CHAPTER 3

THE FUNCTION AND IMPACT OF OUTDOOR INFORMATION TRANSFER

Sub-problem 2: What are the nature and extent of the need for the effective management of outdoor information transfer in terms of both its benefits and its impacts?

Hypothesis 2: Outdoor information transfer, as an important part of the perceptual environment, benefits society and the environment but also impacts negatively on society and the environment. Sense of place and placeness play a crucial role with regard to the benefits and impact of outdoor information transfer. If a *laissez-faire* policy is followed with regard to the management of outdoor information transfer, the impacts thereof will overshadow its positive contribution and will neutralise many of the benefits.

Outdoor information transfer fulfils two interrelated functions. The primary function is to transfer messages to the observer by means of guiding, warning, informing, notifying, advising, promoting or advertising, or by means of any other way of transferring such messages or information. The second function relates to the aesthetic appearance of sign and sign structure in relation to setting. As elements in the perceptual environment, advertisements, signs and sign structures can therefore also fulfil an aesthetic function by contributing to streetscape, setting and image formation in general. It seems only logical that the *direct message function* of outdoor information transfer should display a tendency to dominate and overshadow the *environmental aesthetic function*. It therefore tends to limit the application of aesthetics by keeping it within the confines of individual signs, advertisements and messages. This is especially true of commercial advertising where increased sales and profits are the main driving forces. It is interesting to note that the aesthetic function can play an important role in supporting and actualising the message function.

The impact exercised by outdoor information transfer bears a close resemblance to the above-mentioned functions by having a *message impact* as well as an *aesthetic impact,* each of which may have social, economic or ecological consequences.

3.1. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FUNCTION AND IMPACT OF OUTDOOR INFORMATION TRANSFER

This section will cover the above topic from the period of antiquity until the beginning of the twentieth century. Regarding the impact of outdoor information transfer it will concentrate mainly on the aesthetic impact of advertisements and signs.

Outdoor information transfer harks back to the beginning of human history. Outdoor advertising can be seen as the earliest and most enduring form of commercial advertising. It has survived since the earliest civilisations and has been continuously adapted in accordance with economic development, technological changes and the needs and ingenuity of man.

3.1.1 PERIOD OF ANTIQUITY (2000 BC – 600 BC)

Babylonian merchants employed barkers or criers who advertised their masters' wares by shouting out their qualities to passers-by. They also hung over their doors the symbols of their trade, which indicated the nature of their business. Written signs or messages could not be used widely owing to the illiteracy of the populace (Presbrey, 1968, p. 3). As long as the majority of the population remained illiterate the wandering or static crier, for both public and commercial announcements, and the trade symbol remained the most important means of outdoor information transfer.

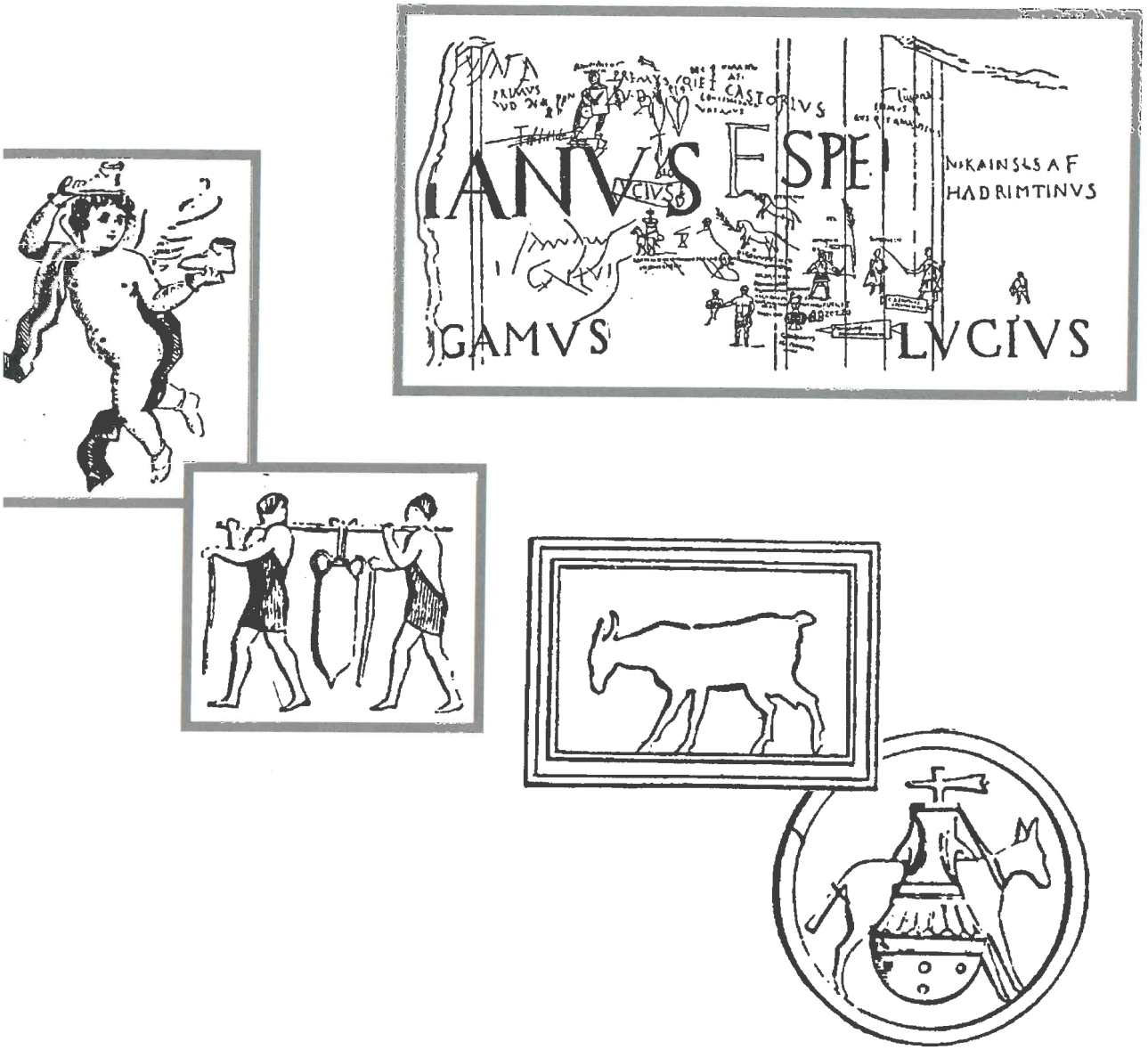
Inscriptions by Egyptian kings on monuments to bolster their prestige can be seen as an early form of outdoor information transfer. According to Presbrey (1968, p.4), the only form of commercial advertising known to the people of early Egypt was the crier, and his announcements were confined to the arrival of ships and the offering of items from their cargoes. The owner of a shipload of wine,

spices or metals, or any assortment of goods, would send out his announcer to sing or chant his story and attest to the desirability of articles just received. He would give further interest to his announcement by describing in florid and very colourful language the regions from which the articles came and the difficulties under which they were obtained. Egyptian shops only rarely made use of signs containing inscriptions or emblems (Larwood & Hotten, 1951, p.1). Henderson and Landau (1981, p.9) mention Egyptian merchants carving sales messages into *stelae* or stone tablets placed by the roadside.

