

LOOK-IN: COLIN SHELBOURN INTERVIEW

Art Editor 1971-75
Editor 1975-92

5 February 2004

Q: What were you doing prior to joining Look-In in 1971? Were you in comics (like all the ex-TV21 people such as Alan Fennell, Angus Allan etc) or more general graphic design?

C: I was in general graphic design. My degree was in graphic design and the very first job I ever had was as the most junior designer on TV Times. This was out of college - I went to Brighton Art School - and I was there for about a year or so and then left TV Times to go and for work for Marshall Cavendish in around 1970. They were the big new name in partworks and partworks themselves were quite new then. As it turned out I worked there for about a year - while I was there I was called back as a freelancer to do some work with some guys from TV Times who were putting together a dummy of a children's magazine. To cut a long story short I came back from Marshall Cavendish to be the first Art Editor of this kid's magazine, which is of course what turned out to be Look-In. So it was through that original TV Times connection that I got involved.

Q: Angus credits Alan Fennell with creating the dummy of this magazine - was it Alan who had come to TV Times or the other way round?

C: I don't know the history immediately before I came on board. My involvement was at the TV Times end of things. What I do remember is that there were two dummies knocking around. One was Alan's, which was really very like a kind of TV21 sort of comic with strips based on TV things and some feature material - it was really a Thunderbirds-y type thing. Whereas the TV Times one that they called me in to work on as designer - I wasn't Art Editor or anything at this early stage - was much more of a magazine and was much more designed and had luscious photos of Roger Moore and people like that and showed very much its TV Times background. What happened was the two sides came together - what I remember is that we did another dummy that brought the two together and we must have shown that to kids I think, to test reaction. That 'come together' dummy had bits of Alan's and bits of TV Times - it was less comic-y than Alan's and more magazine-y than Alan's but more comic-y than TV Times' earlier dummy.

Q: What about the famous logo that ran from issue 1, 1971 until 1981 - was that on the dummy? Would that be your design?

C: Yes, that was mine. Long before Macs, when everything was hand drawn it was based on Gill Extra Bold and that was a typeface we used elsewhere in the comic as headers and so on.

Q: So who worked on Look-In in its early days?

C: I was Art Editor. It was weekly, it was quite a churn. In the early stages, before first publication, it was me working on my own - as soon as we went live then it was me and an assistant in the art dept. On the editorial side it would be Alan as Editor, a guy called Geoff Cowan as assistant editor and there might have been another editorial person, I can't remember. A team of five then really.

Q: Angus pointed out that Geoff wrote a few strips at this time too, including Crowther in Trouble and then later the likes of The Benny Hill Page and Cannon and Ball. Cowan was freelancing on occasional Doctor Who strips for Countdown, TVAction and TVComic between 1971-4 so that would be pretty much at the same time as he was sub-editing at Look-In!

Q: Did you help discover and choose the strip artists at the outset?

C: If you think about how I came into it, it was all Alan at the start, because I didn't know any comic artists. It was Alan and Geoff and also Angus. It was 'Alan's team' who knew the artists and so prompted by them I got in touch with them and saw their samples. Alan was editor, so he had the final say but he introduced me to all these artists

and their work. As the years went by newer artists would come to the office and so it would often be me and not so much Alan that would see those artists. The people that became famous through Look-In like Arthur Ranson, Martin Asbury and Harry North came through the door to me.

Q: The rest had all come through the TV21/Countdown route really hadn't they - Mike Noble, Brian Lewis ...

C: The ones that were 'missing', that didn't come through from TV21, like Frank Bellamy - he did one-offs for us but never anything continuous - Ron Embleton, Gerry Haylock, Harry Lindfield, Frank Langford they were already very famous after TV21 and were starting to do film and advertising storyboard work. [Martin Asbury later took this route too and by the mid-80s was working on the Superman movies - Al]. But yes, Mike Noble for example, he stayed with us - a wonderful, wonderful artist.

