

CHRISTMAS CARDS:

Their Origin and
Manufacture.

BY LILLY BINGEN.

possible to make a comprehensive survey of Mr. King's volumes, for as we went through one of the first books, passing steadily from page to page, he computed that it would take us just six weeks, devoting ten hours a day, and continuing at the rate we were then working, to get from the beginning to the end of the collection; so I decided to content myself with inspecting the first cards in existence, and then, betaking myself to one of the largest houses now engaged in publishing Christmas cards, to learn from them up-to-date methods and business.

Just before the Christmas card was modestly ushered into the world, the greetings of the season were written to dear and distant friends on old-world notepaper with pinked-out edges—the kind which is now in favour with sentimental servant-girls—and, to render the kind-wishes appropriate, a little robin was printed at the top of the paper, surrounded by a wreath of holly and a suitable word of greeting.

It may be surmised that the inventor of the Christmas card in England, Sir Henry Cole (then Mr. Cole), found that he had too many letters to write at the festive season, for in 1846 he suggested that Mr. J. C. Horsley, R.A., should design a card, with appropriate greeting, which should be sent round to all his circle, and, as the illustration shows, the primary idea was to make the memento of the season significant of Christmas jollification.

Rather more than a year earlier a similar idea, but not so felicitously executed, had been carried out by a Scotch engraver. His card showed a laughing figurehead set round with the words, "A guid New Year, an' mony o' them." Though the introduction of the Christmas card thus dates back half a century, the fashion of sending out these pretty greetings did not take a firm hold on the public till about twenty-five years ago. Occasional designs were



IMAGINE a thousand bulky volumes of Christmas cards, musty and dusty albums, catalogues and sample-books, ranged on long shelves and blocking up passages and offices. This was the sight that met my gaze when I made my way to the house of Mr. Jonathan King, whose unique collection ranges from the first Christmas cards printed in the kingdom to the artistic productions of 1897.

What I specially wanted to see were those early efforts of some fifty years ago, which indirectly led to the present enormous trade in cards. At the same time it was im-

published—such as those of a Frenchman, Thierry, who introduced in London the French gelatine cards—and now and again



THE PREDECESSOR OF THE CHRISTMAS CARD.

a set of little cards, with fluted gilt edges, a robin redbreast in the snow, a Christmas gathering, or a selection of seasonable viands by way of a *sujet*, found its way into the market, the obvious idea in these early examples being to make the Christmas card allusive rather than artistic; the exquisite floral design—the summer idyl and the quaint conceit which finds favour at the present time—would certainly have been deemed inappropriate in those days.



THE CHRISTMAS CARD DESIGNED IN 1846 BY J. C. HORSLEY, R.A., FOR MR. (AFTERWARDS SIR HENRY) COLE.

Gradually the Christmas card grew to be a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. As I turned over the leaves of Mr. King's books

I saw that Mr. Stacy Marks, Mr. Walter Crane, Miss Kate Greenaway, and other well-known artists, supplied notable designs; scriptural and illuminated cards, then figures and flowers, landscapes and pretty scenes, came to be recognised as suitable for presentation on the card of greeting, and it was obvious that the Christmas card had come to stay.

Reluctantly turning my back on the quaint and instructive specimens in Mr. King's early volumes, I made my way to the house of Messrs. Birn Brothers, and from their manager, Mr. Elsner, I learnt something of the astonishing dimensions to which the trade has grown, and was able to watch the evolutions of a Christmas card from the sheet of board, not yet divided into sections, to the elegant little souvenir of the season.



ONE OF THE EARLIEST NEW YEAR CARDS.

Here, at any rate, the oft-repeated cry, "Business is not what it was," is not heard, and there was satisfaction in talking with a manager so optimistic as Mr. Elsner. "Many people say that the fashion of sending out cards has had its day, and that the output is not as large as formerly," I said. "Is this your experience?"

"Emphatically not," was the answer. "I do say it was easier to make a fortune ten years ago, because the competition was less keen and cards sold more easily. Now, every year the designs have to excel those that have gone before, but always the demand is for larger quantities. In 1896 we sold eighteen and a half million cards, roughly speaking—that is to say, 120,000 gross, and each gross is reckoned at a hundred and fifty-six, the "baker's dozen" of thirteen being

allowed by the Christmas card publisher. This year we had sold a similar number by the first days of September, with nearly four months of busy trade ahead of us."

