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The little things

In the first of a series of articles featuring easily overlooked details of everyday life, we spare a thought for the street name signs that have been quietly evolving in our midst for more than a century.

Also, in a first for our newsletter, we have a book review on a subject we'll cover in more depth in a future issue - the once widespread use of incising small symbols on buildings to ward against misfortune.



Archaeologist and cultural historian Robyn Lacy investigated the use of hexfoils on the gravestones of settlers in 18th century New England. Her book also provides a valuable general introduction to the subject of such apotropaic marks.

Ken Taylor, chair

Contact us

Email us - secretary@brislington.org - to enquire about any of our community museum's exhibits, to provide feedback or new information etc about them, or to contribute items for this newsletter. We aim to produce this quarterly, but our schedule is flexible so we can react quickly to urgent events (also, during quiet times we can focus on other matters such as sourcing and researching new exhibits).

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Street name signs

When we don't need them, we don't even notice them; and even when we do need them we use them and instantly move on. Street name signs offer the comfort of certainty, yet are rarely of more than fleeting interest and, therefore, they rank high on the list of the least interesting little things in our built environment.

Nevertheless, they have their own story to tell, and clues to their language hide in plain sight. Some have BS4 after the street name, others just have 4, and many have nothing at all - these differences can be used to place the signs within certain date brackets.

Street name only

Initially, street name signs bore only the names of the street to which they belonged. For anyone wishing to peer as deeply into the past as possible, these offer the most interest. In Brislington they appear in a variety of shapes, and there's plenty of surviving examples to form a large-scale study, but only a selection is presented below.

Five distinct types of signs have been found in streets laid out in the first decades of the 20th century (see table below for distinguishing features), each of which is illustrated with examples.

The sign for Repton Road, at its junction with Sandy Park Road, is fixed to the brick side of a shop, at first floor level and has a distinctive history. In the Edwardian period (1901-1910), the new Sandy Park Road shopping street was a favoured subject of postcard publishers, and those photographs chronicle how shop fronts changed and the cluster of large trees at the top of the hill disappeared, one by one. They also show a dramatic change to the street name sign.

The earliest known postcard showing the Repton Road sign was posted in September 1905, and the lettering is painted white on a dark background - probably blue or green rather than black (Hollister c.1905). By February 1909 though, the colour scheme had changed, with black letters on a white background (Harvey Barton & Son Ltd c.1909). The pictures on the postcards are too small to show whether the sign was replaced or simply overpainted, but the position remains constant (and is where the sign still exists today).

This sign, which is in the part of Brislington administered by Bristol at that time, wasn't unique in having white lettering on a dark field: another example appears in the Somerset part of Brislington (Silcocks c.1900). Perhaps, as more postcards come to light, we might begin to narrow the range of dates in which the decision was taken to alter the colour-scheme.

External corners	Internal corners	Fixtures	Examples
square	square	short sides	Winchester Avenue
square	square	corners	Sandringham Road
square	concave	corners	Kensington Park Road
convex	convex	short sides	Repton Road
concave	concave	long sides	Trelawney Park



WINCHESTER AVENUE - at the junction with Winchester Road. The building to which this sign is fixed was a corner shop and, above the original entrance, is a cartouche bearing the date 1911 and the initials CL (presumably of the developer or builder). The erection of the sign and the date of the building aren't necessarily contemporary, but at least it's a convenient starting place for more research.



SANDRINGHAM ROAD - at the junction with Upper Sandhurst Road. The Sandy Park housing development was probably among the very first that followed the 1897 boundary change which saw Bristol expand to annex substantial parts of Brislington including this area west of Wick Road. Even so, properties were still being built in this road in 1906 (Hill et al 1906).



KENSINGTON PARK ROAD at the junction with Hampstead Road, a housing development that was laid out but not yet built in 1902 (Ordnance Survey 1904).



REPTON ROAD - at the junction with Sandy Park Road, a housing development of similar age to Kensington Park Road (above). This was probably painted white when it was replaced by a modern BS4 sign down by the pavement.



TRELAWNEY PARK at the junction with Wick Road. The eponymous residential street was completed shortly before 1902.

4 (Bristol district)

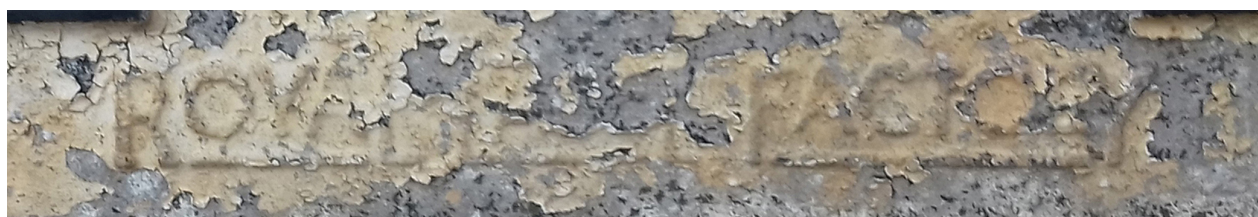
In 1934, Bristol was one of ten places selected to follow the larger urban areas (such as London, Liverpool and Manchester), and have numbered postal districts. Our local district was "Bristol 4", and the suffix 4 can be seen on street name signs from this period until they were superseded by the BS4 system in or shortly after 1967 (Wikipedia 2026).

