

# The Midhurst tradition



***Sign World visits a man who was born in the right place at the right time and has known what he wanted to do since he was a child. He has never worked for anyone but himself, never done anything that he didn't want to do, and he can vary his style from folk art to sophisticated depending on the job and the customer. What makes it worse is the fact that this talented man is a really nice guy. Meet Wayne Osborne, signwriter and artist.***

In West Sussex is a small town of great charm and history, it came second in one of those 'Best places to live in the UK' polls that clutter up some of the magazines on the middle shelves of the newsagents - we don't know who won, and it's got nothing to do with this tale anyway. The town is called Midhurst and due to its conservation status and the number of listed shops in the High Street it can offer a good living to a traditional signwriter. Wayne Osborne was born here in 1974 and still lives locally but has moved just out of town since his marriage. "It means I am less likely to have to come back to the studio at night if I live a bit further away," he told us.

His artistic talent was burgeoned when he was at Midhurst Grammar doing what is called 'Graphic Communications' which involved a range of technical input; he even got to use a 'Badger' airbrush (remember them?) There were no computers to

speak of, just BBC micro's and Commodore 64's. "I wasn't bought up on computers," he explained, "so I never had the chance to get into the culture. I've got one here now to show samples of work and one at home, but that is so I can get onto the Internet and sort out my accounts."

He blatantly admits that he was the art-teachers pet and his visual ability was spotted early on, but, strangely enough considering his career choice, his handwriting was crap. "And still is," he told us, "I was taught calligraphy to try and sort out my day-to-day writing and I never dreamt that it would be my future, but I still can't string a good looking sentence together when I'm rushed."

He learned technical and architectural drawing, a discipline that has proved very useful in his work, but it was something else that truly set him onto the path he now walks.

"My father was a builder and he used to take me out with him for the day during the school holidays. I would help him out where I could and I enjoyed the time we spent together. Then one day I went with him to collect some signs from a company in Chichester. I couldn't believe how fascinating it was to see what the men were doing in there. I walked around getting into everything like a fox in a henhouse. I was invited to stay for the day while my dad went off and got his work done."

The signwriter was a Mr. Don Hickey and he was a typical example of a hand-lettering craftsman of the time, work was scarce and he was doing everything he could to keep his four staff busy. Wayne started haunting the shop, offering to help and learning the trade. His help became more important as one after another the team left until finally in the workshop there was only Don and a man called Steve, with Wayne as support. "Don finally retired

when he reached his mid-70's, it was finally time to relax," said Wayne, "but I still see him and he still does the odd bit of work for me. It gives me an excuse to pop round and it gives him a bit of beer money, and his hand is still quite good."

In 1990 Wayne took his A-levels, Art, Graphics and Technical Drawing. He walked proudly out into the World looking for signwriting handcrafting work - and found himself right in the middle of the vinyl revolution. He wrote off for apprenticeships without results, and at the end of day he learned his skills by working with Don. "I became a time-served apprentice without the bit of paper," he explained, "I was made to repeat and repeat my letters until my hand and my eye were trained. I learned that everything in this business is about straight lines and curves plus balance and design. It's not just the letters it's the space around them and how they relate to each other. Kerning and negative space, you have to learn how to make it a dynamic part of the design."

How the young man that he was found the time and the energy we don't know, but on top of everything else he was doing he started offering his time as a volunteer at the Steam Museum in Hollycombe, Liphook, Hants. It was here at the home of a working steam-engine collection that he became an unpaid coachliner and sign-painter - in fact he did so much



***A real working mans box***



***Keep the stock to hand***

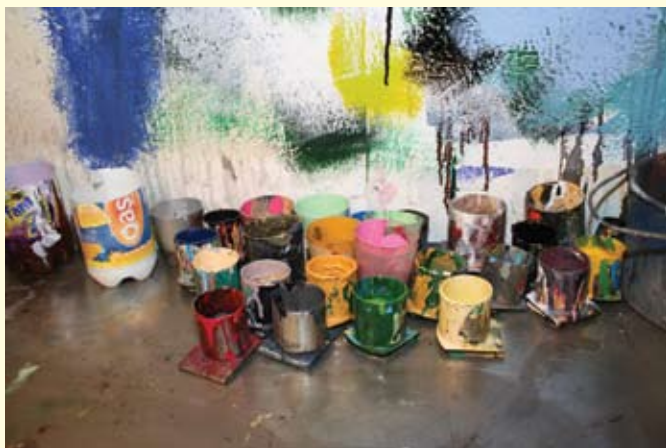
## SHOP TALK

that the museum started to pay him. "Well you've got to eat," he told us, "and by then I was getting some money from Don too, but I was always looking for the first real chance. Then it came when at the age of 17 I got my first real self-employed commission from a company of boilermakers called A G Bicknell. They gave me the job of coach-painter on a steam engine and I had to work closely with Reading Museum to make sure that I got the details just right. That job seemed to go on forever, it lasted me about nine months and at the end I took home just £900 so it was hardly a practical money spinner, but after that the learning curve started to level off and things started looking more viable."

That was how Wayne matured his talent, partly self-taught and largely mentored by Don, and he went through the traditional route of lettering and coachwork, always using his brushes, always sticking to his guns. He had decided what he wanted to be and he worked towards it. He was lucky that at the end of the twentieth-century he was able to benefit from an almost nineteenth-century education in his chosen craft. Dickens could almost have penned his story, and like so many Victorians he started young, for example, Wayne was loose-leaf gilding at the age of 17, and nowadays he will spend in the region of £3,000 per annum on sheet and transfer gold leaf alone. He can still remember running behind Don filling-in the lettering that Don had outlined on a banner. He learned to be conscientious and precise without being precious.

