

Public Lettering: a bike ride for TypoLondon 2012



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Street names

The Victorians and Edwardians were very straightforward about this, choosing robust letterforms and long-lasting materials.

Among the best post-war solutions are the City of Westminster signs designed by Misha Black and the DRU in the 1960s (1). A clear typographic arrangement using Univers Bold Condensed on enamelled steel with the 25mm return giving them considerable presence.

By contrast the alphabet designed by David Kindersley and used widely throughout the country (2) shows too much respect to history and is ill-suited to flimsy pressed aluminium. Only in Bath where it is reversed-out of black does it have any presence.

A more recent conservationist approach was adopted around Regent's Street: this (3) is the second version, the first was too small to be read from across the road. They have no redeeming qualities, and why, as here, duplicate information?

mixed-blue mosaic occupying the central area of the facade. The date is cut in relief at either end.

53 Charterhouse Street: **The Central Cold Storage**. By C S Peach 1899, for margarine manufacturers van den Bergh, and, since 1990 a power generating plant. Grand faïence cartouche on facade with nicely detailed street numbers in shields on columns at street level.

Nos.79–83: **Meat Inspection Offices** by the Corporation of London Engineer's Department, 1930. Lovely decorative carved relief panels by H H Martyn & Co across the top of the building.

3 John Street. Built as a butcher's shop and offices. Has a fine gable enlivened by carved panel showing a wild boar in relief with the awkwardly arranged text, 'rebuilt W Harris 1897'. Flanking the top-storey windows are two smaller, shallower carved panels, one containing a monogram, the other a shield.

115 Charterhouse Street: **Fox & Anchor**. Art Nouveau faïence façade from 1898 by W J Neatby of Doulton's. This incorporates lettering and ornament with tiled panels inset at ground level and mosaic lettered thresholds either side.

119 Charterhouse Street: monogram and date carved in relief, parish boundaries on cast iron plates.

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Their writing on aspects of public lettering includes:
Phil Baines & Catherine Dixon, *Signs, lettering in the environment*, Laurence King 2008 (2003)
And on the web
www.publiclettering.org.uk

The website which grew out of our early walks with students, in need of updating when we have a bit more time.

Some of our other pictures on this subject matter can be found on our Flickr pages:

[flickr.com/photos/phil_baines](https://www.flickr.com/photos/phil_baines)
[flickr.com/photos/catherinedixon](https://www.flickr.com/photos/catherinedixon)

Other material on signs and public lettering

Alan Bartram, *Lettering in architecture*, Lund Humphries 1975
Nicolette Gray, *Lettering on buildings*, Architectural Press 1960
Jock Kinneir, *Words and buildings: the art and practice of public lettering*, Architectural Press 1980
James Mosley, *The nymph and the grot*, Friends of the St Bride Printing Library 1999
See also his blog typefoundry.blogspot.com/
James Sutton, *Signs in action*, Studio Vista 1965

On architectural matters

Simon Bradley & Nikolaus Pevsner, *The buildings of England, London 1: The City of London*, Yale 2002
Bridget Cherry & Nikolaus Pevsner, *BoE, London 4: North*, Penguin 1998
—, *BoE, London 6: Westminster*, Yale 2003

On London

Peter Ackroyd, *London, the biography*, Chatto & Windus 2000.
V S Pritchett, *London perceived*, Penguin 2003 (1962)

Euston Road: **British Library**. While the railway stations next door use their architecture to announce themselves, the new British Library sits back from the road and approached through the dramatic gates and across an enclosed garden. The gates themselves, by David Kindersley's workshop, do not *contain* lettering, they *are* lettering. BRITISH LIBRARY is repeated and progresses from 'light' to 'ultra black'. Having seen the gates, the lettering above – carved, raised letters on red sandstone – seems superfluous, and if judged on its own merits, the over-large definite article dominates quite unnecessarily.

