

Stephens' Inks in Popular Culture

Research by Stewart Wild

For well over a century, Stephens was a household name. The company's ink and stationery products were used in almost every classroom and office environment and were on sale in every high street. The Civil Service and government departments were supplied with Stephens' ink by the Stationery Office.

Apart from wood stains and ink in a variety of styles and colours, the company also manufactured and sold fountain pens; stamp pads and endorsing ink; stapling machines; gum mucilage under the name of Gripfix and later, LePage's; typewriter ribbons and carbon paper; wooden rulers and blackboard chalk; and even crayons and sealing wax.

Advertising

Stephens' advertising was seen everywhere, in newspapers and magazines and in high-street stationers and bookshops. Outdoor advertising ranged from enamel panels at railway stations to thermometers in several sizes in newsagents' shops and on the sides of buildings.

Stephens' products were exported all over the world, and outdoor Stephens' advertising thermometers have been spotted and photographed on buildings as far away as a post office in Istanbul, Turkey; the Baron Hotel in Aleppo, Syria; a railway station in Juliaca, Peru; and the Settlers' Museum in Dunedin, New Zealand.

Stephens' enamel signs and thermometers have been seen on the internet in locations as far apart as Raipur, India; Montevideo, Uruguay; Manitoba, Canada; and Pennsylvania, USA.

Some items even found their way to Antarctica where Stephens' inks and carbon paper were used on early twentieth-century polar expeditions led by famous explorers such as the Norwegian Carsten Borchgrevink and Australia's Douglas Mawson.

Movie appearances

Stephens' large wall-mounted advertising thermometers were a common sight on many UK high streets; one was part of the story in Ealing Studios' celebrated 1949 comedy *Passport to Pimlico*.

At the beginning of the film, a close-up shot features a Stephens' thermometer outside Stanley Holloway's shop. It shows the temperature rising – Pimlico's residents declare its independence to become part of Burgundy – then later falling dramatically as the borough resumes its London status at the end of the film.

Stephens' enamel advertising panels were a common sight on railway stations and many can still be seen to this day on display in railway and town museums. One was glimpsed briefly on the wall of the waiting room in the classic 1938 film *Brief Encounter*, shot at Carnforth station in Lancashire, while another is still in place at Bewdley station, Worcestershire, on the restored Severn Valley Railway heritage line between Kidderminster and Bridgnorth.

Entertainment

In the middle of the twentieth century, a popular song among rugby clubs and the like was a ribald ditty entitled: "They called the bastard Stephen ('cos that was name of the ink!)". Older folk still remember the catchy tune today.

In March 1964 a play with the same unusual title, written by Keith Waterhouse, featured at the Little Theatre, Bristol, part of the Bristol Old Vic. Keith Waterhouse went on to write over two dozen successful plays, including "Billy Liar" and "Jeffrey Bernard is Unwell".

London Buses

For nearly eighty years, from 1855 to 1933, the capital's main bus operator was the London General Omnibus Company. The bus conductors sold printed paper tickets, punched with a hole to show the passenger's boarding point. For many years the back of the tickets carried the words *Stephens Ink*; examples of this inexpensive advertising are on display in The Stephens Collection.

Toy vehicles

Die-cast metal toy vehicles have always been popular among collectors: Dinky Toys, Matchbox and Lledo/Days Gone are three of the best-known manufacturers. Swiss company Eligor produced and distributed worldwide a toy replica of a 1934 Ford V8 Camionette van bearing the Stephens inkblot and the word *Ink* on both sides and the rear doors.

Lledo/Days Gone made a model of a 1939 Chevrolet van bearing the inkblot, *Stephens Inks*, and images of an ink bottle and a fountain pen. There was also a Matchbox model of a similarly branded Model-T Ford van. Examples are in The Stephens Collection.

Nowadays

In the twenty-first century, Stephens artefacts, especially wall signs and thermometers, are still to be seen, many in city museums, some in private collections, and are much sought after – they fetch good prices in salerooms and on internet auction sites. One of the best displays in the UK is in north London, at The Stephens Collection in Finchley.

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