

They're playing our toon

Minnie the Minx and the Bash Street Kids are 40 years old. By Ruth Picardie

Luqmaan started buying comics when he was seven. His favourite characters used to be Mustapha Million from *Whizzer and Chips* and Desperate Dan from the *Dandy*. Now he prefers the *Beano*. "With a comic," he says, "you can sit down and read it over and over again without getting bored."

Unfortunately for Luqmaan, his dad doesn't approve, so he has to resort to that old Bash Street Kids

trick, propping a book around the comic. His dad is not worried about the casual violence: Minnie steamrolling cats, the Bash Street Kids assaulting teacher, Dennis thumping Walter, Gnasher biting chunks off interfering grown-ups. It's just that

Luqmaan is almost 19 years old. "Hopeless at art myself," he says, "but I always find comics entertaining. I don't bother about what people think."

Today, he's in seventh heaven, for he's sneaked out of Preston Municipal Library and is visiting an exhibition next door at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery to celebrate 40 years of those *Beano* favourites, Minnie the Minx and the Bash Street Kids. In fact, he's beaming with pleasure. "Dennis the Menace," he sighs. "Little Plum. Whizzer and Chips. Topper. Tricky Dicky. Roger the Dodger."

The museum is full of adult men, gazing with rapture at the vintage strips pasted on the walls. None of them seems imbued with the anarchic, anti-authoritarian spirit that inform the strips. None looks likely to stimulate Keyhole Kate's enthusiasm. Though the ceiling is low and the carpets scuffed, the visitors look like they are in church, admiring stained-glass windows. One man in his early thirties, boyishly thin, with tufty red hair and a too-small suit, could be a lost member of the Bash Street Kids, except that he is sitting too still, concentrating on a video about their creator, Leo Baxendale. Half dour *Late Show* filler, half home-movie,

the film alternates between vintage strips and a head-to-head between Baxendale and his 30-year-old son, Mark.

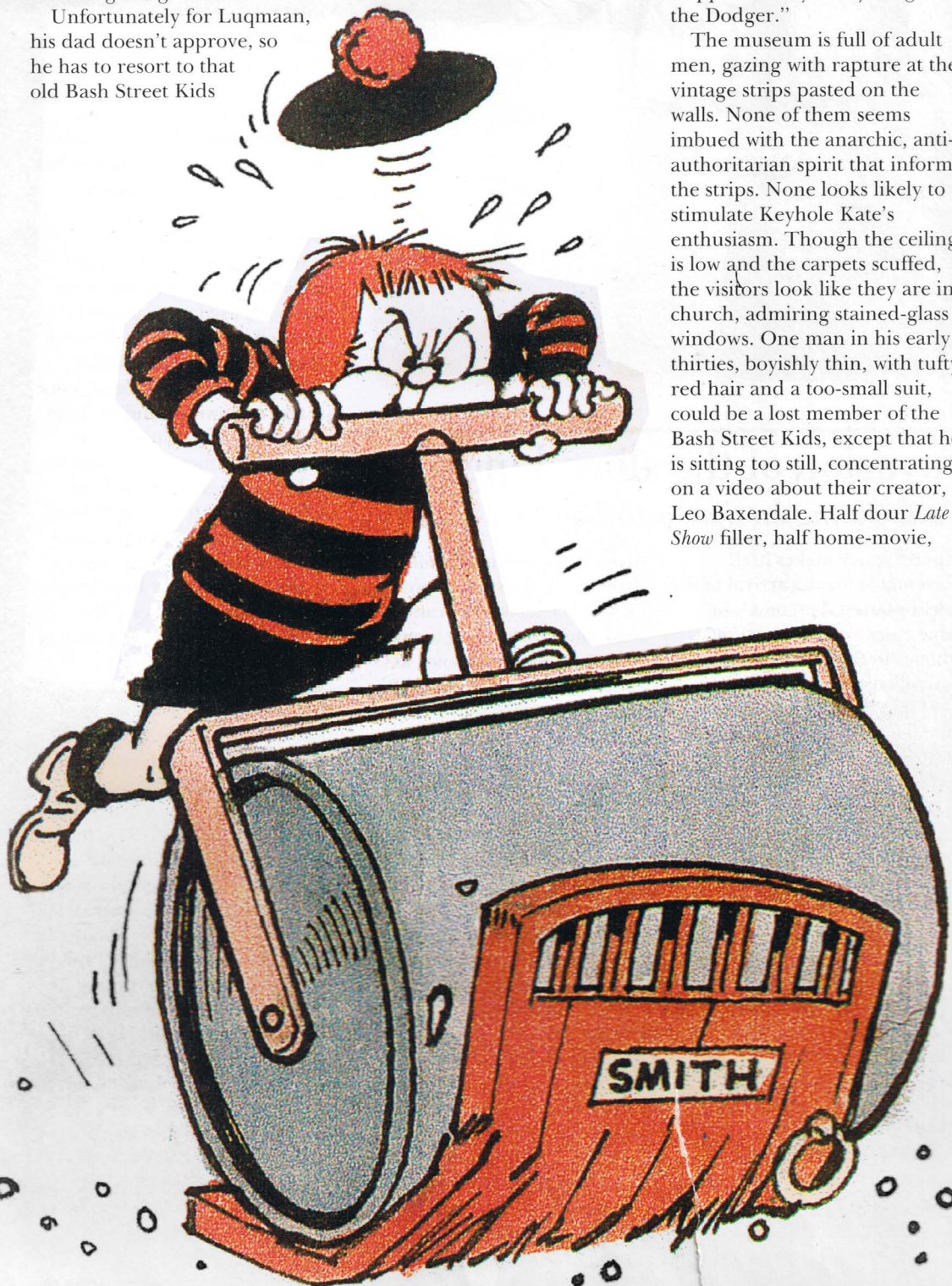
Like many who make a living out of making other people laugh, Leo does not appear to be a cheerful person. Born in Whittle-le-Woods, near Chorley in Lancashire, brought up in Preston (hence the exhibition), he started drawing for the *Beano* in 1953, aged 22. He gave up just ten years later, suffering from pneumonia, exhaustion and depression.

