

CARTOONS WHICH KEPT THE TROOPS LAUGHING, EVEN IN THE TRENCHES

It is amazing that when things get really tough, humans seem to need humour to keep going and you can't get tougher than the WWI trenches.



“If you know a better `ole, go to it”

Bruce Bairnsfather, was an officer in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment who arrived in France in 1914 and in November of that year, defending a series of waterlogged `slots` (trenches) in the area of Bois de Ploegstert, known to the men as Plugstreet Wood.

Bairnsfather was serving on the Western front when he started to draw cartoons of everyday life (rather than the death and injuries) in a soggy hole in the ground. These were pinned up to decorate the dugout walls and put a smile on exhausted men`s faces.

The Bystander magazine published the first of many of his cartoons, which proved so popular that the publishers brought out a book of 43 cartoons entitled *Fragments of France* and later, packs of 6 postcards.

Bairnsfather said he saw the satire of trench-fighters finding themselves *“in such macabre and pathetic predicament of mutilated landscapes, primitive trench life, ceaseless wearing drudgery and the ever present danger of the final nuisance”*



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Many of the cartoons depicted “Old Bill”, a wiley old soldier with a blob nose, walrus moustache, muffler and balaclava, later replaced by a tin helmet.



“Where did that one go?”

This cartoon was based on a real event experienced by Bairnsfather when he was in the trenches at Bois de Ploegstert, near Messines in the Ypres Salient.

“There goes our blinkin parapet again”



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IN AND OUT (I)
That last half-hour before "going in" to the trenches for the 200th time.

Above, titled "IN AND OUT (I)" subtitled "*That last half-hour before 'going in' to the trenches for the 200th time*" Illustrated the anxiety of those about to return to the front line trenches. The card below, "IN AND OUT (II)" illustrates the joy and relief of coming out of the trenches.



IN AND OUT (II)
That first half-hour after "coming out" of the trenches.

A letter to The Outlook magazine about the effect of these two cartoons "*... the two inimitable pictures depicting the hour before going into trenches and the hour after coming out. Well they are absolutely IT. Lord how we laughed over them in the front line,Bairnsfather is one of the people who, by supplying roars of laughter and joy to the troops, are helping to win the war.*"

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"They have evidently seen me"

First sketched on a cottage wall just behind the Front. Bairnsfather wrote

"Although I did not observe from a chimney myself ... I happen to "live" in a house. By "live" I mean waiting for the next shell to come through the



"That 16 inch Sensation"

Bairnsfather was wounded by a shell burst in April 1915 and during his weeks of convalescence suffered recurring nightmares. He wrote

"I think everyone who gets `knocked out` knows this sensation of `fighting one`s battles all over again`"

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In late 1915, after recovering from his wounds, Bairnsfather was sent to train recruits on the Isle of Wight. He was commissioned as 'Officer Cartoonist' and created his famous character 'Old Bill'.

“THE TROUBLE WITH ONE OF THESE SOUVENIRS - Hold on a minute while I knock that smile off his dial”

This card shows Old Bill and his mate with arms full of souvenirs including the much prized German spiked helmet.



***“WHAT IT REALLY FEELS LIKE”
to be on patrol duty at night time”***

An experience only too well known to Bairnsfather himself, to be terrified and have the feeling that he was surrounded by the enemy.

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"THE ETERNAL QUESTION

***When the `ell is it going to
be Strawberry?"***



Two things which preoccupy the fighting man's thoughts - food and bureaucracy.

As the world is being blown apart around his ears, the last thing a soldier wants is some office wallah asking stupid questions.

"THE THINGS THAT MATTER -

"Scene: Loos, during the September offensive. Colonel Fitz-Shrapnel receives the following message from 'G.H.Q.' 'Please let us know, as soon as possible, the number of tins of raspberry jam issued to you last Friday.'"

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In 1983, the acknowledged experts on the life and work of Bruce Bairnsfather, Toni & Valmai Holt, were told by a veteran of the Great War, *“Naturally the stories of Old Bill were always with us and, incidentally, kept us going.”*

An old lady told the Holts she had met a young Australian sergeant at a dance. When he was sent to France she used to go to all the shops to buy Bruce Bairnsfather`s postcards to send to him.

“He said they used to put them up in their dug out for a laugh I would like to think those postcards gave all the boys in the dugout pleasure. It did me, sending them.

“He was killed on the Somme and all my photographs were returned to me, but not one postcard.....”



Most of the information above is by kind permission of Tony Allen, see his website

www.WorldWar1postcards.com/Bruce-Bairnsfather.php

More information about Bruce Bairnsfather can be found on

www.BruceBairnsfather.org.uk

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BRUCE BAIRNSFATHER - THE SHROPSHIRE CONNECTION



The name Bruce Bairnsfather was known to every fighting Tommy in the trenches, their families on the home front and across the British Empire.

Every sort of merchandise was produced featuring 'Old Bill' and the popular cartoons appeared in books, packs of postcards, prints, jigsaws, playing cards, handkerchiefs, cigarette cards, Christmas cards, matchbox covers, calendars and this popular Old Bill

After the war Bairnsfather proved he was more than just a cartoonist. He was an accomplished author, playwright and lecturer. In 1927 he wrote the screenplay and directed a major motion picture in Canada. He appeared on the vaudeville stage in America and in Variety in England. In the 1920s he was recorded on film in America and in the 1930s, took part in early television broadcasts from Alexandra Palace.

Bairnsfather had a great love of the countryside, especially Rural Herefordshire where he grew up and the Clun area of Shropshire where he painted idyllic landscapes.

In the late 40s and early 1950s he would visit South Shropshire to visit his friend Mr. Woodward of County Motors, in Craven Arms. It seems the two would frequent many of the pubs and hotels in the area, when the cartoonist was known to repay his hosts with a mural of 'Old Bill' on the wall. Evidence of these wonderful cartoons still exist at The Stokesay Inn and the Royal British Legion in Ludlow.

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Captain Bruce Bairnsfather completing the mural he did on the wall of the Royal British Legion, Mill Steet, Ludlow in 1947.



Bruce Bairnsfather the WWI cartoonist was described by Gen Sir Ian Hamilton as

'THE MAN WHO WON THE WAR'

The information on Bruce Bairnsfather in Shropshire was provided by Mark Warby, www.BruceBairnsfather.org.uk Toby Neal of the Shropshire Star and his contact, 80 year old Les Beaumond from Admaston who worked for Mr. Woodward, at County Motors in Craven Arms. Picture above by Keith Pybus.