

## JOHN THEODORE KENNEY

Every four seconds, someone in the world buys a product bearing the image of Thomas the tank engine. That image was the work of John Theodore Kenney.

He was born in 1911 in the Belgrave area of Leicester, and studied at the Leicester College of Art. After graduation, he joined Slaters, the Kibworth-based firm of commercial artists where he worked for over forty years. At Slaters, he met his future wife, Peggy.

In the Second World War, Kenney served with the 44th Searchlight Regiment and the 121st Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. He landed in Normandy on D-Day and, though not an official war artist, recorded the scenes he witnessed in a series of graphic drawings. As his regiment moved across Europe with the Allied Forces, he created a visual record of the events as he saw them.

Returning to Kibworth, he resumed his work with Slaters but resigned because of ill-health to concentrate on his painting, and to work on illustrations for two of his own books, *The Grey Pony* in 1954 and *The Shetland Pony* in 1955.

It was as a sporting artist that Kenney made a living and gained his reputation. The hunting landscape of south Leicestershire was inspiration for his vivid and energetic scenes. His preferred canvas size was two feet by three feet, but he could adapt with ease to the constraints of book illustration demanded by Ladybird Books and Thomas the Tank Engine.

His freelance status came to the attention of the Revd Wilbert Awdry, author of *Thomas the Tank Engine*, and Kenney became his third artist. 'We got on splendidly', Awdry recalled. 'He was interested in the work and used to go down to his station [in Kibworth] and draw railway engines from life.' In the first book illustrated by Kenney, *The Eight Famous Engines*, Kenney's attention to detail are obvious.

The steam engines Kenney painted were longer, larger and less like the 'toy trains' of previous artists. His human characters became *real* people: pushing barrows, leaning on shovels, and running along platforms. The scenery recalled the airy, relaxed country scenes of 1950s railway posters. He brought a much-needed lightness of touch and a naturalism that had been previously lacking. He also introduced new characters including Donald and Douglas (the Scottish Twins), Daisy, Diesel and Duncan. His last illustrations in the Railway Series were for *Gallant Old Engine*, (1962).

He illustrated 31 books for Ladybird Books in what is now regarded as that publisher's 'Golden Age', including the series on British historical figures, Charles Dickens, Admiral Nelson, Captain Scott, Oliver Cromwell, Florence Nightingale and

Queen Elizabeth I. He also illustrated one of the best-loved fiction books, *Tootles the Taxi* and the early Robin Hood series, *The Ambush* and *The Silver Arrow*, and provided the artwork for a 1956 book of motor vehicle characters which had a strong artistic affinity with the Awdry books.

John died in December 1972 at the age of 61 years. His art lives on.