# LETTERING AND SIGNS ON BUILDINGS
# c. 1850-1900

COVER
Court House, Bairnsdale, c. 1892.

During the second half of the nineteenth century various decorative letter
faces were created by designers in the gothic revival and arts and crafts
modes. These exotic faces were sometimes specially designed for buildings
in Victoria and can be found on examples dating from the last decades of the
nineteenth century and the early years of this century. Because each face
was designed for the building it appears on they are generally not
transferable from one example to another, unlike the universal types of
utilitarian lettering described throughout this Bulletin.

# LETTERING AND SIGNS
# ON BUILDINGS c. 1850–1900

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# FOREWORD

This publication was first produced by the Victorian National
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R.D. Davidson
Chairman
Australian Council of National Trusts

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

# EXPLANATORY NOTE

The terms used in this bulletin to describe lettering faces are based on those used to describe letter type in printing. Old signwriters used different terms to the now widely known printers terms. Because the signwriters terms are not so widely known it was decided to use the printers terms throughout the bulletin.

What is called Egyptian face in this bulletin is known to signwriters as Footed Block. Ionic and Clarendon are known as Clarendon Block. In Footed Block all parts of the letter are of the same thickness or weight. In Clarendon Block there are thick and thin strokes with block serifs.

San-serif (or grotesque) is referred to by signwriters as Block Lettering. The Fat Faces are known as Old Roman Style, and Fat Italics as Old Roman Italics.

Tuscan Faces are variously known as Antique Style, Old Fashioned Style, Fish Tail, or Tuscan Full Block.

Mr. W. Elsum of the Melbourne College of Decoration drew our attention to the terminology used by signwriters.

The guidelines for lettering and signs set out in this Bulletin are based on photographic evidence from country towns, gold mining towns and suburban areas. While the styles of lettering recorded in the Bulletin seem to have been in use well into the twentieth century, an absence of adequately detailed illustrations earlier than the 1850's makes it difficult to establish general lettering practices in the first half of the nineteenth century. What evidence there is from the first half of the nineteenth century suggests that lettering on buildings was in the restrained faces of San Serif (Grotesque). The evidence also suggests that signs on buildings were not so extensively used as they were after the substantial development of urban centres in the 1850's. Some buildings appear to have had small signs on them, and may have used mixed faces for different lines in the sign. Along with San Serif faces, some of the exotic faces such as Fat Faces, San Serif Compressed, and Fat Italics would have been used. In the absence of any detailed information on early signs and their lettering it is suggested that great care should be exercised in applying this Bulletin to the period before 1850.

# LETTERING AND SIGNS ON BUILDINGS

The most ephemeral feature on buildings built before the First World War has been the signs and lettering originally on them. Of the many buildings surviving from the nineteeth century, virtually nothing remains today of the great variety of those signs. And yet, at the turn of the century, old photographs from all over Australia attest to the fine displays of nineteenth century signs and lettering which were then a vibrant and sometimes dominant feature of city and country buildings.



LaTL *Jubilee History of the City of South Melbourne* (1905), p. 137. South Melbourne, cnr. Victoria Avenue and Merton Street, c. 1905.

But not everything has disappeared, and it is surprising how many remnants of this rich past of lettering and signs are revealed to the observant eye. Actively looking for the remains of these details has its rewards. Perhaps one of the most important benefits of cultivating such acuteness in observation is that it helps one develop an understanding and feeling for the styles of 19th century lettering and the types of signs put on buildings.

The most impressive and obvious remains of old signs are the examples of "permanent" lettering cut into stone or raised in cement render on many 19th century public, commercial, and private buildings. Many banks, hotels and terrace houses used this type of lettering. But not all these examples come to us unchanged and there are reminders that raised

evidence that such lettering was once on the building. But sometimes the raised lettering has been so skilfully removed that no trace survives and only the existence of an old photograph will reveal the old raised lettering. It sometimes also comes as a surprise to discover through the aid of a photograph that some words in a sign of raised letters have been added at a later date. The change of ownership or a change in the name of the building is the most common reason for tampering with this type of lettering.

Of the many less permanent painted signs, some survive untouched on side walls, and some might be found on parapets or under old verandahs, perhaps with the original lettering barely legible under later coats of cracked or worn paint. A very few signs have been rescued from old shops at some indefinite date in the past and kept as curios either by the present owners or as exhibits in a town or folk musuem. All these facets of lettering and signs can be revealed to the alert observer. However, from such fragmentary examples one cannot appreciate the types and variety of signs and lettering used on 19th century buildings. It is only from old photographs that it is possible to establish more broadly the character and details of the vanished signs and lettering. Other sources are also of value in revealing this lost work: newspapers, building journals, and account dockets sometimes show an engraving of a building with an indication of its signs and lettering. But however extensively one searches, the full and complete picture will never be revealed for old photographs and illustrations and surviving buildings reveal only a part of the nineteenth century environment which once existed but has since been changed or destroyed.

One intention of this Bulletin is to encourage by persuasion the use of appropriate lettering and signs on old buildings. With some old buildings, those that are considered historically important, there might be a strongly expressed requirement that only a particular type of sign and specific lettering faces be used. In the range between gentle persuasion and encouragement and a firm requirement, and quite independently of any enthusiasm for using old lettering faces, there is one problem always present. The problem is that the subject matter of an old sign (as distinct from the lettering faces and the shape and materials of the sign) may be entirely inappropriate for modern reproduction and use. A cheerfully made decision to repaint a building in its original paint colours would more than likely not be able also to be extended to reproducing the subject matter of any signs that may have been on the buildings: everything about the use, ownership, and types of goods sold will, in all probability, have changed. Because of this problem, this Bulletin does not set out to champion the literal recreation of old signs exactly as they once were.

# EXTERIOR LETTERING — THE BASIC FACES

Generally, external signs advertised the name of the establishment, and/or the owner or occupier, and/or the type of establishment. In many cases the lettering used was of a simple unembellished type set out as uniform capital letters. These types have been taken as normal practice and more florid faces are considered exotic. The photographic evidence suggests that in restoration work care should be taken in using florid or exotic faces. They should only be used where there is surviving evidence of such lettering having been used on the particular building being repainted. Lower case faces were not used on external signs and the mixture of lower case with upper case was not used in nineteenth century lettering schemes. While the general practice was to use uniform capital letters, some small number of signs have words set out in capitals but with the first letter (and sometimes the last) slightly taller than the other letters.

The most *common faces* appear to have been:

*Egyptian* (Antique). Letters have unbracketed slab serifs, are normally of an even line and are heavy. They are normally square in section.

*Ionic* (Fat Clarendon). Letters are not unlike Egyptian but have bracketed slab serifs which introduces a curve which flows into the stem of the letter.

*Grotesque* (sans serif). This type has letters of an even thickness without serifs and with each stroke thick in the manner of Egyptian. San serif seems to have been the expression of modernity and functionalism in England in the 1850's (Nesbitt, p.162).

Less commonly used faces were:

*Tuscan.* A decorative face with many gay and lively variations. Letters have curled serifs or bi- or tri-furcated terminations. In some cases some sort of feature is introduced half-way up the letter stem. (These faces are often associated with hotels and eating houses.)

*Fat-faces.* Based on a marked contrast between thick and thin strokes with some letters (C, G and S) having barbed terminals. (Sometimes used for a proprietor's name in a sign of mixed faces.)

*Fat Italics.* Letters have an exaggerated contrast between thick and thin strokes with the thin strokes terminating in either a round blob or a barbed serif.

*Fat Gothics.* A highly decorative curvilinear face. (Associated with chemist shops and newspapers.)

*San Serif Compressed.* (Grotesque compressed.)

The old photographs show that the lettering used for external signs on buildings was characterized by boldness and clarity of expression. Even in poor quality and amateurish signs the lettering was always clearly formed such that from a distance it remained legible. That in this Bulletin most of the evidence for the description of signs has been assembled from small photographs is a testament to the legibility of the signs. As well, most signs had a light background on which dark letters appeared.

