PROBLEMS

Cultivating a "Green" Image: Oil Companies and Outdoor Publicity in Britain and Europe, 1920-1936

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The title of E.S. Turner's survey of the development of advertising in Britain and America, *The Shocking History of Advertising,* points to a recurrent characteristic of the medium. [1] Advertising images and slogans can be memorable as well as eye-catching, but all too often have proved to be offensive. The shock to the aesthetic sensibility of those exposed to advertising, however, has come not only from the visual content, but also from the "hardware": for the position of outdoor signs, and the amount of them, has also frequently aroused opposition. The unrestrained profusion of late Victorian and Edwardian urban hoardings led to a public reaction in the course of time; although that process has still to be adequately documented, it appears that an important catalyst was the emergence of the motor car. Not only did it allow the growth of pleasure motoring in the countryside, it also encouraged advertisers to promote their wares in rural areas on an unprecedented scale.

In a book with the rather alarming title of "England and the Octopus", for example, an influential English architect pointed out the ubiquity of sign boards and hoardings in the landscape. Clough Williams-Ellis argued that the "tentacles" of advertising were to be found alongside trunk roads and on the roofs of barns, "on the tawny sails of the Thames barges, and upon gasometers and railway bridges all up and down the country". [2] It was indeed the case, down to at least the early 1920s, that advertisers were able to erect signs with impunity, even close to many of Britain's acknowledged beauty spots, so that

[1] E.S. Turner, *The Shocking History of Advertising* (London, 1965, Penguin edition).
[2] C. Williams-Ellis, *England and the Octopus* (London, 1928), p.67. The author was the architect of Portmeirion. See *The Dictionary of National Biography, 1971-1980* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 909-910.

they could not fail to catch the eye of the passing motorist. Urban and county councils were in fact empowered to make bye-laws preventing the exhibition of such hoardings as would disfigure the natural beauty of a landscape, under the terms of the Advertisements Regulation Act of 1907; and by May 1923 some 93 authorities had introduced such regulations. Nevertheless, the scope of the act was very narrow, and there was great difficulty in defining a "landscape". [3]

However, a campaign against roadside signs began to attract widespread support early in 1923, in part because *The Times* took up the cause. The newspaper articulated the views not only of members of the public, but also of the Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising (SCAPA). The debate was given prominence when a bill designed to control outdoor advertising was introduced into the House of Lords on 8 May 1923. According to one report the bill would have made it possible for anyone to see Tintern Abbey, Magdalen Tower or Kenilworth Castle "without also seeing an advertisement of somebody's boots or soap". Although the bill failed to reach the statute book, the spate of correspondence and articles indicated the growth of a substantial pressure group. [4]

A leading article in *The Times* on 7 September 1923 argued that protection of the countryside was "a common obligation". It attacked that deliberate selfishness which ruined the beauty of roads by turning them into avenues of "glaring tinplate monstrosities". A number of correspondents suggested that such advertisements should be regulated by taxation, as was the case in several European countries. In October the Ministry of Transport felt obliged to join the fray. A letter sent to every county council expressed concern at the extent to which the countryside was being disfigured by the erection of unsightly hoardings, and urged that councils should take action against these eyesores. [5]

During this controversy it emerged that many of the roadside signs in beauty spots were in fact advertising petrol. Mrs Rawnsley and other residents of Grasmere were praised by *The Times* for refusing to allow signs to be erected, especially "the flaming advertisements of petrol". Several correspondents pointed out that those companies which profited most from the touring car were also responsible for spoiling the pleasures of its occupants. Someone described how, when cycling along the Wye valley, "I found my anticipations of Tintern Abbey profanely broken in upon by a horrible yellow advertisement of petrol standing in a field by the roadside, quite close to the spot which Wordsworth's poetry has doubly hallowed". [6]

[3] See *The Times,* 8 May 1923. For subsequent legislation to regulate advertisements see Gordon E. Cherry, *The Evolution of British Town Planning in the U.K. during the Twentieth Century* (London, 1974).

[4] *The Times,* 8 May 1923. For a history of SCAPA see Richardson Evans, *An Account of the Scapa Society,* (London, 1926).

[5] Ibid, 9 and 11 October 1923.

[6] Ibid, 7 September and 16 October 1923. Mrs Rawnsley was married to a founder of

In a significant shift of emphasis, the campaign called on the oil companies to abandon "this whole wasteful business of shouting against each other on the public roads". The vice-chairman of the Isle of Wight Chamber of Commerce explained how beauty spots had been freed of signs through an approach to a large oil company which had agreed to "remove all its signs if its competitors would do the same. These latter were approached and responded in the same way". [7] By the end of 1923 not only had the three major distributors of petrol in the UK agreed to remove all their advertisements from country roads, but other advertisers like Dunlop and National Benzole felt obliged to follow suit. According to Richardson Evans, President of SCAPA, it was "a triumph on the heroic scale". [8] It was also a milestone in the development of the conservation lobby, as those involved later founded the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE).

However, the removal of roadside signs proved to be just as significant a landmark for the oil distributors. Surviving documentation from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company makes it possible to reconstruct the way in which its UK distribution arm, the British Petroleum Company, reacted to this pressure to restrict the use of signs for advertising purposes. The following account not only analyses why it agreed to do so, but also shows how it and other oil companies subsequently adapted their advertising strategies so as to make a virtue out of necessity. They rapidly realised that it could be to their interest to be seen as protectors of the countryside. This lesson was so well learnt, indeed, that in the early 1930s Anglo-Persian and other oil companies began a similar cut-back in the amount of outdoor publicity used by their European marketing subsidiaries, albeit for more complex reasons.

