

## RUPERT BEAR'S CENTENARY

Roger Coombes celebrates a very special birthday

He is 8 years older than Mickey Mouse  
He is 6 years older than Winnie the Pooh  
He is 40 years older than Paddington

**R**upert Bear came into our world in the pages of the *Daily Express* on 8 November 1920. This November he reached the landmark age of 100 years in print; a century of newspapers, books, toys, games, clothes, television adventures and stage shows, not to mention clubs and societies dedicated to appreciation of his role in British culture. How did this come about?

Rupert was 'born' out of a circulation battle between several of Britain's popular newspapers, part of which was fought in the 'children's features'. The *Daily Mail* had the first success with Teddy Tail in 1915, followed by the *Daily Mirror* with Pip and Squeak in 1919 (who were joined by Wilfred a year later) and the *Daily News* with The Adventures of the Noah Family (later known as Japhet and Happy) also in 1919.

The then owner of the *Daily Express*, Canadian Max Aitken (later to be ennobled as Lord Beaverbrook), seeing the popularity of

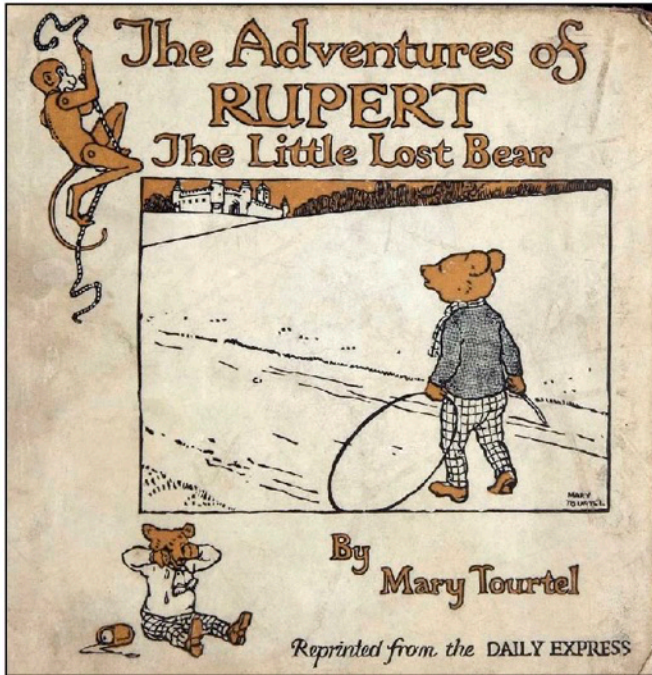
these stories with children (no one was quite sure what to call them—drawings? cartoons? strips?) instructed the editor, R D Blumenfeld, to launch a character to compete with those of the *Express's* rivals. Blumenfeld delegated the task to a sub-editor, Herbert Tourtel, who enlisted the assistance of his wife Mary. She was an artist and book illustrator with an ability to draw anthropomorphic characters. Her previous work included the 1919 series In Bobtail Land for the *Sunday Express* and When Animals Work for the *Daily Express*.

Rupert was 'born', fully formed, with little fanfare in a single panel with a short narrative in rhyming couplets, entitled 'Little Lost Bear'. His appearance was established in this first image and has remained much the same, with subtle evolutionary changes, over the passage of time, most notably when the drawing baton (should that be pen and brush?) was passed from one artist to another.

The basic pattern was there in 1920—plain sweater, checked scarf, checked trousers and







sturdy shoes. On the occasions when Mary Tourtel's Rupert appeared in colour his sweater was blue and his scarf and trousers were white. Today's readers (and they can be aged nine or ninety) are more familiar with red sweater and yellow scarf and trousers, which became standard when Alfred Bestall took over responsibility for Rupert in 1935.

How old is Rupert? People have been debating this for a long time. I see him as being around eight years old; but some regard him as younger, others a bit older. On the occasions when Nutwood's school features in stories it is clearly a single-class primary school with one teacher.

