

Professor James Mosley, a memoir

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Professor James Mosley, a Memoir

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James Mosley, who died on 25 August 2025, was a historian of letterforms, type, typography, and printing. From 1958 until 2000 he was librarian of the St Bride Printing Library in London, and from 1960 until 2021 he taught at University of Reading in what became the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication. Underpinning both roles was Mosley's peerless scholarship, which was both expansive and distinguished by the particular attention he devoted to cultures of letterforms in Britain and two other countries for which he felt a great affection, Italy and France. As teacher, advisor, and mentor to students and colleagues at Reading, he brought to these roles his knowledge and the exemplary research, writing, and publishing that were features of it. The remarks that follow offer a brief account of Mosley's work at the place of learning where he taught for more than six decades, with the intention of memorializing his contributions and their lasting value.

Mosley's principal work as teacher was his superb series of lectures, "History of letterforms", which eventually comprised some 21 lectures spanning a history that commenced with ancient Roman capitals, concluded with modern typography, and advanced from one to the other by way of manuscript hands, Gutenberg, gothic types, renaissance capitals, humanistic script & roman type, the chancery hand, Aldine types, Dutch type, French type, English type, rocaille & neoclassicism, commercial type, old style type, private presses & William Morris, art nouveau, Edward Johnston & Eric Gill, and Monotype & Stanley Morison. These lectures, with their judiciously chosen images and Mosley's expert commentary, were his great gift to Reading, experienced by innumerable students over the years.

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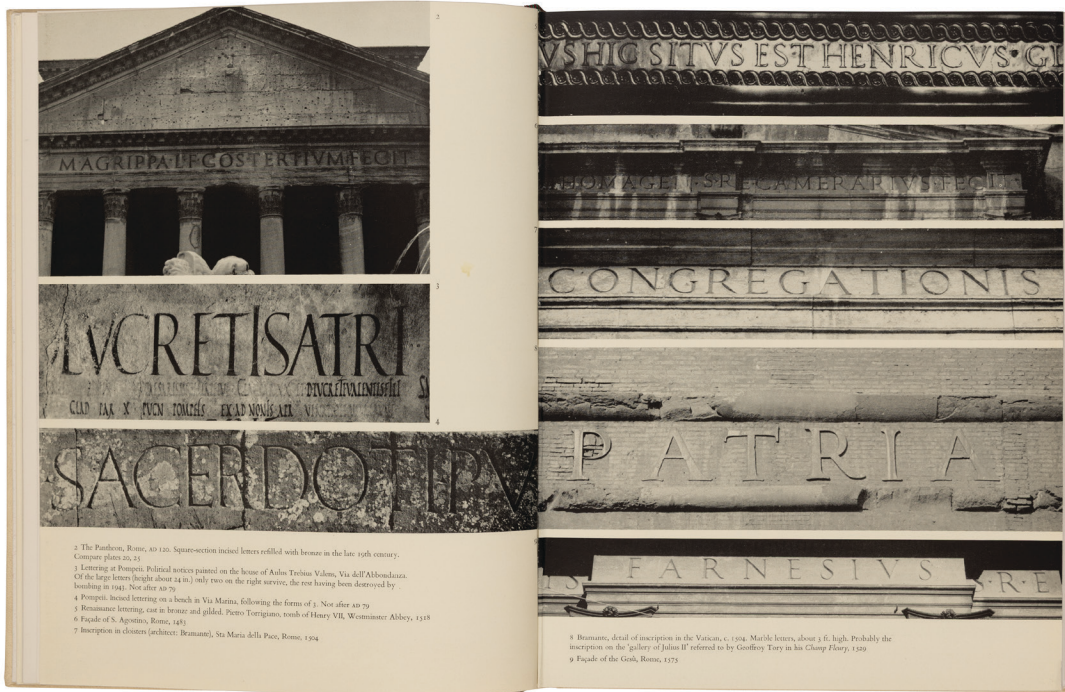


Figure 1. James Mosley, “Trajan revived”, *Alphabet* (1964), showing antique Roman inscripational letters and their later revived forms in photographs taken by Mosley.



