Very Heath Robinson
Simon Parker chats to Adam Hart-Davis about the book he has written to celebrate the ingenious creator of homespun mechanisms, W Heath Robinson

W h en I was a kid we had a couple of collections of Heath Robinson gadgets and I absolutely loved them. I was always making gadgets with wood and string – so he became my hero.

The great joy is in his simple sense of humour and the fact that the things he designed often did work.

"Through researching and writing the book I have tried to piece together all the subjects he used and his drawings closely and realise that, with a bit of ingenuity, they might actually work."

One man to do exactly that is energetic TV presenter, scientist and author Adam Hart-Davis. He says he was once asked to come up with a "machine for pulling Christmas crackers", a salute to Heath Robinson's place in modern times.

A lifelike device of the much-loved cartoonist’s creation that publishers Sheldrake Press should produce as a biographical biography of the great man. Working at his home in Devon and in his words, "I was a Heath Robinson kind of lad", Adam produces a lavish, large-format hardback book containing more than 250 of HR’s colour illustrations and line drawings.

In Very Heath Robinson: Stories of His Absurdly Ingenious World, Adam places HR's inventions against the backdrop of his life and times, exploring the range of mechanisms and gadgets he designed, for example, an efficient machine for conveying green peas to the plate.

In making fun of people playing games, complicating them by introducing additional obstacles and handicaps, often combining two or more apparently incompatible sports, Heath Robinson delighted in the absurdity – and great fun – of how he even came to think about his gadgets.

What’s more, even though they were produced a long time ago, the ideas don’t really age. And what makes them so clever is that while you can laugh in thirty seconds, it is worth examining them for moments, because there is so much of stuff going on in there and we want to know if that piece of hand-fitted string really helped, or if he really did check the thing ran.

William Heath Robinson – to give him his full name – was born in 1872 and died in 1944. Adam says the secret of his enduring popularity lies in a unique ability to inject humour and humanity into his drawings. His drawings provided an astral yet effortless social observation of the times by involving us into a reassuring world of genteelsorted by cheerful everyday improvement and a good-natured debunking of affluence – and across evocative to whom this touches seriously.

"The prevailing desire for elegance and home spun lavish, large-format hardback book in high-quality ink and paper to achieve the highest resolution, and to use the highest quality ink and paper to achieve a really handsome volume. All I did was theourcing the highest available."

Simon Parker, in the book’s notes, described HR simply as "the grad high-ceiling mechanist of absurdity".