



Journey's End!

SAVED FOR THE FUTURE

Paul Rennie explores the remarkable archive of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, which orchestrated safety campaigns throughout the 20th century, using many of the best illustrators and designers of the day. He explains why this collection is so valuable for historians and design enthusiasts

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) is an independent charity that for almost 100 years has promoted safety awareness in Britain. For much of its history, the society has used poster images, design and illustration to communicate its message effectively.

The concept of safety is straightforward. At a basic level we understand it as safety from predatory violence. Now, for the most part, we live beyond this red-in-tooth-and-claw-survival-of-the-fittest arrangement. Nevertheless, the continuing acceleration of modern society and the consequent ferociousness of the machine-ensemble provide ample reason for safety issues to remain important.

It's worth remembering that some of Britain's biggest industries were in the past so dangerous that they were obliged to provide orphanages for the destitute children of deceased workers. The big railway companies, the merchant marines and even the GPO were required at various times to accept this responsibility. The creation of increasingly safe environments for work, rest and play is one of the great achievements of 20th-century Britain.

This achievement hasn't had the attention it deserves. It's difficult to explain why this is so. Today, far fewer people have experience of the brutally dangerous working conditions associated with heavy industry. At the same time, the visual reminders that support safety awareness have been largely tidied up and have given way to more straightforward forms of message. Additionally, much of the general guidance implicit in RoSPA's message has increasingly been successfully integrated into the regulatory and structural frameworks of modern life.

For whatever reasons, the visual record associated with the promotion of safety and accident prevention has, for the



most part, disappeared from view. The absence of a dedicated archive of safety material has played its part in allowing us to forget the RoSPA story.

This is why it is so exciting that RoSPA has just announced the discovery of its archive, which lay undisturbed in a warehouse since 1976 and was, until now, believed lost. The archive comprises hundreds of items of documentation, original artwork and posters from the 1930s to the early 1970s.

This means that, suddenly, there is a much more complete history of RoSPA available; particularly in relation to its promotion of a visual culture of safety and accident prevention. The discovery allows us to connect directly to an earlier period of safety history when poster messages were at the forefront of RoSPA's activities.

The origins of RoSPA date back to the end of 1916. The mechanisation of the first world war provided a context for a greatly increased number of road accidents. In the first instance, the London Safety-First Council (LSFC) was formed to co-ordinate pedestrian awareness of the dangers associated with increased traffic. Because of the war, the responsibilities attached to safer road sense were flagged up by an appeal to public duty and patriotic war effort.

The example of the LSFC was quickly followed in other cities where increased traffic congestion and military activities made the urban environment more dangerous. The various campaigns were merged into a national organisation in 1923. This was called the National Safety-First Association (NSFA). The NSFA's efforts were directed at both motorists and pedestrians. Its campaigns were organised around a local safety week, which enabled the organisers to concentrate resources and focus activity so they could clarify and add force to their message.

The discovery of RoSPA's archive has revealed that the NSFA's efforts during the 1930s largely involved pictorial

posters. This is remarkable in itself and places the NSFA alongside better known names such as London Transport, the General Post Office, Shell-Mex and BP Ltd, and the various large railway and shipping companies, in defining the scale and scope of visual communication in modern Britain.

For most of the 1920s and 1930s the NSFA was primarily concerned with promoting road safety. It was instrumental in conceptualising a consistent set of motoring norms and promoting them through the Highway Code. The advent of a coherent driver and vehicle licensing system in 1930 provided an opportunity for the association to publish *Many Happy Returns*, a small pamphlet that was a humorous tract offering advice to drivers illustrated with line drawings by Cyril Bird "Fougasse".

It's testimony to the NSFA's ambition and design sense that they employed the services of Bird, Hans "Zero" Schleger, Edward McKnight Kauffer and Abram Games to promote their efforts. These people were among the most significant designers in Britain during the 1930s.

The LSFC had also incorporated the British Industries Safety First Association (BISFA) and had, accordingly, a notional concern for industrial safety. This activity was initially much less publicly visible than road safety. The specialist focus on workshop and factory safety was specific and available to subscriber members of the association. However, as the country approached another world war factory safety became a much more widely held priority because of its associations with worker welfare, efficiency and production.

The second world war transformed the scale and scope of the NSFA's activities. In 1941 the association was granted royal patronage and was re-named the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA). At the beginning of the war RoSPA had three main areas of activity – road, industrial and home safety. It became clear to the authorities early on that civilians who had been injured in the black-out or in factories were the main users of facilities and resources prepared for victims of military attack. They saw this as a form of misappropriation and decided that it was important to address the high numbers of accidents urgently.

