



Fig. 1. Oil jar shop sign in Bedford Road, West Ealing (1964); now in Gunnersbury Park Museum.

(Photo: Gunnersbury Park Museum)

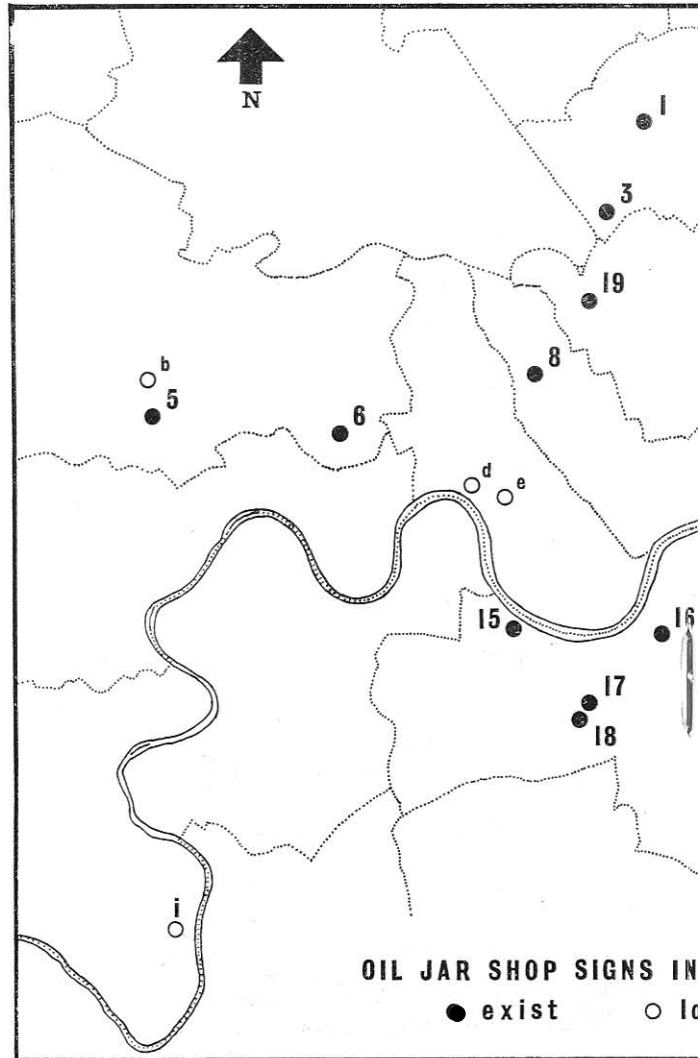
THE OBSERVANT READER will know that the traditional forms of traders' shop signs have not completely disappeared. Some, like inn signs, the red and white barbers' pole or the hanging key are still in use in a modern way. The hanging pestle and mortar continues to be revived by pharmacies well away from its traditional home in Scotland. Bankers also continue to display the symbols and heraldry associated with their business with commendable sureness.

Of more historical interest are the surviving examples of hanging signs that can still be seen in our towns, and now often unrelated to the business carried on below them. These include the umbrella, spectacle frames, boot, bottle, iron key, book or the three golden balls of the pawnbroker. London provides a further example of this type of obsolete sign with the large red painted storage jars¹ formerly displayed by oilmen above their shop fronts. Once

1. The only other example I know of an oil jar used as a shop sign is at Edinburgh. This, however, is type i(a) and was used as a sign at the shop of a tobacconist. (No. 11 Huntley House Museum, Edinburgh.)

The Oil Jar As A London Shop

Fig. 2. Location map of surviving oil jar shop signs including some l



Sign

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lost examples.

