

Stationers Company

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Follow Fleet Street up towards St Paul's, and on Ludgate Hill, at the heart of the City's historic book trade, you'll find Stationers' Hall. The Hall has stood there for 350 years, although the Stationers' Company predates that by nearly three centuries more.

Formed in 1403 from the misteries of Textwriters and Limners, and 'other good people, citizens of London, who used to bind and sell books', the Company received an unexpected boost with Caxton's introduction of the printing press to England. Granted a Royal Charter in 1557, the Stationers' Company soon dominated English book production. Sixteenth-century legislation to curb the circulation of seditious writing meant that before a text could be printed, the publisher needed to secure a licence, issued by representatives of the Crown. Then, licence in hand, the publisher headed for Stationers' Hall, to register their exclusive right to print and distribute the text, known as the 'right to copy'. Once registered, this right was held for life, and could be sold ('assigned') or bequeathed. These included Robert Copland (fl. 1505-1547), who started his career by translating popular French literature into English for Caxton's successor, Wynkyn de Worde. Copland went on to train at de Worde's printing house on Fleet Street, at the Sign of the Sun (before street numbering was introduced, businesses were identified by their signage). By 1521, he was operating his own bookshop and printing press at the sign of the Rose Garland, on the south side of Fleet Street, in premises leased from the Fishmongers' Company. His printer's device – the unique symbols adopted by early printers as a sort of trademark – uses this rose garland motif. Copland also composed his own verse, including *The Hye Way to the Spyttell Hous*, one of the earliest modern English depictions of poverty. The poem describes the plight of those reduced to seeking charity at St Bartholomew's Hospital (the 'Spyttell Hous' of the title). It's also noticeable for containing the first printed version of thieves' cant in English. Copland's son William, one of the signatories of the

Stationers' Royal Charter, took over the press at the sign of the Rose Garland in 1547.

Another Fleet Street based signatory of the Stationers' Charter was Richard Tottell (c.1528-1593). Tottell made his fortune from publishing legal texts, having been granted seven years' exclusive rights to print 'bokes of oure temporall lawe called the Common lawe' by Edward VI in 1553. This privilege was renewed for life by Elizabeth I in 1559. He used some of his resulting wealth and influence to support the Stationers' Company, and also bought large tracts of land in Buckinghamshire and Middlesex. But he's best remembered today for a landmark in publishing history: in 1557, he printed the first poetry anthology in English. Originally titled *Songes and Sonettes*, the collection soon became known as *Tottell's Miscellany*. Containing 271 poems never before printed, it aimed to provide poetry for a wider book-buying audience. A popular success, the book went through at least eight editions before 1600, and in 1584 Tottell made over its publication rights to the Stationers' Company, for 'the reliefe of the poore of the saide Companie'. Tottell's business premises were at the sign of the Hand and Star, on the north side of Fleet Street, close to the Inns of Court.

Over the centuries that followed, Stationers continued to operate from Fleet Street. In 1702, Stationer Elizabeth Mallet made history by having her name on the imprint of Britain's first daily newspaper, *The Daily Courant*, published at her premises at Fleet Bridge. Stationer Samuel Richardson composed the first English novel, *Pamela*, in the backroom of his printing house on Salisbury Court, late in 1739. As newspapers took over Fleet Street, the Stationers' Company maintained its professional associations with the street. In 1935 the Stationers amalgamated with the Company of Newspaper Makers, whose founding members included Edgar Wallace and Daily Express editor-in-chief R.D. Blumenfeld. The Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers is still active today, and you can find out more about the Company, its notable members past and present, and historic Stationers' Hall at <https://www.stationers.org/>.



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Additional notes

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