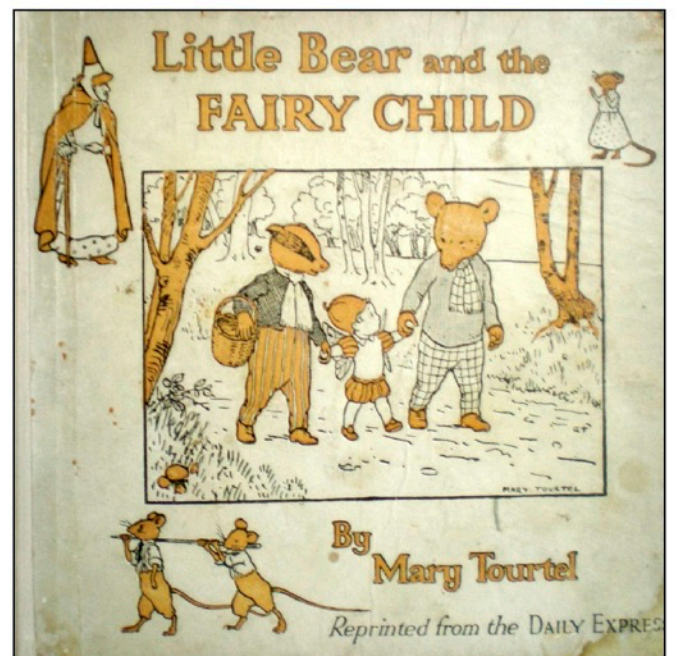
In the early days, the format of the daily episodes was by no means consistent—sometimes it was a single panel, sometimes two or more, while on some days Rupert was missing altogether, his absence being explained by his being 'on holiday'. These measures were necessary when Mary was unable to meet her deadline.

In 1936, between Bestall's fifth and sixth stories, there was a decidedly unusual story using photographed puppets instead of drawings, probably because he too needed time to get ahead of publication deadlines. This 'experiment' was never repeated because the complaints received showed how unpopular it

was with the paper's child readers.

Mary Tourtel's plots and imagery were influenced by fairy stories and nursery rhymes, particularly those of Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm Brothers, evident in the inclusion of enchanted castles, wizards, sorcerers, magicians, dragons, goblins, fairies, knights and princesses. Anthropomorphic 'animals' such as the Bear family and Rupert's friends like Bill Badger coexisted in a supernatural world alongside humans, a world in which there were parallel time zones. In this world, medieval castles and knights could coexist with an apparent 20th-century village with motorised transport and other post-Industrial Revolution technology.

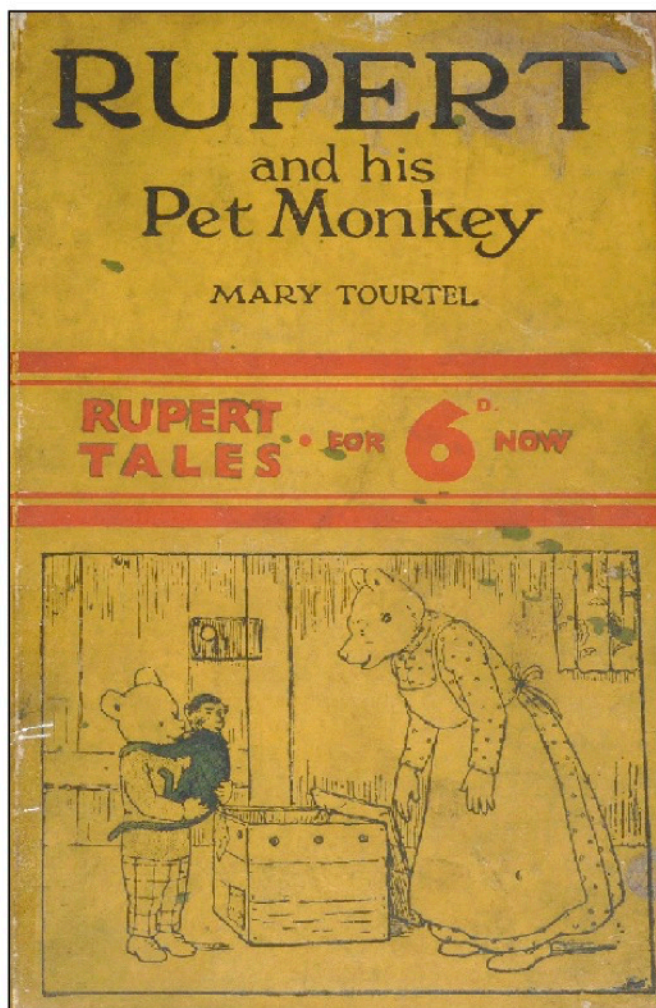
As an artist, Mary Tourtel had a very academic background, which underscored her meticulous accuracy in representing medieval architecture and armour, for example. Today's critics, however, argue that this academic meticulousness limited her scope for composition, making her drawings restricted (within an already restricted format) and monotonous.



