



# Alan Kitching: A Life in Letterpress

by John L Walters

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This book features one of Darlington's lesser-known contemporary famous sons. It is a difficult book to miss, a hefty hardback and in all probability the most colourful volume in the Local Studies room. Beautifully produced, lavishly illustrated – as befits its subject – it offers an overview of the development of an artistic sensibility over a lifetime. It has more pictures than text and also includes a photographic essay showing Kitching at work in his studios in South London.

Born in Darlington in 1940, Alan attended the Primary School in Corporation Road, followed by the Secondary Modern for boys in Gladstone Street. There is a photo in the Northern Echo in late 1955 which shows him as a 14 year old with his inspirational art teacher, Mr Kay. The school had its own printing press and they were in the middle of producing Christmas cards. He began his apprenticeship as a Compositor the following year. A distinction is clearly made between the alternative careers of 'Compositor' and 'Printer' – the former being more about the design principle. Kitching remembers his mentor in the firm instructing him: "Before you start... think about the job...make a little sketch..." So I pulled out a pencil and I started drawing so I knew what to do before I started...I loved doing that. Then you set the type and did a proof.' He was often so absorbed in his work that he was late getting home – even though, as his mother remarked, he had the Town Clock to remind him of the time – he just never heard it.

At the press in Post House Wynd they would be producing everything from stationery to Theatre programmes; but Alan knew early on that what he really wanted to do was make posters. He remembers a particularly striking one that fired his imagination about what it was possible to convey in a single image. It was from a United Nations campaign for 'Freedom from Hunger' and is reproduced in the book. One of the most appealing features of the book is the space it is able to devote to illustrating almost every reference.

We follow Kitching's career from Darlington to fame in the Capital through the text but much more through the reproductions of his work. He did indeed fulfil his dream of designing posters – and amongst other things, book jackets, advertising campaigns, and graphic maps. He moved to the Experimental Printing Workshop at Watford School of Art in the 1970s, a period that culminated with the publication of his own book, 'The Typography Manual' and after that to London.

But words cannot do justice to the rich and lively clarity of his images. This is a book that demands to be savoured at leisure, rightly a pleasure in itself as an object and a work of art.