A contemporary book about Tudor palaces sheds new light on the buildings we thought we knew—and is compulsively readable, says Roy Strong

Dreams of Camelot

A new book devoted to the life and work of the celebrated ‘contraption cartoonist’ opened in Pimperne this year and now we have this handsome celebratory book, with a foreword by Philip Pullman, who notes that, ‘the quality most lasting of all in Heath Robinson’s work is the charm’.

That charm shines through in hundreds of line drawings and colour illustrations spanning the gamut of ‘modern’ subjects, from sunbathing and dieting to skiing. There are hair-cutting machines, a contraption devised for the elegant conveyance of green peas to the mouth and innovative new sports such as tortoise coursing. One or two of his subjects, such as the new-fangled caravan, must have been difficult to send up because they might have sprung from his own imagination.

The cartoons upstage the text at every turn, as they should, but Adam Hart-Davis has produced a useful accompanying commentary that chronicles the social changes to which Heath Robinson was responding. His illustration work for books such as The Water Babies is given space—I hadn’t realised that he also collaborated with Rudyard Kipling early in his career—but the author is surely correct to lay emphasis on his great achievement: the gadgetry.

As he notes, Heath Robinson’s work—like that created by P. G. Wodehouse—was entirely without malice. His cartoons poke fun in the gentlest way at officialdom, boffins, health fads and labour-saving devices, so perhaps it’s not so paradoxical that one of his most fruitful commercial achievements was advertising commissions for new real-world gadgets, such as Ransomes’ motor mowers. That one inspired the vision of a mower that integrated a record player ‘for keeping in dancing practice in the summer months without neglecting the lawn.

Real boffins love these cartoons, of course. Perhaps the most telling nugget in the book is the fact that, when during the Second World War, the Hedges Park codebreakers came up with a complex new machine that turned out to be the precursor of the celebrated Colossus, they named it Heath Robinson.

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