3.1.2 CLASSICAL WESTERN PERIOD (450 BC – 450 AD)

Although signboards outside shop doors are known to have been a form of advertising in ancient Athens, the crier was still the most common medium used for commercial advertising in this Greek city. While his main task was to advertise auction sales of slaves and animals, he also acted as auctioneer by doing the actual selling. The Greeks' love for beauty and perfection was reflected by the public crier. They demanded art from their public criers. He was selected for his pleasing voice and elocutionary ability, and was often accompanied by a musician (Presbrey, 1968, p. 5).

Roman tradesmen also made use of barkers at the door as an important advertising medium (Presbrey, 1968, p. 14). The signboard was another common method used by the shop-keeper to draw the attention of passers-by. Symbols used included a bush of evergreens to mark the wine shop or to indicate the sale of wine at an inn, a cow for the dairyman, and a mule turning a mill as a sign for the bakery (Presbrey, 1968, p. 5; Larwood & Hotten, 1951, p.2). According to Larwood and Hotten (1951, p.1), some shop signs were painted, but as a rule these signs appear to have been made in relief using stone or terra-cotta, and were fitted into the walls at the sides of the open shop-fronts. A smooth space or *album* was also provided alongside the door of the Roman house for displaying the name and profession or trade of the occupant. Various picture signs or symbols were tastefully incorporated into a written album format while sculptors applied their trade by making house tablets of terra-cotta or stone with lettering and illustrations in relief to be set into the album (Presbrey, 1968, p. 6).



art from the barker at the door, the Roman shopowner also
ed signboards to draw the attention of passers-by. The above
istrations provide typical examples of symbols used by the
ious trades: The shoemaker at Herculaneum (top left), the wine
rchant at Pompeii (centre left), a goat indicating the dairy at
mpeii (centre right) and a grain mill indicating the bakery at
mpeii (bottom).

udely painted messages on advertising walls can be seen as the
it false note that crept into outdoor information transfer – the
it tendency to abuse and pollute the visual environment by
ans of commercial advertising. The advertisements shown in
top right corner advertise gladiators and poets and were found
excavated walls at Pompeii. They show an untidy graffiti-like
pearance.

Figure 3.1

Signs of the classical Western period

Source of illustrations: Presbrey, 1968

The importance of the sign as an instrument of orientation is reflected by the fact that some streets in Rome derived their names from signs (Larwood & Hotten, 1951, p.1).

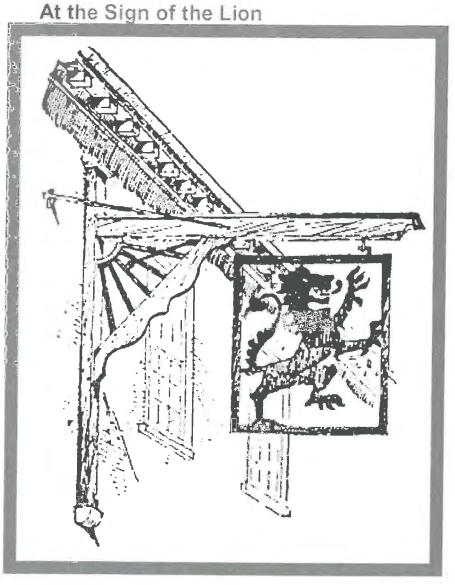
Written advertising became more common after the spread of literacy throughout the Roman Empire, only to disappear with the decline in the ability to read during the Dark Ages. Advertising walls were used in Roman cities to carry a variety of crudely painted messages in black or red at places were crowds gathered, or at central points were people passed in great numbers. These messages mostly advertised theatrical performances, sports and baths, houses to let, and gladiatorial exhibitions. According to Presbrey (1968, pp. 6-7), such walls, which showed signs of advertising psychology and which might have been controlled by advertising contractors, can be seen as the first advertising that comes within the twentieth century meaning of the term. Advertising walls excavated in Pompeii showed an untidy graffiti-like appearance, which reveals a strong similarity to the more extensive problems to be created by large-scale billposting in England during the 1840s and 1850s. The habit of creating new advertising space on such walls by simply whitewashing over older messages contributed to the untidy appearance. Crudely painted messages were also used on or alongside house doors to indicate that a house was for rent. These untidy messages on advertising walls and house doors contrasted sharply with the more artistic house tablets or shop signs. It can be seen as the first false note that crept into outdoor information transfer – the first tendency to abuse and pollute the visual environment by means of commercial advertising.

3.1.3 THE MIDDLE AGES (500 – 1550)

With the decline in literacy and trade the more advanced advertising methods of Roman times were lost. Town criers and barkers again became the most common medium for outdoor information transfer, and they continued to be used for centuries in many European countries. Town-wide crying, however, was in most cases restricted to official use, announcing a new war, or peace, or an execution. Especially in England the merchant mostly had to be satisfied with the barker at the door who reached only those who passed that way. At a later stage public auction sales were included in the wandering crier's announcements, as well as wine shops and a few other commodities. In France tavern keepers had an ingenious way of touting their fine wines: They would have the town crier blow

Town Crier in London

At the Sign of the Lion



The Bull and Mouth

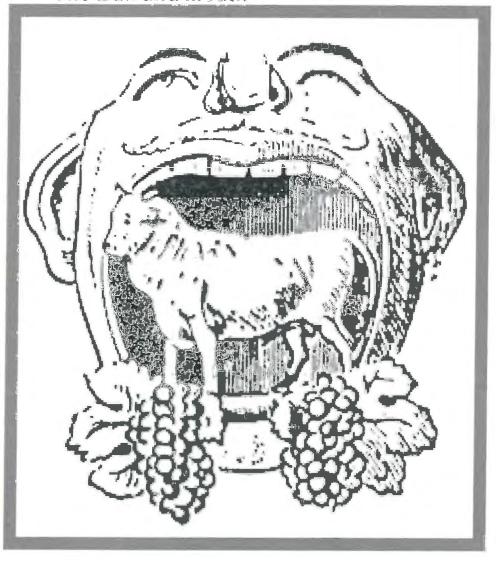
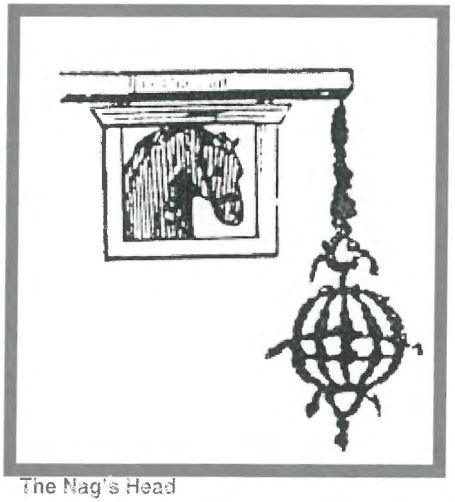
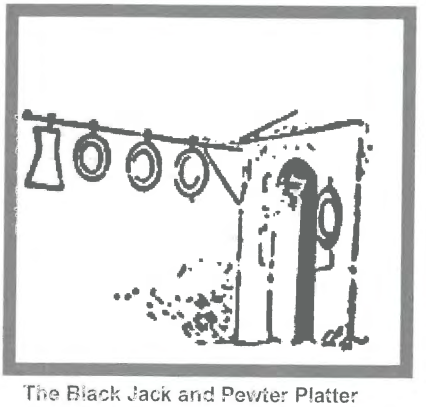


