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LETTERING
ON SIGNS &
BUILDINGS

THE GEORGIAN GROUP
27 GROSVENOR PLACE, S.W.1
Sloane 2844

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The GEORGIAN GROUP was founded in 1937. Its aims are :

- (1) to awaken public interest in Georgian architecture and town planning ;
- (2) to afford advice in regard to the preservation, repair and use to-day of Georgian buildings ;
- (3) to save from destruction and disfigurement Georgian squares, terraces, streets and individual buildings of special merit ;
- (4) to ensure, when an area is replanned, that Georgian buildings are not wantonly destroyed, and that the new buildings harmonise (though they may contrast) with the old.

Particulars of Membership may be obtained from the Secretary.

LETTERING ON SIGNS AND BUILDINGS

Lettering on signs and buildings has become an essential and increasingly obvious part of modern street furniture. The problem of its provision is both intricate and interesting since in most cases the letters are designed for a specific purpose on a specific site. It follows that unlike, say, kitchen equipment, table silver, or street lamp standards, which if well designed could be equally efficient and pleasing in different surroundings, only the right choice among many possible alternatives will make the most of an opportunity to provide lettering for a given building. The widest range of materials, colours, finishes, sizes and fixings, quite apart from variations in the actual shape of the letters, is now made available by modern technique. The question ought then to be *not* "What can we get?" but "Which is best?"—and the measure of success will be the measure of appropriateness in each particular case.

Let us consider the general principles which should guide the choice, and the factors to be taken into account.

- I. The purpose of lettering on buildings is normally to identify the owner or tenant, the character of the business carried on within, or to advertise goods or services—in other words, to make an announcement. It scarcely needs to be argued that the lettering used should be legible; it may also, to a greater or lesser degree according to its purpose, be required to attract attention. The legibility of lettering implies, as Percy D. Smith has said,* "the use of familiar symbols clearly expressed". The letters should be of a shape which is immediately recognisable: any modifications which are carried to excess in a desire to be "different" become distortions and will defeat their own end by making it difficult for the message to be read. Letters, even if of a good shape, should be made in a straightforward manner and not be obscured by complicated

* *Civic and Memorial Lettering*, p. 8.

sections, unsuitable returns, or extravagant shadow effects, all of which may themselves amount to distortions. Legibility will also depend on size, colour, contrast with background, and position. These will be considered in detail later.

- II. Lettering should in a general way be appropriate to the character of the announcement it makes. For example, a building of a public nature like a civic centre, library, hospital or railway station, has a "psychological climate" which is quite different from that of, say, an Oxford Street store, a flower-shop in a country town, or an amusement arcade anywhere. Each demands a different treatment of the lettering it carries. Elements of civic dignity, public service and control, and greater permanence, combine in the first case to make a restrained, monumental type of lettering appropriate. The store, flower-shop and arcade will legitimately tend to use types of lettering which reflect the personal taste of the owner, which are probably more "aggressive" in character (i.e. they try to attract attention because of the competitive element in their business) and which are of a less permanent nature since all are liable to come "under new management" in a way public buildings do not. Permanence of lettering relates not only to the material in which it is carried out and the way it is fixed, but also to the choice of a letter form which will not quickly go out of fashion.
- III. As lettering is, or should be, part of the architectural detail of a building, it should, of course, be in harmony with its general character. A building should be considered as a site for lettering in much the same way as a plot of ground is a site for a building, and should in the same way constitute both a control and an inspiration. To ignore architectural style, scale, openings and mouldings is as impractical as for an architect to ignore the peculiarities of his plot of ground, and the result in both cases is likely to be unfortunate.

This point should not present difficulty in the case of unspoiled buildings of distinct historic (e.g. Georgian) style, where the lead of tradition is so strong. The lettering here must be, without question, in shape, size

and position subservient to the period character of the whole. Nor should there be difficulty in the case of new buildings, as provision is now usually made by architects for lettering space. The problem becomes acute in the case of premises which are used for quite other than their intended purposes. To take extreme cases, a deserted chapel may become a warehouse, or a solid Georgian house, left isolated among a litter of small commercial undertakings or mean dwellings, may be "extended" and become a showroom for a builders' merchant. What is "suitable" lettering for such premises?

