

The History of Smallfilms in Comics

Overview

Throughout the history of television, the desire to reproduce the excitement of a TV show for a young audience in a weekly comic strip, either within an adult publication such as newspapers and magazines, or within a comic specifically aimed at children, has been an obvious way to cash in on a programme's popularity.

Many were badly drawn, not written by the original creators and, in some cases, so far from the originals as to be almost unrecognisable. I remember reading a Dr Who strip and just being perplexed by who these people were that were apparently the Doctor's friends/relatives. They certainly had nothing to do with the TV series I knew and loved.

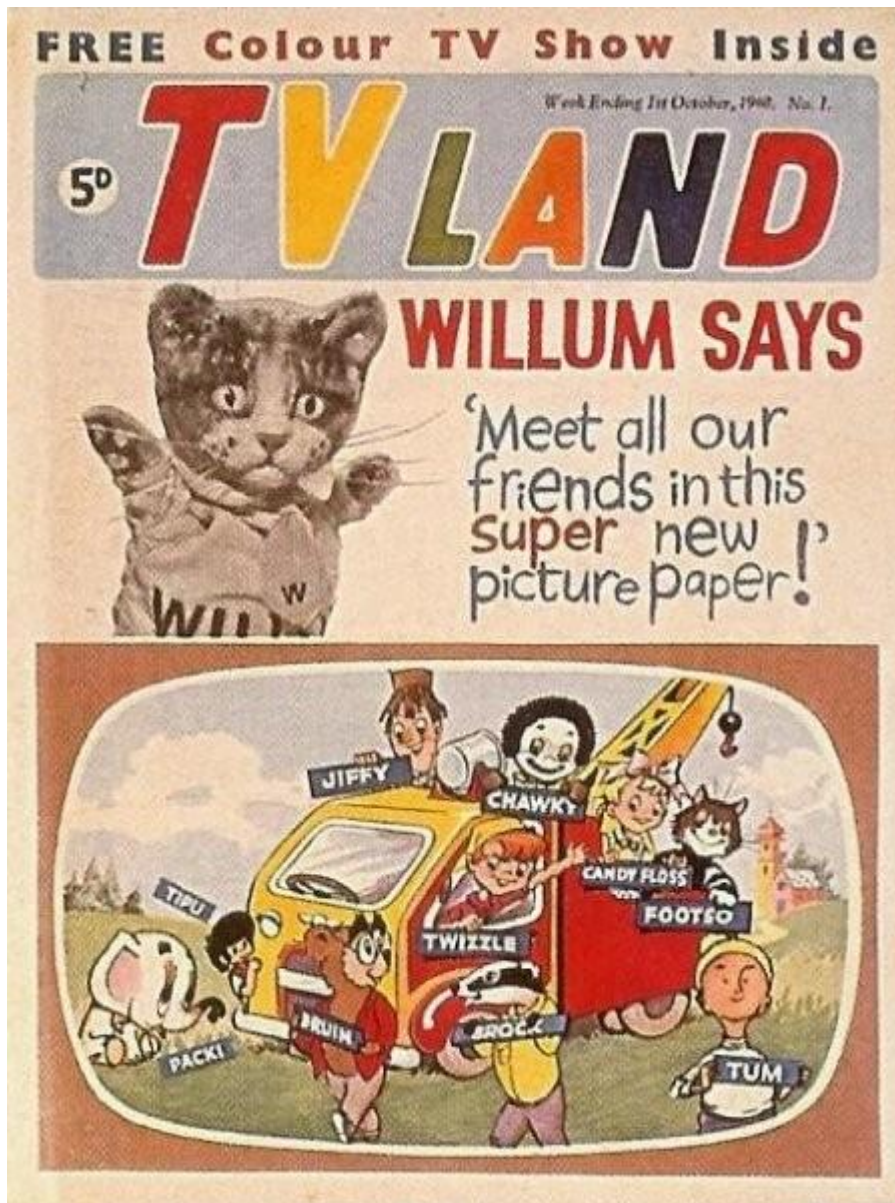
Smallfilms was different, every strip works within the canon of the show, every illustration is perfect even if not drawn by Peter himself and the stories were always beautifully written. In fact, as you will see, some were instrumental in inspiring future TV and book projects that we came to know and love.

So, I have tried to set down here as comprehensive a history of the representation of Smallfilms shows in their many comic strip forms as possible.

