

## Commercial at @

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James Mosley

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### **A b s t r a c t**

This article is the reprint of an October 6, 2013 blog posting on the history of the "commercial at" sign.

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### **Key words**

*design history, typography, font design*

The “commercial at,” the character @, has needed more historical investigation for some time, and indeed I have drafted many texts on it without posting them. This was not so much because the Wikipedia article on @ was seriously defective. It does, as one might expect, supply a great deal of what is needed. But the published information has failed to settle some of the puzzling details that we have some right to expect would have been resolved by now.

In his mostly excellent brief history for a non-professional readership, *Ancient Writing and Its Influence* (1932), the palaeographer B. L. Ullman rather rashly remarked,

The national hands which grew out of cursive preserved a still greater number of ligatures. The Carolingian hand suppressed most of them... But some of them were too well established and therefore have persisted to this day. The most important of all was that of et, introduced into formal writing by half uncial. We use it in English for “and”, the equivalent for Latin et, and call it “ampersand” (“and per se and”) a name that arose when this character was placed at the end of the alphabet and was recited with the other letters: “x, y, z, and, per se [by itself] (the character standing for) and”. This has taken on many different forms in different styles of writing and printing, but nearly all are based on the old & and the italic &. ... Other ligatures still in use are ae (æ) ... There is also the sign @, which is really for ad, with an exaggerated uncial d.

The “lay” or arrangement of types in the compositor’s case, although it had mostly become fairly standardized, tended to vary in some of its details from printing-house to printing-house, according to the kind of work that was chiefly set there. The abandonment of long s and its ligatures in about 1800, which had occupied nearly twenty sorts of the roman and italic fonts, freed up some space in the case. The 1892 edition of *Practical Printing* by John Southward showed a series of non-alphabetic characters in its example of an “improved” upper case which had not been in a normal case earlier in the century.

figure 1

*Practical Printing*, 1892

ä	â	ö	ê	ï	î	ö	ô	û	¼	½	@	℔	=	~	☞	¶	
à	á	è	é	ì	í	ò	ó	ù	¾	⅞	8	9	0	*	†	‡	§
'	°	‰	\$	ℓ	£	⅜	⅝	⅔	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		

These, shown above, in the top three rows of the upper case, included not only @ and the mostly redundant “per cent” character %, but

also the pound sign £, the dollar \$, and also types for the calligraphic “per” and for lb (the pound weight). These were all needed for use in commercial jobs like the printing of catalogues of goods for sale. The & was included in one of the small boxes at the left hand side of the lower case, which had long been its traditional place. The lb character with its cross stroke became obsolete, but it is worth noting that it was used throughout the 29 volumes of the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, set on the Monotype machine.

Many of these characters migrated to the typewriter, which was introduced as a commercial machine for use in offices. No significant domestic market for it was imagined by its original makers, just as the first makers of computers notoriously could not believe that there might be a domestic market for their product. The “commercial characters” were not found on every early typewriter, but it seems to be agreed that most of them, including @, had been placed on typewriters by the early twentieth century, and thereafter few typewriter keyboards lacked them. For this reason, these symbols were unquestioningly adopted by the makers of computer keyboards, who were rigidly bound by tradition.

The “per” symbol (which was admittedly a rather elaborate design) failed to get onto the normal typewriter keyboard and has faded from memory. However, one symbol that did, although few users of computers had any idea what it was for and how to use it, was of course @. Since it appeared to be both universally available and largely useless, it was adopted, as we know (the event has been well-documented), for use with the internet and with email. And although it has been a nuisance to the designers of fonts, who have rarely found its form easy to adapt to match traditional letters, there seems little likelihood that we shall get rid of it easily. The @ we have is rooted in the commercial handwriting of the 19th century.

If this is the case, we are entitled to ask why this is and where and when did it begin to be used? Surely this is a question that it should be easy enough to answer.

Since the question was of no interest to academic historians of writing or typography, enthusiastic amateurs entered the discussion, scattering a profusion of badly-informed ideas. Not long ago, the blogosphere seemed to be full of their excited chatter. Here is some of it, from Italian and Spanish blogs:

Scoperta! la @ è italiana! (Discovery! The @ is Italian!)

La chiocciola @ di e-mail è una invenzione tutta italiana. (The @ is a wholly Italian invention.)

¿Creó un sevillano la @? (Did a Sevillian create the @?)

Sevilla utiliza la @ como reclamo turístico. (Seville uses the @ as publicity for tourism.)

La arroba no es de Sevilla (ni de Italia). (The @ is not from Seville, nor from Italy.)

La @ ya se utilizaba en 1448 en Aragón. (The @ was already in use in Aragon in 1448.)

