

Public lettering a walk in central London

British Library Euston Road, WC1

While the railway stations next door use their architecture to announce themselves, the British Library —[designed by Colin St John Wilson from 1978 onwards, the building was not opened until 1997]— sits back from the road and is approached through the dramatic gates and across an enclosed garden. The large lintel of the gatehouse features carved, raised letters on red sandstone. The work of David Kindersley's workshop, its individual letters and words are well-formed, but the composition as a whole is fatally flawed because the over-large definite article dominates quite unnecessarily. But below, the gates themselves, cut out of heavy sheet steel, are much more successful: they do not *contain* lettering, they *are* lettering. BRITISH LIBRARY is repeated and progresses from 'light' to 'ultra black'.

Beyond the gatehouse and across the courtyard, all the library's internal signage was designed by Pentagram under the direction of Mervyn Kurlansky. It uses the typeface Centaur and is useful only as an example of how *not* to space capital letters.

St Pancras station WC1

At the time of preparing this, St Pancras is currently being redeveloped in readiness for becoming London's second Eurostar terminal. —[St Pancras station buildings were designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott for the Midland Railway from 1868–76 and front a single-span train shed of 1866–8 by F H Barlow & R M Ordish. The Eurostar terminal will include a new Underground ticket office under the station forecourt and involve the moving of the gasworks to the north of King's Cross station.]

In addition to a few much older examples, there still remain traces of the Design Research Unit's British Rail corporate identity of 1964. This used the Rail Alphabet designed by Jock Kinneir & Margaret Calvert. A sans serif typeface, it was designed as a tiled system to enable correctly spaced signs to be assembled by untrained staff.

King's Cross station N1

If St Pancras is about romance, Kings Cross —[designed by Lewis & Joseph Cubitt in 1851–2]— is about function, its façade simply being a screen to the end of the twin arched sheds over the arrival and departure platforms.

Very few traces of British Rail's 1964 corporate identity exist here. Perhaps their privatised successors Railtrack, viewed it as too brutal. King's Cross was re-signed in 2001, with trendy colours and a new typeface: they are in no way an improvement.

319–321 Gray's Inn Road

Painted house numbers and advertisement, presumably dating from the late nineteenth century. These have a wonderful disregard for the building – look at the way they run over the first floor window arcading – hard to imagine that many shops and buildings must once have been painted this way. What a shame the present owners don't repaint them regardless of the building's current use.

Road traffic signs

This example Gray's Inn Road/Britannia Street, WC1

The system used in Great Britain is that designed by Kinneir Calvert for the Worboys Committee (1963) following the style they had designed for the motorways (Anderson Committee) in 1958. The alphabet itself is sans serif, carefully spaced to ensure legibility when seen from a distance and at speed. 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 (as here) for primary routes, white for local signs. Because the distances between all elements on a sign are specified, the size of each sign varies.

The circular, rectangular and triangular signs containing mainly pictorial warnings or instructions follow the forms set out in the Geneva Protocol of 1948.

Taken as a whole, the system carefully addressed all the issues of legibility of letterforms when seen at distance when moving and clarity of information presented. Visually they were a huge step forward from previous versions and still look remarkably fresh today.

Central London Throat & Ear Hospital (The Royal National Throat, Nose & Ear Hospital)

Gray's Inn Road, WC1

There are several versions of the name on the two buildings here. On the original building the frieze at the top contains Egyptian letters cast on terracotta blocks. Almost monoline in construction, each is placed centrally on a square block which creates an irregular rhythm to the words containing *I*.

Above the ground floor are newer Trajan-derived steel letters whose chief quality is usefulness for pedestrians. On the north-facing, flanking wall another version of this name and lettering style appears as a white and blue glazed panel set in the brickwork.

A third version of the name appears at eye level. While the letterform – a condensed modern – is more usually associated with fashion magazine mastheads, its execution is interesting being apparently cast with the terrazzo panels of the wall.

Royal Free Hospital Gray's Inn Road, WC1

There are carved inscriptions below both pediments of this building which somehow seems too big for the street. Each works well within its space and shows up all the later versions saying Eastman Dental Hospital both beside the arch and on the newer building next door.

Parsons' Library Doughty Street/Guilford Street, WC1

Despite being 2 feet high this is the most reticent building name discussed here – I must have cycled past it hundreds of times in the twelve years before writing-up the first version of this walk in 1997. For all intents and purposes the lettering is Gill Sans, but it is relief-carved out of brick and projects perhaps an inch from the wall itself. Like many of the other examples it forms a frieze just below parapet level.

Royal London Homœopathic Hospital

Great Ormond Street, WC1

Nothing great here, but like many buildings which have been added to over a period of time, there are a variety of different names and materials to see. Terracotta lettering set into the brickwork facing the childrens' hospital (main picture); glazed terracotta panel on the corner with Queen Square; and cut-out steel lettering on the balcony above.