Marchmont Street | Tavistock Place | Gordon Square | Byng Place

Mallet Street/Keppel Street: **Institute of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine** P Morley Horder & Verner O Rees, 1926–8. A real feast. Names of medical scientists, in relief within framed panels, form a frieze on all three sides of the building at high level; on panels above the doors – again on each façade – can be seen the name of the building; on the gates are HTM monograms; on the Keppel & Mallet Street corner is a carved foundation stone; and on each corner there are elegant street names. All are fine, almost geometric sanserifs, perhaps by Percy Delft-Smith.

Gower Street

53 New Oxford Street: **James Smith & Sons (Umbrellas) Ltd**, 1857, remains a rare example of Victorian commercial London: mirrored glass, engraved brass and half-round section timber lettering on rails all have a part to play.

Bloomsbury Street | High Holborn | Shaftesbury Avenue | Monmouth Street | Upper St Martin's Lane | St Martin's Lane

May's Court: **The Colesium**. A glorious example of lettering proclaiming the name of a building on the side rather than the front of the building. The letters are formed out of three courses of large terracotta blocks, their 'curvilinear' style is typical of 1904 when the theatre was built and similar in many ways to the tiled lettering on the Leslie Green (red tiled) underground stations.

Bedfordbury | Chandos Place

St Martin's Mews: **St Martin's Schools**. This is a good teaching aid: compare the top and middle lines, even if you



Mechiko Yoshida 2003

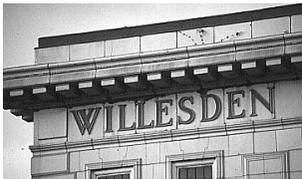
Background

Public lettering, a walk in central London was written by Phil Baines for the 1997 ATypI conference. In 2002 this was made into a website (www.publiclettering.org.uk) by Jack Schulze, Matt Hyde & George Agnelli and the original text was considerably expanded by us both.

To simplify matters we concentrate on larger examples and don't mention incidental lettering – stop-cocks, manholes, dates on buildings, builders marks, &c – of which there is much *en route*. Much of the pleasure of this kind of walk, is finding things yourself. Although also 'public', we generally ignore advertising hoardings, but discussion will necessarily include shop signs and corporate identities even though these are usually approached as pieces of graphic design rather than opportunities for specialist, site-specific lettering.

Phil Baines & Catherine Dixon

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Railways

Corporate identities such as London Transport's or British Rail's have concentrated very much on signage and allowed the proud displays of station or company names on existing buildings to remain(1).

The British Rail alphabet by Kinneir Calvert was created as a tiled system to enable correctly spaced signs to be assembled by untrained staff. This contour letter (2) shows how the optical correction necessary for black on white or reversed-out type is achieved. The smaller letters show variants to the standard tile space.

can't explain precisely what good lettering is, the top and middle lines do it for you. The top line is well positioned but has weak letters, the date has good letters but is incredibly cramped. The middle line is near perfect, what Bartram calls the 'english letter', robust, even proportions for all the letters (unlike the roman model), and a strong contrast between thick and thin strokes. Note too that the success of public lettering depends not just on the letterforms but on how they work within their place on the building and with the architecture as a whole.

St Martin's Place | Trafalgar Square | The Mall | Horse Guards Road

Guards Division Memorial, by Harold Charlton

Bradshaw (architect) & Gilbert Ledward (sculptor) 1926. A memorial with echoes of Lutyens' non-denominational abstraction and some affinity to the Royal Artillery Memorial by Lionel Pearson & Charles Sargeant Jaegger at Hyde Park Corner. The inscription is all about an even texture of confident, strong lettering (which doesn't quite conform to the Macdonald Gill Imperial War Graves Commission style).

Horse Guards Road | Birdcage Walk | Storey's Gate | Tothill Street

55 Broadway, Charles Holden's HQ building for the Underground Group with relief carvings Eric Gill (high) & Jacob Epstein (low). A noteworthy early cruciform plan to allow maximum daylight inside.

New Scotland Yard, spinning sign with lettering by Ed Wright 1968, disfigured by the addition of the crest and slogan c.1998 but restored and re-instated in 2012. Wright's playful geometrically-derived lettering is also used at small scale inside for all the door plates and original signing.

