



**THE UNOFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE  
BEANO**

For everyone who ever worked on *The Beano*,  
and everyone who read *The Beano*.

THE UNOFFICIAL HISTORY OF THE  
**BEANO**

**Iain McLaughlin**



**WHITE OWL**

AN IMPRINT OF PEN & SWORD BOOKS LTD.  
YORKSHIRE - PHILADELPHIA

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by  
**PEN AND SWORD WHITE OWL**  
An imprint of  
Pen & Sword Books Ltd  
Yorkshire - Philadelphia

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ISBN 978 1 52677 785 0

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Typeset in Times New Roman 11.5/14 by SJmagic DESIGN SERVICES, India.  
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd.

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# The Birth of *The Beano*

By the middle of the 1930s, DC Thomson was already highly successful in the comics market. The heart of their Dundee-based comic enterprise at that time was its famous line-up of adventure comics, which had been a huge source of diversion and entertainment through some very bleak and difficult years. *The Adventure* had launched in 1921, with *The Rover* and then *The Wizard* both following in 1922. *The Skipper* first appeared in 1930 with *The Hotspur* arriving on the shelves in 1933. The only adventure comic from the stable to stumble and fall in that era was *The Vanguard*, which started in 1923 but folded in 1926. The enormous popularity of the others led to them being known as ‘The Big Five’ adventure comics. The term is still used to describe them today.

These five titles had been the dominant force in comics, full of thrilling text stories crammed with larger-than-life characters interspersed with some more visual, illustrated stories and a few funny cartoons. The adventure comics also carried some zanier comic strips, which proved to be popular with readers.

Managing Editor of the comics, R.D. Low, looked at these humorous comic strips and began to wonder if they might form the basis for a different type of comic. There had been a very positive reaction to the arrival of what would become two iconic Scottish comic strips, ‘The Broons’ and ‘Oor Wullie’, in the pages of DC Thomson’s *Sunday Post* newspaper in 1936, and this encouraged Low more. Following an experiment, also in 1936, which had seen miniature humour-led comics given away as free gifts in the adventure titles, *The Dandy* was launched in December 1937 as DC Thomson’s first funny comic, although the humour was backed up by adventure stories.

The first issue of *The Dandy* sold more than 440,000 copies, outselling the most popular of the ‘Big Five’ by 130,000 copies. It was an instant success. More than simply being a smash hit in its own right, *The Dandy*

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had emphatically proven that there was a large and lucrative market for comics mixing more humour with adventure.

Probably the most ground-breaking aspect of *The Dandy* was the use of speech bubbles inside the comic strips to tell the stories. Prior to this, British comics had generally told their stories in large blocks of text beneath the pictures. Putting the speech bubbles inside the picture brought the stories to life, and let the characters speak with more immediacy and personality. These strips were a huge success.

R.D. Low quickly set about crafting a sister paper for *The Dandy*, intent on recreating its success. Low's choice as editor was George Moonie. Despite being only 24 years old, Moonie was at that point the Chief Sub-Editor (the Deputy Editor) of *The Hotspur*, having previously held the same position on *The Wizard* after starting his career in the comics on *The Rover*.

Speaking to the BBC's *Arena* programme in 1987, Moonie himself said, 'In 1937 it was felt that there was a place in the market for a comic. We hadn't gone into comics at that time so they took Albert Barnes off *The Hotspur*, where he was Chief Sub, and asked him to produce a comic, which was *The Dandy*, and it came out in December 1937. It was a success so the directors thought they could put a companion paper on the market almost immediately and I was taken off *The Hotspur* and *The Wizard* and asked to produce *The Beano*. And it came out in July 1938.'

Joining George Moonie on the staff of this fledgling paper were Ron Fraser, who was Chief Sub-Editor, and Sub-Editors, Ian Chisholm and Fred Simpson, with Stan Stamper as the junior. Responsibility for the adventure stories in the paper lay with Ron Fraser, but it was Ian Chisholm who was the dynamic force behind the funny pages.

