

Report for the October 2014 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 10 October Ray Aspden, a comic strip writer and illustrator for over 30 years, gave us a talk entitled "*One Hundred Years of British Comic Papers*".

Having been welcomed by the Chairman Clive Hooper, Mr Aspen took us on a magical tour of the last 100 years of comics. He started by pointing out that comic art was always drawn by hand and traditionally was in black and white. It was often linked to the seasons e.g. Pancake Tuesday, Bank Holidays and many aspects of Christmas. The humorous aspect was always important and done with a side look at people e.g. trying to get a pancake off the floor or a Christmas tree through the door.

The quality of the art was outstanding in its details of clothes and background. The morale-boosting effect of mocking the Germans in W.W.1 was very important and the caption bubbles were designed to make the readers laugh. He commented how adults as well as children enjoyed comics and told a couple of stories of how he managed to get a comic paid for on his father's newspaper bill. He, too, liked a laugh!

Comic papers had started as "Penny Dreadfuls" and were then, as now, magazines with comic strips and stories. Harmsworth Press were the publishers and printed on poor paper so they cost only one old penny. They were aimed at the poor, working men in an era when the population was learning to read. This meant they became quite an incentive to learn at school.

Through the medium of comics many cultural icons were born. Judging by the audience reactions many of these were familiar as he named Dennis the Menace, Desperate Dan, Billy Bunter, Roy of the Rovers and Dan Dare the Pilot of the Future. It was interesting to learn that Billy Bunter had to go because the curse of obesity was surfacing. There were children's comics such as Rainbow with the iconic Tiger Tim. Into this publishing world in the early 1930s came the Scottish firm Thomson Press of Dundee. They produced a new format with the minimum of speech bubble and text. The Hotspur was the first and was followed by the Dandy (Corky the Cat) and then the Beano. The editor of the Beano (1938) was put on Hitler's Hit List for extermination! This open style with some colour was the hallmark of Thomson Print and the then Harmsworth Press with bright colours and texts which did not compete well with the Thomson format.

Thomson moved on, sensing the need for more anarchy in their publications e.g. teachers tied down or fired from a fairground cannon. Finally, comics entered the realm of science fiction with Thunderbirds. These were still catering for the male readers but Thomson had not forgotten the girls. In 1929 there was the School Friend. It survived the war and printing ceased in 1975. There were other comics for girls which were very popular, such as Romeo, Bunty, and Mandy.

So why do we not see comics on the bookstalls today? Ray Aspden made several suggestions, the main one being political correctness e.g. no smoking and obesity being two of them. Excessive alcohol might be made funny but the principle is wrong. It was an excellent evening full of humour and stirred many happy memories.