



**SIGNS
AND
LETTERING**



INTRODUCTION

Lettering on the exterior of buildings forms an important part of the street scene. Written messages effectively draw the eye, even of the casual passer-by who perhaps has no real intention of reading them. During this half-conscious inspection something of the character of the lettering and its relationship with the building is inevitably transmitted and helps to influence the general impressions of a street. Such lettering can, therefore, enhance or damage the architectural qualities of a scene and will colour judgements as to the particular character of the place.

The aim of conservation is to protect and enhance the intrinsic merits of an area and exterior lettering must be regarded in this light. The use of standard 'corporate image' fascias or lettering is thus obviously to be discouraged as these will inevitably conflict with the need to protect the *individual* character of a particular area. Good existing lettering and traditions of lettering are in need of protection and new lettering should enhance the character of the built environment. With this in mind, the following guidance notes are offered to assist designers in achieving these objectives.

THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The ever present danger is to consider lettering on the buildings as a kind of enlarged typography applied like a typescript to the fascia of a building. Such an approach will usually appear alien and will contribute little to the appearance of a street. Lettering should be carefully adapted and sited for its intended role to complement the building and to convey its message.

The provision of a superfluity of lettering should be carefully avoided as this leads to confusion and an untidy effect. Repetition of the message is another common fault which, again, can be damaging to the building's appearance.

SITING

Lettering is normally sited either on a fascia, applied direct to a wall or in the form of a hanging sign. Whichever format is required the exact location should be carefully considered. The majority of commercial buildings are more or less symmetrical in their front elevation design and centrally placed lettering will obviously appear logical and will be strongly integrated with the existing pattern. With those less common buildings with markedly asymmetrical fronts the signing should help to retain or regain a general sense of balance when the building is viewed as an entity. It is helpful to consider the existing elevation as a pattern of horizontals and verticals which, in an attractive elevation, will satisfactorily balance each other (Fig. 1).

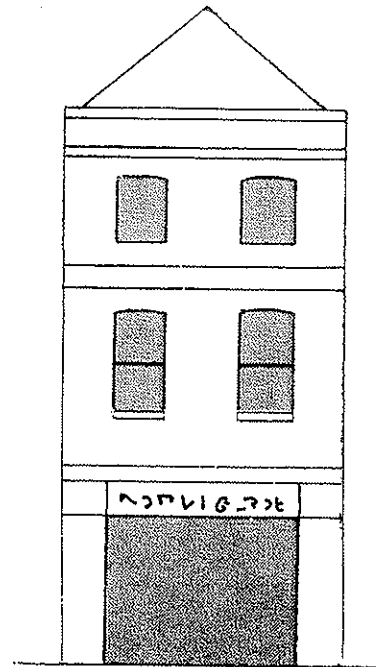


Fig. 1

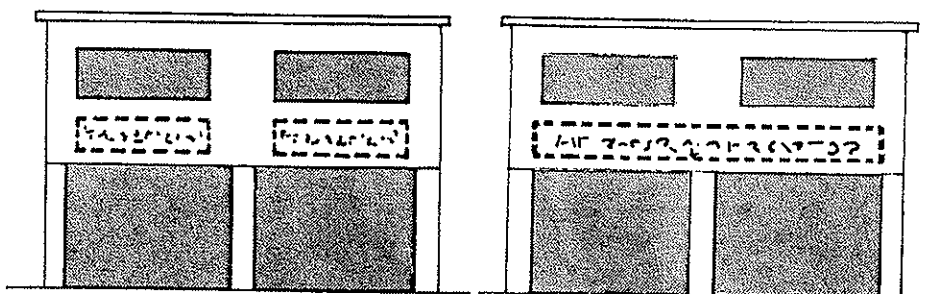


Fig. 2

If, however, the existing elevation has an unduly horizontal or vertical emphasis signing can be used to counteract this and achieve the desirable balance (Fig. 2). It should be remembered that applied board signs of a square, circular or equilateral triangular shape will draw the eye very powerfully and can only be used as the major focus of an entire elevation (Fig. 3.).

