House names, shop signs and social organization in Western European cities, 1500-1900

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In the cities of early modern Europe the houses and shops almost all had names and signs. There were red lions and golden suns; names of ships, trees and plants; figures of history and myth; every conceivable saint. The signs might be made of wood, plaster, stone or iron; leaning over the street or set into the facade. Many were too small to be noticed, while others grew to enormous proportions: one in London in 1718 was so heavy that its weight brought down the whole front of the house, killing four passers-by. Some signs had a name on them, while others were purely pictorial (see Figure 1).2

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2 In London the signs were apparently purely pictorial until at least the late seventeenth century: C. Phythin-Adams, 'Milk and soot. The changing vocabulary of a popular ritual in Stuart and Hanoverian London', in D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds), The Pursuit of Urban History (London, 1983), 84.
Fig. 1: ‘La gerbe d’or’ (The Golden Sheaf), rue Montmartre, Paris. Eighteenth century. (from P. Bailly, Vieilles enseignes de Paris en fer forgé, Paris, c. 1925)

The history of shop signs reaches back at least to Roman times. In northern Europe, however, the earliest traces seem to date from the thirteenth century, although it is possible that they were in use before then. By the sixteenth century both signs and names seem to have been numerous all over Europe, and the evidence suggests that their numbers continued to increase in most cities until the eighteenth century. By then the signs were such a part of urban life that the English versifier Julius Gay could warn:

When the swinging signs your ears offend
With creaking noise, then rainy floods impend.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the signs were, as one French author assured his readers, ‘an institution which today is falling into disuse.’ The later 1800s witnessed a rush of publications about the signs,

3 Adolphe Berty found two in Paris from 1206 and 1212. He argued that they were probably more numerous than the records suggest, but he adds that there was no doubt less need for them in the less crowded outer areas than in the city centres: this corresponds to their thirteenth-century distribution: ‘Les enseignes de Paris avant la XVIIIe siècle’, Revue archéologique, 12 (1855), 1, 2. In a later article studying central Paris in detail, ‘Trois Bots de la Cité’, Revue archéologique, n.s., 1 & 2 (1860), 197-215, 366-90, the earliest sign found by Berty dates from the 1340s and the house-lists for this part of Paris in 1280 do not contain any. See also Grand-Carteret, L’Enseigne, 131; A. Berger, ‘Les enseignes de Paris’, Journal des débats, 24/25 May and 1 June 1858 (24/25 May); Fournier, Histoire des enseignes de Paris, 110.


most inspired by a nostalgic awareness that these picturesque features of the city would soon be gone. 'London is so rapidly changing its aspect,' observed Jacob Larwood and John Hotten in their study of London signs in 1866, 'that ten years hence many of the particulars here gathered could no longer be collected.' By the end of the nineteenth century most of the old signs and names had indeed vanished, and a study of 1913 identified about a hundred in the whole of Paris.\(^6\) Today very few survive, though there are company logos and neon signs, while in the suburbs the houses sometimes have names, but of course no signs. Where the old-style signs do survive it is principally on pubs, restaurants and cafés.

The meagre historical literature on the subject of shop signs offers two main explanations for their existence. For some authors they were primarily a pre-modern form of advertising, designed to attract customers by their prominence or their humour. Alternatively, they are viewed as the precursors of house numbering, a system by which semi-literate people found particular shops, and made their way through the maze of city lanes. 'The original purpose of the signboard,' wrote Sir Ambrose Heal in 1947, 'was, of course, for the identification of a business at a time when few people were capable of reading a shopkeeper's name.'\(^7\) The disappearance of the signs (and presumably of the names) is attributed either to laws against them or to the appearance of house numbers, which supposedly made them superfluous. My purpose is to suggest that the history of shop signs and house names is rather more complex. Close study of how they were chosen and used, and of how they evolved, suggests a role related to the changing character of life in the Western European city between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The functions of signs

There is undeniable evidence, particularly in the eighteenth century, that shop signs and names had a commercial function. We find them on letterheads, in advertisements, and on tradesmen's cards. They were indeed used to indicate addresses where we would use numbers: 'at ... the Red Ball and Acorn, over against the Globe Tavern, in Queen Street, Cheapside, near the Three Crowns.'\(^9\) There is also evidence that in big cities signs helped people to find their way. John Gay advised the traveller

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6 Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, vii.
7 Fegdal, Vieilles enseignes, 12, 177, 174.
8 Heal, Signboards, 2; Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, v; Baudin, L'Enseigne, 11.
9 Essentially the same explanations are given by Y.-D. Papin, 'L'enseigne au XVIIIe siècle', in G. Gomez y Caceres and M. Ange de Pierredon (eds), Les Décors des boutiques parisiennes (Paris, 1987). Grand-Carteret offers both explanations, but suggests that signs first emerged as a form of decoration motivated by the desire to make the houses distinctive, first employed by nobles with their coats of arms, later imitated by artisans and merchants: L'Enseigne, 31-2.
10 Trivia, quoted in Lane.
11 A point also made by the Bibliographical Society.
12 Archives Nationales, nos. 2, 3, 7. Hence the otherwise stated. Thirsk.
13 Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 17.
14 S5693, f. 63v. S568.
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If drawn by business to a street unknown,
Let the sworn Porter point thee through the town;
Be sure observe the Signs, for Signs remain
Like faithful Landmarks to the walking Train.10

The names and signs obviously were very helpful in a large city like London, where very often the street names were not well marked.

Yet the suggestion that signs and names were either for finding one’s way or for advertising is not entirely satisfactory. Many of them were not on shops at all but on residential buildings, so cannot have been for advertising.11 Many houses had the same name, even in the one street, so could easily be confused. In the late eighteenth century the rue des Postes in Paris contained three houses called ‘l’Image Notre Dame’ (the Image of Our Lady), a few doors apart.12 Very often, furthermore, the signs were not clearly visible, some quite small, others set flat against the houses, or else forming part of the iron grille over the door (see Figure 2).

Many houses took their names from statues of saints set into niches in the facade, or from a particular carving nestling amid other decorations. In a narrow street they were not obvious until the passer-by was directly opposite and this was neither good advertising, nor very helpful as a landmark.

In addition, the name of the house was not always obvious from the motif on the sign. An English sign bearing a disembodied leg with a star next to it might be the ‘Leg and Star’; yet it might also be ‘The Garter’, for these were the insignia of the order of the Garter.13 In 1717 a house in the rue de l’Oursine in Paris was called ‘Saint Michel’, but forty years later it was known as ‘la Victoire’ (Victory): the sign was clearly a picture of the archangel defeating the demon, but it had been reinterpreted and given a new name.14 ‘La grâce de Dieu’ was a wineshop in the rue Montmartre in Paris, but the name is difficult to guess from the sign (see Figure 3).

Kings too were notoriously difficult to pick, unless they had some widely recognized emblem. The late eighteenth-century Parisian commentator Louis-Sébastien Mercier playfully describes an ignorant shopkeeper going through old signs and selecting one which, given the balance of power in Europe in the late eighteenth century, Mercier considered quite inappropri-

10 Trésor, quoted in Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 17.
12 Archives Nationales, Paris, S*1642, censure de Sainte Geneviève, c. 1766., rue des Postes nos. 2, 3, 7. Henceforth all manuscript references are to the Archives Nationales unless otherwise stated. The eight most popular names accounted for eighty-five of Adolphe Berty’s sample of 600 Paris house names: ‘Enseignes de Paris’, 5.
13 Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 19.
14 S*5693, f. 63v°. SS683, f. 153.
ate: ‘He examines them, picks out at random the portrait of the king of
Poland, carries it home, hangs it up and writes under it “Au Grand
Vainqueur” (the Great Conqueror).’