Figure 3.2
Outdoor information transfer in England during the Middle Ages and the early pictorial signboard period

With a decline in literacy and trade during the Middle Ages, town criers and barkers (top left) again became the most common medium for outdoor information transfer. Town-wide crying was mostly restricted to official use, announcing a new war, or peace, or an execution. At the end of the Middle Ages the development of the inn sign had outgrown the generic sign and reflected the name and character of the individual inn. The individualised inn sign started with a more simple design (bottom right) and elements derived from coats of arms (top right). The heraldic sign was followed by emblems not derived from any coat of arms (bottom left), as well as more intricate designs (centre) during the early pictorial period.



The Nag's Head



The Black Jack and Pewter Platter

Source of illustrations: Presbrey, 1968

a horn in the street, gather a group – and offer samples! (Russell & Lane, 1993, p.4). Striking processions were used as an effective way to announce theatrical shows.

For the largest part of the Middle Ages the English tavern made use of signs of a rather austere nature containing only generic symbols such as the bush, indicating the availability of wine, and a long pole or ale stake, indicating the availability of ale. It was only by the twelfth century that the naming of taverns, inns and alehouses became common practice and these establishments began to display more interesting designs based on coats of arms or other heraldic elements and religious symbols (BLRA, online; Lamb, 1976, pp.4-5; Rotheroe, 1990, pp.4-7). The development of the inn sign was given momentum in 1393 when King Richard II of England decreed that alehouses had to have signs so that the official examiner or tester of ales would be able to locate all alehouses (Peter's Official Pub & Inn Sign Page, online). When a new brew was to be offered for sale the innkeeper had to hang an ale-garland outside his inn. This usually took the form of a wreath or ball of flowers, and it was a common practice of innkeepers to use the symbol of their house as a central figure within the wreath (Delderfield, 1972, p.14).

According to Presbrey (1968, p.14), signs appear to have been almost entirely confined to the tavern or inn until the twelfth or thirteenth century when shopkeepers and tradesmen started using generic signs such as the red-and-white-striped barber's pole. Later on signs reflecting specific wares in a more imaginative way, such as a gloved-hand for the glove-maker and a frying pan for the brazier, found its place outside shops. The competition between generic signs soon became rife. The custom of confining specific trades to particular streets played a major role in this regard.

> *The advantages of the system [of generic signs] quickly became obvious and as the signs multiplied, each tradesman vied with the other for a bigger and better and more colourful mark of his trade* (Delderfield, 1972, p.14).

The public poster made its appearance in England at the end of the fifteenth century. These announcements were originally hand-written by scribes and were called *Siquis* or *If anybody* because they usually began with the Latin words for *If anybody desires* or *If anybody knows of.* The first *siquis* printed from type in the English language appeared at about 1480. As the name indicates, most *siquis* were of the personal or want-ad type aimed at advertising services, vacant posts or lost

articles. However, some *siquis* were also used to advertise luxuries such as tobacco, perfume or coffee. *Siquis* were posted on church doors or other places where crowds gathered (Presbrey, 1968, p. 15).

3.1.4 THE PICTORIAL SIGNBOARD PERIOD IN ENGLAND (1600 – 1780)

Out of the heraldic sign of the Middle Ages developed a tavern sign displaying painted animals that were not taken out of anybody's coat of arms but were just animals – the sign of the bull, the bear, the cock or the lion. Various other emblems were added and the variety of emblems and tavern signs grew throughout the Renaissance and throughout the eighteenth century as each new tavern-keeper sought something distinctive to differentiate him from his competitors. Signboards were either projected from building facades or hung from poles fixed onto the sidewalk. The development of the pictorial tavern or inn sign culminated in pictorial signs of a more intricate nature which could be seen as paintings of true artistic quality. The *Spectator* of 8 January 1743 made the following comment in this regard:

> *The other day, going down Ludgate St., several people were gaping at a very splendid sign of Queen Elizabeth, which by far exceeded all the other signs in the street, the painter having shown a masterly judgment and the carver and gilder much pomp and splendour. It looked rather like a capital picture in a gallery than a sign in the street.*

Many coach-painters, who transformed the coaches and sedans of the wealthy classes into moving picture galleries, also became sign-painters. High prices were paid for the painting of such artistic inn signs and some of the men who did this type of work had a high standing in the art world. Among them were even members of the Royal Academy. Sign-painting made an important contribution to the development of art in England. Several well-known painters were apprenticed to sign and coach-painters and there are even indications that the English School of Painting derived from the primitive craft of sign-painting (Larwood & Hotten, 1951, pp.21-22) (cf. Presbrey, 1968, p. 19 - 20).

Outdoor signs became the decorative art of European inns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since this was still an age of widespread illiteracy, inns vied with one another in creating attractive signs that could be recognised by all. Together with distinctive names these signs lent a certain charm to inns, especially in England (Russel & Lane, 1993, p. 5).

Tradesmen and shopkeepers were slower in following the example of taverns. Out of the generic and representative symbols of trade grew a need for lending individuality and identity to particular shops. In order to obtain a more distinctive identification the medieval heraldic sign of the tavern was copied by adding to the trade symbol a coat of arms, usually that of a noble family which the tradesman served (Presbrey, 1968, p. 22). According to Delderfield (1972, p.15), the tendency of providing individualistic signs already started in the fourteenth century due to the competition between the same generic trade signs congregating together in specific streets.

The absence of street numbers up to the latter half of the eighteenth century in England can be seen as one reason for the importance of shop and tavern signs. A shop or tavern would be known as being in a certain street, near some well-known structure, such as a specific church, *and by its sign* – the sign of the lion, the anvil or the boot. The sign was used as a landmark and not only became the address of the tradesman, shopkeeper or innkeeper, but the signs of more prominent enterprises also served a more general orienting function. When the naming of streets became general, such names were often taken from the principal or most popular tavern or inn in that street as represented and reflected by the sign of that inn. This practice was taken even further much later, for when the Croydon railway was opened in 1839 many a station took its name from popular inns in the vicinity or along the route (Delderfield, 1972, p.17).

Signboards became progressively larger, more elaborate and more colourful throughout the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries, while also showing a greater excellence in workmanship. This tendency made an important contribution to local character and aesthetics.

