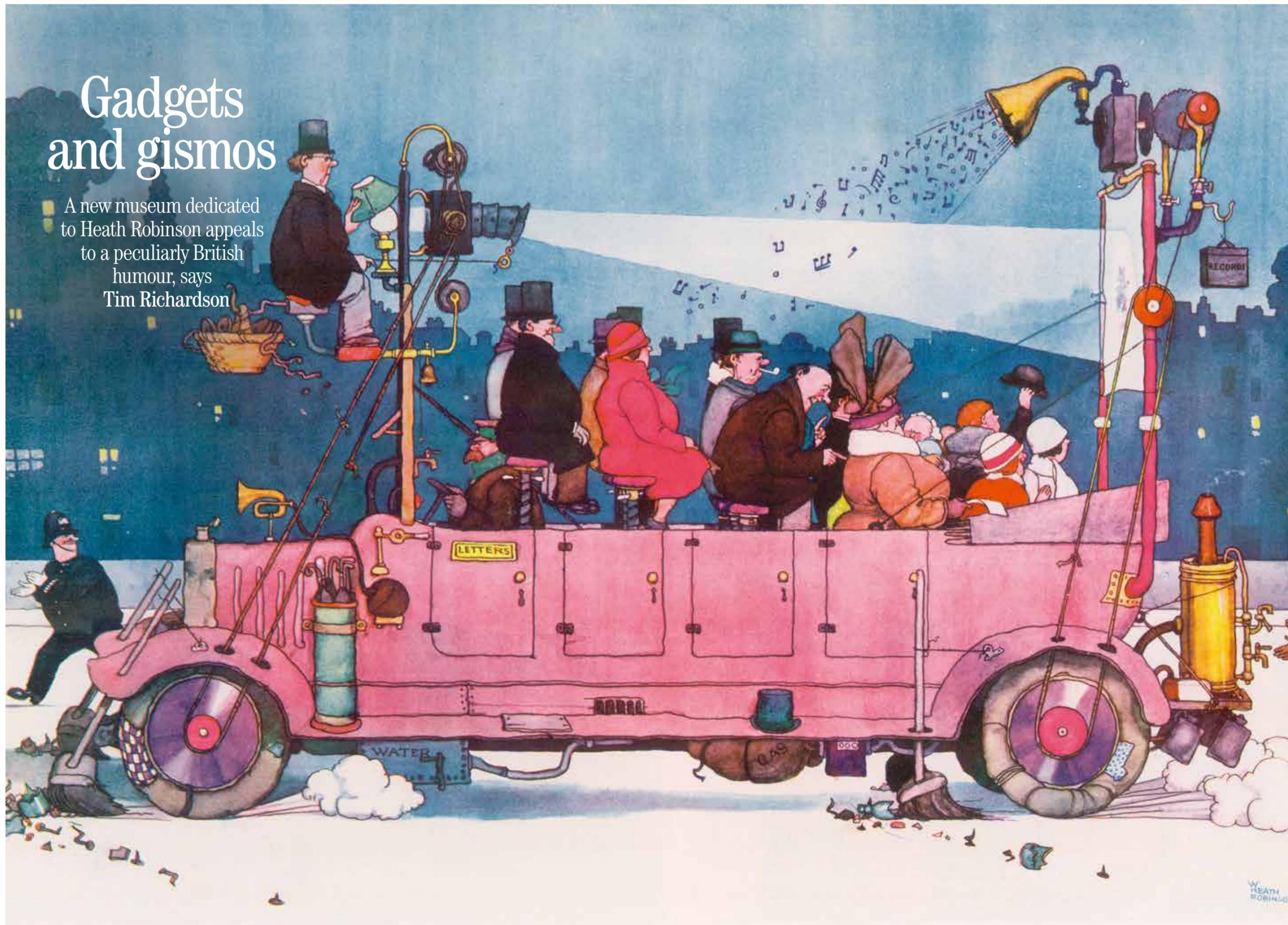


Gadgets and gismos

A new museum dedicated to Heath Robinson appeals to a peculiarly British humour, says Tim Richardson

