

Sufferin' satellites, Dan Dare is back!

Jonathan Glancey celebrates the legendary Space Fleet pilot's 40th birthday, today, and the revamp of his favourite boyhood comic, *Eagle*

DESIGN

Dan Dare, the most British of all comic-book heroes, celebrates his fortieth birthday today. This well spoken, lantern-jawed, space-age Spitfire pilot made his debut on the cover of the first issue of *Eagle* on 14 April 1950. Published by Hulton Press and edited by the Rev Marcus Morris, *Eagle* was probably the finest and certainly the best selling British comic.

Its strongest selling point was "Dan Dare: Pilot of the Future". The original comic closed down in 1969 as children turned increasingly to television for entertainment. It was relaunched in an altogether tougher, rougher and slicker style by Barrie Tomlinson, former editor of *Tiger* and *Roy of the Rovers*, in 1982. The Dan Dare strip was also revived, but the starring role — realised in black and white — went to the space pilot's great-great-grandson and the story was projected a long way into the future.

To coincide with the anniversary, next Saturday sees the current Dan Dare strip in *Eagle* revamped in glorious colour. The new Dan Dare, drawn by David Pugh and Keith Watson, one of the original *Eagle* designers, will be based on the original Dan rather than the 1982 version. He will, however, be updated for the modern audience, a New Man shoehorned into a designer outfit and married (yes, married) to his long-time colleague Professor Jocelyn Peabody (born Moreton, Gloucestershire; hobbies: skiing, riding and alien plant study).

Meanwhile, next Wednesday sees the publication of *The Dan Dare Dossier* (Hawk Publications, £14.95), "the ultimate reference volume" which looks back over 40 years of the Dan Dare strip. The *Dossier* is an exercise in nostalgia for those who remember the original *Eagle*, while the revamped comic — or "magazine" as Barrie Tomlinson prefers to call it — is aimed at a new generation weaned on videos and computer games.

The print run of the first edition of *Eagle* was a million. Over the following nine years, while Marcus Morris was editor and Frank Hampson, the creator of Dan Dare, was its overworked art director, sales of this weekly comic for boys of all ages, rarely, if ever, dropped below 750,000. The cover price of the launch issue was 3d, raised to 4d only 17 weeks later and then quickly up to 4½d.



Sales rose as *Eagle*, with its highly imaginative and beautifully executed artwork, became an integral part of the lives and dreams of British schoolboys and even schoolgirls (although they had *Girl*, sister paper to *Eagle*).

Since its relaunch in 1982, *Eagle* has been selling around 50,000 copies each week. Barrie Tomlinson hopes to double this with the arrival of the new-look Dan Dare.

"We are unlikely to see sales of 750,000 again," says Mr Tomlinson ruefully. "There was simply no competition in 1950; no television, no videos, no computer games. If we make 100,000, the Dan Dare of 1990 will have done us proud."

Dan Dare certainly did *Eagle* proud in the 1950s and early 1960s. Although any page of *Eagle* was exciting and instructive to read, Dan Dare stole the show.

The appeal of the "Dan Dare: Pilot of the Future" strip lay in a combination of three things: Hampson's stunning visuals, his equally strong story-lines, and the fact that although propelled into the late 1990s, Dan Dare and chums were immediately identified, to boys who had grown up

during the Blitz, with the members of a Spitfire, Mosquito or Lancaster squadron. Dan Dare's most relentless enemy, the Mekon, was a parody of Hitler, while the Treens he commanded were Waffen-SS stormtroopers.

Two other factors played a key part in Dan Dare's success with a million British schoolboys. Dare and his chums — Space Fleet Commander Sir Hubert Guest, his batman Digby, Professor Jocelyn Peabody and countless exotic aliens — were given, as far as the comic-strip format allowed, character and emotion.

Both Frank Hampson and Marcus Morris were determined to get away from the American comic-book heroes such as Superman and Batman. Dan Dare was the kind of chap who would, if he were real, open the batting in a game of cricket played for charity. He was the elder brother figure every boy could trust.

