

GREYCAINE BOOK MANUFACTURING COMPANY, WATFORD

Greycaine Industrial Estate in North Watford takes its name from Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company, which moved there in 1926. Despite the fact that Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company was one of the pioneers in the mass production of good quality books sold at prices accessible to all, little has been written about it. This is its story.

ORIGINS OF GREYCAINE BOOK MANUFACTURING COMPANY

Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company derived its name from its Directors, Frank Grey and (Gordon) Ralph Hall Caine. Frank Grey was born Francis John Christian Gruneisen in 1869 in Camberwell, son of John Gruneisen, a book binder. John Gruneisen started a binding business at St. Andrew's Hill, City, which later moved to Bishop's Court, Old Bailey, and then to Baldwin's Gardens, Holborn.¹

Frank began an apprenticeship as a bookbinder, but abandoned it at the age of 19 and went to America, where he spent 7 years. On his return, Frank worked in his father's business for a time, before starting his own business in Cross Street, Islington, later moving to Laycock Street, Islington. By 1908/9, Frank had been joined in the business by Ralph Hall Caine, and the Company name was subsequently changed from Gruneisen to Greycaine.²

Ralph Hall Caine was born in 1884 in Hampstead, son of Thomas Henry Hall Caine (1853-1931). (Thomas)³ Hall Caine was a successful and well-known novelist of his time, selling around 10 million copies of his 15 novels.⁴ (Thomas) Hall Caine was also a major shareholder of Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company.⁵

Ralph Hall Caine was educated at King William's College on the Isle of Man, after which he went into the paper and printing trade, serving his apprenticeship partly in England and partly in America.⁶ During the First World War he was chief technical adviser on paper to the Ministry of Munitions and other government departments, and was made Deputy Controller of Paper in 1918.⁷ In 1920, he was awarded the CBE, and in 1922 he became a Conservative MP. He was a director of paper-making and other companies, and involved in many other projects, some with his brother, Derwent.

¹ *The Greycaine News*, No. 1, 11 May, 1927, p 2

² In *The Greycaine News*, No 1, Frank Grey says that the Company name was changed to Greycaine in 1908, but it appears that this may not actually have happened for some years.

³ Thomas Hall Caine did not use the name Thomas and was known as Hall Caine, but it is used here for clarity, to distinguish him from other members of the family.

⁴ Hammond, Mary, 'Hall Caine and the Melodrama on Page, Stage and Screen', in *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 31 (1) p 39

⁵ Allen, V, *Hall Caine, Portrait of a Victorian Romancer*, 1997, p 385

⁶ *The Times*, 7 March 1962, p 14

⁷ *Ibid*

THE MOVE TO WATFORD

The Company moved from Laycock Street, Islington, to Bushey Mill Lane, Watford, in 1926. The main reason given for the move was the need for larger premises. However, Frank Grey, the Managing Director, also pointed to Union issues. After the move to Watford, he wrote: “I shall continue to run this factory [in Watford] as an open shop, open to both Union and non-Union workers. I closed the factory at Laycock Street because the workers did not play the game.”⁸

Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company moved on to a 20 acre site in Bushey Mill Lane, near Watford North Railway Station. It possessed its own railway sidings, connecting with the main line from Euston, thus enabling fast and easy deliveries to and from the works. The site also already contained some large wooden buildings, which had been used as a munitions factory during the First World War, although these were replaced with stronger and less flammable structures as quickly as possible.⁹

The works were rapidly equipped with all the machinery necessary for carrying out the many processes involved in the mass production of books, and everything, from setting to the delivery of completed books, was done on the premises.¹⁰ Greycaine also had its own staff of builders and carpenters for erecting buildings, and engineers for maintenance.¹¹ Facilities for staff included mess rooms with meals provided at net cost, a dance and concert room, football ground, tennis courts, rest room and accident department.¹²

Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company achieved an impressive output, producing books both for its own publishing company – the Readers Library Publishing Company – and for other well-known publishers.

THE READERS LIBRARY PUBLISHING COMPANY

The Readers Library Publishing Company was started around 1924. Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company put up most of the capital and had a controlling share.¹³ Ralph Hall Caine’s brother, Derwent, was Managing Director, and Frank Grey a Director.¹⁴

The aim of the Readers Library was stated as being “to bring the best-known novels of the world within the reach of the millions, by presenting at the lowest possible price per copy, in convenient size, on excellent paper, with beautiful and durable binding, a long series of the stories, copyright and non-copyright, which everyone has heard of and could desire to read.”¹⁵

⁸ *The Greycaine News*, No. 1, 11 May, 1927, p 4

⁹ ‘A Modern Book Printing Factory’, in *The British Printer*, vol XLI, May/June 1928, p 22

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 22-4

¹¹ *Activity, the Organ of the Home Counties Master Printers Alliance*, vol 5, no 7, April 1934, p 252

¹² ‘A Modern Book Printing Factory’, in *The British Printer*, vol XLI, May/June 1928, p 24

¹³ Allen, V, *Hall Caine, Portrait of a Victorian Romancer*, 1997, p 385

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ Foreword to Readers Library books

The titles of the Readers Library were said to be selected by “one of the most distinguished of living men of letters”,¹⁶ and although he was not named, it is likely that this was Ralph Hall Caine’s father, (Thomas) Hall Caine, the novelist. The Readers Library was also the first to produce ‘the book of the film’.

