

How Old Bill won the Great War

By PETER JOHNSON

(CONTINUED)

THE closing lines of one of Bairnsfather's books reads: "The war was over! Old Bill would go home to Maggie." But obscure retirement with Maggie was not to be the old warrior's lot. Bairnsfather, on a crest of popularity, wrote another play, *Old Bill MP*. He toured Europe and America lecturing and appearing in revues. He drew for many publications, including *Life*. He wrote film scripts and two versions of *The Better 'Ole* were made into films, one of them directed by Darryl Zanuck.

In 1938 Old Bill, who had not been above selling himself in advertising civvy tobacco and motor cars, was used in a War Office publicity campaign as the clouds loomed again in Europe... "Join the Territorial Army... and Old Bill ought to know." The *Daily Express* sent Bairnsfather to Germany to see what Old Bill thought of the Nazis. He told the world in no uncertain terms.

DESPITE the prolific output of Bairnsfather, who died in 1959, his original sketches from the First World War are rare and seldom appear on the market. Collectors' ground lies in the contemporary sepia-tinted postcards, bound editions of *Fragments* and, above all, in Bairnsfather-ware, produced at Grimwade's Stoke-on-Trent potteries during the World War I. Former sales director Fred Seabridge recalls that plates, mugs, jugs and bowls were produced in hundreds of thousands. A plate sold for 1s. 3d. "It's as rare in the Potteries today as anywhere else," he says. "I think that most of it was thrown out in the Twenties and Thirties when the Great War was very much out of fashion."

Some of this ware - each piece with a well-known Old Bill cartoon printed under glaze - bears the inscription on the back: "Made by the girls of Staffordshire during the winter of 1917-18 when the 'Boys' were in the trenches fighting for liberty and civilisation." I found for my own collection a trefoil piece with handle, whose function was obscure unless it could be for cocktail tit-bits. Then one of the cartoons it bore gave the clue. It showed a soldier having his hair cut in the trenches. There was the answer - it was a barber's lather dish, and a good buy at a fiver.

An Old Bill enthusiast of some dedication is Major Nicholas Padwick, aged 76, who served with the Hampshires in the 1914-18 war. He is the senior officer of the Memorable Order of Tin Hats and has the splendid title of Senior Old Bill of England. This group of ex-servicemen who have been in wars meet once a month at the Victory Club in London to chat over old times and conduct the business of the Order. Branches, according to size, are called shell-holes or dugouts and the 500 members eagerly collect Bairnsfather mementoes. Tin-hatted, pipe-smoking, the cartoon Old Bill grins smugly from behind his unruly moustache on the cover of their book of constitution.

And well may he grin. It is 60 years this August since the First World War broke out. Yet Old Bill soldiers on. For him the last post will never sound as long as there is an extra ration of bully beef to be scrounged, a tin of plum and apple jam to grouse about or a muddy shell hole to be turned into a home-from-home with a fire going under the tin bath and a "requisitioned" rooster in the pot. Old soldiers never die. If they are as cunning as Old Bill, they become collectors' items. □

Bound copies of Bairnsfather's cartoons were published by "The Bystander" as "Fragments from France", now eagerly sought by collectors. The seventh edition's cover cartoon is captioned, "How Old Bill escaped being shot in August 1914". The cunning old warrior is shown in pink striped dazzle-camouflage, used during the 1914-18 war on ships. The eighth edition has the "better 'ole" joke as its cover picture.

