

Sandbach History Society: Report of the February 2025 meeting

Speaker: David Hearn

At the online February meeting of Sandbach History Society, David Hearn gave an interesting and humorous talk entitled "Great cartoons and the artists behind them". Mr Hearn talked about a number of artists and showed examples of their cartoons and paintings. He explained that cartoonists are usually very talented artists in their own right who, can produce high quality paintings. Cartoonists are usually well-known for their cartoons rather than their more professional work.

Mr Hearn started with the Bayeux Tapestry which could perhaps be seen as one of the first cartoons; an embroidery using a simplified style to illustrate an event, in this case the defeat of King Harold by William the Conqueror in 1066. He pointed out that, contrary to popular belief, King Harold was not the person with the arrow in his eye, rather he is shown to have been cut down by a swordsman.

Mr Hearn then talked about two familiar cartoons from the mid-eighteenth century by William Hogarth: Gin Lane and Beer Street. They were designed to be shown together, one depicting the evils of drinking gin and the other the benefits of drinking beer. In the former the people are falling about and the buildings collapsing, apart from the pawn-brokers shop. In the latter cartoon the scene is reversed with merry, happy people and the shop dilapidated due to lack of use. However, Mr Hearn also demonstrated that Hogarth was a talented artist by showing a high quality painting by him of his servants.

Quite often cartoons are reused in a different form at a later stage. An example is the famous cartoon by James Gillray called "The Plumb-pudding in danger" showing William Pitt and Napoleon carving up the world following the short-lived peace treaty during the Napoleonic Wars. In 2025 this was copied and amended by Peter Brookes of The Times to show President Trump and Elon Musk carving up Greenland and Europe.

Gillray also drew a cartoon in 1802 to illustrate fears about vaccination following Jenner's discovery of the benefits of inoculating people with cowpox to prevent them developing smallpox. The cartoon shows cows coming out of different parts of the bodies, of people who had been inoculated. However, in 1808 when the benefits of inoculation had become clear, another cartoonist, Isaac Cruikshank, drew a cartoon showing Jenner and his two colleagues seeing off doctors who had been sceptical about vaccinating people.

Mr. Hearn then talked about the artist and illustrator, Edward Lear, who is best known for his nonsense poems and limericks and the accompanying illustrations. However, Lear was a very talented artists who instructed the children of Lord Derby to draw while he himself drew stunning illustrations of birds and animals.

A very political illustrator was Sir John Tenniel (1820-1914) who drew the famous cartoon called "Dropping the Pilot" which was published in Punch in 1890. It shows Bismarck leaving the ship of state after he had been forced to resign as Chancellor by Emperor Wilhelm II who is watching dismissively from the ship. However, Tenniel is also well-known for his illustrations for "Alice in Wonderland". His drawing of the Mad Hatter's Tea party was copied by Carl Giles of the Daily Express in 1973 to show Grandma's Tea Party. However, this time the family are drinking beer rather than tea.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Ernest Shepard was a well-known illustrator. He was a prolific painter and was shown many times at the Royal Academy. After service in the First World War he joined Punch where AA Milne was assistant editor. He then became the illustrator for the Winnie The Pooh books written by Milne for which is now known. Shepard also did the illustrations for The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame. However, he would probably have preferred to be remembered as a serious artist. This sentiment is reflected in an illustration he drew showing Christopher Robin kicking Winnie the Pooh. Shepard is said to have commented, "That dreadful bear ruined my career."

Mr Hearn said that during the Second World War cartoons were used to maintain morale at home. In 1940 after the fall of Paris, Sir Denis Low drew a cartoon in the Evening Standard showing a single defiant soldier saying "Very Well, Alone" echoing Churchill's resolve. However, another cartoonist, Kenneth Bird, known as Fougasse, drew a cartoon in Punch at the same time giving a different view of the same event. It showed two Tommies on the beach, and one is saying "So our poor old empire is alone in the world" and the other replies "Aye, we are, the whole five hundred million of us".

Another war cartoonist was Ronald Searle who is probably best known for his comic strip drawings of St Trinian's school, an imaginary school for girls. However, during the Second World War he was a Japanese Prisoner of War and drew cartoons of the inmates and the guards. His drawings were subsequently used in the War Crimes' trials to identify the perpetrators of cruelty in the camp.

Mr. Hearn finished on a sombre note recalling the attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris ten years ago. The attack was carried out because the satirical magazine had published a cartoon depicting the prophet Muhammad. Eleven members of staff died. Afterwards many Heads of State came to Paris to show solidarity with the French people and to reaffirm the principle of free speech. Cartoons are an important part of a democratic society.

Finally, Mr Hearn recommended the British Cartoon Archive at the University of Kent for those who wish to know more about the subject. He ended by asking members of his audience to tell him about their favourite cartoonist.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be in person at Sandbach Library on Tuesday March 4th at 8pm when Olivia Smedley will talk about "Kilts, Reels, Haggis, the formation of the Sandbach and District Caledonian Society". For more information, go to the Society website, <https://sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk>, Visitors are most welcome but please contact the Society first at info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk or ring Aileen Thompson on 01270-760810.