LOCAL STROUD LINKS TO THE 1948 FOUNDING OF OUR NHS – AND TO THAT ‘ANIMAL FARM’ FILM THAT WE ALL KNOW

Paul Halas is interviewed by Richard House

Richard House [RH]: Paul, at the recent "NHS70" Stroud celebration on 7 July, I learnt for the first time about your parents' extraordinary link with the founding of our NHS. Could you tell us about their profession, and how they came to be involved?

Paul Halas [PH]: Both my mother, Joy Batchelor, and my father, John Halas, were film animators. When they started on their career paths in the early 1930s the animation – or cartoon – film industry in Europe was in its infancy. There had been a handful of productions, notably in France, but in the USA cartoons had really taken off, with characters such as Koko the Clown, Mickey Mouse and Felix the Cat already household names.

With little professional expertise to call on, the animated film companies starting up in Europe mostly had to 'feel their way' into the business, with results that often looked crude compared to the slick work coming from across the Atlantic.

My mum, Joy, found her way into the business via commercial art, was given a trial in an early animation studio in London, and quickly developed a talent for animation that exceeded that of her seniors (though the studio went bust, with many arts related jobs following).

Meanwhile, in Hungary my dad, John, also discovered hidden talents that emerged as he tried different jobs. He quickly became interested in the arts, realising that animated film could exist as a fine art form as well as entertainment. Although opportunities in pre-war Hungary were limited for Jews, dad was able to work as part of an independent animation company in Budapest, and on the strength of his work there he was invited to set up a studio in London. The year was 1936. He interviewed several candidates to work as animators with him, but there was only one whose talent really stood out: Joy Batchelor.

RH: As I understand it, Paul, your mum and dad were recruited to the war effort in their animation work. Can you say something about that? And what was your parents' association with the Stroud area?

PH: My parents never actually lived in Stroud, though as some readers will no doubt remember, their company, Halas & Batchelor, did maintain a studio in the town from 1950 to 1987.

Fortunately for both my parents, a film project they had both been working on in Budapest in 1939 fell through so they made a timely return to London. Many of my father's immediate and most of his extended family didn't survive the Holocaust.

At the start of World War 2, work started to roll in, and what had been a diet of advertising jobs quickly changed to public information films. As an enemy alien, my dad faced the prospect of internment on the Isle of Man, which resulted in marriage with my mum and the formation of Halas & Batchelor. To her dismay, my mum had now officially become an enemy alien! – but an appeal to the Home Office, on the grounds that they were making invaluable propaganda films, resulted in their return to London... – to face the Blitz.
They survived a direct hit on their block of flats, though as a result my mum had chronic back pain for the rest of her life. They moved their operation to the marginally safer town of Bushey (near Watford), and by the end of the war Halas & Batchelor had turned out around 70 animated productions – a rich mix of information, propaganda and training films.

Post war, their studio grew. Running the company, my parents were often more involved in direction and production than in the nitty-gritty of animation, though they always had a great level of involvement in design and construction. My dad freely admitted that my mum was the more talented illustrator and writer, but he had the personality, ambition and ruthless drive that's necessary for success at that level.

As the 1950s approached, John and Joy began planning their most ambitious project to date – a feature-length animated adaptation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. This was to be the first such film made in the UK, and required massive investment – some of which turned out to be indirectly provided by US government sources – no doubt for propaganda (Cold War) purposes. The company also needed far greater capacity in terms of staff and studio space to realise such a production. Fortunately for them a company that had ample space and many talented artists was ripe to be taken over. It too had produced many information films during the war, and its leading figure, Anson Dyer, was on the point of retiring. It was located at Stratford Priory, Stroud.

**RH:** I remember watching that iconic *Animal Farm* film in the late 1960s at my grammar school in Bruton (Somerset): the whole school of 250 children watched it, and I can remember everyone being utterly entranced. And that was made by your parents, Paul! – that's just awesome. Might any of the work done for the film have happened in Stroud?

I understand that the Charley films were made in 1946 and 1947 in time to coincide with the advent of the Welfare State under Clement Atlee's new post-war Labour government. Could you say more about these films, and the contribution your parents made to the launching of the NHS in 1948?

**PH:** While some of the 'business' involved in setting up the production took place in the USA and London, the *Animal Farm* film itself was chiefly made here in Stroud. My mum was responsible for writing the screenplay and script, which involved a balancing act between keeping the American backers onside and not upsetting Orwell's widow Sonia (in the event she was not a fan of the optimistic ending the film was given); while both my parents were involved in designing all the characters and overseeing the animation.

Incidentally, one of the senior animators, Harold Whitaker, who had been with Anson Dyer prior to the Halas and Batchelor takeover, lived and animated in Stroud right until the studio finally closed in 1987. In his time he trained scores of very talented artists, and is remembered as one of the finest animators this country ever produced. He died in 2013 – and no doubt many of your readers will remember him.

The production of *Animal Farm* took a staff of approximately 100 people three years to make, required upwards of a quarter of a million individual drawings, and used up to two tons of paint. The animation drawings were traced on to acetate 'cels' with very fine brushes, and the colours were then filled in with oil paints, before being filmed, one frame at a time (24 frames for a second of film!), with a rostrum camera. As you can imagine, it was laborious work.
Not only was *Animal Farm* the first British animated feature film, it was almost unique in being aimed at a predominantly grown-up audience. It was a box-office success both sides of the Atlantic, and put Halas & Batchelor firmly on the international map. It would, however, be almost another decade before they attempted another feature.