- IV. Lettering, as part of a building, should bear some relation to the street scene as a whole. Again, there should be no difficulty in achieving this in newly developed or rebuilt areas so long as architects provide proper fascia space, for within that limit sufficient variation in style, material and colour can still be obtained to meet the legitimate demands of trade. It is in the haphazard conversion of buildings from residential to commercial use, both in town and country, that the unity of the street scene is most rudely broken, and here the responsibility lies in the first place with the designer of the new shop-fronts. The most beautiful lettering could not redeem the appearance of a street spoiled by the extravagantly vulgar shop-fronts (designed without any regard to the buildings of which they are to form a part) which became common before the last war. Too often, however, an untasteful conversion of a shop-front is made the worse by the use of hideous lettering.

The question of this sporadic commercial development is nowhere more urgent than in our country towns, many of whose streets can still show long frontages of well-built and unspoiled 18th or early 19th century houses. It should be remembered that, compared with city conditions, the absence here of dense traffic, tram and trolley-bus wires, and street furniture generally, allows the total effect of the street elevation in country towns to be seen at a glance and even small changes are more obvious. The preservation of the architectural dignity and unity of such frontages is of enormous

commercial as well as æsthetic value, could the trading community only be persuaded of it, and to attempt to attract custom there by recourse to large chromium-plated lettering and winking neon signs is to destroy the wholeness which is the street's greatest charm and therefore its most valuable asset. It is to begin killing the goose which lays the golden egg. The use of varied colour for walls, railings and fascias, good lettering, and perhaps some well-designed hanging signs, will give all the differentiation and brightness needed by the shop-keepers, while the careful proportion and the unity of the street scene will be unimpaired.

In the tightly packed shopping districts of industrial towns the street scene is usually now quite chaotic, earlier buildings having been replaced piecemeal without any regard to continuity of elevation or architectural style. It is small wonder that against such a background and the noisy restlessness of congested traffic, each shop-keeper attempts to call attention to his premises by writing his name hugely over the whole street elevation, mouldings, balconies and even windows being ignored. In practice, this attempt fails, because so many make it. The screaming announcements follow each other so closely that none can be "heard" and the only buildings which really stand out in such a street are those which like the banks and some public-houses are content to keep their careful, efficient lettering moderate in size and their whole street elevation "quiet."

There is obviously a need for shop-keepers constantly to attract the attention of potential customers, but this is best achieved by changing shop-window displays and changing interior advertisement schemes. Here all the extravagances of "display types," the ingenuity of interior decorators and the imagination of window dressers can combine to produce the desired novelty, while the outside of the premises remains unspoiled. It is hoped that as this point becomes more generally accepted the striving after bigness and sensationalism in lettering on buildings will gradually disappear. Then much money will be saved and our streets as a whole will recover a measure of dignity and quietness.



