

Caxton at the cutting edge, masters of war, McBean feast



PORTMEIRION (images by Leslie Gerry, text by Robin Llywelyn; The Whittington Press, rrp £145; special edition rrp £325) This astonishingly beautiful and vibrant little book, bound from just seven A3 images and nine pages with short texts, tells three different tales that encapsulate the way our world is changing. The first story is that the images, which are views of Clough Williams-Ellis's picturesque resort village of Portmeirion, have been created and personally printed by Leslie Gerry using the last word in computer technology, but the texts are printed by the team at the Whittington Press, under the printer John Randle, on equipment that Caxton would have recognised over 500 years ago. Gerry, whose work in bold even colours evokes mid-20th-century railway and seaside posters, once made up his images using cut coloured paper; now he employs an electronic tablet and Adobe Illustrator software, and prints with an eight-colour Epson giclée printer – giclée being, as Vanbrugh might have said, a fancy French word for 'inkjet'; yet Randle and his colleagues, by contrast, are putting metal type into letterpress machinery and turning handles. So it's a book that captures a combination of skills, nostalgias and traditions that belongs precisely to its moment.

And indeed the Whittington Press itself is the second story: it's going great guns in its fourth decade from a former gardener's cottage in the Cotswolds, the poignant antidote to that ocean of cheap and nasty books that floods the shelves, and a reminder that simple quality lasts for ever, longer even than a Rolls-Royce or a private jet.

The text of *Portmeirion* is printed in luscious 24-point Stephenson Blake Caslon on heavyweight mould-made paper; the binding of the book is such that you can open out all the folded pages in a concertina, with nothing hidden in gutters between pages. The book is mounted between boards and protected by a slipcase, and if you buy the special edition, limited to 125 copies, you get with it, in a solander box, a separate set of prints; an extra image; and a copy of one of them the size of a poster. They are stunning, lovely things; they have an intensity that nothing matches.

But the third story is perhaps the most remarkable one of all, the story of the vision that led Williams-Ellis to create Portmeirion itself from 1925 onwards. Llywelyn is the architect's grandson, and in short bursts he draws on his earliest memories to introduce vignettes of the place that brought the Amalfi coast to North Wales: Battery Square; the campanile; the Gloriette; the ship aground called the *Amis Réunis*, frozen into perpetual harbour; the colour-washed façades sparkling in the sunshine of a summer afternoon. The buildings of dreamers have always played a part in architectural history, but in celebrating the grand eccentrics, from Boullée to Hundertwasser, we might forget that some of the most poignant fantasies are those of a gentle peace, luxuriance and beauty. So it's fitting, too, to discover that Gerry's next project has been – what else! – to depict the landmarks of Ambridge for the website of the *Archers* fanclub ■ TIMOTHY BRITAIN-CATLIN is the author of *The English Parsonage in the Early 19th Century* (Spire) ▷