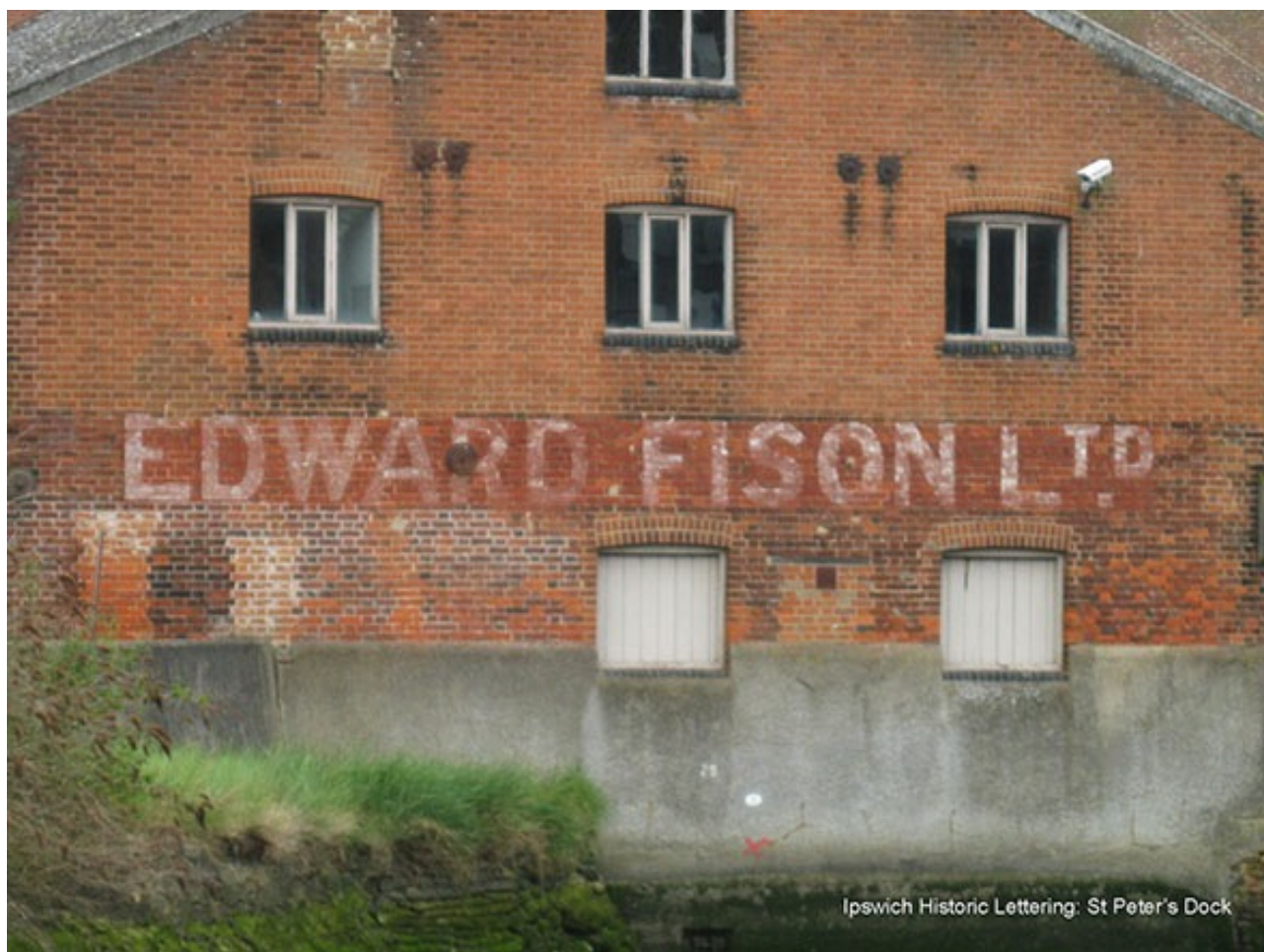


**IPSWICH BUILDING PRESERVATION TRUST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 22ND
OCTOBER 2019**

‘GHOST SIGNS: TRACES OF LOST IPSWICH BUSINESSES’

For many years now, Ipswich artist and illustrator Borin Van Loon has been photographing, recording, and researching examples of old lettering on the walls of buildings in the town. For our AGM talk this year we were delighted to welcome Borin (aka Robin Gaylard) to present some of the highlights of his ever expanding collection – all of which can be viewed on his fascinating website ‘Ipswich Historic Lettering’ (www.ipswich-lettering.co.uk). Robin’s interest has grown out of his graphic expertise – the images he seeks have their own specific fonts with or without the serif, and often they are presented in cartouche form or with other decorative devices to make them more visually appealing. The earliest of them viewed tonight probably date from the late 1800s or early 1900s, but some (including pub names, for instance) may have origins many centuries ago. Almost always they are trade signs, and so record the changing nature of commercial activity in the buildings illustrated. They provide evidence to link with other sources which can help us to reconstruct the past – written records, photographs, directories, and, of course, the buildings themselves. Sometimes they have been painted over with new signs as proprietors change or as a new business takes over, but the weathering process often reveals the earlier layers creating a palimpsest of texts – ghost upon ghost - a striking visual image of change through time, mutability, and the transience of human endeavour.