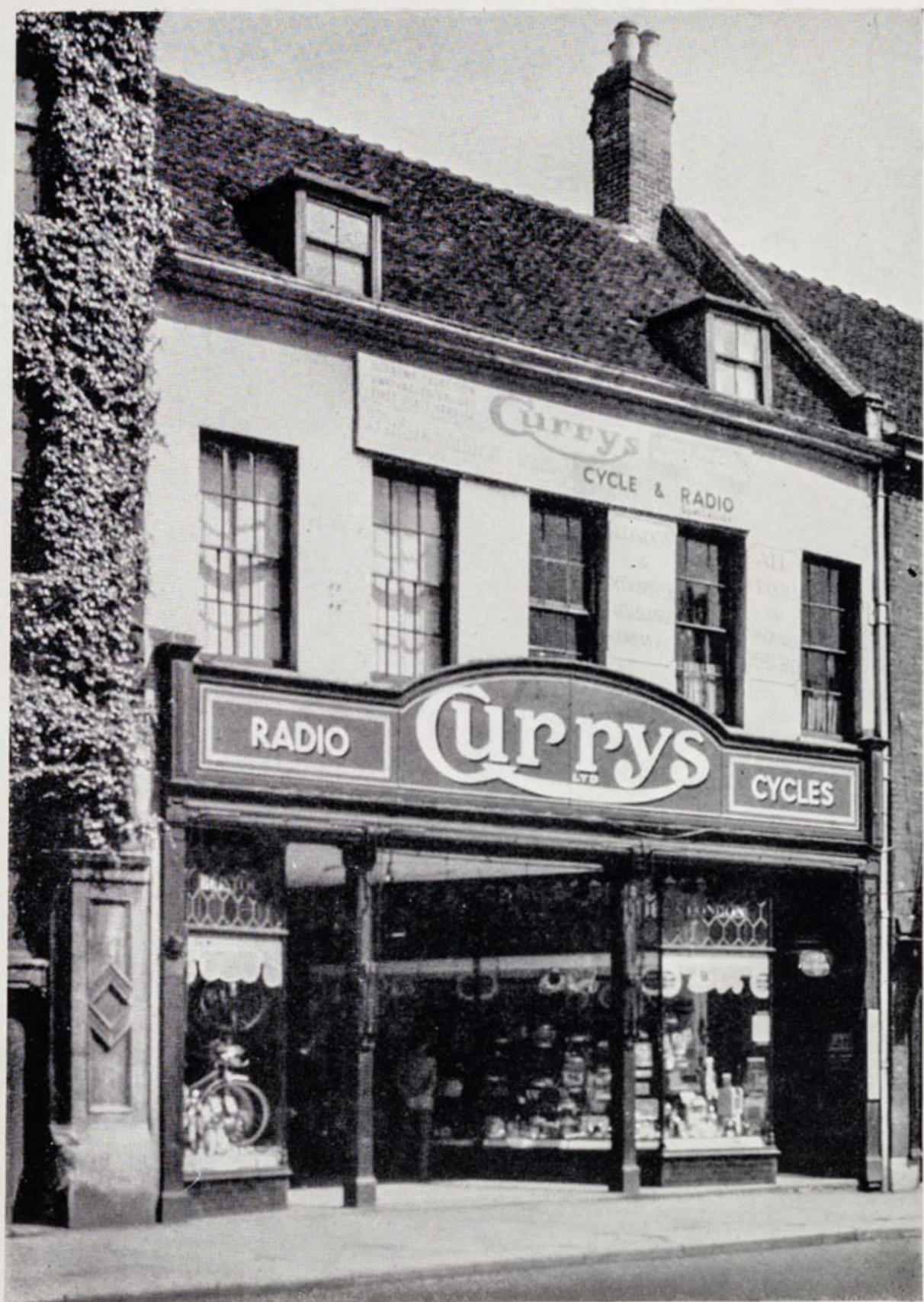
Two signs—one simple, one elaborate—but each of them characterised by good clear lettering.



A good Georgian building poorly adapted to commercial use. There is little to be said for the lettering of either of the fascias.



By contrast, this Regency building has been adapted for use as an office without damage to its architectural quality. The gold lettering is nicely related in size and in position to the building of which it is the embellishment.



Obviously this was once an attractive Georgian house, and it could have been converted into an attractive shop. Unfortunately a different course was taken. The lettering, too, is crude and unworthy.



Here is a shop-front which improves rather than spoils the appearance of the building into which it has been introduced, and of which the lettering is beyond criticism.