The removal of petrol signs

The mushrooming of roadside signs was an indication of how competitive petrol marketing was in the early 1920s, spurred on by the phenomenal post-war growth of British road traffic (the number of private cars alone increased from 105,734 to 695,555 in the period 1921-1926). [9] At the same time methods of selling were being transformed by the introduction of bulk delivery to retail outlets, via the motor lorry, the petrol pump and the service station. These changes not only necessitated considerable capital expenditure, they also

the National Trust. See Graham Murphy, *'Founders of the National Trust'* (London, 1987, pp. 69-100.

7 Ibid, 7 September and 20 October 1923.

8 E.S. Turner, op. cit., pp.244-245. For an appreciation of Richardson Evans, see *The Times*, 11 May 1928.

9 BP Archives file (hereafter "BP") 28972.

initiated a period of vicious competition in which large amounts of money were devoted to advertising and promoting the different brands of petrol.

The British Petroleum Company (hereafter referred to as BP) was a relative newcomer on the scene. It had only become the UK marketing subsidiary of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1917.[10] Prior to that it had been a largely German-owned distributor of motor spirit supplied by Shell. The main priority of the new BP management was to create a nationwide distribution network. This entailed both ocean installations where supplies could be landed and some 42 bulk spirit depots in regional centres around the country, from which lorries could make deliveries direct to the retailer's pumps.

The total motor spirit market in 1920 amounted to annual sales of some 695,000 tons. However, BP's share of this was only 60,000 tons and it had two formidable rivals. One was Shell-Mex (the British distributing subsidiary of Royal Dutch-Shell) which sold in the order of 250,000 tons. The market leader was the Anglo-American Oil Company (the affiliate of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey) which had motor spirit sales of some 300,000 tons.[11]

BP clearly had to establish an identity and to promote its products. Yet the Board nevertheless decided to delay an extensive advertising campaign, on the grounds that "it would be worse than folly to invite a demand with which we could not possibly cope". However, "when the time came that we had to compete for trade instead of deliberately letting it pass us, it was fully realised that our advertising would be on a very extensive scale indeed".[12] However, there was no hesitation as regards erecting iron and enamel signs, which were seen as very important in establishing the Company's name in the motorist's mind. They were attached to garage walls and erected as signboards along rural and urban roads, in all those areas to which the company was able to deliver motor spirit. In addition, illuminated signs were increasingly being used. All these signs took the form of a Union Jack enclosing the logo "BP". Over the course of 1921 some 12,500 iron signs were issued, and in August of the following year the Board heard that most parts of the country were now fairly well covered with roadside signs. It therefore judged that the time was right to sanction a more extensive advertising campaign.[13]

[10] See R.W. Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company. Vol.I: The Developing Years, 1901-1932* (Cambridge, 1982), pp.217-219. The Anglo-Persian Oil Company (A.P.O.C.) changed its name to Anglo-Iranian in 1935, and then to British Petroleum in 1954. This latter name had lapsed in 1931 when A.P.O.C. and Shell merged their U.K. distribution companies, although the "BP" trademark continued to be used.

[11] Board Minutes of the British Petroleum Company (hereafter BP Minutes), 21 July 1920.

[12] BP Minutes, 21 September 1920. R.W. Ferrier, "Petrol Advertising in the Twenties and Thirties: The case of the British Petroleum Company", *European Journal of Marketing*, Volume 20, Number 5, 1986, pp. 29-51, gives a useful outline.

[13] BP Minutes, 24 February 1921 and 3 August 1922.

Early in 1923 BP received the first indication that the company's roadside signs were attracting undue notice. The Board was briefed about the new Hampshire county bye-laws under which the erection of any further roadside signs would be prohibited. The Surveyor, it was noted, "did not wish to call these Bye-laws into operation but requested the advertisers generally to make some suggestion to enable him to deal with complaints of spoiling the landscape, etc.". He had also proposed that "we should apply to him in each case before taking a site for a roadway sign". The Board reluctantly recommended compliance with the Surveyor's wishes as regards the siting of new signs in Hampshire. [14]

A few months later it was reported that the authorities in Gloucestershire, Kent and Somerset were also complaining that BP signs were spoiling "the natural beauty of the landscape". The Managing Director advised that no change should be made "unless the official demand for their removal became insistent and then only in areas where other companies were also called upon and agreed to remove their signs". [15] The Board was also informed that the attack by the local authorities "was more particularly directed against this Company than against either the Shell or Anglo (who had many more of such signs in use than this Company) owing probably to the fact that the Union Jack signs strike the eye more forcibly than others". [16] This attack on BP signs may well have been due to the fact that they had been put up recently on new sites, unlike those of their competitors which would have been longer established. Nevertheless, the Board concluded that such agitation was chiefly engineered by their competitors. [17]

During the course of the year numerous county and urban boroughs threatened action against roadside signs. By the end of 1923 Shell-Mex, Anglo-American and BP had clearly decided that they must give way to this sustained pressure. At the AGM of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company on 17 December, for example the Chairman told his shareholders that it was the Company's wish to reduce the number of BP roadside signs. He added the significant caveat, however, that the removal would have to be done "consistently with the action of our competitors". [18] And it is probable that the three largest oil distributing companies did in fact privately conclude an agreement to do away with roadside signs. [19]

Nevertheless, each company sought to get the maximum publicity value from this renunciation. Shell-Mex announced on 31 December that "in sympathy with the movement for the preservation of the natural beauty of the

[14] Ibid, 23 January 1923.
[15] Ibid, 22 May and 20 November 1923.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 6 July 1923.
[18] *The Petroleum Times*, 22 December 1923.
[19] Ibid 5 January, 1924.

landscape" they would dismantle all their road signs in the countryside. Similarly, the Anglo-American Oil Company stated that in view of the efforts of SCAPA to preserve "the natural beauties of the landscape of the British Isles" they would take down all roadside signs advertising "Pratts" motor spirit. A day later BP announced that it had been reducing its signs in rural districts for some considerable time. "We shall, as soon as practicable, remove all such signs, and are most gratified to learn that other large roadside advertisers are taking the same action.[20] It is interesting that both Shell-Mex and Anglo-American later claimed that they had been the first to remove their signs.