> *Many of them were carved in relief on wood and gilded. Sculptured heads of royalty, of Shakespeare and of pretty maidens were numerous and vied for attention with the red and golden lions, green dragons and other subjects from the animal world. The streets of London looked like a picture gallery* (Presbrey, 1968, p.25).

Of special interest were the so-called gallows or beam signs used for inns. Such gallows signs started with ordinary signs fixed on bars that projected from building facades. However, competition soon urged each innkeeper to project his sign a few centimetres further across the street, until the gallows sign came into being which spanned the whole width of the street (Delderfield, 1972, p.15). Some of

The Muleteers An inn sign by the Italian painter Correggio

A London tavern signboard in the 1730s painted by Hogarth

The sign painter

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries outdoor signs became the decorative art of the inn. Some of the men who created these signs had a high standing in the art world. Inns vied with one another in creating attractive signs that could be recognised by all. Together with distinctive names these signs lend a certain charm to inns (top right and left). The inn sign was followed by the shop sign. Signboards became progressively larger and more colourful, while also showing greater excellence in workmanship. Sculptured heads and gilded signs in relief changed the streets of London into a picture gallery. Of special interest was the gallows or beam sign which spanned the whole width of the street. Some of these signs were of large proportions and cost huge sums of money (bottom right). The uncontrolled increase in size and numbers of signs created a safety hazard which eventually lead to the demise of the pictorial sign.

Figure 3.3

Signs of the pictorial signboard period

Source: Top left, top right and bottom left - Presbrey, 1968; bottom right - Inn signs. online

these signs were of enormous proportions and cost large sums of money. A gallows sign for the White Hart in Scole, Norfolk, included 25 life-size figures and cost £1 000 in the latter half of the seventeeth century, which was an enormous amount in those days (Rotheroe, 1990, p.6; Delderfield, 1972, p.16). However, not all signs were of distinguished pictorial quality. At the end of the pictorial signboard period many signs were still of a more elementary and austere design and it was not always possible to make out the object a particular sign was supposed to be depicting (Larwood & Hotten, 1951, p.15).

The above tendency of larger, more elaborate and more colourful signs, which was driven by competition between individual enterprises, also had a very negative impact on the perceptual environment. The uncontrolled increase in size and number not only blocked out the sun in narrow streets, but also created a safety hazard, which eventually brought about the end of these picturesque signboards. In 1667 it was decreed that no sign should span the street. This, however, did not stop signs from expanding vertically and becoming so heavy that in 1712 one fell down in Fleet Street, London, taking the front of a house with it and killing four passers-by (Rotheroe, 1990, pp.6-7). According to Presbrey (1968, p.25), the authorities ordered all pictorial signs to be removed in 1762 as a result of accidents caused by signs falling. With the ban came an order requiring the numbering of houses, since literacy had spread to a level where it was believed most people could read a number.

> *By 1773 houses were numbered, the picture gallery in the streets had largely disappeared, and London and other English cities had passed through a colorful period in early advertising* (Presbrey, 1968, p. 25).

According to other sources (Inn Signs, online; Delderfield, 1972, p.15), the order to remove all dangerous signs or signs which could in any way be considered an encroachment or an annoyance only came in the latter half of the 1790s. According to Delderfield (1972, p.17), a street numbering system was only fully established in England in 1805.

The pictorial signboard period in England lent a certain charm to tavern, shop and streetscape and contributed to a sense of place and a sense of identity and belonging. Unfortunately this contribution came to an end due to a lack of sufficient advertising control at the initial stage. This tradition was

only kept alive to a certain extent by means of the traditional pub and inn sign of today using symbols and influences of the past.

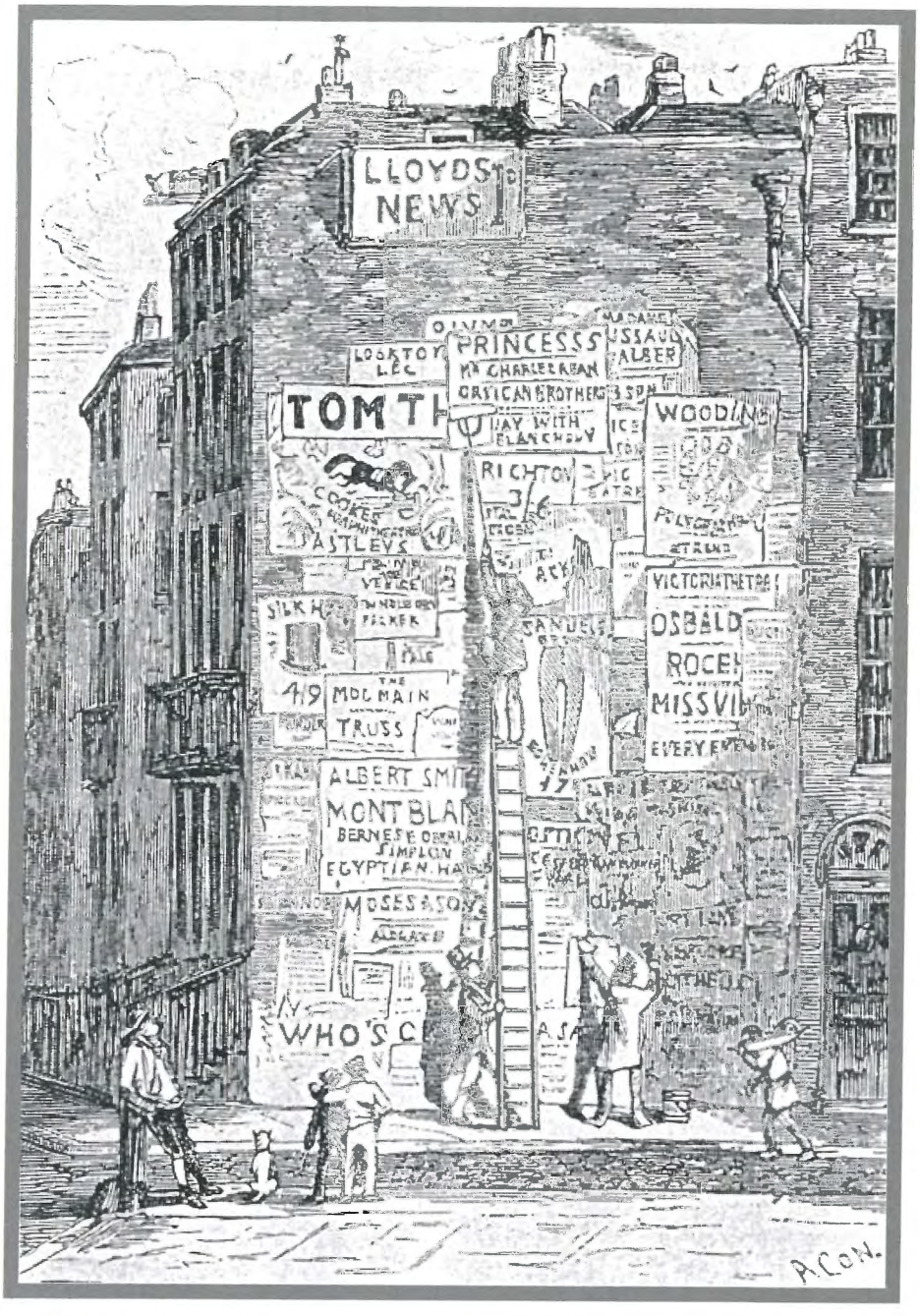
3.1.5 THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BILLPOSTING IN ENGLAND (1775 – 1860)