The lettering faces were usually of an austere type with an absence of more florid faces. Sans-serif or grotesque types predominated. A small, but distinctive



LaTL H4634
Fitzroy, 227 Smith Street, c. 1889

number of signs used Clarendon or Ionic faces. The bold Egyptian (Antique) faces found in some nineteent century signs were not as widely used as the sans-ser faces. Only a very small number of signs used Tuscan faces, and the Tuscan faces were always decoratively restrained and in comparison with some goldmining settlements, such as Gulgong and Hill End in New South Wales, lettering on buildings throughout Australia was austere and reserved. Something of the dominance of sans-serif faces and the ensuing austere appearance of signs can be appreciated from the old signs in Beechworth. All the different examples of lettering faces used in signs in Beechworth, as revealed in old photographs, group in the following broad categories:

| sans-serif alone | Clarendon or Ionic | sans-serif and Ionic | Tuscan alone | sans-serif and Tuscan | Modern fa or Fat-fac |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 141 | 18 | 10 | 4 | 4 | 5 |

Some buildings had a number of signs on them, either painted directly onto defined areas on the carcase of the building, or as sign panels fixed onto the building, or as modelled lettering in stucco. Some signs used two different faces on one sign. Only eight sign fields used Tuscan, whereas some 28 used Ionic, and some 155 used sans-serif, and only a small number of these sign fields used more than one face — that is, one face being used to set out, say, the name of the owner and another being used to set out the name and type of business. Ten sign fields used Ionic for some words and sans-serif for others, and only four used Tuscan with sans-serif. The four fat-face examples (a thickened Roman) are from the late 1850's and 1860's and it appears that this refined face passed out of fashion after the 1860's. By the end of the century lettering had become severely austere and the situation revealed in Beechworth is to be found in other towns, in suburban areas, and in the capital cities of nineteenth century Australia. There were no examples of Egyptian (Antique) faces in the signs in Beechworth, even though this face was reasonably common in other places.

The variety of faces used in signs cannot be described by a simple set of uniform rules. Generally, the letters seem to be based on the compositional principles used to create Roman faces and only capitals are used. While the Roman letter does not appear to have been used very often in external signs many of the lettering faces which were used on nineteenth century buildings can be considered as variations on the stock Roman letters and many of the faces were set out according to the compositional principles based on the square.

Roman faces have contrasting thick and thin strokes and are terminated by pointed serifs and the weight of the thick stroke of the letters is equal to one-tenth the letter height. Each letter is generated by references to a square, and there are four groups of letters: the first group is the wide generously curved letters based on a circle (O, Q, C, G and D) and each of these letters is set out within a square; the second group consists of the narrow letters, some of which use a basic shape of two equal circles placed above each other within a rectangle which is half the width of the square used to generate the letters in the first group (S, B, P, R, E, F, L, I and J); the third group is the wide straight stroked letters which are set out within a full square (H, M and W); the fourth group of letters use a three-quarter square width and consist almost entirely of straight strokes (A, K, N, T, U, V, X, Y and Z). Good quality Roman letters are firm, refined and elegant.

The most common faces appear to have been Egyptian (Antique), Ionic (Fat Clarendon) and Grotesque (Sans Serif). These faces were normally based on a square section for each letter and the letters were not compressed in bold displays required on the exterior of buildings. A less common face, sometimes used for the proprietor's name, was Fat Face.

### 1. Egyptian (Antique)
This is the boldest of the nineteenth century faces. The letters are generated from the Roman face but have massive unbracketed slab serifs and each letter has a very heavy even line which obliterates the contrast between the thick and thin strokes in Roman.



ML:H (18157); *Gold and Silver,* plate 122.



ML:H (18157); *Gold and Silver,* plate 122.

### 2. Ionic (Fat Clarendon)
Clarendon is a thickened Roman with the serifs emphasized. Ionic has the serifs so increased in thickness that solid bracketed slab serifs flow into the stem of the thickened body of the letters. In some cases it is not possible to distinguish in the photographs whether Clarendon or Ionic has been used. As well, in some signs it seems that individual letter styles vary so that some letters appear to be Clarendon and others Ionic.

## 2. Ionic (Fat Clarendon) continued



ML:H (18148; *Gold and Silver*, plate 123.



ML:H (18158); *Gold and Silver*, plate 138.

## 3. Grotesque (Sans Serif)

San-serif signs dominate in the old signs. This style of lettering is present in the earliest photos of buildings and continued to be used into the twentieth century. Sans-serif has letters without serifs and with all strokes of even thickness in the manner of Egyptian. San-serif seems to have been the expression of modernity and functional clarity in nineteenth century lettering.



ML:H (18153); *Gold and Silver*, plate 144.

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ML:H (18251); *Gold and Silver*, plate 125.

The proportions of the Roman letters based on square sections and half and three-quarter squares was followed in the setting out of much sans-serif lettering. It has not been possible to determine any consistent modification to the spacing of sans-serif examples where the weight of the strokes is very heavy or very light or where the letters are compressed. In the cases where the faces have been compressed the weight of the strokes is moderate and creates an open clear effect. Beyond this general observation it has not been possible to determine any rules of composition for compressed sans-serif faces.

The variety of weights, clarity of expression and dependence on the square as the generating form in sans-serif lettering faces, and the extent and manner in which some faces were compressed, must be judged from old photographs of street scenes and individual buildings.

It will be noticed that the form of some nineteenth century sans-serif letters differs from present day practice. The letter "E" in the various signs has its centre horizontal stroke considerably shorter than the top and bottom horizontal strokes. The letter "R" had its sloping leg set out towards the start of the curve of the upper part of the letter. The letter "C" was terminated by ends which if projected would become radius lines to the centre of the letter. The letter "S" was a visually balanced double curve about its centre.

It has been suggested by modern signwriters that variations between nineteenth century letters and modern letters could be the result of differences in painting techniques. In the nineteenth century a letter was first outlined and then filled in. Later, a single brush stroke technique was developed, and the claim is that the shapes of present day letter forms are easier to produce by this technique.

# EXAMPLES OF LESS COMMONLY USED FACES

Less commonly used rectilinear faces, and flamboyant decorative faces have been called "exotic faces" for the purposes of this Bulletin. They should be used with discretion.

## 4. Tuscan

Tuscan faces are decorative and have curled serifs or bi- or tri-furcated terminations. They also incorporate a decorative feature half way up the letter stem. The faces vary greatly and range from austere and only slightly decorated examples to elaborately decorated faces of a gay, lively and frivolous kind.



ML:H (18186); *Gold and Silver*, plate 126.



ML:H (18267); *Gold and Silver*, plate 120.

## 5. Fat Faces



ML:H (18543); *Gold and Silver*, plate 66.

## 6. Fat Italics and Sans-Serif Italics

Italics in upper case (sometimes with a slightly taller first letter to each word) were infrequently used. Letters in Fat Italics have an exaggerated contrast between thick and thin strokes which are sloped. The thin strokes terminate in either a round blob or a barbed



ML:H (18708); *Gold and Silver*, plate 70.

## 7. Fat Gothics

This is a highly decorative and curvilinear face. While this face was not often used for external signs, photographs of nineteenth century Australian towns and suburbs suggest that this face was used by newspapers and chemists.



ML:H (18137); *Gold and Silver*, plate 103.

## 8. Sans Serif Compressed (Grotesque Compressed)



ML:H (18543); *Gold and Silver*, plate 66.

### Mixed Faces

While only uniform capital letters were commonly used in each word or phrase of external signs, there is evidence which shows that a variety of faces might be used in the same sign. One face might be used to set out the name and nature of a business and another to set out the name of the owner (or proprietor). While this type of mixing of faces seems to have been common practice it must be stressed that there was no mixing of faces within one line of a sign or within one word. Generally the name or type of establishment (say BOOKSELLER & STATIONER or STORE) was set out in Grotesque (san serif) when mixed faces were used, however no general rule can be stated.

### Compressed Faces

The bold display faces used in signwriting on nineteenth century buildings were normally based on a square section. Only sans serif faces seem to have been compressed (ie. squeezed in the horizontal direction, so that each letter is long and thin) and then only for use on small signs. This was a technique for avoiding abbreviation and for presenting a desired

curves of the letters are always retained and do not become straight lines.

## Punctuation

A full stop aligned with the base of the lettering was common after an initial, surname, business name, or description of a business. Where Ionic or Fat Clarendon faces are used the full stop is circular, but in other faces, such as Sans-Serif and Tuscan faces, the full stop is a square. Occasionally a word such as a business name would have a square full stop placed halfway up the lettering face both before and after the word.

## Spacing of Letters

Lettering in signs seems always to have been arranged so as to neatly fill the space available and was organised around an axis cutting through the centre of the sign field. This was so even when limited space on a sign forced the lettering to be cramped together or compressed. In good quality lettering and signwriting visual spacing was observed, but in less competent work, letters were spaced equally. Examples of crude lettering and spacing may be attributed to the practice used before 1900 of outlining letters and then filling them in. With that procedure it has been claimed, it was more difficult to achieve a proper balance between the letters than with the present practice of forming the whole letter using thick brush strokes. It would be incorrect today, in attempts to recreate the historical character of lettering and signs, to insist that high quality sophisticated sign-work be always used.

## Ornamental Scrolls and Backgrounds

There is evidence that ornamental scrolls (and coachwork patterns) were incorporated into signs, and that animals or scenes might appear as a part of a sign. In restoration work this type of decoration should be considered exotic and not be incorporated into a sign unless there is evidence of such work surviving on the building. In that case the surviving patterns should be taken as the basis for the new work.

Lettering faces on signs were sometimes given additional character by flaring the letters, by presenting them as shaded faces, by highlighting parts of the letters, or by giving the letters cast shadows. In addition to these devices, words were sometimes arranged as a waving pattern.