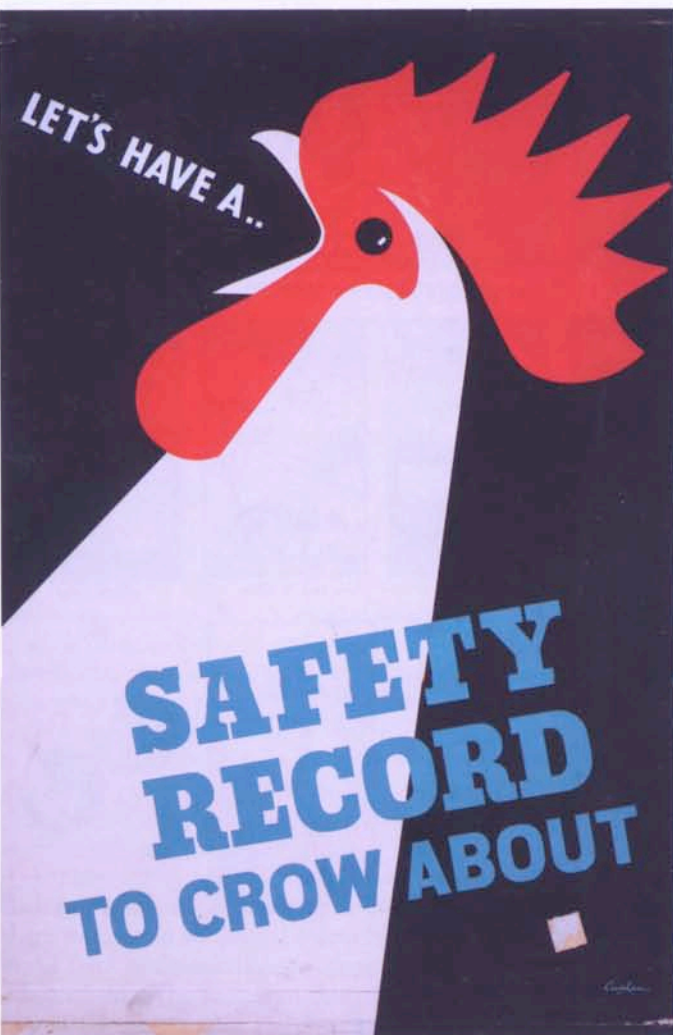
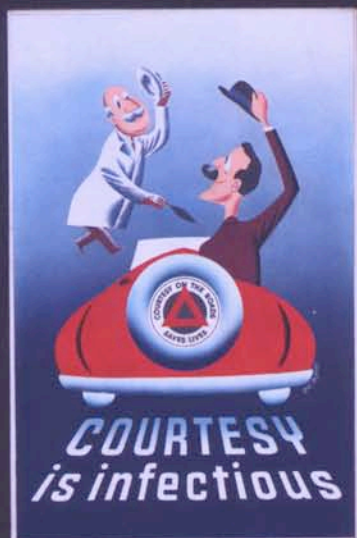
Workshop injuries were not only personally debilitating, but were inconvenient to colleagues and inefficient for production. Many workers suffered eye injuries from flying debris, splinters and shards and these injuries could easily and inexpensively be reduced by appealing to all workers to wear safety goggles. And the best way to address this was through the promotion of safe working practices. This was especially important given the effort demanded from a neophyte workforce to supply the war machine.

Accordingly, and for the duration of the war, the concerns of accident prevention were aligned with those of the war effort: efficiency, morale and production. This was why the government chose to underwrite the publication of RoSPA's safety messages. Implicit in this political decision was the recognition that graphic communication could serve the interests of government and society because it could be made widely available relatively cheaply. Forms of graphic communication at the forefront of mechanical reproduction best exploited these



**March across
when the road is clear**





features. RoSPA's printers made great use of photo-mechanical techniques in design, make-ready and printing. This, in turn, affected the design of the posters.

The demands of industrial production during the war were such that RoSPA's industrial service, closely associated with the Ministry of Labour, became its largest and most extensive service. At the height of this effort about 500,000 posters were displayed in factories and workshops around Britain.

The service provided to workshops and factories a combination of graphic posters, illustrational posters and slogan posters. This meant that a relatively small selection of posters could be displayed in new combinations and presentations kept fresh. The posters were supplemented by a series of notes, strip-cartoons and educational material for discussion. In addition, factory managers were obliged to provide permanent display areas for poster materials and a dedicated space for safety training.

After the war RoSPA had to re-orientate itself to the changing patterns of civilian life. The widespread prosperity and leisure associated with the post-war boom brought a new range of dangers – from increased road traffic and the problem of drinking and driving to various forms of new leisure activity that involved the excitement of risk.