We were introduced to around fifty examples during the course of the evening. I will try to provide a brief summary to indicate their rich variety. The first image was of the ‘Edward Fison Ltd’ sign on the wall of the early Dock Street maltings. This building faces demolition, and Robin noted the alignment of the wall which once housed a Napoleonic barracks with the line of the earliest ford



Ipswich Historic Lettering: St Peter's Dock

across the Orwell – a crossing point which is likely to have been a major factor in the establishment of the town on both sides of the crossing. Other significant demolitions were mentioned – the possibility that in the blighted Carr Street from Cox Lane eastwards we will lose all but the 1884 Co-operative building – thus wiping out the record of the expanding Co-operative stores throughout the first half of the twentieth century, one of which includes the iconic 1908 ‘Each for All & All for Each’ text.



We were reminded that the ‘purple shop’ was not always the termination of Fonnereau Road with a slide of the E. R. George Bakery of 1911, now demolished, which was lost to road widening. Bakeries, of course, were once common features of the street scene and used by many as community oven facilities as well as retail outlets. Over Stoke on Felaw Street the bold lettering of ‘Bake Office’ can still be seen and one can imagine the customers queueing to receive their cooked dinners and baked goods.

Perhaps the most aspirational of cartouche designs was revealed at the top of Argyle Street when some render fell off from a gable end. A builder, A.E. Blasby, boasted that ‘Sanitary Work’ was ‘a Speciality’ and enclosed the whole in a ribbon resembling the Order of the Garter. A similar motif can be found in St Mary Stoke on a Great Eastern Railway armorial. Some humble little stores certainly gave themselves expansive airs – for instance, E. Markham’s ‘County Supply Stores’ which may well only have served its immediate locality, and the jingoistic ‘British Flag Stores’ on Darwin Road. The great engineering works of Cranes, on the other hand, has also disappeared – all Robin could show was a folorn gateway with a cast metal hatchment in the centre – but we still have the commemorative Maritime Ipswich plaques cast by this famous Ipswich company.

Our speaker has also acquired abandoned letters – a gift from Des Pawson was a cast aluminium letter ‘R’ from the International Stores (formerly Ryman’s), and even when other lettering is



salvaged and re-positioned (as in the case of the tiled lettering of 'The Blooming Fuchsia') Robin's eagle eye noted that a tile had been repositioned incorrectly in the re-erected version sited on the new flats. Later in the talk he mentioned that letters from 'V A Marriott Ltd, Builders' on Hanford Road could have been salvaged by Ipswich Museum but unfortunately were not considered useable.

The horse reigned supreme for centuries, and is recorded in livery stable lettering and on the wall of the recently demolished store at the corner of Cullingham and Handford Roads – 'Corn Hay Chaff and Straw Stores' was once available there, before being superseded by a tool hire shop and now by Lidl's car park. Garages were once prominent in central Ipswich. Egerton's had a major garage on Crown Street and, visible from St Mary Tower church yard, the back of the old Assembly Rooms/ Girls' High School once announced that they had become 'Motor Works'. Now, of course, the Motor Works houses the 'Easy Hotel'.

The palimpsests noted by Robin clearly required some detective work and some of his slides included restored versions crafted by him to illustrate the various legends which might be visible. At the Rose and Crown Brewery he came across a line which read 'Dan.....nce'. Ever fanciful he speculated that this might read 'Dance Licence' but was brought back to earth by the prosaic discovery that it actually once spelled out 'Daniel Vince', a one-time proprietor. On another ex-pub raking light could also make visible hidden letters such as a filled-in 'Cobbolds Ales, Wines and Spirits' plaque on The Globe in St George's Street. This raises the question as to whether old signs should be cared for and restored, or left to fade away. We all sighed when the Martin & Newby building was illustrated with its prominent dates, no doubt remembering in our different ways the labyrinth of separate rooms and departments with steps in between that was the hallmark of this last Ipswich ironmonger.



Our final image was a much older one – a ‘wodewose’ or wildman carved on a dragon beam now projecting on the corner of Dial Lane and Buttermarket. Our AGM talk reminded us of the changing face of the town and of the evolving lives and activities of the townspeople. Perhaps it is worth remembering how mediaeval people represented the idea of the wild and unpredictable aspect of nature represented by the wodewose to remind us how fragile is the reality we all take for granted and how time continually erases the little marks we make in our present time. Altogether it was a most enjoyable presentation and the responses of the audience reflected the memories and observations that Robin’s work had prompted. Our warm thanks go to him.

Bob Allen