It is often assumed that the signs and names reflected the trade that was
accompanied beneath them, but in fact few did. The dyer James Savage
operated at ‘The Crown’ in the 1770s, and his neighbour and fellow
tradesman John Stockman at ‘The Sun’.16 ‘Le Paradis’ (Paradise), in the rue
Mouffetard in Paris, originally owned by a fruiterer, was subsequently
adopted by a soldier.17 Such incongruities aroused comment at the time:
‘What can be more inconsistent,’ complained The Spectator in 1711, ‘than to
see a bawd at the sign of the angel, or a tailor at the lion? . . . I have seen a
goat set up before the door of a perfumer, and the French King’s head at a

16 Heal, Signboards, 63.
17 S*1953 (1), f. 119.

18 Quoted in B. Lillywhite, The Adventurer, no. 9 (1938), 18.

sword cutler’s’.18 While some houses did have some
majority did not.

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sword cutler’s’. While some of the many saints who decorated French houses did have some connection with the trade of the occupant, the vast majority did not.

Certainly, there might be some other indication of a trade on the actual sign, even when the name did not convey one. Paris taverns invariably had grape leaves or bunches of grapes on their sign. Even this was not a guarantee, however, for the Musée Carnavalet in Paris holds the sign of Filliol, an eighteenth-century locksmith whose sign is plentifully decorated both with vine leaves and with bunches of grapes! Most signs were not designed to enable potential customers to see at a glance what work was done at that address.

This is hardly surprising if we think about the size and social character of the ordinary early modern town. Most people did not need a sign to tell them where to find the butcher, baker, or candlestick maker! Only in certain trades were the signs obviously helpful to attract attention: for inns, especially, since a traveller or a thirsty wanderer in an unfamiliar part of town would look for a sign indicating where the immediate need could be

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18 Quoted in B. Lillywhite, London Signs (London, 1972), xvii. See the similar complaint in the Adventurer, no. 9 (1752), quoted in Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 22-3.
satisfied. This is no doubt part of the reason for their retention of signs up to the present day. For other trades, however, most of which had a primarily local clientele, there was no such requirement.

What, then, was the function of house names and shop signs? A vital clue is provided by *The Spectator* in 1711. It records an unusual sign in London:

Seeing a punch-bowl painted upon a sign near Charing Cross, and very curiously garnished, with a couple of angels hovering over it, and squeezing lemon into it, I had the curiosity to ask after the master of the house, and found... as I had guessed... that he was a Frenchman.  

The Huguenot community in London adopted distinctive images which the native English observer could identify. In fact shop signs varied widely from country to country. Protestant areas, obviously, adopted far fewer saints' names than Catholic ones. Certainly, the Mother-of-God brewery (*brasserie de la Mère de Dieu*) which occupied a large site in south-eastern Paris would not have been tolerated in most Protestant cities. There were also national symbols, such as Britannia in England and the *fleur de lys* in France. The bear was a symbol of the Swiss, and particularly of Berne. Closer examination reveals more subtle distinctions. Whereas domestic animals very commonly appear on English signs they are rare on Paris houses. Maritime terms were frequent in London, whereas a number of mid-seventeenth-century houses bore the same names as ships in the Commonwealth navy, whereas admirals, pearls and anchors rarely seemed to grace Paris shops. Individual cities, too, had their own particularities. Within France, lions proliferated in Lyon (a pun on the name of the city), pictures of Joan of Arc in Rouen, and Lorraine crosses in Nancy.

Not only did house signs and names vary by region, but they also changed over time. On the very eve of the French Revolution the powerful Paris abbey of Sainte Geneviève renewed its list of dues owed on property within its extensive jurisdiction. The scribe noted that the signs were of little use in identifying the properties, since 'several houses have the same sign, and... most of the owners have taken new signs, even the tenants can change them.'

The turnover of Paris shop signs in the late eighteenth century is also attested by the trade in second-hand signs, which could be readily purchased from the iron-merchants on the banks of the Seine. Property records in Paris tell the same story, for although some signs lasted a very long time, many were replaced when a house changed hands.

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21 For London see Lillywhite, *London Signs*, xvi, 3.
25 See Table 1. This even applied when the sign was engraved in stone on the facade: Berty, *Enseignes de Paris*, 3.
Because the signs and names were frequently renewed by successive owners and tenants, and even reinterpreted by later generations, they reflected changing times and attitudes. They provide rare access to the tastes, culture and mental world of early modern city dwellers — most often artisans and shopkeepers. Of course, at certain times the choice of names was limited by external factors: the transformation of many sixteenth-century English inns from ‘The Pope’s Head’ to ‘The Bishop’s Head’, and a century later the replacement of the ‘King’s Arms’ with the ‘Parliament’s Arms’, were obvious responses to political circumstances. So, too, was the removal of monarchical signs during the French Revolution. But fashion rather than expediency underlay the taste for Egyptian signs in Napoleonic Paris, during and after the Emperor’s Egyptian campaigns. A more profound change is the gradual abandonment of saints by London booksellers in the course of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In sixteenth-century Paris the appearance of names like ‘the Four Elements’ and ‘the Phoenix’ reflects the revived interest in classical mythology, and that of ‘l’Homme sauvage’ (the Savage) a popular awareness of recent voyages of discovery. Another significant change is the adoption of Britannia on London signs in the late seventeenth century, soon after her first appearance on English coins in the 1660s, a spontaneous reflection of a precocious and popularly felt national identity. London shop signs relating to royalty, too, appear to be contemporary with the development of absolute monarchy in Europe. According to Bryant Lillywhite, the earliest ones recorded were the ‘King of Sweden’ and probably the ‘King of Denmark’ in the first half of the seventeenth century. The ‘Fleur de lys’ began to be used by London booksellers at the same time. If Lillywhite’s list of London signs is accurate, the ‘King’s Arms’ became widespread after the accession of James I, and the ‘King and Queen’ sign was introduced after the Restoration in 1660. Foreign monarchs seem largely to have disappeared in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the notable exception of the King of Prussia who became popular during the Seven Years’ War as England’s principal ally on the Continent. Macaulay records that at this

26 Lillywhite, London Signs, xvi, 310.
29 Ornithes, Enseignes de Paris, 6, 8.
30 Lillywhite, London Signs, 73.
32 Lillywhite, London Signs, 307-10, 328. Nevertheless, a ‘King’s Head’ and a ‘King’s Arms’ are listed among the booksellers’ signs in the Short Title Catalogue, 2nd ed., vol. 3, 327.
time sign-painters were kept busy transforming Admiral Vernon into Frederick the Great.33

A somewhat parallel development took place in Paris, with the increasing number of references to royalty (see Table 1). In the Saint Marcel quarter, between the 1660s and the 1730s, the proportion of houses with names like ‘l'épée royale’ (royal sword), ‘Saint Louis’, or ‘la fleur de lys’ more than doubled. This presumably reflects the intense and quite deliberate monarchical propaganda of Louis XIV’s reign, and corresponds to the proliferation of royal images on innumerable everyday objects. This enthusiasm for

Table 1: The evolution of house names in the Faubourg Saint Marcel, Paris

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<td>58.6</td>
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<td>28.3</td>
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<td>119</td>
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1 4.5% if Saint Louis is included as a royal name.
2 10.7% if Saint Louis included.
3 10.1% if Saint Louis included.

