

The Man who drew *Bevis*.



An illustrated talk by Jean Saunders for the Richard Jefferies Society held at the Richard Jefferies Museum on 5 April 2008

Ernest Howard Shepard, pictured here in his early nineties, is the subject of today's talk along with his illustrations for a 1930s edition of *Bevis*. I will begin by explaining how this talk came about and a little bit about Shepard who detested being known as the 'The Man who Drew Pooh', although his pictures of A.A. Milne's Christopher Robin, Pooh, Rabbit, Piglet, Tigger and Eeyore have brought delight to several generations of children.

Mark Daniel's guided walk around Coate Water last June inspired Stan Hickerton to delve deeper into some information about Shepard. During the walk, I had been clutching my copy of *Bevis* with the Shepard illustrations that day – it was this edition that my husband, aged around 10, had borrowed from the library and loved so much. On the walk we compared the scene as drawn by Shepard to the present day. A few days later, Stan sent me an extract from a book published in 1979 titled *A Master of Line* about E.H. Shepard written by Bevis Hillier, the art historian who was named after the Jefferies' book. He talked about how he had grown up with the *Bevis* illustrations and "loved them". Mr Hillier writes in his book:

"Often one finds that the things one admired as a child look trumpery to the adult; but a more tutored eye has only given me a deeper appreciation of Shepard's mastery. My favourite drawing always was, and still is, the one on page 33, '*The willow was obstinate*'. If I try to analyse its appeal (which seems as offensively clinical as analysing why one likes one's family) I first observe how well it represents the passage it illustrates;



'The raft came to another bend, and Bevis with his pole guided it round, and then, looking up, stamped his foot with vexation, for there was an ancient, hollow willow right in front, so bowed down that its head obstructed the fair way of the stream. He had quite hoped to get down to the Peninsula ... But the willow was obstinate'.

"Next consider the power of the composition. The main line of Bevis's body, which continued in a leaning tree faintly suggested at the top of the drawing, forms a diametric cross with the willow hole. You can sense the push of his left arm against the tree – just as you can feel the weight of

the mast against his shoulder in *'The mast fitted'*, a later illustration.

"Only a few artists have been able to petrify movement so as to convey a still continuing force..." Mr Hillier goes on to give other examples of Shepard's brilliance pointing to "a fastidious clarity of line. A Vermeer-like consciousness of light direction. And a genius for pointing up a telling detail – for example the garden sieve hanging on the wall in the second *Bevis* illustration, its sides splitting and springing apart, and, in the same drawing, the mess of curly wood-shavings under the workbench vice."

On sending me the Bevis Hillier extract, Stan Hickerton wrote:

"Anyone possessing the Shepard edition of *Bevis* owns an art collection as well as a treat to read!". I couldn't agree more and whilst I was



BEVIS PUZZLING OVER . . . THE PAPER ON WHICH HE HAD SKETCHED HIS MODEL



Green velveteen and a lace collar
at the age of seven

never a great Winnie the Pooh

fan as a very young child, my father used to read me two other A.A. Milne favourites illustrated by Shepard: *Now We are Six* and *When we were Very Young* and when we were out walking together, we would recite passages that I still know by heart.

Shepard was born on 10 December 1879 (31 years after Jefferies), in St John's Wood, London where he spent his early childhood with his parents and his older brother and sister Cyril and Ethel. He was born only a five-minute walk from the birthplace of A.A. Milne, but it would be many years before their first meeting when their names would be linked for all time to *Winnie the Pooh*. In his autobiography *Drawn from Memory*, Shepard describes his childhood years that were most happy. They were scarred at the age of ten by the

death of his beloved mother after an illness. He wrote in *Drawn from Memory*: "We tried to put a brave face on it for father's sake, and I remember telling my brother that I would not cry any more because Mother would not have liked it. It was years before the cloud seemed to lift and the natural buoyancy and happiness of youth revive itself in me". Shepard himself lived a very long life and died in his 97th year in 1976 - the fiftieth anniversary year of Winnie-the-Pooh.

