

# PEOPLE & PLACES

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Bagpuss and Friends



## ***Firmin & Postgate: the making of Smallfilms***

Peter Firmin and Oliver Postgate created such iconic children's programmes as Bagpuss and The Clangers from studios near Canterbury, in outbuildings including a converted pigsty and a barn.

Peter and Oliver met in the 1950s: Oliver was a TV stage-manager and Peter was a commercial artist (where he learned many of his skills) and lectured at Central School of Art. Oliver worked under the name Smallfilms from 1959 with musicians and actors, and with Peter providing the majority of the design of puppets and illustration.

Despite its small rural roots and the time-consuming nature of early, pre-CGI animation, Smallfilms had a huge output. The partnership and the films produced have received recognition over the years including doctorates for Oliver, Peter (and Bagpuss!), a lifetime BAFTA for Peter, favourite children's programme status for Bagpuss, and an enthusiastic reception (and BAFTA!) for the new Clangers, which Peter Firmin and Oliver's son Daniel were closely involved in producing.

This display would not have been possible without the enthusiastic contribution of Peter Firmin, including very generous amounts of his time!



We are also showcasing Peter's skills and output as a printmaker, with opportunities to buy his work from the desk in the upstairs atrium.

# *Introducing Bagpuss!*

Main puppets by Peter & Joan Firmin

Additional props & drawings by Charlotte Firmin,  
Joan Firmin, Linda Birch, Babette Cole & Ben White

Voiced by Oliver Postgate, Sandra Kerr & John  
Faulkner

First aired in 1974 on the BBC (originally requested for *Watch with Mother*), Bagpuss ran for just one series of 13 colour episodes (followed by numerous repeats).

Each episode began the same way:



*Bagpuss, dear Bagpuss, old fat furry cat-puss,  
Wake up and look at this thing that I bring.  
Wake up, be bright, be golden, and light,  
Bagpuss, oh hear what I sing...*

And Bagpuss woke up, gave his celebrated yawn, and the story began: Emily (Peter and Joan's youngest daughter) would bring broken, lost things to the shop, put them down in front of Bagpuss, say a poem to wake him up, and leave them. Bagpuss and friends would wake up, look at whatever Emily had brought and decide how to mend it, and finally put it in the shop window so that whoever it belonged to could come in and collect it.

Bagpuss' friends included the mice, who lived on a mouse organ (a Marvellous Mechanical Device, worked by a bellows – described by Oliver as something between a pianola and a television set), and Professor Yaffle a wooden woodpecker who knew the answer to everything.

The working animation version of Gabriel the toad on display here could be made to 'jump' up and down using the wooden rod you can see sticking out underneath. And the two rings on strings moved his mouth and made his hand strum the banjo.

The working animation version of Madeleine the rag doll on display here was manipulated by a wooden rod operated through a hole in the seat of her chair.

There are two Bagpusses in existence: one with an adjustable metal skeleton running from the tips of his paws to the end of his tail (displayed here) for use in stop-frame animation, and one without a skeleton that could be used as a hand puppet (which Emily held in the opening sequence). Emily wore a dress made by her mother Joan, and the Bagpuss & Co. window is the Firmin's dining-room window, dressed to look like the shop.

Originally, Bagpuss was supposed to be a marmalade cat, but the fabric ordered from a firm in Folkestone arrived in the characteristic pink and cream stripes ('a very serendipitous mistake' according to Peter!). The skin of the banjo-playing toad Gabriel is made from Peter's mother's old coat; the doll Madeleine was made as a pyjama case by Joan Firmin for their girls.

He was always described as 'just a saggy old cloth cat, baggy and a bit loose at the seams – but Emily loved him'. But he appeared in numerous books, comics, annuals and DVDs, and on T-shirts and as soft toys, and in 1999, he was voted the nation's favourite character in a BBC poll.

## ***Introducing the Clangers!***

***The Clangers (1969-72), 2 series, 26 episodes, colour, BBC, written, produced, narrated and animated by Oliver Postgate. Puppets, props and sets made by Peter and Joan Firmin.***

***The Clangers Election Special (1974), 'Vote for Froglet', BBC***

***Clangers (2015–present), colour, CBeebies, voiced by Michael Palin***



Oliver described the original Clangers as ‘a small tribe or extended family of civil mouse-like persons living their peaceful lives on, in and around a small, undistinguished moon’.

Their planet in the opening sequence was made by Peter out of plaster shaped around a plastic football, with the main sets modelled in a mixture of polystyrene and plaster. The background was a painted sky decorated with stars with a few Christmas decorations to add a bit of fantasy, and the Iron Chicken was made of Meccano. The series was created using the painstaking stop-motion animation method (a style preserved in the 2015 CBeebies revival). The characters made tiny movements in each shot, and then appeared to move when the film was run together (think of the way a flick book works...).

Although the Clangers’ dialogue consisted of their characteristic whistles, Oliver wrote out each speaking part in every script before recording them using swanee whistles. He once took an episode of *Clangers* to a conference in Germany – asked afterwards, some German delegates assured him they had understand what the Clangers were saying, as they were ‘speaking perfect German’.

The 2015 series of *Clangers* was co-produced by Smallfilms with the involvement of Peter Firmin and Oliver Postgate's son Dan. It has proved hugely popular with a new generation of children and generated more merchandise to join the list of annuals, books, a PO stamp, wallpaper and soft toys. And the new *Clangers* won the 2015 Pre-School Animation BAFTA (presented by comedian Harry Hill) and was nominated for the 2016 British Academy Awards (writing and animation categories). A fourth series was made in 2017.