Changes in shop

House names, shop

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solemn. Mercier précised
à la royale, shoes
the crowning poultry
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A parallel chart in my sample of Paris, in the proportion of religious ones becomes this is the transferred
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At the sign’.
the sign.34 At the
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Name of Jesus’. A
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Image Saint Louis
be sure what the sign
of Paris, was considered
which might equal

Another example, Saint Michel’ (before
picture with a magnificent
appearance in the
‘Brewery of the World’
been permitted in
in the second half
Montmartre adopted
the local clergy
century, however,
taken place along
referring to central
highly secular context.

References

34 Mercier, Tableau de Paris.
35 R. Chartier, Les origines du capitalisme.
36 S*1637, f. 480.
37 S*5693, f. 63v = S55683.
38 Larwood and Hotten, mid-seventeenth-century.
39 Angel). The sentiment of the eighteenth century is
with a sculpture of the
monarchy continued in the eighteenth century, but became less and less solemn. Mercier writes of the fashion, in the 1780s, for ‘beef à la royale, cakes à la royale, shoeshine boys à la royale;... one sees nothing but fleurs de lys crowning poultry, gloves, boots...”34 It is part, as Roger Chartier has demonstrated, of a progressive trivialization of monarchical symbols which deprived them of their formerly sacred character, in the process changing the French people’s mental image of their king.35

A parallel change in attitudes is reflected in the use of religious names in my sample of Paris houses (see Table 1). Between the 1660s and the 1730s the proportion of secular shop names actually decreases slightly, while religious ones become marginally more popular. An individual example of this is the transformation of ‘le mouton rouge’ (red sheep) into ‘le bon pasteur’ (the Good Shepherd), quite possibly with only a touching up of the sign.36 At the same time saints lose some of their appeal, apparently in favour of less personal symbols: Paradise, the Annunciation, perhaps ‘the Name of Jesus’. An individual example of this trend may be the transformation in the second decade of the eighteenth century of the house called ‘Image Saint Laurent et Sainte Geneviève’ into ‘La Providence’: we cannot be sure what the sign actually was, but Sainte Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris, was conventionally shown with loaves in her skirts, a depiction which might equally well represent Providence (Figure 4).

Another example, already mentioned, is the conversion of the ‘Image Saint Michel’ (before 1754) into ‘Victory’ (1754-74); presumably the same picture with a more abstract interpretation.37 More striking still is the appearance in the course of the eighteenth century of a name like the ‘Brewery of the Word Incarnate’. Such a designation was unlikely to have been permitted in the more sober, pious seventeenth century: indeed, when in the second half of the seventeenth century an innkeeper in the rue Montmartre adopted ‘la Tête Dieu’ (God’s Head) as his sign, protests by the local clergy led to its removal.38 In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, a trivialization of religious symbols appears to have taken place alongside that of royal insignia. The most sacred symbols, referring to central mysteries of the Christian faith, came to be used in a highly secular context.

Changes in shop signs and house names therefore reflect very profound

34 Mercier, Tableau de Paris, vol. 5, 147.
36 S*1637, f. 490r.
38 Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 279. The same feeling may have motivated the mid-seventeenth-century Geneva Consistory to order the removal of ‘A l’ange’ (the Angel). The sentiment lasted longer in this stronghold of Calvinism, for in the eighteenth century the Consistory ordered the replacement of a sign of the three kings with a sculpture of the kings of England, France and Prussia. Baudin, L’Enseigne, 36.
shifts in popular attitudes. The signs were an expression not only of individual tastes, but of a collective culture and identity: regional or ethnic; Protestant or Catholic, Reformation or Counter-Reformation; increasingly, in the English and French capitals in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a secular and national identity. Simultaneously, of course, they fostered certain attitudes, for the images on shop signs were a major visual source of information for children and for the scarcely literate. We should not be too hasty in concluding what people actually derived from shop signs, but they certainly could have learned the insignia of royal and sometimes noble families, the appearance of their own monarchs, and the symbols of particular saints. Shop signs may have helped form aesthetic values. But whatever their pedagogical function, they certainly contained much of the cultural information that the historian must glean laboriously but which people at the time picked up effortlessly from their social and physical environment. Collectively, they were a statement about the beliefs

House names and values seals and other markers that in the early century, they did. Adams has focused on identity and the most obvious symbols, some such as Leatherseelles, and many others. The sun appears as the sign for inns, occupational signs were obviously not just trade signs for locks. 'the white bell' is a building shop in Charing Cross.

Equally common is John Gresham's 'The Crown', the name shop, moved shop, personal touch, personal touch, the name shop, the name shop, suggested and is usually for a year, that of the period perhaps serve Cross Church from Robert Tiet, and apprentice.

39 H 3382, accounts
39 expenditure, B. L.
Leamington Spa.
40 Lillywhite, London.
41 S 1637, f. 484.
42 Bayney, Books.
43 Heal, Signboard.
44 Larwood and H.
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and values of the city's inhabitants. Like other sorts of symbols, such as seals and coats of arms, builders' marks, or the seignorial boundary markers that were maintained in parts of Paris until the late eighteenth century, they were forms of communication: part of what Charles Phythian-Adams has called 'an understood sphere of symbolic cross-referencing'.

Individually, the signs and names conveyed information about the identity and standing of the house owner, principal tenant or shopkeeper. The most obvious manifestation of this is the occasional use of occupational symbols, some taken directly from the arms of the trade guilds. The London Leathersellers' Company had three bucks passant regardant on their arms, and many London shops had signs bearing three bucks, stags or roebucks. The sun appeared on the arms of the London Distillers, and was a favourite sign for inns and brewers. In Paris it was on the arms of the jewellers. The occupational heraldry naturally went beyond the guild's arms, for there were obvious reasons for a goldsmith to have something gold on his shop sign, for locksmiths to display keys, or for a Paris hatter to call his house 'the white beaver'. In all these instances the symbols reflected the individual shopkeeper or artisan's personal identification with his or her guild or trade.

Equally common were personal symbols. When the London shoemaker John Gresham moved from York Street to Tavistock Street he took his sign, 'The Crown', with him, and many other tradesmen did the same when they moved shop. Other house owners modified existing signs, giving them a personal touch: hence John Cross, when he moved into 'The Sun', changed the name of the house to 'The Sun and Red Cross'. The London Spectator suggested another way in which double names such as this might arise: 'it is usual for a young tradesman, at his first setting up, to add to his own sign that of the master whom he served.' The continuity thus expressed perhaps served as a guarantee of quality. In his study of bookshops in Paul's Cross Churchyard in London, Peter Blayney traces the change of 'the Bell' from Robert Toy to his apprentice George Bishop, then to Bishop's kinsman and apprentice Thomas Adams, and subsequently to Adams' former ap-

41 S*1637. f. 484. The best hats were made from beaver fur.
42 Blayney, Bookshops, 22.
43 Heal, Signboards, 35. See also 11.
44 Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 471; Lillywhite, London Signs, xvi.
prentice Andrew Hebb. Here we see a poor person’s heraldry at work, a combining of elements which, to the connoisseur, would indicate the identity or the professional ancestry of the tradesman. Indeed, some symbols came directly from medieval heraldry: the castle and the portcullis; the arms of towns (‘la Ville de Beauvais’ and ‘la Ville d’Auxerre’ were among the signs in the Saint Marcel quarter of Paris); the fleur de lys itself; and the many heraldic animals.