Notwithstanding that, Rupert *was* popular and quickly found a niche alongside the children's characters in the rival newspapers. Reprints and adapted stories, some in colour, were published by Thomas Nelson and Sampson Low in the 1920s. These were cheap



enough to be readily available and acceptable choices for children's birthday and Christmas presents. The series of yellow hardbacked 'Little Bear' books, which sold for a shilling (and for sixpence in the 1930s) in Woolworths, were especially popular.



From 1930 Rupert also had a place in the *Daily Express Children's Annual* and in 1932 his success was reflected in the creation of the Daily Express Rupert League to rival the *Daily Mirror's* Wilfredian League of Gugnuncs (the club for Pip, Squeak and Wilfred). Children's clubs were all the rage—other examples being those established for Teddy Tail, the Ovaltineys and *Children's Hour*.

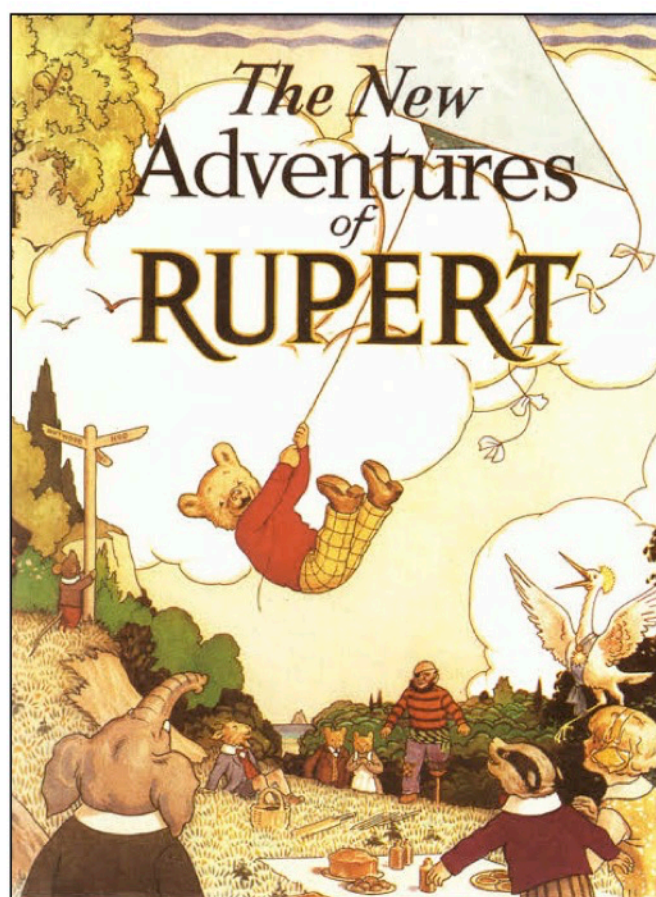
By the mid-1930s, Mary Tourtel had been widowed and her health was failing, particularly her eyesight. The Children's Page editor at the *Express*, Stanley Marshall ('Uncle Bill'), was very aware that Rupert was a valuable asset to the paper and accordingly looked

for a successor. By a stroke of good fortune or perception he found Alfred Bestall, a well-established book illustrator and contributor to *Punch*, *Tatler*, *The Passing Show* and other prestigious periodicals.

