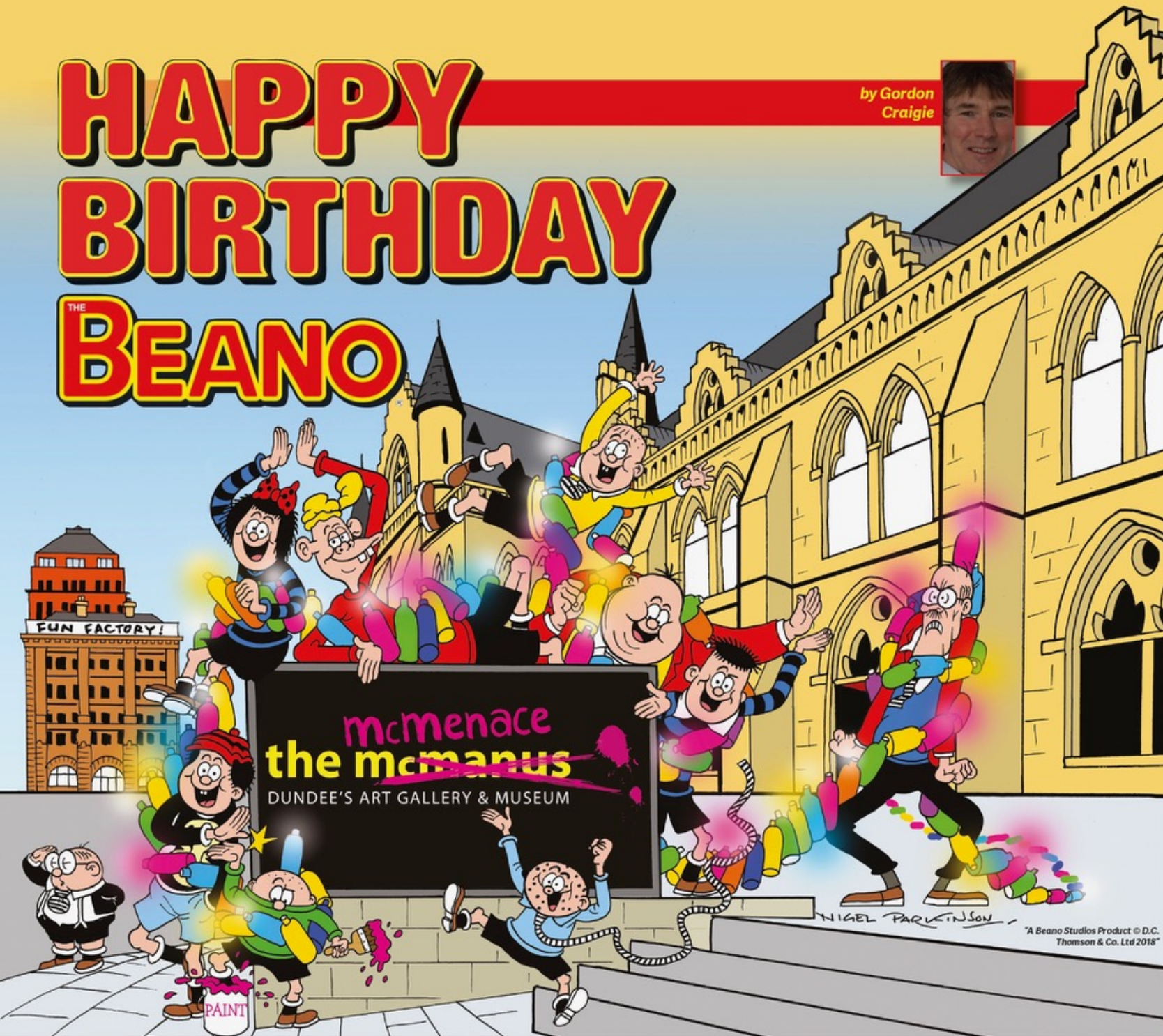


HAPPY BIRTHDAY

BEANO

by Gordon
Craigie



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WHEN AN 80th birthday is approaching there's usually some signs of the protagonist slowing down. Not so with Beano – 80 years young this month and looking as fresh and relevant as ever! The celebrations for DC Thomson's comic creation reaching this milestone have even seen another famous Dundee institution, the city's iconic McManus Galleries, being taken over and renamed by Beano's colourful characters in an exhibition entitled *Bash Street's Back at The McMenace!*

The exhibition is officially described as being a 'fun and rebellious look at Beano at 80'. It takes in the history of DC Thomson as well as the story of printing and the birth of *The Beano*, with a special focus on the hilarious *Bash Street Kids* and their characteristic slapstick humour. Artists and writers who contributed to, and influenced the look and content of, *Beano* throughout the years also feature, alongside a display of how a comic is put together. The exhibition also includes an eclectic mix of *Beano* merchandise that has hit the shelves over the past 80 years. Radio Scotland has described the collaboration between *The McManus* and *Beano Studios* as 'the best example of a successful partnership since Dennis got together with Gnasher!'