Under George Moonie's careful eye, with input and support from R.D. Low, scripts were written, characters honed, and artwork delivered, carefully crafting the comic until it was as they wanted it.

Speaking in 2007, Euan Kerr, who edited *The Beano* from 1984 to 2006, described the first issue: 'Pretty much a replica of *The Dandy* in the style... the mixture of adventure stories, comic strips, text stories... and again it just hit the market at the right time.'

The artists and writers used on the paper were often names already known to the staff from writing or drawing for the adventure papers. Some of those artists also happened to work just a few yards away in DC Thomson's in-house Art Department, which was something of a legend

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in its own right. To supplement the artists and writers they already knew, R.D. Low would often go on scouting trips around the country, arranging interviews with writers and artists to try to find the next big talent for the comics. Reg Carter was one of the new talents Low discovered. Carter answered an advertisement for new artists which had been placed in the *Daily Telegraph*, and in January 1938, he duly met with Low in London where DC Thomson had – and indeed still has – an office in Fleet Street. Carter was an experienced artist drawing for several rival publishers, and R.D. Low was already aware of his work.

Low was impressed enough by Carter at the meeting to offer him a story which was likely to appear in the new comic, *The Beano*. The story was titled ‘Oswald the Ostrich’. *The Dandy*’s front cover star, Korky the Cat, had shown Low how effective a black and white character could be, with Korky’s monochrome fur standing out strongly against the full colour art. He resolved to have another strong black and white character on *The Beano*’s cover. Carter took a description of the character and his story, and drew several sketches which he sent to Low. The pair corresponded until they were happy with the final look for the character. After a change of name to ‘Big Eggo’, the ostrich was chosen as the front cover character for *The Beano*.

Eggo’s adventures would often have him in search of an egg he had accidentally mislaid. More than once, the egg he found was not the one he had lost and something unexpected, like a baby crocodile, would hatch and attack Eggo. Other times he would eat something absurd or simply get caught up in unlikely scrapes. The strips were beautifully drawn and full of delightful slapstick but while Big Eggo was popular enough, he never quite became as treasured as Korky the Cat. He did, however, remain on the front cover for the entirety of the comic’s first decade.

Basil Blackaller was another of R.D. Low’s finds from his scouting trips. Low had met him on the same London trip on which he had interviewed Reg Carter. Remarkably, Basil was just 16 years old at the time and, even more remarkably, his art samples impressed Low enough to write in his notes that the lad really had some talent. Low also expressed an interest in the young artist possibly being a candidate for a move to Dundee to join the company’s Art Department, where his skills could be honed by working with the studio’s experienced team of artists. However, Basil Blackaller’s mother was against her son moving

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north and Basil was unwilling to upset her by going against her wishes. Instead, he took a job at an art agency, but had the wisdom to have his new employers agree that he would be able to freelance for other companies, including DC Thomson.

At the tender age of 16, Basil was the youngest contributor to the new comic. His story, 'Hairy Dan', was his first professional commission and showed an extraordinary technical and artistic maturity for one so young. 'Hairy Dan' followed the adventures of a man with an unfeasibly long beard, who used it to get in and out of all manner of scrapes. He was once outpaced in a running race but managed to win by a short chin by getting the tip of his long beard over the line ahead of his opponent. It was a simple and quite silly idea, and it worked very well.

Hugh McNeill also came to R.D. Low's attention after replying to an advertisement in the press. He was working at a Manchester advertising agency at the time and Low was immediately taken by the samples of artwork McNeill had submitted. He was sent a script, 'Indy the Rubber Man', for the first issue, though it was later renamed 'Ping the Elastic Man'. The character's conceit was a simple one, and one which would be returned to in comics for decades to follow. Ping was able to stretch to ridiculous extremes, which got him into terrible trouble, and also got him out of that trouble. Though he only lasted in the comic for two years, Ping did predate Reed Richards, the *Fantastic Four's* Mister Fantastic, and the most famous elasticated man in the comics, by a good twenty years. Hugh McNeill's most lasting contribution to the comics would come a few months after the launch of *The Beano*, however, when he started work on the story of the living embodiment of 'girl power': 'Pansy Potter, the Strongman's Daughter'.

