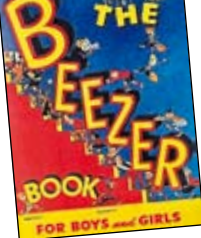


Christmas annuals: They were once as much a part of the festive celebration as turkey and the trimmings.

Comic season's greetings from all my heroes

Nostalgia's a funny thing. I like to think of it as a feelgood trick of the memory where all pain and discomfort is miraculously excised and the mind's-eye images are forever rose-tinted. And while it may not always be healthy to spend too much time living in the past, I doubt I'm alone in finding it strangely comforting to occasionally retreat down my own private memory lane.



Christmas is a case in point. No matter how hard I might try, nothing quite measures up to visions of festive times past when to revel in the beguiling magic of the season of goodwill meant suspending belief and believing at the same time, a contorted Christmas conundrum all too easily resolved in the innocent mind of a seven-year-old.

After all, if the adventure yarns on which I was well and truly hooked had taught me anything, it was that the seemingly impossible was entirely possible and the most improbable highly probable. So, why not believe that Father Christmas's sleigh could dodge the glass-encrusted wall bordering Cow Tower meadow in Norwich to make a safe rooftop landing in Balaclava Terrace before negotiating the tiniest of chimney pots and the chilliest of front rooms to reach my bedroom.

Above all, I believed that Christmas 47 years ago that this jolly old chap would somehow contrive to deliver me the book of my dreams, neatly gift-wrapped, of course, and buried deep in a bedside pillowcase bulging with tantalising possibilities.

Now, I have to admit that my belief was not entirely one founded on childlike faith of the Miracle on 34th Street variety. Nor, indeed, was it a case of some strange Freudian wish-fulfilment. No, this was belief based on hard fact and, what's more, the evidence was lurking somewhere in my bedroom – a comic with a hole in it where a coupon promising hours of pleasure in the company of my greatest boyhood heroes had been carefully cut out.

Had I thought about it all a little more deeply I might have found myself questioning the whole meaning of Christmas, not to mention Santa and his unique, once-a-year delivery service. For nowhere on the coupon was there any mention of Lapland, the North Pole or any other suitably snow-coated Santa-esque headquarters, unless, of course, Fetter Lane in London's EC4 was some kind of festive sorting office serving the UK.

But, thankfully, such illusions would remain unshattered for a little longer and, though I didn't know it then, that less than surprising gift from a most un-grotto-like publishing house on the edge of Fleet Street marked the beginning of a Christmas love affair with the comic annual that even now shows precious little sign of waning.

Of course, much has changed since that Christmas morning when I tore open the festive wrapping to reveal the first-ever Victor Book for Boys, its action-packed cover featuring a fearsome-looking bunch of Tommy-gun wielding Commandos pouring from the battered bows of the destroyer Campbelltown moments after it had smashed into the dock gates of St Nazaire.

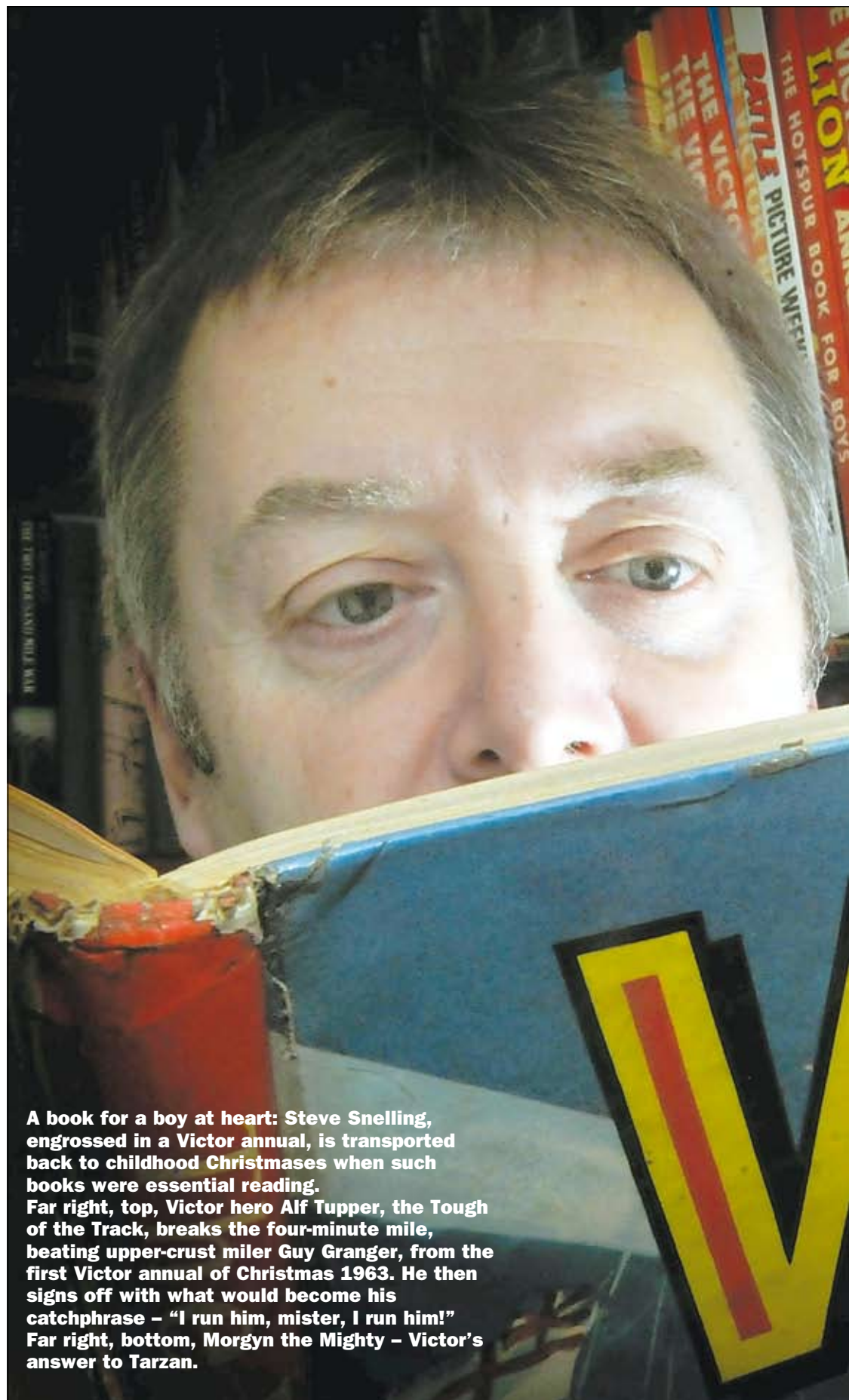
The last five decades have seen a revolution in children's toys, games and reading habits. Many of the things we once coveted, from Dinky cars to Britain's soldiers, have all but disappeared from the shelves of toy shops. But most notable of all the transformations, to a comic fan at least, has been the demise of the Christmas annual.

