

Ghost signs – they are everywhere you look

Ghost signs are everywhere, you just have to know where to look.

And Sam Roberts who set up the site [ghost signs](#) says it is all about being aware of what a ghost sign really is and looking around you. His site was one of the first attempts to gather together a digital collection of the signs from anywhere in the world. Although the site has largely been archived since 2018, his interest in the subject remains the focus of his work.

He defines a ghost sign as ‘the typically fading remains of advertising that was once painted directly by hand onto brick walls’. They tend to date from the late Victorian era right up to the 1950s and 60s. They are not the metal or plastic signs erected on a shop front which are easily removed, rather they are actually painted onto the fabric of a building. But there is a secondary class in Edinburgh at least, with some lettering which was applied to stonework, and then removed, leaving behind its mark. But there are two accepted requisites – age and redundancy. They are often, but not exclusively advertising signs, but sometimes give directions or can even be political messages.

Outdoor advertising moved on to posters in more recent times, and slogans became more nuanced, and occasionally patriotic. The best are those which scan and rhyme, according to *Advertising and Public Memory*, a book edited by Stefan Schutt, Sam Roberts and Leanne White. (Routledge). Phrases such as ‘Dundee marmalade the finest ever made’ worked well to convey ‘a style, a tone of voice’ as well as offering a promise about

the product.



One of the best known ghost signs in Edinburgh is in Stockbridge PHOTO ©2020 The Edinburgh Reporter Roberts is Director of Ghostsigns and Better Letters, and Associate Researcher at the Typographic Hub at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design. He curated the History of Advertising Trust Ghostsigns Archive which you will find [here](#). He helped develop the Ghostsigns Tours app which takes you round the sites in London of some of the best examples along with Adobe Creative resident and experiential designer, Craig Winslow. Some of their work was highlighted (literally with light projections) at the London Design Festival in 2016.

Sam explained his interest in these old advertising signs and how it started. He said: “It was around 2006 when I used to live in north London, in Stoke Newington. It was quite fortuitous that I was living there as there is quite a cluster of ghost signs in the area. I happened to notice one of them, and thought it was intriguing on a number of levels. One was this idea of someone painting a billboard type of advertising directly onto walls, and the other thing was the kind of faded aspect that you get with painted signs. It’s a sign that they represent something of impermanence, like a reflection of life itself, within them. There was an urge in me to document them before they become lost. There has been a slight resurgence of interest in recent years as signs have been replaced by vinyl and billboards and other modern forms.”

Sam continued: “The particular sign that started me off had an interesting form of words on it – “Fount pens repaired”. This sign dated from the mid 1920s so it was coming on for 100 years old. It took me back to the era when people would bother to get a pen repaired, whereas everything today has an element of planned obsolescence built in. Everything now has an expiry date.

“That was the start, and then after seeing that first one you become conscious of their presence and you notice them everywhere. They keep popping up in all different locations. Before long I had around 10 and then emailed friends and family to ask for help. The catalyst was this – the response was incredible as everybody wrote back telling me of signs they knew about – their local signs that they either remembered on their way to and from school or visiting grandparents. They just seem to have a lot of personal significance to people, and many had noticed them before, whether consciously or not.

“This aroused my consciousness and in the last 14 years I have done a variety of different projects related to them.”

Sam later helped the [History of Advertising Trust](#) archive to display more ghost signs on their website, and if you click on the link you will be taken to the Edinburgh results. They hold the largest archive of UK advertising in the world, but it was predominantly newspaper, TV and other forms of easily archivable media. Sam said: “They had lots of Bovril and Guinness ads, but they did not have examples of the painted signs that the brands also used within their history.

“I approached them and suggested we supplement the archive with stuff which is largely undocumented – ghost signs. We got some funding from Hovis who are a big user of old painted signs.

“Then I volunteered for a year to gather material from people all across the country and they put it on their website. All photos and images there have been voluntarily submitted by members of the public.

“What we talk about is two dimensions to fit them within – the means of production and the nature of the business they are advertising.”

Sam’s favourite sign is now lost as a modern building has been

put up right next to the gable of the Carreras tobacco factory on Dingley Road in London, obscuring the most fabulous whole gable sign. You can see it on the [homepage of the Ghost Signs website](#).

Sam told us: “The sign was for Black Cat cigarettes. It was a lovely sign '10 for 6d' – quite interesting that people had such confidence in price stability that they painted it on a wall. There was a picture of a packet of cigarettes and a huge painting of a black cat. When I went back to photograph it once, I noticed some lettering in the bottom right corner which is often where sign painters will put their name as a means of publicity. I noticed it and zoomed in on it – it had the name of the sign company which was ‘Harris the sign kings’ which I really really liked.”

But that sign is no longer visible, unless you are really curious. Sam said: “Finally what happened was that a modern development went up right next to it. The building itself is listed so what happened was the builders left about 6 inches of clearance between the old and the new. What may happen is that the more modern building will eventually be demolished before the older one. The sign is protected from the elements meantime, and people may get a look at it in 60 or 70 years’ time. That is my favourite but it is in a time capsule for now.”

Follow Sam on Instagram [here](#) on Twitter [here](#) and Facebook [here](#).

Sam Roberts