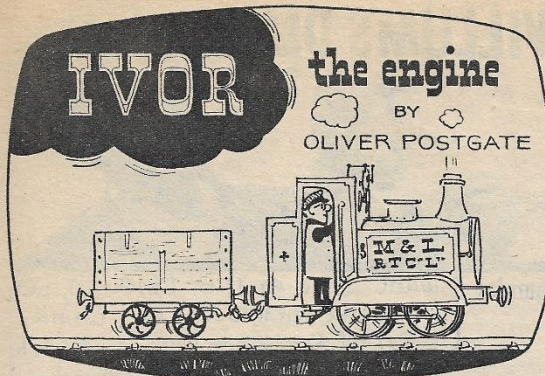
Hopefully some of the titles and pictures will stir up some long forgotten childhood memories and you can re-live those simpler times of reading about your favourite TV shows in your favourite comic.

Early Days

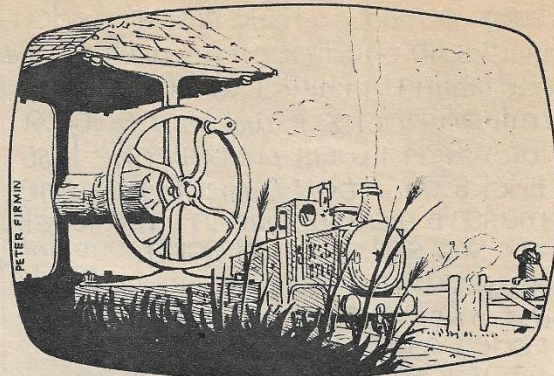
TV Land hit the newsagents in October 1960.



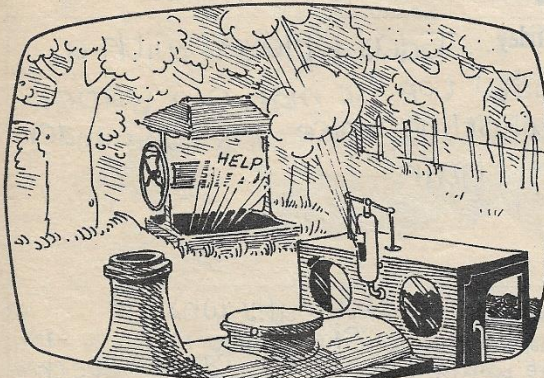
And, as well as the characters featured on the front cover, on pages 14 and 15 was a 12 picture story of Ivor the Engine written by Oliver Postgate and illustrated by Peter Firmin.



1 It was a bright, cold morning, and Jones the Steam and Ivor the Engine were up early to take a load of corn from Pugh's farm to Beynon's mill in Grumbly. Jones stopped Ivor by the old well at the end of the wood.



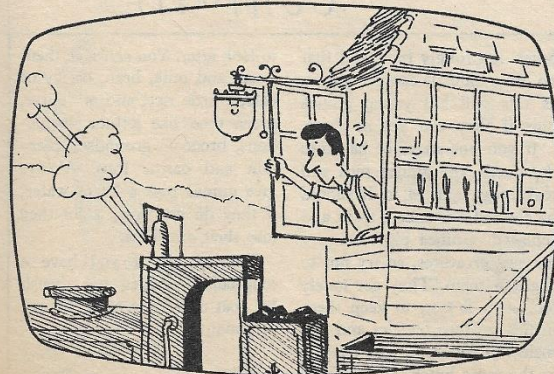
2 "Shan't be long, Ivor," he said, and went off towards Pugh's farm. Ivor stood there listening to the birds singing when suddenly he heard a cry "Help!" "Sounds as if it's coming from the well," thought Ivor.



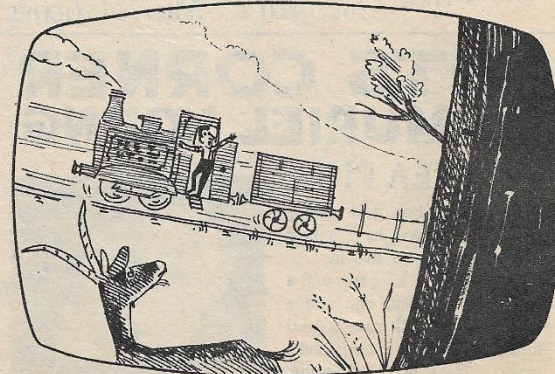
3 And he loosened his brakes a little and rolled down to the well. "Help!" cried the voice. "PEEP!" Ivor blew his whistle for Jones, but Jones couldn't hear him. "Oh dear, I must do something at once," thought Ivor.