Q: When the comic started it was 'TV Times-y' photographic covers - why the change to artwork covers by around no.40 of the first year?

C: Practicality, really. The early covers could be quite static ... not all of them, some were actors in costume striking a pose in a scene and those were sort of quite exciting to look at. More often the photographic covers would be fairly still - they were just simply a famous face, which if you think about it was what a TV Times cover was. Now we were quite pleased with these because we thought it gave a children's magazine a more adult and sophisticated feel but what actually happened was that we weren't really appealing to kids because they were sort of boring really. Therefore the move was to covers that were more active and exciting - for as long as we could achieve those photographically that's great, but actually it was impossible to find that kind of imagery week-in-week out photographically. So we set about finding illustrators who could do action-type pictures which was going back more to Alan and Geoff's comic heritage - it was almost as if the cover picture was a single frame from the comic strip.

Q: One early cover shot, fairly atypically, was a photo of a lizard (no.9) which looked like a Sunday Times supplement!

C: It's funny how your mind slips back thirty years or whatever it is - but that lizard one was a cause celebre because there was some real championing of the lizard for the cover. A faction that said this is a wonderful cover - isn't it great that a children's magazine can have a picture of a lizard on it? And there was another faction saying what the hell are you playing at, that's ludicrous, why would you put a lizard on the cover? I think it must have sold poorly or there was feedback from somewhere or other that really hit home that no way should there be a lizard on the cover again!

Q: So the die was cast for illustrated covers.

C: The irony of the artwork covers is that they weren't Arnaldo Putzu's straight away but he's the one people associate with them. We went through a short period with people like Angus McBride doing them. I realised that if we were going to have these action covers we'd need a roster of artists who were really good at doing action images from TV stills so the thought process led me to someone who would do film posters. So on one hand we had illustrators from comic strip like Angus and then were on the lookout for someone working in film posters. So I saw Arnaldo Putzu's work and thought how fantastic it would be if he could work for us and eventually we got in touch with him. He worked in an agency studio doing movie posters. He was their in-house artist, in an office in Margaret Street up behind Oxford Circus so actually quite physically close to Look-In's offices at the time on Tottenham Court Road.

He did a couple of sample goes at it and it quickly became obvious that he was fantastic. It must have been quite a treadmill for him - he did one a week. He was always quite cagey about how long it took because I guess he didn't want me to realise how quick it was. Even so I would think they took a couple of days - they'd be really hard to do in a single day.

Q: Look-In always seemed to me very expensive - there are cheaper ways of generating pages than commissioning original artwork page

after page, as the comic industry later realised. Was it very expensive to get people like Putzu working weekly?

C: If you think about what an original photo shoot costs now for something like an FHM or a Vogue then you could still get a lot of equivalent Arnaldo covers for that price today. But in terms of the sort of money another children's magazine/comic would have paid we were way beyond that. But interestingly way under Arnaldo's going rate as maybe the top movie poster artist in the country but I think he saw it as steady work, 50 times a year which would be a nice little earner thank you. It added up to quite a decent whack. So both he and we did quite well out of it. I got into quite a groove with him, based around the picture references and I would do a little scribble of what I wanted. So I would round up the picture reference for him from the TV Times picture library and pages torn from magazines, so he would get a file of picture reference from me. It was amazing - I could roughly picture what he would do with these references I was giving him but nearly always they would come back way better and more ... magic than I'd imagined. Wonderful stuff.

Q: Look-In reached an early turning point with no.39 1972. The middle pages now had a colour poster (in this first case glam rocker Marc Bolan) different paper and a more pronounced pop edge, pretty much relaunching the mag for the rest of the decade. What was happening there?

C: I don't remember the circumstances around that. Certainly the move to pop came about from just spotting what was happening in the market. Comparing Marc Bolan with the lizard is quite a leap!

On the technical side, the early magazines were printed by gravure the same as TV Times. This is all history now but photogravure used to be a way of running off lots of copies very fast, relatively cheaply and with good colour quality but was highly expensive in setting up the plates, etching them and so on. So it was a technique that was good for TV Times who sold several million copies a week but it soon became obvious that if we didn't need nearly as many copies as them we couldn't take advantage of the low unit price gravure offered you.