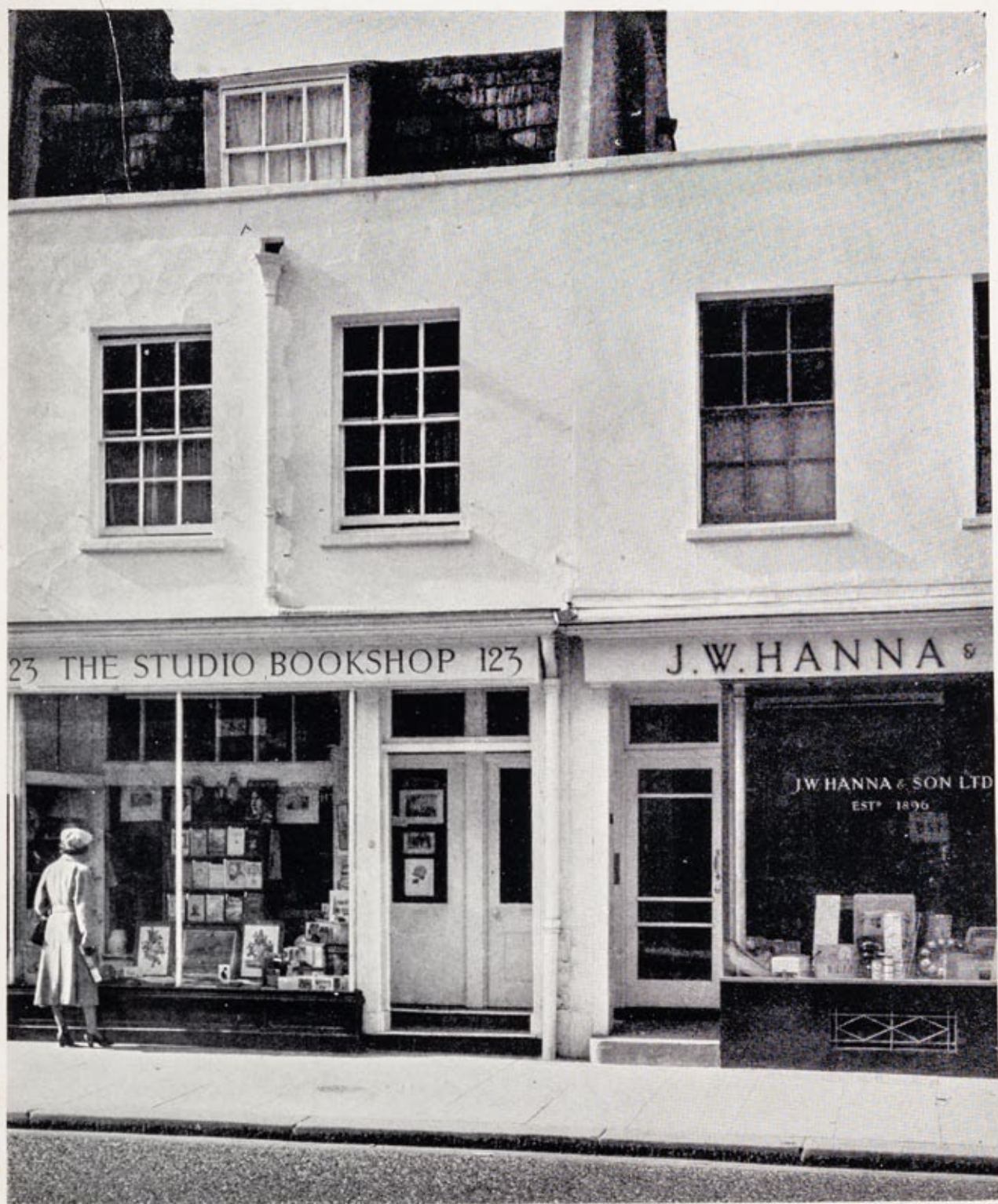
An example of crude and over-emphatic lettering. Both Melias and his neighbour evidently regard the upper part of the building as nothing more than a background for shop-signs.



Here the design of the shop-front is quite good and the lettering of the fascia satisfactory. But both are rendered insignificant by the use of the wall surface above as an advertisement hoarding, in complete disregard of the architectural character of the building and of its relation to the building on either side.



This fascia aims at being smart (like the shoes) but only succeeds in being rather vulgarly showy. The fascia-board is too deep : it is out of proportion with the shop-windows below and obscures the lower half of the first-floor windows which peer uncomfortably over its upper edge. And as if one out-size 'England's' obscuring one pair of windows was not enough, the process is repeated above.



These shop-fronts, by contrast, are simple and pleasing ; and provide examples of excellent lettering.