This concerted action by the three leading distributors of motor spirit was duly applauded. However, this did not mean that all their advertising signs were to be removed; it only applied to their so-called "field" signs on boards standing in the countryside. Shell, for example, reserved their rights to continue the exhibition of their recently introduced "utility" signs. These were designed to inform passing motorists of the whereabouts of a pump or filling station, or to impart other useful information; and they were reported to be "comparatively unobtrusive".[21] Nevertheless, SCAPA was afraid there might be another advertising war if rival companies introduced utility signs of their own.[22] In addition, the companies continued to issue enamel signs which were fixed to the walls of petrol dealers throughout the country. During the period from April to October 1925 BP in fact issued 26,795 of these signs (as compared with 9,161 for the same period of 1924). The increase was due to a decision that BP "should devote some special attention to advertising by means of garage signs, in which they were previously far behind their competitors".[23]

In due course, these other signs themselves came under attack from the conservation lobby. A leading figure in the latter was the influential Patrick Abercrombie, who was to be a founder of the Council for the Preservation of Rural England.[24] In 1926, the year of the CPRE's formation, Abercrombie also published a pamphlet in which he urged "eternal vigilance" upon the enlightened public if they were to stem advertisement abuse. He noted recent successes, but warned that "whole garages are faced with tin petrol advertisements which do not scruple at the vilest degradation of the national flag". The BP Union Jack signs were again clearly being singled out for attack.[25]

[20] *The Times,* 31 December 1923 and 1 January 1924.
[21] See *The Petroleum Times,* 5 January 1924.
[22] *The Times,* 24 May 1924.
[23] BP H14/159
[24] Abercrombie became the first Professor of Town and Country Planning at London University, and was later knighted. See Gordon E. Cherry (ed), *Pioneers in British Planning,* (London 1981), p. 103-131.
[25] Patrick Abercrombie, *The Preservation or Rural England: The Control of Development by Means of Rural Planning* (London, 1925), p. 27.

During 1927 the three large oil companies again responded to such criticism, and ceased to issue such signs. In addition, they asked the owners of garages to remove those advertising signs which were already in place. A report to the BP Board noted that "Shell-Mex have given considerable publicity to their decision to cease issuing advertising signs to garages. This is little more than a gesture, as they, like the BP Company, practically shut down the issue of these signs earlier in the year." Nevertheless, all the companies continued to issue a limited number of special or utility signs. The sole purpose of these was to inform drivers that they were approaching service stations.[26]

A blot on the landscape

During the late 1920s the very pumps and petrol-filling stations themselves came to be seen as "a blot on the landscape". The average petrol station was described as little more than "a litter of tumble-down sheds plastered with multi-coloured enamel signs ... frequently at some particularly charming spot in the countryside, or up the pavements of otherwise delightful country towns and villages".[27] Contemporary photographs bear out the accuracy of this description and confirm that many petrol stations were indeed eye-sores.[28]

Yet it is undeniable that much of the passion with which petrol stations were attacked was due to detestation of the "industrial spirit", and sprang from seeing the petrol pump as a blight on a threatened pastoral way of life.[29] The epigraph to Patrick Abercrombie's 1926 article, for example, was taken from Wordsworth: "Is then no nook of English ground secure from rash assault?" He argued that petrol stations were "the acutest form of colour blemish" from which the countryside suffered:

"The row of petrol pumps in a village by reason of their varied and brilliant colours and emphatic shapes (each a single straightforward mechanical contrivance with a bad habit of exhibiting its entrails) shouts down the quieter natural and older human elements of the village picture and thereby becomes the focal point of interest".

In a remarkable passage Abercrombie contrasted the village postbox with the petrol pump, to the detriment of the latter: "The single vermilion spot of the pillar box ... is like the bright spot that the old landscapists never failed to introduce". Part of the problem, it appeared, was that every pump was painted

[26] BP management report, September 1927. See also Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London, 1985), p. 63.

[27] *The Architectural Review*, December 1929.

[28] See the appendix to C. Williams-Ellis, op. cit., and a review of a C.P.R.E. photographic exhibition, *The Times*, 26 February, 1929.

[29] See Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (London, 1981) pp. 43-5, 64-80.

a different colour. The effect of seeing a mixed bouquet of violent reds, yellows and greens at a service station was, according to another critic, not an acceptable harmony, "but the most reverberating discord". [30]

Throughout the later 1920s progress was made towards changing the appearance of petrol stations so as to satisfy the conservation lobby. The decision by the three oil companies to remove their advertising signs set an important precedent. The visual effect of removing these garage signs was illustrated in photographs printed in the *Architectural Review,* and the result was deemed to be "a tremendous improvement". [31] In addition, in 1927 BP decided to repaint all its petrol pumps green, "in order to blend with the dominant colour of the countryside". [32] Another decided improvement was the gradual removal of pumps actually sited on the kerb itself, although this took some time to be enforced. [33]