4 He shook his regulator open a notch, let off his brakes, and with a rush of steam he was off up the valley all by himself. "Peep!" over the points, past the signal set to stop and down the line to the signal box.



5 "PEEP!" went Ivor's whistle. "Noisy you are this morning, Ivor," said Owen the Signal. "PEEWEEPEEP." "Morning Jones," he said. "Why! Jones isn't there." Owen looked into Ivor's cab. "Very mysterious," he said.

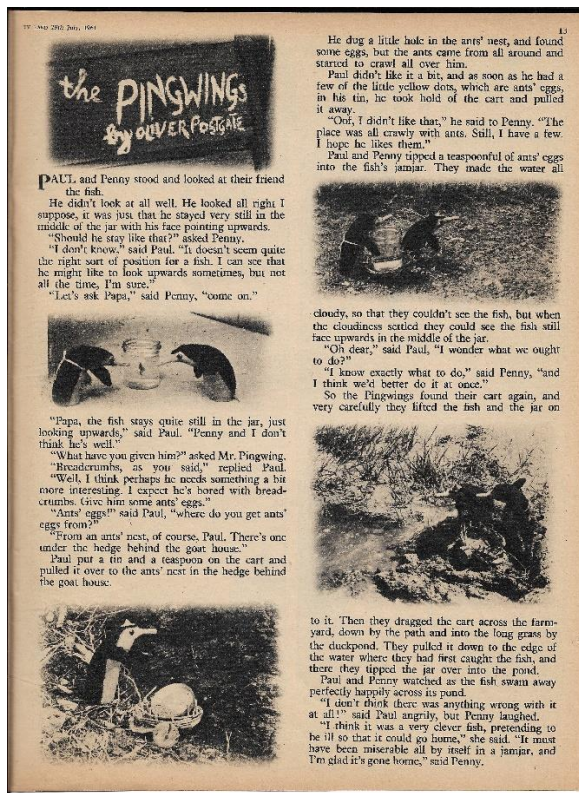


6 Owen set foot in the cab, and "PEEP" Ivor was off like a rocket with Owen hanging on for dear life. "Hi! What are you doing, Ivor? The express is due in ten minutes!" But Ivor rushed on taking no notice.

These stories carried on where the first 6-part series ended in 1959 and were to provide inspiration for the second 13-part series which aired in 1962 as Oliver says in his autobiography Seeing Things – “the ITV company that had put down its marker for another 13 Ivor the Engine films was still waiting. My own feeling had been that the story of Ivor the Engine had finally ended when he sang in the choir, but this had turned out to be untrue because, in order to write the weekly stories for TV LAND, I had had to take my imagination to the corner of Wales where Ivor worked.”

Ivor continued intermittently until the end of TV Land in October 1962 and was joined in 1961 by The Pingwings. Uniquely amongst Smallfilms comic strips these started as photo stories before being illustrated by T. Watts.

Both Pingwings and Ivor featured heavily in the TV Land/TV Playland annuals from 1962-1967 along with several unique Noggin the Nog stories.