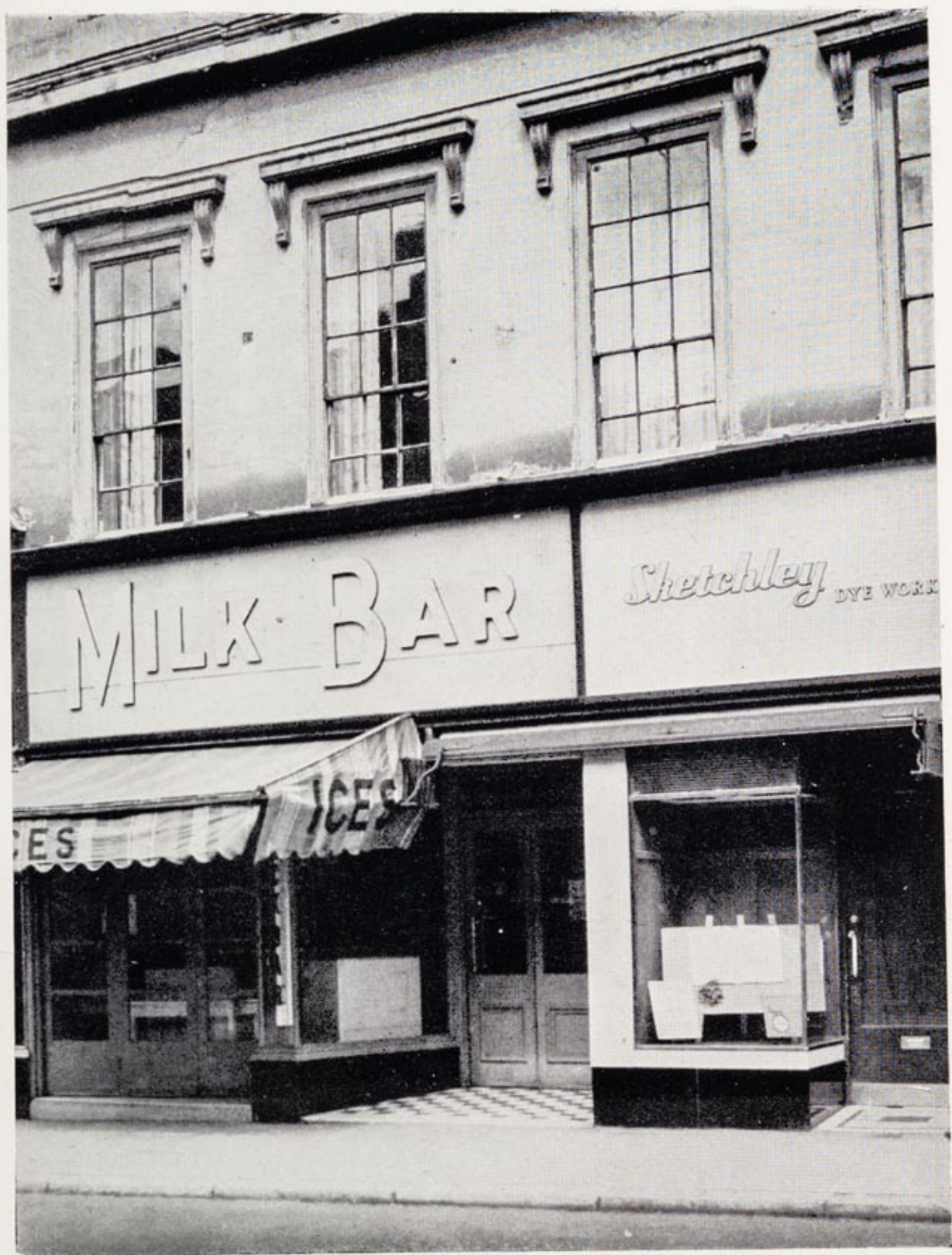
A deplorable exercise in a neo-Tudor manner, which weak, shambling lettering makes no attempt to redeem.



An austere "functional" modern building, with clear and forceful lettering. The size of the letters is to be justified by the fact that the building stands in an open space and not in a narrow street.



The lettering of Halford's fascia is excellent—much better than that of the sun-blind. But the fascia-board itself has no architectural relationship to the building : it is stuck on like a postage stamp. Stanton's shop-front is of better design, but with a little ingenuity it should have been possible to avoid encroaching on the first-floor windows. And the lettering is scarcely in keeping with the building above.