Important recommendations over these matters were also made by a Committee that had been set up by the Home Secretary on 4 August 1928. Its specific brief was to advise local authorities on their powers to control the siting of petrol-filling stations so that these would not injure "any rural scene or any place of beauty or historic interest". [34] In the main, the Committee concentrated on drafting bye-laws that could be widely applied, rather than laying down rigid regulations. Thus it refused to lay down strict guidelines as to the colour of pumps, as there was "a wealth of variety in English scenery and no single colour could be indicated which would blend harmoniously with all surroundings". The Committee also recommended that there should be a ban on "the indiscriminate and haphazard display of advertisements", and proposed a single free-standing sign that would attract the approaching motorist from a reasonable distance. [35]

The recommendations of the Committee were undoubtedly warmly received by local authorities, who increasingly introduced bye-laws concerning the siting, lay-out and appearance of petrol-filling stations in the countryside. [36] *The Petroleum Times* discerned "a movement toward orderliness and decency" in the appearance of petrol-filling stations; and one of the most promising developments was indeed an interest in petrol station design. In 1928 a new

[30] Abercrombie, op. cit, p. 27. C. Williams-Ellis, op. cit., p. 136. For a contrary view see *The Petroleum Times,* 7 April 1928.

[31] *The Architectural Review*, December 1929.

[32] BP 78/63/3, May 1927.

[33] *The Petroleum Times*, 3 November 1928.

[34] See section 5 of the Petroleum (Amendment) Act, 1928, subsequently incorporated in the Petroleum (Consolidation) Act, 1928.

[35] *Report of the Petroleum Filling Stations Committee* (London, 1929), pp. 7-12.

[36] See *The Petroleum Times*, 6 September 1930 and 11 November 1933. The Town and Country Planning Act of 1932 gave local authorities much greater powers to control petrol stations. See Gordon E. Cherry, *The Evolution of British Town Planning*, op. cit., pp. 81-100.

prize offered by the Royal Society of Arts in its annual industrial design competition was for a petrol-filling station at the intersection of two roads. The challenge for designers was to produce a petrol-filling station that was "beautiful as well as conspicuous".[37] In the following year there was a "Brighter Petrol Stations" contest. The winning petrol station was set against a background of tall trees, and was approached over a "rustic" bridge. The pumps were arranged under a long loggia with a red-tiled roof and had been painted green in order to harmonise with the sylvan surroundings. There was a minimum of discreet advertising.[38] Interestingly, the *Architectural Review* discerned an increasing tendency for motorists to fill up at such "designer" petrol stations, and the *Petroleum Times* considered that motorists only got what they deserved if they patronised the "shack" type of petrol stations.[39]

All of these developments were encouraged by BP, Anglo-American and Shell-Mex, yet there was little else they felt able to do at this time to transform the visual appearance of service stations in Britain.[40] This was primarily because all the sites in Britain were owned by independent dealers and pressure from them in the inter-war period stopped the oil companies from running their own service stations. There was a quite different relationship in other European countries however, where most pumps and sites were owned by their suppliers and merely leased to dealers. Such stations were showpieces and advertisements in their own right.[41]

Environmentally friendly advertising

The ability of the three large oil companies to curtail a large part of their external publicity was partly due to the fact that press, rather than roadside advertising was thought to be the most attractive and effective type of publicity. The BP view was that "the British Public is essentially a reading public and it has been proved over and over again that the press affords the quickest and in the end the cheapest form of publicity". By 1931, indeed, BP was devoting only some 5.1% of its advertising budget to roadside signs, whereas the figure for newspaper advertising was 83%.[42]

[37] *The Petroleum Times*, 75 February, 1928; *The Times*, 20 August 1930.
[38] *The Daily Express*, 23 August, 1929.
[39] *The Architectural Review*, op. cit.; *The Petroleum Times*, 11 November, 1933.
[40] This policy or inaction was decisively changed in the early 1950s. See Donald F. Dixon, "The Development of the Solus System of Distribution in the United Kingdom", *Economica*, Vol. XXIX, No. 113, (1962), pp. 41-52.
[41] See C.T. Brunner, *The Problem of Oil* (London, 1930), pp. 97-101, and Donald F. Dixon, "Petrol Distribution in the U.K., 1900-1950", *Business History*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (1963), pp. 1-19.
[42] BP 78/38/19, "Comparative Statement of Publicity Policy", 12-13 May 1931.

Nevertheless, the oil companies still perceived the need to do a certain amount of outdoor promotion of their products. One way of doing this was by means of illuminated globes which were placed on top of the petrol pumps themselves. Initially, these were simple spheres advertising the contents of the tank by brand name alone, but the oil companies increasingly began to issue globes of a distinctive shape related to corporate identity. The Shell globe, for example, was in the form of a scallop shell. BP introduced a shield-shaped globe in England (where all its delivery vehicles displayed a shield bearing the Royal Warranty); and in Scotland, where shale oil was refined into motor spirit and sold under the brand-name of "Scotch", it used a globe in the shape of a thistle. Nevertheless, the *Architectural Review* described them as "hideous globular globes" and criticised "the admiration which they involve in Mr. Bernard Shaw and the Oil Companies".[43]

An innovative solution to the problem of finding new methods of advertising which did not disfigure the countryside was to hang poster boards on the sides of delivery vehicles. These "lorry bills" were pioneered by Shell-Mex but BP also used them, and continued to be employed after the merger of the Shell-Mex and BP U.K. marketing organisations in 1931. They were posters printed to a size of 30 by 45 inches, and "On each side and across the tailboard were special panels for the bills, which framed them with a black margin".[44] They were changed every two weeks or so.[45] These lorry bills had been in use before the voluntary ban on roadside publicity, but were given greater prominence thereafter. Aptly, one of the themes used in these posters from 1924 onwards was that of touring in the countryside, and there was a series entitled "See Britain First", featuring views of such picturesque places as Ben Lomond and Harlech Castle.