The printing process more suited to our print run was Web-Offset which in those days was more expensive per page in colour. TV Times technical department, which was huge in those days, would have found a printer with one of those presses which in those days were fairly new. The way to do it, as a buyer, was as a mix of black and white printing on cheaper paper and lovely colour printing by necessity on the glossier paper. So that's where the combination of papers came about. The placing of colour pages was given by a set pack of possibilities created by the presses.

Having a pop poster centrespread - Colour Centre as it became known years later - was really about making a virtue out of the necessity created by the switch to Web-Offset.

Q: Moving into 1973/4 the pop policy was paying off with the likes of David Cassidy and The Osmonds featuring heavily. The American series King Fu was very popular too - did that series and the kung-fu craze help push Look-In to another level?

C: The Kung Fu TV series was a little violent but a more acceptable way for us to cash-in on the martial arts craze at the time - earlier we had run a Bruce Lee cover and article and we got some flak for that because his movies were X-rated and people wondered why on earth this was in a children's comic. The TV series was astonishingly popular with kids for a time. I remember going to a preview with Alan and possibly Angus. After it finished I said 'That's awful, no kid will like that. It's so slow, nothing happens'. And Alan was like 'What the hell are you talking about? Kids'll love this. It's got martial arts in there'. So he was right and I was wrong. But the series did have these great longeurs where nothing was happening and he was mooching about and then there'd suddenly be some kind of brief, explosive action and what I was spotting was the mooching and Alan was spotting the explosive action.

I can't remember the figures year by year or anything but for most of its life Look-In sold in the 200,000s - 200 and something-thousand a week. There were times when it was over 300,000 and there were

times when it was under 200,000. When I left in 1992, it was selling around 100,000 and I think it lost more from that in the next two years before it closed.

Q: There were some strikes in 1973/4 and issues went out with no numbers or dates on them - do you recall what happened there?

C: There were two aspects at work there. One was the wider printing/publishing world outside of TV Times, the other was a strong journalists' union and occasionally - not very often - they would go on strike. Because Look-In was part of the same chapel as TV Times our writers would be obliged to go along with them (often they were one and the same). But I think most of the times we were forced to miss an issue were down to external circumstances rather than internal.

Q: So you were promoted to editor in 1975 when Alan Fennell left to work on annuals at World Distributors?

C: Yeah, I think January-February? So the issues that would start to show 'me' would be out in the Spring. I think Alan would have put in a good word for me. I'd been playing a bigger and bigger part as the years had gone by and while I don't recall if I was ever officially Deputy Editor, in effect I was. I'm not sure of the exact timescale here but Geoff Cowan left after maybe two or three years - he went to IPC. By virtue of me being there a long time and having taken a hand in its creation I guess I was an obvious candidate, except for the fact my background was in design and not editorial which I guess must have been an issue for the bosses. But to their credit they overlooked that and didn't see it as too much of a problem.

There is some tradition of that - Dennis Hooper [whose first editorships were at Countdown and then TVAction - AI] came from a design background. In magazines more generally there's a smattering of people who have come through that route. Obviously with kids, delivery of the 'stuff' in the first instance is visual, it's a presentation thing, so that was helpful. I don't remember a formal interview but I imagine there may have been some conversation with the Managing Director.

It did just evolve but actually my work as editor never was writing - apart from coverlines - it was in shaping the thing and finding great people to do the writing and illustrating. The thing is about presentation - the way the thing comes at you off the page, which is a mixture of words, pictures, design.

Q: What was great about Look-In was how it seemed to have such a great grasp of what was in vogue or was going to be. Often you had to go on things from, as you say, preview screenings so was it about backing hunches?

