Michael Bond, creator of Paddington Bear

Introduction

In 1968 Michael Bond, creator of Paddington Bear, moved to Fairacre in Haslemere, where he lived for the next ten years. It was here that he wrote several Paddington books, the scripts for the original Paddington television series and the first three Olga da Polga stories, inspired by his daughter Karen's pet guinea pig.

The unveiling of a blue plaque at Fairacre therefore celebrates not only one of Britain's best-loved writers, but also Haslemere's place in the story of a literary icon. Paddington Bear had already become a national treasure by the time Michael arrived in Haslemere. First introduced in *A Bear Called Paddington* in 1958, the character went on to capture the hearts of readers around the world.

In 1994 when the Channel Tunnel was finally linked the British workers gave a Paddington Bear to their French counterparts. Hardly surprising given the books have been translated into over 40 different languages, including Latin. The books have inspired television adaptations, three feature films and, most recently, an award-winning West End musical. Paddington's place in British culture was etched into the nation's memory when Queen Elizabeth II took tea with Paddington. A video capturing the memorable encounter introduced the 'Platinum Party at the Palace' concert on 4th June 2022. The video has had over 22 million views on YouTube and still counting. Following the Queen's death three months later thousands of mourners left tributes of Paddington Bears and marmalade sandwiches outside the royal palaces. Behind this remarkable success was Michael Bond.

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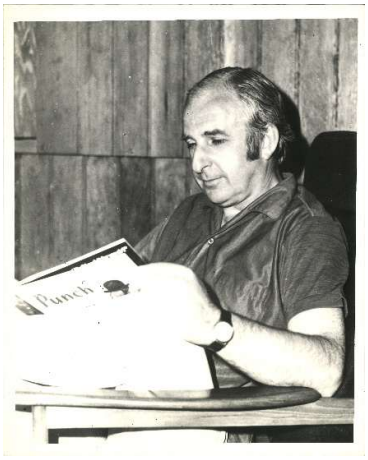

On Christmas Eve 1956, Michael bought a small bear he found sitting all alone on a shelf in Selfridges. He gave it to his wife Brenda and named the bear after nearby Paddington Station. Priced at seven shillings and sixpence this wasn't a cheap gift. However the investment repaid in ways beyond Michael's wildest dreams inspiring the stories that would change his life and eventually make Haslemere part of Paddington's history.

Paddington Bear Becomes a Classic Michael's first book about the small bear from Darkest Peru only took ten days to write but it did the rounds of several publishers before William Collins finally took a chance on *A Bear Called Paddington* and published it on 13th October 1958. The timing was especially memorable, coming just two months after the birth of Michael and Brenda's daughter, Karen. Readers immediately took Paddington to their hearts. His kindness, politeness and famous luggage label "Please look after this bear. Thank you." made him one of Britain's most enduring fictional characters. Michael was fond of marmalade and naturally assumed that Paddington would be too because bears have a sweet tooth. In the first book Paddington arrives with only a suitcase and a half-eaten jar of marmalade. This diet is a constant thread throughout all the stories and films and Paddington always keeps a sandwich under his hat for emergencies. Naturally sandwiches are a central theme in the tea with Queen Elizabeth II and to our amazement we learn she also keeps a marmalade sandwich in her handbag for emergencies!.

Fairacre and the Haslemere Years

Karen remembers it as a happy childhood home and the setting for some of her father's most productive years. Her pet guinea pig, Olga da Polga, inspired Michael to create another much-loved series.

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Observing the animal's exploits in the garden led to *The Tales of Olga da Polga* in 1971, followed by *Olga Meets Her Match* in 1973 and *Olga Carries On* in 1977. Three Paddington novels were also written there: *Paddington Takes the Air* (1970), *Paddington on Top* (1974) and *Paddington Takes the Test* (1979), along with a number of the picture books for younger readers and all the scripts for the first Paddington television series, first aired in 1974. During the next 30 years Michael focused on children's television and an adult mystery series of books, 'Monsieur Pamplemousse'. The central character is a retired detective from the Sûreté Nationale who transitions into a career as an undercover restaurant inspector for Le Guide. Maybe not surprisingly, given Michael's love of animals, Monsieur Pamplemousse is assisted by highly intelligent bloodhound, Pommes Frites. Karen attended the Royal Naval School at the top of Farnham Lane and remembers once meeting another famous local resident, author Alistair MacLean of *Where Eagles Dare* fame.

Karen and Paddington Having grown up alongside Paddington, Karen spent more than thirty years protecting and promoting her father's creation, taking care of the subsidiary rights and leaving her father free to write. They collaborated on a number of picture books and, since his death in 2017, Karen now looks after her father's Literary Estate. Current Fairacre owner, Stephanie Stephenson, recently discovered an intriguing letter written by Michael from Fairacre in 1973. In it, he tells an American reader that nine of his books were already available in the United States and that he was hard at work on the next. Karen confirms that her father always replied to readers' letters and, until he could no longer hold a pen due to arthritis, always wrote to them in longhand. Karen recalls how events from her own life often found their way into Paddington's adventures. When she learnt to ride, Paddington entered a gymkhana. Later, when she was taking driving lessons, her father turned the experience into *Paddington Takes the Test*.

Those Famous Red Wellies Another event Michael took from real life was incorporated into Paddington's wardrobe, his famous red wellies. This all began because Shirley Clarkson ran a small company making soft toys. In 1971 she made two bears with a striking resemblance to Paddington as Christmas presents for her two children. Karen recalls "These bears made their way into commercial production and to stop them falling over Shirley fitted them with children's wellingtons. It wasn't long before either my father or his agent saw one in a shop. Not surprisingly they consulted solicitors and Mrs Clarkson and her husband Eddie were summoned to a meeting in London. Quite by chance my father got into the same lift as them and, seeing Eddie holding a bear, realised which meeting they were going to. Apparently by the time they all got out the lift a deal had been struck and they were granted the very first Paddington licence." Karen adds "The arrangement proved successful and, as family legend has it, helped pay the school fees of Shirley's son, the future television presenter Jeremy Clarkson.

A Lasting Legacy Whilst Fairacre has been somewhat remodelled since Karen's time the basic house is the same. The room where Michael did most of his writing, mainly in the mornings and the dining room where Michael would entertain Karen with conversations with Paddington are still intact. Karen says "The character of Paddington is so real to me it's like he's another member of the family. Well he is." Karen, for over thirty years, ran the commercial side of the Paddington Bear story. She says "My father loved writing, it was his passion he didn't do it for the money and so he never relished being involved with the business side of things. Of course, this only got bigger with merchandising and later with the films." Karen is grateful she's had a job that she could never have dreamt of that has been such a joy and a privilege. Michael passed away in 2017 and is buried in Paddington Old Cemetery. His headstone bears the simple inscription that readers have cherished for generations: "Please look after this bear. Thank you." Karen's one regret is that her father never lived to see Paddington share tea with Queen Elizabeth II. Yet the blue plaque at Fairacre is a reminder that Haslemere played a small but important part in the story of a bear who became a national treasure.