



SAM ROBERTS

Ghost signs: the fading craft of handpainted advertising

Where can you get maids' dresses, corsets and flannelettes these days? Nowhere probably, but signs advertising these and many other examples of long-forgotten wares still remain, high on city walls, too inaccessible to have been worth the trouble of removing, or exposed to view once more by the removal of more recent boardings.

Any walk around London's old streets is likely to pass by historical 'artefacts' often overlooked owing to their ephemeral nature and location. These are ghost signs, the fading remnants of yesterday's advertising, once painted by hand directly onto the brickwork of houses, shops, warehouses and any other available wall space. Look up and around you, and you will soon begin to spot their messages touting custard, pianos, razors, cigarettes and more. Their story is one of survival against billboards, property developers and the wind and rain that constantly wears away at their colours.

The heyday for these hand-painted advertisements came to an end with the proliferation of printed billboard technology. The lower costs and increased consistency across locations afforded by the printers spelt an end to the dominance of the hand-painted form. The

craftsmanship of signwriting for the purposes of outdoor advertising has now all but disappeared, although the recent success of Colossal Media in the USA suggests that the authenticity of hand painted signs is still attractive to some brands. In fact, Jack Daniel's has recently mounted a campaign in the UK along similar lines.

It is difficult to estimate how many ghost signs remain in London and the UK; the number is changing constantly as they are covered up and painted over. In some cases their number is added to as adjacent buildings are destroyed or billboards that once covered them are removed. In the latter case the ghost sign may only be visible for a matter of days before a new illuminated billboard is erected. Enthusiasts will use this window of opportunity to photograph the old sign before it is lost behind the ever-changing electronic display. Although



Left: Sign writers were not infallible – the initial intention to capitalise 'Stoke Newington' was abandoned when the lack of space was noticed. This sign shows clearly how the mortar lines between the bricks were used as guides to ensure consistent letter height. Allen Road, London N16.

Opposite: Ideal Fountain Pen, Stoke Newington Church Street, London N16. An example showing a combination of big brand (Waterman's) and the local retailer (Walker Bros). The sign writer seems to have been given more freedom with the upper half of the sign, whereas the lettering below is consistent with Watermans' branding elsewhere.



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Bloom's Pianos, Kingsland Road, London E2. Striking style in this huge sign painted by Howell Signs of Clerkenwell. It is likely that the pianos would have been sold under a financing arrangement with payments made over many years.

covered up it will remain in excellent condition, protected from the weathering that would otherwise erode it over time.

The signs themselves demonstrate a remarkable consistency in strategic intent as they existed almost solely to make the public aware of the product type and name. Occasionally claims are made such as the 'perfection' of Bloom's Pianos or that Bates's Salve 'cures wounds & sores', but these are exceptions to the more usual basic level of informing people of the existence of the products advertised. Despite this, there is diversity in the signs in terms of design and typography. This individuality comes from their hand-crafted origins, and those pictured here and on the following pages offer a few examples. In many cases the most interesting designs are those for smaller firms, who will have given greater freedom to the sign writer. In the case of bigger, sometimes national, brands there were fairly strict guides to the exact layout of the required sign. Widespread examples of these larger campaigns include Hovis, Bovril and Gillette.

A debate continues among ghost sign enthusiasts as to whether they should be protected by law (as with listed buildings) or even repainted to restore their former glory. The fact that so many have survived to this day is testimony to their enduring nature and negates the need for protectionist interventions. Until they are all weathered away we can continue to marvel at their scale and the craftsmanship that led to their creation. However, we must accept that in time they will all disappear, with the exception of those which have been photographed for future generations to learn from. The next time you're strolling across your town or city take a look up and see if you can spot a piece of commercial craftsmanship from yesteryear. Your photographs and locations are always welcomed by the author, and can be sent to ghostsigns@gmail.com.

