
Printing Collection Folio--913.42-OLD, University of Reading Library Special Collections.

Charles Knight’s grand-daughter, Alice Ada Clowes, wrote in her memoir *Charles Knight: A sketch* (1892) that ‘a certain amount of picturesqueness in his surroundings was necessary to Charles Knight’s happiness’. He confirmed this himself in his many pictorial publications, in which he aimed to share with his readers his love of beauty in all aspects of life. In his address to the Sheffield Athenaeum in 1847, he told his audience ‘[i]t is a real good – it is to some minds a compensation for the absence of many common blessings – to live surrounded by fine natural scenery’. He maintained that ‘[l]ow thoughts do not very readily come into the mind that is keenly, … critically alive to a perception of what constitutes a work of art’.

*Left: Colour plate from Old England*
Again, in March 1848, the Nottingham Mechanics’ Institute was informed ‘we cannot be surrounded too much with the beautiful in art; in civic halls, and wherever men congregate together for public business, or meet for social purposes in our own homes’. Given his views, it comes as no surprise to discover that Charles Knight made an active contribution to the provision of illustrated works intended to enhance his readers’ appreciation of their national heritage.

The rapid growth of towns and industry in the nineteenth century led to an increased awareness of the need to preserve our historic sites.

The movement gained momentum in the 1840s, as greater numbers of working people than ever before travelled on the new railways and took advantage of ‘excursions’ to places of interest. This increased mobility culminated in the crowds which descended on London for the Great Exhibition in 1851.
When *Old England* first appeared in the mid 1840s Charles Knight was already well-known as a publisher, writer and popular educator. Born in Windsor in 1791, he began his career as co-founder (with his bookseller/publisher father, Charles Knight senior) of *The Windsor and Eton Express*. Knight junior edited the weekly newspaper from 1812-1823, before moving to London to set up as a publisher. Financial difficulties led him to join the newly founded Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge [SDUK] in 1827 as editor of its publications. The Society’s aim was to produce cheap, quality literature for the working classes. Many of its members, including the Chairman, Lord Brougham, were active in law, politics and business. They were convinced that education was the key to progress and self improvement in the troubled years of depression following the Napoleonic Wars. The publications were intended to be ‘useful’ works of non fiction, which could be sold cheaply or made available in mechanics’ institutes. Knight empathised fully with the need for popular education. Hard working, enthusiastic and innovative, he prospered and became the SDUK’s chief publisher. However, he understood that readers sometimes looked for amusement as well as instruction. Accordingly, as an independent publisher he produced more popular ‘pictorial’ works for a mass market. These enabled him to help finance the Society’s worthy, useful and sometimes rather dull offerings.

*Colour frontispiece from Old England*
One of the Society’s publications, edited and published by Knight, did become a ‘bestseller’ in 1832. This was the famous Penny Magazine [shown above], which appeared weekly, and contained numerous illustrations and original articles. It was soon followed by the Penny Cyclopaedia. In a period when few among the ‘industrious classes’ had access to museums, art galleries and libraries, Knight’s publications made a huge impact. There followed a series of illustrated works, usually issued in parts and bound on completion, for example Shakespere, The Pictorial History of England and London, which are all available in Reading University Library. These works and others, including Old England, catered to the burgeoning market for national literature and history, part of the ‘heritage’ movement, which fostered national pride.

Knight was active in the movement which promoted ‘Olden Times’ and ‘Merrie England’. His personal interests prompted publications on useful and fine arts, topography, literature and history, while he and his family took part in Charles Dickens’ theatricals to raise money for Shakespeare’s birthplace. He was also encouraged by his printers, William Clowes and Sons. One of the sons, George Clowes, married Knight’s daughter, Mary in 1836. The connection was important. The Clowes printing firm used state-of-the-art technology, which was vital for cheap illustrated publications in the 1830s. The company refrained from pressing Knight to pay his debts, when he was in financial difficulties in 1841, owing to the heavy taxation on paper. Clowes also printed the official catalogue for the Great Exhibition.
An example of one of the historical scenes depicted in Old England. The engraving shows the battle of Worcester, and the flight of Charles II from the Parliamentary soldiers. In the bottom left-hand corner of the image there is an engraving of the old wooden house, in the Cornmarket, Worcester in which Charles lodged.

