

Wynkyn de Worde - The First Printer in Fleet Street

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Wynkyn de Worde was a prominent printer and publisher in England during the late 15th and early 16th centuries, responsible for laying the foundations for commercial publishing in England. Believed to be from the town of Wörth in the Rhineland, he moved to London in 1476 to take up employment with William Caxton, who first introduced the printing press to England.

After Caxton's death in 1491, de Worde took control of Caxton's printing business, eventually relocating in around 1500 from the precinct of Westminster Abbey to premises close to the western junction of Fleet Street and Shoe Lane. This shrewd move reflected his ambition to attract the new mercantile and populist markets in the City, in addition to the Court and Ecclesiastic commissions favoured by Caxton. It also put him within easier reach of bookbinders and other associated pre-printing trade craftsmen necessary to increase his scale as a publisher.

In those days, Fleet Street was a suburb of the City of London, dominated by ecclesiastic residences, set within large gardens. The houses of local tradesmen and taverns haphazardly fringed the streets, with cap-making and bookbinding comprising the earliest trades along Fleet Street and Shoe Lane.

Whilst de Worde undertook some bespoke printing commissions for the aristocracy, he shifted his emphasis to the creation of relatively inexpensive books, poems and almanacks with popular appeal and



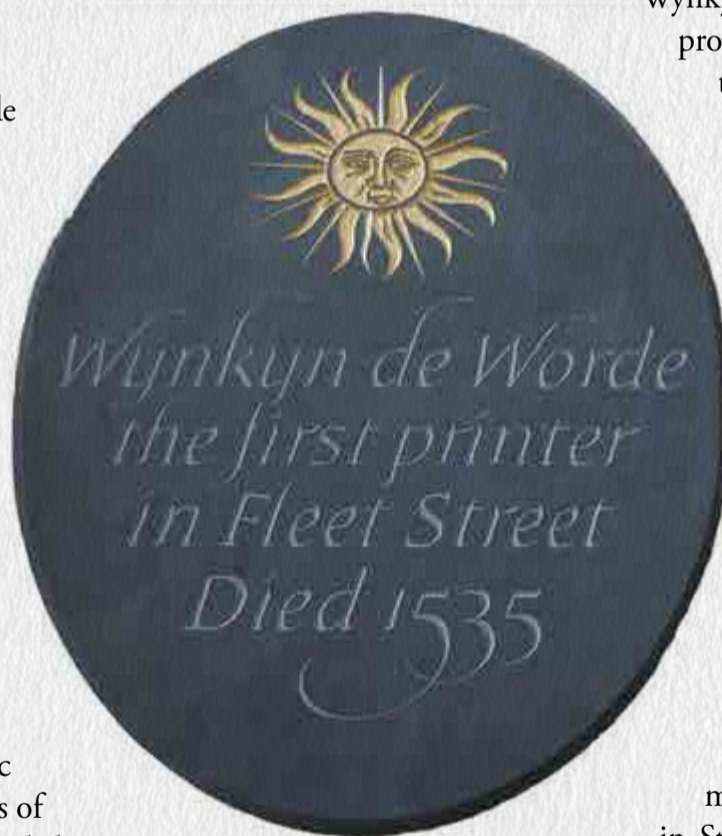
pioneered the inclusion of illustrations to attract a wider commercial audience. Although religious works dominated his output, de Worde also published a wide range of contemporary literature, including romantic novels, poetry, children's books and volumes on household practice. In all, it is estimated that from 1501 to the close of his career, Wynkyn printed over six hundred titles, several of which survive today.

De Worde is also known for his role in the development and popularization of the English language and credited with helping to standardise the spelling and grammar of English. Renowned texts printed by de Worde include the *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, *Morte D'Arthur* by Thomas Malory and *Richard Coeur de Lion*.

Wynkyn was one of the most innovative printers and prolific publishers of his era: he was the first printer to adopt italic typeface, the first to use English-made paper (produced at John Tate's mill in Hertford) and the first to print musical notes with movable type.

His business flourished and in 1509 he expanded his Fleet Street business with the addition of a shop amongst his competitors in St Paul's churchyard. He owned a number of properties in London and was important to the embryonic development of the *Misterie/Company of Stationers*, subsequently known as the *Worshipful Company of Stationers*, an organization that regulated the printing and publishing industry in England.

Wynkyn de Worde continued working into his mid-seventies. He died in 1535 and was buried in St Bride's Church. His name is perpetuated by the Wynkyn de Worde Society, founded in 1957, for "people dedicated to excellence in all aspects of printing and the various stages of its creation, production, finishing and dissemination". Plaques may be found to his memory on Stationers' Hall in Ave Maria Lane and in St Bride's Church.



Wynkyn de Worde - The First Printer in Fleet Street Additional notes

Prepared by Phillip Bennison, with the generous assistance of members of the Wynkyn de Worde Society'

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