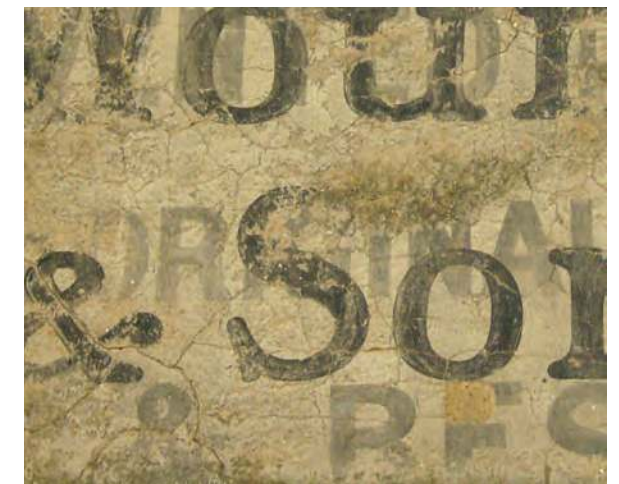
Sam Roberts is a ghost signs enthusiast and maintains the UK's leading site on the subject, <http://www.ghostsigns.co.uk>



*Above: K&M Larn, Belgate Mews
A very simple sign that showing some products still available today and some less recognisable...*

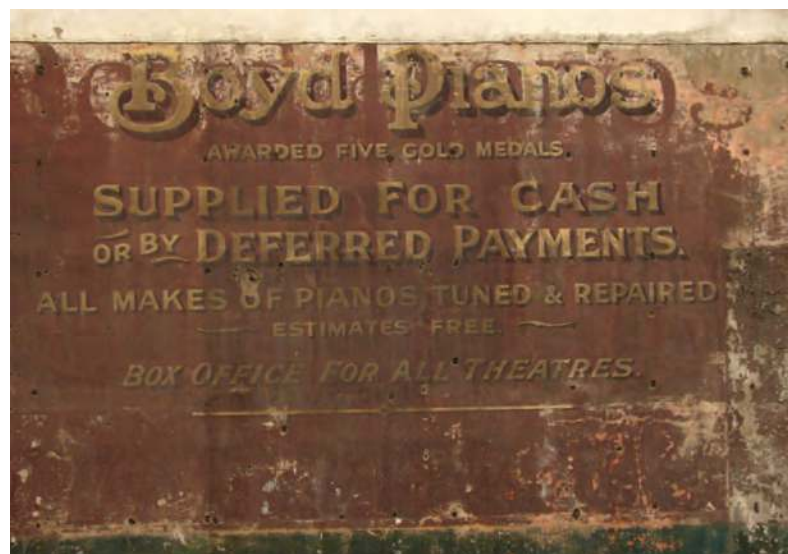


Above and below: Bates's Salve, Cures Wounds & Sores, Sidmouth Street, London WC1. This sign shows clearly how the same location would have been used many times, often for different products. This 'palimpsest' shows two very differently styled signs vying for position on the wall.





Above: Hovis, Hewitt Road, London N8. This is an example of the prolific Hovis campaign, utilising the wall space available on bakers' shops to promote their flour and bread. The consistency of the logo type shows how strictly Hovis controlled the production of these signs, which can be found across the country.



Above: Black Cat Cigarettes, Dingley Place, London EC1. Perhaps most noteworthy for its sheer size, this sign also shows the effects of weathering with the more exposed upper portion now almost completely gone.

Left: Boyd's Pianos, Shacklewell Lane, London E8. An interesting combination of piano seller/repairer and theatre ticket outlet, this sign was revealed for a matter of days before being covered up again. It is so far unique among known examples for its use of gold paint and was produced by Silversigns of Buckingham Road, N1.



Above left: Gillette/Criterion, Kilburn, London. This is one of a series of Gillette Razors and Criterion Matches palimpsests found across London. It would be easy to assume that this was a sign for Gillette Matches without noticing the varying stages in the fading leading to this merging of two distinct campaigns.

Left: Pater & Co, City of London. This petite sign features the very common pointing hand symbol to indicate the whereabouts of the company advertised. It is worth noting that many financial and legal firms continue to commission hand painted signs, presumably as a symbol of their history and prestige.