Gill Sans after Gill

**Dan Rhatigan** looks back through the Monotype archive

'Gill Sans is a sans-serif typeface designed by Eric Gill'. So says Wikipedia. Yet, as Dan Rhatigan, Type Director at Monotype, shows here, the story is much more complicated than that. Monotype, the company which originally commissioned Gill, is now an international concern based in the USA, but one of Dan's responsibilities is to help look after the UK archive. With the aid of material from that archive he shows how Gill's best-known typeface, and its numerous offshoots, were the work of many hands.

**Archive box (right)**

Eric Gill's eponymous Sans family has remained a popular design since the 1928 debut of the Monotype Corporation's series 231 – Gill Sans Titling. The lasting commercial success of Eric Gill's typefaces have ensured that Gill Sans has perhaps the most thoroughly documented development of any Monotype family. The drawings, correspondence and other artefacts held in Monotype's archive at Salfords, Surrey (the same site where British Monotype's vast works once stood) reveal a history of Gill Sans that includes the work on the family outside of Gill's own involvement.

**Hot-metal sample sheet (above)**

As the family grew to include many more styles over the years, the result of commercial demand as well as Monotype's active promotion of Gill and his work, Gill Sans became a collection of loosely related designs, rather than a coherent set of closely related weights and styles. Of the 25 series of fonts eventually produced for hot-metal composition (each including italic styles, when available), only 11 are available as digital fonts today.
against grand garden engraved great grapes a g

Note on Gill Sans Roman (above), and Gill Sans Roman a and g (right)
In general, the collaboration between Gill and Monotype started with India ink drawings submitted by Gill (right), which would then be enlarged and refined by the Type Drawing Office, and then made into punches, matrices, and type in order to set proofs, which would be shown to Gill for commentary, revision, or approval.

Gill Sans Italic (right)
Many of Gill’s drawings show how far the eventual designs departed from his original concepts. These 1928 drawings for the italic, in particular, show a proposal with a very slight incline and more cursive elements than the more conventional style eventually produced for the 1929 release. Discussions about this initial concept must have happened early on in the process, as very few of these qualities appear in even the earliest trials of Gill Sans Italic.

Gill Kayo (below)
The famously eccentric Gill Kayo – later renamed Gill Sans Ultra Bold – started with an even more wildly playful style drawn by Gill in September 1932. His second draft from a month later already shows a more restrained approach that was pretty faithfully recreated in the typeface itself.
Gill Extra Bold proofs (below)

Trial proofs for Series 321 show how slowly work would begin on a family. Since any character that would be proofed still needed to go through the entire process of drawing, cutting, and casting—all including steps for checking and measuring—before any proof could be made, Monotype would start with a few control characters to evaluate the overall dimensions and text colour before completing the character set.

The Monotype Drawing Office (right)

An unidentified employee of the Type Drawing Office shows the essential activity at the heart of Monotype type development: a skilled hand at work refining details of shape and spacing, including incredibly precise adjustments that would be needed to correctly manufacture matrices for different sizes of type within the specific mechanical demands of Monotype's process. Every size of every style of every letter of every typeface would require a hand-made ‘10-inch’ drawing like that of the Perpetua Italic A shown here. (The area of the em for any given type size would be prepared at a vertical dimension of 10 inches on the production drawings).

Gill Sans q and p (right)

10-inch drawings from Gill Sans show the amount of detail captured for each glyph: specific dimensions, variations of the basic form that would be available as special orders, accents that could be added to the basis form, and so forth. The drawings would be re-used as long as possible to avoid inconsistencies in the matrices produced from them. For a popular design like Gill Sans, a single sheet may track decades of additions or corrections. While the outcome of the initial drawings would have been approved by Gill, later variation would be looked after by Monotype's own staff.

Gill Extra Bold (left)

The drawings for Series 321 — Gill Extra Bold (or Extra Heavy in some instances) — show a set of more finished artwork supplied to the Type Drawing Office. Prepared at a smaller scale than the looser sketches, these letters are sketched in pencil, filled in with India ink, then touched up with white. Even with touch-ups, the shapes are too rough for immediate replication into type. Note also that Gill's drawings do not indicate any spacing, another aspect that would be determined by the Drawing Office.

Notes on Gill Medium Condensed (above)

This hot-metal proof for Series 485 — Gill Sans Medium Condensed — shows Gill's annotations, and is accompanied by a small drawing (enlarged) returned to Monotype with the proof, showing in greater detail the adjustments he requested to some of the characters. At this stage, all corrections would be handled by the draughtsmen (and women) of the Drawing Office.
Design variation with size (right)

One of the characteristic features of hot-metal Gill Sans was the variation in certain character forms such as a or p from one size to another. Almost all of these had their basis in Gill's drawings, but the coordination of which version would be available in which size has always been one of the challenges of offering Gill Sans to Monotype's customers.