It would be churlish to spoil their evident enjoyment of such stuff. (Googling will bring up plenty more examples.) We can only hope that they lead to lines of enquiry that are frankly more worth pursuing.

One of these is the claim that the @ stood for the amphora, the vessel for wine or oil that stood for a unit of measurement known to Greeks and Arabs, and that the Anglo-Saxons (commercial rivals from England and the USA) eventually stole the symbol for their own use. The other line, worth pursuing because it has left its trace in current usage, is that the @ stands for arroba, a unit of weight and capacity of Arabic origin, long used in the Spanish-speaking world, which was only eliminated by the adoption of the metric system. Arroba is still the Hispanic word for @.

I have no intention here of raking through among the embarrassingly cute terms that are currently used for the @ in other languages by writers who have stumbled on it for the first time, like the *chiocciola* (snail) in Italian – see above – or the “monkey’s tail” (Dutch), or the etymologically dubious arrobase that is used for some reason in France. Most of the discussion in circulation is dismally facetious and credulous.

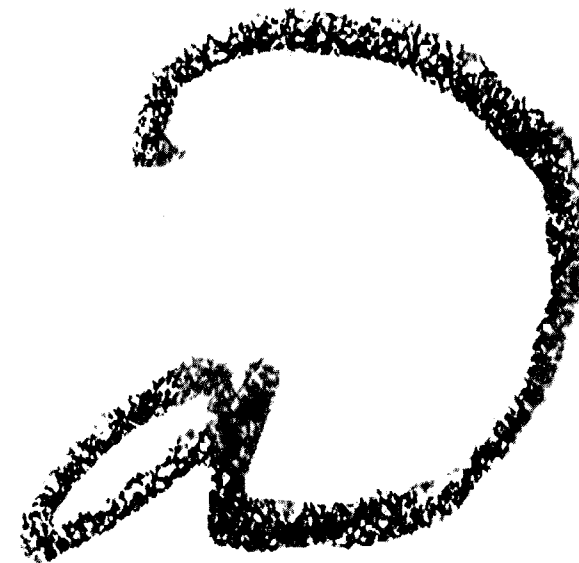
Still, since there is usually some basis underlying many myths in current circulation, one purpose in offering this post (which I hope will soon be rendered obsolete) is to identify these myths and to distinguish between them.

I said that Ullman was rash in appearing to link the use of @ to &, saying that both symbols were “still in use”, though in justice to him, one must note that – unless one takes his reference to “uncial” literally – he did not assign an early manuscript use to it (as at least one online source has accused him of doing). The ampersand did indeed arrive in current use in the 15th century with the revived Carolingian hand of humanism, and it was adopted for their types by Italian printers like Jenson. It is sometimes a delightful design, which has attracted some major punchcutters, but one should note that it was unwise of the BBC in 2012 to let an enthusiast attempt to trace its history on its Radio 4 (of all unsuitable non-visual media). In that context it should have been noted that the inspirational punchcutter was Granjon rather than Garamont, and that the old Roman “Tironian” shorthand symbol for “and” (looking a bit like the figure 7) was not a ligature of e and t, and although it remained in common use in gothic script and types, it (and they) faded eventually from use.

But what about the @? When did it enter into use in commercial writing? Like most people, I suspect, I thought it had been normal English usage in business papers for some centuries. Then I tried to find examples. It was not easy. I found nothing from the 17th century. One of the earliest convincing examples I have found was something – but hardly more than an ill-defined scribble – in the papers of William Strahan (1715–1785), whose prosperity among contemporary printers in London was commonly supposed to be due to his exemplary business methods. The example that follows is simply my rough sketch from a document of 1739 (Add. MS 48800, f. 17v) among the Strahan Papers in the British Library.

figure 2

author's drawing from writing of William Strahan, 1739



It is the earliest example that I have found. Thereafter (but much later and far more slowly than I had thought), the symbol did indeed begin to be adopted in British practice for “at a certain price” or “at a rate of”. This example of the @ as a printing type, which is the first that I have found anywhere, is in a specimen of the Miller typefoundry in Edinburgh, 1822.

