



The 'Four Alls' sign

This Four Alls tavern sign is an interesting item within Storiell Museum's collection of mid 19th century items, and is representative of a type of very early Commercial advertising for a tavern. A wooden board sign painted with oils, the sign is divided into four sections by black painted lines. This ensures we do not take the figures to be standing side by side. The first section is a painting of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) with the motto "I GOVERN ALL" written below. The second depicts a priest with the words "I PRAY FOR ALL" painted below, the third shows a soldier and "I FIGHT FOR ALL" below. The fourth and final section depicts a less formally dressed individual with "I PAY FOR ALL" written beneath. Unusually, to the bottom right hand corner is written "D. J. Williams, Menai Bridge". It is a fairly large sign, being approximately 130cm across within a Heavy Black frame.

Looking in detail

Although three of the characters in this image are instantly recognisable by their dress and caption, the one on the right (I PAY FOR ALL) is ambiguous. It may be a farmer, a business man, a money lender or a banker. The roles of these figures and their place within the social hierarchy of the times were doubtless understood. The figures are strongly presented and unashamedly simplified. The panel of each background is fitting for the character in the foreground, though does not detract, and emphasises that these are four figures standing separately within their own frames. As its purpose was largely functional, the sign needed to communicate clearly, whilst providing an attractive and interesting picture with which to catch the eye of the passing potential customer. It would also have to compete for attention along with other signs in the locality. The use of wood and oil paint would have been for practical reasons to try and ensure the sign could survive the weather for some years.

Oils were also known to retain their colour well, and even today, the colours are bright, warm and inviting, befitting of a sign that seeks to encourage people to go inside and spend time in the tavern.

During the mid-nineteenth century artisan painters could earn a living by producing images for churches or other public buildings, and on the street as shop or inn signs. We assume that D.J. Williams was the identity of this particular painter, though such works were usually unsigned. Sadly, other than the name of the artist, we have no further information about DJ Williams. A commission such as this would have been a significant one, and doubtless indicated that the painter was considered to be very capable. That the sign bears the painter's name or their firm's name suggests that the work could also serve as a means of not only advertising the pub, but also the skill of the painter, and would hopefully lead to more work. Similar to the commercial artists that would follow, such a painter would probably have been regarded as a competent and highly skilled craftsman or draftsman rather than an 'artist'. Such signs are truly a representation of some of the earliest forms of advertising and we see that this sign attempts to convey a message as well as just the name of the pub.

The History of tavern signs

In 1393 King Richard II made it compulsory for all alehouses to display signs to denote the selling of alcohol, or risk losing their beer if they did not comply! In a largely illiterate society, simple symbols were initially chosen, which later the name of the pub itself. The first inn signs were not actual signs at all. The Romans used the bush to denote the sale of wine, a symbol derived from the ivy and vine leaves of Bacchus, the god of Wine. As a result, this influenced the early symbols used to denote the same: the bush, the alestake, hop pole or simply foliage such as ivy.

From the Middle Ages onwards, Inn signs became more and more commonplace as a means of identifying where alcohol was to be bought. Following an Act of Parliament in 1430, this became a legal requirement. Symbols and pictures were extremely important as means of communication due to widespread illiteracy of the time. An ale house or tavern would display a tankard or a bunch of grapes, a cutler would hang a knife above the door, a tailor, a pair of scissors.



'Four Alls' alcohol license

As towns and villages grew, so did the numbers of alehouses, and so the sign was used to set the establishment apart from its rivals and enable its identification, and hopefully recommendation to others. Today many pub signs display a picture that literally represents their name, but in the early modern era the picture was a means of identification and not necessarily the name of the pub. Over time, these signs came to be of greater significance to the pub's identity, and the pub name would change to reflect this.

The meaning of 'Four Alls'

It is not unusual to come across public houses across Britain bearing the name 'Four Alls' or even 'Five Alls', with one such example of Four Alls still in existence in Caernarfon.

It is thought that in Medieval times, such signs originally showed only three alls – the monk, I pray for all; the knight, I fight for all; the commoner, I work for all, with the depictions of the monarch and sometimes a lawyer (I plead for all) being added at a later date to depict 'Five Alls'.

This theme could even be interpreted as a satire of the Methodist Church founded in the 1700's. Methodist ministers would take a pledge not to drink and encouraged their congregations to do the same. Methodist teaching is sometimes summed up in four particular ideas known as the 'Four alls': 'All need to be saved', 'All can be saved', 'All can know they are saved' and 'All can be saved completely'. A further interpretation of this sign's meaning is that the Four Alls sign is quite Socialist in its sentiment and subverts the tradition of naming public houses after the monarchy, or items associated with royalty such as the 'Crown' or 'The Queen's Head' and points out that a large proportion of the common man's earnings or profits from his efforts are used to support the Royals, to pay for the Army and to contribute to the wages of the Clergy. This could have been a way of encouraging a certain clientele of similar political persuasion to frequent the tavern.



The 'Four Alls Caernarfon during the 80s

Inn signs have never lost their place in British consciousness. Although similar to shop signs, inn signs have more historical longevity. Public houses were the first buildings to have signs and when the introduction of street numbering all but wiped out the shop sign, they remained. The sign was not just significant in terms of the public house to which it was attached, but was also crucial to the ways in which people understood and navigated their physical environment. Even today, it is not unusual to provide a traveller with the location of a local pub as a landmark by which they may navigate to their destination.

Signs such as this can provide an insight into how the populace interacted with wider political and social change. Changes of sign reflected a changing world; by looking at the signs of drinking establishments we can gain some perception of the viewpoints of their patrons, the majority of which would normally be lost to history. Even a refurbished public house with all its modern conveniences will often seek to remind its customers of the establishment's historical roots through continuing to use its original name and a traditionally inspired design of pub sign.

Bibliography

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