Experienced artists from the company's stable of comics including Charles Holt, Richard 'Toby' Baines, Eric Roberts and Allan Morley were among the other artists brought in to supply art duties. Morley was a particular stalwart of the comics, having been described as indispensable by *Dandy* Editor, Albert Barnes, for whom he drew 'Keyhole Kate', 'Hungry Horace' and 'Freddy the Fearless Fly', while R.D. Low had said that if anything happened to Morley the comics would be in danger of closing down. Morley was prolific, fast and reliable, and while his art looks dated now, at the time his stories were enormously popular.

For the first issue, Allan Morley contributed a strip, 'Big Fat Joe', which was rather unusual in early comics in that it showed someone

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rather overweight in a positive, heroic light, rather than the regular trope of making anyone weighty a rather villainous glutton. There have been exceptions to that, like Fatty in 'The Bash Street Kids' or Minnie the Minx's favourite sidekick and stooge, Fatty Fudge, both of whom are heroic, if obsessed with food. But comic characters like Hungry Horace and Greedy Pigg have generally shown gluttony as a terrible vice, which was understandable given that they appeared when food was scarcer than it is now. 'Big Fat Joe' only ran for thirty-five issues but the character would later reappear in the 'Lord Snooty' strip as one of Snooty's pals.

Despite all of the undeniable talent among the paper's artists, the giant among them was the first real legend among DC Thomson's long list of artists: Dudley D. Watkins.

After being lured to Dundee from his Nottingham home, Watkins had drawn for many of the adventure papers, producing both colour artwork for covers and black and white strip artwork. In 1936 he had drawn for the test humour comics given away as free gifts, and he had scored a huge success that same year by illustrating 'The Broons' and 'Oor Wullie', which had instantly become firm favourites with the *Sunday Post*'s millions of Scottish readers. It has often been estimated that more than half of Scotland's population at this time read the *Post* every week.

When *The Dandy* launched, Watkins had contributed a short, third-of-a-page story about a tough-guy cowboy. That cowboy was Desperate Dan and he was already on his way to being the most popular story in the comic, having quickly been promoted to half a page and then to a full page. Watkins was always busy but launching a comic without their superstar artist was unthinkable. So he was assigned 'Lord Snooty and his Pals', a full-page story about a schoolboy aristocrat and his unlikely friends, a bunch of working-class children who lived nearby.

Lord Thomson of Monifieth, who was editor for *The Dandy* for six months during the Second World War, said in 1987, 'the giant among them undoubtedly, that remarkable figure Dudley Watkins. He had already made his reputation, rather surprisingly, as a portrayer of Scottish comic character in DC Thomson's *Sunday Post*. There were two full-page cartoons there that still exist, one about a small boy called Oor Wullie and the other about a Scottish working-class family called the Broons. On the basis of that skill, he then developed Desperate Dan and then when *The Beano* came along, he developed Lord Snooty.'

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Lord Snooty, or to give him his official title, Lord Marmaduke of Bunkerton, was *The Beano's* first real superstar character. A titled member of the nobility, he lived in a huge castle and was superficially as fortunate as any kid could imagine being. George Moonie explained the premise of the story to the BBC's *Arena* in 1987: 'Lord Snooty was the character that every reader wanted to be, a young lord with a lot of money and everything at his fingertips. Rolls Royce, big house, bannisters for sliding down, butlers and footmen and all that kind of thing. It was a great background for story material. And then, of course, over the wall there's the gas-works and the Gas-Works Gang. There were the kids that Lord Snooty wanted to mix with so we had the clash of the good and the bad.'

