

Folio Society

The Folio Society is a privately held book publisher founded by Charles Ede in 1947 to serve the UK market and now owned by Bob Gavron (who also founded the St. Ives Printing Group). The Folio Society's mandate is to provide members with 'editions of the world's great literature in a format worthy of the contents, at a price within the reach of everyman'.

Today the company's reach extends far beyond Britain's shores to serve readers in North America, New Zealand, Australia and all points in between. It is a global book club, combining traditional craft with the efficiencies of digital production and business management.

Folio Society members sign up for a minimum of four books per year, selected from a comprehensive list of titles including childrens books and numbered limited editions of the classics. They are frequently tempted throughout the membership year to purchase many more. All of the books are produced to the utmost quality levels, and all are selected on the basis of their enduring appeal and historical relevance.

The company strives to make each publication a work of art in its own right, using digital technologies and manual crafts to meet this goal with all of its titles. Enough people share the Folio Society's love of books and appreciate its artistry to have helped the company build up a substantial business. Over the last 60 years the Folio Society has grown its turnover to around £23m annually and the customer base to 140,000 worldwide. It employs 110 people, of whom 15 are involved in production.

Production Set-up

The in-house typesetting and production team produce pages with XPress 7.2. Most bindings are designed in-house, illustrations for fiction titles are commissioned from a wide range of freelance illustrators, and there is a picture research team for the non-fiction titles. All editorial material is supplied either as Word files or as photocopies of the original work. DataConnection in India re-keys the text of photocopied pages because OCR has been found to be too unreliable, due to the generally poor quality of the photocopies, some of which are of very old originals. DataConnection supplies tagged Word files ready for laying out in XPress, both for the re-keyed and digitally supplied texts.

The Folio Society uses digital hard copy proofs and machine proofs of illustrations for artists. Scanning and digital proofing are done at external repro houses as well as the Folio Society's printers' repro departments. The Folio Society has a PDF-based workflow running production checks with Acrobat. This basic preflighting is deemed satisfactory for its needs.

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▼ Artists increasingly supply digital illustrations, which sometimes require extra work to correct problems such as formatting or resolution. Artists' hard copy originals are, for the most part, scanned at the Folio Society's printers although sometimes this might be done at an outside repro house in order to retain flexibility for as long as possible before deciding on the printer. One particular difficulty which complicates repro for the Folio Society is its use of a range of different and often exclusive stocks, such as the specially made cream paper from the Favini paper mill near Venice used for its drop dead gorgeous fifteen volume Charles Dickens series.

From Letterpress to Offset and Back Again

Technology has helped the Folio Society expand its business scope. Production director Joe Whitlock-Blundell says: "20 years ago we were at two million and I had one half-time helper in production. Our department has grown exponentially more than the business has, due to the increase in publishing activity and the introduction of in-house typesetting." From a handful of titles in the early days, the company now produces over 100 titles per year, including multi-volume sets.

Most titles are produced digitally and printed offset by a range of printers in the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain. For the Folio Society, the attractions of printing further afield currently outweigh those of printing closer to home, at least for the time being. Europe is preferred for reasons of lead times and quality control. Whitlock-Blundell explains: "one of the reasons the Far East doesn't work for us as well as it does for other publishers, is because of the high unit cost of materials, which are often manufactured in Europe".

A handful of the Folio Society's special books are printed letterpress. The company reintroduced letterpress production for its series of limited editions of Shakespeare's plays. The objective was to produce the ultimate Shakespeare edition, as Whitlock-Blundell says: "I thought it would be nice to do a really good looking edition, with a separate volume containing the notes." The result is a stunningly beautiful set, with a copy of the play and commentary together costing £245. Each edition is hand bound with hand marbled sides. These books really are works of art produced with enormous care. According to Whitlock-Blundell: "Hand binding involves about 12 people and it's slow, slow, slow". Production of the Shakespeare series is going up to 3750 copies of eight titles in 2008, and the company may consider more letterpress for other titles in future. The problem is one of capacity now that letterpress is far from a mainstream printing activity. It demands approaches to workflow and deadlines that are no longer the norm but which perhaps remind us of how far digital technology has brought print production. As Whitlock-Blundell says: "Printing letterpress is a very salutary experience".

The Digital Way?

The Folio Society's business depends on its ability to use customer data to hang on to members and to encourage them to buy more than the ►



Joe Whitlock-Blundell, production director of the Folio Society.

The publishers look carefully at different market sectors to create products at different price points and for different age groups and interests, reacting to changing market needs. Whitlock-Blundell notes: “Our planning process is in a state of flux”. This might suggest that the Folio Soci-



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digital production and offset printing with elegant handcrafted finishing, using a mixture of traditional and leading edge technologies to produce truly beautiful books.

– **Laurel Brunner**

