

Courtesy Phillips



How Old Bill won the Great War

By PETER JOHNSON

A small bust of Old Bill, issued for use as a car radiator mascot. This particular bust was bought at auction by the Memorable Order of Tin Hats, a group of ex-servicemen who revere the memory of Bairnsfather's cartoon invention. Strong competition in the bidding put a price of £90 on the bust, which was in excellent condition. Sometimes, however, a collector can find such a bust for £20 to £30.



ROUND 60 years ago a walrus-moustached British soldier sustained the good humour of an army at war and a nation at home, launched his creator on a modestly lucrative career and established his niche in posterity — a shell hole in the mud of Flanders. Today, Old Bill has found his "better ole" in the hearts of collectors.

Old Bill, the best-known cartoon character of a generation, has been immortalised in hundreds of thousands of magazine copies, postcards, posters and pieces of pottery, in books, plays

BELOW — A selection of contemporary postcards issued by the "Bystander" magazine. Many other characters beside Old Bill featured in Bruce Bairnsfather's cartoons. The young officer atop the chimney in "They've evidently seen me" was, in fact, the artist himself and several such cartoons stemmed from his own experiences at the Front.



and at least two films, in car radiator mascots and in a splendid open-top London bus which bears his name in the Imperial War Museum.

Like many memories of the 1914-18 war, however, time has played havoc with Old Bill. Despite the tremendous impact he made, much Old Bill ephemera has been lost — a surefire stimulus to collector-interest. A generation which grew up largely ignorant of the grizzled veteran of "Wipers" and the Somme is slowly becoming aware of his re-appearance in the saleroom and the specialist dealer's shop.

"Considering how much pottery was made with Old Bill cartoons as decoration, there is surprisingly little around," says a London dealer who specialises in commemorative ware. Fortunately for the small but growing number of us who collect Old Bill, he has not yet started on the dizzy price spiral which marks so many other collecting fields. Reasonable prices and fairly infrequent opportunity to indulge in one's obsession make Old Bill collecting a gentle and non-punitive occupation. And heaven forbid that these words of mine in his homage should alter the situation!

Old Bill and his staunch comrades, Bert and Alf, were given to us by a young infantry officer who scratched his first cartoons on the walls of a ruined French farmhouse in which his machine gun section was billeted. Years later, the now successful war artist Bruce Bairnsfather was to write: "Old Bill was not the deliberate creation of a decided upon character. He slowly created himself. He developed on paper from no particular design on my part, and although I never used any one particular man as a model, it is surprising how many times I

have heard of, or heard from, someone claiming to be the original of my cartoon character."

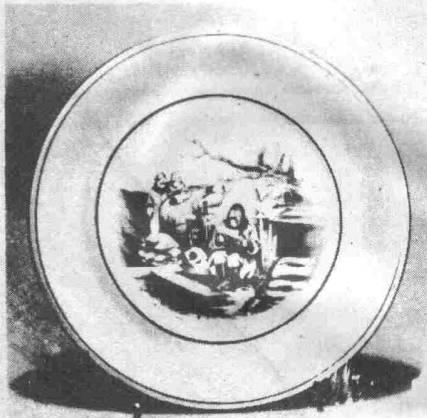
As the monster of Sherlock Holmes overshadowed Conan Doyle, so Old Bill's pungent and forceful reality obscured his own creator. Bruce Bairnsfather was born in India of a comfortably placed Army family. Inevitably he joined the regular army, first in the Warwickshires, then in the Cheshires. He left the Service to go to art school, a vital step which was to lead to the birth of Old Bill some years later.

It was a precarious livelihood which the young Bairnsfather scraped from art in those pre-1914 days: a few advertising drawings for Beecham's Pills at two guineas each (what a splendid collector's piece one of those early originals would make today!), designs for Lipton's tea and posters for Keen's mustard. For a time he decided to try engineering, only to find himself sacked when war broke out in 1914. And so it was the army again, and the early months of 1915 found him in the ruined French farmhouse, sketching with charcoal on the walls for his own and his comrades' amusement.

