

Artist & Illustrator - Harry Wingfield



Harry Wingfield, a self portrait painted during the war years whilst on leave from the RAF.

I was born an only child in Denby, a village near Kilburn, about 7 miles north of Derby on 4 December 1910. My Father, Herbert Wingfield was the oldest of nine children. He worked as a furnace man at a local blast furnace of a type which was more or less obsolete even then, a remnant of the industrial revolution, relying heavily on manual labour in its operation. It was a hot, hard, dirty manual job which bred hard men. My Father was a hard man – a fighter, with a reputation locally as a boxer. He met my mother, Margaret, when she was 19 and working in a local hotel.

I was born in an old stone pub near a smallholding owned and run by my Grandfather. Very soon after I was born we moved to Manchester, where we took a small corner shop and off licence in Hulme. I did well at school in Manchester and eventually had the promise of a place at Manchester Art School, because I found I could draw. I had this bad stammer, but I could draw. However, by then (around 1922) my parents had had enough of Manchester and moved back to Derby, so I missed my chance to go to Art School.

Anyway, we took this small shop on the outskirts of Derby – on the Nottingham Road it was – and I went to School there and in 1926, at sixteen, I wanted a job in a draughtsman's office as an engineering draughtsman because Derby was a major engineering centre then – Rolls Royce was there and also the Headquarters of the Midland Railway with a large railway works. But by then the depression was looming and people were not taking in apprentices, and my bad stammer didn't help. It was a hard world then – there was no such thing as "equal opportunities".

So I ended up in a grotty little advertising agency in the middle of Derby, ready and eager to learn the commercial art business. I was supposed to be a graphics junior – learning how newspapers were made – but there was no one there to teach me so I taught myself, from trade magazines, and that kind of thing and attended evening classes (life class) at Derby School of Art which I continued until 1930. At the office I was the sort of office "gofer" and got round all the local papers where I picked up more, bits of this and bits of that. One of my jobs was to go to local council meetings and sketch the councillors for cartoons.

Then the recession came in earnest and in 1930 our little agency just failed outright. I had to look round for a new job. Although I had been happy there I wasn't too disappointed because it hadn't been a particularly good job. Then I saw this ad in the Birmingham Post in the Central Library and wrote after it. It was at Crabtree's in Walsall and I got an interview practically straight away – I don't know why. I got the train and arrived at the old station yard in Walsall and thought what a nice place – it really was quite nice. I hadn't been there before. Walsall in the 1930's was a busy, compact friendly place, full of interest – I had a good time and really got to know my way around. It was very different from Derby which was a county town, surrounded by countryside.

So I went to the interview. The chap who interviewed me was the advertising manager, as the firm produced all its advertising in-house. Crabtree's was an electrical manufacturer producing small electrical equipment, circuit breakers, domestic and other types of small switchgear – they did quite a big range. The other chap at the interview was John Ashworth Crabtree himself, the founder of the firm. (He died at a relatively early age and is, coincidentally, buried in Little Aston churchyard, under a large granite slab, only a few yards from Bob and Ethel's grave

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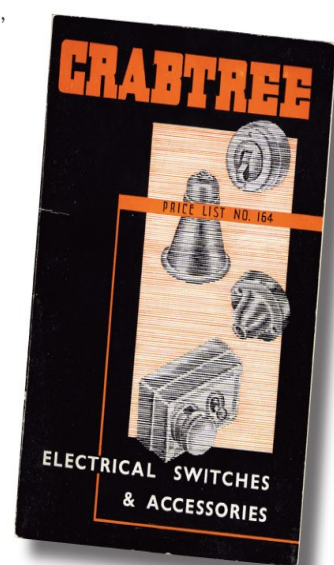
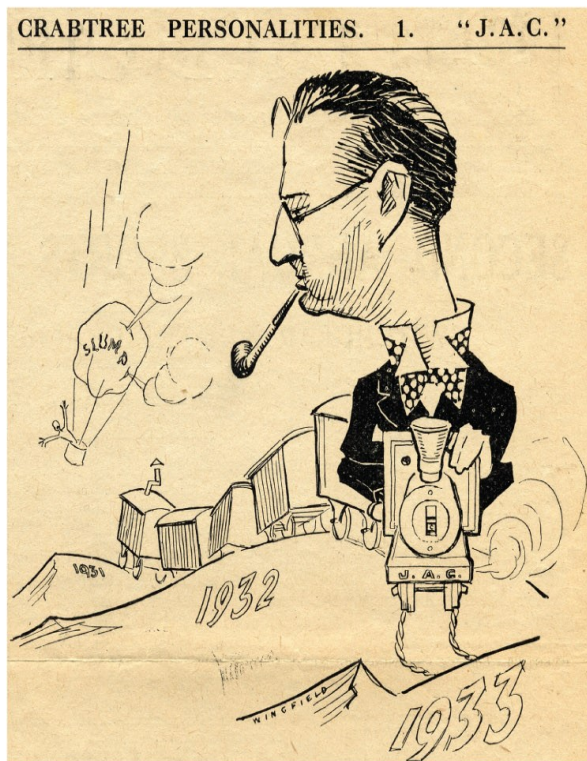
where I shall be buried when I finally decide I've had enough!). They were practically the only Company in Walsall doing much work at that time, because the leather industry was fading out. Even though there was still a fair amount done, it was more in the fancy goods line – it wasn't like the old harness and saddlery industry for which Walsall had been famous, but which had faded along with the horses.

