Occasionally they poke fun at design itself; he made several drawings of chromium-plated steel furniture, which was all the rage, culminating in a fabulous one-piece dining set. In his drawing of the huge rotating kilns in which the chalk and clay react, the engineering is fairly accurate, although the kilns are being rotated by two men pedalling, and the mouth of the furnace, which in reality is almost red hot, has a mantelpiece with a clock and a cat warming itself in front of the fire.

As part of his book Railway Abaldry, written to commemorate the centenary of the Great Western Railway in 1895, he drew a finely detailed picture of the building of Saltash Bridge in 1859. A span of the bridge is being raised by two men with a hand pump, and a few small helium balloons, whereas in real life the task needed five navy ships, 500 men, and hydraulic jacks. His depiction of the structure of the bridge is almost entirely accurate, but curiously, contemporary photographs do not show men painting, fishing, or selling Devonshire cream tea.

When his work was to be used for advertising, he was often asked to produce colour pictures. He used the same technique of making pen-and-ink drawings, and then coloured them in with simple water colour, a system quite different from his early illustration work.

For his illustrations of the Crawford’s biscuit factory is a masterpiece of nonsense. They had built a new factory in Liverpool in 1897, and he visited it some years later. The industrial revolution had run its course; Britain had led the world in the production and use of steam engines, which had powered factories for more than a hundred years, and were giving way to electricity. Yet Heath Robinson preferred to imagine a simpler, quieter age. His version of the biscuit factory is powered entirely by one man pedalling and another winding a handle.

A small army of men staggers upstairs carrying sacks of flour, sugar, and yeast – about ten times as much yeast as necessary – which they tip into a giant food processor. The only source of water is one man with a watering can. On the factory floor three men are actually working, while a further dozen are standing about in their chefs’ hats, watching, chatting, or perhaps supervising.

He was invited in 1919 to produce advertising pictures for Little Nipper Mousetraps, and I guess he did not relish the idea of drawing a mousetrap, with or without a dead mouse in it; so instead he suggested different methods for catching mice. In “The toasted cheese method,” a lump of cheese on a toasting fork is suspended from the ceiling, and being creamed by a candle. Meanwhile a stupendous pyramid of household furniture and utensils supports a wooden pole, up which the mice are supposed to climb, tempted by the cheesy smell. At least 18 fascinated spectators, peering round corners or through the window to watch the action, and the Little Nipper is mentioned only in the caption.

He was always fond of contraptions, and there are many in this book: an auto-shampooer chair, an earwig trap, a weekend all-weather tandem, an electric fireplace, which water flowed from above and into the furnace, which in reality is almost red hot, has a mantelpiece with a clock and a cat warming itself in front of the fire.

Occasionally they poke fun at design itself; he made several drawings of chromium-plated steel furniture, which was all the rage, culminating in a fabulous one-piece dining set. In his drawing of the huge rotating kilns in which the chalk and clay react, the engineering is fairly accurate, although the kilns are being rotated by two men pedalling, and the mouth of the furnace, which in reality is almost red hot, has a mantelpiece with a clock and a cat warming itself in front of the fire.

As part of his book Railway Abaldry, written to commemorate the centenary of the Great Western Railway in 1895, he drew a finely detailed picture of the building of Saltash Bridge in 1859. A span of the bridge is being raised by two men with a hand pump, and a few small helium balloons, whereas in real life the task needed five navy ships, 500 men, and hydraulic jacks. His depiction of the structure of the bridge is almost entirely accurate, but curiously, contemporary photographs do not show men painting, fishing, or selling Devonshire cream tea.

When his work was to be used for advertising, he was often asked to produce colour pictures. He used the same technique of making pen-and-ink drawings, and then coloured them in with simple water colour, a system quite different from his early illustration work.

For his illustrations of the Crawford’s biscuit factory is a masterpiece of nonsense. They had built a new factory in Liverpool in 1897, and he visited it some years later. The industrial revolution had run its course; Britain had led the world in the production and use of steam engines, which had powered factories for more than a hundred years, and were giving way to electricity. Yet Heath Robinson preferred to imagine a simpler, quieter age. His version of the biscuit factory is powered entirely by one man pedalling and another winding a handle.