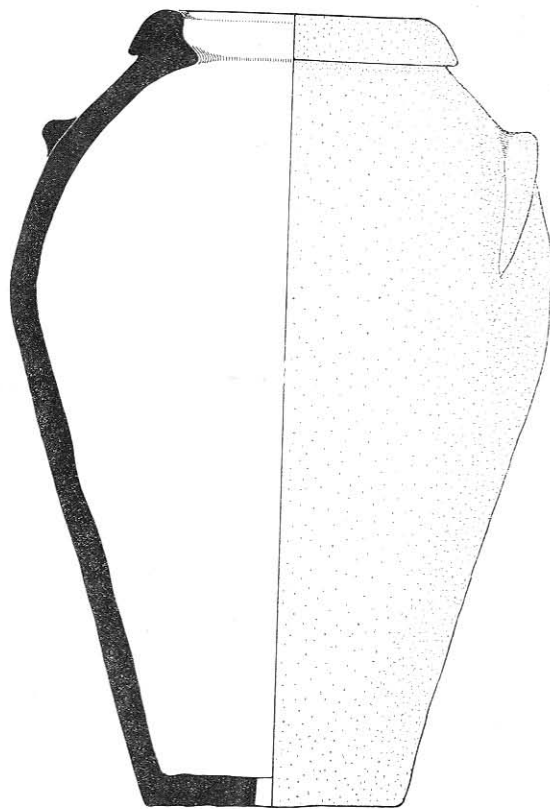
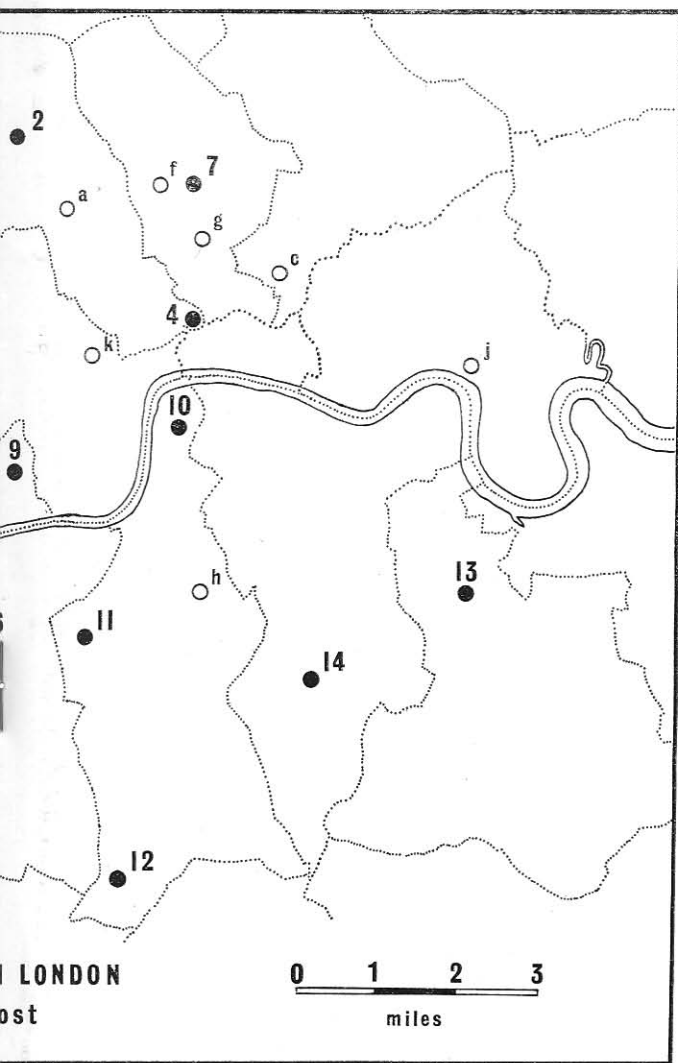


Fig. 3. An oil jar shop sign—a half jar now in the London Museum.(¹)

a common feature of inner London's neighbourhood shopping centres, the surviving examples are now much depleted in number.

While I have youthful memories of seeing oil jars over ironmongers shops when on long cross-London bus rides, it was Vernon Radcliffe who first drew the attention of members of the Thames Basin Archaeological Observers' Group to the importance of recording them. At a T.B.A.O.G. meeting in 1964 he exhibited photographs (fig. 1) of two jars, then recently removed to the Gunnersbury Park museum, from a shop in West Ealing.