Although the advertising wall in the Roman city provided a foretaste of visual resource mismanagement, the first serious impact of advertising on the outdoor environment occurred during the Industrial Revolution in England. Official proclamations and notices of auction sales have established billposting as an occupation by 1780. But it was really the authorisation of the lotteries by Parliament in 1795 that gave a real impetus to billposting and continued to widen the application and impact thereof until the lotteries were abolished in 1826. In rural areas lottery posting took place in both the countryside and in towns. In London vans covered with lottery advertisements was a common sight during the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Presbrey, 1968, p. 491).

After billposting had been established as a more or less common practice an excess of manufactured goods, coupled with a London press that still placed many restrictions on advertising, led to an explosion in outdoor advertising in the mid 1800s (McAllister, 1996, p. 65). This situation was aggravated by a tax levied on each copy of the English newspaper, which limited the circulation of newspapers, as well as an additional tax on each advertisement placed in a newspaper.

> *In the 1840s there was a wide expansion in lettering of dead walls and in billposting. Stenciling of sidewalks also entered a big run. The sandwich man came out in force. Advertising wagons plastered with bills made processions in the streets. Buses carried advertising inside and out. It was the golden age of outdoor advertising (Presbrey, 1968, p. 91).*

After the formation of the first billposting company in London in 1839, a war began between the owners of licensed hoardings and *advertising guerrillas*. By 1855 these night-working *guerrillas*, stencilling sidewalks and pasting posters on every available space had become an enormous problem. Nothing would escape the attention of these guerrillas, not even the doors of private homes nor the kerbstone and lamppost in the street, and sunrise would reveal whole districts plastered with



Source: Presbrey, 1965

ring the Industrial Revolution billposting became quite a oblem in England. This problem reached its peak during the 50s. Billposting guerrillas operating under the cover of darkness re stencilling sidewalks and sticking up posters on every ailable space. Sunrise would reveal whole districts covered by sters. Nothing would escape the attention of these guerrillas, t even the doors of private homes or the lamppost on the street. e chaotic conditions created by uncontrolled billposting forced authorities to take the necessary regulatory steps. Authorised vertising stations, as indicated above by a London bill station in 1840s, were provided and the night-working guerrilla was idually eliminated.

Figure 3.4

Billposting during the Industrial Revolution

posters. Dyer (1982, p. 320) makes the following statement with regard to this period: *At one time in London billposting was so popular that it seemed you might never get to see a building at all.*

These chaotic conditions created by uncontrolled billposting forced the authorities to take the necessary regulatory steps. *Advertising stations,* or authorised places for posting, were established. Defacement of private property without permission was stopped and the night-working *guerrilla* was gradually eliminated, while reputable individuals and firms took control of the billposting business. The 1860s saw haphazard quilts of ill-struck bills replaced by more colourful and better-designed posters in neatly arranged patterns. However, the regulation of billposting resulted in an increase in the number of poster-covered wagons travelling the street.

3.1.6 THE FRENCH ART POSTER (1867 – 1905)

During the latter half of the nineteenth century French artists produced outstanding advertising posters which gave outdoor advertising a salient quality and transformed poster displays into outdoor art galleries. According to Presbrey (1968, p.495), Jules Cheret, who produced his first advertising poster in 1867 and who pioneered the use of colour in the modern poster, can be seen as the father of the true art poster. Cheret used a bold combination of colours to attract attention without giving offence. In this way he succeeded in drawing attention to the product by first drawing attention to the poster (Henderson & Landau, 1981, p.9). His colour schemes were never harsh or vulgar and the subjects on his posters reflected much gaiety and movement. Other French artists, such as Grasset and Willette, took up the same line of work and in 1900 it was estimated that there were two hundred poster artists in Paris. The development of the true art poster in England and the United States was much slower. It never reached the same heights of artistic expression as in France and it never really took root until 1890.

3.1.7 OUTDOOR ADVERTISING IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA (1670 – 1930)

Originally the development of outdoor advertising in the American colonies followed more or less the same pattern as in England. However, the colonial signboard never reached quite the same heights as those of the English pictorial signboard period. Nevertheless, due to a more impetuous and

A Poster by Cheret (Presbrey, 1968)

Figure 3.5
The French art poster

During the latter half of the nineteenth century French artists produced outstanding advertising posters which gave outdoor advertising a salient quality and transformed poster displays into outdoor galleries. Cheret, who can be seen as the father of the true art poster, did outstanding work in this regard.

pioneering spirit, the Americans soon adopted a more extravagant approach with regard to outdoor advertising and became world leaders in this field – a distinction upheld till this very day.

The evolution of outdoor information transfer in America started in the seventeenth century with inn or tavern signs featuring heraldic or similar elements. These signs were followed by the tradesman's symbol and the pictorial sign. Among the first trade symbols were wooden figures for tobacco shops which were carved by men who made figureheads for ships. They had a certain aesthetic appeal and artistic quality and made a positive contribution to the character of the local street.

The American pictorial signs could, however, never be compared with those of the golden age of the English pictorial signboard. According to Presbrey (1968, p.114), they were not *at any time numerous enough or large enough to give the American thoroughfare the picturesque appearance of a London street of the early eighteenth century, nor were they so well done as the famous English signboards.* Nevertheless the American pictorial sign still reached a rather high artistic standard and came into its widest use just before the Revolutionary War in Philadelphia, America's art centre at that time. Portrait signs that depicted famous personalities became rather popular. Painters such as Matthew Pratt painted outstanding signboards that became well-known and contributed to the popularity of those taverns where they were displayed.

According to Presbrey (1968, p. 498):

> *Real outdoor advertising – promiscuous posting on walls, trees and fences – probably was done first, as in England, on behalf of lotteries, which were active in New England in the eighteenth century and are known to have used the printing press freely.*

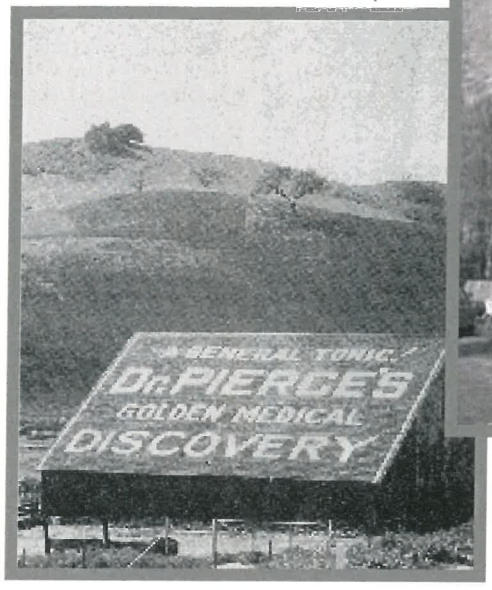
During the late 1860s the intense activity in cities, which was noticed in England a decade or so earlier, had spread to the United States. Urban areas were characterised by intensive billposting (Fraser, 1991, p.10). Even telegraph poles in the streets and the pillars of New York's first elevated railway (1867) were plastered with bills, while fresh kerbstone posters and stencilling on the sidewalks greeted people every morning (Presbrey, 1968, p. 500).