Yet the signs did not display a purely occupational heraldry. There was also, very often, a family one. Just as official heraldic symbols often involved puns on the name or attributes of the bearer, so there were frequently puns and family references in the names given to houses. In Lyon a house bearing a statue of an angel and called ‘maison de l’Angélique’ belonged to one Nicolas de Lange (ange = angel). In Paris the winemongers ‘La Cloche’ (the Bell) belonged to a man named Cloche, while ‘La grande fontaine’ (the big fountain) was owned by a potter, Nicolas Fontaine. ‘L’Image Saint Louis’ became ‘Le Coq’ when purchased by the starchmaker Eustache Lecoq in 1759. A merchant named Pierre Le Grand called his shop ‘Au Czar’ (at the sign of the Tsar), and the sign bore a portrait of Peter the Great. Even more subtle was the name of the ‘Brace Tavern’ in London, kept by two brothers called Partridge! Some of these may even have been family signs, used wherever a family member resided.

Some house names indicated personal allegiances, as informed local residents were well aware. In the 1790s one parish priest in Paris, forced from office by the Revolution, was considered strongly suspect by the local revolutionary committee, in part because the grocery business he had established bore the sign ‘la Providence’. Other names suggested the provincial origins of the owner. There is no positive evidence that ‘la maison de Calais’, ‘le clos Saint Quentin’, ‘la Ville d’Auxerre’, or ‘la Ville de Beauvais’ were owned by families from those places, but all were common birthplaces of immigrants to Paris. We do know, however, that in 1814 the

45 Blayney, Bookshops, 49. Blayney also suggests that when John Williams chose the ‘Crown and Globe’ for his sign, he was making a direct allusion to two earlier shops bearing those names, owned by members of the Waterson family (p. 47). F. Teynac, P. Nolot and L.-D. Vivien, Wallpaper. A History (London, 1982; first published Paris, 1981), 38, cites a mid-eighteenth-century law case over a sign used by the pupil of a craftsman, despite the fact that the master’s widow had taken over the shop: she sued, and lost!
46 S1’1637, f. 529. S1’914, list of 1673.
48 Blayney, Bookshops, 45; Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 473; Heal, Signboards, 31; S1’1637, f. 490. For similar examples see Teynac et al., Wallpaper, 30; Fogdahl, Vieilles enseignes, 138; Grand-Carteret, L’Enseigne, 47.
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owner of ‘Notre Dame de Boulogne’ (Our Lady of Boulogne) had a son living in Boulogne. A great many of the names and symbols used were of direct personal or family significance.

The use of house and shop names to express the identity of the occupant is nowhere clearer than in the innumerable references to saints. Saints provided good images and familiar ones. They also provided protection, and people commonly chose their own patron saint, whose name they shared. When Gilles Regnault bought ‘le pied de biche’ (the Hind’s Foot) in 1715 he immediately changed the name to ‘Saint Gilles’ (possibly by amending the sign, for there was a hint in the story of Saint Giles). A house formerly called ‘le petit Saint Jean’ was known as ‘Saint Nicolas’ when it was owned by Nicolas Lepy, and other houses bearing images of Saint Francois, Saint Pierre, Saint Joseph and Saint Nicolas were owned by people with those names. Nor was this confined to male names: ‘l’image Sainte Catherine’ was owned by a woman named Catherine.31

Yet the signs and house names, like heraldic symbolism, might have more than individual significance. They might act as links between generations, between the namer of the house or the founder of a dynasty and that person’s descendants. This is exemplified by the arms of Albrecht Dürer, the painter, which bore a door. The sign outside his father’s workshop in late fifteenth-century Nuremberg had been an open door, an obvious pun on the family name, itself a translation into German of the name of the village the family had come from, Atjos, meaning ‘door’ in Hungarian.32 Ancestry and origin, family identity and shop sign could be intimately related.

We get a hint of a similar psychology in the retention of shop signs by descendants of patriarchal or matriarchal figures. In the rue Censier in Paris, houses dedicated to Saint Nicolas, Saint Louis, Saint Pierre, Saint Francois, and to Saint Catherine were all named by members of the Bouillerot family, and the signs were retained, in each case, for as long as the properties remained in the family. The ‘Saint Catherine’ house was owned by a matriarch who, surviving her husband by nearly thirty years, raised ten children and managed the family business until shortly before her death in 1713. The respect accorded her is reflected in the retention of the sign until at least 1789 when it was owned by her grand-daughter.33 The Prevost family behaved in the same way with their house, keeping the name ‘Saint Joseph’ from before 1638, when it was built by Joseph Prevost,

52 M. Brion, Dürer (London, 1960), 16.
53 S*1641, rue Censier, no. 26.
until at least the French Revolution, when it was owned by a descendant in the female line. By contrast, the ‘Image Saint Louis’ retained its name only until it left the family in 1759.

A further illustration of the sometimes intimate connection between family and name comes from a Lyon house called ‘à l’envie du pot’ (the sought-after pot). The sign was in this case a stone carving portraying a man holding a large pot and kneeling in front of a second man dressed in a turban. The family of potters who owned the house for over 150 years claimed in the late nineteenth century that the sign had its origin in an adventure which the founder of the dynasty had when he sailed from Marseilles with a cargo of pots. The ship was seized by the Moors, and the potter, to save his wares, offered a portion of them to the Moorish chieftain, who was so impressed both with this generosity and with the quality of the pots that he purchased the cargo and gave the merchant safe passage home. The sign, therefore, displays the merchant offering a gift to the Moorish leader. It is an unlikely story, but it demonstrates a sense of family continuity that was expressed in the sign adorning their house. Such an attachment to patrimony is often seen as a peasant characteristic, but the way that many urban families passed on their property, selling it only when an estate had to be divided among the heirs, is testimony to a similar mentality.

The use of signs and house names in this way is hardly surprising, of course, in societies in which heraldic symbols, publicly displayed, proclaimed upper-class identity and ancestry, in which livery was an everyday sight in the streets, and where coats of arms appeared on coaches, on church windows and chapels. Noble town houses bore the arms of their owners, though tended to be known by the family names — Hôtel Harcourt or Palazzo Strozzi — rather than taken directly from the image. Yet this use of symbols was not confined to the great noble families: humbler lineages, too, placed their mark on the urban landscape.

**Signs and their audience**

But the full meaning of any sign lies not only in the intention of its creator but also in its interpretation by others. House signs are no exception. If naming a house was a statement of personal or family identity, it was also

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54 S*1637, f. 561. S*1668, f. 551.