The real heart of Lord Snooty's adventures was that despite being privileged beyond belief, what Snooty really wanted was to have friends to play with. Despite the wealth, the castle and all the trappings of the aristocracy, he just wanted friends who liked him just to have fun with. Conversely, the gang of kids with whom he played were from the most deprived of working-class backgrounds, wearing rags and often running around barefoot. Snooty became something of a champion for these underprivileged kids, taking them into his house to enjoy extravagant slap-up feed and to use shields from suits of armour as sledges to slide down the huge staircases.

Snooty was a toff but he was designed to appeal to normal kids. These were harsh times, just emerging from the Great Depression and food was scarce. The idea of having a friend who could invite you to a huge banquet-like feast was the stuff of dreams. The writers of the comic understood what poverty was. Dundee was an industrial city with more than its fair share of deprivation. It had seen hard times, in the way most of the country's major cities had through the 1920s and 1930s. To see their audience, the writers and journalists of DC Thomson only had to look out of their office windows or to look at the people they passed on their way to and from work. *The Beano* may have had characters who were in dire financial straits but the comic didn't mock or ridicule them. It showed empathy and drew those readers in, making them heroic and the winners. In many ways, though he was a toff, Snooty was subversive in that he undermined the expectations of class boundaries, and the readers loved him for it.

According to Lord Thomson of Monifieth, again speaking to *Arena* in 1987, the traditional DC Thomson ethos came 'from that tradition,

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the Thomson's tradition, in respect of its magazines, particularly in children's magazines but I think it's true right through its publications, is a rather sort of wholesome, conservative, working class, rather folksy tradition.' And his opinion of Watkins? 'He was a very strange person. He was a very nice person to deal with. He belonged to some obscure fundamentalist religious group and adhered to that very assiduously. He was absolutely prolific with his pen. It was one of his assets of course for a publishing firm that his output per week was very large in volume and remained high in comic quality.'

Watkins' work was a magnet to the eyes of future *Beano* artist, Leo Baxendale. 'Each week I turned to look at Dudley Watkins' stuff and somehow what Dudley did was technically perfect. Wondrously so. There was a kind of intensity of focus which went into each drawing and I think that intensity and passion is necessary to reach out and hold the readers.'

Other comic strips in the first issue were 'Brave Captain Kipper' and 'Tin Can Tommy', both drawn by the Torelli Brothers, whose work was posted each week from Italy. Captain Kipper was an old seadog and blowhard who, when not getting into trouble at sea, was telling tall tales of troubles he had already got into at sea, while 'Tin Can Tommy' had probably the most disturbing and surreal opening episodes of any *Beano* story. The inventor Professor Lee and his wife spent a year mourning the death of their son. To help his wife get over the loss, Professor Lee invents a robot boy to take their son's place. It's a story that has become legendary among the *Beano* staff for that quite bonkers opening. Reg Carter was responsible for 'Monkey Tricks', a six-panel comedy strip following a mischief-making monkey and his antics with his pals in the jungle.

Most of the comic strips were in black and white but the DC Thomson printers had a few tricks up their sleeves to add a bit of colour. The artwork was drawn in black and white but the editorial team or a member of the in-house art staff could mark up pages with a red or blue pencil, asking for splashes of red or for the black on the art to be printed in a deep blue, which was known to the staff as 'Bronze Blue'. That blue would continue to be used in various DC Thomson annuals through into the 1980s.

'Whoopee Hank' and 'Contrary Mary' were both contributed by Roland Davies while Charles 'Chick' Gordon drew 'Hooky's Magic Bowler Hat'. 'Wee Peem' came from the pen of James Jewell and Charles Holt drew 'Little Dead Eye Dick' and also contributed 'Uncle Windbag'. Steve Perkins was on art duties for 'Smiler the Sweeper' and

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Eric Roberts, an artist who would later become one of Albert Barnes' pillars on *The Dandy*, drew both 'Helpful Harry' and 'Rip van Wink'. The latter was a variation on the theme of the short story 'Rip van Winkle' and focused on a man who had been asleep for 700 years, and had to adjust to life in the twentieth century.

