



The Shell Advertising Poster 1920–1953

Introduction

The first Shell advertising poster was produced in 1920. Posters were displayed on the side of the delivery lorries transporting cans of fuel to customers across the country (see figure 1). These posters became known as Lorry Bills. Lorry Bills are characteristic of Shell's advertising during the 1920s and 1930s. This ingenious method of advertising came about when Shell, along with other major companies, responded to public outcries against roadside hoardings in the countryside.



Figure 1: A photograph showing a Shell poster on the side of a delivery lorry in 1925.

The most innovative designs were produced from 1932 when Jack Beddington became responsible for the company's advertising. Under his direction a list of artists not instinctively associated with commercial art were commissioned to convey simple messages for Lorry Bills. These artists went

on to become famous names in British contemporary art, including Paul Nash, John Piper, Vanessa Bell, Ben Nicholson and Graham Sutherland.

Instead of merely illustrating Shell oil and petrol, the company produced sets of posters with subtle themes centred on catchy slogans in a wide variety of artistic styles. Posters promoted motoring as a pleasurable activity, the British countryside and its hidden treasures, or the extraordinary range of people who relied upon Shell. Many of the artists explored different art movements such as Abstraction, Cubism and Impressionism and the Lorry Bills introduced the British public to new elements of Modern Art.

There are over 7,000 printed posters and original artworks in the Shell Art Collection reflecting the charm and character of a nostalgic age of motoring.

The 1920s

In the 1920s, the first few Lorry Bill designs were simple and functional in their message, and illustrated the product. They displayed the commodity, identified the user and defined the use to which it could be put.



Figure 2: The first Shell poster produced. Five cans 'Shell', Shell Studio, 1920. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

Early Lorry Bills also showed the reliability and innovations of Shell's new products. 'Take No Risk – Take Shell' (figure 3) features a new style of petrol

pump, reinforcing the modern approach of the company. This simple image helped to draw attention to the pumps, which motorists could immediately recognise at a garage forecourt, at a time when garages were few and far between.



Figure 3: Take No Risk – Take Shell, Shell Studio, 1925. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

The 1930s

The 1930s was a turning point for Shell and established the company as a leader in advertising. The number of private cars on British roads reached a million for the first time in 1930 and there was a growing concern that motoring was harming the British countryside.

The Council for the Preservation of Rural England and SCAPA (The Society for Checking the Abuses of Public Advertising) protested against poster hoardings and obtrusive signs along the roads in the countryside. Heeding these protests, Shell removed all their placards and enamelled signs which were displayed outside garages and along country roads. Lorry Bills, however, remained the focal point for Shell's advertising.



Figure 4: Jack Beddington, pictured right, with Hans Schleger (left) and Edward McKnight Kauffer (centre). Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

In 1932 Jack Beddington became the advertising manager for Shell. With a good judgement, and the ability to spot young talent, he commissioned artists that became integral to the development of British painting. Shell presented artists with an opportunity to widely exhibit their work and familiarise the British public with modern design. The Lorry Bills became part of a people's picture gallery that toured all over the country on the sides of lorries – bringing art out of galleries and onto the roads of Britain.

Themes

Shell used catchy slogans and themes in their advertising. Their advertisements promoted not only petrol but motoring, and motoring meant special joys – exhilaration, freedom and the pleasures of the countryside. Thus Shell used the whole of Britain as its product: British landmarks, people, institutions, events, curiosities and achievements.

Quick Starting Pair



Figure 5: Chariot and Horses, Jean D'Ylen, 1926. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

The Quick Starting Pair was an early theme used to illustrate the benefits of using both Shell oil and petrol products. The posters in this series feature not the product itself but animals of speed – horses, birds, fish and dogs.

That's Shell – That Was!

Another popular slogan that existed in Shell advertising for over 20 years was That's Shell – That Was! In 1928 a Rex Whistler series of drawings used the slogan That's Shell – That Is! The artist John Reynolds changed it to That's Shell – That Was!, and it was his drawing of a navy holding a shovel and looking after a car which had disappeared from sight that mainly resulted in the series capturing the public eye. But it was the addition of a second head, drawn by a member of the public (who was sent a cheque for 2 guineas for his efforts), which made the series so popular.