The books were sold for 6d in Woolworths and newsagents shops.¹⁷ They proved to be very popular, well-produced, hardback books, and regardless of the disdain of people like Q.D. Leavis, made some good novels accessible to a wide audience. (See Appendix 3) Penguin Books were also later sold for 6d at Woolworths, but Sir Allen Lane, the founder of Penguin Books, recalled that when he first approached Woolworths, their buyer said he thought “Readers Library is better value”.¹⁸

The Readers Library, although immensely successful, eventually succumbed to competition. In 1935, Penguin paperbacks appeared, and the Queensway Press started to publish ‘Chevron’ books, with card covers, in direct competition with the Readers Library books, and the latter soon ceased production.¹⁹

CHANGING FORTUNES OF GREYCAINE BOOK MANUFACTURING CO.

In 1934, the Home Counties Master Printers Alliance (HCMPA) held its Annual Meeting at the Greycaine Works in Bushey Mill Lane, and was full of praise for its achievements. In February 1934, an article in ‘Activity’, the journal of the HCMPA portrayed a flourishing company:

“During the last twelve months four large additions to the factory have been made, giving a new floor space of 50,000 square feet. All these new additions have been built by the firm’s own Works Department and are model fireproof workshops with wonderful light and fitted with very advanced methods for handling large quantities of work.

“The equipment of The Greycaine Company extends beyond the actual printing and binding of books. The well-known Readers Library sales now exceed 7,000,000 copies. The Editorial Department creates new editions and revises standard works bringing them up-to-date and re-issuing them at prices within the range of the average book buyer, completing the entire circle of book production.

“Probably the most astounding development associated with the plant installed originally for the manufacture of Readers Library has been the Firm’s association with the Odhams Press in launching the sixteen volumes edition of ‘Charles Dickens’ Works.²⁰ The placing of this work in the hands of the masses at a price they were able to pay was

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Leavis, QD, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 1932, ch 1.

¹⁸ ‘The Penguin Story: Sir Allen Lane’s 50 years’, in *The Times*, 22 April, 1969

¹⁹ Webb, Denis Le Plastrier, ‘The Family Business of Printing and Bookbinding’ in unpublished family history by son-in-law of Frank Grey, p 66

²⁰ Published by Odhams Press, made and printed by Greycaine Book Manufacturing Company

probably the greatest thing ever done in the world of books. The demand from the first was enormous and orders for the edition went ahead in leaps and bounds until it nearly reached the half-million mark.”²¹

In the April 1934 edition of ‘Activity’, it was noted that Greycaine employed a workforce of 1,200, and had recently handled an order for “six million large books (500,000 each of 12 vols.) printed and fully bound”. This would have been the Encyclopaedia called ‘The Wonderland of Knowledge’, which was published by Odhams Press, and printed and bound by Greycaine. This is a delightful set, packed with fascinating information on a wide variety of subjects, complete with illustrations, some in colour. Volume 3 contains a section showing how the book was produced, with several photographs taken inside the Greycaine works.²²

However, by 1935/6, the Company was facing serious problems. As noted above, the Readers Library succumbed to competition, resulting in an enormous loss of work. Also, in 1936, Odhams Press, which had provided Greycaine with a lot of work, moved to Watford, and started printing its own books.²³ Frank Grey was not a man to give up, and in 1937, he decided to embark on colour printing, and bought some expensive equipment from abroad.²⁴ This tipped the Company over the edge, and in 1938, the Court made a Winding Up Order, taking control of the Company from Frank Grey and Ralph Hall Caine, and placing it in the hands of the Receiver and the Liquidator.²⁵

This process was a long and complicated one, summarised by a solicitor member of the Grey family as follows: “Over a long period the Receiver gradually realized the Assets. While he was doing so, the Company’s property was heavily war-damaged and a claim for compensation was lodged with the War Damage Commission – and held up by Officialdom for years. The claim was finally paid late in 1954 – nine years after the war ended. The Receiver was then, at last, able to clear off his Debenture loans and to hand over a surplus of £149,634.4s.1d to the Liquidator.”²⁶

Meanwhile printing continued at the Greycaine works. In 1941, the business and assets of Greycaine Ltd. (in liquidation) were put up for sale as a going concern.²⁷ By 1942, Taylor, Garnett and Evans had moved in. For more than a decade, the name Greycaines, Taylor, Garnett, Evans and Co. Ltd. was used, but by 1956, it had become simply Taylor, Garnett, Evans and Co. Ltd, printers.²⁸