But British schoolboys also took a shine to the Dan Dare strip because of Hampson's minute attention to detail. The spaceships, hover cars, monorail trains and submarines that appeared in the

airbrushed strip looked as if they might really work if built. Each week *Eagle* featured a centre page spread cutaway drawing in full photogravure colour.

The one by Frank Hampson and Eric Eden of Dan Dare's spaceship, the Anastasia (named after Dibby's formidable aunt who played a key role in first bringing down the Mekon in 1996), which appeared in February 1958, was one of the finest of the series. Hampson and Eden had dreamt up an entire propulsion system for what was effectively a space-going De Havilland Mosquito, designed and built by an alien race (the Treens who lived on Venus), that managed to be utterly convincing.

Not only did the schoolboys love the detail, but so did young architects, designers and engineers who used the Dan Dare strip as a source book.

The buildings and cities that featured in the Dan Dare strip were a brilliant blend of the most advanced contemporary British engineering and the work of architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright. If you take Wright's spiralling Guggenheim Museum in Manhattan and mix it with the flues of power stations, the struts and landing gear of turbo-prop airliners of the early 1950s, you begin to see where Hampson drew his inspiration from.

The science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke was paid a retainer to act as scientific adviser to the *Eagle* team. But such was its grasp of technology that Clarke felt he could learn more from *Eagle* than he could teach its graphic artists.

Although Dan Dare's adventures took place nearly 50 years in the future, the pilot-hero was a familiar figure. Like the rest of his chums he sported a British army officer's uniform topped, when flying, with a Battle of Britain flying jacket.

Dare flew with a pipe clenched between his teeth; he was stern when necessary but full of banter, quips and good humour. He was never caught in a rage or a flap; he never killed an enemy if a well-aimed upper cut would do the trick. And he never, ever lost the crease in his trousers.

If Dare was a naively optimistic figure in an age that had seen the destructive impact of the atom bomb, then both Hampson and Morris wanted him that way. Hampson's stories and illustrations were deliberately designed to convey an optimistic view of a future technology. In the right

hands a V2 rocket could take a man to the moon rather than blow up a housing estate.

Young architects and designers who first spread their wings in the 1950s were entirely in accord with this benevolent view of post-war technology.

If you look at the hi-tech buildings of, say, Norman Foster — the Manchester-born architect who bears a striking resemblance to the Manchester-born Space Fleet pilot — you will see the same design vision in building form. Dan Dare would be at home in the Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank and would happily park Anastasia alongside Foster's Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia.

Eagle's editor, Marcus Morris, who went on to become head of National Magazines, had originally wanted Dan Dare to be a Christian sky-pilot. Dare was to be Lex Christian, a space-roaming curate who would show aliens the Christian way of life.

But Hampson — and no doubt Morris — knew that even the most devout altar boy would never buy such a meek hero. Instead he got Dan Dare, a decent space pilot who represented all the Christian virtues without having to preach them. Action, Hampson knew, speaks louder than words and the Dan Dare strip was full of action.

All good things come to an end. Despite its success in sales and advertising revenue, and despite a £1m turnover in 1957 on the sale of Dan Dare merchandise (jigsaw puzzles, playing cards, walkie-talkies, space suits and so on), Hulton Press sold out in 1959 to Odhams, which later became a part of the publishing giant IPC.