55 S*1664, f. 92 and S*1641, rue Censier, no. 16.

56 Grand-Carteret, L’Enseigne, 152.


58 D. Garrioch, *Seventeenth-century Neighbours in the Seve...*
a public statement destined for a particular audience and within a defined context. Those in the know found the heraldry of shop signs easy reading. Sometimes the full significance of the sign was most accessible to members of the same guild, who through it could identify the tradesman’s professional background. More commonly the principal public for the signs and names was a local one; though it is true that trade and locality often reinforced each other. But even where this was not the case, most people identified closely with the neighbourhood in which they lived, even in cities as large as Paris or London. All those well established in the quarter and plugged into its information networks would quickly learn all about any new neighbour.³⁸

In this social context, the signs and names conveyed more than simply information. Naming a house was a way of taking possession of it: it was a statement of power. House owners were important people within the local community. They were people of substance, and the sign proudly displayed on their door was a symbol of this status. It located them within the pecking order of the community. A great many apparently petty disputes between neighbours were ultimately about precedence, and symbols of status were jealously protected. This gave rise to particularly virulent fights involving principal tenants or shopkeepers, who often attempted to assert authority over other people living in the house.³⁹ The signs they chose were physical reminders of their claim to authority.

The house and shop signs, therefore, were comprehensible to those familiar with the local scene. At a much more humble social level, they played a similar role to coats of arms, seals, the keeping of liveried servants, the wearing of a sword or a plume, or the possession of a turret on one’s house (in Paris a prerogative of the nobility), all jealously guarded marks of rank. They reflect a world in which external signs not only indicated status but served to maintain it, and in which symbol and ritual were used to create and renew relationships of domination and subordination. House signs were part of the symbolic universe of early modern European society.

In some instances, inevitably, they were subverted. On occasion the neighbours took control of the house-name, using a local and often comic variant. In London there was a tradition of slang names: in the seventeenth century the ‘Blackmoorshead and Woolpack’ in Pimlico was locally known as the ‘Devil and Bag of Nails’, and ‘Bag of Nails’ became its name by the second half of the nineteenth century. The more common ‘Elephant and Castle’ was known as the ‘Pig and Tinderbox’, the ‘Hog in Armour’ as ‘the

³⁹ Garrioch, Neighbourhood and Community, 33-7.
Pig in Misery’. This occasionally happened in France too. The ‘Hôtel de Valois’ in Caen was popular but unhumorously known as ‘le logis du Grand Cheval’ (House of the Great Horse), from the sculpture of the Apocalypse on the facade. Two adjoining houses in the rue Moufettard were locally known as ‘la grande maison’ and ‘la petite maison’, although their official signs were ‘la Grâce de Dieu’ (the Grace of God) and ‘la Croix d’Or’ (the Golden Cross).

As these examples suggest, within a local community the signs also functioned to distinguish insiders from outsiders. To someone who had grown up in the vicinity, old signs were familiar faces, reminders of the people who had lived behind them. Newer ones told of new arrivals; they were landmarks of local history. They were also, for the locals, significant topographical landmarks, not for finding one’s way, but to structure and describe the urban environment. Witnesses asked to explain where a fight between the Paris watch and a group of musketeers had taken place in 1752 stated that scuffling had broken out in front of ‘le Tambour Royal’ (the Royal Drum) and had moved along the street past ‘la Boule Blanche’ (the White Ball) to the house of a furniture-maker at ‘La Toison d’Or’ (the Golden Fleece). A ready grasp of these landmarks — particularly if the name was not written on the sign — marked off those who belonged from those who did not. So too, even more conspicuously, did use of the local or slang name, particularly when referring to pubs, the archetypal male community establishments.

The functions performed by shop signs were therefore multiple. They were sometimes used for advertising, and in certain instances enabled people to find their way around the city. But for someone familiar with the quarter they were part of the local topography, essential landmarks as much sensed as seen. At the same time, shop signs and house names spoke of the background, the personality, and the local standing of the shopkeeper or house owner, even of the family who possessed the property. In this sense they were impenetrable to the outsider, part of the common neighbourhood knowledge which defined and bound the local community.

The disappearance of the signs
Why, then, did shop signs largely disappear from most cities in the course of the nineteenth century? In so far as the largely anecdotal literature on them gives any explanation, their demise is attributed either to legislation

60 Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 22.
61 G. Vanel, Caen. Une grande ville aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles (Marseille, 1981; first published Caen, 1910), 211-12. I am indebted to John Cashmere for this reference.
63 Y10994, 21 September, 12 October 1752.
against them or to the advent of house numbering. In London those signs which hung across the street from one side to the other were banned under Charles II, and finally in 1762 an order was issued for the removal of all hanging signs. In Paris and Lyon the size of signs was restricted in the late seventeenth century, and in 1761, following a series of accidents in Paris, a much more fierce ordinance banned all signs which hung over the thoroughfare, obliging them to be placed against the houses. Other French cities followed the Paris example and in Geneva the hanging signs were banned in 1809, though some remained as late as 1850.

These laws coincided with criticism of what some writers saw as ‘gothic’ monstrosities. Mercier for example described them as ‘gross appendages’, and spoke approvingly of police efforts to ban overhanging signs and thus give the city ‘a polite, smooth, and cleanshaven visage’. The Lyon interdict of 1763 observed that ‘the reduction of signs to the same size, height, and projection above the street is to be desired for the decoration of the city’.

The signs destroyed the potential beauty of an orderly, symmetrical streetscape. Nevertheless, they stayed. Neither the legislation nor the tidy city campaigns of the eighteenth century — which in any case were directed against certain types of signs and not against signs as such — affected their popularity. In Paris they actually reached the peak of their extravagance around 1820, while in other cities they remained common until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Nor was it house numbers that put an end to their long career, although the attempts to introduce numbering mark a shift in government attitudes towards the signs. Efforts to number houses began in earnest in the eighteenth century. In France an ordinance of 1768 prescribed the numbering of houses in all the towns of the kingdom which were subject to the billeting of troops, but this did not include Paris. Only in 1779 was a first systematic attempt made to number the houses, on the initiative of the editor of a Paris address book, but it ran into opposition and was abandoned. In Troyes, Le Mans and Senlis, Saint Quentin, Evreux and Rouen similar attempts were made at roughly the same time. Geneva initiated a house numbering system in 1782, while the 1770 London Directory gives numbers for about three-quarters of the houses listed, although there had been hardly any numbers used in the 1765 Directory. In Paris, house numbering was to be introduced successfully only in 1791 by order of the National Assembly, at the same time as in Lyon, Marseille, and other towns, and henceforth it was

64 Heal, Signboards, 2.
66 Grand-Carteret, L’Enseigne, 13; Mercier, Tableau, vol. 1, 216.
68 Heal, Signboards, 3.
used for all official purposes. An improved method of numbering, along the lines of that used today, was initiated in 1805.69

But old habits died hard. In Paris it was left to the owners of the houses to repaint the numbers and by 1820 they were, according to one report, ‘so greatly damaged that they are illegible or even entirely effaced.’70 Only after 1847 did Parisians have the benefit of the much longer-lasting enamelled numbers, although even these were often set too high and remained largely invisible at night.71 By the time efficient numbering was introduced, the signs were already well on the decline. In London, the successful coexistence of signs with house numbers, until at least the middle of the nineteenth century, suggests that there too the numbers did not immediately supplant them.