Knight was sometimes altruistic in his publishing ventures, but he was also shrewd and not one to miss an opportunity. Old England was aimed directly at the heritage mass market. Reading University Library is fortunate to possess two editions of Knight’s Old England, a kind of early coffee table book, folio in size and profusely illustrated. Unusually for Knight, the text and illustrations are on separate pages, not integrated. The editions differ in several respects. The work was first issued in ninety-six parts between 1844 and 1845 and sold at sixpence a copy. According to Ruari McLean the two bound volumes contain twenty-four colour plates and no less than two thousand, four hundred and eighty-eight numbered wood-engravings, and twelve plates of etched portraits, six on a page. Many of the black and white illustrations were recycled from Knight’s earlier publications, including The Penny Magazine, The Pictorial History of England, J. R. Planché’s History of British Costume and Knight’s own Caxton.
However, as the publisher declares in his ‘Advertisement’ [see above], the colour plates were created expressly for *Old England* [see example below]. They are outstanding examples of colour printing using the method which Knight patented himself in 1838. The process involved using wood and/or metal relief blocks in which all the colours (at first, four, but later up to sixteen) were printed one after the other on to the paper so that each print was finished before the next was started.
Knight’s aim was to produce cheap colour plates to be used in his many pictorial publications for a mass market, but the cost proved prohibitive. For publishing runs of less than ten thousand copies hand colouring was cheaper, and it appears that Knight used the process experimentally chiefly in Old England and the complementary volume Old England’s Worthies (1847; Reading University Library holds a reprint by Sangster). The ‘Illuminated Engravings’ in the edition of Old England published by Sangster are markedly inferior, the colours lacking the delicacy and subtlety of the original. However, the 1864 edition has a further sixteen full-page colour prints, (forty in all, including one engraved from a photograph, rather than the usual hand engraving). The reprint featured a charming plate of Chaucer [see below], although most of the prints are again of architectural subjects. There are a number of monuments, tombs, chapels and halls, some displaying fine details of windows, painted screens and ceilings. The work also contains two additional final chapters on ‘the progress of society for the last hundred years’.
W.A. Chatto and John Jackson, authors of *A Treatise on Wood Engraving* (1839) testified that Knight was a ‘liberal encourager of designers and engravers on wood’ (p.405). In the case of *Old England*, the designer was probably T. Scandrett, who signed two of the plates. They were then engraved by S. Sly. The image below shows an example of one of the many pages of wood-engravings in *Old England*, arranged in the style of a scrapbook. An engraving of portraits of Shakespeare is surrounded by other engravings relating to the theatre, including a portrait of one of Shakespeare’s actors, Richard Burbage (bottom row, far right), and an engraving of the Globe Theatre (centre right).

Knight summed it all up in the ‘Advertisement’, which prefaced his publication. He wrote ‘Our work is addressed to the People; but the knowledge which it seeks to impart will be as scrupulously accurate as if it were exclusively intended for the most critical antiquary. To be full and correct it is not necessary to be tedious and pedantic’. The emphasis on accuracy applied not only to the text, but also to the images of this ‘most interesting series of Picturesque Antiquities’. *Old England* was a notable contribution to the general cultural movement. Indeed, almost without exception, Knight’s self-authored and edited works reflected the new cultural awareness, and in so doing he produced some remarkable volumes of great beauty. In his view, the excursion train was ‘one of our best public instructors’ enabling the ‘humblest observer [to] rise early in the morning, and return late at night with an accumulation of knowledge of the best kind – that of actual observation – which very few of the last generation ever dreamt of acquiring in a lifetime’. The eager
educator did all he could to encourage the ‘pleasure tourists’ of the 1840s to take an informed interest in their surroundings.

Note: Many of Knight’s publications are available in University of Reading Library. They may be found in the Printing Collection, the Great Exhibition Collection, the Overstone Collection (the core of this collection was originally owned by the economist J.R. McCulloch, who was a member of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge); and on the shelves of the Main Library. The Publishers Archive also contains material from the printers, William Clowes and Sons.

References

- Strong, Roy, And When Did You Last See Your Father? The Victorian Painter And British History (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978).