Crabtree on the other hand was doing very well. He was expanding and had a nice big office and workshops out near the Arboretum. He called his new works "Lincoln Works" after Abraham Lincoln and even the road was named the same – Lincoln Road. He was a nice chap – a little, quiet chap, but very capable – I always thought him destined for great things. He certainly knew what he wanted in the way of an advertising assistant. I took my specimens along and we talked about them and I remember he made one suggestion on one of them, that I'd made it a bit too complicated. Then he wandered out and as he went gave the other chap, a man named Cox, a nod and there I was – I'd got the job without any bother, and at a salary that was a good living wage for a single man of twenty years – I was very pleased.

There were just three of us handling the advertising. As well as me there was a copywriter, and the manager, who had had a lot of experience in London in the mail order business. When it came to catalogues, he knew his way around. Oh, and there was a lad who did the filing, learning the business – a sixteen year old. The Crabtree catalogue was a very complicated affair, what with all the various switches, current breakers and also cooker units. I was the artist, and the designer and the layout man and I found the freedom, responsibility and opportunity absolutely fantastic. I also used to go out a lot with photographers, who were really good. I learned a lot about the advertising trade and was particularly keen on the print and picture setting side. All in all I did very well. I got on alright and was there for nearly four years. The money was enough to keep a lad going and I was very pleased. Although I had digs in Walsall, I still used to go home to Derby at weekends for quite a while.

Walsall was also very near Birmingham and I made full use of the Library, Museum and particularly the Art Gallery there. Throughout my time in Walsall, I also attended evening classes at Birmingham Art College in Margaret Street. I was particularly good with watercolours, which I had been specialising in ever since I started evening classes in Derby. I also got some experience in oils, and continued life drawing. All in all I had a fair training there and enjoyed it, though I would have preferred the opportunity of a full time art training.

Much as I enjoyed my time in Crabtree's and Walsall, I felt by 1934/35 that I had been there long enough and wanted to move on and up, both in terms of money and my career. I was 24 by then. I had my sights set on Fleet Street, though I wasn't good



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enough yet. I had ambitions in the commercial art world – in selling things through portraying them in an attractive and interesting way. So I left and joined a large Birmingham advertising agency which was one of the best agencies in the Midlands. I was good at “visualising” – creating a lay-out, an illustration to sell a particular product, and worked as a graphic designer (termed commercial artist then) depicting a wide range of products, but mainly cars, lorries, bicycles, motorbikes, cookers etc.

While I was there, I continued the evening classes at Margaret Street and it was there I met my Wife to be, Ethel; in a life class. She was drawing a donkey and I was drawing the mule! Our eyes met across a crowded room! Her Mother was there too – she caught me giving Ethel the eye. But that didn't prevent us getting acquainted and that was that and in 1936 we were married.

We were now living in a very nice new rented house in Foley Road, Streetly and it was while we were there that my first Son, Roger was born.

Shortly after, I left the Birmingham Agency and went freelance. However, that was short lived as the war started soon after.

In 1940, I was called up into the RAF, most of my time being spent in the Azores on an airfield which was a staging post for B17 Flying Fortress Bombers being flown across the Atlantic from the USA to bases in the UK.

In late 1945 I was demobbed and returned home. By then Ethel had moved with Roger and my daughter Jane, newly born, into a rented cottage in a small village called “Whatstandwell”, near Matlock, in the Peak District of Derbyshire. That was a beautiful spot, but no good for us as a family as there was no work for me. So we moved to Birmingham and started up again freelancing, in various different places, the last one being a little studio above a gun shop in Loveday Street. Ethel had aspirations to live in the countryside, so in 1950 we moved to Aldridge Road, Little Aston. For several years I continued to work freelance from the studio in Loveday Street, commuting daily into Birmingham from Little Aston.

Around about then I met up with Douglas Keen, one of a small circle of young advertising people in their 20's I'd knocked around with in Birmingham before the war. He now worked for Ladybird children's books owned by the publishers Wills and Hepworth, and they were looking for someone to illustrate a story book of the Red Riding Hood and Goldilocks and the Three Bears stories. Several illustrators had turned the job down because they didn't think Ladybird was prepared to pay enough, so I got the job. Though I continued for a while with other work, very soon, by around 1952, I think I was working full time for Ladybird. These stories were a new thing for me – a challenge, but they were watercolour and I could do watercolour. I was determined to give it all I'd got and make it interesting – you know, make the animals characterful and interesting – introduce some humour into the pictures if I could, without getting in the way of the story. I pulled out all the stops to achieve “picture quality” and felt I achieved it. I was quite pleased with myself. This was destined to lead to a long and fruitful relationship with Ladybird which was to dominate the rest of my career, but that's another story.

February 2002

Dictated by Harry Wingfield

Sadly Harry passed away in 2003 at the age of 92. To commemorate Harry's

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association with Walsall, the town's art gallery staged an exhibition of his illustrations - a fitting tribute to a man who had practiced his talents at J A Crabtree & Co Ltd.



Illustrations by courtesy of Ladybird Books.



As an Announcer, the "Man of Parts" was a roaring success.

Harry Wingfield's drawing of the "Announcer" at Crabtree's Swimming Gala in 1932.