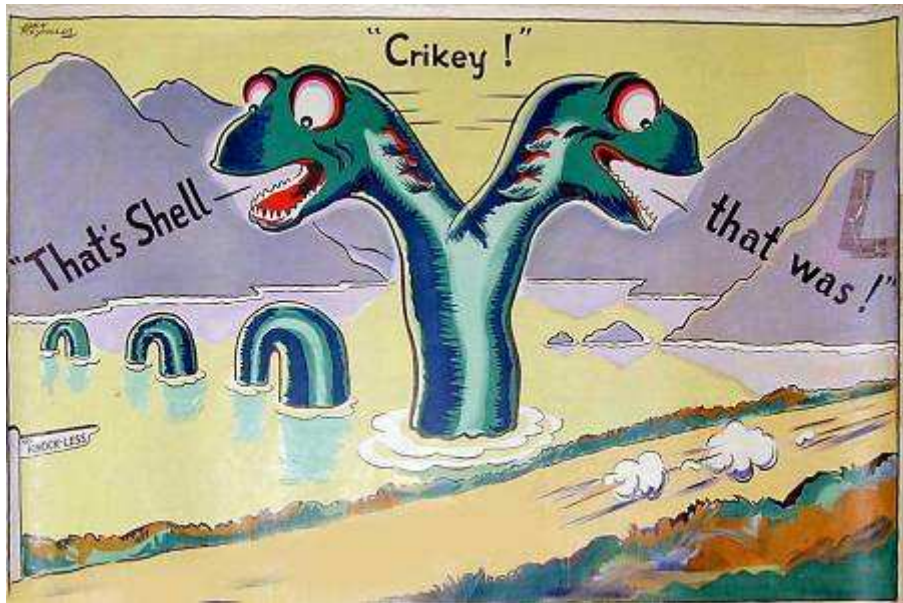


Figure 6: Knock-Less Monster, John Reynolds, 1933. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

See Britain First/See Ireland First

In 1925 Shell began a series of posters featuring the slogan See Britain First – On Shell and See Ireland First – On Shell. Figure 7 is a traditional image showing the golden age of motoring, when roads were traffic free and the few people with cars were able to explore the countryside at will. Motoring was still restricted mainly to the wealthy enthusiast, and the advertising reflects this.



Figure 7: Sma'Glen, Crieff, Dominique Charles Fouqueray, 1925. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

Everywhere You Go

Everywhere You Go was an extension of the See Britain First campaign. It began in 1932 and ended 20 years later. It was a slogan that appealed to a nation that was being encouraged to see the British landscape. Shell tapped into the longing for green pastures and a rural escape from the city when it advertised the delights of the countryside yet reassured motorists of Shell's fuel presence everywhere.

