

HAMILTONIANA



(By Courtesy of Gainsborough Pictures.)



By W. O. G. Lofts

My favourite pre-war English comedian was Will Hay. How I remember his amusing films with such titles as 'Windbag The Sailor;' 'Oh! Mr. Porter;' and 'Boys Will Be Boys!' The latter film was shown at a London O.B.B.C. meeting.

Will Hay was joined in many of his films by those grand character actor stooges - Graham Moffat the fat boy who may have made an excellent Baggy Trimble, and Moore Marriott who played the part of the old man. All three are now, alas dead, and I can well remember learning with some astonishment that in real life Will Hay was an extremely serious man, who never joked. He was also a very clever man, being an astronomer of repute.

Many readers may wonder what connection this has with our hobby. Quite a lot in fact, as none other than Charles Hamilton wrote a delightful long series of stories featuring Will Hay at Bendover School. This has never been written about before in our hobby, the probable reason being that the papers in question are exceedingly scarce.

"Frank Richards" in his Autobiography says "There was another series I remember with pleasure, which featured the popular comedian Will Hay. This series was published in a paper called The Ranger,

edited by Mr. Montague Haydon.... The Will Hay series lasted a long time, and it is a pleasant episode in Frank's memory."

The Will Hay series however, did not appear in the Ranger at all! They appeared in a paper called The Pilot long after the Ranger had finished - almost 18 months. As The Pilot was in a way a continuation of the Ranger under a different title, I can only conclude that 'Frank Richards' must have been under the impression that they never changed the name.

The Pilot in 1937 was publishing the alleged early life stories of famous stars in the world of sport, stage and screen. Stainless Stephen, the famous radio comedian, was one. Alex James, the famous Arsenal footballer, another - whilst another I can recall was Bluey Wilkinson the Australian speedway rider. All stories were of course greatly distorted from the real truth, and were penned by 'ghost writers' - and certainly not by the stars in question!

Will Hay in the late 30s was at the height of his fame, and so what better new feature could there be than a series of amusing school stories of him at Bendover School! (The film of Will Hay in his famous schoolmaster role was called Narkover.)

Characteristic of Frank Richards' favourite theme for the arrival of a newcomer to a school, Will Hay arrived at Doddlebury station (for Bendover School) in The Pilot No. 72, February 13th, 1937. All the fourth were lined up on the platform to meet him, and what a colourful crowd they were too! Many readers have commented in the past on Frank Richards brilliant use of names to characters, and as this series was meant to be highly amusing, and verging on slapstick, surely no other school could equal the names as given to the pupils and staff at Bendover?

Headmaster was Dr. Erasmus Shrubbs, a kindly man modelled on the lines of Dr. Locke. Master of the Fifth was Mr. Choot; a portly pompous individual who had hunting trophies in his study, an obvious relation to Mr. Paul Prout. French Master was a Monsieur Le Bon - nicknamed Mossos Bong - shades of the excitable master at Greyfriars. Another Master who was fond of the bottle was named of all things Mr. Shandy! Nearest public house to the school was called "Three Fishers" - so he may have been a frequent visitor! Dr. Paynem was the school doctor. "Toots" the page. Kelly the school porter. Boys starting with the Sixth were Billy Stuckly. The Fifth Albert Edward Gunter - and Parker. Whilst the Fourth form of which Will Hay was master, and which were mainly featured in the stories were as follows; Dicky Bird the Captain, Jimmy Carboy, Jerry Smart, Tubby

Green, Sammy Straw, Issy Cumming - the Jewish Junior, Podger, Amos B. Gowing, Eric Garnett, Gaston, and the two cads or black sheep of the remove, Reggie Pyke and Fruity Snell.

Will Hay, of course, was ragged unmercifully in his early days at Bendover, but always managed to hold his own by sheer cunning and great wit. Although a buffoon in appearance, he was shrewd, and in time he became very popular with the boys of his form. That was with the exception of Reggie Pyke, who must have been some relation to Cecil Ponsonby. Rather surprisingly in view of the slapstick vein in the tales, the stories run in longish series, with Reggie Pyke in the leading role. Reggie's father, Dunkley Pyke, was a shifty schoolmaster, and he wanted badly to get a job - none other than the Headmastership of Bendover. Will Hay of course stopped all their shady schemes, and eventually both were kicked out of the school after a barring out series.

Another long series featured a Yankee Trader from the South Seas with the name of Cyrus X. Shook. He was trying to kidnap a new junior at Bendover, a Kanaka South Seas Islander who talked in sing-song pidgeon English and was called Koo-Kalinga-Lolulo-Ulolo-La!

Single stories in between series had a very familiar ring of ventriloquism and other popular Hamilton themes. One story, extremely amusing indeed, had spinster ladies coming up to the school in answer to a local advertisement with views to marriage. Will Hay (like Mr. Quelch) had a very difficult time in convincing these good ladies that it was all a terrible mistake - and all he wanted through his advert was a new bike!

In time, the stories became shorter by the introduction of a comic strip also featuring Will Hay, and possibly a few of these stories were written by editorial staff. The tales by this time seemed to have lost their appeal with readers. No. 129 March 19th 1938 was the last written story, and the issue following had Will only in a picture strip. The last issue of The Pilot even had Will Hay's photo removed from the front page near the title - and in this issue The Pilot died - readers being asked next week to buy Wild West Weekly.

Another series of Will Hay stories appeared in Modern Boy starting with No. 42, Dec. 3rd, 1938, written by 'Hedley Owen' but these were based on film scripts and were penned by Hedley O'Mant who was editor of Ranger and Pilot. These could hardly be classed as successful as they only ran for six issues.

Readers who may have extreme difficulty in getting hold of Pilots may be able to get hold of two Boys Friend Libraries:-

No. 647. Nov. 1938. Will Hay at Bendover (Pilot 72-83)

No. 649. Dec. 1938. The Barring-Out at Bendover (Pilot 85-102)

Readers who only like Charles Hamilton in his serious tales would obviously not care for the Bendover stories, but those who revel in his most amusing yarns would enjoy his Pilot ones. Admitted at times the dialogue borders on slapstick, but who can resist a chuckle at the following?

Dicky Bird: "Sir, could you tell me the winner of the 3-30?"

Will Hay: "Clothes Line. Because you can put your shirt on it!"

Probably the only thing about the stories that seemed so unlike Charles Hamilton was Will Hay calling his boys "Little Warts" repeatedly.

Dear Old Will Hay; neither he nor Charles Hamilton is any longer with us, but what memories they bring back. My favourite comedian combined with my favourite school story writer - certainly together when comedy was King.

Will Hay also appeared in the Boys Cinema. Stories adapted from his most famous films. He also appeared in comic strips Comic Cuts and Radio Fun. A special Will Hay number was issued of Mickey Mouse Weekly in the 30s - drawn by Basil Reynolds - and conducted by Will Hay himself. Will Hay made a total of 18 films between 1934 and 1943, and died aged 60 on April 18th, 1949. I have full biographical details about this great comedian - to anyone interested.