

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Stuart Bowell, The History of Advertising

Advertising is 'history around us and today's history in the making.' This was the view of Stuart Bowell as he explored the *History of Advertising* at the March meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickingham Village Hall. He thinks that advertising is a mirror of the time as it reflects and moulds taste. Adverts from the past can now be quite controversial in their content but they do show the attitudes of people at the time they were produced.

Investigating advertising can provide an interesting insight into the past. Stuart Bowell called it 'a barometer of public taste.' Old adverts often mention items that are no longer available, such as Virol which was a malt extract for 'delicate children' and 'anaemic girls.' He explained that adverts have tended to be linked to trade. The earliest were simple signs which showed the types of goods available but advertising expanded in the late 18th Century because of the influence of the Industrial Revolution. Manufacturers had surplus goods to sell. Larger communities in the expanding towns and cities absorbed some of these articles but improvements in transport through turnpike roads, canals and especially the railways led to the creation of national and international markets. Advertising spread in scale with these new opportunities.

Stuart Bowell outlined the different types of advertisements during the 19th Century. Newspaper adverts became more common and the front page of many was occupied by adverts. Paper and painted posters were commonplace. Trade directories and railway directories, like Bradshaw's, also offered openings for advertisers. By the 1870s increasing literacy and cheap transport led to adverts being placed on buses and trains to take advantage of the captive audience. Even the stairs of buses and train stations had adverts on the risers to bombard the senses of travellers. However, enamelled signs are the most enduring adverts. Some still hang on walls in their original setting and many have been preserved in museums. These signs were often put up in strategic places like crossroads or corners. A tablet man would hire a place for a number of years. For example, Stephens ink would be advertised outside stationery shops.

Some advertisers made outrageous claims which would not be permitted today. Pears soap was 'matchless for the complexion' and often used angelic looking children in its posters. Fry's cocoa offered 'no better food.' Swan soap was 'absolutely pure.' Questionable combinations were suggested in some adverts. Oxo was 'excellent in milk for children!'

The Victorian value of thrift could underlie the message of adverts. Nectar was 'the most economical tea.' Brooke Bond tea offered stamps on the packets which could be collected and exchanged for cash. Similarly, Bryant and May patriotically urged support for 'home industries' but said little about the appalling conditions of its workers.

The 20th Century saw the invention of new media for advertisers to use. Products like Ovaltine were advertised on Radio Luxemburg and used catchy songs to spread their message. Cinema programmes had adverts presented by Pearl and Dean. Commercial television began in September 1955 with Gibbs toothpaste as the first advert. Celebrities were used to project an image. For example, Denis Compton the England cricketer and footballer advertised Brylcreem. The power of these adverts was shown by the Heritage Circle audience being able to remember messages from the 1960s and 1970s. 'Esso gives you' 'happy motoring.' 'Go to work' 'on an egg.' 'You're never alone' 'with a Strand.'

Stuart Bowell also used a number of pictures of adverts to illustrate a fascinating and, at times, nostalgic talk which captured the imagination of his audience, evoking fond memories.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at Rickinghall Village Hall at 7.30pm on Wednesday 23 April when Peter Driver will be presenting *It's a Grave Business*, a light hearted look at graveyards and memorials. New members and guests are welcome. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy