



## ENAMEL SIGNS

by Dick Henrywood

Before the advent of giant hoardings and huge printed posters, roadside advertising was much more restrained. In fact, there is a song about the demise of corner shops which includes one verse:

On the walls enamel signs,  
names of old to see.  
Yorkshire Relish, thick or thin,  
and Mazawattee tea.  
Hudson's soap, Robin starch,  
bags of Reckitt's Blue,  
Sylvan Flakes and Oxydol,  
and Nugget boot polish too.

I wonder how many of our more mature readers will recall these old names? Certainly I have been able to confirm that all except Sylvan Flakes and Oxydol can be found on old enamel signs, and I suspect the missing two will turn up at some stage.

The enamel sign was developed in the mid-Victorian period and the world's first purpose-built factory was established by the Patent Enamel Co Ltd at Selly Oak in Birmingham in 1889. Several other major firms sprung up in the following decade and thereafter the signs proliferated. They were used to advertise goods and services of every description right through until the 1960s, when posters and television advertising sounded their death knell.

The normal sites for signs were shops and similar retail or service premises such as garages. The proprietors

would be paid a small fee to display and maintain them. They were often designed for specific places, such as beneath shop windows (long and thin) or at the sides of doorways (tall and narrow). Side walls and end gables were also popular. Some shops were natural sites for appropriate signs, particularly newsagents, grocery stores, confectionery shops and tobacconists. Another common site was the railway station, and even in the early years of the 20th century some market research techniques were used to identify the ideal positions for maximum impact.

Some of the earliest signs were for Sunlight soap and Cadbury's cocoa or chocolate, but other manufacturers soon joined in and the product range grew rapidly. Virtually anything that could be bought at a shop was suitable – groceries of every description (figure 2), sweets, household cleaners (figure 1), drinks and tobacco (figure 3), shoes, furniture, medicines, pet food (figure 4) – the list seems endless. Other products included sewing machines, bicycles (figure 5), motorbikes, prams, agricultural products (figure 4),

*Above. Figure 1. A small group of signs for cleaning products, all very common.*

*Right. Figure 2. A selection of grocery-related signs. Tea, cocoa and chocolate were widely advertised. The Salada tea sign is shaped to represent a packet of tea. (Seymours courtesy Tamlyn & Son of Bridgwater; Salada, Brooke Bond and Oxo courtesy Thos. W. Gaze of Diss)*

**SUPERB**  
**G.P.**  
**GOVERNMENT TEA**  
 RICH  
 RIPE  
 REFRESHING



**VAN HOUTEN'S**  
**COCOA**  
 BEST & GOES FARTHEST

**USE**  
 300  
 PRIZE  
 MEDALS



**FRY'S**  
 PURE  
 CONCENTRATED  
**COCOA** AND DIPLOMAS

J.S. FRY & SONS  
 COCOA  
 MAKERS  
 BRISTOL & LONDON

**COLMAN'S**  
 D.S.F.  
**MUSTARD**

**Brooke Bond**  
 dividend  
 Tea

COCOA & CHOCOLATE  
 MAKERS TO H.M. THE KING.

**ROWNTREE'S**  
**CHOCOLATES**  
 AND  
**PASTILLES**

COCOA & CHOCOLATE  
 MAKERS TO H.M. THE KING.

**Cadbury's**  
 Chocolates  
 MADE AT BOURNVILLE

**CORONA**  
 SPARKLING DRINKS & FRUIT SQUASHES

**BROWN LABEL**  
 2lb  
 BLACK TEA  
**'SALADA'**  
**TEA**



**SEYMOUR'S**  
*Prize-Medal*  
**TABLE WATERS**  
 SEYMOUR'S SHERBORNE.

AWARDED  
 TWO PRIZE-MEDALS  
 EDINBURGH 1926.  
 DIPLOMA LONDON 1924

FACTORY IS A MODEL OF  
 CLEANLINESS AND ONE OF  
 THE MOST UP-TO-DATE IN  
 THE BRITISH ISLES

IT'S  
*'Meat & Drink'*  
 TO YOU

7334



**OXO**  
**CUBE**  
 CONCENTRATED  
**BEEF**

*Lily of the Valley*



**ICE CREAM**

BUY  
**Brooke Bond's**  
**TEA**  
 and so save money.  
 A small spoonful  
 of



**BROOKE BOND'S TEA**  
 is stronger and better than  
 a big spoonful  
 of  
 any other tea





Figure 3. An attractive group of signs promoting drink and tobacco products; the rocket-assisted Green & Ledicott mineral water bottle suggests rather potent ginger beer! (Big Tree Burgundy and Green & Ledicott courtesy Thos. W. Gaze of Diss)



Figure 4. Four good pictorial signs advertising ice cream, flour, dog food and animal feeds, all attractive and very collectable. (BBR Auctions of Elsecar)