Once as much a part of the yuletide celebration as turkey and Christmas crackers, the annual, which could trace its origins back to Dickensian England and beyond, has all but disappeared in the form that I remember and cherish it.

Almost half a century ago when I was introduced to this great festive tradition I could have taken my pick from a veritable library of comic titles. The Dandy, The Beano, The Beezer, Buster, Topper, Valiant, Lion, Tiger, Eagle and, of course, The Victor, soon to be followed by the likes of The Hotspur, Hurricane, Whizzer and Chips. All vied with one another to produce the most eye-catching, funniest and most adventure-packed annual book extravaganza to sit alongside such long-running favourites as Mickey Mouse, Rupert Bear and Oor Wullie.

Nowadays, only The Beano and The Dandy survive as pale shadows of their former exuberantly anarchic selves to compete against the glut of celebrity and TV-linked annuals.

If you think this reads like a lament, then you'd be right. For looking back, beyond the mind-numbing blur of computer games and explosion in hi-tech gadgetry, I count myself lucky to have grown up in an altogether different era, a much simpler, less cynical time which was, though I didn't appreciate it at the time, a golden age



A book for a boy at heart: Steve Snelling, engrossed in a Victor annual, is transported back to childhood Christmases when such books were essential reading.

Far right, top, Victor hero Alf Tupper, the Tough of the Track, breaks the four-minute mile, beating upper-crust miler Guy Granger, from the first Victor annual of Christmas 1963. He then signs off with what would become his catchphrase – "I run him, mister, I run him!" Far right, bottom, Morgyn the Mighty – Victor's answer to Tarzan.

for comic annuals that would all too soon fade into history.

In any given week, I could take my half-a-crown pocket money and spend it on an Airfix kit (all too fiddly and rather boring when complete), put it towards a Dinky car (similarly dull) or blow it, as I usually did, on as many different comics as I could afford.

And, strange though it might seem to today's youngsters, I wasn't alone in this passion for all things comic-strip. Almost everyone I knew regularly bought and devoured at least one comic a week, our fascination with speech bubble storytelling being actively encouraged by schools which kept boxfuls of dog-eared comics ready to be read whenever downpours prevented us from escaping to the playground at break times.

Naturally, we all had our favourites. At my

comic-reading peak I was sharing every scrap of my spare time with Captain Hurricane in The Valiant, Robot Archie in The Lion, Limp-along Leslie in The Hotspur and that most idiosyncratic of goalkeepers Bernard Briggs in The Hornet.

But my one true and enduring allegiance was reserved for The Victor, a boys' picture paper par excellence that prided itself on its rip-roaring tales of "war, sport and adventure" and which was born almost 50 years ago.

The Victor was populated by super-heroes, both real and imagined, cast in a peculiarly British mould. From its true-life tales of wartime derring-do which adorned the majority of its covers to the fictional heroics of athletes, cricketers and footballers, the picture stories focused on characters rooted in a gritty reality.