Clearly, the argument that state action destroyed the signs will not do. However much the Paris police, the most precocious and perhaps the most powerful police force in Europe, may have wanted to introduce an effective numbering system, even they were unable to enforce it. In fact, the house-numbering attempt of 1779 was thwarted by some of the principal magistrates of the Paris Parlement, in particular the procurer général, one of the key members of the Assemblée de Police which co-ordinated the various police authorities of the French capital.72 Even the law-enforcement agencies were not unanimous about house numbering.

This is not to say that the state played no role in the evolution of shop signs. The widespread adoption of house numbers reflects the same impulse to regulate and control as the early laws making signs compulsory for certain trades. The motive for both was often quite explicitly pecuniary: in Geneva in the second half of the sixteenth century an annual tax was to be paid on each sign, and all wine merchants were required to display them. In Paris all houses owing feudal dues to the Crown in the late seventeenth century were required to have the sign engraved on the facade. Later, the revolutionary decree ordering houses to be numbered was intended to facilitate the collection of taxes.73 Until the second half of the eighteenth century European governments encouraged and even required the use of signs. After that they gradually shifted their attention to house numbering, a more efficient method of keeping track of taxable property in large cities. The state’s contribution to the decline of the signs was therefore indirect, in failing to require their maintenance rather than through direct action against them.

When the shop signs and the house names did gradually disappear from

69 Grand-Carteret, L’Enseigne, 58; Prontneau, Numérotages, 109-10.
70 Archives de Paris, VD4, no 4539, quoted in Prontneau, Numérotages, 111.
71 Ibid., 134-9.
72 Ibid., 84.
73 Baudin, L’Enseigne, 34; Berty, ‘Enseignes de Paris’, 3; Prontneau, Numérotages, 86-7.
Western European cities, generally some time during the second half of the nineteenth century, it was not because they were forcibly replaced but because they no longer served the purposes for which they had developed. Several major changes in urban social organization brought this about in Paris, and almost certainly more widely. One was a profound change in family identity and behaviour among the commercial middle classes. Secondly, the neighbourhood communities which provided the principal audience for the signs very largely disappeared from the major thoroughfares of the cities, and with them the symbols of rank and power that flourished within them. At the same time, a new commercial ethos appeared in the larger cities and rapidly spread to provincial centres.

The later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed the ascendency of new forms of individual and family identity among the urban middle classes. Unlike the average seventeenth- or eighteenth-century shopkeeper the nineteenth-century businessman expected his enterprise to go on after his death. In the early modern period a tradesman or -woman chose a personal sign, one which was not necessarily expected to survive. Particularly in an equal inheritance system like the Paris one, the chances were that the shop would have to be sold so that all the heirs could receive their share. But in any case, by that stage most of the sons and daughters would be established in their own trades and would not need (or under guild rules be allowed) another shop. There was little expectation of a son taking over the same sign, of any continuity in business name over the generations, although as we have seen it did happen. The successful nineteenth-century merchant, on the other hand, expected dynastic continuity and wanted the business bearing his name to survive after his death; a desire for individual immortality in this world that was frequently respected by his descendants. The family firm — in which one of the sons, preferably the eldest, replaced his father — had become an ideal, an emblem of family solidarity and honour. The Neuchâtel and Paris firm of Coulon et Compagnie, established in 1796 by Paul Coulon in partnership first with his son-in-law and nephew and subsequently with his own three sons as well, was described by its senior partner as 'a family society, based far less upon the interests of each of its individual members than upon those of the whole'. This did not prevent Coulon from retaining full control of the company finances and of major commercial decisions. As in this instance, sons were frequently taken, even forced, into business with their father. The example of Hippolyte Ganneton is not unusual: although he had begun a

74 For an example where several members of the same family set up in the same trade, yet without any expectation of continuity, see J.-L. Ménétra, A Journal of My Life, ed. D. Roche (New York, 1986).
75 L. Bergerson, Banquiers, négociants et manufacturiers parisiens du Directoire à l'Empire (Paris, 1975), 446-8.
successful career at the bar, after the death of his older brother his father did not wish to see the family tallow business disappear, and insisted that Hippolyte abandon the law and take over the shop.66

The early nineteenth century therefore witnessed the blossoming of firms with names like ‘T. Ryland & Son, Silver Platers’ or ‘Schavye fils’.77 It was family names such as these, which for the most part did not lend themselves to pictorial representation, that now came to occupy pride of place on the building and ultimately might replace the sign altogether. A scholarly chronicler of Paris observed in 1858 that ‘most of the ordinary signs [are] composed simply of a proper name’, and commented on the pride and pretension represented by ‘those long series of shop fronts that bear only the words BERAUD, DUMONT, DURAND, HENRION, CHARBONNEAU, etc.78 The London bookseller Longman provides a good individual example of the evolution that was taking place. From 1725 to 1775, Thomas Longman operated from the ‘Ship and Black Swan’ in Paternoster Row. After his death the business was carried on, presumably by another member of his family, into the nineteenth century. After 1859, however, the sign was abandoned and the business traded as Longman, Green & Co., though the ship has been retained as a logo.79 The Cadbury family provides another example. As an 1824 engraving of their shop in Birmingham shows, John Cadbury’s tea and coffee business had a sign. Yet in the engraving, which if it was made for the family is itself evidence of their pride in their collective achievement, it is the surname which dominates the facade. The adjoining shop, belonging to John’s father Richard, bears his name and initials but appears to have no sign at all.80

The replacement of shop signs by the male owner’s name also reflects the separation into male public and female private spheres in the nineteenth century. It was male achievement that was honoured in the family business name, for unlike most shop signs, which do not refer to male or female ownership, the surname privileged the male founder over the other members of his family, particularly the female ones, whose labour may also have gone into the business. As the century went on, of course, the likelihood of a middle-class wife or daughter participating in a successful business lessened, and the male business name more accurately reflected the division of roles within the family. At the same time, particularly in England, if the family could afford it the house name, now separate from

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76 A. Daumard, La Bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1849 (Paris, 1963), 289.
78 V. Fournel, Ce qu’on voit dans les rues de Paris (Paris, 1838), 289.
79 Heal, Signboards, 32.
80 Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes, 52-7. The engraving is reproduced on p. 54.
the sign, was removed to a suburban residence on which the wife’s existence now centred. The names chosen reflected the new function of the house: names like ‘Rose Villa’ or ‘the White Cottage’, like the names of seaside cottages today, express dreams of refuges where ‘the world’s cares and sorrows might cease, for all was humility, comfort and peace.’ Such names express a quite different relationship with the environment from the house names of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century cities.

A closely related change in urban social organization which contributed to the demise of the shop signs was the gradual transformation of the formerly ubiquitous, socially diverse neighbourhood communities into largely working-class communities confined mostly to the quieter, less commercial back streets of the city. This was a consequence principally of two developments: desertion by the urban elites, and the dramatic increase in city traffic. By the late eighteenth century the commercial middle classes were withdrawing from the neighbourhood community, developing wider ties at the expense of local ones. New forms of sociability (fremasonry, assemblies and reading circles) became more attractive than street spectacles or the local wineshop (although at first they were not necessarily mutually exclusive). In Paris, middle-class families who had once congregated in particular quarters or parishes now spread right across the city. Even those whom Adeline Daumard has termed the ‘bourgeoisie de quartier’ overwhelmingly married their sons and daughters into similar families in other quarters. All of these changes spelt a gradual shift in neighbourhood relations, a reduced commitment to parish and quarter on the part of a shopkeeper and professional elite. The process was further advanced in the early nineteenth century by the growing though never universal division of Paris and other cities into distinct working-class and well-to-do districts, as the local professional and merchant elites went to live in more desirable areas. These property owners and even principal tenants who were now increasingly withdrawing from the local community were, of course, the very people who had in the past most commonly chosen names and signs for the houses.