British Monomarks

27 Old Gloucester Street, WC1

A simple but very effective use of cut-out steel and silhouette to announce the company's name down this small alley.

Faraday House 48 Old Gloucester Street, WC1

This carved, raised, building name shows one of the more playful approaches to our subject, some letters being reduced to abstraction making them legible as letters only when seen in the context of the rest. The letters are carved from the blocks making up the wall and until 1995 were self-coloured. Unpainted, they were emphatically part of the wall, a fact disguised by colour.

Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design

Southampton Row/Theobald's Road, WC1

As first planned the Central School of Arts & Crafts—[by W E Riley with A Halcrow Verstage of the LCC Architects' Department for W R Lethaby, the school's founding Principal in 1907–9]—would have had carved lettering on the corner but all that was executed was the original name above the outer entrance doors.

A name change to Art & Design in 1966 was ignored, but in 1989 the college was merged with St Martin's School of Art and became part of the London Institute. The name placed outside in the early 1990s is an example of how not to do it. As with most corporate identities, this one decrees that all buildings are signed in an identical way regardless of age, history or style.

Pharmaceutical Society

Great Russell Street/Bloomsbury Square, WC1

This example of a v-cut monoline Egyptian with even character widths dates from 1860 and until at least 1975 was gilded which must have looked even better. Nevertheless it is a fine form and works well in the space and with the architecture.

British Museum Great Court Great Russell Street, WC1

After the British Library moved to St Pancras in 1997 building work began here to transform the area around the former Reading Room. Norman Foster's scheme enclosed the brick Reading Room in stone to match the surrounding buildings —[The main parts of the museum were designed by Sir Robert Smirke between 1823–47. The domed Reading Room was the work of his brother Sidney and was finished in 1857.]— and the whole area was roofed with a geodesic-like glazed roof. From afar it looks as though a bouncy castle is on the roof, from inside, as though you're walking through a computer-generated image. The lighting is flat and slightly blue and the sound, when full of schoolchildren, is like a swimming pool. The sense of space which was, on opening, impressive, has largely been nullified since by a plethora of direction boards and two information desks.

The drum of the Reading Room is surmounted by an inscription saying when and why, while lower down, sponsors' names cover the surface. A quote from Tennyson is set in the floor. Compared to the quality of Michael Harvey's work at the National Gallery this is a real disappointment, the letterforms are virtually the typeface Rotis, Foster's corporate face. At the upper level it has a shallow square-cut section and is set too high in the space. The sponsors' names in upper & lower-case are spaced for pattern-making rather than readability. None of it feels as though it were done by someone who really loved lettering or the effects of light and shadow and scale.

Dairy Supply Company

Coptic Street/Little Russell Street, WC1

The first Pizza Express (1965) in the country, and an example of old lettering surviving. Here it is very much an integral part of the original building and is accompanied by various monograms of the company initials. When the company expanded, they copied their original lettering on the small extension they built alongside in Little Russell Street. In total there are seven places on the two façades where the company name or initials appear. The building – including the lettering – was refurbished in 1999.

James Smith & Sons (Umbrellas) Ltd

53 New Oxford Street, WC2

The company was founded in 1830 and moved to this premises in 1857. It is the largest umbrella shop in Europe and a rare example of Victorian commercial London. As with 319–321 Gray's Inn Road, the promotion of the business occupies much of the structure but here the materials are richer, more ostentatious and more varied. Mirrored glass, engraved brass and half-round section timber all have a part to play. Over time parts have had to be replaced but this has been done carefully and, with one exception, sympathetically.

Lavers & Barraud 22 Endell Street, WC2

These carved letters running along two sides of the building may not be the best lettering examples on the journey, I just like the fact that they've survived intact without the indignity of having a new plastic sign screwed through them. Raised lettering is easier to remove: the terracotta letters on Talbot Mansions in Little Russell Street have been entirely carved off.

Underground station Long Acre, Covent Garden, WC2

There are three periods of underground history to see here. The building dates from 1906 and was designed by Leslie Green, architect of the majority of the Yerkes 'tube' stations with their typical red-glazed façades. —[The first underground railway was London's Metropolitan Railway from Baker Street to Farringdon Road which opened in 1863. This was a cut-and-cover construction – a huge trench was dug in the road, the railway was laid and a tunnel over it to support the road. The 'tubes' are strictly-speaking the deep-level tunnels excavated through solid earth behind some form of shield. The City & South London Railway was London's first in 1890. The American financier Yerkes was behind the Underground Electric Railways Company of London. This included the Piccadily & Brompton, Baker Street & Waterloo, and Charing Cross, Euston & Hampstead Railways. All tubes and underground companies became part of London Transport in 1933.]— Covent Garden on the Piccadily & Brompton Railway opened in 1906. Like all the red-tiled stations it was built only two storeys high but designed to support more and so be developed later as land values rose.

