

AN INTRODUCTION TO SIGN WRITING

During the late 19th Century, literacy rates began to rise sharply as a result of successive education reform acts. Before this, most shops would display a symbol or picture that told passers-by what the shop was selling. A good example of this is the Carboys in the Chemist shop at Blists Hill.



These large glass bottles were filled with brightly coloured liquids and would be displayed in the window. Other shop symbols included a red and white striped pole which indicated a barbers shop, and the three golden spheres displayed above a pawn brokers shop. By 1900, when most people could read, these symbols were replaced by a painted sign above the shop.



Visitors to Blists Hill Victorian Town cannot fail to notice the wonderful, hand-painted signs that adorn the site. Signwriters had to serve a seven-year apprenticeship to learn the trade but you can have a go at home because we are going to let you into one of the secrets of the trade – *pouncing!*

You will need:

- Paint brushes
 - Black Paint (water-based blackboard paint is ideal)
 - White paint (acrylic or water-based gloss is ideal)
 - An Apron
 - A4 piece of cardboard, hardboard or thin plywood
 - A4 paper
 - Sticky Tape
 - A duster or similar cloth
 - Talcum Powder
 - A Pin or a pair of compasses (be careful!)
 - Old Newspaper
1. Paint a piece of cardboard with a dark paint
 2. In Microsoft Word, choose a san-serif font such as Arial or Impact and design a sign. For the first attempt, just choose one or two words. Use a really large font size (about 120pt) and print out your design. You could also try and design your own font on tracing paper
 3. Use something sharp such as a safety pin to prick holes around the edge of each letter. This takes a while so see if you can get an adult to do the donkey work! Remember to use another piece of cardboard underneath your design to protect your table!
 4. Now wrap a small heap of talcum powder in a cloth. An elastic band can be used to secure the gathers. You have now made a pounce bag
 5. Use sticky tape (ideally masking tape) to secure your design onto the sheet of painted cardboard
 6. Firmly dab the letters with the pounce bag so that some of the powder shakes through the cloth
 7. Carefully remove the design sheet. You should see the letters outlined by little dots of powder
 8. Use a fine brush to paint the outlines of your letters in a lighter colour, then fill them in with a slightly larger brush
 9. Once the letters are dry, use the dark background paint left to make any corrections if needed

Signs became more and more elaborate and would include gold leaf and 'drop shadow' to really make the letters stand out.