84 Garrioch, Neighbourhood, esp. ch. 5. For England, Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes.
At the same time, the main audience for the house signs and names, the now more socially homogeneous neighbourhood community, was slowly being driven off the streets by the increasing flow of human and vehicle traffic. This was in part a product of growing population, but was just as much a reflection of the administrative and commercial integration of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century city. The appearance of permanent street names was one symptom of the changing pattern of mobility, designed to enable outsiders to find their way through streets which the locals knew perfectly. Another was the growing number of maps: in the eighteenth century at least 132 maps of Paris were produced, fifty-one in the last two decades of the Old Regime, compared with only ten in the last quarter of the seventeenth century. An earlier sign of commercial integration was the appearance of trade directories: in London from 1677, for Paris a few years later. It was not only that there were more shops. They were of a new type, shops in the modern sense of the term with a specialized retail function and serving a city-wide clientele. This development was part of the 'consumer revolution' which by the late eighteenth century was sweeping many parts of Western Europe. These changes brought ever-increasing numbers of people into the city centre, as did the increasingly demanding administrative apparatus of the developing state. The successful introduction of public transport, earliest in Paris in 1828, testifies to the increase in movement around the city. By the late nineteenth century suburban development and increased residential segregation had made commuting commonplace for the middle classes and increasingly for the workers, and had created specialized commercial centres in most Western cities. The increased traffic in these areas profoundly affected the neighbourhood community, robbing it, in the major thoroughfares, of the natural theatre of life which the street where disputes, games

85 Roche, People of Paris, 13.
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and local gossip had always taken place under the windows and eyes of the entire neighbourhood. In the large and expanding cities of Western Europe, those who moved into any area which invited large numbers of outsiders had little sense of belonging to a neighbourhood community. The state of course played a major role in this process. Far more important than legislation in hastening the disappearance of the signs were the repeated efforts of municipal authorities to improve traffic flow by chasing away the street-sellers, by banning street games and work done in the middle of the thoroughfare.

A further change, also in part a consequence of population growth and of the development of a centralized state, was the disappearance of older forms of symbol and ritual as means of maintaining relationships of domination and subordination. In early modern European society symbols of rank and regular rituals such as processions served as repeated affirmations of power and of social identity. They confirmed the hierarchy that everyone was familiar with, even though there might be disputes over precedence and a minor reshuffling of places over time. However, as cities became places where people were less and less likely to know even the most prominent citizens, such rituals lost their power. The symbols of personal and family authority — coats of arms, a sword — no longer served their former purpose. Such outward signs belonged to a society in which everyone knew who was entitled to bear them, and in which pretension or fraudulent use of them was severely punished. In the nineteenth-century city power was not externalized in this personal way.

These far-reaching changes produced a new relationship between the city’s people and the urban environment of which shop signs had been so much a part. The signs too were affirmations of identity, and they gradually lost their symbolic significance and their power. The public for whose benefit they existed and which knew how to read them, whose physical and symbolic world they helped to shape, was gradually fading. This process was not a uniform one. It happened earliest in the city centre, which increasingly became the property of the whole urban population, and only later in less frequented areas. The best-known shop signs and names might remain landmarks, of course, notably those of fashionable shops, of the new department stores, and of famous pubs and restaurants. But these were


88 Garrioch, Neighbourhood, esp. ch. 8. See also the 1807 incident recorded by the daughter of a Birmingham manufacturer, who was harassed by two boys while on her way home from school; she took refuge in a ‘reputable-looking shop’, but did not know the shopkeeper. This was not only a reflection of growing middle-class concern about social promiscuity, but also of the absence of a neighbourhood community which might oversee and regulate such behaviour; cited in L. Davidoff and C. Hall, The architecture of public and private life. English middle-class society in a provincial town, 1780-1850’, in Fraser and Sutcliffe (eds), The Pursuit of Urban History, 343. See also Boulton, Neighbourhood, ch. 9, and Earle, Making, esp. 240-50.
known to everyone in the city and no longer had a specific neighbourhood function.

One more major change, the appearance of a new and powerful commercial ethos in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, determined the later evolution of the signs and names. The corporate spirit which had characterized urban trades throughout the early modern period gradually gave way to a more ambitious, competitive spirit symbolized by the growth of advertising. In London in the second half of the eighteenth century merchants began making extensive use of trade cards — large cards or even posters advertising a tradesman’s wares or skill. The authorities had earlier frowned on such practices, viewing them as breaches of professional ethics, in the same way as lawyers and doctors today are generally forbidden to advertise. As late as 1776 a Paris police ordinance renewed earlier bans on advertising, which now included shop signs. The Lyon ordinance of 1763 frowned on ‘the abuse by some merchants and artisans who attach to their houses signs of excessive cost and size, and who in order better to attract public attention, push them forward to vie one with the next.’ The same sentiments underlay the ban forbidding artisans in most of the Paris trades from having more than one retail outlet: the suspicion of competition was intense. This did not, however, prevent eighteenth-century French merchants from advertising in more subtle ways, putting the sign of their house on their wrapping paper or issuing metal tokens bearing their name and shop sign, just as London merchants had done a century earlier. Advertising in newspapers became more common and more sophisticated, and the French Revolution facilitated such practices. After it swept away the guilds, the way was open for shopkeepers to advertise freely.

This new spirit in itself was not inimical to the use of shop signs: on the contrary, it encouraged them. Most tradesmen used their signs on their trade cards and on the bills they sent to clients. Eighteenth-century merchants began to make their signs as large and as noticeable as possible, as the various French edicts prohibiting such practices testify. In Paris the investment in signs appears to have reached its height during the Restoration:

89 Heal uses these trade cards, along with bills, for the 2,000 entries in The Signboards of Old London Shops. Nearly all date from the second half of the eighteenth century. See also, for example, The Commercialization of fashion, 24-99, and on advertising, McKenzie, George Packwood and the commercialization of shoveling, in McKenzie, Brewer and Plumb, Birth of a Consumer Society, 146-94.
91 Grand-Carteret, L’Enseigne, 13.

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This is a practice that survives to this day, and is often ridiculed of the stage of economic development reached and spends a little money on the signs of the shop in the hopes of attracting more trade. In London this has been more common in the past. The city of London and the suburb of Westminster both have a long history of shop signs. They are often very large and eye-catching, and are in some cases of great antiquity.

At the very time, however, that the signs were becoming so important, making it clear that the shop signs must, as the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century signs and names, be legible and obvious.

The signs with traditional names, however, no longer had a use for such ways. The French Revolution abolished the guilds, and with them the signs that had been the symbols of the guilds. The new spirit of advertising and the desire to attract the attention of the passers-by led to the adoption of more modern forms of advertising, such as the use of glass windows and the display of goods. The French Revolution led to the abolition of the guilds and the signs that had been the symbols of the guilds. The new spirit of advertising and the desire to attract the attention of the passers-by led to the adoption of more modern forms of advertising, such as the use of glass windows and the display of goods. The French Revolution led to the abolition of the guilds and the signs that had been the symbols of the guilds. The new spirit of advertising and the desire to attract the attention of the passers-by led to the adoption of more modern forms of advertising, such as the use of glass windows and the display of goods.

