

British Seaside Posters

Over the last five years Christie's have held an annual sale of British seaside and travel posters. The advent of the holiday season and the approach of the sixth sale in this series provide an opportunity to examine this market and to give an indication of the parameters that define this market.

Railways in Britain

The history of the railways in Britain is an enormous subject about which many people know a great deal. Indeed, there are specialist publications on almost every aspect of railway history and the National Railway Museum in York is a treasure house of objects. The Museum also holds what is effectively the national archive of railway advertising art. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London also has many railway poster images amongst its extensive poster and advertising collection.

In simple terms, and in relation to poster design and advertising history, the story of the railways in Britain may be divided into three periods. The first is the period from the origins of the railways through to 1923. The second period ranges from 1923, the year that four major railway companies were formed, or grouped, together regionally through to 1947 when the railways were nationalised. The third period spans from 1947 to the present. For practical purposes it is fair to say that this last period came to an end at some point in the 1960s when the British seaside

holiday was effectively killed off by a combination of cheap package holidays abroad, mass car ownership and evolving consumer sophistication.

The three periods of railway history outlined above each have their own style of poster advertising determined by a combination of economics, technology and taste. The characteristics of the first period reflect both the prevailing notions of good aesthetic taste and the peculiarities of an advertising environment that was not yet fully developed.

The organisation of the railways was such that most of the companies required little advertising as each operated within a form of regional monopoly. Furthermore, within the context of an environment defined by many medium sized organisations advertising remained uncoordinated and haphazard in its display. It should be also be recognised that poster images from this early period of development in railway advertising are rare.

It took until the beginning of the 1920s for the nascent advertising industry to acknowledge that fewer, larger posters displayed on special sites were more effective than many small posters. Coincidentally, the extra cost of special display sites forced the industry to begin to be more creative in its messages and communication. The effectiveness of this strategy defined the process whereby the industry justified its fees and established the conditions in which poster design could develop in sophistication.

The second period identified above is characterised by the creation of four large and regionally based railway organisations. The creation of these groups was dependent on command structures that could operate over large distances and established an environment in which the effective display of posters could be co-ordinated and enforced. The larger scope and scale of the companies also required them to project their identities and services over a wider area. This, it was acknowledged, could be effectively done through poster communication. These larger

organisations therefore created the conditions in which poster design could flourish as a key strategy of public address in the period before the electronic media. It should be remembered that poster printing during this period was by colour lithography whereby prints were produced by drawing each of the individual colour separations on stone by hand and eye and in reverse. The make-ready time to prepare the stones for printing made this amongst the most expensive forms of commercial printing.

The four large railway groups were the Southern Railway (SR), the Great Western (GWR), the London, Midland and Scottish (LMS) and the London and North Eastern (LNER). Each of these companies was served by its own London terminus and each had its own specific requirements in poster advertising.

The Southern served an area to the south east and south west of London. Its primary business was commuter traffic into and out of London. In addition it provided the beginnings of European travel through its cross-channel services from Victoria. Southern Railway advertising was aimed at encouraging leisure use of the network and to attracting visitors to the south coast and to Navy days at Portsmouth and Chatham. Resorts such as Brighton, Bournemouth and Eastbourne required little extra advertising as their relative proximity to London assured them of a steady trade. The Southern were pioneers of electric power and produced a series of posters drawing attention to the speed and environmental benefits of this technology.

The Great Western Railway enjoyed a special status for having been the creation of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The network served the southwest, Wales and the Midlands to Crewe. Its perception of itself was such that, as an organisation, it attached little value to publicity for its own sake. The posters that it commissioned were generally in a rather conservative style and directed viewers to the genteel attractions of the Cornwall, Devon and Welsh coast resorts. Both the Great

Western advertising and that of the Southern were limited, in the end, by the lack of direct competition for their regional services.

The status of the two northern facing companies could not have been more different. Both the London, Midland and Scottish and the London and North Eastern served Scotland through the competing east and west coast routes. The large populations of the Midlands and the industrial north provided a rich trade in holiday and excursion traffic for the railway companies. The resorts of the Lancashire coast and those from of the east coast found themselves in a competition to attract visitors that was determined, to a large extent, by the opportunities afforded by the two northern railway companies. Of the two, the LNER was by far the more dynamic under Advertising Manager William Teasdale.

Before examining some of the posters in greater detail we should first describe the peculiar and specific economy of poster production that these conditions fostered.