Now a fast rewind to the immediate post-war years. Clem Attlee’s Labour Government was preparing to introduce the Welfare State, but wanted a means to 'sell' the concept to a public for whom it contained many unfamiliar and, even, revolutionary ideas. My parents had come from ordinary backgrounds, and following the horror and suffering of the war they were fully behind building a fairer society, in which all would be looked after regardless of their means.

The government wanted to inform the public about their plans, and my mum and dad had an animation studio and the expertise built up from producing information films throughout the war. And so Charley was born: an everyman type of chap who was a little sceptical of all the new-fangled ideas being brought in, but after a few exchanges with a rather patronising narrator, he would end up convinced of their merits.

The government accepted the concept eagerly, and between 1946 and 1947, seven Charlie films were produced and went out on general release. They involved all aspects of the Welfare State, and included ‘Your Very Good Health’, screened at Stroud’s recent NHS celebrations, describing the forthcoming National Health Service.

RH: Paul, you must feel very proud of your parents’ vital contribution to one of the most important government social initiatives in human history, anywhere! Or as you said yourself in a recent press letter, “The NHS remains the most powerful institution for social justice ever seen”.

How old were you when you first became aware of all this? – and are there any records about all this wonderful cultural history in the local library or in our Stratford Park Museum?

PH: I’m immensely proud of what my parents achieved, and here I want to pay tribute to my sister, Vivien, who gave up a career running a graphic design studio in Paris to oversee the Halas and Batchelor film collection, and has spent the past 25 years saving our parents’ legacy for posterity.

With hindsight I can say that growing up with very driven film-maker parents was an odd childhood, although of course at the time it was Viv’s and my normality. Dad remained a distant figure until we were old enough to talk about things that interested him – films and art – while mum did what she could to balance career and motherhood. Her background and her gender made what she achieved all the more remarkable: I still bristle when people speak of my dad without realising my mum made every bit as great a contribution; but the demands upon her, plus being in constant pain, took their toll, and she went into a long decline from the mid-1960s until her death in 1991.

I can remember when, in 1955, the studio relocated from Stratford Priory to the Old Vicarage at Cainscross. I was just 6 years old, and I recall the smell of tomatoes growing in the conservatory at the rear of the building, and playing with the miscellany of animation equipment that was being unpacked. I was aware
that *Animal Farm* had made mum and dad kind of famous, but at the time I was more interested, perhaps excusably, in playing Davy Crockett games.

Animated films were part of Viv’s and my childhood. We were often whisked off to film festivals in lovely (and sometimes less lovely) foreign locations, and sat through seemingly endless screenings of odd, wonderful or dreadful animated films. I suppose we were very privileged, but gradually we came to take less and less of what was going on around us for granted.

We met film-makers from the USA, from the Soviet Union, from Japan, Romania, France, Yugoslavia…. One of dad’s great missions was to preside over international film societies, share one another’s films and foster international friendship – even at the height of the Cold War. He and my mum had always been politically to the Left, and knowing what madness and destruction can come from intolerance he was desperate to help bring about greater understanding amongst people. That alone was a pretty amazing achievement.

The Charley films were early examples of films with social content; but although the bulk of our parents’ subsequent output was commercial they returned to social themes on a number of occasions. Commissioned work paid for their pet projects and experimentation – for which they were well known.

Last year there was an exhibition on Halas and Batchelor at the Museum in the Park, featuring showings of some of the films, artwork and one of the old editing machines. Many of their films, including the Charley series, are available from the Halas and Batchelor website, at [www.halasandbatchelor.co.uk](http://www.halasandbatchelor.co.uk), or via the archive of the British Film Institute at [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk).

RH: This is all quite enthralling, Paul. You tell a story of great achievement, creativity and sheer hard work and commitment, that spans one of the most fascinating periods of Britain’s social and cultural history. Thank you sharing your parent’s inspiring story with us. One last question: what is your own most treasured memory of your parents; and how would you want your parents’ legacy and contribution to be most remembered?

PH: Perhaps one of the best memories has nothing to do with film or their careers – just family. A holiday we took in Hungary in 1959, by car. The journey was punctuated by punctures, and I recall being stopped on a road in Germany by a very officious motorcycle cop. Both dad and mum were mumbling that he’d probably been a Gestapo officer; well, there was family history – and you should’ve seen the officer!

We stayed for a while in Budapest with our paternal grandmother – a formidable Jewish matriarch who’d survived everything – before travelling along a succession of dirt roads to the vast and beautiful Lake Balaton. It was only three years after the tragic 1956 Hungarian uprising against the Soviets, and the country was still heavily scarred, but everyone was immensely generous spirited and we were constantly pried with food. One of the favourite Hungarian ‘delicacies’ is carp: a very noble fish but not good eating to British tastes. It resembles mud. They disguise it with loads of paprika, but then it tastes like mud with lots of paprika. The holiday was wonderful, and my memories of it remain in sharp focus.

Viv’s and my parents’ legacy? Leaving aside odd childhoods and parental flaws – after all, this isn’t a ‘warts ‘n all’ exposé’ – the sum total of what John and Joy achieved is considerable. Over 50 years they created over 2,000 films. As well as
producing mainstream commercial material they ploughed profits back into fine art films, experimental films, developed many revolutionary technical innovations, and were responsible for discovering and nurturing animation talent – dozens of leading animators learnt their craft at H&B. Last but not least, they worked to improve international understanding between people. The boy from Budapest and the girl from Watford did pretty well.