One of the most important contributions to a more impetuous and extravagant approach to outdoor advertising in America was made by an entrepreneur by the name of TC Barnum. Barnum was a

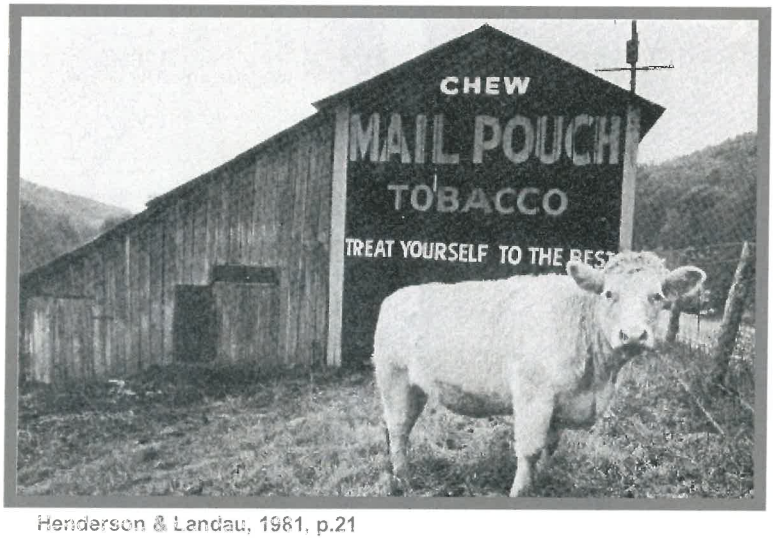
rather colourful character who had a certain flair and natural ability to make use of outdoor advertising that attracted attention. During the latter half of the nineteenth century he made use of a variety of gimmicks and flashy methods on a grandiose scale, such as brass bands, processions, gas-lit advertisements, banners and painted signs to advertise enterprises such as the American Museum in New York (Presbrey, 1968, p.215).

While the height of the Industrial Revolution in the United States saw its share of outdoor advertising in the cities this country also distinguished itself with regard to another outdoor advertising development aimed at the countryside – painted messages on rocks, cliffs and manmade structures (Fraser, 1991, p.10). This is a clear reflection of the extravagant and impetuous American approach to outdoor advertising. This rock-painting tradition, which had quite a significant impact on the visual environment, was introduced by the patent-medicine manufacturer at the beginning of the nineteenth century. After building up some momentum a wave of patent-medicine advertising hit the American countryside between 1860 and 1880. Painted letters were put onto rocks and cliffs, on barns and abandoned structures, and on the roadside fence and any other available place everywhere. In the words of Presbrey (1968, p. 501), *no good rock or obtainable barn anywhere [went] undecorated*. St Jacob's Oil, a patent medicine for rheumatism at that time, produced some of the more prominent and well-known if not notorious examples in this regard. A Mississippi River steamboat, painted a brilliant red, was used to deliver cargoes of St Jacob's Oil along the river. This steamboat carried the words *St Jacob's Oil* in letters 12 ft (3,7 m) high, so that it could be read from almost as great a distance as the boat could be seen. In another typical case the words *St Jacob's Oil* was written in huge letters on a prominent rock at the Niagara Falls. However, this advertisement aroused such a wide criticism from thousands of tourists that it had to be removed (Presbrey, 1968, p. 390). Patent medicine advertising was soon supplemented by advertisements for other products. A good example in this regard is a painted advertisement for a dentifrice on Maiden's Rock near Redwing, Minnesota. The word *Sozodont* was written on Maiden's Rock in letters of such a size that it could be seen by Mississippi River steamboat passengers from a distance of three miles (4,8 km) (Presbrey, 1968, p. 402). The visual zone along the railroad became an even more popular hunting ground for these *rock-painters* than the riverboat routes. Apart from rocks and other surfaces not only the sides but also the sloping roofs of barns along the railroad were adorned with product reminders. In 1870 the

Henderson & Landau, 1981, p.21



The American Highway Project
[http://www.highwayproject.org/galley.htm]



Henderson & Landau, 1981, p.21

Figure 3.6

Painted signs in the United States

Due to a more impetuous and pioneering spirit, the Americans adopted a more extravagant approach to outdoor advertising. One of the first manifestations of this approach was painted messages on rocks, cliffs and manmade structures in the countryside during the latter half of the nineteenth century. An advertising message in huge letters was even written on a prominent rock at the Niagara Falls. These painted signs were concentrated along railway lines and riverboat routes. Along railway lines not only the sides but also the sloping roofs of barns were adorned with product reminders.

first national painting service was organised by Bradbury and Houghteling, who had *a reputation for reaching and painting rocks regarded as inaccessible* (Presbrey, 1968, p. 501).

Another important contribution to outdoor advertising by the Americans at the beginning of the twentieth century was the free-standing billboard (Fraser, 1991, pp.8;14). An increase in car ownership during this period broadened the scale of both the application and impact of outdoor advertising.

> *Then came the automobile and a rolling audience of thousands along country roads that formerly had seen only the occasional farmer going to town. The "circulation" that grew with the spread of the automobile gave outdoor display a new importance to both local and national advertisers. Certain suburban sites for the poster or painted board became as valuable in their way as the crowded street corner in the city was to the cigar store. Where there never had been a board the roadside in places now acquired long rows of them* (Presbrey, 1968, p. 503).

The private motor-car can be seen as the single most important factor in the history of outdoor information transfer. It introduced a new era. From now on outdoor advertisements and signs would be aimed at transportation routes, competing for the attention of the motorist. Outdoor advertisements and signs would soon become a major influence and visual element to be reckoned with in both rural and urban landscapes. The turning point in this regard came in the 1920s and 1930s when the motor car became an established mode of transport in the United States (Fraser, 1991, p.46; Russel & Lane 1993, p. 330).