figure 3

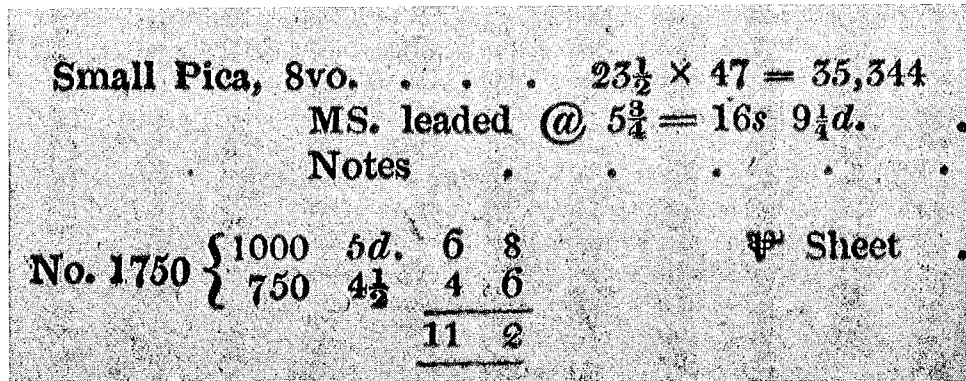
Miller typefoundry, 1822

O tempora, o mores! Senatus hoc intelligit,  
consul videt: hic tamen vivit. Vivit? imo vero  
etiam in senatum venit: fit publici consilii parti-  
iceps: notat et designat oculis ad caedem unum-  
ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTU VW  
ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTU VWXYZÆCE  
£ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 @ 1 1 1 2 3 1 3 5 7 1 0 1 2 1 6

It can be seen again in an English manual of printing (T. C. Hansard, *Typographia*, 1825), in a passage reproducing handwritten book-keeping. (Notice, too, the use here of a typographical version of the symbol for “per”.)

figure 4

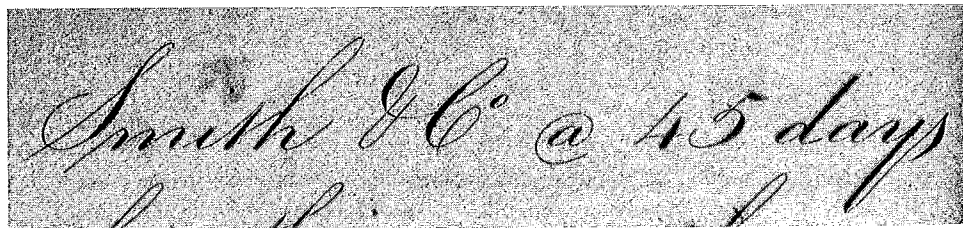
*Typographia*, 1825



Here, finally, is an example of @ in a British handbook of instructions for book-keeping, C. Morrison, *Practical bookkeeping*, Edinburgh, 1838. It is very nicely drawn, but its date is quite late.

figure 5

*Practical bookkeeping*, 1838



What about the Spanish connection? In 2000 there was a flurry of excitement about the “discovery” of the early use of @ by an Italian academic. The source was Professor Giorgio Stabile, of La Sapienza university in Rome, who was engaged on an article for the Treccani encyclopedia, one of the enterprises that Google and Wikipedia have to some extent displaced for use in our current research.

Stabile let it be known to some friends in the media that in the course of his researches into commercial documents he had found an early use of @ in the correspondence of some Italian merchants based in Seville in 1536. This discovery made news, and it still generates some excitement in journals that should know better, like the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*, who keep obsolete links alive to Stabile and his important researches.

It would have been satisfactory if Professor Stabile had been more candid about the source of his “discovery”. To his credit, he did later acknowledge that his “research” among original documents consisted in this case of finding an example in a well-known, well edited and well illustrated published collection of commercial correspondence that had been made some decades before by Federigo Melis, *Documenti per la storia economica dei secoli XIII–XVI*, con una nota di Paleografia Commerciale di Elena Cecchi. Firenze: Olshki, 1972 (Istituto Internazionale di Storia economica “F. Datini” Prato, Pubblicazioni – Serie I. Documenti, 1). The documents that Stabile claimed to have found are illustrated on pages 214–215, and the originals are among the Strozzi papers in the Archivio di Stato, Florence.

Stabile explained that the symbol @ in this text stood for containers of wine measured by the unit known as the amphora, and he suggested (but without providing sources) that this was a widely-used Mediterranean unit of measurement. He might have added – but he did not – that in several of the commercial letters shown in his book by Melis, the @ is also commonly used for the date, in phrases like “Ad di 20 di gennaio” (on 20 January), which takes it closer to its later use in business documents. He made no reference to its more general use in contemporary Italian commercial handwriting or the scrittura mercantesca, on which, as its title shows, a useful appendix in Melis’s book was contributed by Elena Cecchi.

How far did the historians of writing contribute to the story? For writing of the Italian Renaissance they gave most of their attention to the cancellaresca corsiva, the official “chancery hand” derived from the humanistic cursive of the 15th century which was shown in a well-known series of printed handbooks of the 16th century. All the same, in several of these handbooks an example of the gothic commercial hand, the mercantesca, was often to be found at the back. There is in fact a little handbook of the hand by Eustachio Celebrino, an associate of the writing master Tagliente, *Il modo di imparare di scrivere lettera merchantescha*, 1525, but it does not appear to include examples of the use of @.