Shepard's father was an architect, and his mother was the daughter of a watercolourist, William Lee R. A. Shepard followed in his footsteps by drawing as soon as he was able to hold a pencil. Here are some of his remarkable early drawings that demonstrate his ability to capture movement so well:

His aunts drawn when he was 8 and a battle scene and fire engine drawn at 7 years of age.



'By far the most energetic'

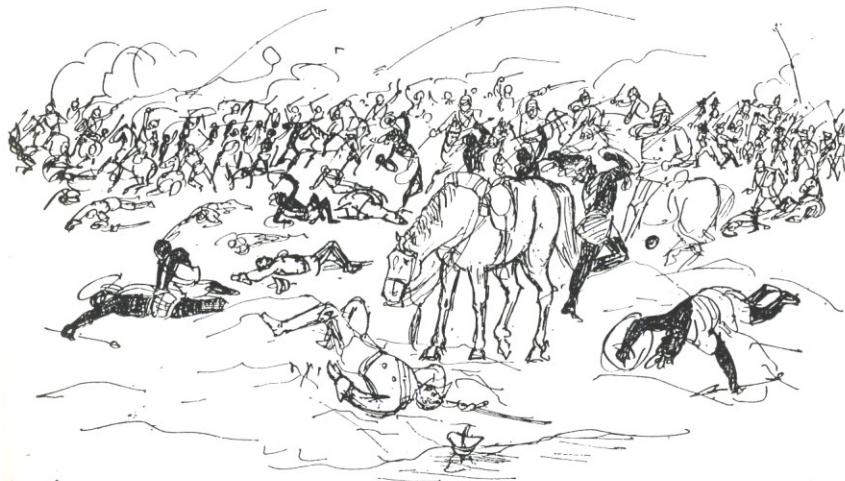


'Stout and short of breath'



'My godmother who always felt the cold'

THE AUNTS
I drew them from life in 1888



'Mostly concerned with battle scenes'

Drawn by me in 1887



My impression of the fire, drawn at the age of seven

On his mother's death, the family moved from St. John's Wood to Hammersmith. He attended nearby St. Paul's School where, contrary to the school's reputed philistinism, he was "forced" to draw and paint. It is quite likely that he knew Edward Thomas (born 3 March 1878) who also attended this school – Edward was nearly 2 years older. Shepard was a cheerful boy, fond of practical jokes and, in the current slang of the day, was described as a "giddy kipper." Kipper was a nickname which clung to him all his life. From St. Paul's, he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy Schools, where he met Florence Chaplin, his first wife, whom he married in 1903. His first picture was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1901 and in 1907 Shepard had his first piece of work accepted by *Punch*.

In 1915 he was commissioned by the Royal Artillery and served at the Battles of the Somme, Arras and the 3rd Ypres. Edward Thomas lost his life in battle at Arras in 1917 – their paths might have crossed again. Paul Nash (1889-1946), another pupil from St Paul's School, ten years younger than Shepard, also served in WWI. Nash is remembered for his war paintings and those of the English Downs that also inspired Jefferies writing. In WWI Shepard rose to the rank of Major and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery in the field. During the war years, he sent jokes about the battles to *Punch*.

In 1921, Sir Owen Seaman, editor of *Punch*, formally invited Shepard to join the *Punch* Editorial "table", which meant an appointment to the regular staff. Shepard succeeded Leonard Raven Hill as second cartoonist in 1935 and then became first cartoonist after Sir Bernard Partridge's retirement in 1945. He met E.V. Lucas, who would later introduce him to Alan Milne.

According to his granddaughter, novelist Penelope Fitzgerald, Shepard was ill-suited to being a political cartoonist. "He neither found it easy to get a likeness

nor could he manage the sheer indignation which gives political satire its weight," she said. However, RCG Price, in his history of *Punch*, believed that with Shepard's arrival "the rest of *Punch* began to look static". Shepard's political cartoons are often full of literary allusions - with visual references to Sir John Tenniel's illustrations for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and for novels by Charles Dickens. His love of animals led him to include them as part of his composition wherever possible in his cartoons. His drawings of 'Pan', the spaniel in *Bevis* are stunning and alive. He excelled at drawing horses, cats, dogs and children but without sentimentality. (Show pictures of children at table with cat and the milkmaid with cat.) Shepard recounts an incident when the family went to stay on a farm in Kent when he was seven. He made friends with a one-footed black hen that he took to bed with him until his mother found out (show illustrations x2).

