



GENTLY FADING AND FLAKING, OLD HAND-PAINTED ADVERTISING SIGNS STILL HAUNT MANY A BUILDING WALL. THE SIMPLE ACT OF LOOKING UP CAN MAKE AMATEUR ARCHAEOLOGISTS OF US ALL

Words: **KIRSTEN ELLIOT** Photography: **SAM ROBERTS**

Today's advertisers occupy a wider variety of blank spaces than ever. The TV ad and billboard remain popular, but thanks to the digital age chances are the last advert you or I saw was online, and aimed directly at us. It's easy, then, to fall into the trap of thinking 'the olden days' were more commercially gentle. But go back more than 60 years when the adjective 'viral' was still only used by doctors, and firms plugged their goods to the public with a determination and wiliness to match that of any of today's big brands.

Walk around any city and gaze up at the old buildings. You see that faded lettering, coloured paint peeling gently from walls, and the suggestion of a once-decorative scroll? Perhaps the faint word 'Bovril' or 'Bookbinders'? These are relics of old advertisements, painted there when every vertical surface – no matter how exquisite – was regarded as a legitimate place to promote your wares. They are known as ghost signs. And they are beautiful in a way email spam can only dream of.

"They tend to be in your peripheral vision," says Sam Roberts, whose Ghost Signs Project (www.ghostsigns.co.uk) aims to photograph, »



1 The sign for B Flegg Saddle & Harness Maker at 18 Monmouth Street, London, has been restored to its original vibrancy. 2 Meanwhile, the plain and clear letters of HJ Golding Electrical Supplies, St John's Hill, London, are starting to disappear entirely.



* The faded advertising signs painted directly onto walls. Often hidden by later buildings, they never fail to thrill when discovered for the first time. Many surviving examples can be found in the UK, US, France and Canada.



Harper Piano Co, Holloway Road. Although long gone from Holloway, the ghostly spirit of the company remains there.

“Landlords were HAPPY to allow signs on their walls – advertisers were prepared then, as now, to pay readily for ADVERTISING space”

research and archive surviving hand-painted wall advertising in the UK and Ireland. “Because they come from an era when people walked and took slower forms of transport.” He began noticing and snapping ghost signs near his home in Stoke Newington, London and, realising these fascinating but fragile relics could not last forever, decided it would be good to create a proper record of them. He contacted friends, and asked if they too knew of any, receiving a flood of photographs. A subsequent appeal through London’s *Time Out* magazine brought in even more responses. Finding he now had a sizeable collection, Sam contacted the History of Advertising Trust (HAT) to suggest they help create an archive of signs before it was too late. Backed by funding from Rank Hovis – whose company features in more ghost signs than any other – the project took off. The busy, collaborative Ghost Signs website contains links to the HAT archive and invites the public to submit their own discoveries.

Advertisements on walls have a long history – they have been found at Pompeii and on Arabian archaeological sites – but their heyday really began in the early nineteenth century. In Bath’s elegant Milsom Street, you will find an example that dates back to the 1820s, advertising a circulating library, reading room and state lottery office. This is just one of a rich supply of ghost signs to be found in the city. Sam Roberts believes that because many of the buildings are listed, the signs have been inadvertently preserved.

Money talks, whatever the era: nineteenth century householders and landlords were happy to allow signs on their walls as advertisers were prepared to pay handsomely for advertising space. The work was done by skilled signwriters who sometimes used the mortar lines in the bricks as a guide for letter heights, especially on smaller signs and those that appeared »



Redfern's Rubber, Lambourn Road, London. These were temporarily liberated having been under billboards. They have since been re-covered.



THE STORY BEHIND THE SIGN

THE attitude of the wealthy towards poor girls in the nineteenth century is laid bare on the wall of Gays House in Margaret’s Hill, Bath. “Asylum for teaching young females household work” reads the sign of the institute founded in 1819, which was “intended for the reception of destitute children who are of an age to leave school but not yet old enough for household service”.

By 1827, it was in financial trouble. There had been typhus, and paid nurses had been required. In 1832, it was forced to close.

With the young girls long gone, the sign serves as a reminder of an extremely sad past, yet reinforces how times have changed.



A building along the Graham Road in Islington is still the proud bearer of a sign for the flooring company Diespeker.



Blooms Pianos, Kingsland Road, London, now offers a different sort of perfection.

“The SIGNS were never intended to last – advertising, by its very nature, is EPHEMERAL. Yet they are social documents”

on the business’s premises.

The consistency of design for bigger brands and national campaigns, such as Player’s or Nestlé, was achieved through painters’ guides issued by the relevant advertising agency. These were scaled to the appropriate size before the preparation of paper or fabric to set the design onto the wall. It’s possible that the big companies hired a travelling team, which gave consistency but made for less interesting graphics. As Sam says: “The best signs are those where the skill and creativity of the signwriter are evident in the finished product”.

Should they be preserved? Sam Roberts has mixed feelings: “Some are genuinely artistic – others are, at best, simple lettering, and, at worst, downright eyesores,” he says. The signs were never intended to last – advertising, by its very nature, is ephemeral. Yet they are social documents. Above all, they are an example of an under-appreciated skill. Says Sam: “It is interesting that the value placed upon the craft of signwriting is, in some way, diminished versus crafts that created more permanent artefacts, such as furniture and jewellery. Many of these signs are close to becoming antique, yet the skill involved in producing them is valued less than that of the cabinet maker.”

Ghost signs reveal the history of a city and its people – discover them now, before they fade away completely. **S**

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1 Deane & Co Chemist, The Pavement, Clapham. The druggist existed until 1986 and is outlived by its sign.
 2 Meanwhile, over in Islington, London, Sam’s favourite feline Black Cat Cigarettes still guard their old factory in Dingley Road.



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PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE GEORGE, YAWN CREATIVE WWW.YAWNCREATIVE.COM