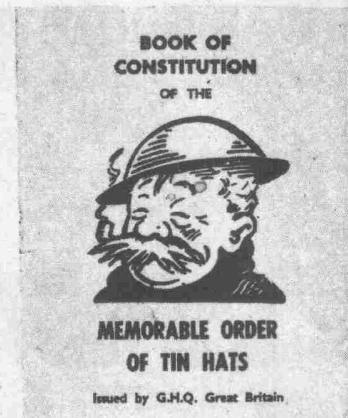
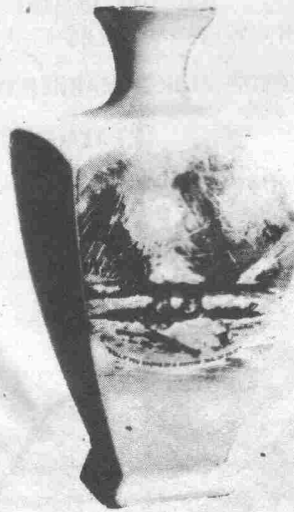
Bairnsfather later looked back on the early comradeship of the trenches with nostalgic affection and with something approaching a romanticised attitude to warfare: "I have watched the enormous changes creeping in. They began about July, 1915. My experiences since that date were very interesting but I found that much of the romance had left the trenches. The old days, from the beginning to July, 1915, were all so delightfully precarious and primitive. Amateurish trenches and rough and ready life, which to my mind gave this war what it sadly needs - a touch of romance." Those words were written, not years after the war, but in 1916 when the canker of harsh reality had already begun to be felt in this war to end all wars.

Back, however, to early 1915, and the ruins of the billet shared by Second-lieutenant Bairnsfather and his unit. The village was under heavy shellfire and around him soldiers were

A representative selection (see also front cover) of four pieces of Old Bill pottery, all decorated in sepia transfer-print under glaze. The mug and the vase bear Bairnsfather's most famous cartoon of all, the caption of which became a World War I catch-phrase: "Well, if you knows of a better 'ole, go to it." Mostly, the pottery was made by Grimwade's of Stoke-on-Trent and the plate below, captioned "What time do they feed the sea-lions, Alf?", bears on the reverse (below centre) the inscription "Made by the girls of Staffordshire during the winter of 1917/18 when the 'boys' were in the trenches fighting for liberty & civilization". The other plate (lower right) is captioned "Where did that one go to?" and signed "B.B. Belgium 1915".



MADE BY THE GIRLS OF STAFFORDSHIRE
DURING THE WINTER OF 1917/18
WHEN THE BOYS WERE IN THE TRENCHES
FIGHTING FOR LIBERTY
& CIVILIZATION

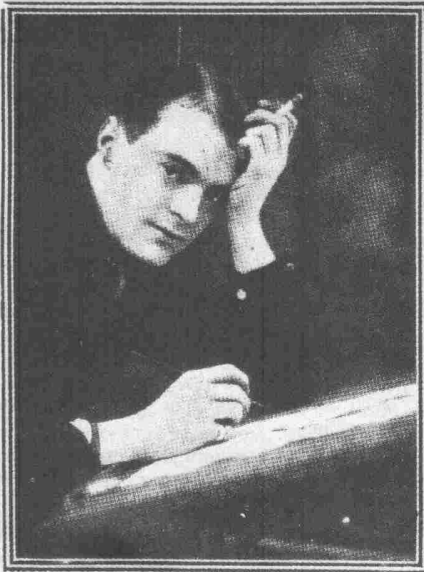


The rule book of the Memorable Order of Tin Hats. Branches, according to size, are called General Headquarters, Commands, Dug-outs and Shell-holes.

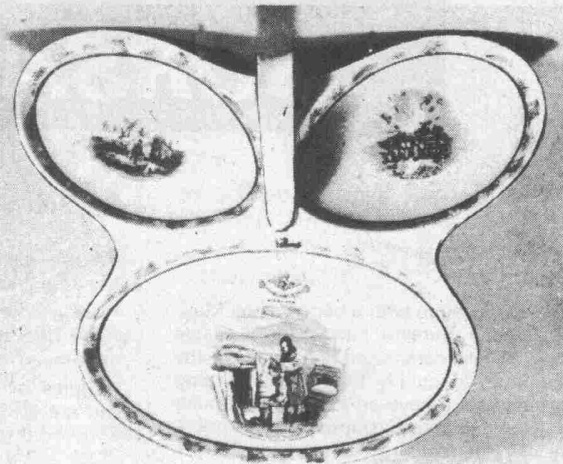
saying, "Where did that one go?" Bairnsfather made a quick pencil sketch on a pad liberally sprinkled with the dust which fell at every explosion from the broken roof. From his sketch he later completed a wash drawing at another farm, "looking out on a mountain of manure for inspiration". It showed five men peeping from a dugout, on the roof of which a massive German shell is bursting. The caption read: "Where did that one go?"

Bairnsfather chose the magazine *Bystander* at random and sent the drawing off to try its luck in publication. Then he forgot all about it - there was a war to be fought.

Several weeks later, during a breather from the line, Bairnsfather received a letter of acceptance from the magazine and three guineas for his cartoon, published as "A Fragment from France". His second "Fragment" was also the result of a



LEFT — This camera portrait of Captain Bruce Bairnsfather accompanies the editor's foreword to the eighth edition of "Fragments from France", a booklet of cartoons issued by "The Bystander" magazine.



