

This article appeared on the Time Out Big Smoke blog on Monday, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2009:  
[http://www.timeout.com/london/big-smoke/blog/7842/Ghost\\_signs\\_of\\_London.html](http://www.timeout.com/london/big-smoke/blog/7842/Ghost_signs_of_London.html)

## Ghost signs of London

Sam Roberts



Bloom's Pianos by Ronnie Hackston.

“Fount pens repaired”, said the sign, which got me thinking about exactly who gets their pen repaired these days?

“For your throat’s sake smoke”, said the sign, and I wondered if that was entirely sensible advice...

“Take courage”, said the sign, and I did.

These slogans can be found on walls across London, touting products from a past era such as Black Cat Cigarettes, Daren Bread and Peterkin Custard. There are also many for more familiar brands such as Hovis, Gillette and Nestle. What makes these advertisements special is that they were painted by skilled sign writers directly onto the brickwork of buildings.

These old hand painted advertisements (ghostsigns) intrigued me and back in the summer of 2006 I took my camera out to Stoke Newington and photographed five or six with the aim of preserving them. It was clear they wouldn’t last forever as the elements had already led to some fading.

I then wondered how many more there might be and emailed my pictures to friends asking if they knew of any others. The response was an enthusiastic flood of images and locations, something entirely unexpected. Following up on the leads took me to Brixton, Bethnal Green and beyond and before long I had a collection of over 50 photos. A further appeal via the pages of Time Out led to even more discoveries and I was soon in possession of a sizeable record of this fading advertising form. Some of the pictures I had were even for signs that had since become ‘extinct’.

The question I'm often asked is whether I think these signs should be protected in law or by English Heritage. In theory this is good idea but the fact is that they all fade to nothing in the end. I believe our efforts should be directed towards capturing them now with our cameras so that this fascinating piece of advertising, commercial and craft history can be preserved for future generations.

My current work is focussed on creating a permanent photographic ghostsigns archive in collaboration with the History of Advertising Trust. This has taken the scope beyond London to include signs from across the UK and Ireland. Establishing this archive will meet the objective of my first trip to Stoke Newington by providing a safe home for not just my own collection but also those of many other enthusiasts across the country. A nationwide effort is currently being mounted to photograph, record and research these signs with over 200 people already involved.

Work is in full swing and hundreds of images have already been submitted and categorised in the dedicated group on Flickr. The best and most interesting will eventually be used to launch the History of Advertising Trust ghostsigns archive.

If you know of a ghostsign near you, have any photographs or information about the companies advertised or those who once painted them please get involved via the blog, the Flickr group or by email. The Bloom's Pianos sign above was submitted by Ronnie Hackston, it would be great to see your pictures in the archive too...