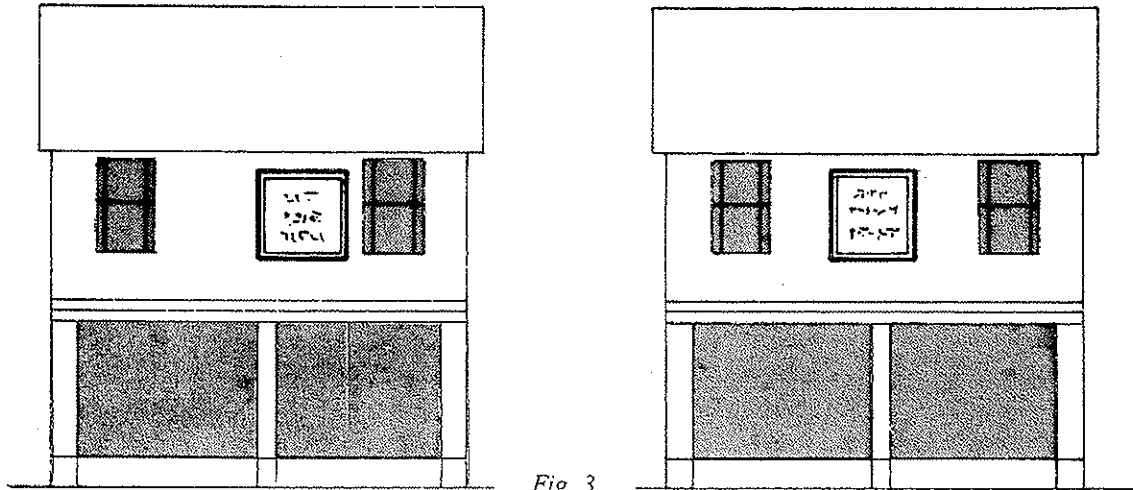


Fig. 3

Lettering painted direct on a plaster or brick wall is a traditional device which can be used to considerable effect. Generally this is best located within an existing architecturally framed panel or other suitable architectural element such as a string band or parapet. However, it can be applied to plain wall areas as long as the patterns so formed do not damage the overall effect of an elevation (Fig. 4.).



Fig. 4

Individually cut out letters of painted wood or metal can also look well when applied direct to the wall of an existing building. Here they should be related and framed by the existing architectural membering and seldom seem satisfactory when just applied to large plain surfaces.

Prominent hanging signs should again be related to the apparent visual centre of an existing elevation although a small minor hanging sign can usually be satisfactory in a less formal position.

On those, unhappily rare, occasions, where a new building design and its possible signing are being considered together, then the above criteria are particularly relevant. Such situations obviously provide the best possible opportunities to achieve maximum integration of signs and façade. Even where the contents of the signs remain unknown, the provision of suitable locations for such signs and the necessary architectural framing should form part of the *building* design.

Where a new building is to occupy an important corner site, the use of an angled hanging sign or lettering on a curved or splayed corner can have great effect.

LETTERING STYLE

As has previously been mentioned, lettering on buildings should appear as an inevitable part of the elevations. With this in mind the choice of letter style and the techniques of application should be selected so as to allow for this satisfactory integration. The letters should be strong and 'architectural' in form rather than calligraphic or typographic which will appear weak and ineffectual in the street scene.

Fortunately there are a number of robust nineteenth century letter forms that are eminently suitable to achieve these ends and were specifically designed to serve this purpose. They include, 'Egyptian', 'Ionic', 'Tuscan' and related ornamentals.

These three categories of serif lettering have the virtue of legibility and strong bold forms which relate well to the overall texture of many old buildings.

E *Egyptian*

E *Sans Serif Capitals*

I *Ionic*

K *Modern Roman*

T *Tuscan*

THE VALUE OF THREE DIMENSIONS

Despite their obvious virtues these nineteenth century serif forms will not appear sufficiently architectural for most locations unless they are translated into real or simulated three dimensions by means of signwritten painted shadowing or by using solid projecting individual letters (see illustration centre pages). It is important that lettering on fascias or board signs should normally make use of one of these techniques.