The latest narrator of the Clanger stories is Monty Python's Michael Palin (a self-confessed Clanger fan who used to watch it with his own children), who has described the challenge of trying to step into the revered tonsils of the original Clanger voice - Oliver Postgate.

Palin believes that *The Clangers* shared 'a similar spirit' to *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, which also began in 1969: *Clangers* 'set out to be different from any other series for children, and I suppose Python set out deliberately to be different from anything that had gone before. *The Clangers* was this planet where odd things happen to strange people and it was a little subversive, a little anti-establishment. You weren't afraid to make extraordinary leaps of credulity.'

### **Mother Clanger's 'skin' and 'skeleton'**

Each original 1960s Clanger had a 'skin' knitted by Peter's wife, Joan. The 'skin' on display here was re-knitted by her, as the original model for the Mother Clanger was stolen in 1972 during the BBC's 15th Anniversary Exhibition. Inside was a 'skeleton', or armature, made from wood and metal, with foam chips used as padding. (This followed the model that Oliver and Peter perfected while making *Pingwings* and *Pogles*.)

The original armature shown here has many hinges to allow the Clangers to be put into position during filming, while pipe cleaners were used in the hands and ears to allow shaping in the animation process, and holes in their feet meant they could be tin-tacked onto the planet.

The complete figures on display are the original Auntie and Uncle Clanger.

# Noggin the Nog

# *Noggin The Nog*, (1959-65), 30 episodes, black and white, BBC

# *Noggin The Nog*, (1982), 6 episodes, colour, BBC



*'In the lands of the North, where the black rocks stand guard against the cold sea, in the dark night that is very long the men of the Northlands sit by their great log fires and they tell a tale...'*

So began each epic of *The Saga of Noggin the Nog*...

Peter Firmin was inspired to make the series by the walrus-ivory Lewis Chessmen depicting Norse characters seen at the British Museum. He remembers seeing Noggin peeping out from behind a shield, and Oliver spotted a scared Thor Nogson on a pony – the story had to be told! The Nordic patterns on the back of the chessmen can be seen in the series titles and illustration style, and Oliver delighted in the Badness of Nogbad and doing his voice!

Peter sees himself as Thor Nogson. Nogbad bears more than a passing resemblance to film villain Terry Thomas, but is left-handed (like Peter). And the book *Noggin and the Moonmouse* gave the world a glimpse of the creature that was the precursor for Clangers.

The characters live in the Northlands, and the film backdrops were painted onto stiff paper and often reused – some were part cutout to overlay each other and allow characters to emerge.

Over the years the Norse characters manifested themselves in many ways. The most obvious was books – dummies of which were often made to sell the idea to a publisher: Oliver would have already written the text and Peter had done the drawings.

But they also appeared in videos and dvds; a musical play (The Rings of Nudrug, Birmingham Rep 1971); a play (Noggin and the Firecake, Unicorn theatre 1983); and a children's musical (Eine Kleine Nog Music, the Gulbenkian, 1990).

In 1994, Royal Mail issued a stamp showing Noggin and the Ice Dragon (with Nogbad The Bad and one of his crows lurking in the background, having posted an unlikely letter promising to be 'The Good').

Most recently, the characters have seen a great revival via the Nogmania book and reprinted books and remastered films on dvd published by the Dragons' Friendly Society.

### **Oliver Postgate's original Noggin Script**

Oliver's script, written for the episode 'Noggin and the Ice Dragon', and loaned by Daniel Postgate.

(And if you are a fan of dragons, why not visit our tiny Anglo-Saxon dragon pendant in the Explorers & Collectors gallery?)

### **Noggin at sea in his longship**

Noggin, King of the Nogs, had fallen in love with Nooka, Princess of the Nooks (from the Land of the Midnight Sun), and went on a perilous voyage to find her.

His crew is his trusted advisor the bearded Thor Nogson. Graculus, the large green bird that first bought an image of Nooka to Noggin, sits on the ship's prow. Noggin and Nooka later married and had a son, Prince Knut.

## **The friends of Bagpuss: films made by Peter Firmin and Oliver Postgate 1958-86**

*How many do you remember?*

*Alexander The Mouse* (1958), 26 episodes, black and white, ITV

*The Journey of Master Ho* (1959), single film, black and white, ITV

*Ivor The Engine* (1959), first official Smallfilms production, single film, black and white, ITV

*Noggin The Nog* (1959-65), 30 episodes, black and white, BBC

*Ivor The Engine* (1962-64), 3 series, 26 episodes, black and white, ITV

*The Seal of Neptune* (1960), 6 episodes, black and white, BBC

*Pingwings* (1961-65) 3 series, 18 episodes, black and white, ITV

*The Mermaid's Pearls* (1962), 6 episodes, black and white, BBC

*The Pogles* (1965), 6 episodes, black and white, BBC

*Pogles' Wood* (1966-68), 2 series, 26 episodes, black and white, BBC

*The Clangers* (1969-72), 2 series, 26 episodes, colour, BBC

*Sam on Boff's Island* (1972), 20 episodes, colour, part of *Words And Pictures*, BBC

*The Clangers Election Special* (1974), 'Vote for Froglet', BBC

*Bagpuss* (1974), 13 episodes, colour, BBC

*Ivor The Engine* (1975-77), 2 series, 40 episodes, colour, BBC

*What-A-Mess* (1980), 6 episodes, colour

*Noggin The Nog* (1982), 6 episodes, colour, BBC

*Tottie: The Story of a Doll's House* (1984), 5 episodes, colour, BBC

*Life On Earth Perhaps* (1985), single film, colour, BBC

*Tottie: A Doll's Wish* (1986), 5 episodes, colour, BBC

*Pinny's House* (1986), 13 episodes, colour, BBC





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