## 1. Flaring

Some sans-serif examples show *flaring* at the ends of individual letters. The ends of the letters are slightly widened out with a flare to give each character a vibrant appearance.

## 2. Shaded Faces

Many signs show that various letter faces were often *shaded* to give the appearance of the letters being raised from their background. It would appear that, in doing this, strict rules of perspective were not to be observed as shading in perspective would lead to awkward and confusing effects unless the sign was viewed from the point at which the perspective was meant to be viewed from. Instead a simple but effective convention was recommended. All letters were shaded at the same angle, generally downwards and to the right, at an angle of 45°. In signs incorporating the name and type of establishment, the name of the owner, and the type of goods sold, only some lines or individual names or words in the sign might be treated with shaded letters.

## 3. High-lighting

Sometimes the parts of shaded letters on which light would be presumed to fall if the letters were real three-dimensional raised letters, were painted in lighter colours. This technique was called *high-lighting*.

## 4. Cast Shadows

Another nineteenth century technique was to give the letters *cast shadows* so that the unshaded letters appeared to float or stand clear of the surface of the sign. Few examples of this technique have been positively identified from the old photographs, although in some cases the lettering in the photographs is so small and blurred that it is impossible to distinguish between shaded faces and faces with cast shadows.

A reasonable conclusion is that shaded lettering was frequently used, that high-lighting was subtly practised, but that unshaded lettering with cast shadows was infrequently used.

## 5. Waving Patterns

In a small number of cases words were set out to create a curved waving pattern. When such a decorative feature is present the letters are also surrounded by ornamental scrolls of coach work. This manner of presentation was always reserved and never flamboyant.

## EXTERIOR SIGNS

### General Characteristics

External signs were variously painted on the carcase of the building, on frieze panels, blocking courses, and parapets, designed for the purpose, and on painted panels fixed onto the building, such as end spandrels closing a verandah, and horizontal fascia or trimming boards along the outer edge of the verandah facing the street. In general practice signs were not (rarely ever) placed on the "structural" elements of a building such as pilasters and architraves, or across rustication. As well, photographic evidence suggests that signs were seldom if ever suspended below the verandah or cantilevered from the carcase of the building, and these signs should not be used unless there is evidence of such signs having been used on the building.

Signs on parapets, and spandrels closing a verandah, and horizontal fascia or trimming boards along the outer edge of the verandah facing the street, were either on the material of the building itself, or on painted timber or painted flat metal sheets (galvanised iron). Generally the field or surface of these signs would be defined by a border or an edge moulding so that the area of the sign would be clearly differentiated from the rest of the building.

Signs on the carcase of the building were often painted directly onto either the brick or the rendered or painted surface of the building. Where a specific background was prepared it would be by either painting the brickwork or render, or painting the surface of the sign area another colour to the general body colour of the building. Such a specific background would be defined by an edge line of a different colour so that the area of the sign would be clearly differentiated from the rest of the wall surface.

In nineteenth century practice signs were not internally illuminated or self-illuminated. It appears that the only source of illumination to signs came from street lighting or a front light to the premises. The exceptions to this were the small self-illuminated signs sometimes painted on the small glass panels of oil lamps bracketed from poles outside the entrance to some buildings (say hotels). (Spot-lighting or flood-lighting, from a concealed or unobtrusive source of light, independent of the sign and the structure supporting the sign, might be a suitable compromise to the problem of illuminating painted signs).

## THE LOCATION OF SIGNS ON BUILDINGS

The signs on buildings have been grouped into the following broad categories:
1. Signs on the carcase of the building
2. Signs on or attached to verandahs
3. Freestanding fixed signs
4. Signs around shop windows and on glass
5. Miscellaneous

### 1. Signs on the Carcase of the Building



LaTL H852
Melbourne, Collins Street, north side, near Swanston Street, c.1883

Signs on the carcase of the building were generally painted directly onto the brick or plastered surface of the building, but in some small number of cases the lettering of the sign was cut into the face of the building (sunk lettering) or the lettering of the sign was fixed onto the surface (raised lettering). As well, a small number of painted panels were fixed onto the carcase of the building.

There are two broad groups of signs on the carcase of the building:
A. *Defined sign fields on the carcase of the building:*
(i) pediment block above the cornice;
(ii) blocking course above the cornice;
(iii) frieze panel below the cornice;
(iv) defined parapet panels above the verandah but below the architrave;
(v) undefined parapet areas above the verandah but below the architrave.
B. *Ad hoc sign fields on the carcase of the building:*
(i) painted directly onto some part of the side wall;
(ii) painted directly onto some part of the wall area of the street facade;
(iii) painted panel fixed onto some part of the wall area of the building.

In the first of these groups the signs were placed in clearly defined panels which formed a specific sign field with definite boundaries. Not all buildings had signs placed in all the possible defined fields on the building but practice suggests that they are the parts of the carcase of the building which might be considered the proper place for signs to be placed.

The other group, the ad hoc sign fields on the carcase of the building, represent individual initiative which takes advantage of a visible wall surface of a building to display a sign. In some cases these signs might today be considered as defacements, such as where a brick side wall has a sign directly painted onto the brick. In other cases, the practice seems less a defacement than a sensible and functional display.

A painted sign on the side of a building was usually located at the top of the wall as a painted rectangle abutting the front corner or in some cases extending in a strip across the full depth of the building. Sometimes such side wall signs would be in sections between window openings in the wall.

Signs painted on the wall surface of the street elevation, for example, between windows, are of two general types. In one case the lettering was painted directly onto the body colour of the wall without any edge or border being put around the sign. In the other case, a painted border or edge moulding would define the sign field whose background might be painted a different colour from the body colour of the overall elevation.

In urban areas, and especially on commercial buildings, some buildings had signs painted onto the side walls and on the street elevations between window openings. But generally, the more important buildings, (or the more civically oriented buildings such as a bank) did not have these types of ad hoc sign fields painted on them.

## 2. Signs on or attached to Verandahs



LaTL H852
Melbourne, Collins Street, south side, near Swanston Street, c.1883

Verandahs were an important location for signs and there were some nine different types of sign fields on verandahs:

(i)   fascia boards to the ends of verandahs;

(ii)  spandrels closing the ends of verandahs;

(iii) fascia beams below the street edge of the verandah;

(iv)  defined fascia panels below the street edge of the verandah;

(v)   panels fixed above the street edge of the verandah;

(vi)  panels enclosing the sloping roof of the verandah;

(vii) transverse signs standing on the top of the verandah;

(viii) transverse hanging signs under the verandah;

(ix)  projecting signs.

The first six types of sign field seem to have been standard locations. The next two (vii and viii) appear to have come into use in the later part of the nineteenth century, and the last is an early twentieth century feature. As with signs on the carcase of the building, not all the possible sign fields on verandahs would be used on a particular building and some buildings did not have signs on any part of the verandah. The first six types of sign field were so frequently used as to suggest that it was standard practice to choose one of these positions for a sign with the most common being the first four locations.

By the end of the nineteenth century transverse hanging signs under verandahs were being used. Because the verandah and its shadows so often obscured detail under the verandah it is not possible to be sure just when or how extensive the use of hanging signs was. Examples seem to date from c. 1895 and after. No contemporary comments on any that were not used earlier have been found. A cautious conclusion is that hanging signs were probably not used before the 1890's but that from that decade they became a standard sign field added to the commercial environment built in the nineteenth century.

## 3. Freestanding Fixed Signs

A number of freestanding fixed signs can be seen in old photographs of urban areas. These have been grouped into the following categories:

(i)   over the footpath

(ii)  high level (above the verandah level):
      (a) solid background;
      (b) "suspended" lettering

(iii) over laneways between buildings.

The examples of freestanding signs over the footpath date from the 1860's as do the high level signs with a solid background located above a verandah. With high level signs with "suspended" lettering, the apparently transparent background was a wire mesh onto which was fixed the cut out letters.

The third type of freestanding fixed signs were those over laneways between buildings. These were also in use by the 1860's and were of two types, one having a rectangular sign running over the laneway, and the other having a curved sign over the laneway.

## 4. Signs Around Shop Windows and on Glass



LaTL H639
Fitzroy, 46 Gertrude Street, c.1886

Because the verandahs and their shadows in many cases obscure the actual shop front it is difficult to establish the nature of signs around shop fronts and on the glass. However, several different locations can be detected:

A. *signs around shop windows:*
    (i)    frieze panels above doors;
    (ii)   vertical side panels;

B. *Signs on glass:*
    (i)    shop windows;
    (ii)   fanlights;
    (iii)  top hung windows.

In a number of early shops without verandahs, signs were placed in fascia or frieze panels over the entrance. In some cases, signs on frieze (or fascia) panels above doors can be made out under the verandah. Sometimes verandahs were later fixed onto the carcase of the building at the point where the frieze panel would be, and for this reason few of these signs survive.