The Oil Jar

The large storage vessels with crescent handles, known as oil jars, are found in Britain and north-west Europe in archaeological site collections, in museums, in gardens and fixed over the shop fronts of the London oilmen. They are also found on colonial sites in North America and the Caribbean. They are unlikely, however, to have been made in any of these areas and a western Mediterranean source appears indisputable. They fit into an 18th

and 19th century context and are the more recent representatives of a long Mediterranean tradition of using large earthenware containers for water, wine, oil or grain. Precise evidence for their 18th century dating is provided in the two similar paintings by Samuel Scott, of the Custom House Quay in London, dated to 1757.² These paintings show an open oil jar and another, closed and still in its straw rope travelling frame, standing on a London quay.

In 1971 I attempted to distinguish three types of oil jars.³ All three types can vary in size considerably:

- i. Jars with a low rim and bearing plaques, 18th century;
- ii. Jars with a low rim without plaques, 19th century;
- iii. Garden jars with high rounded rims, often impressed with Italian potters marks, late 19th and 20th century.

I was not aware of one important further distinguishing feature at that time. All the above types must further be divided into (a) plain and (b) banded forms. The latter form has two raised concentric projecting bands, one joining the base of the handles and the other lower down the body of the vessel.

With one exception the London oil jars belong to type ii(a); that is jars without plaques and without bands. The exception belongs to type ii(b). The following description is of a typical jar used as a sign and now in the London Museum (and drawn in fig. 3). It was removed from an unknown shop and had been cut in half for wall fixing when erected as a sign.

LARGE earthenware storage jar, 0.84m. (33in. high), out-turned rim with lid seating internally. Placed high on the body are vestigial crescent shaped handles (on this example cut in half) but no plaque exists. The base is flat and while the body of the vessel is consistently 3cm. thick, in general, it may be described as a rough and poorly finished container, the fabric is a pink micaceous earthenware (the hallmark of these vessels). The exterior is unglazed but thickly painted. The interior has a patchy lead glaze. Compared to the late 18th century oil jars, from the Mewstone wreck site at Plymouth, this jar has a hard modern feel to it. (The cutting of the jar into two was achieved by drilling a hole in the base and by cutting down to this on each side with a saw).

The Oil Jar Shop Sign Before The 19th Century

The earliest dated reference given in the Oxford English Dictionary for an oil shop is 1679. However at least 18 tokens were issued by London oil men

2. In the V and A (FA249) and at Fishmongers' Hall, London.
3. *International J Nautical Archaeol* (1972) 1 147. Oil Jars from the Mewstone wreck, Plymouth where the archaeological evidence is discussed and references given.

between 1654 and 1669. Ambrose Heal in his valuable catalogue of 17th and 18th century shop signs⁴ (collated from directories and trade cards), says the signs used by the London oilmen included Neates, tongues (cattle), the olive tree and the oil jar, and that the Italian warehousemen also used the sign of the oil jar. Of the twenty-three signs cited by Heal the following are worth quoting in full.

George Bowley — at the Oil Jar, 61 Within Bishopsgate 1771.

Joseph Cam — at the Oyl Jar, corner Tothill St., Westminster c 1760.

Hawkins — at the Oil Jar, 10 Edward St., near Portman Sq., c 1780.

Francis Humphreys — at the Jar and Three Pidgeons, Newgate.

Jones — at the Oil Jar, Charing Cross. 1740.

Christopher Pack — at the Ham and Oil Jar, Bartholomew Lane, Royal Exchange. c 1760.

Bartholomew and Wm. Price — at the Jarr on Holborn Bridge. c 1750.

John Tlsoe — at the two Jarrs Blomsbury 1727.

The distinction between the oilmen and the Italian warehouseman in trade terms was probably not a very clear one, as one of Heal's warehouse examples suggests:—

Barto Valle and Bros. — at the Orange tree and two Oil Jars, St. James's Haymarket, near Panton St. 1751.

