

P G Wodehouse's Strange Machine

As you come into the Museum's main room and turn into the P G Wodehouse corner you see standing on the desk a typewriter. P G once said that all he wanted was a chair, a table and a typewriter and this machine, although a later model than his 'Monarch', has proved to be a source of great curiosity to many of our visitors below the age of 30. Is it a computer? What does it do? Can I have a go on it? And so on. Even those over the age of 30 may wonder why the 'Qwerty' or Universal keyboard on it is laid out as it is. When I was taught to touch type the first thing our teacher said was, 'Is there anyone here who is a left-handed pianist?' No? A pity! This was because the keyboard is so laid out that the left hand does 60% and the right hand 40% of the work and both hands' fingers have to work independently; the one digit not used was the left-hand thumb. So why this arrangement in the first place?

The idea of a typewriter came to an Englishman Henry Mill around 1714, but unfortunately his patent was far too vague 'An artificial machine or method for the impressing or transcribing of letters singly or progressively one after another' – he could have been describing a child's alphabet toy and few people were interested. Nothing much happened then until a century and a half later in 1873 an American inventor, Christopher Sholes, teamed up with Carlos Glidden. Glidden was a printer and it was he who reproduced the printers' letter layout and together with Sholes designed the keyboard so that the letters which in early machines were arranged to rest in a semi-circular typebasket before being struck, did not get tangled up with each other – the 'Qwerty' arrangement. Their invention – all in capital letters - was further developed and promoted shortly afterwards by the Remington company and became a great success. Later still many other firms such as Barlock, Hermes, IBM and Olympia produced models. Over the years there were also many different attempts to produce a quicker, more efficient keyboard layout but without success. Now new versions of personal computers, tablets, i-phones and mobiles are produced seemingly every other day and more ergonomic keyboards have been designed but the 'Qwerty' arrangement stays with us.

When P G Wodehouse left Emsworth in 1914 to go to America with the advent of WW1 and because so many men were lost in the trenches, it was the women who seized their chance to step up to the platen (the hard roller round which the paper turned) to become 'typewriters'. It was they who were called that rather than the machines at first. In large numbers their machines made an unbelievable racket crashing away in huge rooms called typing pools. Bells pinged constantly as they came to the end of the line and operatives had to bang the carriage back again with their left hand. Woe betide them if they dirtied their white gloves by changing the ribbon spools which provided the red and black ink and worse still was the time lost by correcting an error by rubbing away at multi layers of paper interleaved with carbons. Still, by becoming a 'typewriter' they added another job opportunity to those traditional stereotypes of the time of becoming a housemaid, shop-keeping or nursing and it was their prowess on the invention of the Sholes and Glidden keyboard which changed their lives for ever.

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