A small army of men staggers upstairs carrying sacks of flour, sugar, and yeast – about ten times as much yeast as necessary – which they tip into a giant food processor. The only source of water is one man with a watering can. On the factory floor three men are actually working, while a further dozen are standing about in their chefs’ hats, watching, chatting, or perhaps supervising.

He was invited in 1919 to produce advertising pictures for Little Nipper Mousetraps, and I guess he did not relish the idea of drawing a mousetrap, with or without a dead mouse in it; so instead he suggested different methods for catching mice. In “The toasted cheese method,” a lump of cheese on a toasting fork is suspended from the ceiling, and being creamed by a candle. Meanwhile a stupendous pyramid of household furniture and utensils supports a wooden pole, up which the mice are supposed to climb, tempted by the cheesy smell. At least 18 fascinated spectators, peering round corners or through the window to watch the action, and the Little Nipper is mentioned only in the caption.

He was always fond of contraptions, and there are many in this book: an auto-shampooer chair, an earwig trap, a weekend all-weather tandem, and a series of machines for practising swimming at home. Pride of place, however, must go to the “interesting and elegant apparatus designed to overcome once and for all the difficulties of conveying green peas to the mouth.” The machines is utterly preposterous, and could scarcely have worked, but the question I asked myself was why on earth did he bother to dream up such a device. I suspect that it was indeed to overcome the difficulties he mentions. Brought up with strict Victorian table manners, he would have been required to eat all his vegetables from a fork, with the prongs pointing downwards. Eating peas like this is almost impossible; they just roll off. This is Heath Robinson the engineer who has found a solution to the problem. Another solution is described in the poem attributed to Ogden Nash:

I eat my peas with honey; I’ve done it all my life.
It makes the peas taste funny, but it keeps them on the knife.

In a glorious picture of a small flat on a chilly morning, elegant low technology allows the husband to switch on both the electric fire, and the geyser to fill his bath, while his wife cooks breakfast, and all this without either of them getting out of bed.

Here Heath Robinson was celebrating innovations; the geyser had been invented in 1868 by a painter called Benjamin Waddy Maughan; he invented it after the gushing hot springs of Iceland. Gas burned at the bottom and heated the water in a web of pipes, through which water flowed from above and into the bath; this was essentially the first device that would provide hot water for ordinary people.

The electric fire in the bedroom was a more recent invention; it first appeared in 1912, but did not become popular until the 1950s, because most households did not have powerful enough electricity supplies. Meanwhile the kitchen range had been invented in the late 19th century by the ebullient American spy Benjamin Thompson, who had revolutionised the army in Bavaria, been made a Count of the Holy Roman Empire, founded the Royal Institution in London, and
Heath Robinson retired to Paris to marry the widow of Anton Lavoisier, who had been guillotined during the French revolution. Heath Robinson was no great sportsman, but he must have enjoyed watching games from tennis to golf, for his drawings are too close to the real thing to be purely imaginary. He did, however, design a magnificent system for magnetically enhanced skating. This is clearly absurd, although it might almost work; very Heath Robinson.

Heath Robinson himself was a skinny man with a wry smile and a full head of hair. In many of his scenes, however, the men are middle-aged, tubby, balding, and deadly serious. No one smiles. Heath Robinson wrote about this in his autobiography My Line of Life: “Whatever success these drawings may have had was not only due to the fantastic machinery, and to the absurd situations, but to the style in which they were drawn. This was designed to imply that the artist had complete belief in what he was drawing; he was seeing no joke in the matter, in fact he was part of the joke. For this purpose a rather severe style was used, in which everything was laboriously and clearly defined. There could be no doubt, mystery, or mere suggestion about something in which you implicitly believed, and of this belief it was necessary to persuade the spectator. At the slightest hint that the artist was amused, the delicate fabric of humour would fade away.”

Perhaps that is why Heath Robinson took himself seriously — so that we can enjoy his jokes. Adam Hart-Davis is the author of a book on the life and work of William Heath Robinson: Very Heath Robinson: Stories of his Absurdly Ingenious World.

See Book Reviews (p.18).