Several of the above examples might also suggest that actual oil jars were used as signs in the 18th century in addition to painted sign boards. The trade cards illustrated by Ambrose Heal confirm that the jars referred to are the tall type with crescent handles. It is noted above that the precise origin of the oil jar is unclear. The use of oil jars by Italian warehousemen in the 18th century suggests an association strengthened by another of Heal's oilmen entries:

Richard Hockett — at the Grand Duke of Tuscany's Arms, against Cecil St., Strand. 1720.

Tuscany has always been an important producer of olive oil and it is a fact that many of the later (type iii) garden jars are made in Tuscany.

19th Century Oil Jar Shop Signs in London

Nearly twenty shops in Greater London still have oil jars attached to them. The following lists attempts to describe them. While it cannot be complete it does draw on the knowledge of many Londoners. The map (fig. 2) shows their distribution related to London Borough boundaries. As far as I can discover the oilman's use of the oil jar as a sign is a London phenomenon. Several provincial examples have been reported to me but, with one

4. Sir A. Heal, *The Signboards of Old London Shops* (1947). A review of the shop signs employed by the London tradesmen during the 17th and 18th centuries.

exception, and ignoring an Edinburgh tobacconist, have proved false trails. The distribution on the map might be described as widespread but it does have a central and western bias, suggesting a western dispersal. This may be a false deduction but enquiries in east London have proved barren. The now demolished Limehouse example was located by chance in the P.L.A. painting collection. The exception that proves the London rule is Coltman's shop at High Wycombe, Bucks, and this location also fits the pattern of western dispersal.

The majority of the jars in the list are fixed to 19th century buildings, with a bias to 1840-80. At Shoreditch and Hampton Wick they were fixed to buildings of 18th century date but the erection of the jars is, presumably, later. For example, the Shoreditch shop did not become an oil shop until c.1825. In the case of one of the Ealing shops the building clearly dates to the early years of the 20th century. Where a projecting fascia or shelf allowed it, the whole jars were used for the sign. Where this was not possible, a specific use of half jars was developed to allow fixing to the flat wall surface above the shop fascia. The half jars were fixed by bent iron rods or chains and stand on projecting clamps with the top opening sealed. The cutting of jars has surprised some and has led to the false belief that plaster or stucco jars exist. The original and correct colour for the jar when painted was red, stressing their natural colour, but green, grey and black can be found today.

At the present time more oil jar signs survive in Camden and Wandsworth (four each) than in other boroughs. Most shops used one, two or three jars, but seven remain at Clapham. All the jars belong to type ii(b) except the banded example at Putney, and all should be 19th century in date. It is possible that the height of the jar's rim increased through the 19th century but sufficient details are not available.

The list is based on London boroughs and is divided into two integrated parts. The surviving jars are listed numerically but the lost examples are listed alphabetically. The former aims at completeness but the latter examples are based on a very random selection. Further examples will be warmly received via the Editor. Photographic numbers in public collections are noted.

OIL JARS KNOWN IN POSITION IN 1973 (including firm identifications of lost signs)

Camden

1. 40 High St., Hampstead, NW3. S. Fowler and Co. (domestic stores) 2 half jars (unpainted) building dated 1878. (G.L.C. 72/724 and 5/6).
2. 4 Fleet Road, NW3. South Hampstead. Thompson's Stores. 3 half jars (green red green) building c. 1860/80. (G.L.C. 72/0757 and 8).

3. 218 Belsize Road, Kilburn, NW6. (disused) 3 half jars (red blue red) building c. 1860. (G.L.C. 71/35/141/21A).
 - a. 206 Camden High St., NW1. (Evan Evans, est 1852 family oilman) 1 whole jar. building c. 1820. (*Express and News* 2.3.73. ph).
4. 39 Greville St., EC1, Holborn. T. Wigan (domestic store) 2 half jars (red) building c. 1840-50. (G.L.C. 72/4153 and 4).

Ealing

5. 28 Northfield Ave., W13. Clarke's Stores. (est 1901, now closed) 2 half jars (red) building c. 1905. (G.L.C. 72/04298).
6. 200 Acton Lane, W4. (Makandu Decor) 1 jar. Details not known.
 - b. 2 Bedford Road, W13. West Ealing. Reeves Stores (grocers) 2 whole jars. (red) building c. 1880-1900. Removed in 1964 to Gunnersbury Park Museum. (GP Mus photos) see fig 1.