From the 1930s and through to the gruelling wartime years of the 1940s, Shepard's humour remained gentle and uplifting. According to cartoonist John Jensen: "Shepard moved from strength to strength, increasingly able to impose his quiet humour on otherwise grim and humourless topics."

When author A.A. Milne asked E.V. Lucas whom he would recommend to illustrate some children's verse, Lucas named Shepard. But Milne was reluctant to use Shepard, believing he did not have the style of draughtsmanship he wanted. In the early days before the First World War, Milne had described Shepard as "perfectly hopeless" as an artist, but the years between had fortunately made him realise the exceptional brilliance of Shepard's line drawings and to show his delight and pleasure he inscribed Shepard's own copy of *Winnie-the-Pooh* with this verse:

"When I am gone
Let Shepard decorate my tomb
and put (if there is room)
Two pictures on the stone:
Piglet from page a hundred and eleven,
And Pooh and Piglet walking (157) . . .
And Peter, thinking they that are my own,
Will welcome me to heaven."

Shepard's wife, Florence died in 1927 and in 1944 he married Norah Carrol. He contributed a weekly drawing to *Punch* until 1949 and thereafter a monthly illustration. He closed his London studio in 1955 and retired to Lodsworth in Sussex where he continued working into old age.

Shepard was commissioned by Jonathan Cape to illustrate an edition of *Bevis* in 1932. This edition is introduced by E.V. Lucas who, no doubt, recommended Shepard for the task. Shepard visited Coate earlier that year and drew at Coate Water. In an unpublished manuscript written by Shepard he wrote: "Another book for boys that I enjoyed illustrating is Richard Jefferies *Bevis*. This story of boyhood gives a vivid description of the adventures of Bevis

and his brother Mark in Queen Victoria's reign when Swindon was a county town and Coate Farm, where the boys lived, was surrounded by meadows with Coate Water, the big lake, on the far side. The lake was the boys unexplored sea. They mapped it, built and rigged their boats, made bows and arrows and even made a gun while they hunted with their spaniel. I believe the book had never been illustrated till Jonathan Cape commissioned me to do so in 1932. I went to Swindon early in the year and found farm and lake much the same as it must have been when Bevis lived there — the lake was weedy and uncared for, the council oak was still standing and there were many features that could be identified. Now Swindon has spread almost as far as the farm and the lake is an ornamental water for the townsfolk".

Shepard's notes and diaries are held at the University of Surrey. Their archivist was kind enough to send me records of material they hold where Shepard mentions *Bevis*. The records are scant. The first mention of *Bevis* is dated 4th January 1932 and on 18th February Shepard records that he came "to Swindon and drew at Coate Water". He mentions working on the drawings until 19th August finishing with the map of the *New Sea* and the title page drawing.

Bevis was also a great favourite of Christopher Robin Milne. AA Milne's son carried a pocket edition of Jefferies' works with him throughout his army service in World War II and chose *Bevis* as the book he would take as a castaway on 'Desert Island Discs'.

Shepard's illustrations are also best remembered in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind In The Willows*, *Dream Days* and *The Golden Age*.

I'll finish with another extract from the Bevis Hillier book. He asks "What, finally, is Shepard's place in the history of English illustration? I see him as the end of a tradition, not the beginning of a new one. He is the last of the great Victorian 'black and white' men". Hillier mentions H.M. Brock who was also a *Punch* illustrator who also named a son 'Bevis.' Hillier believed that Shepard had an unsentimental understanding of children whereby the artist is able to put himself in the child's skin. Hillier writes: "Richard Jefferies had the same gift, which is one reason why Shepard was so ideal an interpreter of *Bevis*".