

## Media Information

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# Signmakers Head For Heights



Abseilers and technicians poised to re-brand Vienna's 14-storey, five star Intercontinental hotel with eight-foot lettering were stopped in their tracks when a fleet of helicopters and Israeli security personnel effectively sealed off the place.

Ariel Sharon was booking in and the team from Leeds-based Ashleigh Signs was shadowed every step of the way during the complex installation project.

Most commissions for the award-winning £14 million turnover company are less hair-raising but many are certainly challenging, with Ashleigh handling major identity changes across the UK and Europe. In addition to the major hotel groups and pub chains, customers include High Street names such as Monsoon and Orange.

The firm's innovative approach has garnered a raft of awards, including supplier accolades from Allied Domecq and Bass and two sign industry awards for signage of the new multi-million pound Bibi's restaurant in Leeds, followed by the lighting scheme for that Vienna hotel. Centre piece of the Bibi's frontage is a statue, sculpted in resin, flown to Canada for a specialist finishing process and making it back in time for the restaurant launch.

As marketers and brand managers continue to ring the image changes – 2,500 pubs were recently re-signed for a major chain - so Ashleigh develops innovative new solutions, techniques and materials, including the latest digital printing presses. LED lighting is used increasingly. Longer lasting and low on maintenance, it also costs substantially less to run than fluorescent tubes, so the environment also benefits.

A studio staffed by 15 in-house designers lies at the heart of the modern creative process, where brands are created, developed and interpreted. An intranet system transmits designs direct from screen to state of the art routing and cutting machines. There is even a specialist piece of equipment for producing signs in Braille.

But the traditional art of sign writing also remains intact with materials including gold leaf and paint. The company still has its own pictorial artist with a reference book-lined studio deep in the factory.

Manufacturing director Andy Bedford is proud of the fact that every process is handled in-house by the 125 strong work-force. Alongside the high tech approaches Ashleigh employs time-served traditional joiners, fitters, engineers and wrought iron masters, plus teams of highly skilled fixers who actually put the signs in place. At their disposal is a fleet of HGVs, cherry pickers and hydraulic handling machinery for the larger installations.

Andy Bedford explains: "When we have a major roll-out for a pub or restaurant chain, we can have up to 30 fixing crews out on the road, some of them trusted freelancers. It's a serious logistics exercise that never ends as images change, in fact, we've visited some pubs up to 20 times for signing changes."

Ashleigh's origins started some 20 years ago when Ken Sadler launched an engineering business and gradually found orders for signage materials increasing. A switch from traditional engineering methods to extruded aluminium proved to be a quantum leap forward.

The company remains in family hands, with the emphasis firmly on innovation and further growth. Links with local schools ensure a steady stream of new recruits who have joined the company as modern apprentices and are given a spell in each department for a year before deciding which discipline to follow.

Says Bedford: "Although we're in a very competitive industry we have a very healthy order book and an increasing flow of orders from overseas. In addition to major schemes changing the corporate identities of outlets, we handle signs down to the last detail, including hotel room door numbers and internal signs, in normal and, increasingly, Braille formats.

"The ban on smoking in pubs will bring us a welcome bonus – imagine all the "No Smoking" signs that will be needed," he smiles.

Ian Williams, Leeds Chamber of Commerce & Industry's executive director, comments: "Companies like Ashleigh Signs epitomise the continuing success of Leeds manufacturing companies that have successfully repositioned themselves within the market by combining traditional skills with innovative and modern production processes. Major high street, hotel and retail brands are being manufactured right here in Leeds."

## **Ends**

**Photography:** Ashleigh Signs pictorial artist Gary Hunter completes a portrait of Nelson, watched by Ian Williams.

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