It is astonishing to realise how many stages even a humble halfpenny card must pass through before it is on the market. Naturally the first thing is to procure a suitable design. It is interesting to note that each year sees the introduction of absolutely new designs, none of the old ones being used again. The design is a most costly item; the same price is paid for it,



PAINTING AND DESIGNING CHRISTMAS CARDS.

whether it is to figure on an expensive or a cheap card, but the greater sale of the modestly-priced card enables the publisher to strike a balance. Though many well-known artists devote considerable time to the work of designing, it is more often than not that the publisher suggests the subject, its treatment and colouring, his practical knowledge being of paramount value.

An ordinary design fetches about three guineas; if it is particularly good or original the price goes up from four to six guineas, and a clever designer, whose work is known

in the trade, can make a steady income of from £500 to £900 per annum. This sounds a large figure, but I saw a file of receipts, and in one small drawer I viewed a collection of black-and-white and coloured designs for which the firm had paid over £3,000.

Somewhat curiously, the majority of designers are women artists, and of course there are a great many who wield the brush and are desirous of gaining the tempting incomes which fall to the successful worker. From time to time the manager is bombarded by irrepressible ladies who cannot be persuaded that their work does not possess the requisite attributes. On one occasion an amateur presented as her own design a hand-painted card which was promptly recognised as actually emerging from their own studio. Another lady, who displayed a portfolio of highly unsatisfactory daubs, was politely informed that the work was not in the firm's style. "I've taken these to every publisher in London," she remarked ingenuously, "and the same thing has been said each time. Will you kindly explain what is your style?" She was answered, "The most finished work that can be bought for love or money." "Why, that is an exact description of my designs," was her retort; and on the manager uttering a mild dissent, she gathered up her sketches wrathfully, and withdrew with the statement that he was no judge of real works of art!

Amongst the most successful designers are the Misses Magnire—Miss Helena Maguire devoting herself to children and animals, Miss Bertha Magnire to floral devices; Mr. H. Rylands and Miss Jackson, for classic heads and figures; Mrs. Pauline Sunter, for Japanese subjects and children; Miss Harriet M. Bennett (perhaps the most popular of all), for figures; Mr. G. Nokes, landscapes with floral combinations; and Mr. C. Goodwin Kilburne, for sporting subjects. Those who frequent the picture galleries will be familiar with the work of many of these artists. About six hundred sets of designs, equivalent

to thirteen or fourteen hundred actual designs, are bought annually by a firm, good work being accepted at all seasons, though there is very little that can be taken from an amateur or outsider who lacks the practical skill to work out his ideas.

Comic cards from the novice are sometimes capable of reproduction, or an idea in the rough is occasionally bought, the design worked up in the studio and set to rhymes by the tame punster and poet.

A pathetic interest attaches to one set of comics. They were brought to the firm by one of the regular workers, but, as he had already supplied more than his average number, there was an inclination to refuse them; also they were not quite up to the mark. "Look here," said the poor fellow who offered them, "my wife is dying in the hospital, and the authorities have given her up; she can't live over to-morrow, and I must make the money for the funeral expenses which will arise." "If you can bring me anything which I *can* accept, I will take it," was the reply. The man went home, and in his dire need painted six comic designs, which were bought by the firm, and sold capitally when reproduced, and the money, as he had foretold, paid for the interment of his wife.

Once a design is accepted, the next thing is to decide whether it shall be brought out as a cheap or expensive card. This being settled, it is sent to the printing works for an estimate, the information being added what quality cardboard is to be used, which lithographer is to carry out the work, and what the extent of the edition will be. The cost being then agreed upon, the design is given to a lithographer, who makes a dissection of the colours—that is to say, he finds out how many colours are used and how many will be required to reproduce the same. A clever lithographer can often save a colour by printing one on top of the other, thus, a blue over yellow gives green; it may be necessary to have greens of other shades, but this serves for a contrast, and spares one tone, at any rate.