Two of *The Beano's* most famous adventure stories appeared in that first issue. These stories did not contain any speech bubbles but had large blocks of text beneath neatly ordered rows of pictures. 'Morgyn the Mighty', dubbed 'The Strongest Man in the World' above the title of his first appearance in *The Beano*, was a muscular athletic figure with a Tarzan-like appearance, wearing a leopard-skin leotard. With Tarzan films doing big business at the movies, Morgyn was an astute choice to help launch *The Beano*. In that first story, he fought against a giant eagle which had tried to make off with one of his goats and then, after the eagle dropped him in the ocean, he fought and killed a 15-foot-long tiger shark before dragging it to shore. Morgyn's adventures, drawn by George Anderson, were in the same high-adventure style that had made 'Flash Gordon', 'Buck Rogers', 'Tarzan' and countless other comic strips so popular; Morgyn continued in *The Beano* for fourteen weeks. *The Beano* was not Morgyn's first comic home. He had originally appeared in *The Rover* in 1928 and, indeed, the series which appeared in *The Beano* would later be reprinted in *The Rover* in 1954. Morgyn would later appear in *The Victor* and many of his adventures would be collected into book form.

'Wild Boy of the Woods', drawn by Richard 'Toby' Baines, was the tale of a resourceful but lonely boy who lived in the woods, and was taught how to survive by a mysterious old hermit. Mysterious old hermits tend to appear quite regularly in old adventure stories but are rarely seen anywhere else. If you ever meet one, there is a good chance that you are in a comic strip. 'Wild Boy of the Woods' had an unbroken run of four years, which was unusually long for an adventure picture strip. It returned in 1947 for another two-year run and then had a final, shorter series in 1958, when it was drawn by Andy Hutton. Throughout the twenty-year run of 'Wild Boy of the Woods', no-one ever answered the burning question: who on Earth thought that this wild young Tarzan-like boy should be named *Derek*?

The third of the adventure picture strips was 'Cracker Jack', drawn by the superb Jack Glass. Western films were big business in 1938, and 'Cracker Jack' was the tale of a modern-day cowboy who used a whip

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rather than a gun to solve his problems and catch crooks. Jack was often seen on the rodeo circuit, performing tricks in the arenas, like snuffing out candles with a crack of his whip or lifting a pistol from an opponent's holster before the varmint had a chance to draw.

The adventure strips, with their blocks of text, provided plenty of reading for *Beano* fans, but they were nothing compared to the text stories which sat alongside them. Current *Beano* readers are usually amazed by the revelation that ten of the first *Beano*'s twenty-eight pages were given over to text stories.

These were written by one of an army of freelance writers employed by the company. They worked to a brief or a synopsis provided by the editorial team, who would then edit – or 'sub' – the text when it came in, ensuring that it told the story that had been agreed upon and that it also ran to the correct length. These stories were introduced by an illustrated title or heading block. The rest of the page was simply columns of type.

Dudley D. Watkins provided the artwork to accompany the title lettering of 'The Adventures of Tom Thumb'. The fairy tale of Tom Thumb, the woodcutter's son who was only 6 inches tall, was already a staple for children when it appeared in *The Beano*. The story would continue in the comic until 1950, and Dudley would continue drawing the character even beyond the end of the picture story in *The Beano*. In 1961, DC Thomson published *Bimbo*, a new nursery title for younger readers. The comic carried with a new version of 'Tom Thumb', and again it was Dudley D. Watkins who provided the artwork. Nobody would be surprised to hear that the artwork was still superb.