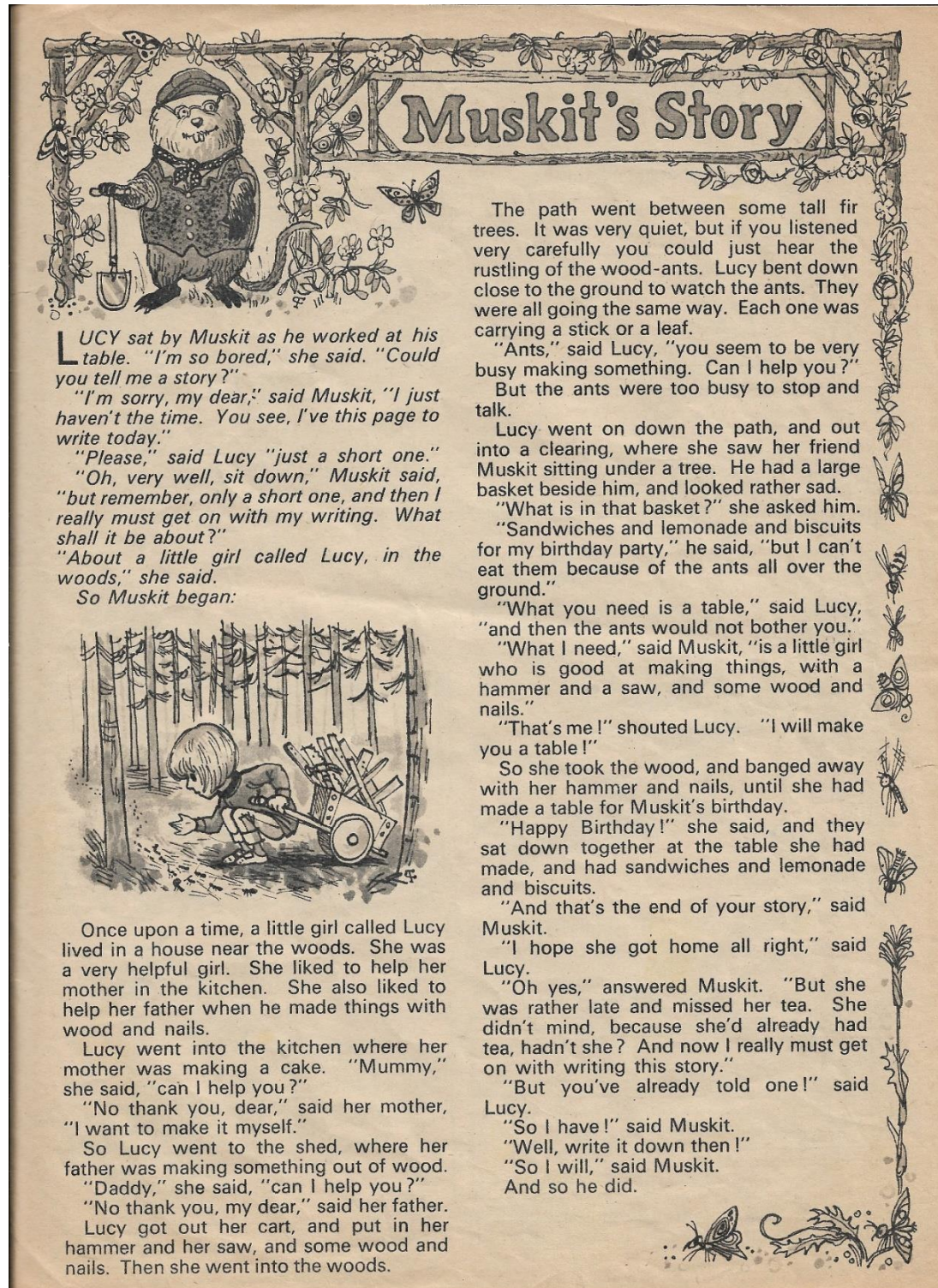
Pippin

The 24th Sep 1966 saw the launch of a “new coloured picture weekly for the very young viewer” and there, proudly on the front and back covers, was The Pogles.




The stories were written by Oliver and Stephen Sylvester, who provided the voices of Tog and The Plant; but never illustrated by Peter, that job was done very beautifully by Bill Mevin and Neville Main.

Although, not strictly speaking Smallfilms, Pippin comic also contained another Postgate/Firmin creation. Based on a TV show from 1963/4 called Muskit and Dido, 'Muskit's Story' appeared in Pippin from issue 1 until March 1968 and was written and illustrated by various people including Oliver and Peter.



Muskit's Story



LUCY sat by Muskit as he worked at his table. "I'm so bored," she said. "Could you tell me a story?"


"I'm sorry, my dear," said Muskit, "I just haven't the time. You see, I've this page to write today."

"Please," said Lucy "just a short one."

"Oh, very well, sit down," Muskit said, "but remember, only a short one, and then I really must get on with my writing. What shall it be about?"

"About a little girl called Lucy, in the woods," she said.

So Muskit began:



Once upon a time, a little girl called Lucy lived in a house near the woods. She was a very helpful girl. She liked to help her mother in the kitchen. She also liked to help her father when he made things with wood and nails.

Lucy went into the kitchen where her mother was making a cake. "Mummy," she said, "can I help you?"

"No thank you, dear," said her mother, "I want to make it myself."