C: It was backing hunches, it was about gut feel - mine and that of others on the team. But it was easier then - there were two channels (BBC1 and ITV), and we couldn't touch BBC as we were TV Times. Therefore any reasonably decent series for children or that children would watch that ITVbought would be transmitted by ITV and have a critical mass of viewers. Whether they ended up liking it or not was a different thing but it would be seen by a hefty bunch of folk. We would know in advance that ITV had bought the A-Team or whatever and so the view for us was to decide whether it was any good or not. Usually they were, otherwise they wouldn't have been bought by ITV. Then it was a matter of going about getting the rights.

Q: So with you as editor, the sort of public face of Look-In was Ed 'Stewpot' Stewart, Radio 1 DJ and host of the BBC's Crackerjack in the mid-70s. How did that come about?

C: Well the idea wasn't that we were trying to pretend he was the editor but that he was the editor of the Newsdesk. And he would bring us the news because he was this great TVpresenter with his finger on the pulse of what was going on. We used to write it but he and his agent used to submit some of the more touchy-feely personal stuff. The real news we did although it was often that the items came about through something he tipped us off about if we went to lunch or something. Yes, it was a ghosted column as you get on most newspapers.

Q: ITVfootie commentator Brian Moore was another Look-In face

with his On the Ball page.

I can't remember if I brought him in or if he had come in via Alan but I used to meet up with him maybe once a month just for lunch and he would sometimes have tip offs for us. Sometimes not, so we would have to compile our own fascinating facts about that week's player. I say 'we', the approval or choice of player was made by us in the office but a really good guy called Sheridan Davies used to write and illustrate those pages.

Q: But you had to spot trends outside of just TV?

C: Yes, obviously ITV was the starting point of most of what we did but later we had to keep our eyes out for movies, so obviously Star Wars, Grease ... the mega ones. Also, we had to keep our eyes out for shows that weren't designed for kids but ended up being popular with them. Like Starsky and Hutch.

Q: Kids aspire to those kind of shows even if they can only understand it on limited levels. Not just those more violent action series but risqué sitcoms that Look-In featured like Man About the House or Mind Your Language. They see it as a set of recognisable, repeated rituals.

C: There was familiarity there then. These series ran for a number of years and quite often a lot of weeks per year, so they were almost like soaps today in a funny way. It's maybe stretching a point but it's the same kind of rationale that has kids like EastEnders today. I mean EastEnders is pretty grey and grim and miserable but most of that miserable side does seem to wash over children who watch it and they're getting something else out of it.

We were ruthless about not covering things that went out after 9 o'clock. The Sweeney always went out after 9 o'clock so we wouldn't have done anything very much on that [there's a one-page article and poster in one issue - AI] but while Starsky and Hutch also went out after 9 our way into that was to cover David Soul the pop singer. And of course S&H was BBC so we weren't allowed to touch that series at all really!

Q: Was the Star Awards really useful for feedback?

C: Well there are cheaper and quicker ways of getting feedback but the Star Awards was good for publicity and it got some television coverage [the awards were usually announced on Maggie - AI]. It did throw up some strange ones mind you - Brotherhood of Man once got best pop group! I met Joanna Lumley through it - she won one for The New Avengers. They were great fun - at that time there weren't really any other children's awards. A lot have come along since.

Q: Mentioning The New Avengers, it made the cover of Look-In twice and as you say Joanna won that Star Award - was there ever a plan to run a strip?

C: Sitting here now you'd have thought it would have been an absolute goer. Perhaps it wasn't available? You'd think that would have been on our hit list - I can't think what the circumstances might have been.

[I am quietly cursing Colin for not getting to it and sorting this out back in 1977 but I'll try not to hold it against him! - AI]

Q: Do you recall any other might have been? Angus mentioned The Muppets?

C: Yes, I think that would have made a great strip. I can remember meetings with the licensing people and I think maybe the Henson people maybe had misgivings about what we might do with their property in our own strip. They were very strict guardians of their property.

Another one was CHiPs which we ran for a while but I remember a big problem with that. We either had a problem which meant it delayed the strip or once we started it we had a problem that meant we cut it short but either way we ran fewer than we would have liked.