The earliest example of the @ character that I have found in an Italian writing book is in a document in the commercial hand in a letter dated 8 May 1557, a woodcut at the end of the first publication of Giovanni Francesco Cresci, the *Essempiare di scrivere più sorti lettere*, published in Rome in 1560, with the phrase, ponete @ conto nostro – “put [the sum] to our account”.



## Addendum

This informal article began with a reference to discontent with the confused, often badly informed and sometimes chauvinistic sources of information that frustrated my own attempts to understand where this symbol came from and what it has meant. It made me doubt whether I should add yet another contribution to the debate.

figure 9



### Du rare à l'unique

Conférences à l'école nationale des chartes,  
en Grande salle, de 17 h à 19 h.

Du rare à l'unique. Pourquoi ce titre? Certains événements, artefacts ou productions immatérielles pourraient être perçus à première vue comme des exceptions, voire des curiosités insusceptibles de portée générale.

Pourtant, ce qui risquerait de passer pour de simples objets d'érudition se révèle parfois, à force d'érudition même, comme des points de convergence de toutes sortes de questionnements historiques où le rare côtoie l'unique et l'exemplaire, pour se transformer en noyau porteur d'énergie fondamentale.

29 janvier 2013 - La véritable histoire de l'arobase, par Marc Smith, professeur de paléographie à l'école nationale des chartes.

L'arobase ou nœud arrobe (@), hier signe graphique rare et marginal, aujourd'hui symbole de l'internet voire même unique de la communication moderne, a fait l'objet des géologues les plus confusés et contradictoires. La conférence cherchera à en préciser l'origine, ou plutôt les origines, depuis le monde méditerranéen de la Renaissance et l'Angleterre du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Ce sera aussi l'occasion de réfléchir en retour à la manière dont l'information, sur l'internet, se forme, circule et se déforme sans fin.

However I am glad that I did, because it has led me to discover a substantial body of work that will do much to clear up the confusion. In January 2013 Marc Smith, Professor of Mediaeval and Modern Palaeography at the École nationale des Chartes, the leading institution in its field in France, gave an illustrated lecture on the @ in French, a link to which can be found on YouTube [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZLWtvfSqCY>]. He has published a summary of his lecture in a printed journal in France (*Graphê* 55, July 2013), and he plans to put its substance into a book. One hopes that it will include a generous selection from the many images of documents, handwritten and printed, some of which are familiar but most of which are wholly unknown, that accompany the lecture.

At the heart of his argument is the question of the arroba, the unit of weight (and capacity) of twenty-five pounds that was a part of Spain's heritage from its arabic past until the metric system overtook it. One meaning of @ in Spain and Portugal, and to some extent in France, was indeed the arroba, but it stood for many other things too. Professor Smith shows that it was something of an all-purpose abbreviation for many words beginning with a, like avoir. In one of his documents, in French, dated 1391 it is used for initial "an". The current French term arrobase appears to be simply based on the Spanish plural arrobadas. But he notes, as I have done, that English speakers belatedly adopted a continental variant of an accented form of a as "à", tending to use it where it was a convenient way of saving space by not writing "at" in full. As a universal term, he appears to be content with the anglophone commercial at.

As a palaeographer, Marc Smith was well qualified to find and to interpret the many early documents in which @ has appeared. But his researches have been wide-ranging, and he has done good work among handbooks for book-keepers, typefounders' specimens, several from Spain, beginning with Pedro Ifern, 1793 (but he shows a rather crude example, possibly cut on wood, in the *Ortografia de la lengua castellana* of the Real Academia Española, Madrid, 1754), collections of commercial correspondence, and typewriters. He offers the Caligraph No. 2 Commercial of 1883 as an early machine with a key for @. For French typefounders, with an eye on their neighbouring market in Spain, the @ stood for arroba. He has found a type for an English @ in Patrick Kelly, *Elements of Book-keeping*, 1805. [various dates, needs to be checked, CB]

Since he does not substantially differ from the suggestions I make in my own text, I am inclined to leave it more or less as it was posted, but anyone wishing to take the matter further and stand on firm ground must turn to his account of his own extensive researches, and follow them as they progress. One hopes that they will.

JM 11 October 2013

## Author

James Mosley was the Librarian of the St Bride Printing Library (London) from 1958 to 2000. A founding member of the Printing Historical Society in 1964, he was the first editor of its Journal. He has written on a wide range of printing and typographic history, including *The Nymph and the Grot: the revival of the sanserif letter*. He received the 2003 American Printing History Association award for his contributions to printing history. He has taught at the University of Reading and the University of Virginia Rare Book School. He blogs printing historical essays at [Typefoundry](http://Typefoundry.blogspot.com) [typefoundry.blogspot.com].