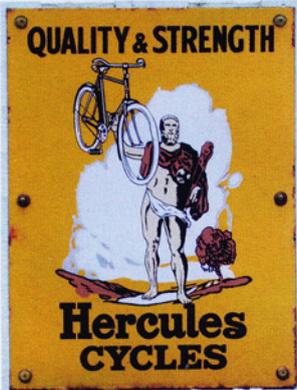


Figure 5. Four signs advertising famous bicycles; another Raleigh advert has a cut-out cyclist riding along the top of the sign. (Humber courtesy Tamlyn & Son of Bridgwater; Centaur courtesy Thos. W. Gaze of Diss)

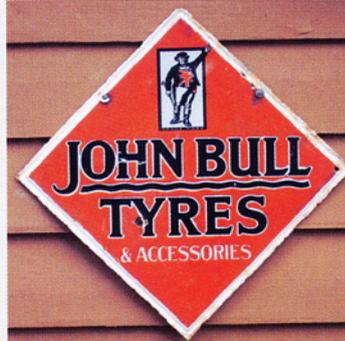


Figure 6. Various motoring-related signs promoting tyres, fuel and servicing. The Mobiloil Gargoyle sign is still in situ on defunct garage premises in Devon.

paints, fountain pens and inks, radios and gramophones, even tennis racquets. Services included car servicing and related fuel, oil and tyres (figure 6), opticians, insurance (figure 7), house removals (figure 15), railways and shipping, travel and tourism. In fact, not much human activity was missed by the sign maker.

The majority of these signs are rectangular in shape although sizes vary enormously. The wording is often quite short and simple, with bright colours used to attract attention. Longer texts are not uncommon but some of the most striking signs incorporate pictorial images and these are particularly desirable (figures 4, 13 and 14). Non-rectangular signs are less common, although some firms used circular or diamond-shaped signs and a few were cut out to special shapes, good examples including a man riding a Raleigh bicycle, a jar of Bovril and a tea leaf advertising Mazawattee Tea. One excellent example shown here is for Aeroshell lubricating oils (figure 8), while another for the Automobile Association would always find collectors (figure 9).

Both these shaped signs are double-sided and this technique was used for signs which would hang outside appropriate premises. The AA sign, for example, would

be from a garage or hotel, and other relatively common signs can be found for Pratt's petrol, Rocklight paraffin and similar products. Some would have a specially designed bracket, sometimes in wrought iron, whereas others would simply have one edge of the surface bent back to form a flange which could be screwed directly to a wall. Double-sided signs were also quite commonly



Figure 7. Insurance signs were not uncommon on railway stations; this one from the Railway Passengers Assurance Co has a typical note that the station master acted as their agent.



Figure 8. A superb shaped Aeroshell lubricating oil sign from Southend Airport, sold at auction for £1,540. (Thos. W. Gaze of Diss)



Figure 9. A double-sided AA sign which would have hung outside a garage or approved hotel, sold at auction for £165. (Tamlyn & Son of Bridgwater)

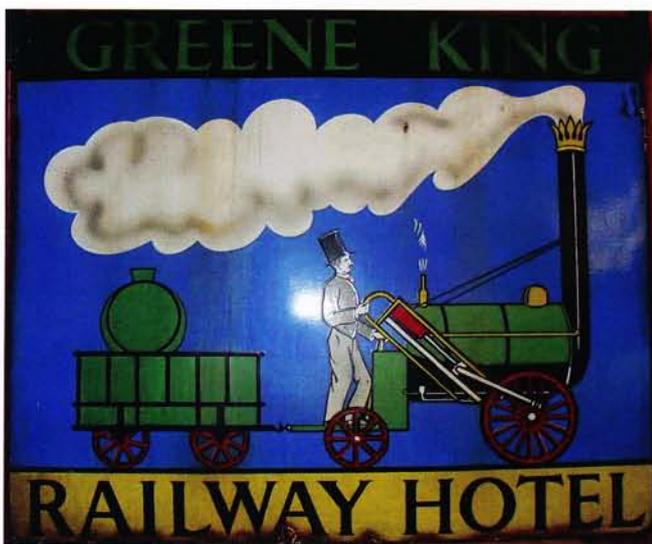


Figure 10. A fine double-sided inn sign from Greene King's Railway Hotel, original location unknown. (Thos. W. Gaze of Diss)



Figure 11. Three novelty signs incorporating thermometers. (Lyon's Tea and Nosegay courtesy BBR Auctions of Elsecar)

used for hotels, inns or public houses (figure 10).

There are also a range of novelty signs, several of which incorporate thermometers (figure 11). Other thermometer signs were issued for Nut Brown Tobacco, Stephens Inks, Izal disinfectant, and even Brooklax (a chocolate laxative)! An excellent variant was issued by Gillette razor blades with the addition of a small barometer. Hudson's Soap was advertised on quite a range of signs, amongst which are some fitted with a clockface and movable hands. These could be set to show times such as when the bakery came in, when cyclists should light up in the evening, or when the shop was due to open or close, none of which have much to do with the soap!