The promotional material for the exhibition features the artwork specially commissioned by *Beano Studios* for *Bash Street's Back at The McMenace!* This work takes its inspiration from the silkscreen created by Sir Peter Blake (he of *The Beatles Sergeant Pepper* album cover fame) to commemorate '75 Years of *The Beano*' back in 2013.

The Beano, renamed simply *Beano* in 2016, was launched in 1938 and is the longest running comic in the world. Initially aimed primarily at boys aged 7–11, but also now attracting the 'coolest' girls, *Beano* nowadays enjoys a 50-50 split between boys and girls and has enthralled generations of kids over almost 4,000 issues. *Beano* is an enduring success story, with a current weekly circulation of almost 40,000 and a readership of over 400,000. The comic still sells a copy every 17 seconds despite branching out into the digital world with the UK's fastest growing website for kids running alongside the top-rating *Dennis & Gnasher Unleashed* animation, currently showing on the CBBC television channel.

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Pic credit: Alan Richardson

As befitting the home city and headquarters of the DC Thomson publishing empire, Dundee has also become a centre of excellence in the study of comics. The University of Dundee hosts the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies, offering courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Chris Murray, Professor of Comics Studies at the University of Dundee, points out that *Beano* is the only survivor of the Golden Age of British comics. "It appeared in July 1938 and, along with its stablemate *The Dandy* (which appeared the year before), reshaped the face of British comics. Heavily influenced by the 'American style' (colourful, using word balloons and sequential visual storytelling, rather than the traditional British style (illustrations with blocks of text underneath)), *The Beano*



Mike Stirling, Head of Menacing, Mischief and Rebellion! Pic credit: Alan Richardson

was a breath of fresh air. It has become a byword for British comics, which have always been a bit cheeky and subversive."

On a more personal note Murray reminisces, "my own memories of *Beano* stretch back as long as I can remember. Being a Dundonian, comics were everywhere in my youth, and DC Thomson comics loomed large and were an enormous sense of pride. I recall my mother telling me that her father had worked in the DC Thomson printworks in the 1950s. He would come home and slip still warm copies of the comics under his children's pillows so they would find them in the morning".

Most iScot readers will be familiar with the DC Thomson back catalogue – *Beano*, *Beezer*, *Dandy*, *Hotspur*, *Jackie*, *Topper*, *Twinkle* and many, many more over the years. Not forgetting the equally iconic *Broons* and *Oor Wullie!* Dundonians are justifiably proud of this legacy and their contribution to the city is recognised in various ways – brass statues of Desperate Dan and Minnie the Mix in the City Square and Oor Wullie on his bucket outside the McManus, and even a previously unnamed street being christened *Bash Street* a few years back! The comic characters have also provided musical inspiration - Ricky Ross (Deacon Blue) creating *BeanoLand* and Pete Ham (Badfinger), inspired by Dennis the Menace, writing *Dennis*. And celebrities generally fall over themselves to get involved – guest editors have included Harry Hill, Nick Park and Richard Hammond, while big

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names are regularly featured, often lampooned, in the strips themselves, like David Beckham, Wayne Rooney, Barack Obama, and many more. In fact, it has often been said that you've only really made it if you've appeared in *Beano!*

So, what is the secret of these comic success stories? As is usually the case, most of the credit has to go to the generations of creative, talented and passionate individuals who made these comics successful. Today, that same passion is evident in Mike Stirling, Head of Beano Studios Scotland. Chris Murray describes Stirling as "a whirlwind of ideas and energy" who "really understands the *Beano* readership, and also *Beano's* unique place in comics history". Indeed, Stirling is the alter ego of Dennis the Menace, the *Bash Street* boss, the undisputed leader of the *Beano* town pack. In his previous role as the comic's Editor-in-Chief, his vividly coloured business card was emblazoned *Licence to Menace!* Stirling enthuses, "I used to call myself *Menace-in-Chief*, but now I've moved on to *Head of Menacing, Mischief and Rebellion!* I loved that old business card and I always got a warm reaction from people when they asked what I did. *Beano* is where kids rule and because of that it gives us great scope to be cheeky and naughty. Of course, with great power like that comes great responsibility too".