So Lucy went to the shed, where her father was making something out of wood. "Daddy," she said, "can I help you?"

"No thank you, my dear," said her father.

Lucy got out her cart, and put in her hammer and her saw, and some wood and nails. Then she went into the woods.

The path went between some tall fir trees. It was very quiet, but if you listened very carefully you could just hear the rustling of the wood-ants. Lucy bent down close to the ground to watch the ants. They were all going the same way. Each one was carrying a stick or a leaf.

"Ants," said Lucy, "you seem to be very busy making something. Can I help you?"

But the ants were too busy to stop and talk.

Lucy went on down the path, and out into a clearing, where she saw her friend Muskit sitting under a tree. He had a large basket beside him, and looked rather sad.

"What is in that basket?" she asked him.

"Sandwiches and lemonade and biscuits for my birthday party," he said, "but I can't eat them because of the ants all over the ground."

"What you need is a table," said Lucy, "and then the ants would not bother you."

"What I need," said Muskit, "is a little girl who is good at making things, with a hammer and a saw, and some wood and nails."

"That's me!" shouted Lucy. "I will make you a table!"

So she took the wood, and banged away with her hammer and nails, until she had made a table for Muskit's birthday.

"Happy Birthday!" she said, and they sat down together at the table she had made, and had sandwiches and lemonade and biscuits.

"And that's the end of your story," said Muskit.

"I hope she got home all right," said Lucy.

"Oh yes," answered Muskit. "But she was rather late and missed her tea. She didn't mind, because she'd already had tea, hadn't she? And now I really must get on with writing this story."

"But you've already told one!" said Lucy.

"So I have!" said Muskit.

"Well, write it down then!"

"So I will," said Muskit.

And so he did.

The Pogles continued in Pippin until June 1974 (it lost its spot on the cover in March 1970), when it was replaced by Bagpuss.



Bagpuss was written by Oliver and illustrated, in colour, by Peter. It continued in Pippin and after it merged with Playland, though later strips were in black and white, until the end of 1977.