SANS SERIF CAPITALS

Again 'flat face' versions of these sans forms are strong and bold, but are intrinsically less decorative than serif letters. They are generally more successful in solid cut out form as painted shadowing is out of character with their fundamental simplicity. The straightforward geometry of sans serif lettering is best suited to buildings of a boldly geometrical character particularly where reinforced by strong architectural membering.

ROMAN AND ROMAN BASED CAPITALS

Roman capitals were expressly designed to be carved into a flat stone face. To use Roman as a typographical letter style cast in metal or signwritten in paint is to abuse its essential character. On those occasions when lettering is to be incorporated into a new stone-faced building, Romans are the natural and appropriate choice (see illustration centre pages).

However, Roman letters with slight internal or external painted shadowing can be fairly successful on a signwritten fascia if the lettering is small but nevertheless takes up the major part of a narrow fascia band.

LOWER CASE LETTERS

As a general rule lower case letters have a relatively informal character in comparison with upper case (capitals). For this reason they are somewhat less suitable as architectural lettering except where the relevant message is ancillary to a main text in capitals. Mixing capitals and lower case tends to produce an asymmetrical and irregular visual pattern very much at variance with any formality in the setting.

ITALIC OR SLOPING LETTERS

These should generally be avoided as the introduction of intrusive diagonals produces an unwelcome informality and conflicts with the rectilinear nature of an architectural background.

SCRIPT LETTERING

Like sloping letters, joined script lettering has an informal even casual look, like a personal signature. However, a fret cut single word or a similar effect achieved by signwriters' shadowing can be given some architectural weight. Such a device is most successful when allied to a visually very strong architectural framework, where the lettering can appear almost as an abstract decoration. Unfortunately a similar sign set against a large area of plain walling tends to suggest signed notepaper. Script lettering, with slight and subtle shadowing, is best reserved for secondary messages and minor informally placed signing.

OTHER LETTER STYLES

Clearly there is an infinite variety of typefaces and letter styles and numerous new designs are being continuously introduced. Novelty does obviously have some appeal, but this should not be sought at the expense of the appearance of a building or of an attractive street scene. At present most Essex shopping streets show an abundance of differing letter types, the majority being disagreeable or thoroughly damaging to their building and setting. Designers and signwriters should think very carefully before deciding to use a novel or essentially non-architectural form of letter.

ILLUMINATION

Neon signing, illuminated letters, and internally illuminated box signs are generally considered unsuitable for historic street scenes. Such signs tend to be too obtrusive and are usually constructed of unsympathetic materials such as plastics and perspex. Signs illuminated externally, by means of concealed top light tubes or carefully positioned spotlights are rather more satisfactory. However, such illumination should only be envisaged for premises that are normally open after daylight hours, such as dispensing chemists, public houses, restaurants and cafés and other places of public entertainment.

MATERIALS

The choice of materials is governed by the need for compatibility with the colours and textures of the particular building and of the other structures in its immediate neighbourhood. In Essex these are most likely to be of painted render, red or gault brick with roofs of tiles or slate. Such building materials are variable in effect but all tend towards a medium degree of texture. An immediate juxtaposition of these, with hard smooth and shiny substances produces a harsh and jarring conflict and is damaging to the overall appearance. Hand-painted surfaces have the merit of providing a lesser degree of textural contrast in addition to being very much in evidence in any ancient street. Painted window frames have for long provided an agreeable intermediate texture between the coarser walling materials and the hard shiny surfaces of window glass.

For these reasons hand-painted timber fascias or cut-out letters or signboards should be the usual choice for a conservation area. Conversely, hard shiny materials such as plastics, unpainted metals or glass or ceramic mosaics are generally inappropriate in an historic environment. Hand-painted individual metal letters have been used with success in the past with the paint applied to give a flat matt appearance. Another possible exception involves the use of gilded cut out plastic letters which can provide the traditional effect when viewed from a distance.

CONSTRUCTION OF FASCIAS AND WALL SIGNS

These are usually made up of sheet timber such as marine ply with a painted timber frame. Timber sheets have the visual disadvantage of at first providing a monotonously flat surface and eventually distorting and warping. Care also has to be taken to avoid butt jointing sheets when making up a long fascia. Traditionally many fascias were constructed of good quality thick tongued and grooved boarding which gave the advantage of surface texture and were less prone to unsightly decay. All fascias, hanging sign boards and wall-mounted signs should have visually robust and substantial frames. This surround should be mitred at the corners, adequately flashed and should be moulded to cast shadows both on the frame and on the sign surface itself. The frame should be regarded as an architectural member of the building on which it is placed

SIZE OF LETTERING

The size of letter should be determined by the need for legibility without unduly dominating the appearance of the building.

Principal fascia lettering should normally take up between half and three-quarters of the fascia depth, as small dainty letters will appear insufficiently related to the ground. Lettering on wall-mounted signs should, for the same reason, appear to almost fill the available space, although embarrassing blank areas can always be filled with appropriate decorative devices.

CROSS STREET

Attractive and unusual street signs can add character to an area.

This excellent example in stove enamelled metal comes from Saffron Walden.



Excellent painted sign on tongue and groove boarding.



Attractive Italic script suitable for a secondary sign.



Sign boards should be well 'filled' with lettering or symbols. This example would benefit from the shadowing of the main lettering.



Nineteenth century cut-out applied lettering.

WANTED TO BUY:
ANTIQUES · FURNITURE
SILVER · BRASS · CHINA

ELD LANE ANTIQUES

PLATED ITEMS
BOOKS · PICTURES
DEALERS INCURIOS

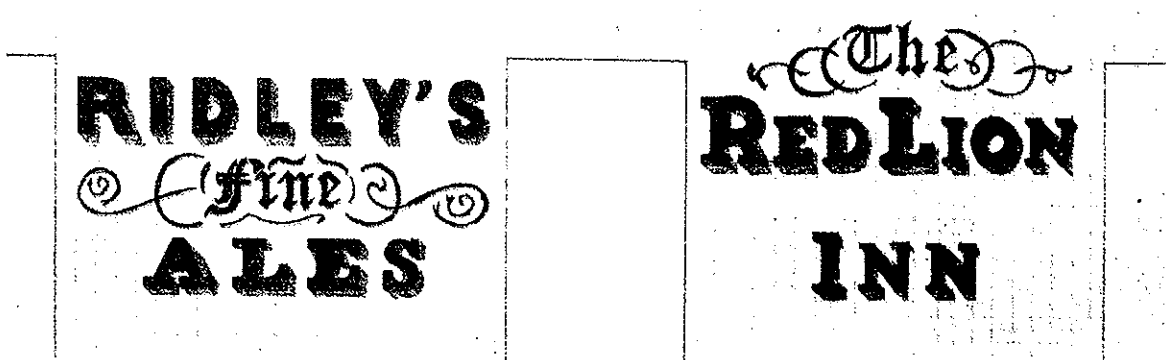
Roman lettering appropriately almost filling a narrow fascia board. Slight shadowing of the main title would have provided a more 'architectural' effect.



Nineteenth century decorative lettering on fascia. The original is painted on glass in imitation of marble, which although unusual is perhaps too shiny for a village setting!



Roman lettering as street name, carved into stone string band.



Attractive public house lettering painted directly onto brickwork.



Strong 'Clarendon' based fascia lettering with shadowing.



Modern Roman-based shadowed lettering.

HANGING SIGN BRACKETS

Hanging signs are a long established and potentially attractive form of external advertising. Unfortunately many of the existing signs of this kind have unsuitably light weight and flimsy sign boards and awkward or fussy hanging brackets.

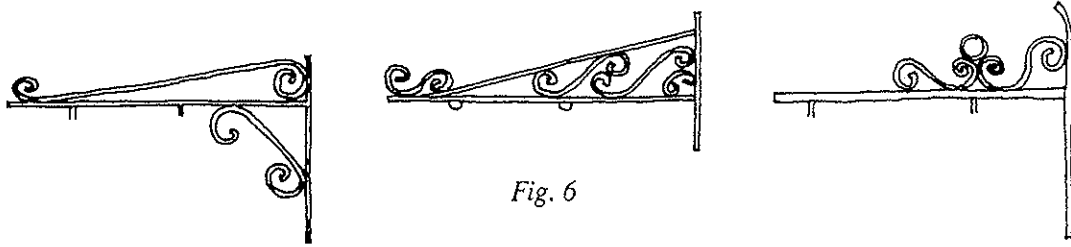


Fig. 6

Fig. 6 shows three examples of brackets for fairly small signs that are unnecessarily complicated thus attracting attention away from the sign and producing a disagreeable pattern against the sky. It is suggested that for signs with brackets of less than 1 metre outreach, elaborate iron scrollwork should not be used and in most cases scrolls should be avoided altogether.