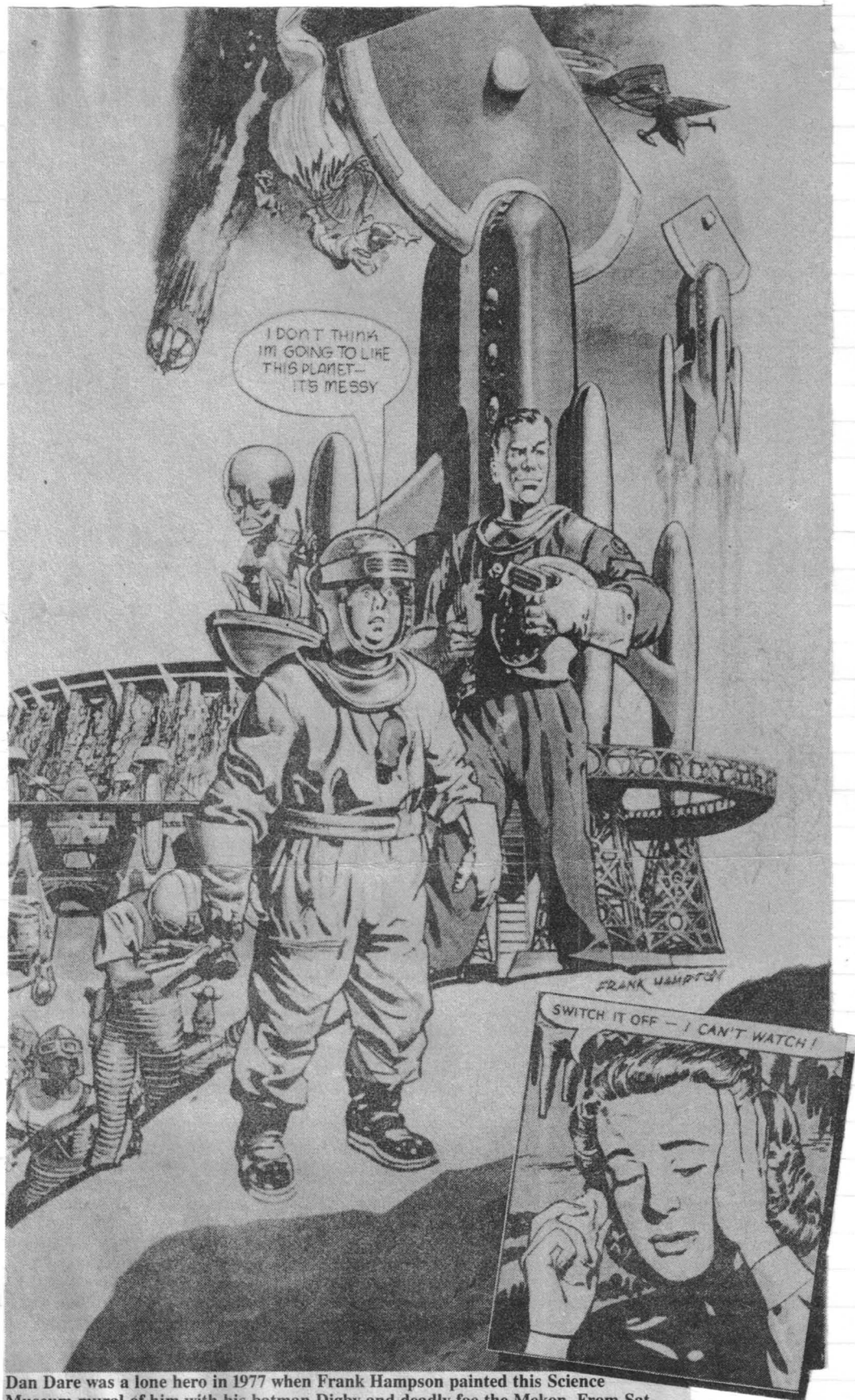
Frank Hampson left and, although the graphic artists he had trained, such as Roy Campbell and Keith Grant, kept up a brilliant flow of Dan Dare stories, *Eagle* was changing. Before it was dropped in 1969, the Dan Dare strip had become a black-and-white spread inside the comic.

Dan Dare had been ousted by television and what publishers seemed to believe was children's need for more graphic violence, more fantasy and less realism.

After a 13-year absence, *Eagle* was relaunched by Fleetway Publications under the direction of Barrie Tomlinson. But the 1990s Spitfire pilot and the Frank Lloyd Wright cities were not resurrected. The stories were more *Star Wars* than *Battle of Britain* and the artwork was slick rather than inspiring.