Q: Punk rock - was that another trend you had difficulty fitting into the Look-In style, like the post-watershed TV series?

C: Yes a little bit. Look-In was always based on chart singles, on what would be on Top of the Pops basically or what was on TV on a Saturday morning so the fact that a record was fantastically popular with non-kiddies didn't cut any ice with us - that wouldn't have made it right to do in Look-In. I can think of some terrible misjudgements about people we featured when we shouldn't but that was often over-enthusiasm from one of us in the office. But I think it was pretty clear the sort of pop we would go for and not go for in the magazine.

With regard to punk, I don't think we ever did anything much on the Sex Pistols but what we did do was The Police, Boomtown Rats. There was enthusiasm from us in the office for Elvis Costello as the kind of 'acceptable face of punk' but I don't think he ever did appeal that much to kids. When he started of course he had a 'look' and those things are important.

ABBA were perfect for us - glamorous looking, over the top dressing - like dolls almost - catchy tunes. Nowadays ABBA are seen for the greats they were but there was a time when ABBA were really, really out of favour and only really liked by kids. By the time of punk and the end of the 70s people were sneering at ABBA but kids loved them for much longer than that, hence their continued coverage in Look-In.

Q: What was your involvement with the ITV companies?

C: We would go to see companies in their offices every six months maybe, hearing the gossip from the guys on TV Times who had advance info and were sworn to secrecy but let us in as were in the fold, also we were reading the trade press like Broadcast. Also, while there 13 separate ITV companies, not all of them were equally weighted in importance to kids. So there was Thames and LWT in London, ATV (then later Central), Granada and Southern down on the coast were big for kids. So really we kept closer contact with six or seven. People from the companies would come into TV Times so we'd go for a drink sometimes. We had close contact with Thames particularly because a lot of the buying of American shows for the network was done through Thames.

Q: Did you go on set visits and locations shoots - Angus Allan remembers seeing the Tomorrow People in studio?

C: Down at Teddington, yes. I'd be there a couple of times a year maybe.

Q: I wondered about your ties with Gerry Anderson and Space:1999 (particularly given the track record of Fennell and co in Anderson shows). Did you visit the 1999 set at Pinewood I wonder?

A: Yes, a few times as I recall, while we were running the Gerry Anderson half-page (compiled and illustrated by David Jefferis).

Q: What about Look-In's involvement with Gerry's Space City exhibition at Blackpool? I was one of the 50 prizewinners in the 1978 design a spaceship competition and somewhere among my mum's photo albums is the letter, signed (well, it's printed anyway!) by yourself! My name's in the winner's list in a 1978 issue.

A: What a memory! I remember visiting the exhibition in Blackpool and having a very nice weekend at the same time. Was it near to Ripley's Believe It Or Not Odditorium, or am I hallucinating in my old age?!

Q: It was on the Golden Mile, just North of Centra; Pier - the Odditorium's now in the Pleasure Beach! Was there any exotic foreign travel on Look-In?

C: The foreign travel I can remember was to Stockholm to see ABBA. This was a trip with Angus. It was known that we were going to do this Story of ABBA strip and we'd signed contracts and paid money to do so, so the promise was that we would meet ABBA out there and Angus would hear all their stories face to face. As it turned out we didn't at all but we did meet Stig Anderson, their manager. I think we were there a couple of nights or something but my memory of this was that Stockholm was ferociously expensive and we quickly ran out of money. Angus bailed me out on his credit card and I had to reimburse

him later on!

Q: Looking back at it, a lot of the ABBAstrip was 'narrated' by Stig so that'll be why.

C: As far as other programmes went, most live action shows that were made for kids would have some sort of presence from Look-In at the time of their shooting. So either I would go, or Angus, or someone else from the office. I remember the series about the train, The Flockton Flyer. They filmed that down near Minehead and I went down to see that on location. That was one of many so I don't know why that one particularly sticks in my mind. Follyfoot's another one I remember - do you know, I think that was the first time I met Angus. Follyfoot was up in Yorkshire - I remember a long train journey with Angus. And that was in the very early days.