Animals often provided good subject material for text stories, and if those creatures were in somewhere as far off and exotic as Canada, then all the better. To children, most of whom had never left their home town or even seen a television set, another country might well have been as far away as the Moon. The adventures of 'Black Flash the Beaver' were set in Canada, and contained a surprising amount of factual natural history information, which was requested by the editorial staff. The title picture was another contribution from Toby Baines.

'The Wangles of Granny Green' was a comedy prose story with a title image by Charles Gordon. It told the comedy adventures of Jimmy Green who dressed up as an old lady and pretended to be his own grandmother... This is a surprisingly common occurrence in the comics, even to this day.

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Jack Glass provided the title block illustration for the fantasy story ‘The Wishing Tree’ and also for the superb ‘The Shipwrecked Kidds’, which is one of the tensest and most tightly written of the adventure stories. It deposited two spoiled children, Cyril and Ethel Kidd, onto a desert island along with an assistant cook and an experienced sailor, and it’s an exceptionally well written story. Jack Glass also provided the title art for ‘My Dog Sandy’, a bit of a tear-jerker of a story about a brave border collie.

Circus stories have been a staple of comics over the years, and both *The Beano* and *The Dandy* would carry several such stories of different styles. Toby Baines was again the man behind the pen providing the title drawing for the circus-based drama ‘The Ape’s Secret’. A page of Jolly Jokes completed that first issue. It was a full and busy comic, providing the readers with value for money.

Organising a comic, particularly a new one, is a great feat of organisation, demanding a mixture of administrative skills, leadership and creativity. George Moonie conceded to *Arena* that the comic was a lot of work, but emphasised the value being given to readers. ‘It was a biggish paper at 28 pages but for very little cost. It only cost 2d in old money. It was quite a mix of cartoons and dramatic picture stories and also the written story, the prose story, which of course has gone out of fashion.’

The first issue of *The Beano* was an immediate success, selling more than 440,000 copies. R.D. Low had struck gold again. Almost immediately he set about trying to perform his brand of alchemy a third time. This time, the comic would be titled *The Magic* and aimed at a slightly younger audience, though world events would stop this publication from reaching the iconic status of its siblings.

Though both of DC Thomson’s new comics were huge hits, there were some who doubted their worth. Lord Thomson of Monifieth, talking to the BBC in 1987, explained: ‘There was always a great deal of argument in those days, and still today, over whether comics are a good influence or not. I had friends whose parents would not allow them to read these things and therefore they got my black-market copies smuggled and read in secret.’

As was the fashion with comics at the time, the content of *The Beano* was refreshed regularly. Adventure stories and prose stories both tended to be self-contained with a definitive end to the narrative. The characters

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might return at a future date but when the serialised story was finished, something else came in and took its place. 'Morgyn the Mighty' ran for three months but another story, 'Lost Among the Silver Dwarves', was ready to replace it, and when 'Cracker Jack' rode off into the sunset, 'Young Strongarm the Axeman' was waiting in the wings.

The churn of stories was constant. Chief Sub-Editor, Ron Fraser, who had responsibility for the prose and adventure stories, would be continually working on at least three waves of stories for each of their allotted slots in the paper. He had to get the current story to press, have the next story almost edited and ready to go into the paper, and then have the next in line being written. There was no let-up in the constant demand for content and the comic would churn through dozens of stories. Although it was hard work, the readers relished the constant diet of thrills and excitement.

The comic strip content also went through regular refreshes. As early as the fifteenth issue, a new story 'Hicky the Hare', again drawn by the Torelli Brothers, had been introduced, but it was in issue 21 that the first major changes to the comic happened. 'Monkey Tricks' and 'Smiler the Sweeper' disappeared, replaced by 'Good King Coke', drawn by Eric Roberts and 'Frosty McNab', illustrated by Sam Fair.

That issue also saw the debut of a character who would become a comic legend and whose name would pass into common usage, when 'Pansy Potter, the Strongman's Daughter' made her first appearance. Strongmen were a popular cultural icon of the time. Every circus had one and they had been a staple of variety halls. They were still regular fixtures in film and their popularity had been part of the thought process behind the creation of *The Dandy's* legendary cowboy strongman, Desperate Dan.