93 Memousis, Historical Dictionary of the Early Years 1821 and 1822, 193.
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House names, shop signs and social organization

This is a practice that has grown into a mania at Paris, and is even a subject for the ridicule of the stage, since many a shopkeeper considers his sign as a primary matter, and spends a little capital in this one outfit. The city of London is remarkable for the beautiful signs that the traders put up. They always surpass those of Paris for size, quality of execution, and price. There are some which have cost as much as twenty, thirty, or fifty pounds sterling.

At the very time, therefore, when the neighbourhood and family functions of the signs were in decline, their commercial role became increasingly important, making them larger and more conspicuous. Yet this renewal of shop signs may, ironically, have hastened the disappearance of the house signs and names. As early as 1661 a royal edict in France had ordered that shop signs must, in case of dispute, have priority over house signs, and eighteenth- and especially nineteenth-century writers invariably associate the signs with trade. The advertising function of the signs and names gradually superseded their other uses. Eventually, when the shopkeepers no longer had a use for them, their removal left the houses bare-faced, mere numbers in the street.

It is again an irony that the main reason the shopkeepers did dispense with their signs, from the 1820s on, was the same one that had previously led them to adopt more elaborate ones. In the early years of the nineteenth century window displays, decorative shop fronts and subsequently plate-glass windows gradually began to surpass the signs as eye-catchers. Before the French Revolution, one work published in 1827 tells us, no ornamentation distinguished [the shops] one from the next, and their narrow windows, fitted with tiny panes, scarcely allowed the daylight to enter. The cafés, for example, today so brilliant, and whose Bohemian crystal panes allow the passers-by full liberty to discover all that they contain, had then for the most part almost nothing to distinguish them from what we today call a low tavern. The apothecaries, today pharmacists and chemists, the confectioners, did not then allow the passers-by to glimpse the sumptuous and symmetrical arrangement of their bottles and jars.

93 Momentos, Historical and Classical, of a Tour through part of France, Switzerland, and Italy in the Years 1821 and 1822 (London, 1824), quoted in Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 35.
94 Quoted in Todd, 'French advertising', 523. The translation is mine. Visitors to London in the early nineteenth century also commented on the signs: see Larwood and Hotten, Signboards, 31.
95 Grand-Carteret, L'Enseigne, 50; Savary des Bruslons, Dictionnaire universel, 'Enseigne'.
96 A. Caillot, Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des moeurs et usages des Français, 2 vols (Paris, 1827), vol. 2, 211-12, 213-20 on other improvements to shops, and 220-23 on gas lighting.
Many shops, the author continues, had installed elegant counters, carpets, mirrors, marbles, bronzes and painted panels. The shop fronts were decorated with shining iron-work, and the interiors were now enticingly lit, often with gas lamps. Other writers make similar observations. In Geneva, around 1824, the shops were 'remarkable by their lighting, their elegance, their commercial decoration, and the new type of shutters which, opening all the way down to street level, allow the merchandise to be displayed to best effect.' Such displays robbed the signs of the advertising function which in many places was by then their sole reason for existence. So too did the printed handbills and posters which became an integral part of the early nineteenth-century Western city and which were aimed at clients from further afield. The investment hitherto lavished on shop signs was transferred to posters, and long before Toulouse-Lautrec some of the best-known names in nineteenth-century French art — Meissonnier, Manet, Daumier, Raffet — applied their talents to advertising.

The only establishments which almost universally retained their distinctive names and signs were pubs, and some cafés and restaurants. Often on corners, they remained vital local landmarks, particularly for the male population, and thus retained a neighbourhood function. Other factors, however, were probably more important. One was simply that drinking places were heirs to an important historical tradition, in that taverns seem to have been among the first shops to adopt signs and in many places had actually been required to display them. Signs and names were therefore an indispensable part of their commercial identity. But most of all, these sorts of establishments increasingly, from at least the eighteenth century, served a casual clientele from outside the neighbourhood (although they obviously served the locals as well). Unlike those of a baker, their clients were likely to wander into the street, and would be attracted by the sign or the name, which immediately indicated the function of the premises. Unlike those looking for, say, a piano, they would not consult a directory or look for a particular address. In addition to their continuing role as local landmarks, therefore, the signs and names of pubs, restaurants and cafés retained a commercial function that those of other businesses had largely lost.

The timing of all these changes was not everywhere identical. In England the new consumerism came perhaps fifty years earlier than in France. In large cities and capitals the place and functions of the signs and names almost certainly evolved earlier than in provincial centres, and in London


98 Fegdal, *Vieilles enseignes*, 231.

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and Paris developments preceded those in other parts of Western Europe. Yet everywhere, the general, long-term pattern was broadly the same. In early modern cities composed of overlapping neighbourhood communities, shopkeepers and house owners used house signs to express their personal and family identity, as well as their occupational and devotional loyalties. But as the cities of Europe became more unified under the twin influences of the state and of capitalism, as the barriers between individual quarters and neighbourhoods broke down, as the mercantile age reached its zenith and social classes emerged in Western cities, the functions of the remaining shop signs gradually became almost exclusively commercial. When other forms of advertising replaced the signs, most of those that remained became generic symbols like the pawnbroker’s balls or the pork-butcher’s pig. These no longer expressed the history or the idiosyncracies of the proprietor; but were merely standard commercial emblems, without names or personality. An equal anonymity characterizes the other common form of sign today, the company logo.

The names, meanwhile, went their own way. By the mid-nineteenth century, when the signs were disappearing, the huge panels on the shop fronts and the thoughtful names of suburban havens spoke of a new and very different middle-class sense of family. Some shop names did retain a commercial function, like those of cafés and public houses, or of the new department stores of the later nineteenth century: ‘Le Bon Marché’ or ‘la Samaritaine’. House names, on the other hand, entirely eschewed any commercial function and fied the city centres for the quieter streets of nineteenth-century middle-class suburbs. Some can still be seen, and the tradition of naming lives on in some suburbs and in seaside and rural resorts. Many — ‘Ocean View’, ‘The Willows’, ‘Les Quatre Vents’ (the Four Winds) — now reflect twentieth-century urban dreams of peace and rural settings. Some still have family significance, of course, referring to those who have made their home there. Migrants have often chosen names that remind them of their origins. Such names, in so far as they speak to a wider audience, address other family members or people of similar ethnic origins, rather than the neighbourhood. They reflect the dispersed communities of twentieth-century cities, made possible by the automobile and the telephone.

In very recent years, of course, there has been a revival, in reinvigorated inner cities, of shop names and hanging signs for antique shops, fashion boutiques, handcraft and novelty shops. Their function, like those of early nineteenth-century shops, is to catch the eye of the potential customer. Particularly on antique shops and in ‘heritage’ tourist areas, they deliberately play on the late twentieth-century nostalgia for an imagined landscape of the past. In so doing, they offer an unspoken guarantee of

47-8. For further examples, loft and Hall, Family
‘traditional’ quality and of service: of small-scale, artisanal production and individual attention, as opposed to mass production and chain-store anonymity. They too, therefore, are signs for their times.

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