It came as a surprise to Alfred (AEB) on his appointment in 1935 to learn that he would be responsible for writing the stories as well as illustrating them. He was also asked by Uncle Bill to steer away from Mary Tourtel's 'magical' content because it was considered that she had over-indulged in fairies and the like and in her last few years her stories had become somewhat too dark for their young readers.

Alfred accepted this challenge and hit his stride quickly. Uncle Bill had already decided to make two frames per day the permanent format and to replace the rhyming couplets with Alfred's prose. The couplets were soon to reappear, however, in the new *Rupert Annuals* first published by the *Express* in 1936.

These annuals became a standard feature in Christmas stockings and have been published every year since then, even during the paper-





rationed years of the Second World War, because Lord Beaverbrook deemed that Rupert's daily appearance in the newspaper (he only missed a few when war news pushed him out) and his annuals were vital to children's morale. Ask anyone today who is old enough to remember the air raids of WWII and they will invariably say a *Rupert Annual* was among the items kept in the air raid shelters. This year's *Rupert Annual*, by the way, is No 85.

Entrusting the Rupert character to Alfred ensured his continuation. He did not slavishly attempt to copy Mary's style, but his early stories showed some of her elements, such as Rupert's somewhat 'stocky' build (although he had slimmed down significantly in Mary's care). Within a year he had made Rupert 'his own'.

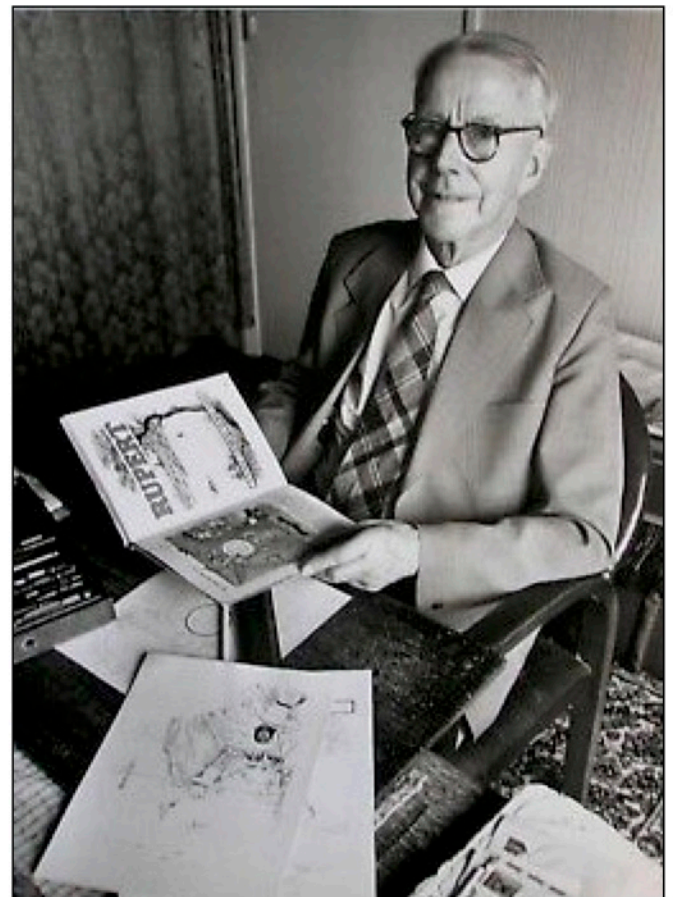
Rupert's character altered perceptibly as well. Under Mary he had become rather petulant and wimpish (sometimes crying in adversity) and she had endowed him with few facial expressions. Alfred, on the other hand, extended Rupert's range of facial emotions and his movements became more fluid. Art and fashion critics have likened Alfred's illustrative technique to a cinematic style, with different frames showing the action from different angles, as a film director would.