Figure 2. James Mosley, “Trajan revived”, *Alphabet* (1964), showing revived forms of antique Roman inscripational letters.

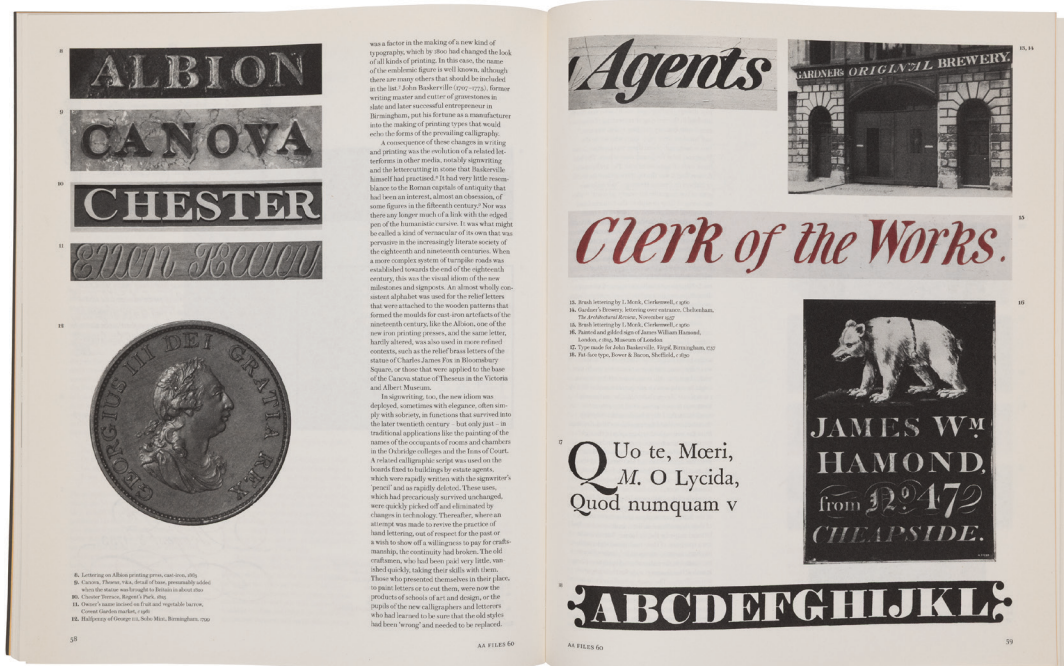


Figure 3. James Mosley, “Naming ‘Victory’: in search of an English vernacular letter”, *AA Files* 60 (2010), showing examples of letters described by Mosley as “English vernacular”.

The “History of letterform” lectures were, for Mosley, also a living statement, constantly evolving as new documents came into circulation, new knowledge created, and new literature published, encouraging interpretations of greater nuance. This ‘living’ quality may have discouraged Mosley from recording or publishing the lectures, not wishing to fix them in time as recording or publishing would require him to do. But as he entered his final years at Reading, Mosley’s lectures were at last captured during the Covid-19 pandemic, as voice over images, to make good the loss of in-person teaching. And so this awful event provided the impetus for the lectures’ preservation, initially for Reading students and now for everyone following their recent online publication.*

As part of the “History of letterforms” lectures, Mosley produced course materials that reveal in other ways how he sought to represent this history. Among these are his reading lists that confirm the literature he regarded as significant. Of interest, too, are his annual examination papers each with its ten questions, of which students had to answer four. Questions were constructed with deliberateness and exactly phrased, and are indicative of how Mosley framed salient developments: “How and why was the ‘antique letter’ introduced in Italy during the 15th century?”; “Early types were derived

* The lectures were recorded in 2020 and 2021, and made publicly available in autumn 2025. See: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLh8Q6TpPxtgxSG6DEuOrH9iKx9bh6Pr7G>.