The story was drawn initially by Hugh McNeill, though a number of other artists including Basil Blackaller, Sam Fair and James Clark would all contribute pages in the next few years. Pansy was a girl with extraordinary strength. Like Desperate Dan, the strength was natural to her and was something she used casually. As with most comic characters who have a trait or an ability, Pansy thinks she is the normal one and everyone else is different or a bit odd for not having her strength.

The Pansy strips were delightful, the scripts giving the artist the scope to play Pansy's enormous strength for laughs. In an early strip, Pansy was concerned that she might not be able to complete her homework

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in the fading light, so she went outside and bent the steel streetlamp, then pushed it through an open window into her house so she would have light to work by. To use a phrase favoured by former *Beano* writer and *Dandy* Editor Morris Heggie when discussing scripts, 'Delightfully simple is simply delightful'.

Pansy Potter was an instant success. She would run until December 1947, before returning in 1949 in a second series which ran until 1955. A third series ran almost the duration of 1958 and a fourth from 1989 until 1993. Since 2012 she has made sporadic appearances, such as in mini-strips or as a historical character turning up in backgrounds. In addition to *The Beano*, Pansy appeared in *The Sparky* comic, drawn by John Geering.

The comic strip line-up continued to change, but the popular stories always stayed as George Moonie and his team continued honing their content. Stories were tried, and if they were popular, they stayed. If a story was less popular, something else was brought in to replace it. It is a system which was used by every comic in the DC Thomson stable and which *The Beano* still uses today.

## R.D. Low

Robert Duncan Low was the beating heart of the DC Thomson comics department. The son of a jute mill mechanic, he was born in 1895 and joined DC Thomson as a trainee journalist in 1913, aged 18. Just eight years later, aged only 26, he had risen to become the Managing Editor of all of DC Thomson's children's publications. Having been promoted to authority at a youthful age himself, he would think nothing of promoting equally young members of staff to edit his papers.

A small man in stature, he was often described as being a ball of energy. Low understood comics, and coming from the working-class background of Dundee's jute mills, he also understood the audience he had to aim for. He knew that after a hard day of work, they wanted entertainment and escapism. And they wanted it for a reasonable cost. Low set about delivering to his audience with *The Adventure* in 1921 and *The Rover* a year later. *The Wizard* (1923), *The Skipper* (1930) and *The Hotspur* (1933) followed, forming 'The Big Five' action comics, all overseen by Low's patrician eye. Hundreds of thousands of these comics were sold every week, turning DC Thomson's Meadowside offices into an efficient comics powerhouse.

Though their adventure comics contained humorous cartoons and some light-hearted strips, Low was convinced that there was a market for humour-based comics. The success of the gently humorous comic strips, 'The Broons' and 'Oor Wullie' (who is believed to have been based by Low on his own son, Ron), only cemented that conviction. This led to the publication of *The Dandy* in 1937, *The Beano* in 1939 and *The Magic* in 1939. His plans to expand the range of humour comics further were only halted by the advent of the Second World War, though eventually he was able to expand the stable of funnies with *The Topper*

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in 1953 and *The Beezer* in 1956. Many more comics would follow, and Low would take a keen interest in them all.

Among the staff, R.D. Low was held in exceptionally high regard and affection. Former *Beano* Chief Sub-Editor, Alastair Bernard, said of Low, 'R.D. always looked after his boys.'

Former *Beano* editor Euan Kerr agreed. 'He was a bit older by the time I got to know him but he always took a keen interest in the staff and what we were doing, and he certainly really knew about comics.'

A great part of the affection felt for Low by his staff came from the fact that even though he was management, he was still an inventive and creative force, and still working with writers and artists on ideas. In 1953, he worked with artist Ken Reid to develop the classic *Beano* character, Roger the Dodger. The staff of the comics always appreciated a managing editor who understood the work involved in creating comics.