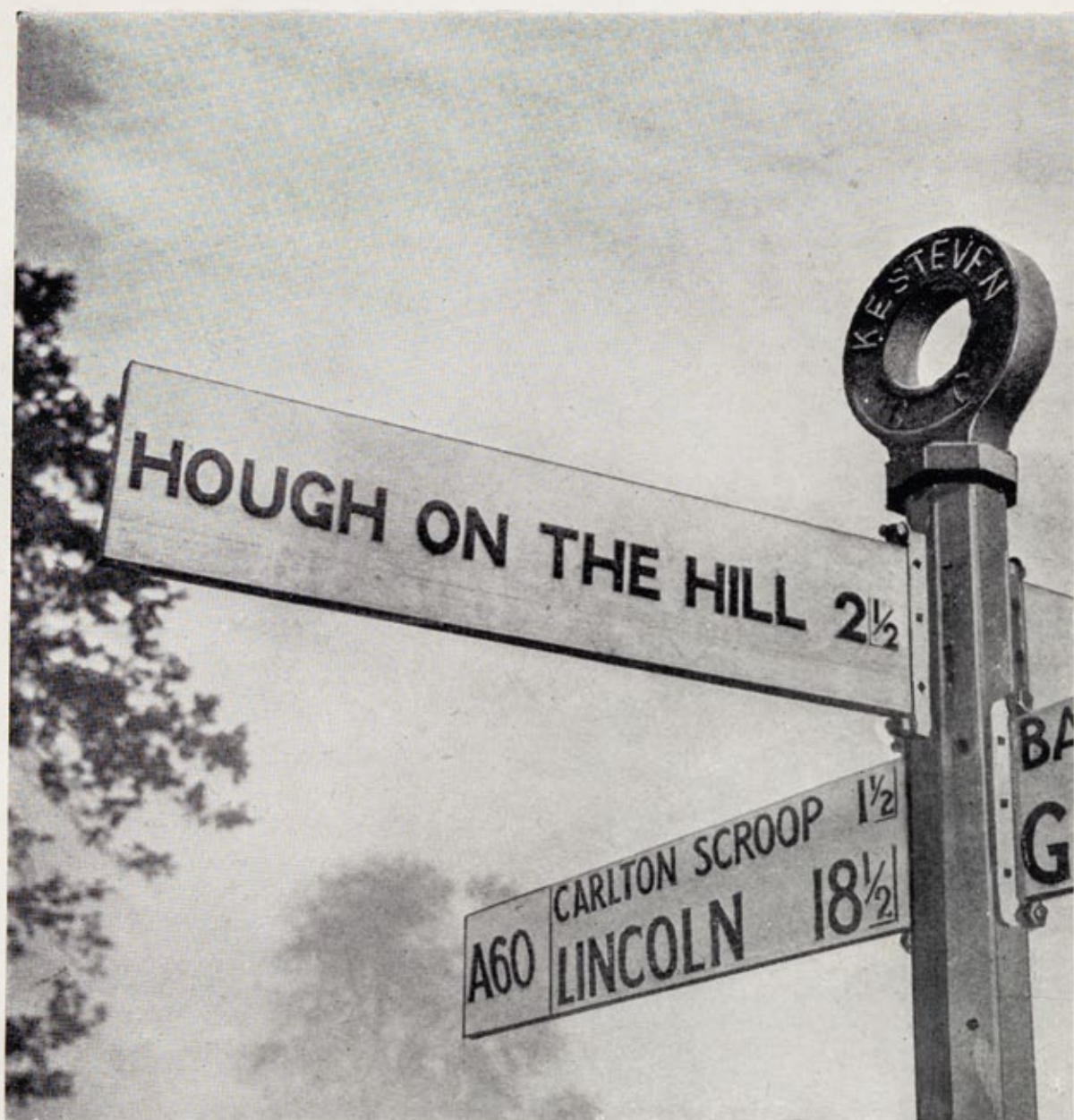
A pair of fascias each of which shows up the faults of the other—MILK BAR is too bold and *Sketchley* too weak ; one is too large for the space provided, the other too small. Both boards are again too deep and encroach on the first-floor windows.



The lettering of the board here fails of its proper purpose viz. to convey a "message." The name of the shop-keeper is difficult to read and of her business there is no indication.



Mr. New, on the other hand, states all that he has to say—and all that he needs to say, in good clear lettering on a board nicely proportioned to the space available above the door.



And lastly an example of that familiar road-side feature, the sign-post—with clear bold lettering, apt for its purpose.