Under the direction of Jack Beddington, who in 1929 became the Publicity Manager of Shell-Mex (and later of Shell-Mex & BP), new artistic standards for advertising artwork were reached, rivalling those earlier set by Frank Pick for London Transport.[46] It was Beddington who personally commissioned young artists to produce the artwork for the lorry bills, including Graham Sutherland and E. Mcknight Kauffer.[47] His series of "Landscape Lorry Bills" communicated simple ideas and beliefs in a memorable way for a mass audience; and such was their artistic excellence that from 1931 they appeared in special annual art exhibitions at the Burlington Galleries. According to David

[43] *The Architectural Review*, op. cit.

[44] Mark Haworth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer: A Designer and His Public* (London, 1979, p. 74.

[45] BP archives, typescript of Vernon Nye's "Recollections".

[46] Ibid. For Frank Pick, see *The Dictionary of Business Biography*, (ed) David Jeremy, Vol. 4 (London, 1984) pp. 678-680.

[47] Ibid.For an appreciation of Beddington see *The Times*, 3 April - 17 April 1959. See also Bevis Hillier, *John Betjeman: A Life in Pictures* (London, 1984), p. 109.

Mellor, Kauffer's "Stonehenge: See Britain First on Shell" was the most reproduced poster of that first Shell-Mex advertising exhibition. Kenneth Clark was then Director of the National Gallery and he praised the way that Shell chose to be associated with beautiful landscapes. [48]

It was Beddington who promoted the notion that "Shell protects the countryside." Soon after he joined the company in 1929 he initiated a series of press advertisements on this theme. They featured photographs of historic villages and carried the caption that "We don't advertise in places like this". [49] Beddington also published advertisements that incorporated letters of praise from the SCAPA and from the distinguished architect Clough Williams-Ellis. [50] There was even a press advertisement entitled "Shell and the Countryside" which argued that

> Shell began removing its advertisement signs from the countryside as long ago as 1923. In 1927 they also asked their garage owners to remove Shell enamel plates from their premises. Many thousand such plates were, in consequence, abolished and the work is still in progress. Shell's ways are different. [51]

Jack Beddington's promotion of the "countryside" as a theme was also evident in his sponsorship of the famous series of *Shell County Guides*. However, most of the credit for these has to go to the young John Betjeman, who first approached Beddington with the idea, and who became the general editor. It is noteworthy that this series, which began in 1934 with Betjeman's own "Shell Guide to Cornwall", is still being revised and added to.

Advertising conventions

Shell's ways were indeed different, but only insofar as brilliant publicity gained it credit for a policy that was shared with its two main rivals. The progressive removal of signs was in fact, according to a BP memorandum, "the result of an agreement between the different companies". [52] Whilst competitive rivalry between the three large oil distributing companies in the inter-war period was real, it was also strictly regulated. The close collaboration between BP, Anglo-American and Shell-Mex was openly acknowledged in the oil trade, where they were referred to as the "Combine". [53] According to C.T.Brunner,

[48] See David Mellor, "British Art in the 1930s", in Frank Gloversmith, (ed), *Class, Culture, and Social Change: a New View of the 1930s* (Brighton, 1977), pp. 195-196.
[49] BP 2301033; Nye, "Recollections", op. cit.
[50] *The Times*, 17 July 1930, p. 13. See also *That's Shell-That Is* (London, 1978).
[51] BP 2301039; P. Wright, op. cit., p.63.
[52] BP 78/38/19, "Comparative Statement of Publicity Policy", op. cit.
[53] See Brunner, op. cit., pp. 36-42. Brunner was in fact a senior employee of Shell-Mex

author of an authoritative account of the oil industry published in 1930, this had grown out of informal links during World War One. However, it was also reinforced by a defensive alliance designed to see off competition from smaller "pirate" companies selling cut-price Russian oil.[54] It was the loss of market share to the latter which in 1926 prompted these three oil companies to enter into a formal trade percentage agreement.[55]

This allocated quotas to the participants and introduced measures to reduce distribution costs. A number of inter-company committees were created and a wide range of marketing "conventions" were agreed. These went into exhaustive detail and were codified in a manual to be given to every branch manager.[56]

Co-operation over advertising was an important part of this process, as it was an area where expenditure could be easily reduced. Just as there were conventions relating to prices and other terms of trade, so there were understandings about the type of promotional activity that the companies could use and the amount of money that could be spent. Many of the more extravagant — and expensive — types of outdoor advertising were thus specifically excluded. Sky projection and streamers and other advertising from aircraft, airships and balloons were banned. Some publicity was normally allowed at a limited number of public gatherings; this included agricultural shows and motor vehicle exhibitions, but not dirt-track meetings.

There were also long and detailed restrictions on the issue of advertising signs and posters. In general, branch managers were reminded that signs were primarily intended to aid the passing motorist, rather than to help particular dealers. On no account was there to be any payment to a dealer to persuade him to erect a sign; and no sign issued was to have a greater value than £. 5. Signs were not to be placed within half a mile of any garage or filling station (with the exception of "special" signs). The use of "ray, daylight or reflector" types of signs was prohibited, as was the erection of "dummy pumps" (which were defined as any sign or structure purporting to represent a pump).