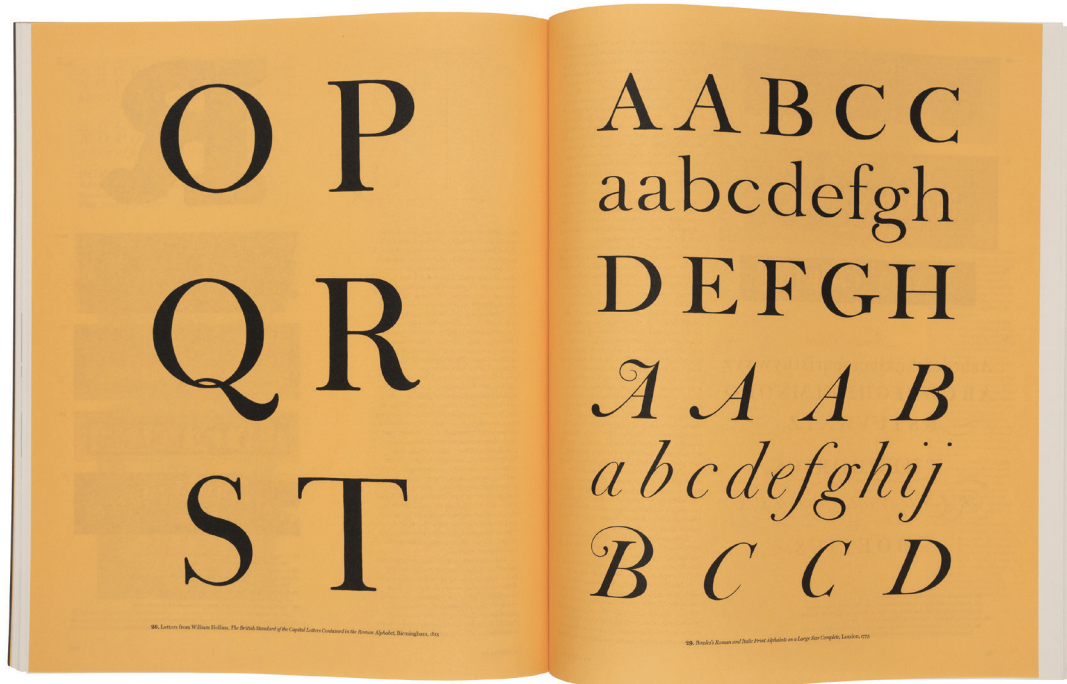


Figure 4. James Mosley, “Naming ‘Victory’: in search of an English vernacular letter”, *AA Files* 60 (2010), showing “English vernacular” letters.

closely from pen-written forms. Trace the manner in which type moved away from a literal reproduction of writing, and explain why this was found to be necessary.”; “The *romain du roi* is sometimes called the first modern type design. What reasons support this opinion?”; “William Morris commented on the ‘sweltering hideousness’ of the work of Bodoni. What similarities can be detected in their printing, and what differences?”; or “In his book on modern typography, Herbert Spencer quotes the remark by Guillaume Apollinaire, ‘one cannot carry everywhere the corpse of one’s father’. How far was the ‘new typography’ influenced by rejection of accepted standards?”. Such questions demanded from students answers that demonstrated not mere rote command of historical facts but an ability to grapple with a complex interplay of ideas and actors, often across time, place, and technology.

As an extension of the “History of letterforms” lectures, Mosley supervised or advised undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral dissertations and theses. While not in itself unusual, Mosley brought to this work implicit exemplars for how to locate, assemble, and present historical narratives. These include, foremost, a series of articles published around the time he joined the University of Reading, articles such as “English vernacular” (Mosley, 1963–64), “Trajan revived” (Mosley, 1964) and “The nymph and the grot” (Mosley, 1965). Each, with its evocative title, offered arrays of evidence that variously combined primary texts, contemporary accounts, testimonies and literature, and

well-imaged exemplars and artifacts from astonishingly varied documents, objects, and buildings. Many images — of inscriptions especially — were site-specific, proficiently photographed by Mosley on research excursions in Britain and abroad. Other images, gathered through opportune visits or encounters, confirmed the survival of historical artifacts or present-day continuities of authentic forms and practices.* The articles provided salient demonstrations of scholarly and practical sleuthing, and of textual *and* visual evidence working in close partnership to make compelling arguments, applicable in turn as models for students' research and the documents they created.†