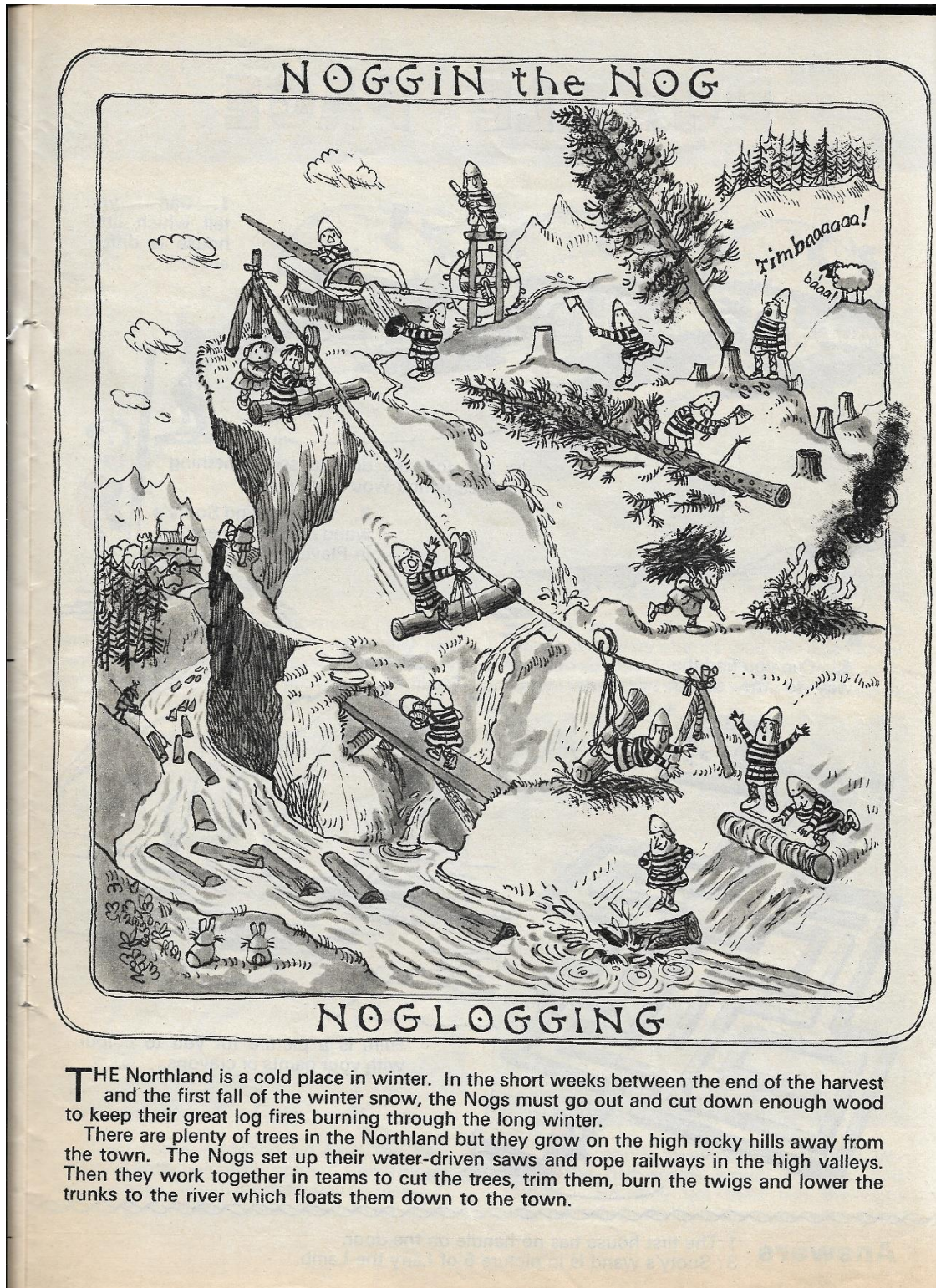
Playland

Launched by Polystyle as the sister comic to Pippin in January 1968, Playland carried more Ivor strips until August 1968 when his place was taken by one of the most unusual and brilliant Smallfilms contributions.

Noggin the Nog had already appeared as full length illustrated stories, all written and drawn by Postgate/Firmin, in several annuals, but never in a comic.

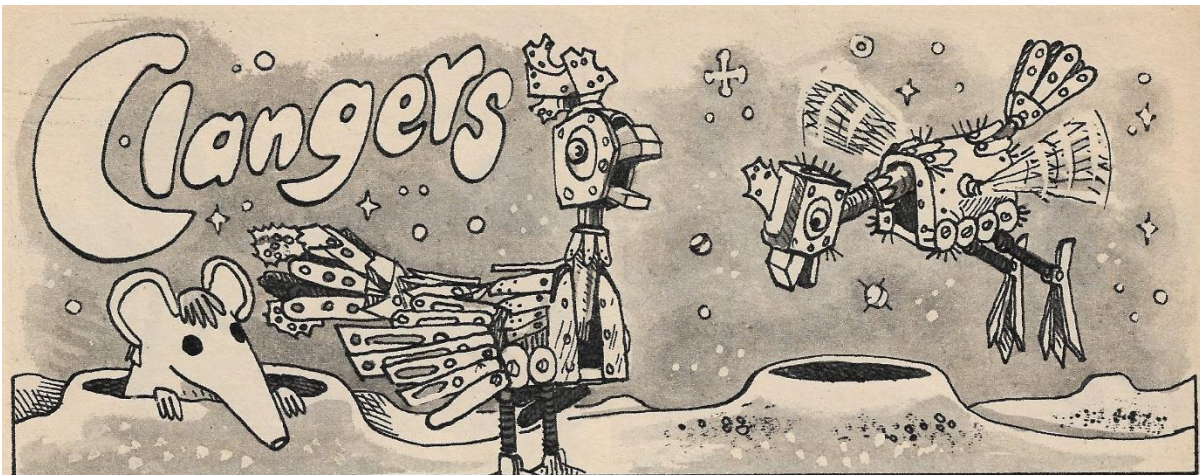


But in August 1968 a completely different style of comic strip appeared in Playland comic



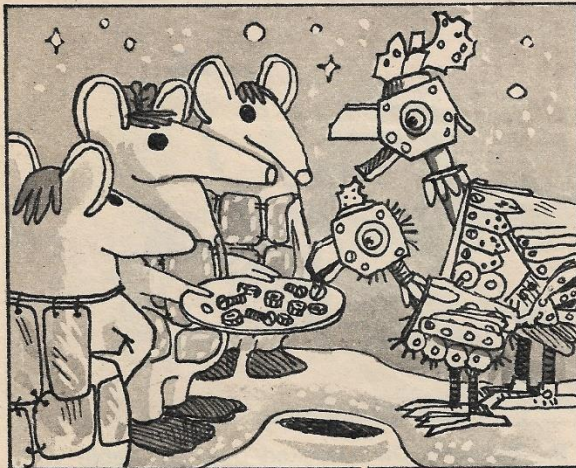
and went on to form the basis of one of the best books Oliver and Peter ever produced – Nogmania.