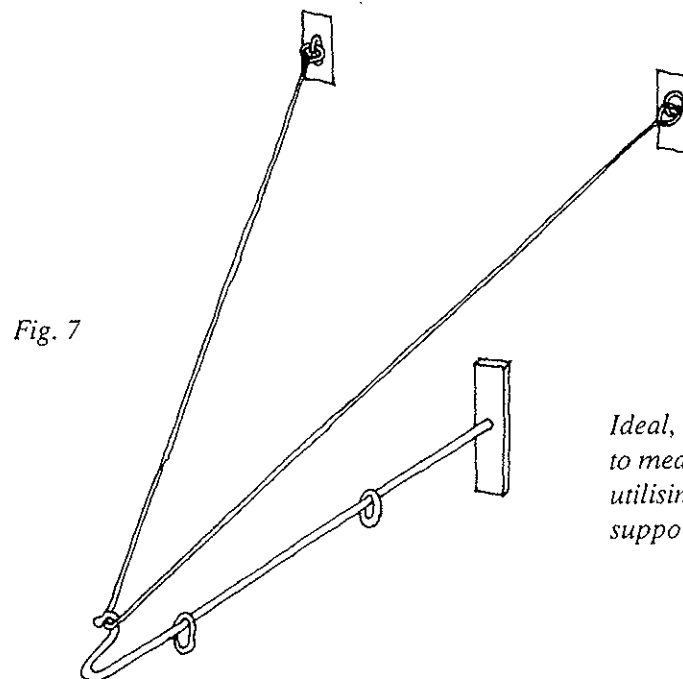


Fig. 7

Ideal, simple bracket for small to medium-sized hanging sign, utilising circular rod and 'V' support wires.

Fig. 7 shows a very satisfactory type of bracket for such signs with a wrought iron circular rod and two thin anchoring stays. Very tiny signs of 500mm or less in width are best edge fixed direct to the wall without any evident form of bracket.

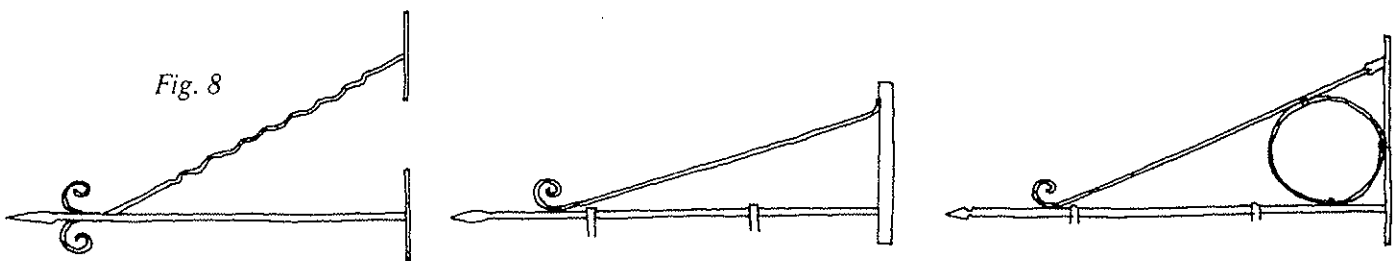


Fig. 8

For medium sized signs (from 1 metre to 1.5 metres in length) a little more elaboration is reasonable and Fig. 8 provides some possible examples.

Examination of existing signs suggests the following points:

1. The horizontal bracket should be generally square or circular in section except for very large signs where a deep flat section can be used to provide greater strength.
2. The horizontal main bracket should be determined by a spear point or twisted rod to act as a suitable finial.
3. Scrollwork should normally be made out of a flat bar, with tightly wound scrolls with their ends flattened and flared.

