

Look Up and Learn

A wander around
Shrewsbury town centre
observing wall plaques

Look Up and Learn

Wall plaques and inscriptions on the outside of buildings and landmarks can tell you a lot about the history of a particular place. There are:

- Blue Plaques/Open Plaques
- Fire Marks
- Wakeman Trail plaques
- Curiosities which don't fit into any of the above categories

Blue Plaques

- London's Blue Plaques link the people of the past with the buildings of the present.
- The scheme started in 1866 and is thought to be the oldest in the world.
- It has been run by English Heritage since 1986.
- Although Blue Plaques are only found in London, other similar schemes have sprung up elsewhere.

Open Plaques

- There is a world-wide open register, Open Plaques, which catalogues, curates and promotes commemorative plaques and historical markers (often blue and round) installed on buildings and landmarks.
- Open plaques are signs that connect people or events to a specific location in the past.
- The scheme is known as the “museum of the streets” and was established in 2009.

Criteria for plaques

Blue Plaque (London only)

- The proposed recipient must have died at least 20 years ago.
- A plaque can only be erected if there is a surviving building closely associated with the person in question.
- All decisions made by English Heritage.

Open Plaque

- The building owner must give permission for a plaque to be erected.
- Cannot be put on listed buildings.
- A person or organisation is willing to pay for it, e.g. Rotary Club, Horticultural Society, Civic Society.

Fire Marks

- A fire mark is a plate, usually of metal, fixed on behalf of an insurance company, to a building insured by that company.
- Usually placed between the first floor windows on the front of the building.
- There were three main fire insurance companies in Shrewsbury.

Shrewsbury Insurance Companies

- 1780 Salop Fire Office established.
- 1837 Shropshire and North Wales Assurance Company, a rival, was established.
- 1890 Shropshire and North Wales Assurance Company merged with the Alliance Assurance Company.
- 1918 Shrewsbury Corporation took over fire services.

Purposes of Fire Marks

- To mark or identify the property insured. It was important to do this before formal addresses were in use. No property was “secure” until the mark had been fixed in place.
- Early marks bear a number which corresponds to a policy number. This practice began to die out after 1800.

Purposes of Fire Marks

- Another purpose of a fire mark was to guide the fire brigade.
- Each insurance company had its own fire brigade which attended fires relating to their policy-holders.
- It used to be thought that, if a property was owned by a rival company, the fire brigade would leave, but there is no evidence to support this view.

Purposes of Fire Marks

- Finally, fire marks were an advertisement.
- It is for this reason that fire marks were used long after they were actually needed.
- The term “fire plate” is commonly used to distinguish later signs from the earlier “fire marks”.
- True marks are those old signs which bear a policy number.

Salop Fire Marks



Shropshire and North Wales Fire Mark



The Wakeman Trail

- From 1983-2013, pupils at the Wakeman School made ceramic tiles of features of Shrewsbury architecture.
- These tiles have been made into 28 beautiful wall plaques which have been placed all around Shrewsbury.
- The example shown overleaf can be seen on the English Bridge riverside walk. The full list is printed on the back of the walk leaflet.

The Wakeman Trail



Curiosities

- On our walk we came across a number of inscriptions, interpretation boards and other curiosities, which did not fit into any of the categories discussed so far.
- We hope you like them as much as we did.
- And after finding the curiosities on our walk, your challenge is to find some more of your own!

Note

- It was not possible to include all types of plaques on the walk.
- For example, there are a series of buildings in the town marked as being of “Historic and Architectural Interest” .
- There may be other plaques in the “Discover Shrewsbury” series.

References

- Open Plaques website (for Shrewsbury)
- <https://openplaques.org/places/gb/areas/shrewsbury/plaques>
- British Fire Marks and Plates, Catalogue of the collections at the Hall of the Chartered Insurance Institute, available to view at Shropshire Archives.