Q: The annual endpapers in particular always had photographs of the series being filmed out on location.

C: Those pictures would either be taken for us by the company - we would ask for those to be taken - or they would come from TV Times. It had its own team of staff photographers. Amazing to think of now when everything's freelance but there was a team of five or so in-house. They'd be out round the companies and studios every day with a brief of the kind of pictures that were needed. Amazing to be able to do that.

Q: In Autumn 1979 there was an ITV strike that blacked out the entire channel for about eleven weeks. Was that difficult for you or could you absorb that?

C: Do you know, I'd forgotten that. While we might not have had the new TVshows to promote we probably just filled it with more pop people or generic stuff and some lateral thinking.

Q: Was the 70s a golden age for Look-In or were the 80s as successful or as much fun for you?

C: The 70s were more naïve, the 80s a bit more knowing. In terms of enjoying working there I've got very happy memories of both, in terms of sales it was pretty much the same. The sales of Look-In went up steadily in the first four or five years to this plateau over 200,000. The greatest sale ever I think was in the mid-80s which I think was about 350,000.

Q: What caused that? The A-Team?

C: No, it would be the pop content - Wham! Duran Duran, Culture Club.

Q: The big change, it seemed to me as a reader who had been with it on-and-off since 1977, was in September 1981 when that logo disappeared. Was it a spoiler for (TV) TOPS from DC Thomson?

C: I remember Tops - I can't remember the thought process that led us to that big shake-up at Look-In. It might well have been Tops. There was certainly the feeling that Look-In was due for refreshment because it hadn't had one for a long time - that's a common industry thing to stop you getting tired. Maybe it was a reaction to a dip in sales?

Q: And there was a switch to photo covers.

C: That would be to create freshness and newness and would have been coloured I'm sure by the huge success of Smash Hits [published from 1978]. You'll notice that most of the covers from then on were pop and that meant the fact that the picture was not very active - going back to the original problems in 1971 - doesn't matter so much.

Q: That meant the famous Arnaldo covers stopped.

C: Was the split that sudden? Did we ever use any illustration after we moved to photos?

Q: Yes, there two or three montage covers.

C: Yes, it was a change of policy, yeah.

Q: Just before that 1981 style change the paper quality had changed too hadn't it? It was the same all the way through?

C: Yes, I think that let us do colour throughout or near enough. Again that was influenced by Smash Hits. Look-In had had the market for boys and girls up to about age 13/14 to itself for a decade and had served that market jolly well but Smash Hits had come along in 1978 and was fantastic. We all loved Smash Hits, I thought it was a magnificent piece of work and what that did was sort of redefine and put on a lid on where Look-In could go. It didn't really threaten us that much as it was very obviously different and it was only about pop music but it had a bearing on how kids perceived what a magazine would be. Smash Hits was on beautiful paper, colour all the way through ... other people piled into that market so we had to take stock and think what Look-In needed to be doing. Something if not 'Smash Hits good', at least 'this good' and still able to operate as the market leader.

TOPS I remember but the big thing that hit Look-In was Fast Forward in the later 80s.

Q: What about Beeb in 1985 from Polystyle? That was very short lived.

C: Dennis Hooper was editor on that. I think there was some kind of bad blood between Polystyle and the BBC over lack of advertising for Beeb on the BBC. Or maybe it was that the BBC were disappointed in the product - there was some fall out between the two parties.

Anyway, out of that came Fast Forward. It was from the BBC in exactly the same way as Look-In was from ITV and Fast Forward was very heavily promoted on the BBC. Of course, we'd been promoted heavily ourselves on ITV. We used to make an ad about a particular issue a couple of times a year (Laaa-La-La-La-La-Look-llllllllll!). And a plain slide and voice over most weeks.

Q: Those ads were made by Cosgrove Hall weren't they?

C: Some were, and some by an agency who TV Times used for their weekly adverts.