Letter Forms

The letter forms which should normally be used on buildings will be some variation of the Roman capitals to

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which we in this country are now completely accustomed and which therefore are most immediately recognisable. "Small" or lower-case letters if well designed are sometimes used with great success, but on the whole they are more suitable for massing on interior commemorative or memorial tablets.

Among the forms to be avoided are :—

(i) Gothic (or "Early English") alphabets, because the capitals are ornate and unfamiliar while the lower-case

Tennant and Co.

letters consist so largely of a series of close vertical lines that they cannot be read at our present speed of travel.

(ii) Those in which the essential letter shapes are lost, so

D.O. BEARSTEAD

that one can be confused with another.

(iii) Enlargements of illegible personal signatures. These may be engaging if used for trademarks, magazine advertisements, posters or shop-window displays, but are out of place on fascias.

Good Alphabets

(i) Will keep the essential letter-forms clear, whatever their other differences.

(ii) Will show consistency of treatment in recurring details such as serifs, the loops of B, P, R, the tails of K, R, etc.

(iii) Will possess vitality and not be trimmed into lifeless exactness, most especially if the method of making them is a direct one (like stone cutting or signwriting).

(iv) Will not be so elongated that they can be read only



at the instant of passing directly in front of them, or so broad in the down-stroke that the letters appear as a series of

B. H a m m o n d

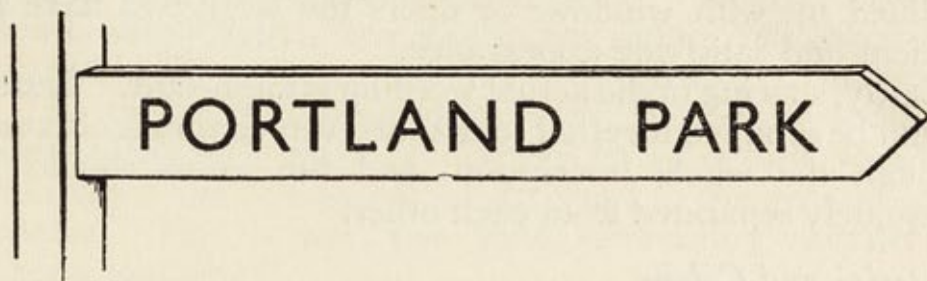
unconnected blobs. The type called "Elongated Roman", which has proved so successful for interior work, exhibition display, or printed advertisements, is an example of a form unsuited to outdoor use.

(v) Will be "good" in relation to the medium in which they will be carried out. To take some obvious examples :

(a) Flourished letters are unsuitable for building up in metal with deep returns (and the cost would be prohibitive) but could be excellent if signwritten in gold on the dark painted fascia of a country inn. The natural strokes of the brush would give an appropriate individuality and liveliness.

(b) A good sans-serif letter is probably the best for directional street signs, or for fascia lettering built up in

metal etc. to carry neon lighting, but it would be a poor choice for an inscription cut in stone on a Civic Centre.



The chisel so naturally and sensitively makes the serif forms that without them incised letters look hard and lifeless.

(c) Letters showing a great difference between thick and thin strokes, or with long tapering serifs, can be reasonably used for painted work, but not if they are to be cut out of wood with deep returns, or to be cast in metal.

Size and Position

It is clear that much of the disfigurement caused by lettered signs is due to their excessive size. It will be found that on a fascia of normal depth and height above ground and with a reasonable contrast between them and their background, 6" letters will be easily seen from across the road. On very deep fascias or in a wide street, letters of up to 12" may be more appropriate. Any greater size than this can only be justified on, say, the long frontages of factories which are seen at considerable distance from rail or road. As Percy D. Smith has pointed out,* we must be practical in our choice of size: not too small, bearing in mind the speed at which we move, and not too big, remembering that our natural area of vision restricts what we can see at a glance.

But size is obviously related to position. The largest lettering on the largest building is still not easily seen if the street is narrow (since one cannot get sufficiently far away from it), or if the placing is too high. Lettering should not be placed in a position which disregards the architectural features of the building, e.g. window openings. This not only effaces the architectural design, but the unrelated lines running behind and between letters will detract from their legibility. Letters of moderate size surrounded by a considerable area of plain background on a fascia will be far

* *Lettering in Association with Architecture : Lettering of Today*, p. 91.

more "telling" than larger ones completely filling the available space. Further, if the limits of that lettering can be lined up with windows or doors the work will have an efficient and satisfying appearance.