"As you can see, this is an absorbing and interesting scene," says Leo, flatly. "Look at Plug's radiant smirk." "Well, that was exciting," says Mark, in the same Lancashire deadpan; "What's next?" "Note the graceful arc of teacher's teeth," says Leo. "I do think Minnie looks charming when she wins," says Mark. "I knew this was a vintage set as I drew it," says Leo, "yet there were troubled thoughts in my mind."

There is not much for kids. Half the strips are too high for anyone under five foot tall to read, which is just as well in the case of "I Love You Baby Basil", the Leo Baxendale strip which ran in the *Guardian* from 1990 to 1992. The eponymous hero spends most of his time with his trousers round his ankles, with his friend Cynthia similarly undressed. The third character, Basil's grandad, smokes a pipe and wears a dress. Baxendale's book, *On Comedy, The Beano and Ideology*, is stowed away in a glass case. There are letters of appreciation from other cartoonists, including Tony Robinson, who presents the BBC series *Stay Tooned*.

"I bet Madness read the *Beano*," writes Tony, "and the Sex Pistols and The Young Ones; I bet Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer read it now and I shouldn't be surprised if it's flown over to the States each week so Faith No More and Nirvana and Steve Martin can have a copy." I bet.

For children, there is the dressing-up box, filled with red-and-black striped jumpers (Dennis and Minnie) and school caps (the Bash Street Kids). Children are coaxed into the appropriate outfit and photographed by happy fathers.



Which is your favourite character? I ask eight-year-old Andrew. Silence. Do you like Minnie? "Yes." What do you like about her? Silence. "She's naughty isn't she?" repeats Andrew, a little uncertainly. "And she always plays jokes on teacher." Do you like the Bash Street Kids? "Not that much," Why? "I've not really seen them that much." "You prefer books, really," says Edwina, his mother. Do you like the exhibition? "Yeah."

Perhaps I can get a response from Andrew's younger brother, Michael, five. Which is your favourite character, I ask brightly. "Dennis." Oh, joy! Why do you like Dennis? "Cos he's always silly." Do you like Gnasher? Michael shakes his head. Minnie the Minx? Another shake. Why not? "Cos

I don't like naughty things." "Children now are more into Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and *Jurassic Park*," says Edwina, kindly. "It brings you back to your childhood, doesn't it?"

Lawrence, 63, is glowing with happiness. "I had the *Beano* and the *Dandy* right from the first issue, practically," he says, proudly "Korky the Cat, Lord Snooty and his Gang, Desperate Dan." But what on earth is the appeal to an adult man? "They're just funny people. They do daft things."

"I was more into books," says his wife Elsie, 54. "I don't think they ever grow up, do they, men?"

'Minnie the Minx meets the Bash Street Kids' is at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, until 29 January. Admission free.