C: Fast Forward was the first real head on challenge Look-In had ever had. I've no idea why it took so long. So from there being one magazine for kids who were interested in TV, pop, sport and stuff, suddenly there was another.

Q: The mid-80s saw you and Angus coming to blows over violence in the action strips. What's your take on that? Was it down to you or pressure from above at TV Times?

C: It was me being nannyish is what it was. For the best of motives. I sensed a sort of change in people - this is parents, adults - their approaches to violence. Now, with hindsight, I'm sure I went right over the top but there was something going on then. No but Angus is right, it was me being very nannyish. The instruction was to have no weaponry pointed at people. For a time we had the rule that you could see a gun - or a bow and arrow in Robin of Sherwood - but it wouldn't be pointed at anybody. I can see now how frustrating it must have been for Angus - he'd didn't agree with my stance and it also meant he had to restructure the way he went about telling the stories.

Q: Did you have your own kids by this time, whereas you hadn't back when Kung-Fu was on the pages, and this made you feel slightly more protective of the readers?

C: That's a good point, I hadn't thought of that. Yes, I was a dad by then ... I think it was more that I had this sense of this feeling being around in the world, of anti-violence. As I say, I may have misread it and it doesn't seem to be so strong now but that was the vibe I was picking up. I mean, if we'd run Tom and Jerry in Look-In my thoughts wouldn't have gone as far as to take the cartoon violence out of Tom and Jerry.

Another difficult issue at that time was sponsorship in sport. On photographs we had of racing cars or footballers we had great agonies

then - it's only in the last 20 years or so that shirt sponsorship in football happened. So suddenly in Sports Spotlight we would be confronted with a photo of a strip with Carlsberg on it. Using a similar rationale to how we tackled the violence, I tried to use only photos that didn't show a 'dodgy' sponsor. We even went to lengths of retouching offending pictures - and this was before Photoshop, it had to be done very expensively by the repro houses. Which wasn't probably a great use of my editorial budget but it seemed important at the time. We come across similar photos now at Egmont and I think it's just accepted now that you're going to get those kinds of sponsors.

Q: Speaking of Photoshop retouching there (or the lack of), when did Look-in move to Macs and DTP and away from the hand paste-up/repro house path?

C: I don't think it was until the very late 80s, possibly even 1990 or 91. The first sighting we had of Macs was in the main TV Times offices and at that point in the 80s they had the capabilities of a super-typewriter. What was great about them was that you could share type around, so that if you typed something once it could go round the office, to the printers and so on. But they weren't designing pages on them until the end of the 80s.

Even so, when we got Macs at 1990 or so we were still not as late as some kids and teen mags. Of course it might be that we had and others had a Mac-look without knowing it - the prepress and repro houses might well have been rendering our paper layouts using Macs.

Q: Speaking of those later days, the late 80s - the picture strip seemed to decrease in importance around this time. Was that a cost thing?

C: Not particularly ...it was to get more value from the other material in there, so yes the posters, the features, facts and stuff but the other reason was that the whole rationale for having a strip of a famous TV property was that it gave you an extra dose. Because in the past when you wanted to watch The A-Team most people still had one go at it on a Saturday night once a week. Where Look-In scored was in bringing you stuff about the A-Team when it wasn't on telly. That rationale vanished when kids got access to videos and could watch an episode as many times as they liked.

What we moved to were strips that did something you couldn't really do on TV - so we moved away from the live action stories to things that were more pure comic strip in nature like Scooby Doo or Alias the Jester. Something where we felt it being a comic strip was still appropriate, still worked, was still funny. But I think eventually we ran out of properties that suited that to be honest.

From the mid 80s we moved towards more strips that were about celebs so it would either be people, usually pop stars, having adventures or the life stories of those celebs. That seemed to be quite a good use of strip for a while but again we ran out of people.

