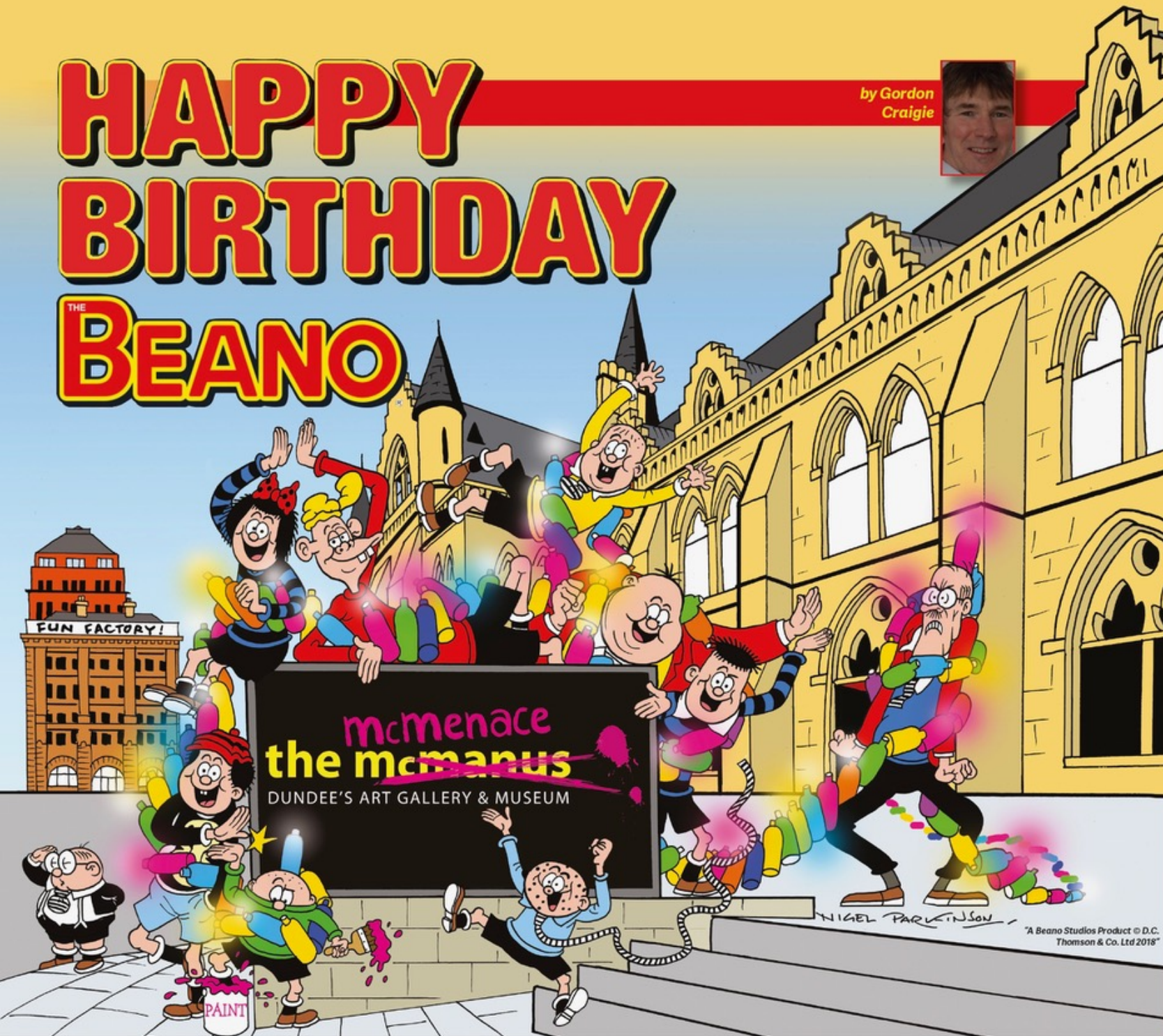


HAPPY BIRTHDAY

BEANO

by Gordon
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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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"A Beano Studios Product © D.C. Thomson & Co. Ltd 2018"



Pic credit: Alan Richardson

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 Beantown 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 Fuhrer! 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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