Signs on vertical side panels to shops do not seem to have been widely used. This may be because many of the shop fronts were flanked by either pilasters or tuck pointed face brick. Represented structural members, such as pilasters, were generally not a field for signs in nineteenth century practice.

There is somewhat more evidence on signs on glass, although it is too scant to enable firm conclusions being formed as to the extent and range of lettering on glass. Some windows had signs painted on them and others had the lettering gilded. Lettering with gold leaf was an expensive and quality process and for those reasons it was probably not extensively used. They divide into three groups; gilding on large shop fronts; gilding on small glass areas such as panels above doors; decorative gilding on windows.

While gilding on glass was a quality signwriting product, a more prosaic everyday use of lettering on glass was the painting of letters onto the glass which then had a white stipple background put over it so that the lettering (in a dark colour or black) stands on a white ground. Many examples of this treatment can be made out on shop windows, and on double hung windows.

The lettering faces on glass were generally restrained (sans-serif being the common face) with few examples of decorative faces being used.

## 5. Miscellaneous

There are a number of sign features which do not fall into the specific categories so far discussed. For the sake of completeness they are introduced here:
    (i)    Signs showing a painted scene;
    (ii)   Freestanding (unfixed) signs;
    (iii)  Trade signs;
    (iv)  Street numbers.

On shops, a few signs had painted scenes on them. They were more a feature of the 1850's and 1860's than later in the century.

A number of photographs show that freestanding (unfixed) signs were placed out on the footpaths during trading hours. Few details can be made out on these signs. They seem to have been casually stood against a verandah post or hitching post. Photographs dating from c. 1860, c. 1880 and c. 1900 show these freestanding signs. It is possible that this may have been more widely practised than the photographs suggest as many street views were taken on public holidays.

The early twentieth century photographs show that brand name trade signs were being used by that time.

In urban areas, street numbers were painted in a variety of positions on buildings, ranging from the ground floor pilasters between shops to the first floor wall plane or the frieze at the top corner of the side wall. Several of the above positions were sometimes employed. Corner buildings with a splayed corner facade often included street numbers on the splayed face, usually on the upper frieze.

## DIAGRAMS OF COMMON LOCATIONS
## OF SIGNS

*Signs in panels across the facade:*

*Blocking course above a cornice*

*Frieze panel below cornice*

*(cornice: no lettering)*

*Fascia or frieze panel above the ground floor*
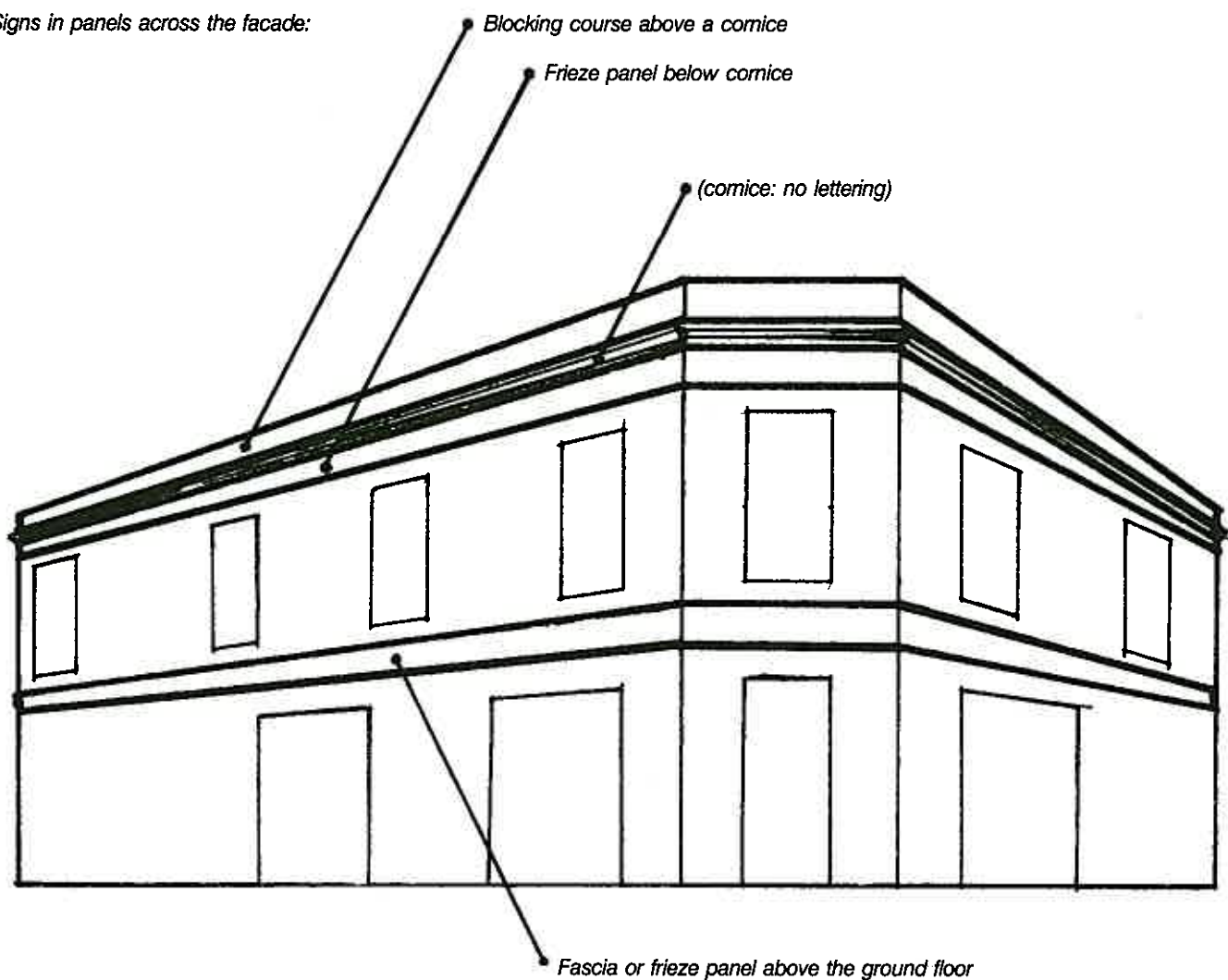
Note: With few exceptions, signs were not placed on "structural" elements in a building such as pilasters and architraves, or across rustication, but they were placed in the frieze panels.
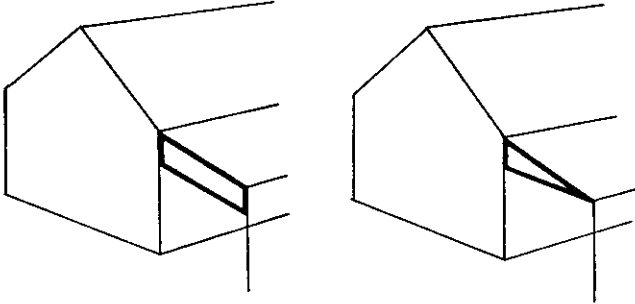
*Signs below a built up cornice:*
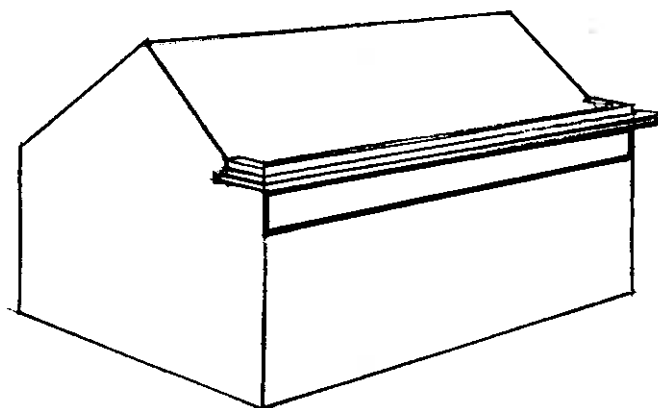
*Signs in pediment areas above a cornice and on the wall beneath the cornice and above a verandah, and on side panels beneath the verandah:*
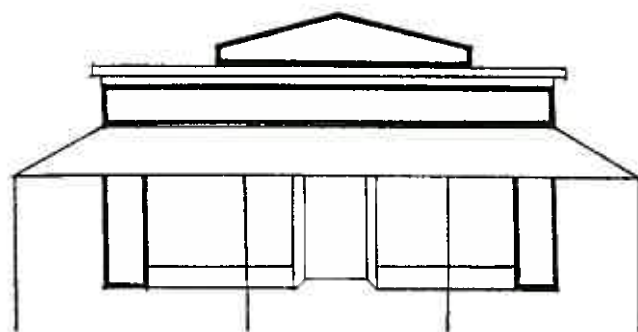
*Signs on end spandrels of verandahs: (both on the outside and the inside of the panel)*

