



Best British Bonces

Ben Simpson

This output is a creative project comprising an illustrated essay, several exhibits, and a series of workshops. It is a practice-led history of British cartoonists.

Research Process

This research investigates the political elasticity of 'Britishness', exploring the semiotics of humour, and how select cartoonists represented the 'Britishness' of their childhood. It is researching perceptions of humour and the potential revival of British humour comics.

Research Insights

The project found that there are modes of humour that are no longer acceptable due to a shift in societal values. The project tries to address what is humour now and the potential for the revival of such aesthetics.

Dissemination

The project was disseminated via publication, The Zine, via exhibition and a series of workshops aimed at 12-18 year olds.

PANEL SHOW EXHIBITION

SUNNY
BANK
MILLS
APPROVED

THE MEGA-SUPER
AMAZING

ZINE

FEATURING WORDS AND PICTURES
TO INTRIGUE THE IMAGINATION

Dater
Sunny
20

BEST BRITISH BONCES CAN READ

Britishness in comics... hhhmmm... when thinking of Britishness in comics I can't help but hark-back to a more innocent time... a time without social media... a time, can you believe it, without the internet... a period of time in my childhood that I look back upon, admittedly with rose-tinted glasses on, back to those wet-family-seaside-holidays in Filey and the surrounding British east-coast of the late 1980s. I was lucky enough to be one of the last generations of children to be fully exposed to a full plethora of British humour comic weeklies, not just The Beano, but oh so much more.

Over the following pages I will be exploring Britishness in comics, through observing the documented societal changes of my generation and through the work of, who to me are,

the four-core-comic-presarios that either trailblazed the way or still carry that flaming torch for neigh-on eighty years. These are, arguably, the most influential British Children's humour comic book creatives that have been solely responsible for inspiring the past three generations of comic book creators and will surely continue to inspire future generations of illustrators and cartoonists alike. They are non-other than the legendary Ken Reid (active in comics circa 1938-1987), the genius zietgeist Leo Baxendale (active in comics circa 1952-1978), the Beano talisman David Sutherland (active in comics circa 1960-1994) and journey-man-turned-comic-maestro Tom Paterson (active in comics circa 1973-1994).

From the publication of Ken Reid's first comic strip; Budge err, Fudge the Elf in The Manchester Evening News late 1938 to Tom Paterson's most recent Sweeny Toddler page in Rebellion's Cor!! & Buster Humour Special April 2019. There's just one common denominator that connects all four of these shining lights. Can you guess what that is? Yes, that's correct; The Beano. With its literal meaning; a British noisy festive celebration, seems as good a place as any to evoke what Britishness may or may not be left in this country once known as, admittedly self-proclaimed as, Great Britain. The chorus of Tomson's Rule Britannia (suddenly booms out of a dusty old speaker): *Rule, Britannia, rule the waves; Briton's never will be slaves.* (McMahon and Curdy, 2005). This gives me a somewhat sinking feeling as it too may have given Ken Reid, the man behind Jonah the Jinx, and regaled by many as being the godfather of modern British children's humour comics. Who on the completion of his final Jonah strip for The Beano in 1964 returned from posting his artwork up to Thomson's only to find his home and canal boat submerged by water; the jinx of Jonah struck again!

WHEN THE BELL BASHED,

Although the school ground version would probably be more Reid's cup of tea: *Rule Britannia, Marmalade and Jam, Five Chinese Crackers in your earole, Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang.* As provided by Moore (internet source with absent) date. Britishness, but what does it mean in today's pre-post-Brexit society?

There are those who try to solidify definitions of Britishness. But for me, and I'd like to hope for the vast majority of our indigenous population of these isles formally known as Great Britain, this should be a fragmented and fluid ideology encompassing all that is great and good left within our ever-changing collective cultural society. Which traditionally for me had the British Children's humour weekly comic at its heart. Gone are the days of T.S. Elliott's essential British items including: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, The Dartboard, Cup Final, Beetroot in Vinegar, Boiled Cabbage and Gothic Churches, now this list would have to be seriously ammended (Calcutt, 2000, p.8). With the exception of The Dartboard and Cup Final the items on his list are quite far removed, oh how far we have come, but are we any better for it? And what items would replace them now?

According to Calcutt (2000), *British culture has never flown so fast. Since 1997 we have lived through Cool Britannia, New Britain and the End of Britain?* These labels came in and out of circulation so quickly that it is tempting to dismiss them as pure PR admen's slogans for changes that are not really happening. But, though exaggerated, each of them represents real developments in the way we live now. (Calcutt, 2000, p.9).



In this modern pre-post-Brexit society the essential British items shopping list is more likely to include: a Donner kebab, a Chicken Tikka Masala, an apple (of the smart phone variety) with a Google maps street view of a back alley in Croydon showing the aftermath from a post knife crime incident being played back on a time-delay live feedback, a bottle of Chardonnay, a six pack of craft beers, a Virtual Reality Computer Generated version of a cup final and if you're really lucky an Augmented Reality version of Viz available in your local newsagent containing a very swearly and overweight version of what Sweeny Toddler might have grown-up to be; but hey, it's not all bad at least it's still, written and drawn by Tom Paterson!