Sometimes, progress and prosperity combined to create unexpected new risks. For example, the advent of the polio vaccination and the widespread immunisation of children from the late 1950s onwards transformed the usual risks attached to youthful adventure. The dangers of polio were well known. Epidemics associated with the water-borne virus were a recurring feature of most communities in America and Europe from the 1880s onwards. Young children were especially susceptible to the disease, which often resulted in paralysis. Hospital treatment was long drawn out and involved incarceration in a tank respirator, or iron-lung. These dangers had meant that few children were allowed much contact with standing water. However polio vaccinations suddenly made rivers, canals, ponds and lakes fatally attractive. In consequence, there was a spike in water-related accidents. This is why the RoSPA archive shows the sudden rise from the late 1960s of posters about water safety.

The risks associated with aquatic adventure were an unintended consequence of medical progress. Prosperity, holidays and water-based leisure activities also helped to change the types of risk that needed addressing. Similarly, the progressive electrification of homes associated with the progress of a materialistic consumer culture created new and unforeseen risks.

All RoSPA's posters were printed by the firm of Loxley Brothers in Sheffield. This is entirely appropriate as the history of Loxley's is closely associated with the Quaker and Yorkshire non-conformist traditions of enterprise and welfare.

From the 1920s onwards the firm was linked to the great York-based confectionery enterprise of Rowntree's. The packaging and point-of-sale promotion of Rowntree products became the bedrock of its business. The scale of operations demanded by Rowntree allowed Loxley to develop capacity and expand its activities. From the 1930s it could provide two-colour offset litho services for poster printing in 20" x 30" format.

The litho presses were electrically powered rotary action machines that could print at speed. They comprised a vertical arrangement of rollers that fed paper and



Poster No. P.S.1



Poster No. P.S.2



Poster No. P.S.3



Poster No. P.S.4



Poster No. P.S.5



Poster No. G.S.1



Poster No. R.F.2



Poster No. P.S.3



Poster No. P.S.24



Poster No. P.S.26



Poster No. P.S.32



Poster No. P.S.43



Poster No. P.S.44



Poster No. P.S.45



Poster No. P.S.13



Poster No. P.S.14



Poster No. P.S.15



Poster No. P.S.16



Poster No. P.S.17



Poster No. P.S.18



Poster No. P.S.20



Poster No. P.S.21



Poster No. P.S.22



Poster No. P.S.27



Poster No. P.S.28



Poster No. P.S.30



Poster No. P.S.36



Poster No. P.S.37



Poster No. P.S.29



Poster No. P.S.38



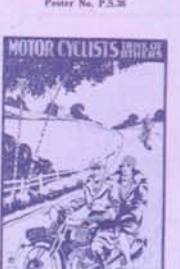
Poster No. P.S.40



Poster No. P.S.46



Poster No. P.S.47



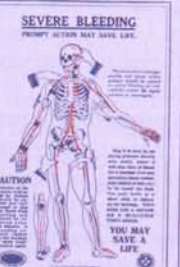
Poster No. P.S.48



Poster No. P.S.49



Poster No. P.S.50



Poster No. G.P.11



Poster No. G.P.48





ink through the press. The principle behind lithography is the antipathy between oil and water. Ink is made to stick to the parts of a surface that have been prepared with grease or oil. It can then be washed off the rest of the surface. The first surface for lithographic printing was German limestone, but the make-ready for stone litho was time-consuming. The large pieces of stone were difficult to move and the whole process from commercial art to print probably took several months. However, these difficulties were soon resolved by series of technical developments that allowed quicker and simpler make-ready and speedier printing. These developments powered the press and transformed the horizontal action of printing into a spinning vertical action. The addition of offset rollers allowed for a clean separation between paper feed and ink. Eventually, the development of photo-sensitive zinc plates and half-tone screens allowed an entirely mechanical form of image production.

Photo-mechanical make-ready also allowed for the colour-separations required for each poster to be retained on glass plates. The plates provided an immediate and accurate contact print on the sensitised zinc. This enabled RoSPA to re-issue its most effective designs regularly.

In the wartime context of economy, the machine minders at Loxley also became expert in split-duct printing. This allowed them to print an additional colour by dividing the ink trough at the front of the machine to contain two or more differently coloured inks. The success of this trick required the operators to manage the machine and its running speeds sensitively.

Artists, designers and illustrators

The NSFA had started out in the 1930s hiring the services of the most talented and sophisticated designers of the period and the quality of RoSPA's visual communications was advanced further in the 1940s by Ashley Havinden and Tom Eckersley, who were on its publicity committee.

Remarkably, the second world war provided an opportunity for RoSPA to commission work by designers in uniform and by émigré designers. The work of Manfred Reiss, H A Rothholz, and Jan Lewitt and George Him featured regularly in this period.