As mentioned above, Alfred had been asked to remove Mary's Gothic influences and use of magic. He succeeded with the former, but in the arena of children's literature could not totally dispense with the latter, although his 'magic' was never 'real' but merely illusory. The company of 'chums' and semi-regular characters increased as Alfred created new ones and Nutwood became a more identifiable location as the starting point for Rupert's adventures. When I started writing this article, John Harrold, who was Alfred's successor from 1979 to 2002, was working on a definitive map of Nutwood, attempting to place the residents' homes within the village and its surrounding countryside—a task which Alfred had shunned. This map was to have been part of the centenary celebrations for The

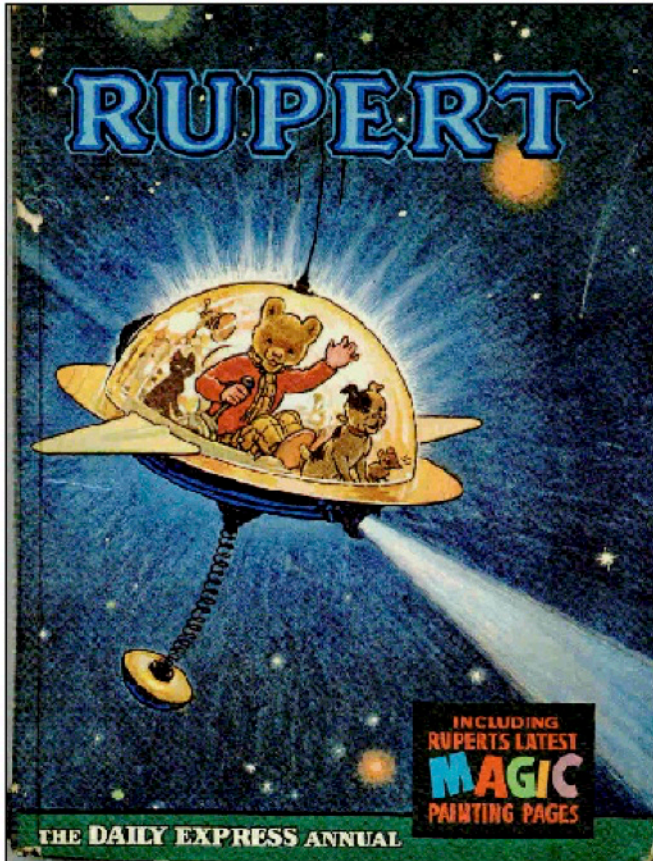
Followers of Rupert. Sadly, Covid-19 has caused much of this to be postponed.

During the 1920s and 1930s, the *Express* licensed various publishers to reprint Rupert stories, some of which were reformatted, abridged and coloured, and from 1930 to 1934 the *Daily Express Children's Annual* included a previously published Mary Tourtel Rupert story. However, 1936 marked a new direction with the first *Rupert Annual*, entitled *The New Adventures of Rupert*, published by the *Express* and containing five of Alfred Bestall's early stories, which had appeared in the newspaper in 1935-36. This was the first of the annuals, which have continued to be published to the present. I have recently reviewed the latest—No 85—for The Followers of Rupert's *Nutwood Newsletter*. During that time the title has varied but it is continually known as the *Rupert Annual*.

There have been many other publications, some from the *Express* and some published by other companies, too numerous to include here. Arguably, the peak of Rupert's popular-







ity was in the 1950s and 1960s, yet here he is still going in 2020. It had been necessary for the *Express* to switch to soft covers between 1943 and 1949, yet they managed to introduce full colour as a much-appreciated compensation. Hard covers returned in 1950. Since 2003, they have consisted of reprinted stories, with a few new tales being written and drawn specifically for the annuals by Stuart Trotter from 2008. These have never been in the *Express*, which since 2002 has followed a policy of only reprinting old stories, some of which have been quite heavily cut.

