

# Down Your Way

YORKSHIRE'S NOSTALGIC MAGAZINE

£2.50 ISSUE 172 APRIL 2012

## CO-OP VALUES STILL STRONG

Risk that paid  
off for Harry  
Gration

Land Girls  
called up  
again

Barnsley's Titanic  
year of triumph

Leeds Showstoppers

JAYNE MANSFIELD'S YEAR IN YORKSHIRE





ROY HAMPSON, CASTLEFORD

## NOW YOU SEE THEM BUT MAYBE SOON YOU WON'T

**W**herever we wander, whether it's down a quiet country lane, along a village street or up and down the busy thoroughfares of a familiar town or city, it won't be long before we encounter some form of advertising or other. It may be just a simple sign printed on a home computer, then tied to a lamp-post announcing a jumble sale, village fête, or car boot. Or it could be a rusting old van placed strategically in a field among rolling countryside bearing a placard advertising a local garage, pub or restaurant. These days there's no escape, we are bombarded from all sides. It's as if everyone has something to tell us, and is it any wonder we tend to think the brightly coloured billboards and banners are an urban curse? Those over

the top bright graphics shout and scream at us at every opportunity in order to catch the eye – blatantly visible on bus stops, litter bins, shop windows, or on the sides of buses and taxis.

However, take a look beyond, up, down, and sideways, you'll soon discover a more gentle lost world of advertising painted long ago by skilled artists who used the sides of walls and above shop windows as a canvas. They are the faded remains of nineteenth and twentieth century adverts once painted by hand onto the brickwork of building exteriors. Their purpose was to encourage passers by to smoke or take 'Bile Beans' and drink 'Fry's Cocoa'. They are known as ghost signs. It's amazing how many you can still spot on our streets.

After decades they still manage to survive,

*Don't fade away ...touched-up Bile Beans ad on Lord Mayor's Walk, York, again showing wear*





*Modern art ...a coloured 'abstract' behind Leeds station, and clockwise, right, unusual wooden lettering in Fossgate, York; something indecipherable in Lock Lane, Castleford; Magnet Ales sign in Heslington Road, York; and gold lettering in a Skipton alleyway*

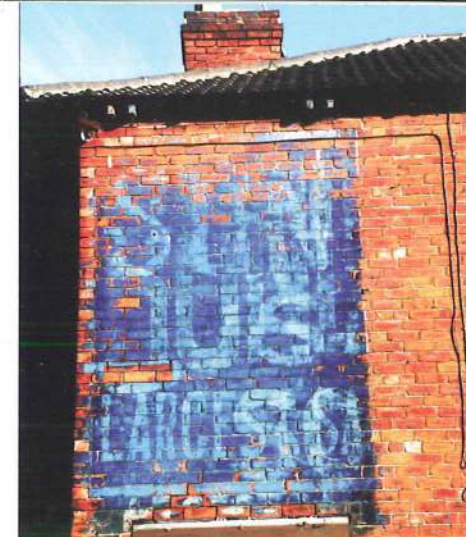
thanks to good old fashioned lead paint. Considered by many to be works of art they still play an important role as part of our commercial, craft, and advertising history. Sadly though, the old adverts are vanishing as buildings are ripped down, or the walls are painted over, or simply the paintwork is fading due to weathering and the passage of time. They certainly deserve to be photographed and preserved as proof to future generations of their existence.

Businesses of all kinds once used hand painted advertising to publicise themselves, including smaller local companies. The bigger brands, such as Hovis and Gillette, would pay for signs spanning the whole country. There's a really good example of such a sign down Lord Mayor's Walk in York advertising 'Bile Beans'. During the early 1980s someone took the time and trouble to restore its lovely black lettering which stands against a deep yellow background; sadly though it is fading away once more. More fine examples can be spotted in

Ilkley on a street leading off Leeds Road, once advertising a local butcher's, and in Skipton at the entrance to a passageway, a gent's outfitter spells out his services from long ago in lovely faded gold lettering.

Often, the signs were painted over by other advertisers, which can make it difficult these days to distinguish most of the original lettering. We are rewarded though with beautiful coloured abstract patterns on the side of old decaying brick walls. Try spotting an instance of this alongside the canal behind Leeds City station. Using walls as a canvas for signs has a long history – even the preserved ruins at Pompeii have the remains of a painted sign depicting jugs of wine and other delights, tempting passers-by to visit a brothel.

The wall signs themselves were introduced on the back of the industrial revolution during the nineteenth century and the bright colours must have acted like a rainbow among the dark grim streets associated with Victorian times, and the early part of the twentieth century.



This form of advertising was popular for almost four decades from the 1920s to the late 1950s. The advent of new colour printing methods and simple economics meant the writing was certainly on the wall for the more traditional wall painted advertising.

There were many different techniques employed to actually paint on the letters, and each sign-writer would carry out the work in his own way. Smaller signs could be produced freehand, often using the mortar lines of the bricks to measure the height of the letters. Another common method was using a spiked wheel to perforate the lines of a particular design into a sheet of paper. This could be placed on the wall and patted with charcoal or chalk dust to leave an outline which could be filled with paint.

During Victorian and Edwardian times the general pace of life in a typical street would be much slower than now, so people travelling along streets were more likely to take notice of wall advertising. It's also worth noting in those

early days that many of the population could have been illiterate so the messages would always be kept simple, perhaps embellished with an illustration of the product itself.

Owning property with an ideal wall to paint an advert would prove to be a money spinner for its occupants. A broker would tour the neighbourhood to seek out a suitable wall in a busy location before talking to its owner and offering a sum of money per month to lease the space. Often the broker would amass fifty to a hundred wall spaces then offer them to a large company for advertising.

When wall advertising ruled, bright-coloured tinplate signs were also in favour too, nailed onto the walls of businesses alongside the painted variety. The likelihood of spotting any examples in the streets would be nil these days as they are sought after by collectors, but there are examples in museums, including Elsecar heritage centre in South Yorkshire. Happy ghost sign hunting.

Website: [www.ghostsigns.co.uk](http://www.ghostsigns.co.uk)