Eckersley and Pat Keely were established poster designers who contributed regularly to RoSPA campaigns. Leonard Cusden and Philip Mendoza also became established members of the RoSPA publicity team. Cusden became RoSPA's creative director after 1945 and played a key role in advising his colleagues on points of effectiveness and economy in design. His role at RoSPA allowed him to produce many designs for the society and to define its house style during the 1940s and 1950s. The largest number of designs in the archive are by him.

Humour had been a staple of RoSPA's campaigns since Cyril Bird's designs in the 1930s. This continued into the 1940s. While Mendoza designed a number of posters, his real contribution to RoSPA's campaign came in his strip-drawings of the misadventures of Percy Vere, a well intentioned but hapless character. His pictures were produced in both poster and booklet form and provided an alternative

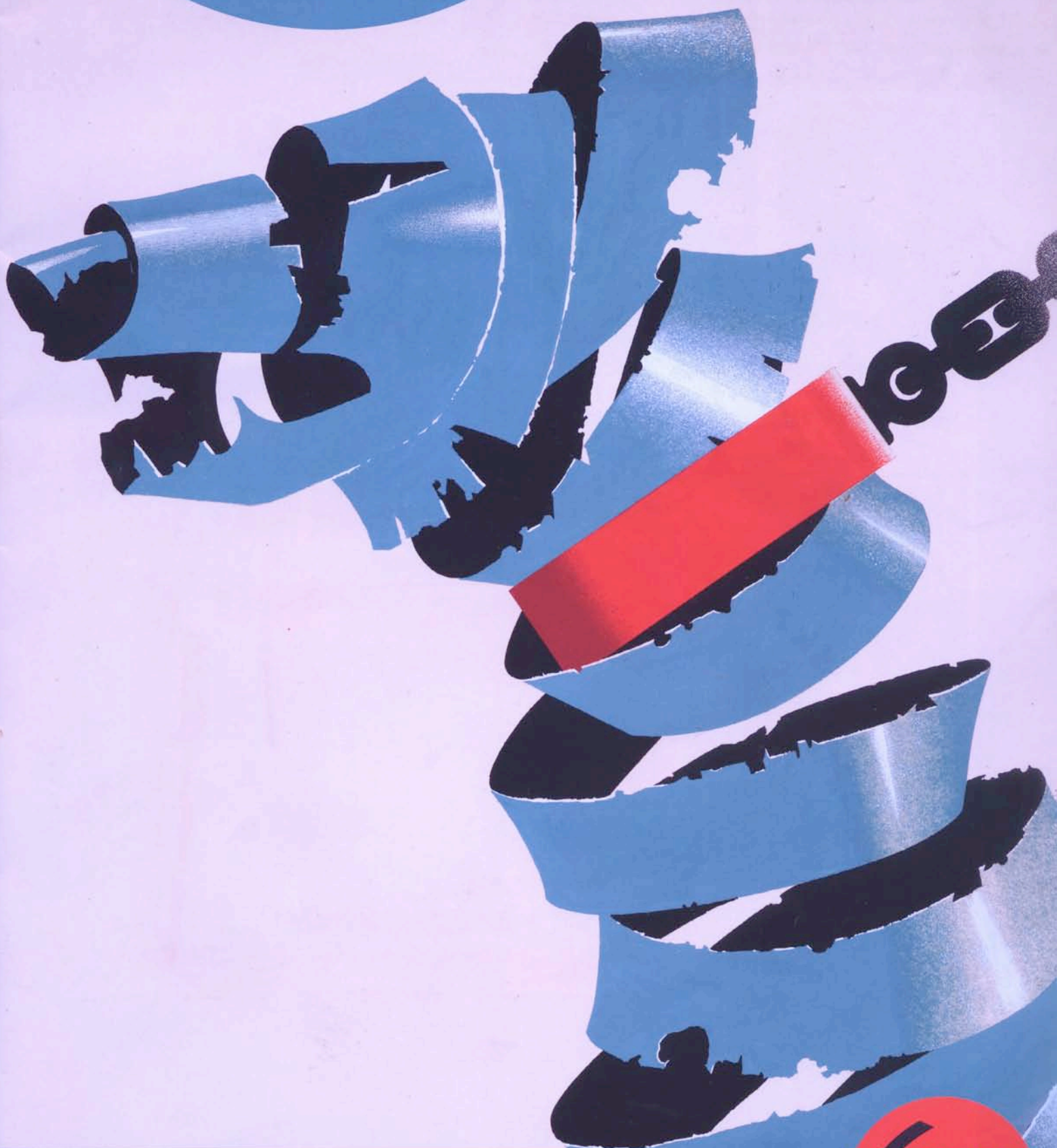
ILLUSTRATION

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