The conventions also laid down the manner in which signs and posters might be removed "by reason of amenities or under the roadside signs agreement". The policy was that where county councils had enforced bye-laws under the Petroleum (Consolidation) Act of 1928, companies would decline to issue signs or advertising globes to dealers, except the permitted slats for statutory signs. In regard to signs already in place, and where these were the

& BP.

54 Ibid, pp. 22-25, 36-42. For a detailed analysis see Julian Bowden, "That's the Spirit!: ROP and the British Oil Market, 1924-39", *Journal of European Economic History* Vol. 17, No. 3, Winter 1988, pp. 641-665.

55 BP S/231/1.

56 BP H18/21, W. D. Braithwaite, "Distribution of Motor Spirit in England", 2 May 1927.

property of dealers, the local authorities were to be informed that the companies had no power to compel their removal. In cases where a rental was being paid, however, those signs would be removed by a date to be agreed by all companies, "provided the local authority concerned gives an assurance that it genuinely intends carrying out the bye-laws without distinction between one company and another". Furthermore, when signs were thus removed, those sites were to be registered as prohibited sites and barred to other companies. [57]

Petrol advertising in Europe

There were to be similar cut-backs in petrol advertising signs in European countries, although these did not occur until the early 1930s. "The movement to abolish all road signs, in order to preserve the amenities of the countryside, is gathering strength everywhere", the manager of the Anglo-Persian publicity department reported in 1931. [58] The reason for the time-lag from developments in Britain was not altogether clear, but the fact that the European oil markets were smaller and less advanced was partly responsible. There were far fewer pumps and service stations to cause offence and these were kept very smart by the oil companies who owned them. Nevertheless, Anglo-Persian, Royal Dutch-Shell and the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey were seeking at this time to make substantial economies in the distribution costs incurred by their marketing companies in Europe. In a series of "As Is" agreements drawn up after the famous 1928 meeting at Achnacarry Castle in Scotland, not only did they undertake to support each other's market shares but they also agreed to eliminate unnecessary publicity, especially that spent on signs and posters. [59]

The chronology and extent of the resulting cut-backs varied in each European country. The degree of commitment to outdoor publicity was affected by the role of the state, and also by the nature of the marketing companies concerned; for they had their own local identities and managements, and did not always take kindly to pressure from head office to collaborate with their competitors. The following account can again only be documented from the archives of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, but sufficient light is cast on the role of the other participants in these attempts to reduce the number and type of petrol signs.

According to a survey undertaken by M.R. Bridgeman, manager of the

[57] BP 8204/15.

[58] BP 78/38/19, M. R. Bridgeman, Report on A.P.O.C. publicity in Europe, 3 March 1931.

[59] For an introduction to "As Is" see Christopher Tugendhat, *Oil: The Biggest Business* (London, 1968), pp. 97-112. A detailed analysis can be found in *The International Petroleum Cartel* (Federal Trade Commission, Washington, 1952), pp. 226-268.

Anglo-Persian publicity department (and later Chairman of BP), there were real differences of approach to publicity across Europe. Advertising was of much less strategic importance in France, for example, than in any other country. This was largely because the oil market was so heavily controlled by the French government which, through the *Office National des Combustibles Liquides,* set imports and determined many of the selling conditions. Because of these restrictions Anglo-Persian's French company, the *Société Générale des Huiles de Pétrole* (hereafter SGHP) which was established in 1921, was almost guaranteed a set share of petrol business. "No intensive publicity campaign is therefore necessary," reported Bridgeman, "and advertising is reduced to the smallest proportions sufficing to keep the name before the public. [60]

It was also government policy to place a heavy tax on outdoor advertising. This even applied to advertising on the pumps themselves, and was the reason why in France "the pump globes at service stations which are lighted at night are all plain white circular globes, those belonging to one company being indistinguishable from those of one another". However, SGHP and the other oil companies were able to make extensive use of murals painted on house walls and gables ("pignons") and these served to inform the motorist that he was approaching a pump or garage. "In many countries they might be regarded as fantastic or unsuitable" suggested Bridgeman, but "in France they do not seem inappropriate". [61] However, the most distinctive aspect of the company's publicity was thought to be its house colours of green and yellow. Even the uniforms of the service station attendants were in these colours. "There is no doubt that these colours are popular in France," it was reported, "for they are said to tone well with the French scenery. [62]

In the spring of 1931 the French subsidiaries of both Shell and Standard Oil of New Jersey announced their intention to withdraw all their roadside signs in order to preserve the beauty of the countryside. This was a public relations stunt according to SGHP, as there were comparatively few roadside signs in France, at least as compared with murals, and there was little evidence that they had marred the countryside. It was also "a way of escaping the taxation they had thus incurred through their road signs". [63]

In Belgium, by contrast, there was keen and intense competition in the oil market. It was in this country in 1919 that Anglo-Persian had first set up a European distribution outlet, through a company called *L'Alliance.* The general standard of advertising in the country was, according to Anglo-Persian's publicity manager, "greatly inferior to that which would be expected in England or France". Nevertheless, all the oil distributing companies used roadside signs

[60] BP 78/38/19, Bridgeman, "Report", op. cit.
[61] Ibid, Bridgeman, "Visit to S.G.H.P., Olex, & L'Alliance", 5-7 February 1932.
[62] *BP Naft Magazine*, Vol. VII, No. 4 (1931). For origin of the S.G.H.P colour scheme see Ferrier, op. cit., p. 500.
[63] BP 78/38/19, Meeting on publicity methods, Paris, 12-13 May 1931.

and advertisements painted on the walls of houses; and there were also a limited number of electric signs. *L'Alliance* had initially employed "Union Jack" signs and posters similar to those used in Britain, but it was soon realised that these were inappropriate. *L'Alliance* later introduced large "Catchlite" signs carrying the letters "BP". These lit up at night when a car's headlights reached them and "are very striking, unless as in England their effect is marred by the multiplicity". [64]

