

Ghost Signs

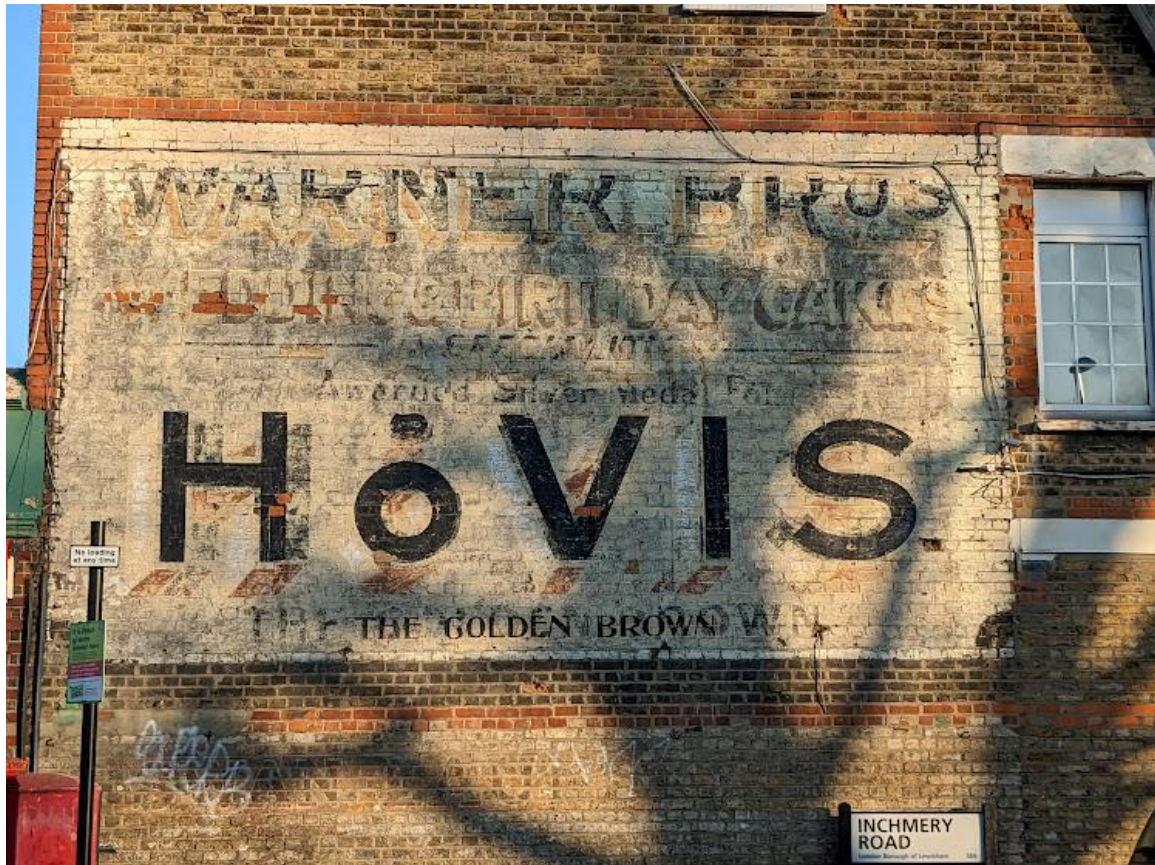
Anna Cusack

Walking through towns and cities around the world, the casual observer may glimpse a ghost sign, a faded memory to a historic product or provision. Ghost signs are old painted signs, normally advertising goods or services, and most often located on the sides of buildings. They have stood the test of time, left in situ through nostalgia or indifference. Providing a unique glimpse into the past.

Ghost signs are occasionally referred to as 'fading ads' or 'brick ads', but 'ghost signs' seem to be the preferred term. That they are almost gone, have been glimpsed but could disappear overnight makes them somewhat romantic. There are now numerous coffee table, photography books, and walking tours all documenting their existence around the world.

The term 'ghost signs' was coined in the 1980s although no one is quite sure how it came about.¹ It is a fitting term for these faded remnants of the past yet 'ghost' is an ambiguous term and open to interpretation. The appearance of the signs, sometimes more strongly illuminated by the rain or sun, changes their manifestation to the naked eye, bringing to mind a ghost. This is why these signs are of such interest; they capture the imagination.

¹ S. Roberts and G. Marshall, 'What is a Ghost Sign?' in S. Schutt, S. Roberts, and L. White (eds.), *Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs* (2017), 15-16.



Hovis ghost sign Inchmery Road, Catford SE6 © Anna Cusack

Many ghost signs were originally painted with oil-based paints. The oldest likely used lead paint as it adheres to masonry surfaces better. Dating signs is not always easy. Older signs date from the mid-nineteenth century, and the majority in Britain are from between 1900-1940. The oldest known ghost sign in Britain dates from 1820 and is on George Street in Bath. It was discovered due to plaster falling off the side of The Porter pub and advertised the building's former role as a chemist.² As they were often refreshed over time it is sometimes hard to pinpoint exactly when a ghost sign was created. Though the product itself helps in this regard. However, most date from before 1950 and the coming of the billboard. Billboards were often placed directly over a previous sign. New ghost signs are still being uncovered when billboards are taken down.

² A. Swift and K. Elliot, *Ghost Signs of Bath* (2016), quoted in this [article](#).



Ghost sign at Drivers Lane Berwick-upon-Tweed. John Beveridge, fish curer, cooper and auctioneer (c.1860s). © [North East Heritage Library](#)

Ghost signs come in many styles and sizes. This small one on the wall by a doorway at Berwick-upon-Tweed, the huge Hovis advertisement on the side of a building in Catford, London and the advertisement at No. 6 Wardrobe Place, London, stating, 'Snashall & Son Printers, Stationers & Account Book Manufacturers – 1st Door on (..?)'. Each one is a snapshot into the history of consumption and advertising in a particular time and place.



‘Snashall & Son – Printers, Stationers & Account Book Manufacturers – 1st Door on (..?)’ In Wardrobe Place, London. © Anna Cusack

For London, there is an incredible ghost sign map [here](#) and tours that can be taken. Although it is thought that less than 1% of the signs of the metropolis remain. Around the world there are ongoing debates about these echoes of the past and if they should be preserved or listed. What is clear is they have stories to tell.

The past is all around us, every alley, every street, every building, and every fading sign tells a story. So, remember to look up, and look closely. History seeps through.

We would love to see your favourite ghost signs so please do share them with us in the comments or on social media.

References and Resources:

S. Schutt, S. Roberts, and L. White (eds.), *Advertising and Public Memory: Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Ghost Signs* (2017)

C. Bunford, *Liverpool Ghost Signs: A Sideways Look at the City's Advertising History* (2012)

S. Roberts and R. Reed, *Ghost Signs: A London Story* (2021)

W. M. Stage, *Ghost Signs – Brick Wall Signs in America* (1989)

A. Swift and K. Elliot, *Ghost Signs of Bath* (2016)

A. Hart and L. Nalty, *Ghost Signs of Dublin* (2014)

C. West, *Fading Ads of Gloucester* (2014)

[The Ghostsigns Blog](#) – There some wonderful blogs here. This is also where the London map of ghost signs is housed and a further reading list that covers ghost signs in America, France or The Netherlands (among other places) should you be interested in ghost signs around the world. Your one-stop spot for all things ghost sign related.