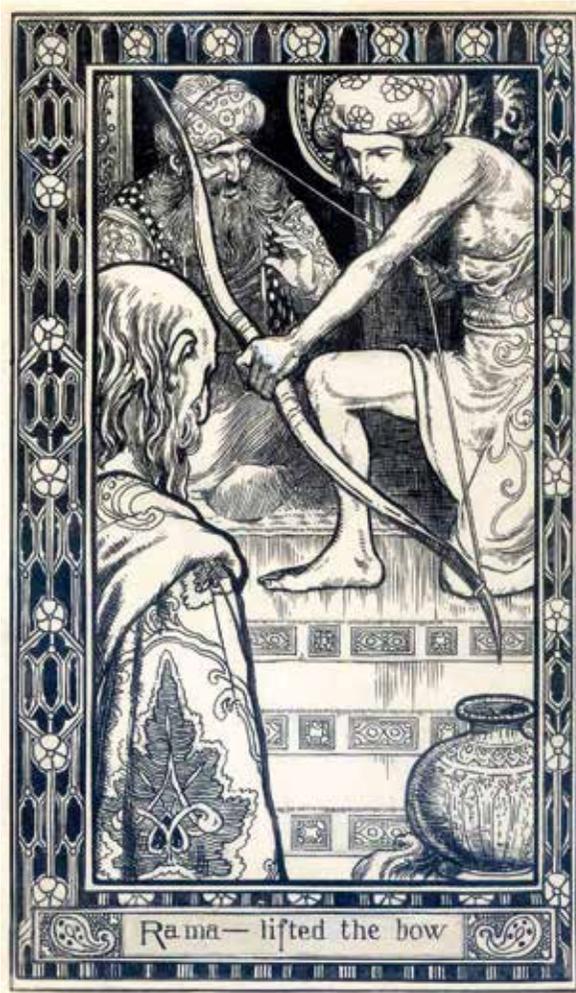


THERE are not many artists whose reputation is such that their name has become an adjective, but the 'contraption cartoons' of William Heath Robinson (1872–1944, above) are so well loved in Britain that the term 'Heath Robinson' has become an accepted way of describing any improvised practical solution that is complicated, homemade, somewhat fragile and quite possibly prone to break down. There is an element of mockery, for sure, but perhaps almost as much admiration, too—it takes more than a little ingenuity to come up with something truly 'Heath Robinson'.

Heath Robinson's place in our culture has been recognised this month with the opening of a brand-new, Heritage Lottery Fund-financed museum devoted to his work, housed in a sparkling new building in Pinner Memorial Park, Middlesex. (The artist lived in what was then the village of Pinner between 1908 and 1918.)

The gallery itself, by ZMMA architects, is appropriately complex, with a copper-clad roof that appears to be falling in on itself and witty internal details, such as wormlike ventilation ducts and light fittings made of copper piping.

Two spacious gallery rooms ('deformed rectangles') provide a venue for a permanent exhibition displaying the full range of the artist's *oeuvre* as well as a quarterly temporary exhibition on a special theme. The first of these is 'Heath Robinson at War', which shows



how a 1909 commission for a series of cartoons satirising the Kaiser's army produced his first forays into an absurd world of over-elaborate and often self-defeating contraptions and ploys.

In both World Wars, Heath Robinson sought to deflate our deepest fears of the enemy through ridicule—literally, in the case of popped Zeppelins (with German airmen falling from the sky)—or through plucky ingenuity on the Home Front by means of innovations such as 'The Melted Butter Tank Stopper', intended to stymie any Nazi invasion of Britain.

Part of the appeal of the world of Heath Robinson is that very British fondness for idiosyncratic boffins, but the war cartoons show that his work also plays to the national penchant for (false) modesty. After all, was there not something rather Heath Robinson about useful wartime improvisations such as the bouncing bomb, faked-up airfields or Churchill's 'funnies' (specialised tanks)?

The cartoons were massively popular and Heath Robinson realised he had hit a seam of gold. A typical contraption cartoon depicts an experimental laboratory or factory ground, peopled with pudgy, bespectacled boffins in baggy tweed suits who are all busy testing their gadgets in deadly earnest. Pipes, pulleys, flywheels and counter-weights add needless complexity to relatively simple operations. Many of these devices

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Heath Robinson's sketches were famous for portraying over-elaborate exercises. *The Kinocar* (1926), 'a luxurious vehicle fitted with many devices for the comfort of passengers returning home on a winter's evening'

Above: Rama Lifting the Bow is an example of Heath Robinson's early, more serious illustrative work

Above right: A Warm Welcome for Every Parachutist (1940)

‘Pudgy, bespectacled boffins in baggy tweed test their gadgets’

require unfeasibly large numbers of people to operate, such as 'Testing Artificial Teeth in a Modern Tooth Works' (1929), in which individual teeth are being subjected to minute scrutiny.

Although he continued with his 'serious' work as a book illustrator, Heath Robinson was to expand on the gadget theme over three decades, producing cartoons for magazines and advertisements as well as books such as *How to Live in a Flat* (1936), which lampooned Modernist architecture and labour-saving devices, and *How to Make a Garden Grow* (1938), including instructions on how to take root cuttings (while burrowing underground).

By no means all of his cartoons rely on contraptions for their humour. One of his best-loved drawings, *How to Train Yourself to Avoid Being Caught in Any Part of the Field* (1926), shows a shirt-sleeved fellow with a cricket bat being bowled to by a small boy, completely surrounded by flower pots and metal buckets that he's trying to avoid.

Part of the gallery's mission is to reveal the less-well-known side of Heath Robinson's work: his illustrations to editions of Shakespeare's plays, Rabelais and children's books such as *The Water Babies*. Indeed, most of the permanent exhibition is devoted to this topic, a decision made apparently on the strength of the argument that this represents his best work (a contention reflected in the most recent book on the artist's work, by Geoffrey Beare).

There is great interest and charm to this aspect of his output, but Heath Robinson's illustration work also has serious shortcomings, notably his faltering facility with the human figure, and his penchant for the sentimental-grotesque is an acquired taste.

Heath Robinson's claim to posterity will surely always rely entirely on his contraption cartoons: highly original, joyously inventive, laugh-out-loud funny and peculiarly British. The fact that the new Heath Robinson Museum can be found in a park in suburban Pinner, rather than central London, seems perfectly appropriate given his predilection for pricking Pooterish pomposity. 🐘

Heath Robinson Museum, Pinner Memorial Park, 50, West End Lane, Pinner, Middlesex, HA5 1AE (www.heathrobinsonmuseum.org; 020-8866 8420)