The political economy of railway advertising

The “golden age” of railway poster advertising (1923-1947) was made possible by the co-incidence of several factors. The standard display format of railway posters became the Quad Royal sized poster that measured 50 by 40 inches. The large landscape format gave artists and printers full scope to explore the full potential of the medium. Only the larger print firms were equipped with the plant and artisan skills necessary to print these sized posters using stone lithography. Accordingly, these railway posters were printed by a handful of the biggest printing businesses in Britain. Most of these print firms had grown under the patronage of a powerful local client and were regionally dominant. In addition to the main print works they also had London offices.

The example of Jarrold's in Norwich may be used to illustrate the point. Jarrold's were the printers used by the Coleman's mustard business to produce labels and packaging. Jarrold's expanded

as the demands of the Coleman's account grew during the 19th century. Coleman's were one of the first firms to make use of the advertising poster at the end of the 19th century and Jarrold's developed a specialist department to supply this work. The plant, time and labour required to produce coloured advertising images of poster size placed this work at a premium and Jarrold's began to solicit commissions of this specialist work. The scale and quality of the work along with its public display conferred a "trophy status" on it for the print firm. Accordingly, they made every effort to produce the highest quality work in the poster department. This tended to further increase the cost of the work to clients. It should be emphasised that the large railway poster images of the 1920s and 30s were produced, notwithstanding their commercial status, at the technical limits of the artisan skills available. In terms of printing quality they have never been bettered.

Luckily, a system of collaboration between the railway companies, the resorts advertised and the printers developed to spread the costs of the campaign more evenly. Where the railway company was advertising a resort destination the cost of printing was met from the budgets of the town. The town could justify this expense to its ratepayers on the basis that it would attract visitors and increase the local economy. The printer could proceed with the make-ready secure in the knowledge that his, relatively high, costs would be met. The distribution and display costs were met by the railway companies. Because of the limited display sites available on railway platforms the editions of these commercial posters were always smaller than one imagines. A typical edition might run to 1000 or 2000 copies. Most of these were used. The few that survive were generally saved by printers, designers or enthusiasts. The rarity of these images is not yet factored into the pricing structure of the market.

This arrangement had two important consequences for the design of these posters. The first was that the printer's had a natural tendency to view this work as a self-advertisement. Accordingly, they promoted colour lithography as a process capable of every naturalistic effect. Stylistically,

this manifest itself in the promotion of “artistic advertising.” It was only when competition intensified that efforts to reduce costs forced the kinds of simplifications in image making that are characteristic of 1930’s poster design. The second significant consequence was that the poster developed, through the client’s demands, into an image assembled to project the best features of the resort. Accordingly, the resultant images are often very different from reality. This contrasts significantly with the early period of advertising art that tended to promote products through recognisably realistic images. The railway posters deviation from straightforward realism made a contribution to the development of a sophisticated, allusive and poetic visual language of advertising in Britain.

The Artists

The opportunities for artists to produce poster designs during the 1920s and 30s were widespread. The period is notable for the emergence of a group of specialised poster designers who were able to serve the new advertising industry. In addition there were opportunities for fine artists to engage with new audiences, beyond the gallery, through advertising.

William Teasdale was appointed Advertising Manager of the LNER in 1923. He immediately identified a course of action to promote the company through poster advertising and to develop a corporate identity based on the quality of service, technical expertise and partisan cultural regionalism in respect to the area served by the railway. Teasdale immediately began to commission posters for these various themes and was quick to recognise the extra potential that good design might bring to his project. By 1926 Teasdale had identified the kinds of work that served his interests best and those designers whose work was most effective. In order to advance his project Teasdale contracted the five best poster designers to the LNER. The five were Fred Taylor (1875-1963), Frank Mason (1876-1965), Austin Cooper (1890-1964), Frank Newbould (1887-1951) and Tom Purvis (1888-1957). The LNER also commissioned designs from many other artists including Sir Frank Brangwyn and Dame Laura Knight.

In general terms these designers were associated with the progressive school of advertising art that favoured the simplifications in image design made possible by solid blocks of flat colour. Taylor was a specialist in architectural themes (cathedrals and historic houses), Mason was a specialist in maritime and shipping subjects. Austin Cooper produced posters, often in sets, that used humour and wit to communicate their messages. Frank Newbould produced poster images that used flat colour but eschewed dramatic simplifications. The results were both contemporary and sophisticated. The major figure amongst these artists was Tom Purvis. Purvis was the champion of a poster style based on the dramatic and effective use of flat colours. These were arranged so as to produce remarkably realistic perspective effects so that the images seemed to be both optical illusion and, at the same time, realistic.