Night displays and the large-scale application of illuminated outdoor signs in the American city is another achievement typical of American approach to outdoor advertising. Before the advent of electricity, gaslit signs were used since 1840 to display outdoor advertisements after dark. The first huge electric sign away from the premises of the advertiser was constructed on Broadway in New York in 1891 against the blank wall of a nine-storey building. Various other signs followed this advertisement until, in the words of Presbrey (1968, p. 508), Broadway became the *great white way* at the beginning of the twentieth century. This brilliant and dazzling display of a magnitude of colourful, flashing and moving signs attracted large numbers of sign gazers after dark. Large-scale night displays were also established in other cities with large evening crowds such as Chicago,

Atlantic City and Detroit. However, Broadway remained the trend-setter and some illuminated signs even became major attractions of international importance at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as a seven-storey-high sign erected on the roof of the Hotel Normandie in 1910.

The mid 1920s saw a decline in incentives for aggressively exploring outdoor advertising strategies, as broadcasting became a viable national advertising medium (McAllister, 1996, p. 66).

3.1.8 SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF OUTDOOR INFORMATION TRANSFER

Apart from commercial advertising outdoor information transfer performed a variety of social functions of a more basic but nevertheless important nature in the past. The functioning and survival of towns and cities actually depended on effective outdoor information transfer. In the first instance almost every city or town had a collective communication system to gather people together in times of danger or for festivities of communal importance. According to Mumford (1975, pp. 79-80), the range of such systems played an important role in limiting the size of town and city.

> *Mesopotamian cities had an assembly drum, just as medieval cities used a bell in a church town to call their citizens together... In the Middle Ages to be within sound of Bow Bells defined the limits of the City of London; and until other systems of mass communication were invented in the nineteenth century, these were among the effective limits to urban growth.*

Secondly, such instruments of public communication were also used for various other purposes of a more general nature, some of which are still of relevance in modern times. A good example is the church bell, which is still used today in certain towns to announce the hour or to announce important happenings such as weddings or funerals, or simply to call churchgoers to church.

3.1.9 CONCLUSIONS

A historical perspective of outdoor information transfer has shown that especially commercial advertising has a latent and inherent capability of having a negative impact on the visual environment. It only takes favourable circumstances such as periods of economic growth, technological progress or

periods of promotional frustration in other advertising media for outdoor advertising to show its hand and leave major footprints on the environment. Good examples in this regard include:

- The untidy graffiti-like advertising walls of Roman cities reflecting the economic stability and high degree of literacy enjoyed in the Roman Empire.

- Competition between generic shop-signs during the Middle Ages due to the custom of confining specific trades to particular streets.

- Signs competing with one another during the pictorial signboard period, each one striving to be bigger and projecting further away from the shop-front than the neighbouring sign, leading to the gallows signs which spanned the whole street and which not only had an aesthetic impact but also created a safety hazard.

- Excessive billposting during the latter half of the Industrial Revolution in England, followed by a similar trend in the United States owing to an excess of manufactured goods and promotional stress caused by a press that placed many limitations on advertising, especially in England.

- Advertising messages painted on rocks and other structures in the American countryside, which reached a peak between 1860 and the mid1880s.

- An increase in car ownership at the beginning of the twentieth century, which broadened the scope of outdoor advertising along transportation routes and introduced a new era in outdoor information transfer.

- The large-scale application of electrically illuminated signs at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Conditions have never been as favourable for the flourishing of outdoor advertisements and signs as during current times due to economic globalisation, the availability of credit, a spirit of materialism and consumerism and the progress made in the field of electronic and digital technology. Scenic America

(online, (4)) estimates the current number of billboards along major American highways at 500 000, with an estimated annual increase of between 5 000 and 15 000.

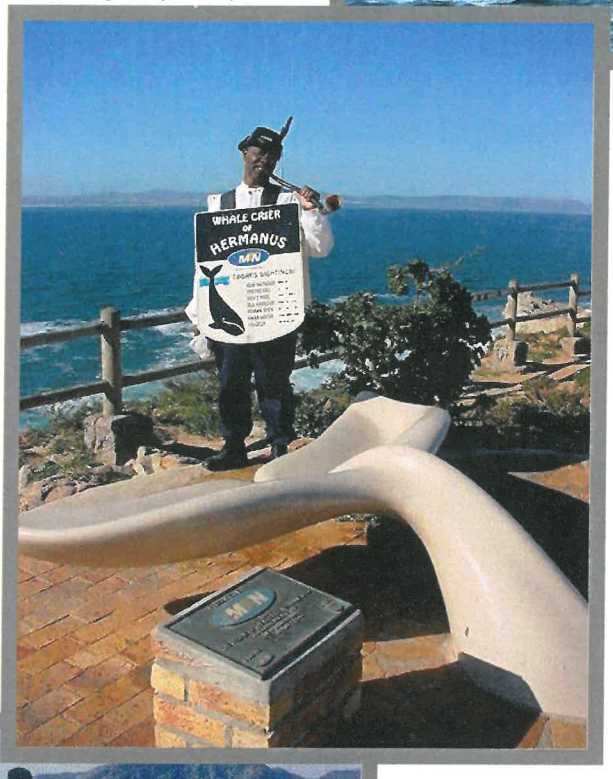
The impact of outdoor advertising can also be related to cultural factors and the efficiency of control measures. In contrast to the American approach, various countries such as the United Kingdom, France and South Africa followed a rather conservative and more visually pleasing approach to the management of outdoor information transfer. Unfortunately, as a result of economic globalisation, the more extravagant and impetuous American approach to outdoor information transfer, together with a high impact on the environment, is currently being exported to the rest of the world. South Africa in particular is rapidly changing to the American model.

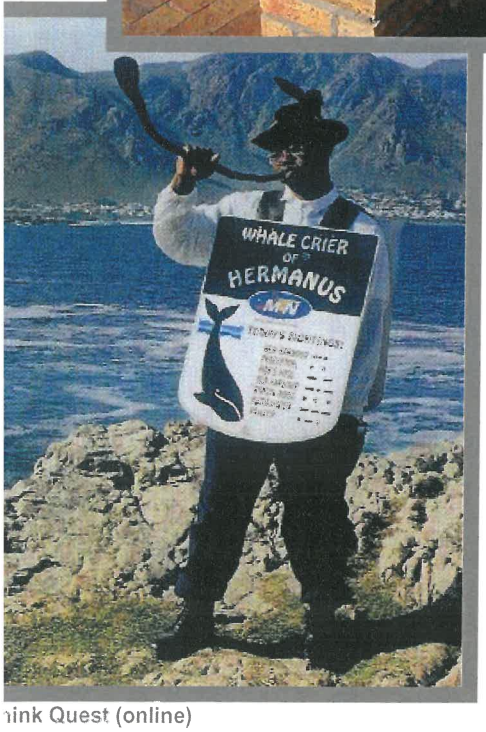
History has also revealed certain attributes of outdoor information transfer which contributed to the visual environment and a sense of place in the past. Some of these attributes may still be of relevance today. The following examples may be mentioned in this regard:

- Some of the earliest and less obtrusive forms of outdoor information transfer, such as the generic trade symbol, the crier and the church bell seem to have a perpetual value, making an important contribution to local sense of place throughout the ages while also contributing to a sense of permanence and stability. The trade symbol survived until modern times in the form of the striped barber's pole, while in Third World economies of today the informal street seller is still using his voice to advertise his wares to passers-by. The voice of the crier can also still be heard in various other places such as Hermanus, a coastal village in South Africa, where a *whale crier* blows a horn of dried kelp and announces the arrival of whales to visiting tourists. And at Boppard the bells of St Severus resounding across the River Rhine links past with present and bear witness to the timeless beauty and grace of the church bell.

