

## An Interview with Wilf Prigmore

### Julia Round

*Writer and editor Wilf Prigmore worked at Fleetway/IPC in the 1970s. He was Group Editor for Girls' Adventure Comics, co-creator of Misty and editor of Tammy, amongst many other roles.*

*The following interview is taken from conversations with Wilf by telephone, email and in person, between November 2016 and December 2019.*

**Julia:** What drew you into comics – how did you get to IPC?

**Wilf:** I joined, I think it was about 1971. I got in there by accident, I was a trainee sub on a local free-sheet, called *News Shopper*, you may or may not have heard of that one. Kelvin MacKenzie used to work there before he became quite big and then obviously editor of the *Sun* so I worked with his dad and Kelvin MacKenzie and his brothers were there before I joined. Then there was a bit of a cut back, they got rid of somewhere like twenty out of twenty-four journalists and a friend of mine, his dad worked at IPC and he knew there was a vacancy in the competitions department.

That is a bizarre thing – an outfit there who wrote competitions for everything within the company.

**Julia:** Really? So they weren't devised by the individual comics editors or writers?

**Wilf:** No. We wrote competitions for the girls' group and the boys' titles and instead of putting it in internal mail like some other people did I thought "I'll go around and deliver the stuff and see what goes on." I just got to know people that way and somebody said 'Oh, you're the sort of person we'd like in the juveniles and do you fancy coming over here?' Which I'd never thought of before and I ended up in a vacancy on *Tammy* and then as the sub editor on loan. That was for Gerry Finley-Day; he was the editor, Pat Mills was the sub editor. I worked there with Joe Collins – he was a good writer and quite a big part of the comics at the time. So my first introduction into comics was with some people who became quite big in the field eventually.

**Julia:** What sort of time was that? Was *Tammy* quite well established by then or was this quite early on?

**Wilf:** No, it had just about started, I'm not sure how long it'd been going when I joined but could only have been a few months. I remember seeing the first issue and I think I probably got involved in doing letters page or competitions or something to do with the early ones while I was still in the other department.

**Julia:** You've said that Joe [Collins] could turn his hand to anything, and I've heard from other people that sub editor roles and the roles more generally could be quite varied. Was it the same duties all the time? Was it just editing or were you rewriting and scripting and so on?

**Wilf:** It was all sorts, first of all scripts would come in where the editor or somebody would have spoken to a writer first, sorted out the story or idea. Once that was thrashed out the scripts would come in and so we'd look at that before it went out to the artist. As you'll know, a lot of our artists lived in Spain, so the problem there was that it'd go out to a translator, possibly we had an agency in Brussels, and it may have gone to Brussels to be translated and then sent on to Madrid or Barcelona or somewhere else.

That was always fraught with problems! I learnt early on that with the British artists you could write in short-hand, you could say somebody looks like a character from *Grange Hill* or whatever was current at the time, or when you talk about, say, the weather, we had a peasouper or some colloquial thing. You wouldn't have to explain that a peasouper meant thick fog. When we got a piece of artwork back one day, there was a school scene with children sitting down at their desks. They seemed to be spitting something as the teacher walked in the door, and there were these black things flying through the air, and I thought what on earth is going on here? I went back to the script, and it said "Teacher," – I think it was Hermione – "Teacher enters the room, children blow raspberries."

That was quite a good lesson actually, and you realized after that you just couldn't take things for granted; you had to spell out particularly for translators exactly what you wanted, and not to write in shorthand.

**Julia:** Sure. I can't imagine what the artist must have made of that. He must've felt like "These English schools are crazy!"

**Wilf:** Well, exactly. I remember Kelvin Gosnell – he was from *2000AD*, but I think this might have been on one of the others, *Tornado* maybe – I saw him one day, and he said he had a piece of artwork back and in a corner of one of the frames there was a one-legged character with an eye patch, and what looked like a parrot on his shoulder. He said, "What on earth is this about?" And turned out they'd described the scene with a one-armed bandit in the corner.

So that was then part of the sub's job, you'd have to be very careful, learn to be quite pedantic, and make sure that people understood what you wanted. Also, some people were quite good writers in terms of maybe doing a book or something, but they weren't very visual. There is one script that I remember really well, it came in and the chap had written a balloon that was 70 words long. You imagine trying to get 70 words, it would take half a page or so. You had that sort of thing. There was a lot of re-writing and you had to make things really fit into a picture.

And make the pictures work! You couldn't have ten pictures of two people talking. You had to move that along. That really was the main part of the sub editor's work. Then, when the artwork came back, to check that really you've got the pictures that you need. Then it went out for lettering. In the early days, it was hand lettered, there were a few specialists who did that. Then gradually we got the computer sort of lettering or machine sets. Then it had to be read again because sometimes people couldn't read any alterations we'd made on the scripts, or there were typos and different things, so you'd have to read the balloons when they came back and make sure they were right.