Old Bill pottery comes in many forms. This is a sepia-tinted barber's lather dish, sold in Margate and bearing the town crest. The central cartoon is a hair-cutting scene in the trenches.

personal experience. Bairnsfather was on the roof of a building "poking about" when a shell whizzed by. The incident went into sepia-tinted immortality: a young officer with binoculars atop a tall chimney, looking aghast as a huge shell rips through the base of his precarious perch; the caption — "They've evidently seen me."

UNDOUBTEDLY, Bairnsfather's most famous cartoon, which provided a catch-phrase for generations, was that of two old sweats in the solitude of a Flanders shell-hole while the most devastating explosions rend the air above the ground around. Says one to the other: "Well, if you knows of a better 'ole, go to it." Surely the most memorable war artist's impression of all time. Lieutenant Bairnsfather received four guineas for it. (Later he earned £20 a page and was put on a £1,000-a-year contract.) A prescient general in the War Office quickly bought the original.

In the war museum at Ypres there is an enlargement of the cartoon with a legend which would astonish Old Bill, whose command of French was of the most primitive military variety: "Mon vieux, si tu connais un meilleur trou. . . vas-y!"

The *Bystander* (every Tuesday, 6d) began regularly to publish Bairnsfather's cartoons. The dogged good humour of Old Bill, now emerging as the dominant character, was siezed upon as eagerly by the men in the trenches as by the public back at home. A senior British diplomat wrote to Bairnsfather: "You are rising to be a factor in the situation, just as Gilray was a factor in the Napoleonic wars."

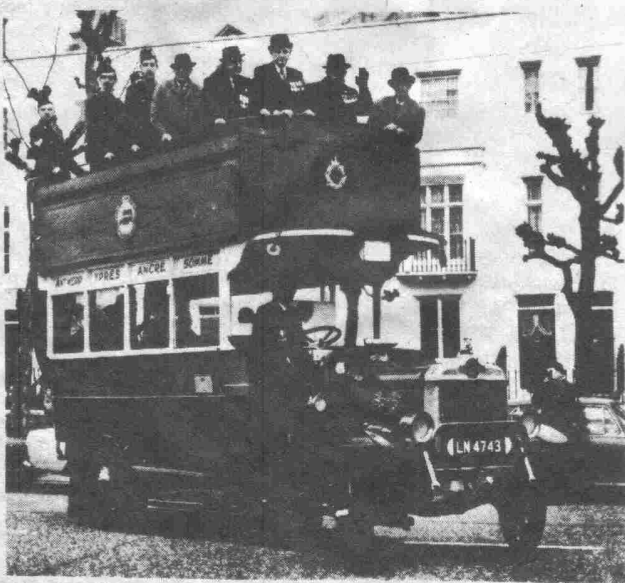
More than that, through Old Bill a nation at war could laugh at itself. To some, Bairnsfather's cartoons were an echo of patriotism; some of the jokes are blatantly jingoist (one in particular takes a savage bite at a would-be conscientious objector pleading his case before an exemption tribunal); others in their poignancy and discernment are bitterly anti-war. In a collected edition of *Fragments*, published at intervals, the editor of the *Bystander* wrote at one time: "I fear the enemy will be even more infuriated when he turns over the pages of this book. In it, the spirit of the British soldier, who, hating war as he hated hell, flocked to the colours to have his whack at the apostles of blood and iron, is translated to cold and permanent print."

However, Old Bill's cynicism had begun to tell a few issues later when the editor wrote: "Fed up. Yes, that is the word by which to describe, if you like, the prevalent Bairnsfather expression of countenance. But the kind of weariness he depicts is the reverse of the kind that implies 'give up!'"

Halfway through the war Bairnsfather promoted to captain and once wounded, was seized by the machine and transferred to the Intelligence department to draw funny pictures for the war effort. Old Bill was far too potent a weapon to go uncontrolled. From then until the end of the war Bairnsfather was a fully licensed "humorous war artist". On his appointment he ran from the War Office to the Old Ship Restaurant and celebrated with a cup of coffee and a Gold Flake cigarette. Then he went across to Cox's bank "to draw as much as I could out of that £1. 0s. 11d. that still remained to my credit."

At the request of the Allies, Bairnsfather toured the French and the Italian fronts. Old Bill found a counterpart in the American army as the artist soldiered with his pencil among the Doughboys on the Western Front. Bairnsfather wrote autobiographical books, *Bullets and Billets*, *From Mud to Mufti* and (much later) *Wide Canvas*. He found time to write a play *The Better 'Ole*, which ran in London for more than a year and toured Australia, Canada, the U.S.A. and India.

Courtesy Imperial War Museum



The London bus "Ole Bill", which saw service in khaki drab on the Western Front, seen here arriving at its home, the Imperial War Museum, on May 5, 1970. Its radiator bears a bronze bust of the famous wartime cartoon character.

(MORE NEXT MONTH)