Lastly, spacing of the actual wording is important. Letters should be grouped together so that an even texture is obtained through the whole inscription, and the words should be adequately separated from each other.

Material and Colour

The material for letters should be carefully considered in relation to the atmosphere of the work as a whole.

The most enduring letters are those incised in stone and these should be reserved for public buildings where dignity and permanence are of first importance. Cast bronze is a material which always carries an air of solidity and style and letters made from it are most successful in a near-classical design. Their somewhat grave effect is occasionally lightened by using a filling of coloured ceramic enamel. Letters can also be cut from sheet metals and given a variety of finishes; or be built up from metal, with or without a coloured finish, but it should be noted that there are probably more examples of vulgar lettering carried out in this method than in any other.

Some of the most satisfactory letters for ordinary shop fascias, schools, garages, etc., are those made from hardwood, hardboard or laminated plastics, and given various weather-proof covering. They can be gay without looking cheap, are very durable, need little maintenance, and can be obtained in a great variety of styles, colours and sizes.

Painted fascias and boards give perhaps a greater opportunity for a flexible individual treatment than any other kind. Painting is, of course, the traditional method of naming shops and houses and should be used wherever possible to preserve the harmony of period buildings. The few Georgian shop-fronts and the many Georgian houses which remain should be treated in this way, and a few opportunities will occur to use the charming 18th century italic letter-forms with their elegant flourishes. Such opportunities should not be missed.

It is remarkable how a good, rich-coloured board lettered in gold has an invaluable quality of brightness which will

hold its own among fascias using more "modern" methods. It is noticeable, too, how much more satisfactory letters are if painted in light colour on a dark ground rather than the reverse.

The colour of the painted fascias should, of course, be harmonised with that of the whole building and, where the building is one of a group, have regard to the general colour scheme. This is no more than elementary architectural "good manners".

Why not Take Advice?

The Georgian Group is concerned not only to keep standing, but also to keep unspoiled, the best of the Georgian buildings which remain to us, and to improve wherever possible the general quality of the street scene which provides the setting for many of them. It is urgently necessary that the growing concern for the right planning of our towns and for the preservation of Georgian buildings should be accompanied by a greater attention to the quality of the lettering on buildings. There is already the negative control of the Regulations issued under the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947, which limit the over-all size of advertisements and give power to prohibit any signs considered to be detrimental to local amenities. But positive information and advice is often needed. There are several firms which specialise in the production of good lettering, from whom expert advice and work of quality can be obtained. County Planning Officers and City Architects are usually most willing to be consulted. If advice cannot be obtained locally, the Georgian Group can be applied to. It is in the interests of the whole community that more attention should be paid to the quality and scale of lettering and that expert advice should, where necessary, be taken.

This Pamphlet has been written for the Georgian Group by MARJORIE DIXON. The photographs were specially taken for, and are copyright by, the Georgian Group.

The Lettering Centre

The Lettering Centre undertakes the design and production of the finest lettering for architectural and monumental purposes and for exhibitions, displays and industrial design. The studios produce lettering in cast, moulded, pierced, solid inlaid, applied, engraved, carved and painted materials including the full range of metals, plastics, woods etc.

The Lettering Centre incorporates the lettering departments of E. J. & A. T. Bradford Ltd. and Daymonds Ltd. The combined studios, under the direction of principals who are artists and master craftsmen, are staffed by a hundred skilled workers—experts in their various crafts—all of whom take their part in producing work of the very finest quality.

The work of the studios can be seen on many historic buildings including Buckingham Palace, St. James's Palace, St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, Houses of Parliament, cathedrals and municipal buildings, as well as the ordinary shop, office or factory. The fact that, at the time of printing this, commissions are actually in work for no less than 80% of the architects who are Royal Academicians is evidence that the efforts of the studios are appreciated by those who expect the best work. Readers are invited to apply for illustrated literature to The Lettering Centre 61, 62, 63 Borough Rd., London, S.E.1. Tel. HOP 2316 (5 lines)



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