Noggin ran for 15 editions and, after a short gap was replaced by The Clangers.



1. The Iron Chicken was on the Clangers' planet, teaching her iron chick to fly.

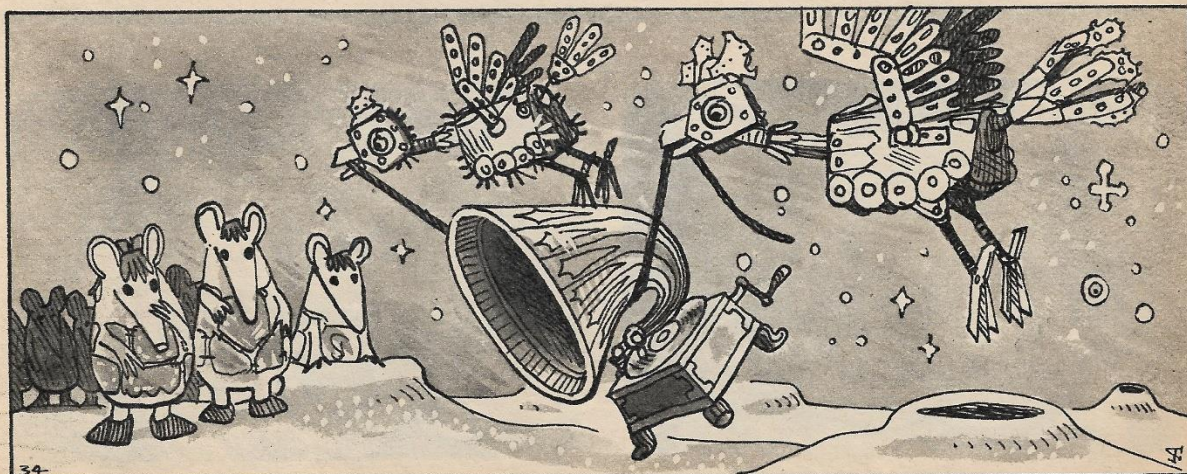
2. The chick flew very well. The Iron Chicken watched her and felt very proud.



3. "She will soon be as good an old-iron collector as I am," she announced happily.



4. "We will go and collect a present for you, dear Clangers, for being kind to us!"



5. She flew away with her chick but they soon came back towing a very large thing.

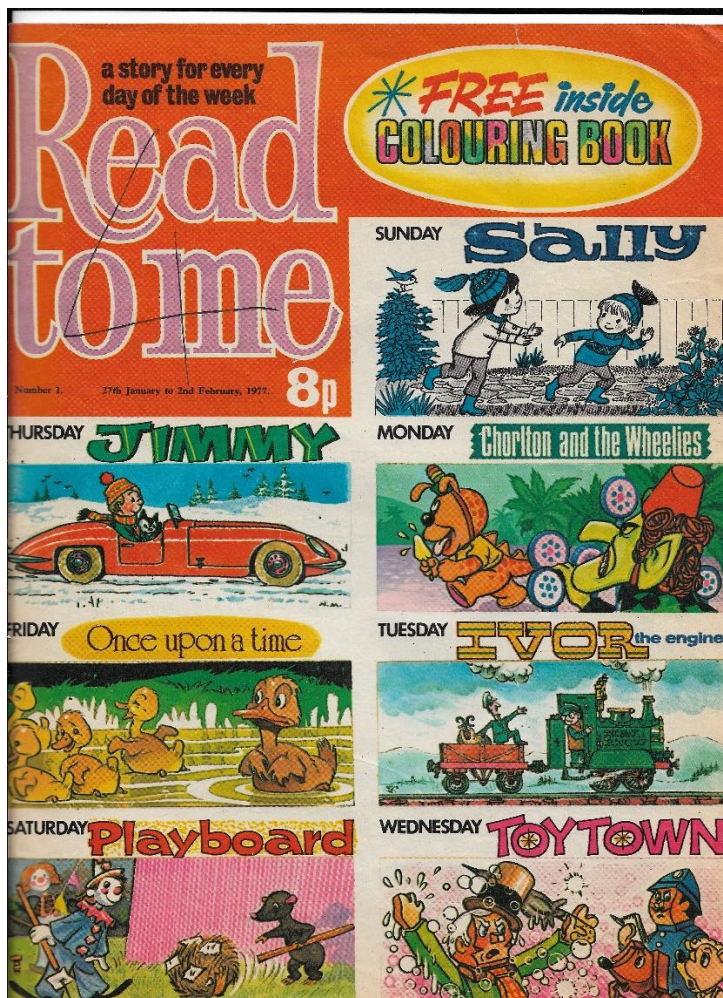
6. It was a very strange-looking object. The Clangers wondered what it could be.