His solo work started in a shed around the back of a pub, he was doing work instead of paying rent, and for four days a week over two years his bread-and-butter was paid for by painting menu boards for a brewery chain of 15 pubs. He was the only free-lancer in a group of people employed in the work and so managed to avoid all of the 'team building nonsense' that was foisted onto the other men. He was repeatedly fired and rehired, the first because of his stubborn refusal to get involved in team activities and the second because of the speed and quality of his work. Those days are long gone now and Wayne is in his own premises and very much his own boss.

At the time of our visit he was outside happily repairing an old rocking horse and on his easel he was sorting out some gold lettered listings for a local sports club. His workshop is about the size of eight old-style red telephone booths long by another eight wide. He has a battered old Apple computer with things piled on top of it and shelf upon shelf of small tins of paint, everything from One Shot to Dulux household enamel. When we asked him what primer he used he just grinned and replied "Anything that works." He paintbox is almost a work of art in itself, and there is evidence that when he is hard at it Wayne will use almost any surface to clean the paint off his brushes, including the walls. In another corner is the 'monster', a growing pile of paint scrapings



**Maybe not neat...**

# SHOP TALK

onto which Wayne has been cleaning his palette, as every artist through history has done.

A small and furious ball of energy that holds court in the place is Sammy the terrier who will come up and show you whatever toy he is worrying-at during your visit, to everyone's amusement.



**Sammy the Pup**

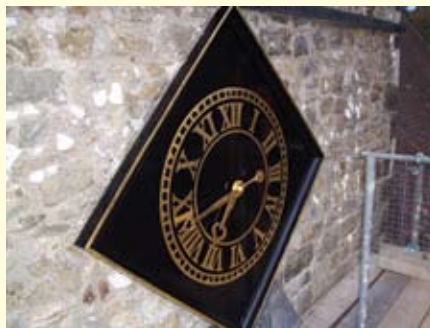
"These days I am doing a lot of high-end traditional work, but I still find time for 'Beware of the dog' and 'Keep off the grass' type things, and the projects can vary from quite sophisticated work to a very naïve folk style." Explained Wayne, "And it can be useful living somewhere like Midhurst because in a very real way I follow the shops. You see I sometimes get to do the signage for what can only be described as vanity openings; you know the kind of thing. When somebody asks me to do the fascia for a shop specialising in dried frog-spawn scented soap or yaks cheese candles I sometimes wonder whether it's worth my while using undercoat because you can be sure that I'll be cleaning it off and starting again for the next incumbent before the paints properly dry.



**A sample of Wayne's beautiful traditional gilt work**



**Before the Osbourne touch**



**After**

And sometimes it's just tragic that I get called back to a job because of an unexpected event. For example I did some lovely gilt lettering onto the windows of a jewelers called Allnutt. The windows were the original Georgian 5mm thick float-glass. It was wonderful to be working on them, a real treat, and I was proud of the job. Then I got called back because some sods ram-raided the place and I had to do it all over again but this time onto modern strengthened glass. They did more than just rob the place that day, what they did was sacrilege."

He still talks about the early days, like the time he carefully lettered the smoke box door of a steam engine called 'Little Lucy' and then watched when, as soon as it was fired up, the letters peeled clean off "Like the skin of an onion." And the time when he lettered 'Highflyer' a 1918 steam road-roller that had been converted to drive a giant swing in the steam museum. Throughout his career some of his jobs have really taken his imagination, like the commission he got to convert the signature of dressmaker Cathryn Ariston to a fascia seven feet long by a



**Highflier, an early project**



**The customer watched every brush stroke**

foot high, and the time that he got to paint a real Romany caravan, it took 70 hours with the owner watching just about every brushstroke. Then he had to restore the slate clock for Midhurst Parish Church... ..life is never boring for a man with a brush in his hand.



**Can you see when Wayne took over the lettering?**

We asked him how he gets his customers, "Word of mouth," he answered, "plus the website and an ad' in Yellow Pages. I get a lot of business while I am working too, it must be the mahlstick and the brushes that get the attention. People literally say 'Do you do this for a living?' You can imagine what goes through my head in the way of an answer." And is he still enjoying the work? "I love it, I love the tight and controlled stuff as much as the free



**Controlled yet fluid**

## SHOP TALK



***The panels are sent to letter artists Wayne knows all over the world***

and looser styles. I love the fact that every day may bring something new, something challenging, that I could be designing a complete identity for a new company one week and matching 17<sup>th</sup> Century gilt scrollwork the next – I almost envy myself sometimes.

I also love being part of a small yet global community. At the Trossachs Letterheads Meet, (May 2006) I had a chance to talk to all these people I had heard of and felt like I knew but had never met. I was surrounded by famous names and faces and at first I felt a bit out of my depth.

But you know, by the end of three days I couldn't walk more than a hundred yards without someone stopping me for a chat or feeling a tap on the shoulder from someone that knew of my work.

We send sign plates to each other, we work up our logo's on a wooden plaque, sign them and exchange them, mine are all over the world, and we can chat on-line any time we feel like it – a real community."

It seems to us at Sign World that a man this good that loves what he is doing so much deserves all the support he can get, so if you are looking for someone to sort out a bit of traditional brushwork for a customer you could do worse than give Wayne a ring on 01730 817900 or E-mail him to [wayne@osbornesigns.co.uk](mailto:wayne@osbornesigns.co.uk) Have a look at his website by going to [www.osbornesigns.co.uk](http://www.osbornesigns.co.uk) It will be worth it.



***Look at the gilt work***