All of the aforementioned artist's work has a distinctly British feel to it, could this art style represent Britishness now? As we teeter on the edge of a new chapter for these British isles, surely re-separating from Europe should evoke the very essence of Britishness, this same essence that riled the French when William Hogarth made a serious political statement when unveiling his painting 'O the Roast Beef of Old England (The Gate of Calais)' in 1748 as discussed by Young (2000, p.30), *Britain the underdog with the superiority complex... there is one throwback to Hogarth, in that Englishness is being reborn.* Calcutt (2000) argues that: *The partial adoption of symbols like the cross of St George represents not a close identification with Englishness but the desire to disengage from the old-fashioned aspects of Britishness motivated by the same factors that prompted Cool Britannia as an antidote to the dotage of Rule Britannia.*

WE ALL ATE BANGERS AND MASH!

In any case it is matched by an equally powerful nostalgia for traditional British symbols. (Calcutt, 2000, p.12). But the tendency now to fly the flag of St George, instead of the Union Jack, in highstreets and at national sporting events only emphasises how Britishness is in fact being deconstructed.

Young (2000) claims that Hogarth spoke for an English-Britishness that had substance...what lay ahead...was the exporting of this strange hybrid of a national construct to all corners of the earth. British commerce, exploiting British inventiveness and supported by British military power, crossed every ocean. Hogarth's world was not defensive or apologetic. Battles thought were battles won. There was nothing empty about the power of the nation-state or the sense of identity, envied by competitors, that went with it. Now the claim to Britishness has a bleating quality. It supremely lacks self-confidence. You know it by its whinging. (Young, 2000, p.31). Especially with the sub-nationalisms and inherent flourishing of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland indicates that Englishness is being left behind with the loss of Britain at the heart of this fracturing.

This makes me think of anything but a typical English country garden scene and the disappearance through erosion of the east-coastline itself evokes and encompasses my thoughts on, what I would argue, is the erosion of Britishness and the very fabric of the country itself. And yet, there is hope claim Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) if Britain can reconcile itself to a new beginning, there is the chance to carve out a new identity. Rule Britannia is a call to leave behind the jingoistic ignorance of the past and build a fairer Britain, eradicating the inequality that blights our society and embracing our true strengths. (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019, forward).

Silly Tiddlers



WHO STOLE ALL THE LAUGHTER?

The hope is that Britains are beginning to see themselves and the country for what it is; a hub; crossroads; filter; melting pot for multi-culturalism. Kibble-White (2005) comments: *But, like a snake consuming its own tail, the circle gradually grew smaller, with less to sustain it as the years rolled by. What caused the comic-reading audience to fall away over the Eighties and Nineties isn't clear, but there are a few doorsteps upon which the blame has traditionally been laid: television, home video, computer games pretty much every other media, really.* (Kibble-White, 2005, p.293).

Whatever the core reason for the lack of sales and disappearance from many titles from the shelves of our local newsagents that fact was that kids were being forced to grow up faster and became more concerned with their self-image and how they are perceived by the world around them and less concerned about the misadventures of their once favourite comic book character. This is an inherent problem within our modern-day society a problem that is only becoming more heightened through the advent of Social media. Possibly, just possibly, the demise of the British weekly humour comic; a staple diet of even the poorest of children throughout the past three generations, is the root of all our apparent turmoil and flux.

Baxendale (1993) spoke of, *Humour is the heartbeat of comedy, but is nevertheless only part of comedy. Comedy is a structure; a particular way of thinking; a particular way of working; a way in particular of synthesising the unlike, the unexpected. The most incongruous things that the mind may light on, can be joined in Comedy in perfect congruence. Comedy was for me, first, a market; but its singular attractiveness as against other markets, was its possibility for uninhibition.* (Baxendale, 1993, p.11).

KEEP THE ASPIDISTRA FLYING!



I feel as though Baxendale hit upon something within his observational statement. Perhaps it wasn't the other medias that had over taken the need for comics but perhaps it was the fact that the all important humour element had become lost from British Children's humour comics or perhaps our Children's perception of humour has changed. If I am wholly honest its been many years since I laughed-out loud from reading a copy of *The Beano* and with this being the final page left from this whole field of comics, how much longer can it stay rooted? Its humour may need re-addressing. I'd like to think that I could be a part of this revival and surely there must be more hope for it than another of our Great British humour based institutions; the seaside Joke Shop.

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Contextual Information

IT'S ART! FROM COMICS!!!

PANEL SHOW

A seven week exhibition of comic book art, events and workshops.
Curated by Si Smith and Dick Bonham.

SEPT 21 - NOV 10, 2019



THE ARTISTS

ANNA MILL, BETH DAWSON, CAT FARRIS, CHARLOT KRISTENSEN, CHARLOTTE BAILEY, DARRYL CUNNINGHAM, DEAN ORMSTON, DISA WALLANDER, DOCTOR SIMPO, FLAMEBOY, GABBY SCHULZ, JACKY FLEMING, JADE SARSON, JEFF ANDERSON, JOE DECIE, JONATHAN EDWARDS, JULES SCHEELE, KATE CHARLESWORTH, KATRIONA CHAPMAN, LAURA HOWELL, LEE THACKER, LUKE HEALY, LDCOMICS, LUKE PEARSON, MAWIL, MIKE MAIHACK, MYF TRISTRAM, REBECCA K JONES, ROB DAVIS, SALLY JANE THOMPSON, SARA VARON, SHAZLEEN KHAN, SI SMITH, SIKU, TILLIE WALDEN, TOM GAULD, UNA, WARWICK JOHNSON CADWELL, ZARA SLATTERY.

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