

an interview with

sam roberts

GHOSTSIGNS WALKING TOUR



by Albani Calusin

Whispers of advertising past were the focus of our walking tour through Stoke Newington in the London leg of our study trip. Lead by Sam Roberts, we had the opportunity to get up close and personal with some of London's best ghostsigns and explore local art, traditional craft and advertising history.

A 'ghostsign' is an old hand-painted advertising sign that has been preserved on a building for an extended period of time. On the Ghostsigns Walking Tour, we walked the streets of Stoke Newington to see many different ghostsigns and learn about their stories and the time period in which they originally existed.

I spoke with Sam to gain more insight to how his ghostsigns project began, his take on ghostsigns and to get to know a little more about him.



Could you talk about your journey to founding the ghost signs project and how it all came about?

After graduating (Philosophy & Mathematics) in 2001 I got a job in the advertising industry trade association in the UK. This led to working within the industry at agencies and other trade bodies for ten years, with some time overseas volunteers in between. I was interested in the history of advertising, and also its ethics, especially with respect to outdoor advertising. I think that these two factors led to me noticing my first ghost sign, the fountain pens one that we saw on our walk.

At the time there was some stuff online, but my curiosity and obsessive compulsive tendencies took over and I had to find out as much as I could about what I felt was a neglected part of advertising history. Throughout I was spurred on by the personal connections that the signs seemed to elicit in people, it seemed like everyone had a connection to one of their local signs, or one they could remember from their youth.

Over time I got involved with more and more research, projects, and press interviews.

It was a hobby primarily but on my return from volunteering in Cambodia (2010-13) I decided I wanted it to be more than this. My work is now split between stuff on ghostsigns but, perhaps more importantly, my work on Better Letters which is all about nurturing the craft of signwriting and making sure that in 60 years someone else can lead a walking tour looking

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at the fading signs that were originally painted in 1917.

What was your first ghost sign sighting like?

To be completely honest I can't remember. However, once I had noticed it I would look at it every time I passed and it made me aware of the presence of these signs on the street. Fortunately for me, the area where I live has lots of them, hence the

tour being located there, and so I was quickly exposed to many other examples. I started saying to my girlfriend (now wife) that something should be done about them, that I might start photographing them for posterity. One day she said 'why don't you stop talking about it and actually do it', and that was probably the turning point for me.

What was life like before that first encounter?

As above, I was working within the advertising industry. I moved from roles in client services/new business to working in training and human resources. It's a great industry with lots of brilliant people in it, but I think I always had a yearning to ultimately be self-employed.

Why do you feel it's important to raise awareness and protect ghost signs?

I think they are survivors of a past that can be easily forgotten, and very public survivors at that. In the same way that we revere architecture that represents particular eras, I think the same applies to these signs as relics of advertising past. They are also important at the local level, with many people in the community valuing them





because of their role as place markers. Another aspect for me is that they serve to document craft history, the skill that went into painting them has been in steady decline, although is now experiencing a resurgence. They are a valuable document of the intersection of advertising, craft and local history.

I stop short of lobbying or advocating for legal or other

you talk more about that?

This has been my vision for about seven years now, a global map, accessible through mobile phones, so that wherever you go in the world you can go out on a little ghostsigns walk of your own. It would need to have a submission feature to allow rapid growth and development.

The snag is always my limited technical knowledge, although

adding more tours to my existing mobile phones app. As I'm typing the big project I'm preparing for is the London Design Festival where, with Better Letters, we're running a series of workshops, and creating an installation called the Glowing Alphabet Peep Show. Some useful links to that are here: www.betterletters.co/ldf. The other major project is getting

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means of protection as I don't feel it's the best use of my time and energy. I don't oppose people doing it, but it's just not for me. My preference is to see the signs valued in a more general sense, and those that own host buildings keeping them for that reason.

On the tour, you mentioned putting together a map of all the found ghost signs. Could

I am working with a developer on some testing which is looking good. The best outcome would be finding a sponsor to invest the sort of money that would be required to create something that does everything I'd like to see it do.

What other projects are you currently working on or have worked on?

The map above is one, and

ready for the arrival of our second baby, due in October!

What is your favourite thing about leading the walking tour?

I love the input that guests bring to the walks. Having fresh eyes looking at the signs helps me to see and become aware of new things. I meet people from all walks of life, and with a variety of personal and professional

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experience. This diversity means that I've learned from architects, graphic designers, local historians and marketing people. Each new perspective enriches my own understanding of the signs we visit and so, in a way, the research process is ongoing because of this.

What is the strangest or most unusual thing that has happened on one of your walking tours?

One of the stops on my Stoke Newington walk used to be a relatively new painted sign on a wall. (I had to edit it out because I needed to cut the total tour time down).

One time I was stood opposite it and pointing out to the group some of the obvious flaws in its design and execution. There was a woman listening in on the pavement opposite who then came over to tell me that she'd painted it! It was definitely awkward, but I got chatting to her and she explained that she wasn't a professional, more of an artist, and that she'd done it for fun for her antique store.



What do you like to do in your free time?

Hanging out with my wife and daughter (age 2) probably occupies most of it. I swim for fitness and wellbeing, and then offset this with beers in the pub. It's actually an interesting question because five years ago I'd have said studying ghostsigns, but now that's part of my job!

Coffee or tea?

Very good question. Even though I love it, I've moved away from coffee because it was upsetting my stomach. I now only have the occasional cup when I'm visiting a place that has good stuff. My tea drinking consists of an Earl Grey first thing in the morning, followed by lots of fruit/herbal infusions, dominated by Lemon & Ginger.