportunity to look more closely at the impetus for making the typeface, its challenges, and its resulting typographic image. The text below encapsulates the essence of the typeface, it originally appeared on the Fenland District Council website.

An extraordinary place with a strange,
open beauty you won't find anywhere else.
It has a unique landscape with its own history,
its own culture,
its own way of working—
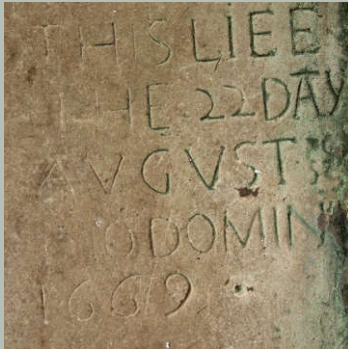*and its own way of talking.*

Fenland imagery

The graphical language created for the launch of Fenland was derived from abstracting ideas of space, scale, planes of expanse, as well as natural and man made forms .

Kinder Scout, Derbyshire

Worn tombstone, Countisbury

Adding a stroke to fake degradation

Alphabet experiment, Brian Coe

Origins

Increasingly troubled by the repetitive and self-referencing state that type design appeared to be in, I decided to go on the search to see how the shapes of letters could be made differently. Easier said than done. The drive was to challenge myself to push an idea beyond where I would normally take it, then rein it in a little to balance the overall design. Ideas and questions started in earnest on New Year's Eve 2010, whilst on a family holiday in Derbyshire. Nice surroundings and away from the distractions of tech.

— degradation of image

Initial thoughts revolved around what happens to a shape when it is weathered. A primary example being where the elements have eroded the lettering of a standing tombstone, or a laid tombstone being worn down by passing feet. The thins fade away, the sharp edges soften and corners round. A modern attempt to weather in this fashion could be via the photocopier, repeatedly copying the copy. Or applying a filter. The problem here is that the end result is anticipated and expected. Nothing new or exciting or challenging. What is interesting though are the points of thinning around a curve or its junction with a stem. And this raised the question of where these thin points could go.

— making shapes

The conundrum was that the letter shapes needed to be readable but at the same time they needed to be different. The alphabet experiment designed by Brian Coe and expanded on by Phil Baines lends some thought to what the essential part of each letter is, and then questions what can go and what can remain. However, removing letter parts became a red herring, but it did prompt the question as to how each letter could be made, and so change its underlying skeleton. Constructing letter shapes instead of writing them became the mantra. After all we don't read written forms, we read constructed illusions of writing. So could a letter remain recognisable if its skeleton was changed or dressed differently? Admittedly many letters don't offer much opportunity to be constructed differently, so, as the design progressed other ideas were needed to build the DNA of the typeface.

FF Can You (Read Me)? typeface, Phil Baines
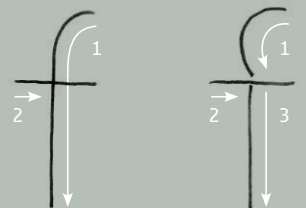
Instead of making a letter f in two strokes, as expected in writing, it could be made in three, and so create an opportunity for a junction along its crossbar

David Mellor factory, Hopkins Architects

City cutlery design, David Mellor

— inspired by industry

Not far from where the family was staying in Castleton in Derbyshire is the David Mellor factory at Hathersage with its cafe, shop, and design museum. On this visit I picked up on the tactile and fluid shaping of steel. This visual metaphor fitted with my vision for the stems and arches of letterforms; the thin points of bends reflected the thinning of a letter's curve. Instead of aligning these in accordance with the written path of a pen stroke, thin points were added at a variety of places to 'release tension', keep the line alive, and maintain a visual rhythm.

— bolstered by heroes

Comments by previous type designers helped to provoke different thinking. In 1935 William Addison Dwiggins argued about the type style born of the Renaissance: "*You don't live in Venice in 1500. This is 1935 … take letter shapes and see if you can't work them into something that stands for 1935 … Electricity, sparks, energy – high-speed steel – metal shavings coming off a lathe – precise, positive – say it with a snap … Take your curves and stream-line 'em. Make a line of letters so full of energy that it can't wait to get to the end of the measure.*" In 1960, Hermann Zapf wrote "*The type of today and of tomorrow will hardly be a faithful recutting of a 16th century roman of the Renaissance, nor the original cutting of a classical face of Bodoni's time–but neither will it be a sans-serif of the 19th century.*" In 1963 the Swiss designer Karl Gerstner wrote "*doubtless the sans serif is not the end of the development, but rather an intermediate station*". Adrian Frutiger cleverly showed his dilemma over 'what next' in a picture pairing different typeface styles with different modes of transport. It's pretty obvious that the question under the space ship remains unanswered. We've ventured into space but we still use typefaces from the mid 20th century. The 'what next' is one of the drives for new type designs.