Hudson's Soap also used a novel ploy to attract attention, with coded letters incorporated within their signs. They issued a small cardboard guide titled 'A Railway Puzzle Explained' which listed the codes, all of which were slogans such as 'Makes Washing Easy' or 'Improves Public Health!' The idea was clearly an early version of I-Spy designed to help while away long train journeys and subliminally advertise the soap at the same time.

One other interesting point to note is that a number of signs bear the maker's name, usually in small lettering in a bottom corner. Typical examples include Wyman & Sons of London, Chromo of Wolverhampton, Hancor Signs of Mitcham, and the Patent Enamel Co Ltd mentioned in the introduction above. There are many others and this could provide a fruitful field of study for the more academically-minded collector.

Today such signs are very collectable. Although not plentiful they regularly turn up in auction sales, particularly with collectors' items. There are collectors of signs themselves but there is also a good market for the specialist – a biscuit tin collector, for example, might like a Huntley & Palmers 'John Ginger' sign as a centrepiece for the collection; a collector of fountain pens would be

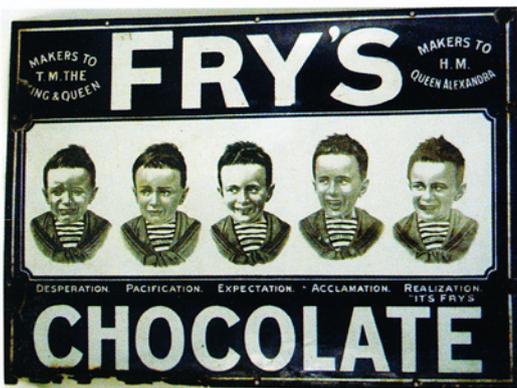


Figure 12. An iconic Fry's Chocolate advert depicting five boys in various stages of anticipation. (BBR Auctions of Elsecar)

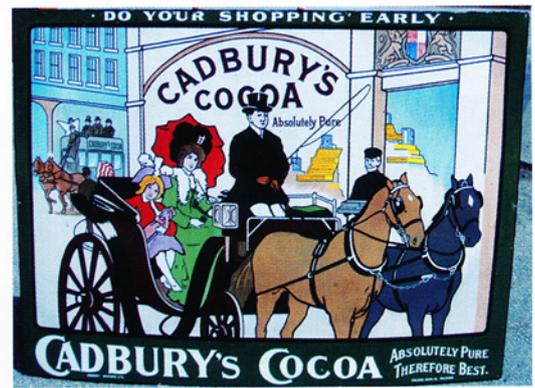


Figure 13. A superb Cadbury's Cocoa pictorial advert, amongst the most collectable of enamel signs, sold for £4,704. (BBR Auctions of Elsecar)



Figure 15. A very large but badly deteriorated sign for Powell & Powell, house furnishers, auctioneers, undertakers and removal and storage contractors of Bath. Despite its very poor condition this sign still sold at auction for £176. (Tamlyn & Son of Bridgwater)

Left. Figure 14. Another fine pictorial sign, this one for United Kingdom Teas, sold at auction for £5,152. (BBR Auctions of Elsecar)

attracted to a Waverley or Swan pens sign; any real ale enthusiast would be spoiled for choice!

Some signs have become particularly famous including the Fry's Chocolate sign depicting five boys in various stages of anticipation for their reward (figure 12). Fry's also issued a range of comic advertising postcards by Tom Browne and two of these were also issued as enamel signs. Unfortunately you might need a small mortgage to acquire them.

As to value, the range is vast. A common small sign with simple lettering only might fetch around £20 or £30 whereas a large pictorial sign would be in the hundreds or even thousands (figures 13 and 14). As with all other collectables, condition is paramount. Being metal, signs are inevitably liable to rust, although the enamel surfaces are surprisingly robust and signs have been dug up from gardens or old tips in remarkably good condition. Some rusting around edges or mounting holes is quite acceptable, but when areas of rust impinge on significant parts of the design, value is adversely affected (figure 15). As with all collectables, look for items that you like and are the best that you

can afford. Then you will get years of happy ownership.

Sadly, relatively few signs remain *in situ* although the odd survivor can sometimes still be found (see for example the Mobiloil Gargoyle sign in figure 6), hopefully to remain for posterity. Examples are often on display in museums but there is no doubt that they are best seen in original surroundings. Stations on preserved railway lines can be a rich source, and a number of the signs shown here were photographed during a pleasant day on the West Somerset Railway.

Anyone wishing to delve into the subject in more detail would be well advised to acquire a copy of Christopher Baglee and Andrew Morley's *The Art of Street Jewellery* (New Cavendish, 2006; see ACC Christmas offers catalogue). With around 2,500 signs illustrated in full colour alongside much original social history, it is a fascinating read.

*Dick Henrywood is a consultant specialising in collectors' items and collectable British pottery.*