



Ally Sloper tobacco jars. In the centre is an Ally Sloper vesta-case for matches.



Mr & Mrs Sloper's bodiless ventriloquist's-dummy heads. Here, Ally still retains his famous top-hat.



A Victorian paper scrap commemorating Ally.



Sloper as an early ventriloquist's full-sized dummy.

The world's first successful comic cartoon character

by Jack Tempest

The Americans tend to believe that the first comic paper strip cartoon character to appear in print was their 'Yellow Kid'. They also tend to believe that the 'Yellow Kid' character, an unknown quantity in the UK who has never yet appeared on our America-dependent TV screens, is a world's first.

Well - he was not! Britain produced its very own bizarre comic strip character in the 1860s, some 30 years before artist Richard Felton Outcault's 'The Yellow Kid' character hit the transatlantic headlines in 1896! Cartoon figures had been popular for some time in Continental publications. Other Continentals had dabbled with the comic-strip style of presentation used by Charles Henry Ross and his wife Marie Duvall, when they first created their irascible red-nosed gin-drinking Ally Sloper character. Ally Sloper rapidly became very popular and his curious originality made him a most important laughter maker in the British Isles.

Although Charles Henry Ross was the son of the noted artist Sir William Ross, R.A., he possessed only limited artistic talent. He turned to journalism after serving as a clerk in the Admiralty. Marie, his French-born wife, an ex-dancer, had suffered an accident that meant giving up her theatrical appearances. Her artistic talents were good enough to allow her to become a successful illustrator of books and magazines. Ross was a 'doodler', always scribbling out ideas. Two of them were the red-nosed cantankerous Ally Sloper, along

with his partner Iky Mo. Whilst Ross doodled his ideas, Marie knocked them into shape.

Ally eventually took his public bow in a new magazine first published in 1867. At the time Britain's leading comic magazine was 'Punch' and the introduction of a rival publication, aptly named 'Judy' received a good welcome. Ally and Iky's bumbling adventures were well appreciated by the new publication's readers. Ross was appointed to the editorship of 'Judy' in 1869 and increased the appearance of Ally's adventures! When 'Judy' was later sold to the Dalziell Brothers engraving company, Ally Sloper's high popularity was rewarded by the appearance of a new magazine known as 'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday'!

'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday' was launched in the May of 1884 at its Fleet Street HQ with Gilbert Dalziell on its staff. Inevitably the new address quickly became popularly referred to as the 'Sloperies'. A 'sloper', in those days, was the name for a person who quickly 'sloped-off' out of the back door when the rent man called! A fact that gives you some idea of Ally's unstable character! A new artist was brought in to help over the drawing of Ally's activities. He was an American named William G. Baxter who had been working on a publication in the North of England, lost his job, and had been trying to find employment in London. He was given the job of drawing a weekly cartoon on the cover page, featuring Ally involved in a humorous, topical or

political situation. The idea was a great success - this was the kind of cartoon that had wide appeal and the magazine increased its readership immensely.

Baxter improved the more naïve original Ally Sloper, making slight changes in his character's appearance - which the readership apparently appreciated. Ally was given a new family - and his third wife. There had been a vagueness over Ally's 'nearest and dearest' up to now but soon everyone was to know that he had a definite wife - still a 'Mrs Sloper' - and five definite children. These were Alexandry, Tootsie, the Terrible Twins, and the baby Jubilee. He was given relatives such as Aunt Geezer, Cousin Evelina, and an Uncle Boffin. Ally's mates now included Bill Higgings, Lardy Longsox, Lord Bob, Miss Tottie Goodenough, and His Grace.

In 1886 Baxter had his very last Ally cartoon published and he died of TB in hospital some two years later, after ending his last years in poverty and imbibing too much gin. Ally Sloper continued his appearance - from the pen of a new artist named W.F. Thomas. He was careful to follow Baxter's style of drawing so that Ally's character remained much the same. The main difference was the elevation of Ally into the realms of the Higher Classes. Now the scoundrel was drinking and holding forth in conversation with the Higher Classes. How much higher could he get than riding with Queen Victoria in her Royal Carriage, or chatting with the Prince of Wales? The public enjoyed the move and 'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday' retained its popularity up to its 1,000th edition near the end of the nineteenth century.

As they say 'All things must come to an end' and gradually the fame of Ally Sloper began to dwindle. Perhaps Gilbert Dalziell, who inherited the paper had begun to realise this when he decided to sell of 'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday'? It was to change hands a few times - and eventually its title reduced to just 'Ally Sloper'. Wars bring changes in fashions and the magazine survived only to half way through the 1914-18 World War when it finally closed down. A few attempts to reintroduce the magazine when peace returned proved short-lived. It was RIP for Ally Sloper - but he had enjoyed a good life and given a lot of people a great deal of pleasure.

Many collectables have existed in Ally Sloper's name. They still turn up from time to time, though many younger people have never heard of Ally and fail to realise just how popular he had been. His red-nosed face has been turned into ceramic tobacco jars with lids replicating his famous battered hat. Copies of 'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday' occasionally turn up and are worth acquiring, there are Ally Sloper games, watches, match vests, glass paperweights, Ally Sloper sauce bottles, framed illustrations, and several varieties of crested china formed as Ally Sloper heads.

The photographs show items from the Frank Nelson collection. Frank, now retired was noted for his humorous automaton figures and was once the consultant and restorer of antique automaton figures in the now closed York Automata Museum. One of the mechanical figures he produced was, not surprisingly, a study of Ally Sloper riding a unicycle!



Frank Nelson, who collected all these Ally Sloper items, has now retired to produce small hand-operated versions of Victorian-style automata such as this clown acrobat.



An Ally Sloper sauce bottle - this originally held 'Ally's Favourite Relish'!



A painting of Ally.



The 'Game of Ally Sloper'. Here the game board has been framed for show, but it would originally have been pinned to a wall to allow blindfolded party participants to attempt to guess where to pin on his hat, spectacles, and bow-tie - all made from printed card - in the right places. A sort of more complicated version of 'Pinning the Donkey's Tail'!