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²¹ ‘The Greycaine Works’ in *Activity, the Organ of the Home Counties Master Printers Alliance*, vol 5, no 5, February 1934, p 191

²² Between pages 1088 and 1089

²³ Webb, Denis Le Plastrier, ‘The Family Business of Printing and Bookbinding’ in unpublished family history by son-in-law of Frank Grey, p 66

²⁴ *Ibid*, p 67

²⁵ *Ibid*, p 67

²⁶ Extract from letter written in 1956 by Denis Le Plastrier Webb’s father, a solicitor, in *Ibid*, p 69

²⁷ *The Times*, 5 July 1941, p 8

²⁸ Kelly’s Directories of Watford. The last entry at that site for Taylor Garnett Evans & Co. is 1972

APPENDIX 1: GREYCAINE MANAGERIAL STAFF, 1927

Managing Director	Frank Grey
Director	G Ralph Hall Caine, C.B.E., M.P.
Director	George Bowler, J.P.
Secretary	Miss Annie Day
General Manager	Horace Grey
Greycaine Representative	Percy Gawthorne
Office Manager	J Norman
Printing Mangager	W.O.P. Gibb
Bindery Manager	Arthur Carbery
Bindery Foreman	A.J. Nicholls
Printing Machine Dept. Manager	F. Brockman
Composition and Foundry Dept. Manager	W. Jack
Embossing and Gold Laying Dept. Manager	S. Hodgetts
Stock Dept. Manager	A. Mountain
Machine Case Making Manager	W.H. Coates
Folding Machines Manager	E Mountain
Book Despatch Dept. Manager	W. Bevan
Readers Library Despatch Dept. Manager	H. Gawthorne
White Paper Dept. Manager	A. Neave
Bindery Warehouse Dept. Manager	J. Bevan
Imperfection Dept. Manager	H. Bird
Engineering Dept. Manager	R. Bunyard
Binding Dept. Manageress	Miss E Spiers
Binding Dept. Assistant Manageress	Miss N Philipps
Folding Dept. Forelady	Mrs E Smith

From: *The Greycaine News*, No. 1, 11 May, 1927, p 8

APPENDIX 2: FOREWORD TO READERS LIBRARY BOOK

FOREWORD

THE READERS LIBRARY is intended to bring the best-known novels of the world within the reach of the millions, by presenting at the lowest possible price per copy, in convenient size, on excellent paper, with beautiful and durable binding, a long series of the stories, copyright and non-copyright, which everybody has heard of and could desire to read.

Nothing of the kind has ever before been possible, even in the days when book production has been least expensive. To render it possible now it will be necessary that each volume should have a sale of hundreds of thousands of copies, and that many volumes of the series should in due course find their way into nearly every home, however humble, in the British Empire.

The publishers have the utmost confidence that this end will be achieved, for, already, in less than four years that these books have been on the market, upwards of forty million copies have been sold in Great Britain alone.

The novels of the READERS LIBRARY will be selected by one of the most distinguished of living men of letters, and a short biographical and bibliographical note on the author and his works will be appended to each volume.

From: Readers Library Edition of *Alice in Wonderland*

APPENDIX 3: 1927 LIST OF READERS LIBRARY BEST SELLERS

Hunchback of Notre Dame	710,000
Blue Lagoon	550,000
Raffles	“
Ten Commandments	“
Thief of Bagdad	400,000
Tale of Two Cities	380,000
Alice in Wonderland	350,000
Constant Nymph	“
Merry Widow	335,000
East Lynne	305,000
Grimms Fairy Tales	300,000
Ghost Train	“
Manhandled	“
Pam	“
Les Miserables (Film)	260,000
Water Babies	255,000
Andersen’s Fairy Tales	250,000
Ben Hur	“
Black Tulip	“
Havoc	“
Luck of Roaring Camp	“
Little Women	“
She	“
Tales of Mystery	“
Uncle Tom’s Cabin	“
Call of the Wild	245,000
Xmas Carol	230,000
Black Beauty	220,000
Iron Pirate	215,000
Shulamite	“
Ann Veronica	200,000
Beatrice	“
Beloved Vagabond	“
Black Pirate	“
Buried Alive	“
Cleopatra	“
Cobra	“
Devil’s Garden	“
Eagle	“
Greensea Island	“
Gulliver’s Travels	“
Heart of Unaga	“
Iron Horse	“

King Solomon's Mines	“
Last Days of Pompeii	“
Last of the Mohicans	“
Les Miserables (Fantine)	“
Mill on the Floss	“
Morals of Marcus Ordeyne	“
Man in the Iron Mask	“
Man in the Twilight	“
Queen's Necklace	“
Robinson Crusoe	“
Sea Beast	“
Sea Wolf	“
Silas Marner	“
So Big	“
Typhoon	“
Toilers of the Sea	“
Three Men in a Boat	“
20,000 Leagues under the Sea	“

From: *The Greycaine News*, No. 1, 11 May, 1927, p 7