One of Stirling's responsibilities is to *Beano's* heritage, given that the comic has been going from strength to strength since before the Second World War. He explains, "*The Beano* launched in 1938 and, during the war, adopted a daring approach. We completely mocked Hitler, Mussolini and Göring in cartoon form. It was propaganda in its purest sense, but the plan was to show kids there was nothing to fear from the enemy. Worryingly, there was documentation found after the war showing *The Beano* on a Nazi hit-list because of crimes against the Führer! Obviously if the war had gone the other way there was certainly no chance of *The Beano* being allowed to continue and the staff may have faced sanctions of the most severe type possible.

"Prior to the war *The Beano* had largely been a mix of stories, but a lot of them were text-heavy adventure tales. After the war, *The Beano* changed its cast of characters to naughty kids. Remember this was the era when kids should be seen and not heard. Comics used to have heroic grown-up characters like Desperate Dan, who's a great character... but he's an adult. During the 1950s we had Dennis, Rodger the Dodger,



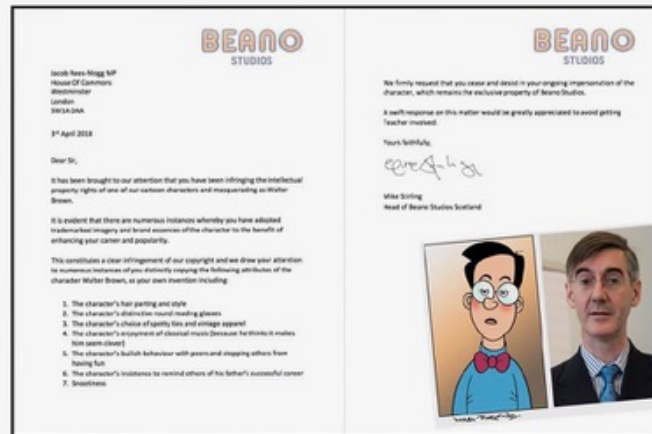
Pic credit: Alan Richardson

Minnie the Mix and, by 1954, *The Bash Street Kids*. These characters are still our main, most popular, most licensed characters, all these years later."

Stirling even looks a bit like a grown-up Dennis, with tightly controlled curly black hair and a mischievous grin. He has also been known to wear a red and black striped jumper on occasion, but the responsibility he feels towards children is clear. Stirling laughs at the Dennis comparison, saying "folk have said that before and I take it as a compliment although I don't know if they intend it as one! My job's brilliant, there are so many opportunities. We go into schools quite a lot and the kids are such a good laugh because they just get so into it. But their teachers also welcome us in. We're really fortunate because we're only ever going to feature stuff that's cool and that our readers and visitors to *beano.com* are going to like so we're not really going to rub anybody up the wrong way. We do things in our own spirit. We'll be cheeky, but we'll not be nasty".

That cheeky nature caused a wee bit of a Twitter stoushie recently when Stirling wrote an open letter to Jacob Rees-Mogg (MP for the 18th century!) accusing him of breaching a *Beano* character's copyright. Allegedly referred to by some in Westminster as 'Waltergate', the whole episode was characteristically tongue-in-cheek, but

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Stirling does appear to have a point...

Stirling explains, "Beano is completely apolitical, but it's such a big part of everyday culture it's not surprising that political figures are sometimes referenced. If kids are aware of someone due to being in the news or being talked about at home, there's a fair likelihood they may feature in a small way. Donald Trump came up in a Halloween poll last year as someone who scared kids, so we produced a spooky video featuring him. However, we have to be careful to not alienate anyone in the mischief we make.

"A few years back, Alex Salmond had made some reference to David Cameron's cabinet as 'Lord Snooty and his pals' and a couple of newspapers actually approached us and wanted us to integrate that into stories. They said it was a great news piece and they'd give us lots of publicity for it. But we don't really want to get involved in politics, though we'll often take the mickey out of it. During the Independence Referendum in 2014 we had a letter from a reader asserting that Beano has a 'proud British heritage' that should be reflected in the context of the referendum. He wanted us to bring out a special edition to be called Be-A-No, but we went back and said the only political issue that was concerning our readers at that moment was the prospect of the school day potentially getting increased to 10 hours! We really don't have a Beano position on political issues and I think that's important - we're the Menace Party, that's our only niche! I guess our manifesto would be to encourage everyday rebellion and support the power of 'the thinking kid' as we believe that's the secret of our success and we'd love everyone else to benefit similarly."



