



## Brave New Albion

**PRESS ENGINEERS** After years of careful preparation, Rochat has launched a new Albion relief printing press – the first to be made for over 100 years. Artist Nick Morley goes to Barnet to test it out

The Rochat family has been making printing presses out of the same premises on Moxon Street, Barnet, since 1969. The tradition of making solid, precision machines that are also things of beauty has been passed down through three generations and, in the last 40 years, the family has dispatched some 15,000 presses from the UK as far afield as Australia and Canada. Their presses are built to last, made from solid steel and cast iron, but are precision-engineered to allow the discerning printmaker to make the tiny adjustments necessary to pull a perfect print. Now the firm is branching out. Having spent years moving, installing and servicing Albion presses for artists and colleges, the Rochats have decided to make their own. It has been a mammoth task and a labour of love involving a range of people with specialist skills, some of which are in danger of dying out.

In 2009 the family was given an 1854 Ulmer and Sons Albion and decided to use it as the prototype for their own press. As nobody else has made one since around 1900, it was, literally, back to the drawing board. Measurements were taken and detailed drawings made. After some adjustments, the next stage was to hand-carve the patterns for the press out of wood – a job given to a skilled craftsman. These patterns were used to make moulds for casting. Details such as the lions' feet and leaf-motif finial were derived from other presses. Rochat's name and address were also added, as well as the company's website on the feet, which should help to date the press in the future!

Casting took place in various foundries in

Birmingham. Here, the firm has used innovation to improve on the traditional methods. Instead of using pure iron, an iron/steel alloy has been employed, which has a much higher tensile strength and will prevent the damage from stress that can happen to cast iron presses when printing under high pressure. In addition, the toggle motion has been hardened to prolong the press's lifespan. Back in Moxon Street, the parts were machined, carefully assembled and fine tuned. For added authenticity, various bolts were filed by hand to match the original square design rather than the modern-day hexagon. And the paint job is black – in line with the original (not their signature RAF blue, a feature which dates to when Harry Rochat was in the airforce). At long last, the new Rochat Albion was ready to test.

### Testing its Mettle

Seeing the machine, for the first time, in the workshop, I was struck by its beauty. Sitting regally in the glow from a dusty skylight, its black surface glistened. On closer inspection, I found a rare level of attention to detail. The ground steel surfaces sang against the dark paint, with the brushed brass and mahogany handle lending an extra touch of class.

I usually print my linocuts on an American French Tool Co. etching press at East London Printmakers in Hackney. This gives excellent density of colour due to the high pressure, but the paper inevitably moves as it passes through, causing drag marks. The advantage of a platen press is that the pressure is exerted vertically.

This eliminates drag marks and paper-stretch and makes it very easy to register multiple blocks. The downside is that, as block size increases, so the pressure is spread over a larger area and it becomes more difficult to get a strong impression. For their first Albion (two more sizes are planned), Rochat fixed on a top platen size of 16 x 22 inches. Naturally, I wanted to print something that made good use of the printing area offered, so I inked up my latest creation, the linocut *Dodo with a YoYo*, which measures 14 x 17 inches. The press performed admirably. Without exerting undue force on the handle, I was able to get a decent print and, after adjusting the pressure and amount of ink, quickly produced a near-perfect impression. The action of all the moving parts was silent and smooth.

The press is available with or without a tympan. This is covered in linen and will come with a counter-balance. Currently, adding a tympan makes a big difference to the price although ways of making this more cheaply are being investigated. Once delivery costs are factored in, this is not a cheap piece of equipment but one your fellow printmakers will covet and it will retain its value for years.

The new Rochat Albion press, with tympan & associated fixings, is £8,400; the price without tympan is £6,500 (prices are ex.VAT). The printable area is 16 x 22 ins (40.6 x 55.8 cm); max. paper size is 18 x 24 inches (c. 46 x 61 cm). Turnaround on orders is expected to be six to eight weeks & potential customers are welcome to visit the workshop and try out the press. Visit [www.harryrochat.com](http://www.harryrochat.com)

### Images, left to right

The new Rochat Albion bearing the Rochat company details (TOP) & the specially designed feet featuring the Rochat website (BOTTOM)  
Nick Morley (left) with his linocut *Dodo with a YoYo* & David Rochat  
(L TO R) David, Christine & Lynne Rochat