Hackney

- c. 11 Pitfield St., Shoreditch, N1. Now demolished and redeveloped. 2 half jars. building 18th C. (*Survey of London* Vol. 8, pl. 70). (G.L.C. 1919 0007/9956C).

Hammersmith

- d. 63 King St., W6. Hammersmith. 2 whole jars. now outfitters. building c. 1860-80. (*Living London* Vol. 2, p. 378. 1901).
- e. 99 Fulham Palace Road, W6. Hammersmith. 2 half jars. now removed. marks remain.

Islington

7. 383 Liverpool Road, N1, Highbury. Mrs. J. Pettitt. Oilstores. Closed. 1 whole jar (red) building c. 1830. (G.L.C. 71/1/35/14/7).
- f. 1 Fredrick Place, Caledonian Road, N7. 3 whole jars. Now removed. (Islington Local Hist. Coll).
- g. 1-7 Essex Road, N1, Angel. G. Ginger. Now demolished. 2 half jars. (Islington Local Hist. Coll).

Kensington and Chelsea

8. 102 Portland Road, W11. Notting Hill. Martin's Stores. 4 half jars (grey) building c. 1850-60. (G.L.C. 71/1958).
9. 1 Godfrey St., SW3, Chelsea. Simmond's Stores. 2 half jars (red) building c. 1840. (G.L.C. 71/2348).

Lambeth

10. 127 Lower Marsh, SE1, Waterloo. (Eastwood's) 2 half jars (white) building c. 1880. (G.L.C. 72/1090).
11. 1 Polygon, SW4, Clapham Old Town. (Grocers) 7 half jars (white) building c. 1840. (G.L.C./Newbury N.51128/51).
12. 5 Greyhound Lane, SW16, Streatham Common. Benbrook's Stores. 2 half jars. building c. 1900. (G.L.C. 71/97817).
 - h. 67 Loughborough Road, SW9, Brixton. 2 half jars now removed. building c. 1880.

Lewisham

13. 74 Upper Brockley Road, SE4, Brockley. M. Manfield and Son (domestic stores). 1 half jar. (G.L.C. 73/4626)

Richmond Upon Thames

- i. 12 High St., Hampton Wick. (Winterbourne's Stores). Now demolished. 3 half jars. building 18th C. (Twickenham Local Hist. Coll. c. 1910).

Southwark

14. 184 Lordship Lane, SE22, East Dulwich. W. and A. Beszant oilman. 4 half jars. building c. 1870. (G.L.C. 71/7821). Recently removed.

Tower Hamlets

- j. Three Colt Street, E14, Limehouse. Exact location unknown. 3 jars. (P.L.A. Coll. watercolour 1877).

Wandsworth

15. 22 Lacy Road, SW15, Putney. (now Lacy Heating). 2 half jars, banded (red) building c. 1880.
16. 106 Plough Road, SW11, Clapham Junction (now hairdresser) 2 half jars. building c. 1870. (G.L.C. 72/1/0299).
17. 185 Merton Road, SW18, Southfields. Bruce's Domestic Stores. 2 half jars building c. 1890.
18. 199 Merton Road, SW18, Southfields. Cook and Alexander. (grocers) 2 half jars.

Westminster

19. 366 Harrow Road, W.9, Paddington. W. Browning est. 1869. 2 whole jars (yellow) building c. 1870. (G.L.C. 72/0185 and 6).
k. 37 Carnaby St., W.1, Soho. W. Morrell, oil and colour warehouse, now demolished. 1 whole jar (red) building c. 1800. (G.L.C. 62/02644 and F 2320).

Buckinghamshire

20. 29 High St., High Wycombe, Bucks. Coltman's Stores. 2 half jars (grey) building 18th C.

The location of the jar drawn in fig. 3, and now in the London Museum collection is unknown.