1918 - 2018

I HAVE MADE SPEECHES URGING WOMEN TO ADOPT METHODS OF REBELLION

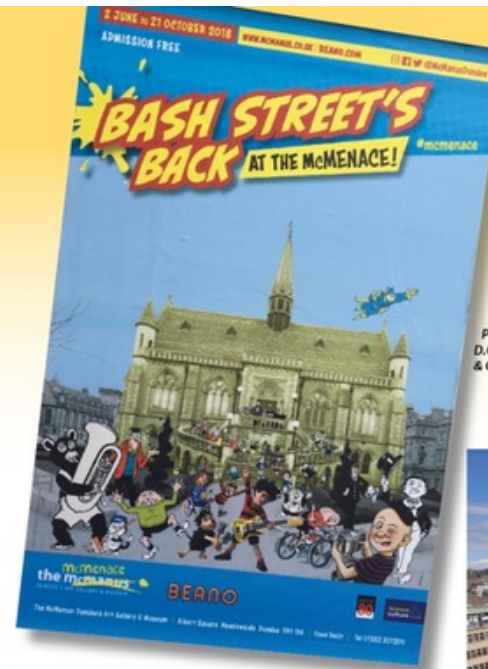
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And so, the phenomenon that is *Beano* continues to thrive with the rapid growth of an award-winning digital network centred around *beano.com* and topped off with growth for the comic in a declining market. Beano Studios was launched in 2016 with a mission to create hilarious, rebellious entertainment for kids of all ages worldwide. The Studio produces diverse entertainment across multiple channels including TV shows, a digital network, theatrical projects, consumer products and brand collaborations as well as the legendary comic and annual.

We're the Menace Party, that's our only niche!



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Stirling proudly reflects, "Bash Street's Back celebrates 80 years of creative rebellion in the 'World Capital of Comics'. I'm proud that the city's favourite building has chosen to rename itself in honour of our amazing characters this summer; how brilliantly rebellious is that?! Tens of thousands of Dundonians have been involved in making *Beano* a worldwide phenomenon - so this is their tale too. A local success story, with strong international appeal, every visitor will learn some of *Beano*'s most cherished secrets... for free!"

Early signs from the exhibition are encouraging, as Carly Cooper, Curator of Social History at The McManus Galleries recognises, "we have had a great reaction to *Bash Street's Back at The McMenace!* so far. Different ages are enjoying different parts of the exhibition - older people who maybe worked at DC Thomson enjoy the history and process elements and younger people are enjoying the interactive elements with the old school set-up and bean bags. Lots of people are sharing memories of reading *Beano* as a kid and young readers today are introducing some of the new characters to parents and grandparents."

Poignantly, Murray notes that "*Beano* was born in the dark times of the late 1930s, in a country recovering from economic disaster and poised on the brink of war. Sound familiar? *Beano* has always poked fun at absurdity and taught us to laugh at hardship and puncture pomposity, and it continues to do so. We've never needed *Beano* more!"

Fittingly, given his passion and commitment to all things *Beano*, the final words have to go to Mike Stirling, "*Beano* has endured because of the genius decision to make rebellious kids the stars back in the 1950s. At the time, we were emerging from an era where the mantra was that kids should be seen and not heard. *Beano* smashed this. Our kids weren't stacked against each other, but instead made fun of grown-ups, which was even more daring. This formula has evolved to reflect the lives of generations since, meaning our characters are instantly relatable and comparable. *Beano* characters

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change all the time as *Beano*town changes to reflect the best parts of the world and times in which we live. *Beano*town is designed to reflect real life, only larger than life, wherever kids live, everywhere in the world. I'd hope kids of all nationalities can imagine themselves living happily together in *Beano*town. I believe the kids enjoying *Bash Street's Back at The McMenace!* will be the creative and rebellious adults responsible for carrying *Beano* to its 100th birthday celebrations in 2038, with similar big-time collaborations and myriad mischief!"

Bash Street's Back at The McMenace! runs until Sunday October 21 at The McManus Galleries, Dundee.

Admission is FREE!

Open Monday to Saturday, 10am-5pm; Sunday 12.30-4.30pm

The exhibition features objects from both the DC Thomson archives and the city's collections, including a rare first edition *Beano*, a traditional linotype machine and, of course, much loved Dennis the Menace fan club memorabilia.