During 1931 both Shell and *L'Alliance* removed all of their roadside signs in Belgium and also substantially reduced the number of their painted wall advertisements. *L'Alliance* also retained a number of its "Catchlite" signs, but only those that warned motorists of a dangerous corner or that indicated the distance to a service station. Shell got valuable publicity for its action by distributing postcards to buyers showing a Shell signboard overthrown, with a commentary that read: "Shell first suppressed the hideous signboards so disfiguring to our landscape... Shell invite the other companies to follow suit and to suppress all signboards". [65]

Unfortunately, these initiatives were not followed by the American Petroleum Company, the subsidiary of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey. This company had not previously advertised in any scale in Belgium, but during 1931 had "rushed headlong into an advertising campaign" and had entered into contracts that still had two years to run. It was reported that the other distributing companies such as Purfina, Texas and Sinclair would certainly have followed the lead of Shell and *L'Alliance,* "if they were not afraid to see Standard solely advertising alongside the main road, no mention being made of their own Company". The following year Bridgeman sent the Managing Director of *L'Alliance* a copy of the advertising agreements operating in Britain, but he noted that "progress in this direction can only be made piece by piece" as existing contracts expired. However, a compromise was eventually reached and it was agreed that no further contracts would be made after 31 December 1933. [66]

In Germany, the development of distribution facilities occurred rather later than elsewhere, due to depressed post-war conditions. In 1926 Anglo-Persian acquired a marketing company in the country called "Olex". The house colours were blue and white and it used the letters "BP" enclosed within a shield. It should be noted, however, that "BP" was often assumed to stand for "Benzine und Petroleum" (petrol and kerosene). [67] As in other countries, the oil companies had erected a large number of roadside signs. These were supplemented by wall

[64] Ibid, Bridgeman, "Report", op. cit.

[65] Ibid, Bridgeman, "Visit" op. cit.; N. B. Fuller to Olex, 14 November 1931.

[66] BP 79/118/3, "Competition and arrangements with competitors", 1 December 1931; BP 78/38/19, Bridgeman, "Report" op. cit.; Bridgeman to L'Alliance, 23 March 1932.

[67] *BP Naft Magazine*, Vol. VII, No. 5 (1931).

lanterns, advertisements painted on walls and house tops, and by arrows pointing the way to the pumps. However, the Managing Director of Olex approved of the cut-backs in publicity in Britain and France and informed Anglo-Persian in London that "during recent years the tendency of our Authorities against roadside advertising has become still more pronounced than it was in the past". Late in 1931, therefore, Olex suggested to its leading competitors that they should collectively agree not to erect any further signs, and that those already in place should not be overhauled but taken down when dilapidated. The aim was that all road signs should disappear by 31 December 1933. [68]

Negotiations dragged on until a number of wide-ranging advertising restrictions were concluded at a meeting between representatives of the Standard, Shell and Olex in Hamburg on 26-27 October 1933. The accord was explicitly entered into "in order to realise economy according to the [As Is] London Memorandum". The scope and detail of the clauses made them comparable to those which had been drawn up for the British market. The intention was to do away with all superfluous signs. The companies thus agreed to renounce "all propaganda on sign boards at the entrance of a locality, on traffic tables, tables indicating the direction to be taken by vehicles, warning signs, stands regulating the traffic, at railway stations, outside or inside of vehicles belonging to third parties". It was nevertheless agreed that where a pump was hidden from view companies could erect a sign. [69]

Although these were voluntary restrictions, much of the impetus came from the knowledge that the German government was planning its own curbs. These were published in 1934 by the Advertising Council Board of German Economics ("Werberat der deutschen Wirtschaft") under the title of "9th Werbenovelle". In particular, it was proposed to regulate the number and position of illuminated signs that could be displayed. [70] The Law of 26 June 1935 for protecting the natural beauties of the Reich ("Reichsnaturschatzgesetz") was said to be "probably the most thorough-going measure" of the kind enacted by any government. [71] Olex had indeed warned London that "advertising in built-up areas by means of illuminated shields and globes, electric signs, flags, canvas signs, the painting of walls and house gables, etc. and even the use of house colours such as our own blue and yellow, has, in the past few years, been the subject of increasing attacks". And when the companies renewed their advertising agreement in January 1936 they decided to limit the number of illuminated signs and to end the painting of gables and houses. [72]

The particular house colours used by Olex were the subject of some internal

[68] BP 78/38/22, "Publicity by road signs", 11 November 1931.
[69] Ibid, Minutes of meeting in Hamburg, 26-27 October 1933.
[70] Ibid, Olex to A.P.O.C., 14 May 1936.
[71] The view of Lord Howard of Penrith in C. Williams-Ellis, (ed), *Britain and the Beast* (London, 1937), p. 283.
[72] BP 78/38/22, Olex to A.P.O.C., 14 May 1936.

debate, as Anglo-Persian had suggested a change to the green and yellow used by SGHP and *L'Alliance*. "It seems a waste that we should not also in Germany utilise the green that we employ in neighbouring countries," argued Eric Berthoud, an English Director on the Board of Olex, "as it certainly harmonises best with natural surroundings and goes some way to meet the perpetual (and justified) outcry that petrol pumps constitute a blot on the landscape". However, he had to point out that the cost of repainting everything in a new livery would be prohibitive. Such a change would also have been foolhardy at a time when the German authorities were endeavouring to persuade distributing companies to give up their individual house colours and to unify the colour of their pumps in either grey or green. [73]