Many old Essex public houses have very large and elaborate wrought iron hanging signs sometimes as much as 3.0 metres in outreach (Fig. 9.). These usually form an attractive and important visual feature of the building and deserve retention and careful maintenance. At this size, wrought iron scrollwork really comes into its own and transforms a utilitarian object into a minor work of art.

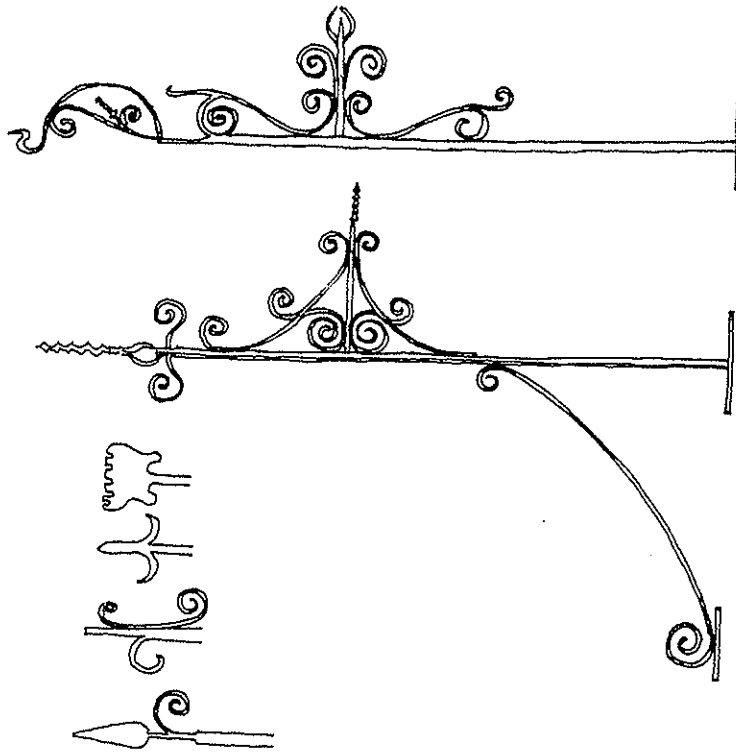


Fig. 9

*Traditional brackets for
very large public house sign.*

PUBLIC HOUSE SIGNS

Generally signing for public houses presents the same problems and opportunities as other commercial premises. The traditional painted hanging sign confers individuality and can form a valuable townscape feature. Similarly, the free standing post-top sign can have great merit and the loss of the large elaborate sign gantries spanning the carriageway is to be regretted. Public house lettering and signs have improved enormously in the last few years and can now be used as object lessons for other traders. The lettering tends to be based on the fine nineteenth century faces or their modern derivatives and is well spaced and sited. Their major limitation is that they are only too evidently standardised with the same signs appearing on many licensed premises.

TRADE SYMBOLS

Traditional trade symbols, sadly now rarely seen, can add considerably to the character of an old commercial area. Hanging signs, depicting typical goods or the fondly remembered striped barber's pole can provide minor landmarks as well as forming effective advertisements. Essentially these should be demonstrations of craftsmanlike skill whether painted in trompe d'oeil or as a three-dimensional motif. Their provision will be generally encouraged as they contribute to the individuality and interest of a building.