This page and those that follow are ... Found in the first edition of *Designing Programmes* of 1963 and are also lacking in the second edition of 1965. For all my fixation on sans serif, even back then I wrote, "Doubtless sans serif is not the end of the development, but rather an intermediate station (like every previous font)."

Quite true. The thought about a possible further development of the font did indeed keep me occupied even before the conception of the *Gerstner*

Above from Designing programmes
*Below are early sketches for the typeface IBM Original, later released as Gerstner Original*

going to be.
"Electricity" he said, "sparks, energy—high-speed steel—metal shavings coming off a lathe—precise, positive—say it with a snap." I waited to see if he would get closer to something that I could use. "Take your curves and stream-line 'em. Make a line of letters so full of energy that it can't wait to get to the end of the measure. My God—these Lino machines that you tell me about—what kind of letters would *they* spit out if you left it to *them*? 1500 Venetian? Not!"
"But now look" I said, "take that Fell type. That's

Emblems and Electra, Linotype

The type of today and of tomorrow will hardly be a faithful recutting of a 16th century roman of the Renaissance, nor the original cutting of a classical face of Bodoni's time—but neither will it be a sans-serif of the 19th century. It will surely be said that most book printers and their customers demand the historical forms. But on the other hand most of the public, too, demands cheap imitations of Chippendale furniture, Renaissance writing tables and romantic reproductions. Nor is it always only the little people for whom modern forms lack appeal, since

About alphabets, The Typophiles

Illustration for 'The graphology of the centuries' chapter shown in Type Sign Symbol, *ABC Edition*

First stem internal bend was removed


*Initial idea of a bend*

Constructing shapes
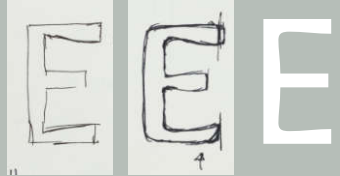
Some stages of the capital E
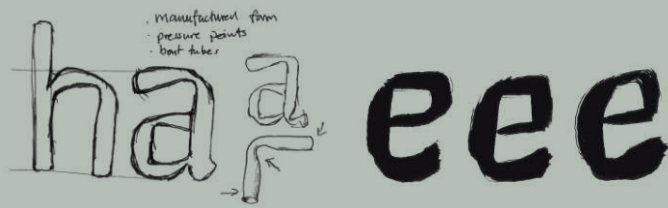
Building the design

Initial ideas prompted a brief exercise of splodging around with a brush and black ink, followed by several questions about shape construction. The idea of a bend didn't work in some situations, especially on several lowercase verticals. However, a bend was successfully incorporated in many capital letters. This allowed the upper and lowercase to balance more and even out the texture.
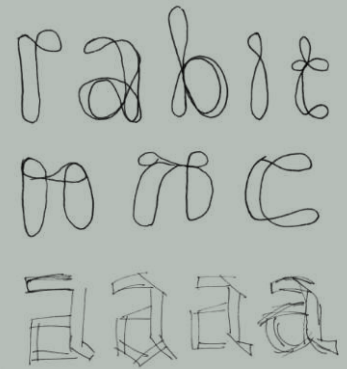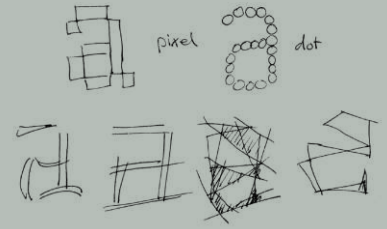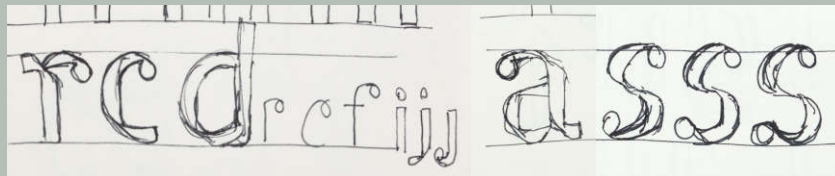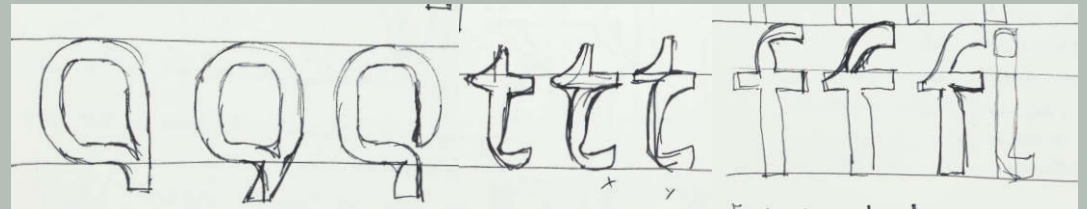

Ball terminals

Ball terminals to several lowercase letters were considered as a feature but were dropped. Other letters provided the opportunity to make quite eccentric shapes but again, pushing too far upset the integrity of the whole text image.