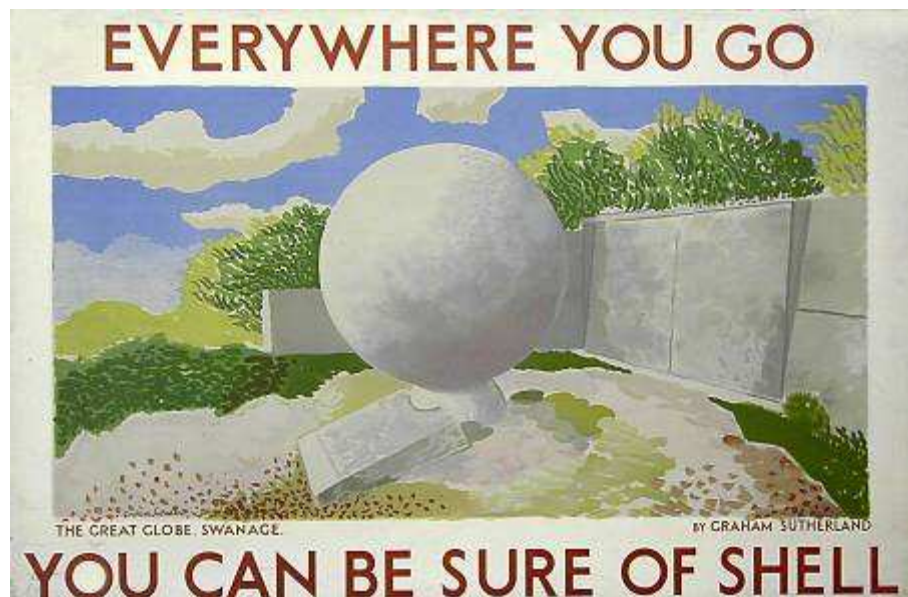


Figure 8: Great Globe, Graham Sutherland, 1932. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

Visit Britain's Landmarks

This series of posters features a number of follies from around Britain. John Betjeman, well-known poet and author, was asked by Jack Beddington to write a list of follies for the campaign, and artists were invited to choose a landmark from the list.

Also at this time, the Shell Guide series was launched, edited by Betjeman. These popular publications, each presenting a different county, continued the campaign to encourage motor tourism throughout the British Isles until the 1980s.



Figure 9: Kimmeridge Folly, Paul Nash, 1937. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

People Prefer

Another popular campaign claimed that all sorts of people preferred and used Shell, from Theatre-Goers to Motorists and Gardeners.



Figure 10: Theatre-Goers, John Armstrong, 1938. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

After 1939

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Shell's advertising campaign ceased and Jack Beddington left the company.

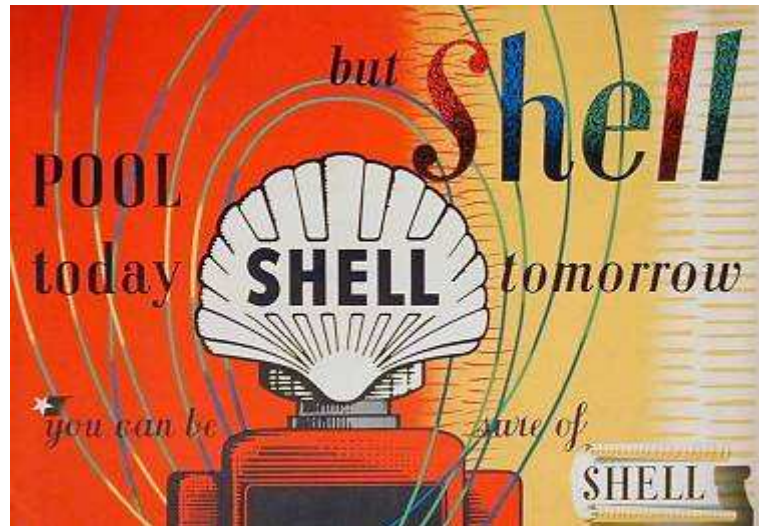


Figure 11: Pool Today – But Shell Tomorrow, Barnett Freedman, 1952. Copyright Shell Brands International AG.

In the early 1950s, after eleven years of restriction, oil companies were allowed once again to sell petrol under their brand names. Shell aimed to reclaim its popular pre-war image. Preparing the public for 'the day', Shell's advertisers decided to take over the entire national consciousness about the end of rationing. A good example of this is Pool Today – But Shell Tomorrow (figure 11).

Modern technology and photography began to transform the poster, and this distinctive period of advertising came to an end. In 1953, as the lorry gave way to the petrol tanker, Shell ceased the production of Lorry Bills.

Today, Shell Lorry Bills and some of the original art works have been preserved within the Shell Advertising Art Collection and remain an important part of Shell's heritage.

If you would like more information about the posters please contact the Shell Advertising Art Collection Manager via the Contact Us page of our website (http://www.nationalmotormuseum.org.uk/contact_us).

Further Reading:

Shell, 1998. *The Shell poster book*. London: Profile Books Ltd.

Hewitt, John, 1992. The 'Nature' and 'Art' of Shell Advertising in the Early 1930s. *Journal of design history*, 5(2), pp 121-139.

Last updated: 25 November 2009