*Signs above the ends of verandahs: (This location was rarely used.)*
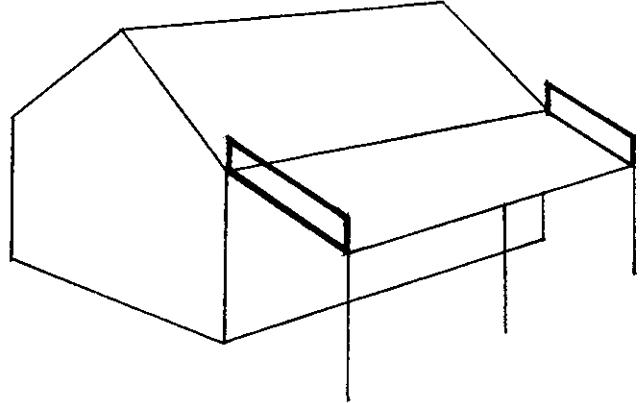
*Signs on horizontal fascia or trimming boards below the outer roof edge of verandahs (and between the posts):*
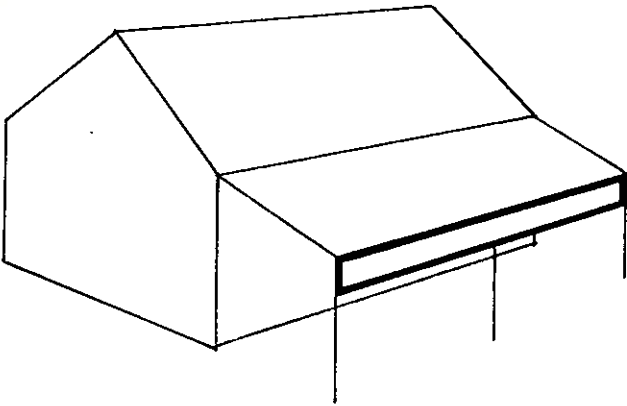
*Signs above the outer edge of verandahs: (This location was less frequently used.)*
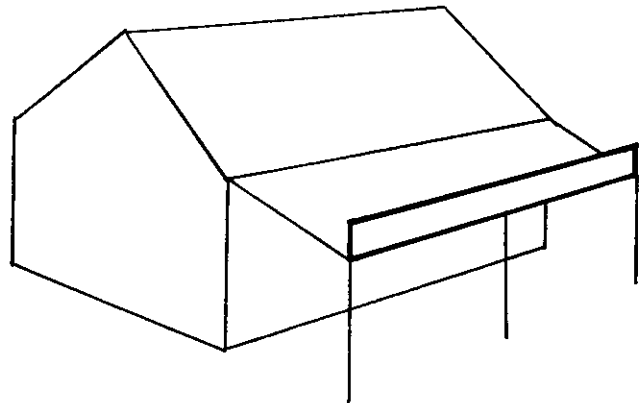
*Signs around verandahs and below the roof edge:*
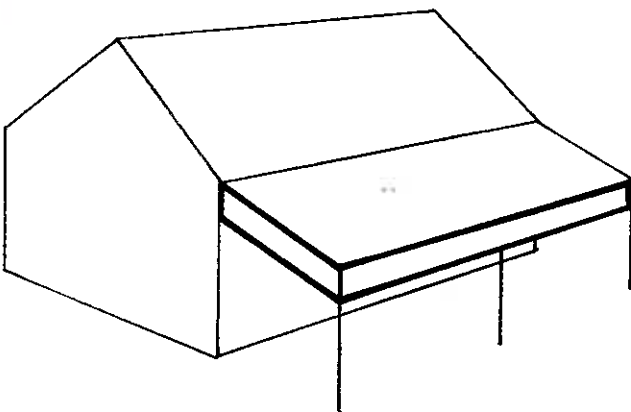
*Signs around verandahs and above the roof edge: (This location was less frequently used.)*
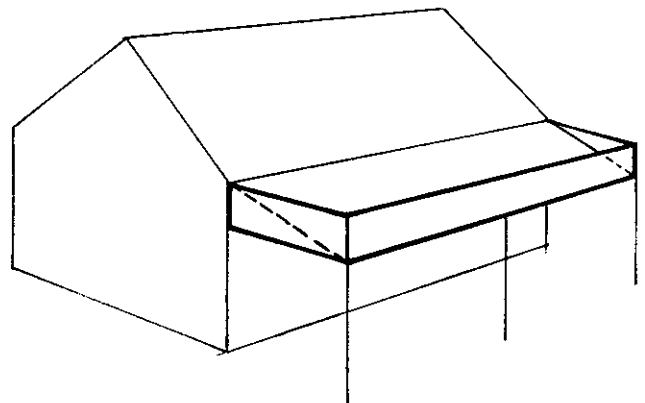
Note: Photographic evidence suggests that signs were seldom if ever suspended under the verandah at right angles to the direction of the footpath. It is recommended that suspended signs under the verandah not be used unless there is evidence of such a sign having been used on the specific building considered.

*Signs on side walls or on panels below the eaves line:*
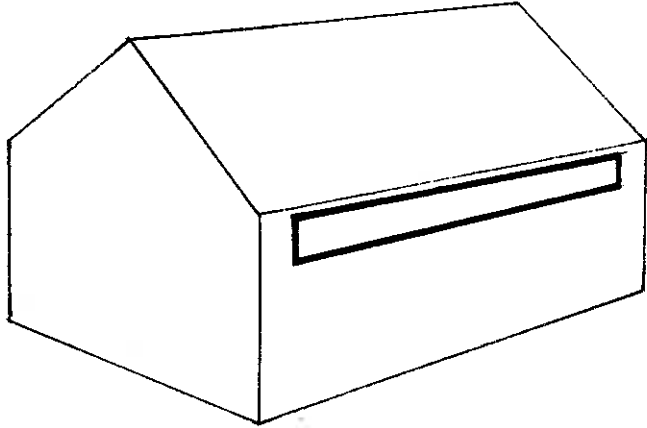


*Signs on end walls or on panels below the gable line:*
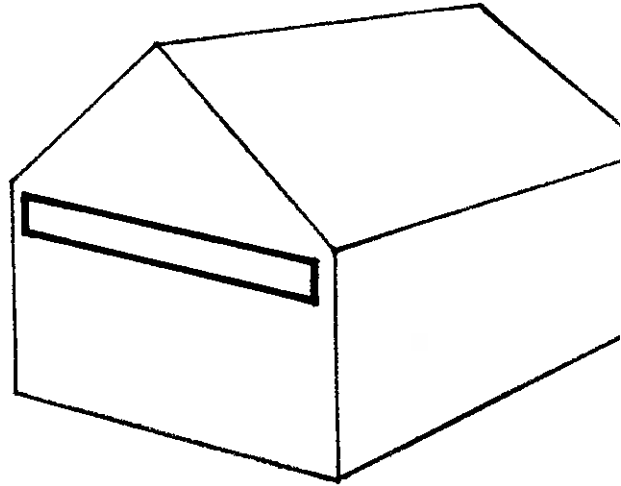


*Signs on panels above the eaves line:*
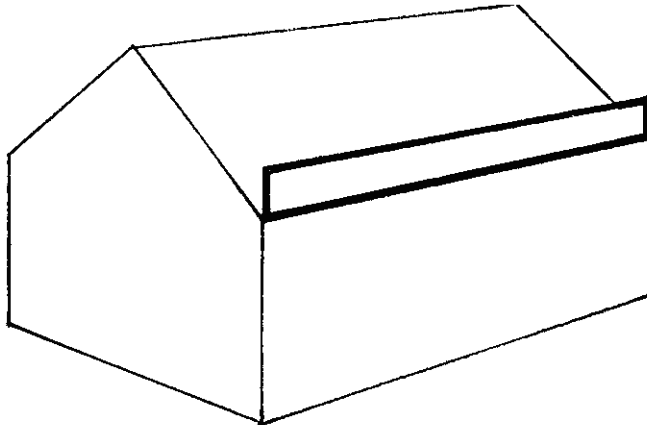


*Signs on rectangular panels across the lower part of the triangular gable end:*
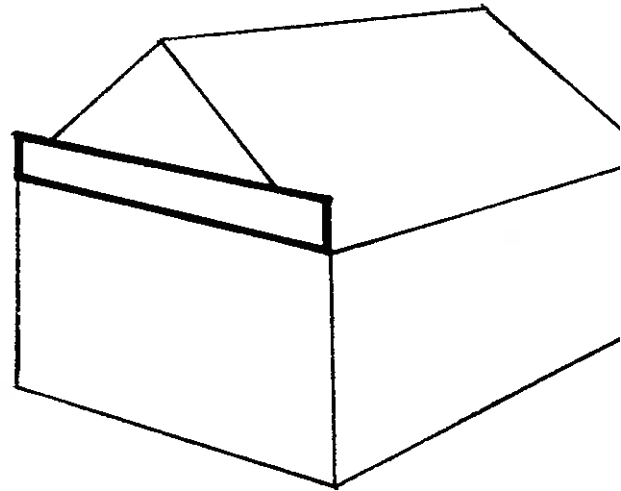