In Switzerland, Anglo-Persian's subsidiary was a company called "BP" Benzin-und Petroleum A.G. (hereafter BPAG), which had been created in 1927. [74] "The countryside in Switzerland has, as yet, not suffered to any great extent from the erection of hideous signs in most picturesque places," the company informed London. It did display large sign boards on village approach roads however, but only a limited number owing to "fees, rent and taxes". The principal type of sign was a triangular iron plate, enamelled in the colours green, yellow and black with the letter "BP" in the centre. Such signs were placed on telegraph posts and walls opposite pumps, and were also used in combination with an with an arrow to show the motorist that the next "BP" pump was only 50 yards away. [75] Nevertheless, BPAG agreed with Anglo-Persian in London that it should "set an example to others to «keep the countryside beautiful« by abolishing its roadside publicity". It therefore decided to erect no more signs, except for those which consisted of "an arrow or other sign to denote a mal [sic] visible pump". In addition, it initiated a proposal to its Shell and Standard rivals for the removal of signs after a given period of time. [76]

In Denmark Anglo-Persian's associated company was the *Det Forende Olie Kompagni A/S* (hereafter DFOK), formed in May 1920. Bridgeman noted that the British ownership of the company possessed great propaganda value in Denmark, "while in certain other countries, notably France, the exact opposite is the case" [77] The question of roadside publicity was discussed when Managing Director Kaj Tersling visited London in September 1930. DFOK had a large number of both painted and enamelled road signs, especially near the entrance to towns and villages, and Tersling agreed that the publicity value of such signs was minimal. It was decided that their use would be restricted to advertising new pumps. Resources would be concentrated instead on making

[73] Ibid, Olex to A.P.O.C., 4 Jan. 1936; Berthoud to Medlicott, 19 August 1935.
[74] *BP Naft Magazine*, Vol. VIII, No. 5 (1932).
[75] BP 79/118/7, Olex to A.P.O.C., 10 December 1930.
[76] BP 78/38/19, 24 November 1931; BP 78/38/7, 5 August 1931.
[77] Ibid, Bridgeman, "Report", op. cit.

the "Blauen Pumpen" efficient and attractive in their blue and white liveries. [78]

The first sales in Sweden were made in 1924 through DFOK, which used an independent wholesale company. It was not until 1928 that Anglo-Persian established a new distributing company based at Stockholm called Svenska "B.P". Its house colours were those of the Danish company and it also placed road signs at the entrance of all villages where it had pumps. "The use of them is as a rule met with strong opposition by most people," the company informed Anglo-Persian, "owing to the offensiveness of these signs and bills in the midst of surrounding nature". [79]

Although significant numbers of roadside petrol signs were removed, the oil distributing companies operating in European countries continued to place greater reliance on outdoor publicity than was the case in Britain. This was no doubt partly due to the absence, except in Germany, of strong opposition to signs. Yet the companies did not have a real alternative, as they found that press advertising was not as effective as in the British market. For example, in 1931 SGHP devoted only 19% of its advertising budget to press advertising, compared with 41% on roadside signs. In Germany, however, Olex spend 31% of its advertising budget on press advertisements and only 23% on signs. [80]

Conclusion

Illuminated signs and hoardings are now subject to the strict control of the planning authorities, and so it is difficult to recreate the sense of shock experienced during the early 1920s at seeing signs "mushroom" along roads and at beauty spots. The only comparable phenomenon has perhaps been the proliferation of estate agents' "For Sale" signs in Britain during the boom of the housing market in early 1980s.

The oil companies were responsible for some of the worst aesthetic offences in this respect by "advertising on the landscape". Yet they soon realised that it was in their interest to remove these offending signs, provided that this could be done *collectively*. Their shrewd adoption of a «green» image soon followed, as did their support for the new campaign to preserve the countryside. In the process the oil companies introduced a number of innovative promotional techniques: these ranged from painting petrol pumps in the environmentally friendly colour of green, to the use of lorry bills portraying British beauty spots. They also adopted a quite unique voluntary code of advertising practice.

Undoubtedly, an important reason why the oil companies were so willing to

[78] BP 79/118/4, 26 September 1930; BP 78/13/19, 18 November 1931.

[79] BP 78/38/21, Svenska "BP" to A.P.O.C., 3 November 1930. *BPNaft Magazine*, Vol. VIII, No. 4 (1932).

[80] BP 78/38/19, "Comparative statement of publicity policy", 12-13 May 1931.

cut-back their outdoor publicity was that this was in accord with a wider commitment to reducing marketing expenditure. This lay behind the later attempts to eliminate unnecessary signs and posters in other European countries. In these markets there was little of the grassroots hostility to petrol signs so evident in Britain, although there was strong pressure from the German government. In the event, whilst many signs and posters were reduced, there continued to be a greater reliance on them than was the case in Britain.

The British conservation lobby rightly drew attention to the need to remove excessive petrol signs and to revamp the appearance of service stations. However, it is clear that some critics, if not anti-industrial, were at least motivated by a vision of the countryside that was essentially conservative. There was some truth in C.T. Brunner's argument that the attack on petrol signs sprang in part from "propaganda against motor transport in general by people who had their own reasons for wishing to see it throttled".[81] Even Patrick Abercrombie, one of the pioneers of academic Town and Country Planning, occasionally betrayed his sensibilities in this respect. It is thus very ironic that petrol signs regarded as a "blot on the landscape" in Britain in the 1920s are now avidly sought by collectors, and have acquired respectability with the passage of time.

[81] Brunner, op. cit., p. 129.