Trying a variety of different letter constructions

The first digital trial showed promise but as with all early stages of type design it raised many questions and issues. The second trail evened up the textural colour, but continued to highlight the need to balance the vertical, round and angular based letter shapes. As the design progressed a variety of letter designs were tested.

travel north along the road and pay the thirty pence for the toll to cross the bridge and travel over the river

typography

First digital trial

travel north along the road and pay the thirty pence for the toll to cross the bridge and travel over the river

typography

Second digital trial

travel north along the road and pay the thirty pence for the toll to cross the bridge and travel over the river
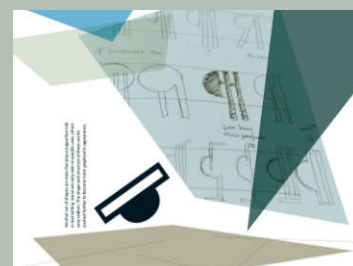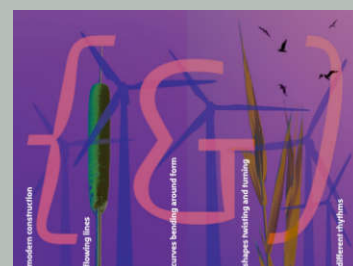
typography

Final design

Nocton Fen, *Keith Roper*


Tupholme, *Keith Roper*

Pages from the printed Fenland specimen

Showing the design

When it came to visualising material for Fenland, a primary source was the artwork of Keith Roper. Roper's pastel paintings of the Fens and surrounding areas depict a wilderness of open skies, space, and scale. They are supreme at conveying the concept of a landscape by barely hinting at any physical object. With deftly abstract gestures; planes of sky, cloud and land are marked out and made instantly recognisable. As an analogy with the typeface these images provided the ground for the graphical language. From this, planes of colour and image where cut and overlaid, silhouettes of birds fly high and boundless. Tree skeletons repeat to define horizon and scale, leaves, reed, and seed heads appear abstracted in detail. Wind turbine blades are used to offer a link from the ancient and wild landscape to modernity. All of which aims to come full circle and echo the few lines that describe the Fens which appear at the beginning of this issue of Footnote.

When the typeface was started the effects of the financial crash of 2007 were still being felt, and it was my intention to have a party at the launch of the typeface; principally to have a drink with friends still recovering from its aftershock. Considering the more recent challenges we've all faced this seems quite quaint, but one needs a drink from time to time. Kemistry Gallery in London was booked. I was happy to down some beer and chat but it dawned on me that something needed to appear on the walls for people to look at – so a mini exhibition was put together. Thirteen A1 panels told the story of the Fenland typeface from its initial idea through to final production. Perhaps on hindsight there should have been more panels as the gallery toilet flooded at the end of the evening.
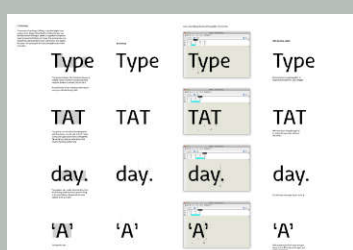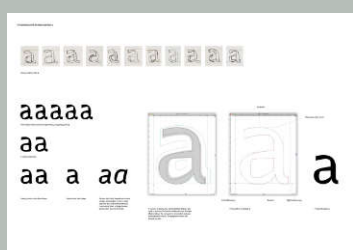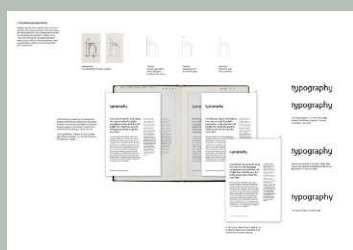
Some of the exhibition panels

Launch party at Kemistry Gallery on 19 March 2012

Pchnąć w tę łódź jeż
Victor jagt zwölf Box
großen Sylter Deich.

ExtraLight

That with the hope of plenty leans
And cheers the farmers gazing brow
Who lives and triumphs in the plough
One sometimes meets a pleasant sward
Of swarthy grass—and quickly marred
The plough soon turns it into brown

Regular

construction

Heavy

SMALL CAPITALS

Specially designed small capitals

[@type]
[@TYPE] [@TYPE]

All capital and small capital designed sorts

The typeface family

Fenland's extended character set was conceived to be functional; there was also a conscious decision not to include ligatures or swash letters, and instead let its strong personality be the core feature. Different characteristics become apparent as the weight changes from ExtraLight to Heavy. The lighter weights show a twisting and spirited rhythm, the mid weights create a lively and varied texture reflecting that of a serif typeface, and the heavier ones are more solid and steadfast.