Comparison of 5pt and 12pt (below)

Along with the clean-up and spacing of Gill's letters as they were made into type, the major contribution of the Type Drawing Office was the translation of the basic design for each physical size of type that could be produced. For the design to still feel like Gill Sans whether it was typeset and printed in technically challenging 5-point sizes, typical text sizes between 8 and 14 points, or larger headline sizes, almost every detail of the letters would need adjustment: stroke width, proportion, spacing. It was these decisions that were worked out by the draughtsmen of the Type Drawing Office under the direction of a man named Fritz Steltzer, then subject to approval by Stanley Morison, Gill himself, customers, and others.

Style variation (below)

The style variations for certain letters within Gill Sans – variation from one size to another, or one style to another – have been a point of debate within each incarnation of Monotype ever since Gill Sans was first released. This packet of notes and memos traces the debate about just four characters – b, d, p, and q – across three decades. The same differences of opinion divides designers even today.

Language extension (below)

Monotype's other responsibility as the publisher of Gill Sans was the preparation of characters needed outside the core Latin alphabet drawn by Gill. The accents for the Latin alphabet were typically designed in-house at Monotype, but adaptations of the design for other alphabets altogether, such as Cyrillic or Greek, would be made in collaboration with native readers of the script, typically those at the companies who would order the localised version of the design.

**What next?**

Modern print-buyers are demanding more variety and quality.

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GILL SANS WITH ALTERNATIVE CHARACTERS

**NORMAL & ALTERNATIVE GILL SANS SORTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>J</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Q</th>
<th>R</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>g</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WHAT SORTS ARE AVAILABLE IN ALTERNATIVE CHARACTERS**

1. a, b, d, g, p, q, s, t, u, w
2. A, B, D, G, P, Q, S, T, U, W

**NOTES**

SPECIAL CHARACTER NUMBERS (SAME IN ALL 3 SERIES)

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<th>170</th>
<th>217</th>
<th>264</th>
<th>311</th>
<th>358</th>
<th>405</th>
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<td>499</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>593</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Gill Sans Cyrillic (right)**

A sample setting of Gill Sans Cyrillic, approved by Stanley Morison and John Dreyfus long after the death of Eric Gill and Fritz Steltzer, designers and supervisors of the original.

**Phototype (above)**

Like all of Monotype's successful families for hot-metal composition, Gill Sans was adapted for the Monophoto system – phototypesetters reproducing typefaces from a matrix case of film negatives rather than brass matrices. Monotype did extensive testing to ensure that phototype type looked comparable to metal type, especially with flagship families such as Gill Sans. Nevertheless, families were reduced down to only two or three optical sizes, since the film negatives were reduced and enlarged with a lens. With this change to the available fonts for each type design, Monotype offered guidance to customers about which master was best for different typeset sizes.

**Digital Gill Sans (above)**

The next major stage in the evolution of Gill Sans, of course, was its digitisation. Although each style of Gill Sans was digitised faithfully from an earlier source, the proliferation of font formats and versions for different customers and technologies has naturally led to a sometimes confusing range of product options. As font formats have developed over the years, current 'Pro' versions of Gill Sans for desktop computers or web sites contain a greater number of characters in one place than ever before. Unfortunately, however, very few of the variant shapes produced for hot-metal have yet to make their way into the digital fonts.

Gill Sans is without a doubt Eric Gill's creation: his playful variations upon a theme remain distinctive and true to his sensibility. However, the family has only flourished over the years thanks to Gill's original collaboration with the advisors, draughtsmen and engineers at Monotype, who were then charged with maintaining and expanding his designs after his initial approval, and certainly in the many years after Gill passed away in 1940.

What we know as Gill Sans today is both a design of Gill's and a design of many others, each with their own expertise contributed to the whole endeavour.

Dan Rhatigan is UK/US Type Director with Monotype, and helps maintain the archive at Salfords. Originally from New York, he came to the UK in 2006 to do an MA at Reading, and started working for Monotype in 2008.

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The hot-metal family (with red series numbers), and the digital family below it (below)

As shown in this comparison of the available versions of Gill Sans for hot-metal casters and today's computers, the complete Gill Sans family has both contracted and expanded. The less popular members of the original family were not digitised while other weights and styles have been created over the years, generally at the request of specific customers.