

# Community service

Brighton-based cartoonist Harry Venning regularly graces the pages of one of Britain's leading broadsheets despite no formal training. Now he's on a mission to prove anyone can draw

WORDS: Simone Hellyer

Given the state of world politics, there is often just one corner of the daily newspaper that still raises a smile: the comics. And for 23 years Brighton-based Harry Venning has been putting a wry smile on the faces of *Guardian* readers every Wednesday with his comic strip *Clare in the Community*.

This level of longevity is no mean feat, especially for someone who never set out to become a cartoonist nor achieve any formal art qualifications. "I had a career as an actor which was going absolutely nowhere," Harry explains, adding: "It would take me off to different parts of the country and when the job was over I didn't have any money or friends. So I thought to myself: 'I want a job'

and consciously decided to start working as a cartoonist and just sent stuff out to newspapers, magazines, local councils, anybody really. Of course, it's fiercely competitive, but I had no idea otherwise I probably wouldn't have bothered. Ignorance is bliss, I suppose."

Success came quickly with Harry securing illustration work in joke books and children's literature as well as a strip cartoon in *The Stage* called *Hamlet*, which he is still doing 30 years later. His best known comic strip *Clare in the Community* has achieved great staying power too, running for 23 years and counting. The comic's heroine Clare is a well-intentioned social worker with all the politically correct jargon, but none of the

practical solutions.

The strip was initially inspired by a former girlfriend who worked as a social worker, although as they are still friends (and he would like it to stay that way) Harry is at pains to point out that the character Clare is not based on her.

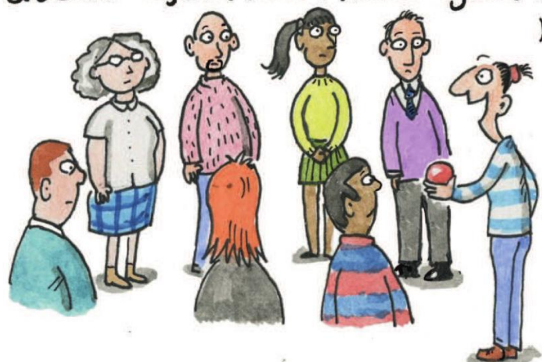
"I got a lot of material from hanging around with her and her friends, but it didn't end up

**ABOVE:** Harry's most famous cartoon strip *Clare in the Community* has been running for 23 years

**LEFT:** The strip features in *The Guardian* every Wednesday



OK Workshop, let's have a bit of fun introducing ourselves! The ball goes round and when it comes to you you say your name and a fact about yourself. Here goes!



I'm Doreen and I'm visually impaired.





I run, I swim, I paint, I write, I sing,  
I protest, I volunteer, I garden  
and I Zumba. Why? Because I  
refuse to be an old lady fit  
only to be patronised!



Well, good for you!



**ABOVE:**  
Social worker  
Clare often puts  
her foot in it

being that beneficial to the relationship.

"Nowadays, I get my inspiration from loads of places because it's not just about social work; it's about relationships, office politics and anything that's happening in the world. It's stuff that people have said or that I have noticed. I go through the newspapers too, but it can't be too topical because topical goes stale very quickly.

My dread is to sit down and nothing come out, but it hasn't happened yet," he says.

Harry also developed *Clare in the Community* into a radio series that ran for 12 series on Radio 4, allowing him to flex his comedy chops and develop all the ideas that didn't fit into three frames of a comedy strip. On whether Clare has changed much in her 23 years, Harry says: "I used to

draw her with a great big nose, but I don't any more – so the nose has shrunk and my drawing has got a bit better over the years. But I don't think she has changed much – it's a bit like with sitcoms, people don't want the characters to change. I think if she started learning from her experience, it would defeat the object. If anything she's got worse."

*"I think everyone should draw; it's really great for your mental health"*

Harry has always loved drawing, but with no formal training his style is the one that came naturally to him and is one he describes as "old school", as he explains: "I do a pencil rough, draw over it with ink and paint it over with watercolours. I do now make changes to it on the computer, so the horror of making a big blob of ink isn't the same as it used to be. I used to use gallons of Tipp-Ex to blot out mistakes. I'm in a studio with about 15 other artists and I think I'm probably the most backward when it comes to technology. I like a pot of ink, some water and to make a mess."

Harry jokes that he will work for "anyone that will have him" and his drawings have appeared in numerous books, newspapers, magazines and other publications.

Due to his connection to social services he also regularly works with the caring professions and was heading off to do some live illustrations at a social work conference after his conversation with *Sussex Life*.

"One of the hardest jobs I've had was drawing cartoons for a conference on child protection last year. It was quite challenging because sometimes you're standing up there and there's nothing that you can draw to reflect the horrors of the subject matter," he says, adding: "Cartoons aren't always a barrel of laughs – there's challenges in it, but challenges are good, I think."

Another challenge he has set himself is to get more people drawing and he regularly holds cartoon workshops for both adults and children at literary and arts festivals up and down the country. "I think everyone should draw," he says, "it's really great for your mental health, your memory and your creativity."

"At some stage, probably at school, people are told they can't draw and some people are terrified of it. So I'm on a bit of a mission to get people to draw. The great thing about cartoons is that they don't have to be realistic, so it's a great place to start." ♦

## Good to know

To see more of Harry's work and find out about his workshops, visit [harryvenning.co.uk](http://harryvenning.co.uk)

**BELOW:**  
Harry taught  
himself how  
to draw