Q: Look-In had always done that (probably due to Angus Allan having been bowled over by a preview of the pilot episode of The Monkees while at Lady Penelope) going back to running David Cassidy in adventure stories and the 1976 ABBAbiography but I think there was more of it by the 80s both in terms of adventure stories (Madness, Bucks Fizz, the glorious Haircut 100 strip, Five Star) and life stories. TOPS did a brilliant Adam Ant time travel adventure in their early issues too ...

C: I'm sure there was a crossover in the artists who did Five Star for us - the Grays, Gordon and Maureen Gray? I think we might have seen their work in TOPS and then asked them to work for Look-In.

Q: Yes, they did Adam Ant at TOPS (first) and Five Star and The A-Team for you at Look-In.

C: There was a fantastic series that Arthur [Ranson] did, The Story of the Beatles, that was really good.

Q: Talking of artwork, Angus reckons most of the original pieces have been destroyed? Do you think he's (sadly) right?

C: There was a time when I think certain artists were given the option

of physically coming in with a car and taking it away, I seem to remember. Such calls to the artists to come and collect might have been prompted by three physical moves of office we made over the years before we ended up at IPC's King Reach Tower. I haven't got a pile of it in the loft or anything - unfortunately!

Q: A few pieces have been sold in recent years including some Ranson Beatles work and Angus was gifted work by John Burns so some of it's out there [since conducting this interview I've read that John Burns was instrumental in campaigning for strip artists' rights over this issue and co-founded the Society for Strip Illustration (SSI) so it's possible this call to collect work was the result of Burns' pressure? - AI].

Q: How did Look-In, and your role, come to an end?

C: IPC bought TV Times when the listings magazines went deregulated multichannel - the ITV franchise companies cashed in their chips at this point basically. And when IPC bought TV Times they got Look-In as part of the job lot and a women's magazine called Chat.

Q: This was in Spring 1991 then.

C: We moved into the IPC offices at King's Reach Tower. I was eventually made redundant by IPC - I was told at the end of 1991 and finished working as Editor of Look-In in January 1992. Obviously I wasn't happy about that but to their great credit IPC took on Look-In and kept it going at the time they had just got rid of their children's publishing. And what remains of that portfolio of titles is here now, at Egmont - they bought what years before IPC had sold to Robert Maxwell's Mirror Group, the IPC Fleetway imprint. It was IPC who stuck with Look-In and kept it running until the last knockings in 1994.

Q: When IPC took over did you think it was the beginning of the end?

C: It was more, 'What's in store?', let's wait and see what IPC wants to do with it, what can they afford to do with it. At that time circumstances around children's publishing and around Look-In were changing enormously so it was no longer the magazine that was selling quarter of a million a week. It was no longer that cheap to produce, they were loads of rivals to it, both in terms of other printed matter but also just other calls on kids' time.

When I left Look-In at the start of 1992 it was selling 100,000. When it closed in 1994 it might have been, I'm guessing, 70-80,000.

At Egmont today, if we sell 50,000 of a title we're quite pleased as long as we've done our sums right and have constructed the magazine appropriately for a 50,000 sale. The days of titles selling hundreds of thousands a week for kids are gone.

They say the past's a world away and in some ways it's true - the TV world was a different place then, unlike now when there's several BBC offerings for kids, three commercial channels, the satellite channels and all of the timeshifted viewing of stuff on videos and DVD. Comics - and Look-In especially - used to fill the gaps between the TV and so on going off but those gaps eventually closed. And with them the likes of Look-In.

Colin now works as Group Director at Egmont, overseeing their output of children's comics, putting all his vast experience to good use! I hope you'll agree that the Look-In story is a fascinating one - huge thanks are due to Colin for sparing the time to share it with me. Thanks are also due for the fantastic work he and his teams put in over those years - Look-In was truly inspirational to so many of us who work in publishing today.

My very special thanks also to David Bishop who arranged this interview for me - cheers, David!

Alistair D. McGown, June 2004

This interview is © Alistair D. McGown. It should not be reproduced in whole or in part without prior written permission from the author in accordance with the designs and patents act 1988.