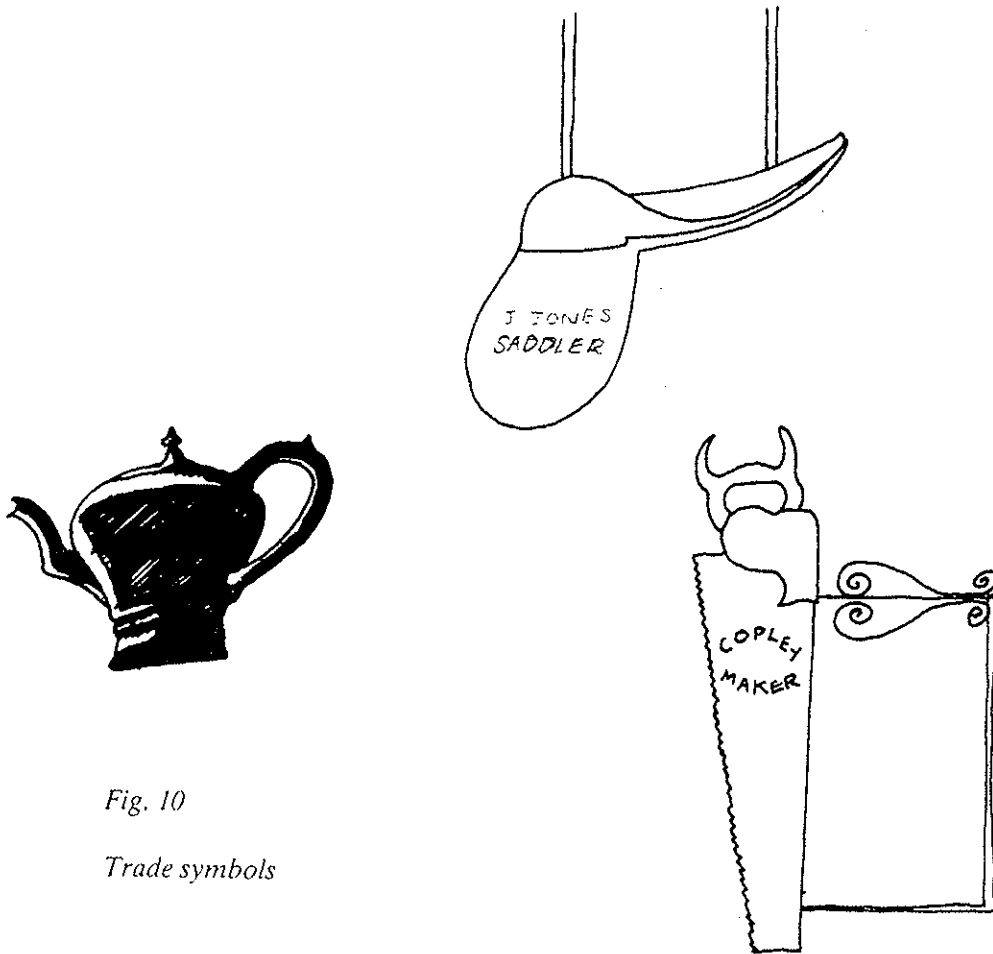


Fig. 10

Trade symbols

STANDARD SIGNS AND THE 'CORPORATE IMAGE'

Corporate signs are, by virtue of their standardisation, extremely damaging whatever the merits of the particular design. The essence of the character of an historic town lies in its individuality and 'standard' elements from elsewhere effectively diminished this characteristic. Where traders have such an otherwise appropriate trademark or logo it should at least be 'individualised' to achieve a unique character for each situation where it is to be used.

SIGNS PAINTED ON SHOP WINDOWS

Where there is no fascia or where a fascia is undesirable, lettering painted direct on a display window can be a practical option. Such lettering can also be very attractive and effective being nearer to the eye level of the passer by. The layout of text should be dictated by the shape and proportions of the glazing sheet and an arc of lettering is a pleasing traditional method. The tradition of gilt window lettering to advertise upper floor professional offices is an appropriately effective technique. Similarly the solicitor's brass door plate is usually an attractive feature of a street scene.

CONCLUSION

The improvement of the general standard of lettering and signing on buildings in Essex Conservation Areas could have a considerable beneficial effect on their character. This would not only achieve visual advantages but could well improve commercial viability, particularly when the potential tourist trade is taken into account. The problems offer two particular challenges, that of appropriate design and secondly of craftsmanship. The skills of the signwriter and of the carpenter are key factors which will determine the final success of the work. It is suggested that, within the traditions outlined above, there is potential for much artistry and invention with individual traders vying with one another to produce exciting variations.

Acknowledgements

The following officers of the County Planning Department contributed to this leaflet:

D. F. Stenning, Dip. Arch. (Brighton)

R. R. Carpenter, Dip. Environmental Planning