Another example of the perfect combination of Oliver's storytelling and Peter's illustrations, the Clangers graced the pages of Playland comic until 1973.

Pippin in Playland

In July 1975 Pippin and Playland combined. Bagpuss was still in colour but reduced to one page. Later it would continue in black and white until 1978 when we saw the welcome return of Ivor the Engine, although this time not always illustrated by Peter, apparently his daughter Charlotte helped out as well.

However, Ivor had not been idle during this time. A new comic called Read to Me was launched in January 1977 and Ivor was the story for every Tuesday.



Read to Me only lasted 7 months when it merged with Pippin in Playland.

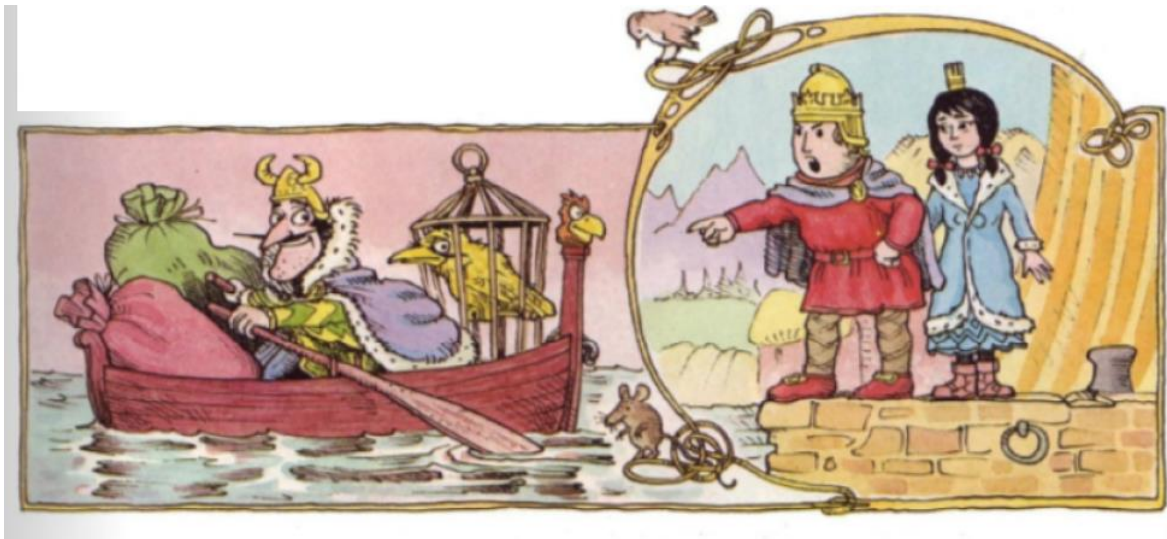
In November 1980 Ivor made the cover and stayed there for 2 years continuing inside until the comic's eventual demise in 1986 when it was taken over by Buttons.



And that was the end of Smallfilms in mainstream comics. A run of over 20 years with almost every creation represented.

But Smallfilms had one last hurrah.

In 1985 Marshall Cavendish followed up their successful set of magazines/cassette tapes of people telling children's stories with another set called Storyteller 2. In this run three Noggin the Nog stories were included – The Birds, Noggin Comes Back and Noggin and the Money. All beautifully illustrated in full colour by Peter and read by Oliver.



All three stories can be found on YouTube.

Modern Times

Fast forward 30 years and The Clangers makes a comeback. This time under the supervision of Daniel Postgate and Peter Firmin, and guess what? They get their own magazine.