A pair of early examples in Brislington can be found at Eagle Road where we have examples of both the full spelling and abbreviated version. Close inspection of the sign with full spelling reveals the manufacturer's name - Royal Label Factory - written beneath the letters E and R. The road's name, incidentally, commemorates Eagle House, which was demolished in 1934 (Rowe & Williams 1986, 37), making way for the new road.

Corners	Numeral	Punctuation (full stop)	Examples
chamfer	large	square	Eagle Road, 4.
convex	large	none	Hollywood Road 4
convex	small	none	Fry's Hill 4
convex	small	circle	Kenneth Rd. 4.



EAGLE ROAD, 4. - at the junction with Bath Road. Eagle Road isn't shown on the OS map revised in 1930, but is on the one revised in 1938. As such, it's very likely that the sign is contemporary with this redevelopment of the site.



ROYAL LABEL FACTORY - In the 1930s, that company was located at Stratford-on-Avon, and it's still well known as a producer of metal signs.



HOLLYWOOD ROAD 4 - at the junction with Bath Road, on the Kings Arms public house. This has a full-sized 4. this part of Hollywood Road, incidentally, existed several centuries before Bristol postal district 4 was created, and appears on a map dating to 1745/6 (Wilster).



FRY'S HILL 4 - the lower end of the Fry's Hill footpath, at the junction with Hollywood Road. This narrow public thoroughfare existed long before Bristol postal district 4 was created, and is shown on the 1846 tithe map (Bristol Archives). This sign has the small sized 4.



KENNETH RD 4 - at the junction with Barton Grove. This sign has the small sized 4. This road was developed from a green field site in the 1930s or early 1940s.

BS4 (modern postcode)

More modern street name signs bear the suffix "BS4", which is a reference taken from the postcode system introduced by the Post Office to make sorting offices and postal delivery more efficient.

Bristol was one of fifteen places selected as early adopters of this modern postcode system, with Brislington being in the BS (Bristol) area, district 4 (the full postcode is followed by a space, and then a number for the sector, and two letters for the delivery point). This system could have been in use here as early as 1967, so any street sign bearing BS4 belongs to the period since then.

There's a very wide range of variations in street name signs bearing the suffix BS4, but this isn't the time to detail them. Oddly, we can see two distinctive types at a single location (presumably an error of duplication, this being a road that was created only recently) - on the north side of Oak Close near Wick Road (illustrated on page 1).

One of those signs shows the modern innovation of combining the street name with a traffic sign that's listed in The Highway Code as "No through road for vehicles". What the next development might be, to increase the information in the sign and make it even more useful, may be anticipated with interest.

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Book review

Daisy Wheel, Hexfoil, Hexafoil, Rosette: Protective Marks in Gravestone Art

Written by Robyn Lacy

Published by Berghahn Books in 2024

Having read numerous articles but only one book on protective marks (*Medieval Graffiti*, by Matthew Champion published more than a decade ago in 2015), I opened this new book in the hope of an informed update on the themes variously described as 'ritual protection marks', 'apotropaic marks', or even - and this term is deprecated among researchers - 'witch marks'). I was not disappointed.

In the first paragraph of her introduction, Lacy acknowledges the great difficulty (and challenge) of this field: the practices of ordinary folk that weren't in keeping with mainstream traditions simply weren't recorded by those who kept the histories of their times. We can see the signs they left, but lack the handbook to interpret them.

Although Lacy's focus is narrow - the use of protective signs on gravestones and other mortuary monuments (particularly in the British coastal settlements of northeast North America) - she provides context that spans continents and millennia. The human belief in the power of signs and symbols to ward off evil and misfortune, although openly used in the medieval church, is essentially a form of magic that predates Christianity and history itself.

Lacy's research into the use of protective symbols in monuments to the dead is ground-breaking and establishes a firm foundation for future research. She focuses on the hexfoil, a so-called compass-drawn design with six 'petals' (arguably drawn with the points of small shears rather than an actual compass), but helpfully describes other signs such as the W (VV) marks. She also features the whorl (multiple arcs from centre to perimeter, filling the circle like a swirl of ripples), which is too complex for graffiti, but relished by stone-masons for its decorative form.

Lacy explores the history of the branch of magic that generates protective marks, and the radical change in their use occasioned by the Protestant Reformation (which effectively saw them shift from church and public buildings to private dwellings). With many individual examples discussed in some detail - ranging from hexfoils on medieval grave slabs in Britain to hex marks in the Pennsylvania Dutch tradition - the reader may form a rounded view of their use. This is a very readable work, and its author is diligent in explaining technical terms throughout.

Then we arrive at the fascinating case study of 288 gravestones with hexfoils or whorls commemorating deaths between 1600 and 1799, distributed among twenty burial grounds in and around the New England area of the United States (hexfoils and related protective marks are very rare on gravestones at that time in Britain). The total number of gravestones in the timescale and location of the case study was 14,020, so the protective marks were present on only 2.05% of gravestones. There was no significant difference in protective marks between the graves of people clearly identified on their memorials as men and women (144 and 104 respectively).

The wealth of detail in this book will keep the enthusiast dipping back in to deepen their understanding (it even surveys protective marks in modern culture, ranging from New Age iconography of the hexfoil as sacred geometry and the 'flower of life', to cults, video games and even tattoos). Its comprehensive and accessible narrative provides a platform on which the reader can base their own exploration of whichever branch of the subject interests them. Robyn Lacy has delivered a book that not only informs but inspires the reader to notice - and perhaps even record - the often-overlooked evidence of life's intriguing mysteries that surround us. We can but look forward to more from this author.