Wide language support and advanced typographic detailing are included across all weights and styles. The character set contains small capitals, an extensive range of number sets and fractions, and the considered alignment and sizing of various sorts.

The glyphs are treated as graphical shapes and are constructed instead of written. A side effect of a constructed typeface is that it can often appear rigid and monotonous, to counteract this the stems of Fenland incorporate bends, curves and thinning details to alleviate the monotony. However, a certain degree of a manufactured quality is retained by keeping the shapes simple, and at times reinterpreting a glyph's underlying structure.

A serif typeface generally has a different structure to its lowercase than its uppercase; think of stroke terminal features and serifs, and how they differ between both sets. Not the case with a sans serif where much of the lowercase detailing is continued in the design of the uppercase. Fenland follows the former approach allowing the uppercase to follow one model and the lowercase another. The uppercase is more mannered in its construction with thin points distributed more evenly. The accompanying italic is fundamentally a sloped roman with a long *f* added. As a nod the conceptual design of Paul Renner's Futura, a straight alternate j is available. Several glyphs play a supporting role in text setting – sometimes they're rarely seen. Consequently these symbols are free to be pushed further and become more graphical, perhaps even abstract in their appearance.

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Support for a wide range of languages

123 456 123 456
789 ³ ⅚ $\frac{5}{6}$ ⁵₆

Lining and non-lining numbers (both proportional and tabular), small capital and reduced sizes for notation and fractions

O o

Different upper and lowercase construction

([{&@

◖§》

Graphical treatment of supporting glyphs

f *f*

Italic long f

j l

Straight alternate j

ExtraLight

Light

Regular

Medium

Bold

ExtraBold

Heavy

Fenland

offers a BOLD

and striking image

that's instantly

recognisable

and fresh.

Its visual UNIQUENESS

becomes especially apparent

when seen large.

Suitable for all manner of

applications and boasting a

full character set making it

capable of complex

typography.

ExtraLight Italic

Light Italic

Italic

Medium Italic

Bold Italic

ExtraBold Italic

Heavy Italic
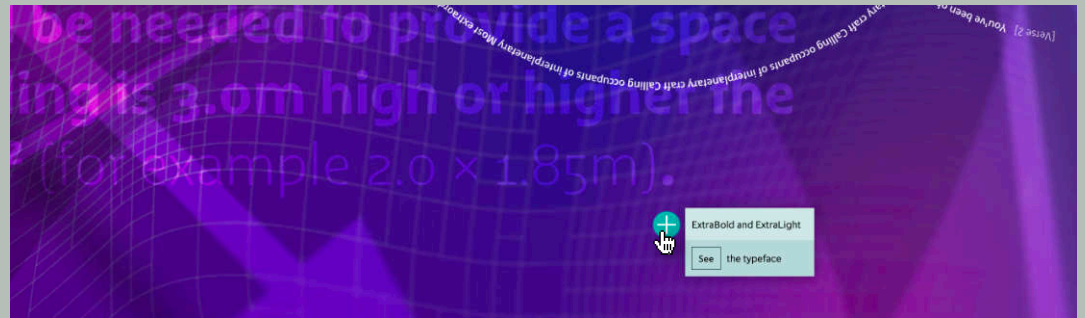
Explorer Fenland at typography.net

Try the fonts out

Discover more
Take a look at the different resources available at typography.net and studiotype.com.

— explore
There's now a dedicated Explorer page for Fenland. Glide over the typeface and explore its weights, shapes and words, then click on any of the ⊕ icons to discover more. Explorer is best experienced through a desktop, laptop or tablet. There's a link on the Fenland page as well as under Explorer on the menu bar .

— try the fonts
All the fonts can be viewed and tested through the website. You can also download each font with our Demo Licence allowing you to try them locally in your applications.

Font Info PDF

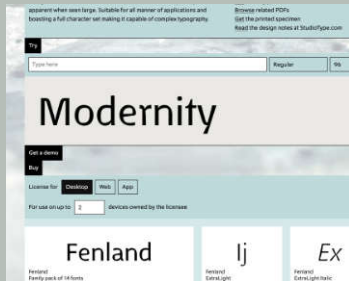*— specific information*
The Font Info PDF gives an overview of the detailing of the fonts, their features and language support.

The Fenland page at StudioType.com

— design notes
Additional information about the inspiration and development of Fenland can be seen at studiotype.com.

— specimen
A PDF version of the specimen is available to download from the Fenland page at typography.net. You can also grab a copy of the expanded printed version via the Publications section. These are free (postage applies though) and stocks are quite low.

Fenland printed specimen