

Inn Signs of England

by Esmerelda Weatherwax (August 2009)

This is the first in what I hope will be several articles on English pub signs and peripheral bits of interesting, but not necessarily useful, information.

Over 25 years ago when I lived in Dagenham I used to visit a pub called The Angel in nearby Rainham which is the next village east along the north bank of the River Thames. There is also a Rainham on the Kent side of the river which may have been founded by the same bunch of Saxons but the modern villages are not connected.

Rainham was never a port on the scale of Barking where the abbey was but there was a trading in livestock and vegetables and a ferry over the Thames (which remained into living memory, although that memory did belong to a *very* old man) which was of some importance in the Middle Ages as one of the crossing points for pilgrims travelling south from the Marian shrine of Walsingham in Norfolk to that of St Thomas a' Becket in Canterbury. Once on the Kent bank of the Thames they could pick up either the road travelled by Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury or one due east to Rochester.

The parish church still contains a mediaeval wall drawing of a small ship, a cobb. The pub sign for the Angel was a painting of this ship afloat, overlooked by a beautiful Angel with proper wings and hair in an attitude of prayer and protection. One week we got off the bus and it wasn't hanging. In its place was a badly executed sexy cherub, leering through a pastel haze.

"What did you do with the old angel and ship?" we asked, hoping naively that it was out the back and wondering if there

was room for it in our garden.

“Had it painted over” said the Governor. “It was old fashioned and dull”.

The pub went into a gradual decline over several changes of management, closed, reopened, has reopened again as The New Angel but just has a rusting bracket with no sign the last time I was over that way.

I had no reason at the time to think that this was anything to predict a loss on a national scale.

We know that [Telegraph in September](#) last year.

Painted pub signs are dying out due to the rise of generic high street wine bars, conservationists have warned.



You could spend ages trying to classify signs and not find a conclusive method. Some painted signs hang off the building, others hang on a pole, others are painted directly onto the wall.



The Lion is a very common symbol in heraldry; the Red Lion is specifically associated with John of Gaunt and later King James I of England and VI of Scotland. Others which have become common inn signs are the White Hart which was the personal badge of Richard II, the Bear and Ragged Staff was that of the Earls of Warwick. The Rose and Crown is also royal and English and became popular at about the time the Scottish King James was encouraging the use of his Red Lion. The Rose and Crown hinted at loyalty to the Crown – of *England*. The Crown speaks for itself, the Crown and Thistle is rarer, the

Feathers is the symbol of The Prince of Wales.