But nostalgia for the old, familiar Dan Dare was hard to bury. Vauxhall launched its current Cavalier on the back of sci-fi imagery inspired by Dan Dare, while *Private Eye's* cartoon strip "Dan Dire" (which casts Margaret Thatcher as the Maggon, Neil Kinnock as Dan Dire and Roy Hattersley as Pigby) is as sentimental as it is satirical.

But the third-generation Dan Dare, although given a face-lift



Dan Dare was a lone hero in 1977 when Frank Hampson painted this Science Museum mural of him with his batman Digby and deadly foe the Mekon. From Saturday he will be engaged, to be married to his colleague Professor Jocelyn Peabody (right)

and designer outfits, promises to resurrect stalwart Christian virtues. David Pugh's and Keith Watson's artwork promises to be good news for *Eagle* purists (potential readers of the new-look *Eagle* will be aged up to 60 and more), but Dan Dare will never be quite the same.

He will no longer clench a pipe and is unlikely to say things like "Sufferin' Satellites" or "Jumpin' Jets", no longer refer to fights as "scraps", scientists as "boffins" and spaceships as "kites".

But the most controversial aspect of Dan Dare's transition from Decent Chap to New Man is - sufferin' satellites! - his marriage to the elegant Professor Jocelyn Peabody.

In the old *Eagle*, Dare's official biography lists his hobbies as cricket and model-making. According to Barrie Tomlinson his new hobbies are "surfing in the Sea of Tranquillity" and "rocket testing". This has obviously done something for the evergreen colonel's sexual chemistry.

"But," says Barrie Tomlinson, "there was always something special between Professor Peabody

and Dan Dare; Frank Hampson certainly thought so. The Mekon is going to be jealous."

But is the new Dan Dare a do-gooding sky-pilot in military disguise? "Not really," says Barrie Tomlinson, "although he will insist on a church wedding."

Why create a love life for Dan Dare? "Children expect more realism than they did in the 1950s. If you ask our target readership (100,000 boys and girls aged from eight to 15) what their favourite TV programme is they will say *Neighbours*. The Dan Dare strip will be a bit more like a soap opera than the original, but it will be action-packed with all the detail that made the Frank Hampson team so special."

But even if Dan Dare has changed for video-generation children, rest assured that the Mekon remains the same evil green monster and Digby will still be dreaming of Yorkshire pudding covered with lashings of his aunty's gravy, and of custard, and uttering such unfashionable expletives as "bloomin' Ada". The video generation cannot have Dan Dare and Digby all their own way.

Dan Dare's vital statistics

Colonel Dan Dare O U N. Interplanet Space Fleet. Awarded The Order of the United Nations for Leadership in the Venus Expedition 1996.

Full Name:	Dan Dare
Birthplace:	Manchester, England, 1967
Height:	6 feet (1.8288 metres)
Weight:	12 stone (76.203523 kilogrammes)
Married:	About to be
Hobbies:	Surfing in the Sea of Tranquillity, Rocket Testing
Best friends:	Digby and Professor Peabody
Worst enemy:	The Mekon
Pet hates:	The Mekon
Diet:	Too much regimentation in space command
Car:	Strictly vegetarian (gave up meat in 1990)
Favourite TV show:	Automagnet Series 500 (special edition)
Personal ambition:	<i>Space Battle Challenge</i>
Professional ambition:	To stay alive
Favourite reading matter:	Not to become Space Fleet Commander
Favourite videos:	Latest volume of Space Fleet Technology and <i>Eagle</i>
Favourite planet:	<i>Ghostbusters 26</i> and <i>Back to the Future 41</i>
Favourite other planet:	Earth
Most dangerous planet:	The outer star system holiday planet
Favourite colour:	Venus
Favourite characteristic in others:	Anything other than Mekon Green
Least favourite characteristic:	Loyalty
	Disloyalty