Mosley continued publishing such articles at Reading in *Typography Papers*, the book series launched in 1996 by his colleague, the late Paul Stiff. Mosley was probably the kind of contributor Stiff sought to attract to the pages of *Typography Papers*, which provided space and apparatus for the evidence-intensive illustrated studies that Mosley had already perfected. His articles include a technical study of the *Romain du roi* types (Mosley, 1997), an argument for Giovan Francesco Cresci as instigator of a major change in the form of Western handwriting and progenitor of the baroque inscriptional letter in Rome (Mosley, 2005a), and a finely balanced profile of the French *technologue*, Gilles Filleau des Billettes (Mosley, 2013). Mosley was present in *Typography Papers* in other ways, too, for example when consulting on post-war modern typography in Britain (Stiff, 2009), about which he had first-hand experience; in supplying a translation from Italian of Giovanni Mardersteig's article about Leon Battista Alberti and the 15th-century inscriptional letter (Mosley, 2005b); or in making available from his own research material Des Billettes' description of stencilling that was the basis of two articles (Kindel, 2013a, 2013b).

In looking back at Mosley's teaching and highlights of his scholarship, writing, and publishing, it is possible to identify in them characteristics and values that were of great importance to students and colleagues at Reading, as they surely could be — or should

* Examples of this kind include, in "English vernacular", 18th-century pattern letters that continued in use at the Whitechapel Bell Foundry in London; or, in "Trajan revived", sets of baroque inscriptional letter stencils still used to lay out inscriptions in the Laboratorio Marmi in the Vatican City. Many of Mosley's photographs of lettering from this time, of inscriptions from ancient and baroque Rome and renaissance Florence, and lettering of many kinds from around Britain, became part of a photographic collection of applied lettering in the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication; they were also shared with colleagues at the Central School of Arts & Crafts (as was) for accession to its Central Lettering Record.

† The three articles were republished more recently as *The Nymph and the Grot* (Mosley, 1999); "Traiano redivivo" (Mosley, 2001a) and "La ninfa e la grotta: la rinascita dei caratteri senza grazie" (Mosley, 2001b) in *Radici della scrittura moderna*; and "Naming 'Victory': in search of an English vernacular letter" (Mosley, 2010), which repurposed parts of the original 'English vernacular' article and whose publication was facilitated by Mosley's former student, the late John Morgan.

be — to any student of history seeking depth, expanse, and richness in the accounts they construct. Overarching all was a many-dimensional, cultured, and highly literate engagement with the past, supported by a deep regard for artifacts and survivals, and their identification, collection, preservation, recording, re-use, or reconstruction. For Mosley, too, there was a primacy of language, which took many forms. Among them was the use of language as a tool of historical enquiry, including the close attention he paid to terminology and the meaning of words in their historical context. There was also a command of languages, in which Mosley was fluent in several and had a more-than-working knowledge of more. This enabled him to locate, transcribe, and translate key documents and texts that were foundational to his historical accounts, and powered them. When speaking, he was laconic, measured, and quietly meaningful, if sometimes quizzical or purposely open-ended. When writing, he was knowing, precise, and evocative both in word choice and expression while unfolding historical narratives in revealing, even revelatory, sequences of observations, readings, and conclusions. He placed great value on visual evidence, on gathering telling images in libraries, museums, archives, or in the wild. This says much about a concern to encounter the historical object first-hand, often in its original setting and not just in reproduction. An important by-product of this was his detecting of historical phenomena (and anachronism) in the present by tracing the use of past forms and exemplars over time.

Enduring memories of James Mosley at Reading include the most quotidian: greeting him weekly when he arrived for his lecture, as he did with constancy, year-on-year, discussing with him some aspect of the upcoming lecture or a new image he'd added, hearing about his latest endeavours or current concerns, or asking for his views on some pressing question, newly discovered source, or recently acquired artifact. These encounters were among the best — informal, sometimes droll, always enlightening — and it was this teacher, advisor, and mentor that students and colleagues at Reading could get to know. If such encounters now live only in memory, Mosley's legacy as a historian remains, and while knowledge goes on expanding and evolving, his example can continue to guide us all in how to do history in our field.

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