Low eventually handed the reins of the comics over to his friend George Moonie in 1973, having built an extraordinary stable of comics for DC Thomson. His passing in 1980 was mourned by former colleagues, who knew the unique position he had held in creating the British comics industry and the debt owed to him by everybody working in it.

## In the Fight

In September 1939, *The Beano* was barely more than a year old but it was a firm favourite with the nation's children, and also with a large number of adults who enjoyed the comic once their children were safely tucked up in bed. It was selling well, was a regular part of children's weeks and well rooted in the hearts of the readers. However, on Sunday, 3 September 1939, the world changed, threatening to bring *The Beano* to an abrupt halt.

For the majority of the 1930s, Germany had been rearming itself and growing more belligerent. It had broken its commitments from the Treaty of Versailles by building its armed forces and remilitarising the Rhineland, and had attacked its neighbours. The German invasion of Poland was the catalyst which spurred British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to declare war against Germany.

War would bring enormous changes and challenges to the country. It would also put *The Beano's* existence and the lives of its staff at risk.

The war was a bizarre time for the children of the UK. It had the harshness of seeing fathers and brothers go away to the war, the terror of air raids, the confusion of evacuation, the sudden reality of rationing and, for far too many, the sudden loss of family and friends. Many were wrenched away from their families in the cities and sent to the countryside or overseas. In the face of all of the bleakness, the war still managed to bring an odd sort of excitement to their lives. They had gas masks and air raid shelters to play in, they could pretend to be soldiers defending the country, and they could salvage as much scrap as they possibly could.

They could also read their *Beano* and *Dandy* comics.

When war was declared, there was little hesitation in the offices regarding what the comics should do. They had to join up and do their bit. The comics had a lengthy lead-time, with their deadlines being

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more than a month before they were published. That system had been in place for several years. It meant that when war was declared, *Beanos* for October were being printed and the following issues were already almost prepared. That meant that it wasn't until the middle of November that the first properly war-themed strip appeared. *The Beano* may have taken a while to join the war but when it did, it came out fighting. Pansy Potter was the star of *The Beano*'s first wartime propaganda story. Out for a sail in a little rowing boat, she finds herself being shelled by a U-boat. After punching their shells out of the air, Pansy tows the U-boat back to Blighty where the Nazis are taken away and she has a medal nailed to her chest.

From there *The Beano* and its crack platoon of comic commandos took the attack to the enemy. At first the stooges were general 'Nasties' as *The Beano* often dubbed the Nazis, but certain prominent enemy figures were viciously lampooned personally. Hitler was portrayed as ineffectual and weak, and many of his most trusted allies as idiotic yes-men. The intention was to make the enemy less fearsome and to give the children the confidence that Britain could overcome them because they appeared to be idiots.

One of the first figures to become genuinely despised by the British public was Lord Haw-Haw, a German propagandist who made radio broadcasts from Germany in an affected upper-class English accent and whose broadcasts were intended to spread misinformation, disrupt morale and try to turn the British people against the war. Several different people voiced these treacherous broadcasts but ultimately, William Joyce came to be the man most associated with the character of Lord Haw-Haw. No-one is quite certain how the name Lord Haw-Haw came about for this character, but the name was in common use by April 1940 when *The Beano*'s prose story 'Down with Lord Haw-Haw' was being written and edited. The villain of the story wasn't the real Lord Haw-Haw, whose identity wasn't actually known until much later, but someone who aped the German propagandist's actions. That didn't really matter though. What mattered was that in its pages, *The Beano* was punching back at the enemy and by living vicariously through the characters, the readers were fighting back too.

During wartime, paper was a scarce and valuable resource. It was scavenged to be recycled for the war effort or used as toilet paper. It's a sad truth that wartime *Beanos* are scarce because so many were salvaged