- Throughout the ages signs attached to shops or other enterprises often formed a medium for artistic expression and contributed to the local sense of place. The sculptured Roman album or house tablet in terra cotta or stone displaying the name and profession or trade of the resident; wooden figures at the American tobacco shop carved by men who made figureheads for ships; and pictorial signboards often painted by men who had a high standing in the art world. The

Image IT (online)



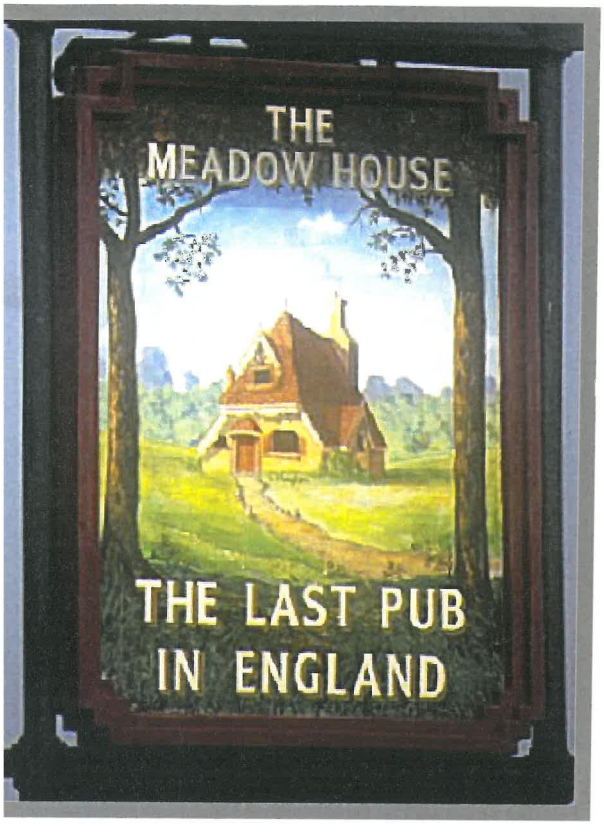


ink Quest (online)

Figure 3.7
Whale crier

Some of the earliest and less obtrusive forms of outdoor information transfer such as the generic trade symbol, the crier and the church bell seem to have perpetual value, making an important contribution to local sense of place throughout the ages while also contributing to a sense of permanence and stability.

The trade symbol survived until modern times in the form of the striped barber's pole, while in Third World economies of today the informal street seller is still using his voice to advertise his wares to passers-by. The voice of the crier can also still be heard in various other places such as Hermanus, a coastal village in South Africa. In the months of June through November the Southern Right Whales come to mate and calf in the warmer waters of Walker Bay. During this period Wilson Salakusana, the only whale crier in the world, walks the streets of Hermanus blowing his kelp horn to alert hundreds of shore-based whale-watchers to the whereabouts of whales. The key to the codes he is blowing is shown on his sandwich board, together with the number of whales spotted at each location



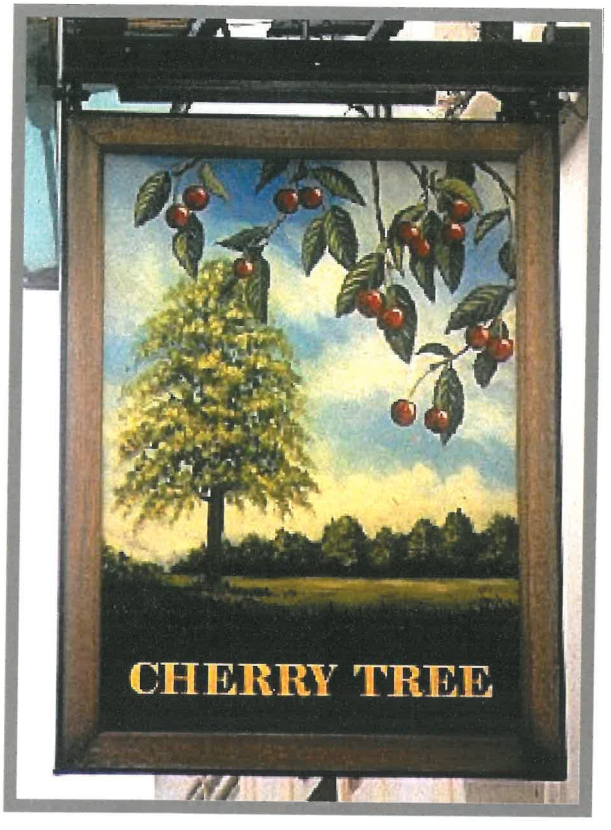


Figure 3.8

Contemporary English inn signs

The English inn sign of the past often formed a medium for artistic expression which contributed to the local sense of place. This tradition has been kept alive over the years and even today inn and pub signs can be seen as a key contributor to local sense of place. Present-day inn signs have been described as *an illustrated guide to the history of Britain* (Inn Signs, online), and as *a great open-air portrait gallery* where much can be learned about the past, and often the present, of different local communities (Rotheroe, 1990, p.3).

rce: Peter's Official Pub & Inn Sign Page (Online).

pictorial signboard of shop, inn and tavern made a very important contribution to the English streetscape of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It could be seen as decorative art and in most cases formed a visual harmony with the building to which it was attached. These signboards formed the essence of the identity, character and charm of many a shop, inn or tavern. However, the most striking example of the sign's contribution to placeness is the fact that the signs of more prominent shops and inns often served as landmarks and were even used in the naming of streets. The tradition of the English inn sign of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been kept alive over the years and even today inn and pub signs can be seen as a key contributor to local sense of place. Present-day inn signs have been described as *an illustrated guide to the history of Britain* (Inn Signs, online). They have also been described as *a great open-air portrait gallery* where much can be learned about the past, and often the present, of different local communities (Rotheroe, 1990, p.3).

- The French art poster of the latter half of the nineteenth century gives additional proof of the potential of advertisements and signs as a medium for artistic expression.

- The large-scale display of illuminated signs at the beginning of the twentieth century opened up the way for advertising displays in entertainment districts such as Las Vegas and Times Square which became major night-time tourist attractions.

History has also shown the effective management of outdoor information transfer to be an absolute necessity in order to optimise the positive elements while at the same time minimising the impacts thereof. Insufficient control of advertisements and signs can actually be detrimental to the positive elements of advertisements and signs of a high aesthetic quality and may even neutralise such positive contributions. This point is clearly illustrated by the English pictorial signboard of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which made a very positive aesthetic contribution to streetscape and sense of place, but were eventually banned at the end of the eighteenth century owing to insufficient control of the size and number of signs.