Steve Snelling recalls Christmases past with comic immortals like Alf Tupper, Robot Archie and Lonely Larry

Main picture: ADRIAN JUDD



carriage, he'd turned his nose up at the cheeky offer of a chip thrust through the window of his chauffeur-driven car. These were cardinal sins that could have only one result.

And so the scene was set for the climatic encounter at White City. As usual Alf is late. A rush-job to complete 10 auto-guards, whatever they are, has him racing to the start-line, stripping off his welder's overalls to reveal his running togs.

Hitting the front at the start of the last lap, it looks, as David Coleman might have put it, as though he's gone too early, but what Alf lacks in track craft he more than makes up for in guts and determination. To Granger's evident surprise, he holds on to win, breaking the four-minute mile in the process, before heading straight for the exit to deliver his order, still in his running kit, aboard a rickety handcart. Asked how the race went, he replies with the immortal closing line that would become his catchphrase: "I run him, mister, I run him!"

Simplistic though it undoubtedly was, Alf's distinctive brand of class warfare played out on the running track struck a chord with working-class lads everywhere. What, indeed, was there not to like about a larky likely lad with an iron will to win? It was, in short, a winning formula, just like the annuals themselves.

After all, here you had your favourite characters, gift-wrapped for Christmas, in colour-washed (as opposed to the weekly black and white strips), specially elongated adventures that would keep you enthralled through all those dull moments between festive parties.

For me, that meant revelling in the fictional second world war heroics of bomber ace Matt Braddock VC and Bar, the Tarzan-like, jungle-loving strongman Morgyn the Mighty, Mick Muggins, billed as the worst boxer in Britain, and Sam Barnham, the legendary showman manager of Kegford United.

For others it meant losing themselves in the extraordinary adventures of Hotspur's Pacific castaway Lonely Larry and his tame toucan Tommy, taking to the skies with daring autogyro ace Grasshopper Green and taking on Jerry in the cockpit with Lion's leading fighter ace Paddy Payne.

And that's before you even begin to think of the likes of the Dandy's Cactusville cowboy Desperate Dan. Or the Beano's Biffo the Bear. Or the ageless Rupert, who, though never my cup of tea, has just celebrated his 90th birthday in his own fantasy land of pastoral bliss.

The list is, in fact, endless, or, at least, it was back in the mid-Sixties. By the time The Victor ended its proud run of annuals with its 31st edition in 1994, the nation's love affair with comics was already in terminal decline.

The Victor, having swallowed up many of its DC Thomson stablemates, had fought its last fight. Even Alf, in his final Christmas outing, seemed to have lost his way in a charmless, poorly-executed tale of his rivalry with an unscrupulous and underhand hill trail runner.

Of course he won out in the end, but it was a pyrrhic victory. That last annual boasted almost as many photographs as it did comic-strip stories. It was a sad conclusion to a grand Christmas tradition.

Now all that's left is a lingering nostalgia. No longer will there be a pillowcase brimming with presents. No longer will there be a spanking new comic adventure annual. But the memories born of those graphic boyhood strips endure.

And should I ever wish to remind myself of the magic of Christmases past I need only pick up any one of the battered, well-thumbed, red-spined comic annuals to point me in the right direction for a wistful and unashamedly joyous journey down memory lane.

Bloomin' Ada, as dear old Alf would say, I must be getting old!

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I count myself lucky to have grown up in an altogether different era, a much simpler, less cynical time which was, though I didn't appreciate it at the time, a golden age for comic annuals that would soon fade into history

And none were grittier than my all-time favourite, the spikey-haired apprentice welder from the back streets of grimy Greystone who achieved legendary status as The Tough of the Track.

Alf Tupper was, in many ways, the archetypal Victor hero, an irrepressible underdog battling against all manner of adversity, from class prejudice to social deprivation, in a track career spanning two comics and more than 40 years.

Toffs, foreigners and cheats might pull the occasional fast one, but you always knew that Alf would defy all the odds to win through in the end. He was, in short, the ultimate working-class hero who succeeded in inspiring a host of real-life sporting heroes, from Ron Hill to Brendan Foster and Steve Ovett to Peter Elliott.

A typical rough, tough storyline would see a

much put-upon Alf, exhausted from over-work and fuelled by a seemingly never-ending supply of his favourite fish 'n' chips grub, hitching a ride to a world-class athletics meeting, arriving just in time to don 'spikes' and distinctive wolf's head vest before running his snooty rivals into the ground.

In fact, that was pretty much what happened in that first Victor annual of Christmas 1963 which pits Alf against upper-crust miler Guy Granger, 'Britain's Olympic hope' from the exclusive Royal Unicorn Athletics Club. Beaten into second place in their first meeting (unlike other super heroes, Alf was not invincible), our hero is suitably unbowed.

Defeat rankled, but what rankled even more was Granger's snobbish attitude. Not only had he refused Alf a place in his first-class train

