

# Enamel Signs

Dick Henrywood looks at old advertising signs

I have always been most attracted to gardens that offer surprises. It is always good to turn a corner and encounter something unexpected, possibly a pond, a sculpture, an abandoned bicycle, or some other object used as a decorative feature. Perhaps some gardeners might like a novel suggestion. What about old enamel advertising signs? Just the things to brighten up a run-down wall or the side of an old shed!

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 brand names?

The enamel sign was developed in the mid-Victorian period and the Patent Enamel Co. Ltd. at Selly Oak in Birmingham established the world's first purpose-built factory 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, sweets, cigarettes and tobacco, soft drinks and beers, household cleaners, shoes, furniture, medicines, pet food – the list seems endless. Other products included sewing machines, bicycles, motorbikes, prams, agricultural products, paints, fountain pens and inks, radios and gramophones, even tennis racquets. Services included car servicing, opticians, insurance, house removals, 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. 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.

There are also a few novelty signs such as a Duckham's oil sign (illustrated left), which incorporated a thermometer. 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 clock-face 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!

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 quite 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 attracted to a Waverley or Swan pens sign; garden related signs such as the collection displayed at Trevarno Garden Museum in Cornwall and any real ale enthusiast is spoiled for choice!

As to value, the range is vast. A common

small sign with simple lettering might only fetch £20 or £30 whereas a large pictorial sign would be in the hundreds. As with all other collectables, condition is paramount. Being metal, signs are inevitably liable to rust, although the enamel surfaces were remarkably 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. 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, 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 most of the signs shown here, along with others, were photographed during a pleasant day on the West Somerset Railway. Now there's a good idea for an interesting day out!

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