

Captain Bruce Bairnsfather and his association with the Lighthorne Drama Group

By Colin Such (2014)



Captain Bruce Bairnsfather was the World War I cartoonist responsible for the series of cartoons of “Old Bill”, which he drew for “Bystander” magazine. Little did I realise, when doing research for an article I was writing for a postcard magazine on Bairnsfather postcards, that Bairnsfather had a local connection and that he had been a driving force in the precursor organisation to the Lighthorne Drama Group.

Bruce Bairnsfather was born to a military family in British India and the family returned to England and settled in Bishopton, Stratford-on-Avon in 1904, when Bruce was 17. Both of his parents were artistic and both Bruce and his father served on the Shakespeare Festival Decorations Committee, Bruce producing in 1907 banners of Shakespeare characters, which remained in use for several years. Bruce enlisted in the army for a 10 year commission, but did not find life stimulating and resigned after only one year. He wanted to become a commercial artist and at the age of 21, joined the New Art School and School of Poster Design in Kensington, run by John Hassall, who famously designed the iconic “Skegness is so bracing!” poster.

Bruce Bairnsfather, as well as being an artist, was also a gifted set designer and actor. He designed a miniature theatre at his Bishopton home and with his friends would act in local productions, often dressing as a woman. One of his friends was Clare Verney, cousin of the 19th Lord Willoughby de Broke of Compton Verney. Clare lived at the Old Rectory at Lighthorne and in 1910 and 1911 Bruce acted in, stage-managed and designed elaborate sets for pantomimes for the Verney family, that were staged in a specially constructed theatre in the grounds of Lighthorne Rectory. In 1910 Bruce played the role of Aunt Jemima in *Robin Hood* and in 1911 he was Widow Twankie in *Aladdin*. The following pantomime, *Robinson Crusoe*, in January 1913 took place in Compton Verney.

Bruce designed the programmes and presumably the posters for these productions and Clare Verney featured prominently on them all.



On 2 August 1914 he enlisted in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and by November he was serving on the front line in Belgium. He started drawing on scraps of paper, doodling and designing comic characters, one of which became Old Bill. He sent several of these sketches and greetings card to 27 year old Clare Verney in Lighthorne and a scrap album

of them was auctioned in July 2014. This is the link www.fieldingsauctions.co.uk/lot/111782 . The album realised £820.



Encouraged by Clare and his fellow officers, he sent a few of his cartoons of Old Bill to *Bystander* magazine, who published them in March 1915. They proved popular with the readers and Bruce was invited to submit more. However he was wounded at the second battle of Ypres in early 1915 and was repatriated. The War Office realised the boost to morale of the front line troops that Bruce's cartoons provided and, after he had recuperated from his injury, he was transferred to the Intelligence Department, as an Officer-Cartoonist and from 1916 to 1918 visited the French, American and Italian front lines sketching cartoons and scenes. In December 1915 *Bystander* gave him a 6 month contract to provide them with Old Bill cartoons and this was followed by a 3 year contract in January 1916. They produced 9 sets of 6 postcards of the cartoons and these were also published in collated form and called "Fragments from France". The postcards were very popular with the troops serving in the trenches and many thousands were printed and used. They are still fairly common today and can be purchased at postcard fairs or on eBay for a few pounds each.

An event which Bruce Bairnsfather witnessed was the 1914 Christmas truce, which happened on Christmas Day on a number of locations on the front line. Soldiers from both sides met in no-man's land and exchanged Christmas greetings and played football. Bairnsfather recorded that it was an "invigorating tonic" that put back something "human".

Bruce Bairnsfather became successful and wealthy and in 1919 he became editor of the popular magazine "Fragments", on a salary of £5,000 per annum. He purchased a new 16 hp Sunbeam car, made in Coventry and arranged to have a personalised number plate, BB

77. No doubt this made redundant the bicycle he used to use to travel to see Clare Verney and his Lighthorne friends.