The Purvis technique was not new. It was based on the 19th century discovery of Japanese woodcuts and the perspective illusions of the “floating world.” The flat colour style of the Japanese had quickly been appropriated by poster designers around Europe. These including Toulouse Lautrec in France, the Beggerstaff Brothers (William Nicholson and James Pryde) in England and Lucien Bernhard and Ludwig Hohlwein in Germany. The aesthetic simplifications of the Purvis style had the added benefit of reducing the number of colours required to achieve the finished design so that economy of conception was linked to dramatic impact and reduced costs.

The contracts offered by the LNER left meagre pickings for the other railway companies. Luckily there were many fine artists only too willing to accept commissions. A complete index of artists associated with railway advertising is beyond the scope of these notes but we should mention the most significant designers linked to the other railway companies.

The most coherent and consistent challenge mounted to the LNER designers was promoted through Norman Wilkinson (1878-1971) at the LMS. Wilkinson was a maritime artist who had

worked, during WW1, on the problems of camouflage at sea. His own poster style made use of flat colours, realistic composition and a subdued palate to create atmospheric nautical scenes and landscape views. The rather conservative tone of Wilkinson's posters set the mood of the LMS campaign that was augmented by the creation of a roster of artists drawn from the ranks of the Royal Academy. Amongst the artists associated with LMS poster design are Lamorna Birch (1869-1955), Stanhope Forbes (1857-1947), Sir William Russell Flint (1880-1969) and Sir William Orpen (1878-1931). The LMS also looked to the continent and were able to commission the French master A M Cassandre to design for them.

Within the limited objectives of their advertising campaigns both the SR and the GWR produced many fine posters. Leslie Carr (no dates available) and Kenneth Shoesmith (1890-1939) were each commissioned on several occasions by SR. The "War and Peace" posters of the railway centenary by Helen McKie (d1957) are probably the most technically sophisticated poster images of their time. The two Quad Royal images show an apparently similar view of Waterloo Station. One shows the station dressed for the "black-out." The other shows in civilian and ceremonial dress. The lighting of the views is completely different and so the posters represent two separate and immensely complicated pieces of work. I mention these posters as exemplars of the skill and craft required in poster design and printing.

The relative conservatism of GWR advertising was reflected in their general choice of artistic views of seaside and resort. These were mostly competently produced. Their most interesting posters were a set of six designed by the Modernist Edward McKnight Kauffer (1890-1954) in 1933.

Collecting posters

Pre-war

The railway posters produced before WW2 are now recognised as part of a “golden age” of railway advertising when craft, skill and steam combined to produce images that evoke a glamour and sophistication of past times. Accordingly, the pricing structure for these posters has developed to reflect the quality of the design, the cultural significance of the image and the rarity of the poster. An ordinary Quad Royal poster from before WW2 is now valued at about £1000. Poster images recognised as significant in design terms are reaching a higher level of between £2000 and £3000. At the top of the scale are the posters of Tom Purvis whose best images could command in excess of £7000. There are also generic micro categories of images so that posters with a bathing beauty or steam engine command a premium. Similarly, the posters advertising Devon and Cornwall are generally more popular than those advising more workaday destinations.

Post-war

The post-war railway environment was dominated by the creation of British Railways (BR) in 1937. The convergence of nationalised structure and post-war austerity made for a bleak advertising environment. By the time things picked up the world had changed and package holidays and cars had spelt the end of the railway advertising poster.

The post-war railway posters probably represent the entry point for collectors to this market. The posters are generally half the size of their pre-war precursors. They are usually Double Royal size that measures 25 by 40 inches portrait. Accordingly, their visual impact is less. The posters were produced using photo-mechanical and offset lithography and address a more populist market. The glamour and sophistication of the 1930s resorts is replaced with an easier, more relaxed projection. The obvious absence of sophistication in these images had made them ripe for the contemporary re-readings of nostalgia and irony. Prices for post-war BR posters begin at about £300 and rise to, maybe, £1500 for an image with bikini clad beauty.

Conservation and display

The primary reason to collect English seaside posters is to display them. They have scale and colour and a jaunty holiday feel that makes them ideal for contemporary taste. The poster can be safely displayed in normal light levels. Any folds, creases and minor losses within the poster may be made good by specialist conservation. This will usually involve placing the mount on a linen or japans tissue support. The acidity of the paper will be neutralised so that the poster is stable over time. The costs of conservation vary depending on the amount of work required.

For framing it is recommended that the Perspex or glass of the frame is kept away from the surface of the poster.

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