Having settled the colour-scale, he draws an outline of the design and from it works on separate stones each colour. The general scale for Christmas cards comprises the following tints: yellow, pale, medium and dark blue, pale violet, pink, rose pink and light lake, grey and grey-brown. With this combination most designs can be reproduced, and it is always advantageous to get the lithographer to confine himself to one scale,

as the publisher, wishing to make the edition as large as possible, naturally wants as many different Christmas cards as feasible placed on the one big stone.

As each colour is worked on the stone it is sent to the "proving" department, where a proof is pulled from the stone on a hand-press and is afterwards given to the lithographic artist who is reproducing the design. He can then judge whether any alteration of the stone is necessary. In the case of a design lithographed in twelve colours, the same piece of card must be printed twelve times. It is absolutely necessary to go through a laborious and complicated process, which is all hand-work, in order to prove that the lithography of each design is working out satisfactorily. These "proof" stones are used for the taking of the transfers required for the making up of the big stones. The sheets are printed on immense machines capable of making from 3,000 to 3,500 runs a day, the dimensions of the sheets being 40 by 57 inches.

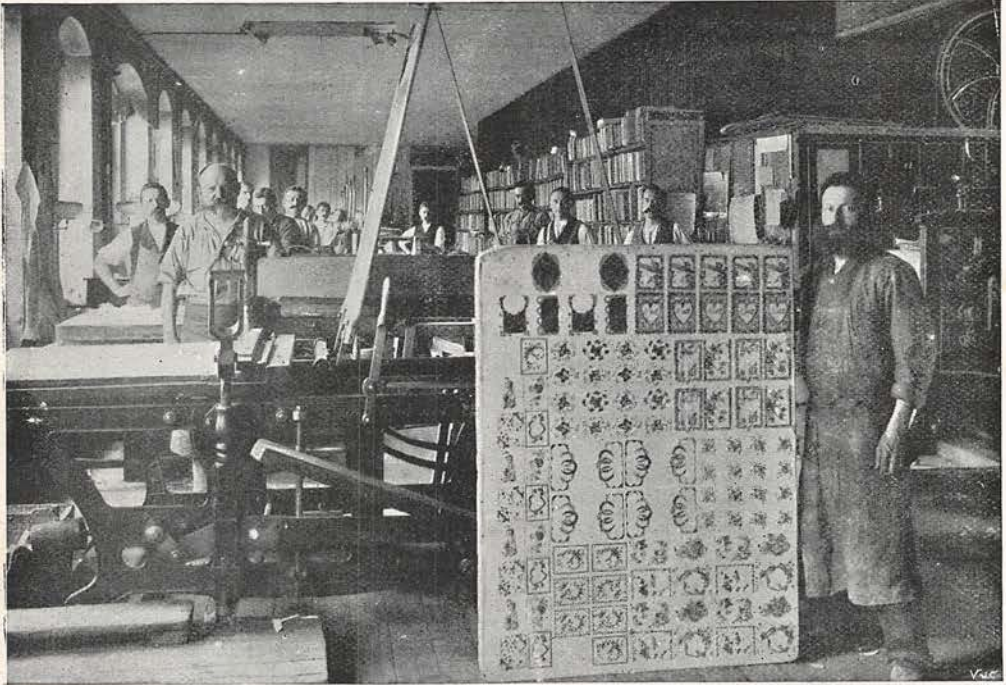
These sheets are fed into the machine by a woman, and another takes it out the other side, about every second sheet being examined by the machine-minder to see that the exact colour and register are kept. When the edition is completed the slowest part commences, known as the "finishing."

The cards are cut up by machinery into squares and sent to receive small pin holes, where special indications have already been printed. This is in readiness for the "embossing," which consists of forcing the cardboard upwards by the use of a steel die and matrix, various presses being used, from the homely gold-blocking press to the magnificent double-feeding mammoth embossing presses of Karl Krause. After the card is embossed the matrix is removed and very hard cardboard laid over the card. It is next placed under the press, when the sharp edge which is left on the embossing plate cuts the card into the requisite shape. Then, unless it has to be jewelled, it is finished and sent to the packing and sorting rooms and banded into dozens. Each so-called dozen is usually made up of ten cards containing Christmas mottoes, and three with New Year greetings, which gives an idea of the relative popularity of Christmas and New Year cards. It is interesting to note that no quotation on a card finds better favour than "There's gladness in remembrance," whilst the popularity of this couplet—

Prithee receive this unpretentious card;
Prithee believe it carries my regard—

has yet to be surpassed. Amongst floral designs, the pansy, for friendship, and the sentimental forget-me-not have always found the largest sale; children prefer cats by way of design, and among the masses two hands clasping, a heart, or a horseshoe, is the most fashionable card, whilst the superstitious

Grove, and such like localities. Another comic that commanded popularity also arose from a saying of the moment. "May this Christmas take the biscuit" was printed beside a biscuit packed in a box and sold largely in the year when the favourite slang expression was, "You take the cake," or



A LITHOGRAPHER'S STONE, SHOWING PROPORTIONATE SIZE OF MAN AND STONE.
(On the surface of this stone are the designs of various Christmas cards.)

person likes to choose an emblem of good luck, such as the four-leaved shamrock or the horseshoe.

Looking at the children's cards, I saw a quaint collapsible chicken-house, the poultry behind a net caging. The history of this design was rather curious. A lady's veil was dropped on the floor of the office one day, and on picking it up it occurred to the manager that it would make a good piece of netting, and then he thought of putting the feathered tribe behind it. The card caught on very well, and during its manufacture there were enough veils used to stock quite a number of the fair sex.

A very popular comic card was a wedding ring tied with a white ribbon bow, and the catchword, "Now we shan't be long," heading an appropriate verse. This was obviously a lady's card, as it had such a huge sale in the shops of drapers at Kensington, Westbourne

"Annex the abernethy." Comics of course must be topical to sell well. Messrs. Birn Brothers commenced with only eight numbers of these humorous cards, of which they sold three-quarters of a million, and to-day they have eighty numbers, and find employment all round the year for one hundred and sixty hands to make up "comics."

During my visit I traversed every department—there are five in the basement alone. Of these the largest is the cutting, blocking, and embossing room; there, amongst other machinery, was a rotary cutting machine, where one man can cut to size quite easily half a million cards per diem. Before blocking, the cards are powdered, first with French chalk and afterwards with a special material which, under heat, has a certain adhesive power. Next they are blocked with aluminium leaf, or gold, and after these machine processes, they are cleaned over by girl hands

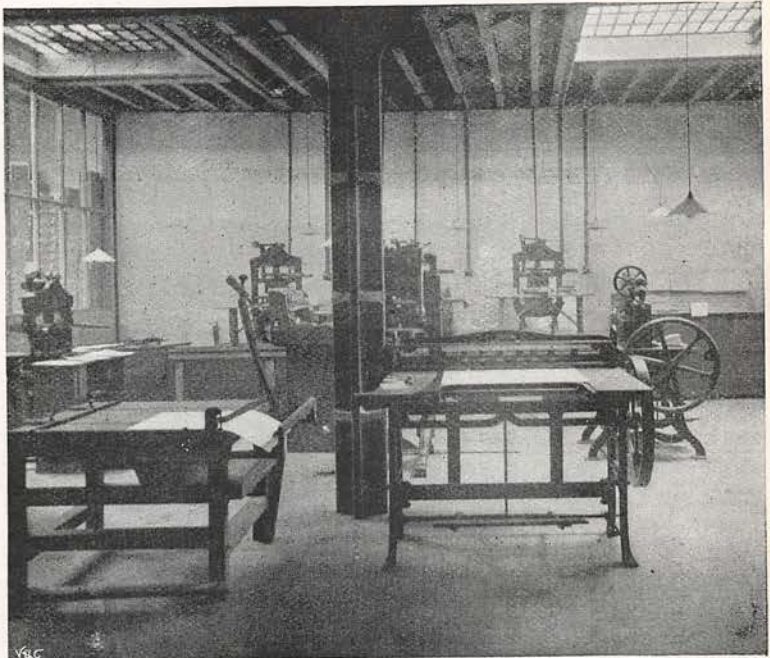
and then embossed and scored for folding. The folding is now a big feature, as flat designs are quite out of fashion, and every card has one or more folds. After this they are taken to a card-cutting machine and cut in fancy shapes: this being a list of the processes carried on in these departments. Many firms, however, have all this machine work done outside for them. I inspected the store-room for boards, which are nearly all of English make, English cardboard and paper being recognised as superior in quality.