The earliest lettering here is the terracotta station name with 'curvilinear' lettering typical of its time. At platform level similar forms are made from ceramic tiles and set within coloured borders which differ from station to station. The word UNDERGROUND appears in an anonymous sans serif with the characteristically large U and D which was first used around 1908.

The typeface most associated with London Transport actually pre-dates it. Commissioned by Frank Pick in 1916, it was drawn up by Edward Johnston. It was the first sans serif to depart from the prevailing grotesque pattern and has proportions based on Roman sources. When typesetting technologies and typographic fashions changed in the late 1970s there was talk of replacing the face but Colin Banks of Banks & Miles suggested that a re-drawn version would preserve 'the hand writing of London' as well as address the technological issues. New Johnston appeared in 1980, has an enlarged x-height and is used in slightly heavier weights than the original.

Station signage now uses the system designed by Henrion, Ludlow & Schmidt using the New Johnston typeface: apart from station names all signage is now upper & lower-case.

27–29 Long Acre (*recently re-developed*), WC2

Only very slight traces of both 'London's favourite fruiterers, T Walton & Sons (London) Ltd' —[This was Walton's warehouse and head office. They also owned a chain of shops situated in tube stations which all used similar lettering.]— and 'Saint Martins School of Art' remain on this façade. The building has been cleaned of its history both within and without. No evidence can be seen of the original floor plan in the new H&M and the ground floor façade is only an approximation of the original fenestration.

St Martin's School of Art bought the lease to this building in 1980 and re-used the letters left by the previous owner making the extras needed to re-sign the frontage. —[Although the college merged with the Central School of Art & Design to become Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design in 1989, the new name never appeared on the building.]— When the graphics course left the building in November 1999 they took the letters with them and re-erected them on the fourth floor of the college's Lethaby building in Southampton Row.

Street names

Hop Gardens and elsewhere, WC2

The Victorians and Edwardians were very straightforward about street names choosing robust letterforms and long-lasting materials. Among the best post-war solutions are the City of Westminster signs designed by Chris Tinings at the DRU c.1968. They use two colours and sizes of Univers Bold Condensed to create a clear hierarchy of information. Produced from vitreous stove enamelled steel, their 25mm return gives them considerable presence whatever the background material.

Any reservations I have about the scheme concern not the design but the scale and necessity of its application: did every street name in Westminster name really need replacing at this time? Was it really necessary to define the new borough's territory quite so pedantically, it's rather like a dog marking its territory. Several serviceable older versions exist along Floral Street nearby.

The Coliseum May's Court, off Bedfordbury, WC2

A glorious example of lettering proclaiming the name of a building on the side rather than the front of the building. Presumably this was because the front of the theatre would be covered in an ever-changing display of publicity for the performances themselves. The letters, formed out of three courses of terracotta blocks, are 'curvilinear' in style, typical of 1904 when the theatre was built and similar to the tiled lettering on the Leslie Green underground stations previously referred to.

At the time of writing (April 2002) this façade is invisible under a shroud of scaffold and plastic. This is part of English National Opera's £41 million restoration and improvement of the whole building which is due to be complete for its centenary year.

Pedestrian signagetraffic island at junction of Charing Cross Road,
St Martin's Lane and William IV Street, WC2

There is provision in the road sign legislation for pedestrian signs. Despite their efficacy, the conservation lobby and sign manufacturers seem to have got these finger-posts accepted by local authorities as acceptable substitutes for pedestrian signage. Am I being irrational or are these a waste of time and money? Everything about them is apologetic. As objects they are weak, the detailing is badly-observed and generally too small. As signs they do not work: the capitals are 'set' too tightly for reading across a wide road.

St Martin's Schools St Martin's Mews, WC2

This is a good teaching aid: compare the top and middle lines, even if you 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-in-the-Fields St Martin's Place, WC2

This church was built between 1721–6 to the designs of James Gibbs. Lettering is carved across the pediment and dated 1722. This is lettering on its way somewhere. It does not follow the roman model, either in weight or in proportion, but it has not developed like the example at St Martin's Schools into the English letter.

National Gallery, Sainsbury Wing, Trafalgar Square, WC2

This extension to the National Gallery was opened in 1991. —[The architect was Robert Venturi of Venturi Scott Brown Associates of Philadelphia USA. It was designed to complement William Wilkins'

19th century gallery, to which it is linked at first floor level.]— There is lettering on the outside to the left of the entrance [pic], and in the foyer behind the reception desk, but it is overpowered by other distractions. Going up the grand staircase to the galleries however is one of the country's largest commissions of carved lettering for many years. The names of some of the Renaissance masters run along a frieze which begins way above your head with Duccio and ends at your feet with Raphael. It was carved by Michael Harvey in 1990 and the forms themselves are very much 'his' sharing many characteristics with his lettering for book jackets and his 1990 typeface Ellington.

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