Oil And Oil Men

The oil jar, as a primary container, must I suggest, have held second or third quality olive oil. The oilman by the 19th century would, however, have sold a wide range of animal and vegetable oils, together with their secondary products. The former oils provided burning (for lamps) and lubricating (machine) oils. The drying vegetable oils provided paint, varnishes and soaps as well as lubricants. The non-drying vegetable oils, which includes olive oil, provided cooking oils, burning oils, soaps and lubricants, etc. The vegetable fats made soap and candles. The tables in the 1809 *Oil Man's Vade Mecum* only needed, however, to distinguish between fish oil and seed oil. While not the petroleum oil of our energy crisis, the oilman's products were just as vital for cooking, lighting, lubricants and much else in its time. Turning again to olive oil it is worth quoting Cassells' *Household Guide* (circa 1880):

"The best Olive oil is imported into England in flasks and is then known as solid oil, . . . Sometimes — and this is especially the case with oil of an inferior quality — it is sent over in jars." Cassells' goes on to say most of the olive oil is sent from the port of Gallipoli,⁵ but a considerable quantity comes from Lucca and Florence. Which brings us back again to Tuscany.

Today the function of the oilmen has largely disappeared. The 1973 edition of Kelly's London Post Office Directory has few entries under olive

5. Gallipoli near Taranto in Southern Italy, the great market for Apulian oil, and not the port in the Dardanelles which also exports oil.

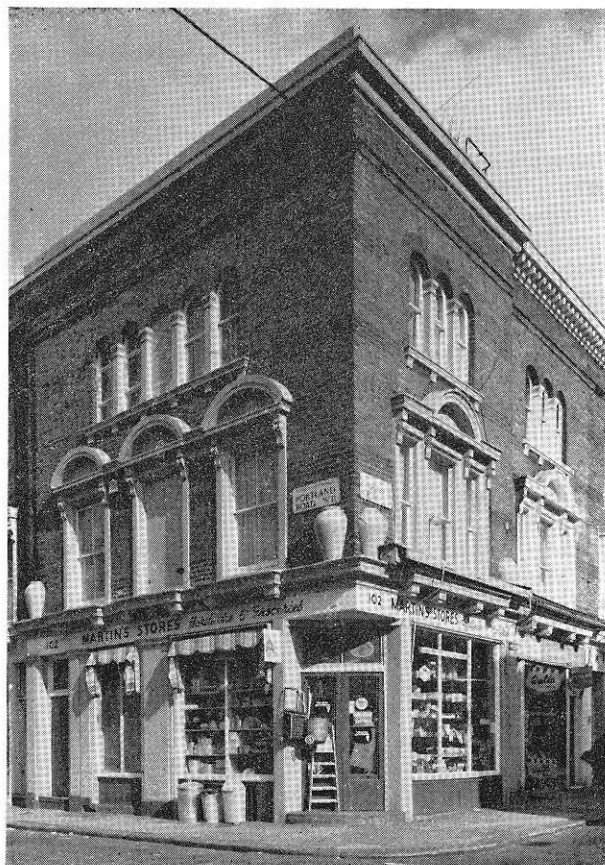


Fig. 4. 102 Portland Road, Notting Hill. (Photo: G.L.C.)

oil importers but no longer carries a classification for oil and colourmen. In contrast the 1939 edition of Kelly's recorded over eight hundred businesses under that classification. There were even five entries under Italian warehousemen in that year. Where businesses have continued, and they are many, they are now described as domestic stores, ironmongers and grocers. The locals may still call them the "oil shop" but this refers to the supply of paraffin rather than the turps, polishes and bottled products that are the poor reminders of former days. Can the well recalled smell of the oil shop still be found? Certainly a few businesses remember to paint their oil jars red but others forget. The archaeologist moves in.

Acknowledgements

Mrs. P. J. Glanville, London Museum, Miss B. Goshawk, Gunnersbury Park Museum, Mr. I. Noël Hume for assistance and the following, among many, who helped with locations: M. Airs, G. Canvin, M. Engering, N. Farrant, M. Gilman, J. Hurst, J. Lee, J. Milne-Smith and P. Whitbourn.