Passing on the ground floor through the card-room, counting-house, checking department, private offices and show-room, I halted in the card-room to see a number of girls deftly manufacturing "comics," securing toys and tiny models of every sort in fancy boxes. There were piles of bells, diminutive hammers, imitation cigars, etc., stored around them, which they fastened in place with great celerity. Others were picking out orders and parceling. A third batch of girls were jewelling—sprinkling silver on the cards (that being almost the only form of jewelling now in vogue)—and getting the cards ready for the hand-painted department.

The studio is occupied by a permanent staff of young ladies whose work is to execute hand-painted cards, remodel and produce designs. A certain number of young artists who have already worked in this studio do some work for the firm at home, but no outsiders are entrusted with commissions, as the work must be the same all through. The earnings here average from ten shillings to three guineas a week, and every artist has the chance of making extra by overtime in the busy season. The hours are from 9.30 till 6, and no artist is expected to give more than two months' time before commencing to earn. This work appeals to so many that

there are constant applications for a post in the studio, and a permanent list is kept of ladies waiting to enter when there shall be a vacancy. Speed of course is necessary in painting the cards, and an average worker accomplishes eight dozen cards a day, or four gross a week. It will be imagined therefore that a lady who recently applied and offered to produce *six* hand-painted cards weekly was not added to the staff!

In the studio I had a glimpse of designs already settled for 1898, and learnt with satisfaction that in a collection of 650 cards not one was designed out of the mother country, whilst, in spite of the many processes



From a photo by]

BLOCKING AND EMBOSSEING ROOM.

[W. H. Bennett.

a large proportion is executed from start to finish on the premises.

Upstairs, in the black-and-white room, some forty girls were mounting cards and tying bows to the folding cards. It may be noted that the hands use about a hundred pieces of ribbon, amounting to 3,600 yards a day, making with it fifty-two thousand bows on an average. This is chiefly in connection with the black-and-white and private Christmas card trade, the latter being a branch of the industry dating back about seven years, and very much in favour at the present time.

Whilst the general sample-books of Christmas cards are taken round by the travellers

in the beginning of May, when orders are booked, the private card book is only issued in the beginning of September, and business is done in this line right up till Christmas. The great novelty produced by this firm in 1897 is the personal photograph card, which has for design the portrait of the sender, or his wife or children, as choice may dictate. Marvellous to relate, an order for any number of these cards, with private photograph, address and greeting, is executed and delivered within twelve hours, a fact which was



GIRLS MANUFACTURING CHRISTMAS CARDS.

actually demonstrated to me, on my expressing scepticism.

The middle and upper classes, who send out a mass of cards, usually include the private greeting card in their order. One professional gentleman has a standing order for eleven hundred private cards, which must enable him to greet an extensive circle; a second client generally requires nine hundred, but from fifty to one hundred is the average order for an exclusive design. The present taste is for small-sized cards, quality

being preferred to quantity, and the firm has an idea in course of manufacture for 1898 which will surpass all previous attempts in combining minimum size with maximum value.

I was curious to know what was considered a record sale for any one card, and learnt that last year the biggest hit was made by a small design in imitation of platinotype, but lithographed. Of this one number three-quarters of a million were sold, and naturally the idea was extensively used this year by other firms. Some other curious facts I gleaned from the manager, namely, that they spend quite £2,000 a year on the manufacture of boxes for the cards, and consume tons and tons of cardboard. Exclusive of the usual cards of greeting, they issued in the private card book this year a hundred and thirty-five new designs, and as the demand for monogram work last season was almost too heavy to be met, this year they have inaugurated a department exclusively for that work. The thousands of tiny photographs which I saw being mounted on the cards are all produced by the most expensive platinotype process, which gives the requisite delicacy, and this work for the black-and-white series is, again, all English.

An idea of the dimensions of the private card trade can be gleaned from the number of sample-books issued by this one firm alone—fifteen hundred—the which, actually costing them twenty-three shillings, they are content to sell to their customers for five shillings, so valuable a part do the sample books play in bringing in orders.

It is interesting to note that many charitable organisations apply to the firm for Christmas cards, and the sample books, as well as many huge packets of big and little, funny and sentimental cards, find their way into hospital wards and other benevolent institutions, to gladden the eyes of those who might not otherwise be the recipients of the popular Christmas card.