The Limerick Typographical Society can trace its origins back to 1819. In 1879, it became a branch of the National Graphical Association and, in 1964, on the formation of the National Graphical Association, its affiliation to that body was automatic.

Much could be written of the heroic part played by the staunch trade unionists of those early years, particularly in the stormy periods of industrial and political strife when sedulous literature, ballads and broadsheets of the explosive kind were the order of the day!

I well remember during World War I, when apprentices to the printing craft were paid anything from 2/6 to 4/- a week (1st year), with an additional 1/- increase annually until the completion of the 7-year term. What is more, a working week was 52 hours, with no annual holidays, two bank holidays, and, should you have the misfortune to fall ill, well, you had it – or had not it – no wages, no sickness benefit … and the employer couldn’t care less.

Work – slavery would be more apt – usually commenced at 8 a.m. in job, or commercial houses for journeyman and apprentice alike. Lighting the fire, operating the treadle machine, washing up the machines and handmade forme forms with potash (a liquid that smarted the eyes, and almost burned the fingers to the bone) were all part of the daily routine. (Should the boss be living in the upper portion of the establishment, an apprentice could, on occasion, be called on to do the shopping for dinner).

Conditions in newspaper offices were no less different, except on post days. Long before the introduction of the rotary press, an apprentice was given his ‘supply’ to be delivered, on foot, to regular customers residing at places between the Racecourse and Fairgreen, as the case may be.

The last decade has seen drastic changes, and it is not easy to predict the effect of the technological onslaught on the craft. New methods have replaced old skills and already the work of the compositor has been greatly eroded. The lessons of history clearly show that the advance of technology cannot be stopped or diverted, and there is no reason why the Limerick print workers cannot meet and master this latest challenge. But no matter what the future holds, let us hope that they will always maintain the best traditions of their craft.