Victoria Street | Artillery Row | Greycoat Place | Lambeth Bridge | Lambeth Road

St George's Circus: Obelisk and milestone, erected by the Blackfriars Bridge Committee in 1771 as the formal southern termination of a mile long boulevard leading to their recently completed bridge. Very fine square-section incised English letters.

Blackfriars Road

(Former) Charing Cross Railway, Blackfriars

Station, opened 1864, closed 1868 (and replaced by Waterloo East). Typical nineteenth century cast stucco sanserif letters announce the station's name. This façade was restored in 2005.

Blackfriars' Bridge | New Bridge Street

Ludgate Circus (NE corner) **Ludgate House** (Horace Gundry 1872–3). Formerly Thomas Cook's. The best typographic clock in London.

Ludgate Hill | Old Bailey | Giltspur Street

St Bartholomew's Hospital has been on this site since its foundation in 1123, and refounding by Henry VIII in 1546. Architecturally the centrepiece is Gibb's central-facing courtyard ensemble (1730–68) but later buildings now surround these and face outwards. From the South:

—**Outpatients' department** by E B l'Anson, assisted by Rowland Plumbe, 1903–7. This features rather spindly applied lettering to its southern end wall, and, on the Giltspur Street façade 'SBH' and date monograms.

—**Library & museum** by Edward l'Anson (E B's father), 1877–9, features large scale carved lettering as a frieze in the Renaissance manner. The scale and ambition is not matched by the quality of the lettersforms themselves. The end wall of a narrow, 1963–70, extension by Adams, Holden & Pearson separates the library from E B l'Anson's 1907–9 **Pathological Block 16** which has a similar frieze of lettering with identical issues.

—**Gatehouse**, 1702, designed by Edward Strong Junior, but reconstructed and refaced by Philip Hardwick in 1833–4. The lettering feels more like the original date, rich but rather untutored. Compare it with the lettering above the disused entrance to **19 the Receiving Rooms** (towards Little Britain) by Philip Hardwick, 1842 & 1861, which is a very robust and self-confident English letter.

Metropolitan drinking fountain & cattle trough association. Key characters to look out for here are the angular ampersand, and a capital C and G which are only very subtly differentiated.

Long Lane | Smithfield Street

6–7 West Smithfield, Carved lion with shield, reads 'Justice and strength'. In 1867, Thomas Herbert, scalemaker, acquired the business of Henry Wood (est.1760) at this address, and the firm became known as known as Thomas Herbert & Sons. The company is now The Herbert Group but, since 1968, has been based in Haverhill.

West Poultry Avenue | Charterhouse Street

Smithfield Market. The central market buildings were designed by Sir Horace Jones and constructed in 1866–7 after the old cattle market moved to the Caledonian Fields north of King's Cross in 1855. To the West are the Poultry Market (1962–3 by T P Bennet & Sons) and the General Market flanking Farringdon Street (1879–83 also by Jones).

Port of London Authority cold store by T H Smith, 1914. Square-section carved letters at the top of the building (= May the gates of the empire flourish) are overshadowed by the splendid, carved, curvilinear letters, inlaid with



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Traffic signs

Before 1964 road signage in Britain used an anonymous caps only sans serif type, black on a white panel within a larger coloured sign (blue or yellow according to class of road). There are quite a number of these older signs in use in central London today (1).

The system now used is that designed by Kinneir Calvert following recommendations made by the Worboys Committee and the style they had already designed for the Preston by-pass (now part of the M6) in 1958.

The alphabet itself is sans serif, carefully spaced to ensure legibility at long distances, and different versions are provided for reversed out or black lettering. Signs have different coloured (and latterly, reflective) backgrounds for different classes of road – blue for motorways, green for A roads, white for local signs – and the size of the signs themselves differs because it is determined by the content (2).

Although there was much controversy about the relative merits of sans serif versus serif lettering (see *Design* 129, September 1959, pp.28–32, and 152, August 1961, pp.56–61 for contemporary accounts), in this context at least, nothing very conclusive seems to have been proved either way.