*Signs on panels above where a verandah connects with the main carcase of a building:*
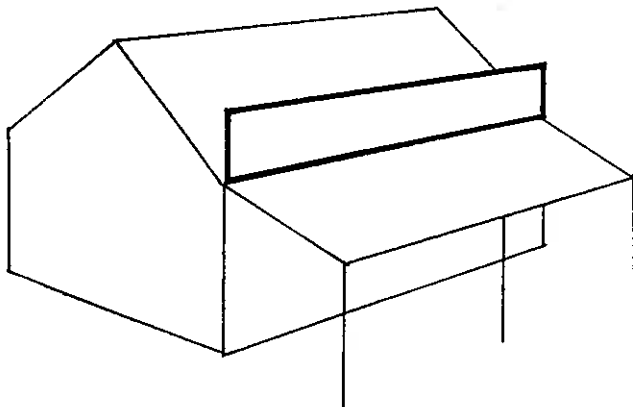


*Signs on rectangular panel across the lower part of a triang gable end above a verandah:*
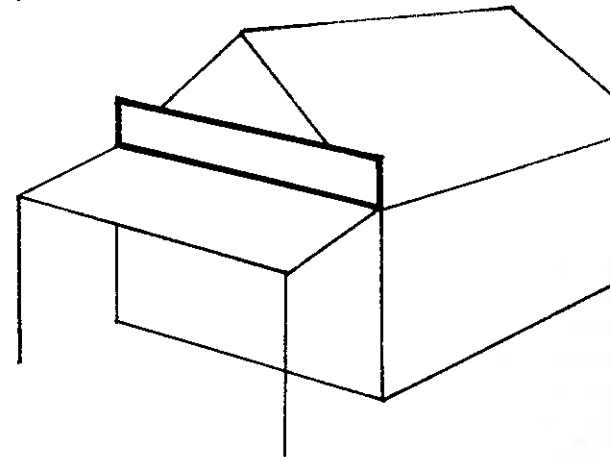


14

*Signs in the triangular field of a gable wall:*



*Signs in the triangular field of a gable wall above a verandah:*
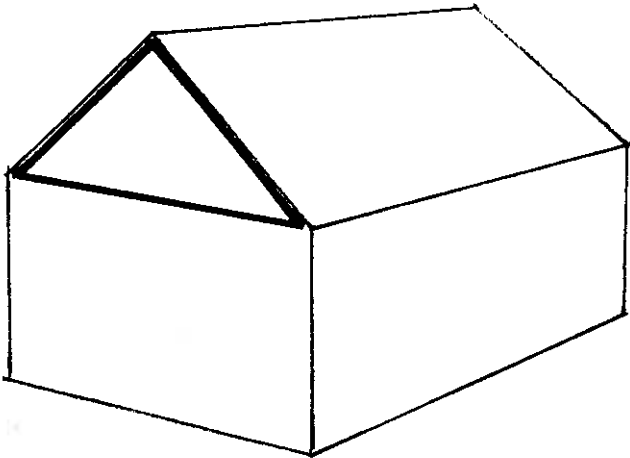


The lettering in signs appears always to have been organised in a symmetrical manner around an axis cutting through the centre of the sign (or the area available for the lettering). Generally, signs were restrained. The lettering was not crowded together, and the field on which the lettering was placed was not crowded out with densely worded information. Even when exotic type faces were used these general characteristics were adhered to.

The following arrangements appear to have been used:

Rectangular field with a single (well spaced) horizontal line:





Rectangular field with two horizontal lines:
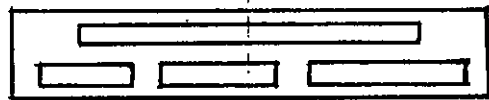


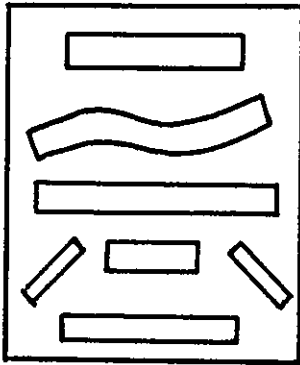Rectangular field with three horizontal lines:
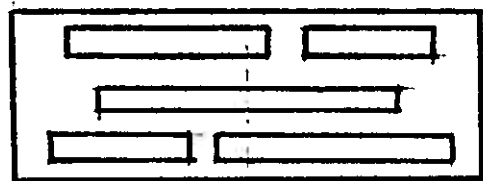


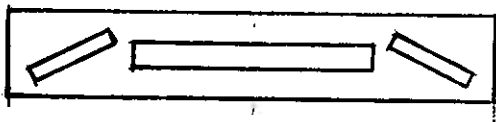Rectangular field with four horizontal lines:
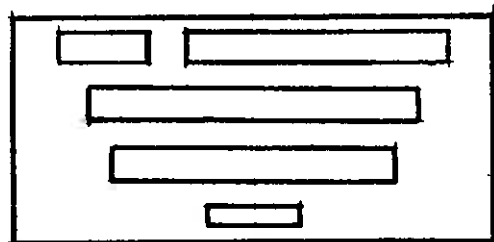
Vertical rectangular field with multiple horizontal lines:
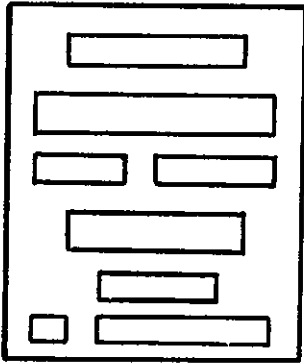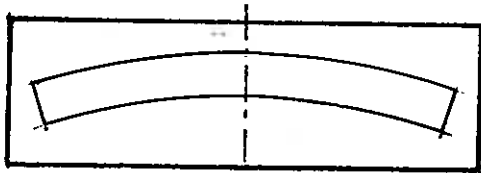
Vertical rectangular field including angled or waving lines:

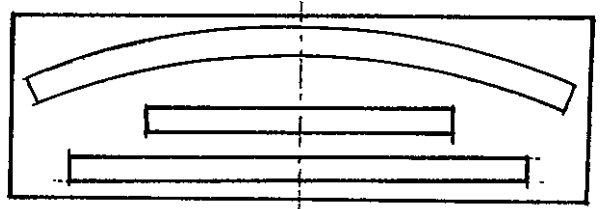Rectangular field with horizontal central line(s) and sloping side groups:

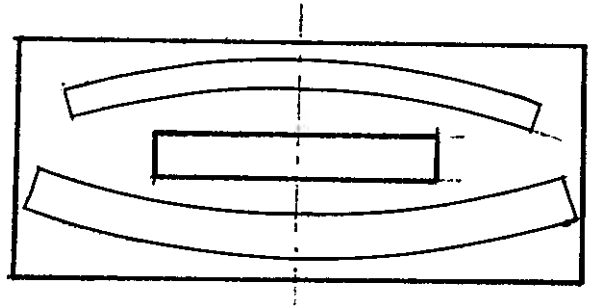Rectangular field with a single up-curved line:

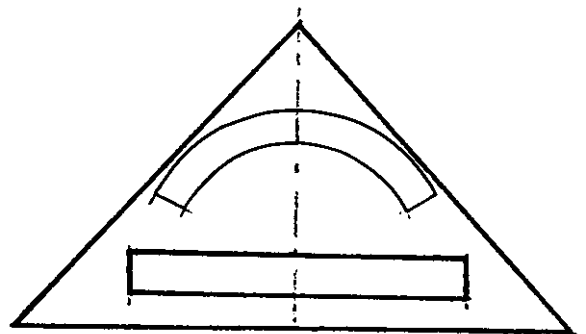Rectangular field with a single up-curved line above and a single horizontal line below:

Rectangular field with a single up-curved line above and two horizontal lines below:
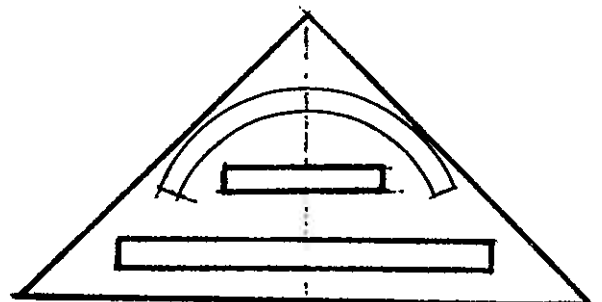
Rectangular field with a single up-curved line above, a single down-curved line below, and a single horizontal line in the centre:
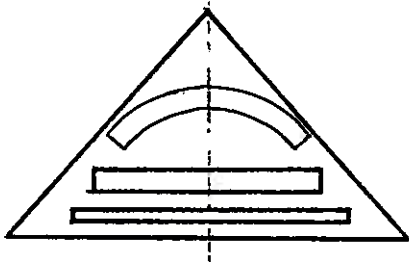
Triangular field with a single up-curved line in the apex and a single horizontal line below:
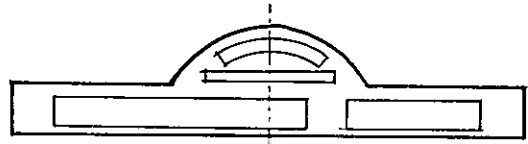
Triangular field with a single up-curved line in the apex enclosing a single horizontal line, and with a horizontal line below:
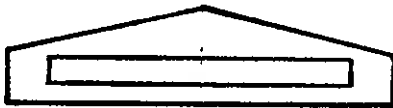
Triangular field with a single up-curved line in the apex and two horizontal lines below:
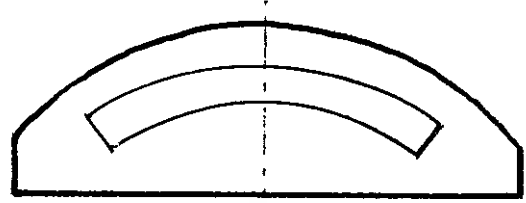
Composite rectangular and curved field with a single up-curved line above and horizontal line below:

Triangular pedimented field with a single horizontal line:

Segmental pedimented (curved) field with a single up-curved line:

Triangular pedimented field with a single up-curved line:
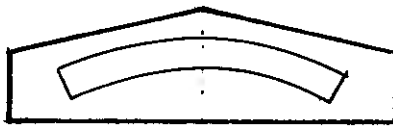
Segmental pedimented (curved) field with a single up-curved line and a single horizontal line below:
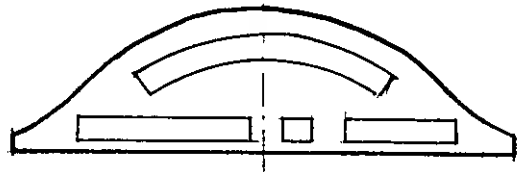
Triangular pedimented field with a single up-curved line above and a single horizontal line below:

Note: Decorative waving curves of lettering (say e.g. Fat Italics, Fat Face, or Fat Tuscan) which are found in some nineteenth century signs were set out symmetrically around the central axis and balanced around central more dominant words which were set out in a straightforward horizontal manner.
See Appendix A, Examples 2, 4, 8.

Composite rectangular and triangular pedimented field with a single up-curved line above and a single horizontal line below:

## SIGN COLOURS

The range of colours set out in the current edition of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Technical Bulletin *Exterior Paint Colours* should be the guide for the colours of all signs and letter faces.

Little evidence remains of the actual colours which were used in signs during the nineteenth century. The photographic evidence indicates that in many cases the lettering on signs was in dark colours and appeared on a light ground. In some cases the ground seems to have been white.

The lettering colour in some surviving in-situ signs is black. Some shop signs painted on wood had a black ground with silver letters. A hanging sign which has survived untouched in Beechworth has a background in a biscuit colour, and the letters are black. The colours of the shaded parts of the letters are in an olive green and the highlighting is in pale olive. Beneath the present ground colour a brilliant glazed red colour is visible. Whether the panel was used for an earlier sign of which the red was the original ground, or what else, is not known.

Some examples of lettering on glass were certainly in gold leaf. Other examples have dark letters (black) on a light ground (white stippled).

## SOURCES AND REFERENCES

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University of Melbourne Archives Department.
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# APPENDIX A

## SOME NINETEENTH CENTURY EXAMPLES

### Example 1

LaTL H840

Melbourne, Bourke Street west, south side, 1865

Grotesque (sans serif) is used in nearly all the signs visible in the street scene, but a Fat Face (Roman face) is used ("Servants Forwarded") as well as Fat Italic (Roman italics) on the sign projecting across the footpath ("Lade & Sanders"), and an elegant Roman face on the same sign ("Manufacturers").



### Example 2

LaTL H3044

Melbourne, Bourke Street, south side between Swanston and Elizabeth Streets, December, 1860.

Grotesque (sans serif) is clearly visible together with a raised Tuscan face ("Tilke's City Hotel") and other isolated exotic faces such as Fat Gothic ("and") on Rookledge and Co's building, ("Orders") on Mrs. Benjamin building. Note the street number "62" on the Labor office. Lettering on glass can be seen on the ground floor shops.



### Example 3

LaTL H852

Melbourne, Collins Street, north side, near Swanston Street, c. 1883

A large sign painted directly over the brick party-wall, with a white background and bold Grotesque (sans serif) letters.
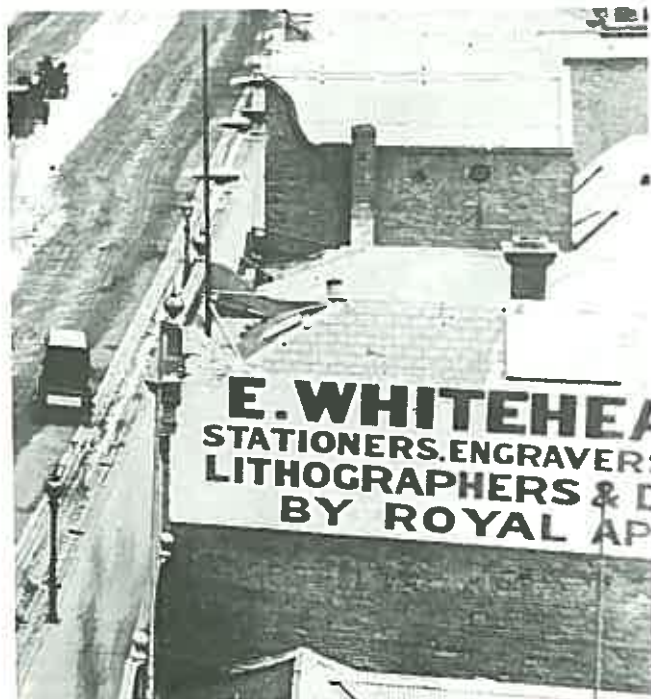


### Example 4

LaTL H852

Melbourne, Collins Street, south side near Swanston Street, c. 1883

These quality shops have restrained and elegant signs featuring Grotesque (sans serif) and a beautiful flared Roman on an open background to the fascia of the verandah to Haigh Brothers.
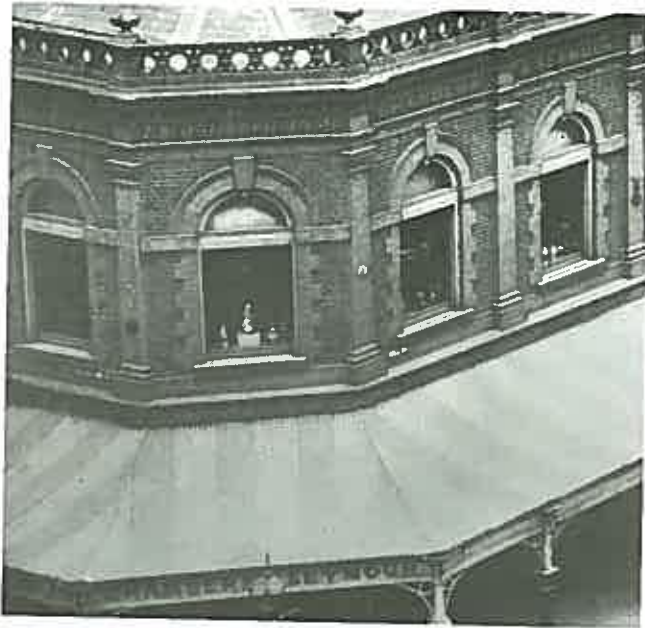
## Example 5

LaTL 852

Melbourne, corner Collins and Swanston Streets, c. 1883

Shaded Grotesque (sans serif) is used in the frieze entablature ("Chambers & Seymour") and on the fascia to the verandah, a rare instance of lower case italics can be seen in the frieze of the canted corner ("Established 1850")



## Example 6

LaTL H12221

Melbourne, Elizabeth Street near GPO, c. 1900

The name of the hotel is in Grotesque (sans serif) on the upper wall ("Felix Hotel") and shaded Grotesque is used on the fascia to the hotel entrance ("162 August Heffner 162") while Ionic (Fat Clarendon) is used on the fascia of the shop next door ("160 Henry Davy & Co."). The upstand below the shop window uses an Italic Fat Face. The clear glass of the lamp outside the hotel uses Grotesque for the hotel name. Both the hotel bar window and the window of the chemist shop have signs on them.



## Example 7

LaTL H639

Fitzroy, 46 Gertrude Street, c. 1886

In this suburban example, Grotesque is used in the segmental pediment ("Westmoreland House"), and on the fascia ("Tailor") while the proprietor's name is in Tuscan ("I. Fawcett"). The lettering on the glass has a white stipple background and features Grotesque, Egyptian (Antique) ("Woollen") and some flowing Grotesque ("Tailor's Trimmings"). The lettering on glass over the door is shaded.