By the 1960s, Alfred Bestall was finding his workload too heavy so other artists—Enid Ash, Alex Cubie, Lucy Matthews and Jenny Kisler—were drafted in to help, often producing the backgrounds and figure work, while Alfred completed the heads. Alfred officially retired in 1965 after 30 years producing almost 300 stories, although he continued to contribute artwork for the annuals until 1973. The endpapers for that year were, in my opinion, amongst his best, showing that he had lost none of his imagination and skills.

Alex Cubie emerged as his immediate successor although not for long as he too was approaching retirement as an *Express* 'in-house' artist. The 'team' had been joined by John Harrold in 1976 and he eventually became the official Rupert artist, working to scripts provided at first by James Henderson and then by Ian Robinson. It was the Harrold/Robinson partnership which was to take Rupert through the 1980s and 1990s and into the 21st century.

Although John was expected initially to draw in Alfred's style, he was soon allowed to stamp his own vision on Rupert's world, whilst retaining and possibly extending Alfred's sense of humour, executed through his superb draughtsmanship. Although John and Ian inherited AEB's full cast of characters they introduced a few new ones such as Otto-line and the Sage of Um. For the annuals, Harrold experimented with page design, adding asymmetrical shapes and introducing L-shaped story title pages. Devotees of Rupert had, in the early 1980s, formed their own fan club—The Followers of Rupert—membership of which was predominantly adult, though their children were encouraged to participate. You would find no greater admirers of Alfred Bestall than these Followers, yet within a short space of time John Harrold was held in equally high esteem.

I have not ventured far into Rupert merchandising—toys, calendars, diaries china figures and videos (speaking of which, remembering the popular TV series and its catchy song, I have to emphasise here and now he is





NOT Rupert *the* Bear!) because to do so would exceed the limits of space set by Vic the editor. If he were to commission a follow-up article I would have to include Brintje Beer (the Dutch version), Paul McCartney and the Frog Chorus, and Terry Jones' Channel 4 documentary which triggered my personal 'Rupert Renaissance'. How about it Vic? [*Get writing, Roger!—Ed*]

From the 1980s, marketing of the Rupert brand was directed at adults as much as at children, including adult-sized scarves, ties, waistcoats and sweaters (own up, Gyles Brandreth!) and, to my mind more significantly, jigsaws, greetings cards and posters of some of the superb aforementioned annual covers and endpapers painted by Alfred and John. A particular favourite with Followers and fans in general is John's cover for the 50th annual in 1985. I invite you to study it in order to understand why.

Can you identify John's tribute to Alfred?



A bit of a wobble happened in Rupert's publishing world in 2002 and for a while it seemed that the future of our ursine chum was in doubt. New ownership, management restructuring, profit and loss spreadsheets—call it what you will—at the *Express* resulted in the parting of the ways for the creative team behind Rupert and their employers. This did not lead to Rupert disappearing altogether from the pages of the newspaper but, as mentioned already, there have been no new stories for the last eighteen years. What we have seen during those years have been reprints from the

'back catalogue' of 1935-2002, which is an impressive archive.

The production of the *Rupert Annual* is no longer done in-house by the *Express* but has been licensed firstly to Pedigree Books and then to Egmont. It is Egmont who commission Stuart to write and illustrate the covers and one new story per year, the rest of the contents being reprints of stories, puzzles and other activities taken from previous annuals, predominantly the work of AEB and John Harrold.

Stuart continues the established world of Nutwood in what I call 'Bestallesque' style. His story in this year's annual celebrates 100 years of Rupert by bringing the 1920 Rupert forward to the present to team up with the 2020 Rupert. This is a masterful achievement blending the very distinct style of Mary Tourtel with the 'Bestallesque'. Sadly, Stuart's stories do not appear in the *Daily Express*.

Covid-19 restrictions prevented The Followers of Rupert from holding their traditional gathering at the end of August, at which there would have been special celebrations, but there are signs of general awareness of this significant anniversary in nostalgia-type publications such as *Best of British* and *Evergreen*, as well as a new issue of Rupert postage stamps by Royal Mail and the minting of Rupert 50p coins by the Royal Mint.

Happy anniversary Rupert! .