## Example 8

LaTL H4634

Fitzroy, 183 Smith Street, c. 1889

A few buildings had an extensive display of signs on the face of the building, with all the sign fields carefully organised and symmetrically balanced.

(F.W. Niven & Co. lithograph).

## Example 9
LaTL H4634

Fitzroy, 227 Smith Street, c. 1889

In addition to a variety of letter faces (Grotesque, Egyptian, Fat Face) this undertaker's shop also featured three painted scenes relating to the cemeteries at Kew, Melbourne and St. Kilda.



## Example 10
LaTL H3044

Melbourne, Bourke Street, north side between Swanston and Elizabeth Streets, December 1860

A large illuminated sign featuring shaded Grotesque ("Cobb & Co's", and "Office") and Tuscan ("Coach") on a white stippled background.



## Example 11
LaTL 2966

Sebastopol, c. 1860's

Grotesque (sans serif) lettering in the frieze panel of Burke's Victoria Hotel. Bold austere signs in this manner were not uncommon throughout Victoria, and dominated over surroundings in primitive settlements.

## Example 12
LaTL H1698
Majorca, 1866
Shaded Ionic (Fat Clarendon) is used for the name
R.W. Strangwood. Egyptian (Antique) with shading is
used for Brown's Commercial Hotel. On the surrounds
to the verandah the word "ironmonger" is in
Grotesque (sans serif) and in a restrained Tuscan. The
smaller lettering on the verandah surround is in Fat
Italics ("Paints, Oils, Varnishes &c"). The small chemist
shop next door is ready to receive its sign in the panel
above the timber pilasters.



## Example 13
LaTL H26132
Dunolly, c. 1861
The name in the pediment area is in Grotesque (sans
serif) while the names below the cornice are in Ionic
(Fat Clarendon). The portable sign against the post has
"gold" in Tuscan and "bought" in Fat Italics.



## Example 14
LaTL H26116
Broadway, Dunolly, c. 1861
Shaded Grotesque (sans serif) appears in the pediment
area and on the end spandrel to the verandah. The
owner's name is in a shaded Tuscan, and the other
lettering is in Fat Italics. A crude sans serif face has
been painted directly on to the bricks of the side wall.



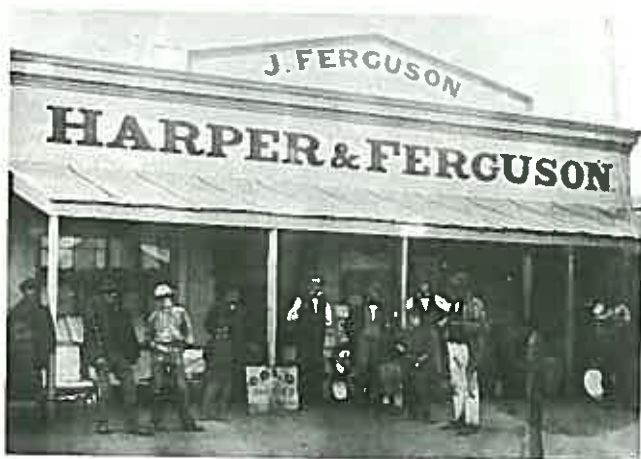## Example 15
LaTL H33147
Guilford, (n.d.)
Shaded Tuscan with decorative work is used in the
pediment area, and a bold shaded Grotesque (sans
serif) is used across the blocking course above the
cornice. The smaller lettering is in Grotesque
("London"), and Fat Italics ("House"). Some lower
case Fat Italics is used in the side panels to the shop
front ("Order" and "Receiving") and Fat Face is used
for the word "Box".



## Example 16
LaTL H26120
Dunolly, c. 1861
Open clear Grotesque (sans serif), with decorative
lower case Fat Italics ("General Groceries").

## Example 17
LaTL H26118
Dunolly, c. 1861



## Example 18
LaTL H1706
Majorca, c. 1866

Ionic (Fat Clarendon) ("O'Farrell's Store" and "W. Hardegen") and shaded Grotesque (sans serif) dominate, with the smaller lettering in Fat Face ("Fancy Goods") and Grotesque ("Family Grocer") surrounded by decorative swirls.



## Example 19
LaTL H1704
Majorca, c. 1866.

The lettering in the large panel is an Ionic (Fat Clarendon) whose serifs are so little curved as to appear almost like Egyptian (Antique) face. The lettering in the frieze panel above the shop windows, and on the sign to the weatherboard building is Grotesque (sans serif).



## Example 20
LaTL H1987
Market Square, Bendigo, 1861.

Most of the lettering is Grotesque (sans serif) of various sizes. The hairdresser's name is in Fat Face. The large sign above the Argus Office has the word "English" in Fat Face. The lettering on the glass windows is Grotesque.

**Example 21**

LaTL H26117

Dunolly, c. 1861.

A rectilinear Ionic (Fat Clarendon) which might be mistaken for Egyptian (Antique) is above an example of Grotesque (sans serif). Both faces are shaded. Note the signs above the ends of the verandah.

**Example 22**

LaTL H1703

Majorca, c. 1866.

Ionic (Fat Clarendon) and Grotesque (sans serif) are the dominant faces. Note the small signs on the wall of the Imperial Hotel. (The oil lamps carried between poles sometimes had lettering on the glass. These were the only form of self-illuminated signs used).

**Example 23**

LaTL H26121

Dunolly, c. 1861.

Grotesque (sans serif) painted directly on to the weatherboarding.

**Example 24**

LaTL M2945

Bendigo, c. 1866.

The universal lettering face in this streetscape is Grotesque. The exception is Professor Lewis's establishment which features: Fat Gothic ("Professor"); Ionic ("Lewis"); Grotesque ("haircutting"); Fat Italics ("shampooing saloon"); as well as a projecting sign fixed to the wall at the entrance, and striped poles.

**Example 25**

LaTL *Jubilee History of the City of South Melbourne* (1905), p. 137. South Melbourne, cnr. Victoria Avenue and Merton Street, c. 1905.

By the end of the nineteenth century some buildings had become covered in signs, and new artistic faces were added to the older functional faces.



**Example 26**

LaTL *Jubilee History of the City of South Melbourne* (1905), p. 130. South Melbourne, 270 Clarendon Street, c. 1905.

A rich display of signs and lettering in a new and lively style which made the reserved nineteenth century signs seem old fashioned.

## APPENDIX B
### FREE STANDING SIGNS

**Example 27**

LaTL *Jubilee History of the City of South Melbourne* (1905), p. 123. South Melbourne, Park Street.
A late example of large signs painted directly onto the (brick) wall surface of Mr. Lewis's Cycle Works.



**Example 28**

LaTL *Jubilee History of the City of South Melbourne* (1905), p. 101. South Melbourne, 57–61 City Road.
An intense display of the utilitarian Grotesque still being used in the first years of the twentieth century.

This Bulletin has dealt with large signs on buildings. The details of other types of signs have not been covered:
  (a) unfixed small signs placed outside a building;
  (b) small signs fixed to the carcase of a building;
  (c) small signs fixed to the fences of a building;
  (d) small signs on the glass of lamps outside buildings;
  (e) signs on shop windows;
  (f) free standing small signs fixed to posts.

Some nineteenth century buildings, such as houses, did not have signs painted on them. With these buildings, where it was necessary to advertise some aspect of the building or its occupant, one or more of the smaller signs listed above would have been used. From the photographic evidence available it seems that signs would not have been placed on residential buildings such as terrace houses and free standing houses (apart from the name of the terrace or row).

In modern practice it seems desirable to respect this feature of nineteenth century work and where new uses demand signs, a small sign fixed on the fence or a small free standing sign should be used. The former being more preferable as the latter was rarely used. The small fixed signs might have been as large as 24" × 18" (600 × 450) max. Every effort should be made to find a solution which does not involve the sign being placed on the building.

Where modern free standing signs are necessary, they should be kept both away from the building and back from the fence, be at eye level or lower, be discrete and not obtrusive, and use faces such as Grotesque, or Ionic. They should not, on the one hand, be made to appear as if they are part of the original nineteenth century building, or on the other, be made to appear completely at variance with nineteenth century decorum.

**APPENDIX C**

Technical Bulletins Steering Committee
D. Cassidy (National Trust)
L. Armstrong (Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation)
R. Tonkin (Historic Buildings Preservation Council)
N. Rooney (Secretary)

**APPENDIX D**

Existing and Proposed Publications in the Series
Existing Publications:

Conservation Bulletins: Philosophy and Approach; Roofing.

Technical Bulletins Series: Exterior Paint Colours; Principles of Cleaning Masonry Buildings; Planting c. 1850–1900.

Proposed Publications:

Timber Frame Construction; Joinery; External Finishes; Internal Finishes; Infill Development; 19th Century Fences and Gates; Shopfronts and Verandahs; Structural Damage to Buildings.

**APPENDIX E**

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