So that sort of rounded that off. And then it was adding your bits and pieces: “Great News!”, what's coming next week, or been done this week. And the general production things – making sure it got away on time and then you'd have to wrap it all up, and deliver to the printers. So yeah there was quite a lot going on.

**Julia:** It sounds hectic! And the lead-time on each issue is what, about six weeks or something for most of the comics?

**Wilf:** I would say that was probably about right. I know we always lived at a different period. I used to have a little monthly calendar on my watchstrap because I could never remember what day it was, we was living in a different time. And if you did any annuals or specials, well, with an annual, you're almost a year in advance. That is why, particularly any annuals with pop pictures or football pictures, they are always out of date –the teams have changed or people have left the group, or died or whatever. Annuals are really out of date before you've bought them.

**Julia:** So you don't leave that stuff till last on the annuals, you just do it as you go along and hope for the best, I guess? Or end up radically changing it at the end?

**Wilf:** Yes, yes that's all you could do. Unfortunately, instead of being a showcase for the title, they [the annuals] were seen as a bit of a moneymaker for the company because mostly they were reprints. We tried giving a small budget to put in at least a couple of new stories, you'd try to get a new “Bella”, for instance, if it was *Tammy*. You'd try and get something new. But invariably there would be a lot of stuff that you went down the vaults and picked up – things that had been printed years ago.

**Julia:** Were they just filled with whatever was there? Would you go looking for something in particular, or just put in whatever would suit?

**Wilf:** There wasn't always a record of these things – unless you had some bound volumes of old issues. If you've imagine you got 30 odd pages for each publication coming back from the printer, they'd just be wrapped up in brown paper, stuck on a shelf somewhere, we've got X amount of titles, so you've got loads and loads of wrapped up envelopes. Then one day somebody would try and undo them perhaps, and then maybe get all the copies together for a particular strip, but it was a little bit haphazard, you couldn't always go and lay your hands on things. I think it's a bit easier now, if you've got an electronic filing system. But everything was there in physical format, and there were just rows and rows and shelves of things.

**Julia:** It sounds fairly chaotic to work within!

**Wilf:** Yes.

**Julia:** Organized chaos on a weekly basis, maybe.

**Wilf:** Sort of, yes! Then of course, you had your post to deal with because there were very few artists who lived nearby. John Armstrong for instance, he was in Middlesbrough, Mario Capaldi too. There were three or four artists that lived around the Middlesbrough region. The post was much better now than these days. You could not absolutely rely on it, but it invariably would come, and there was more than

one delivery a day. But things got late sometimes, and sometimes an artist would jump on a train or drive down and bring things.

It was sometimes a problem, there were post strikes. Sometimes Mario Capaldi and John Armstrong would have to bring their pieces down on the train from Middleborough, and this probably cost them most of their fee! It was a big issue with the serials especially as of course you can't substitute something else.

**Julia:** I've always wondered why so many of the foreign studios were used for British comics art. Do you know how this came about? Was it cost effective, or because they were the best? Why there was there was this kind of arrangement sending stuff to Spain, to Barcelona and so on?

**Wilf:** Well, I think they had some fantastic artists of course. They and America had a bit more of a tradition of comics work, and being held in some sort of respect. Maybe it was just something that they would aspire to, thinking, well, it's not a career that's in any way demeaning. The Spanish seemed to be particularly good at it, there were some really good artists there. I think they certainly filled *2000AD* and *Misty* and a lot of the newer titles over the years.

But then again, we had some very good ones here, people like John Armstrong who worked in the industry for years, but I think there weren't very many new artists in this country coming into the business. Say one or two. I don't know about nowadays, of course, I haven't been involved for years, but there wasn't a great interest for new artists to start.

**Julia:** Can you talk to me a bit about how particular titles came about then? How were new titles proposed and decided on?

**Wilf:** With IPC, they were really originally imitators of DC Thomson. I think all the people who started it, actually had come from DC Thomson or they'd written for them. John Purdie was a Thomson man. He ran the girls' group at the time. Gerry Finley-Day, Ian MacDonald, John Wagner, they'd all been at DC Thomson or working for them. Malcolm Shaw as well. Joe Collins. I'd say, really there was a real Scottish entourage, who'd all come down and set up this rival company at IPC.

I think they liked the freedom of IPC, because I heard from a few people that they were terribly mean at Thomson. If you wanted a new pencil, you had to take the stub of your old one in to show them that you had used it, you hadn't taken it home, and then you got a new pencil. I think they looked upon the staff maybe as their offspring. Malcolm told me one day that he'd been called in by the bosses because he'd been seen coming into work from a different direction, and one of the young ladies had lived roughly in the direction he was coming from. If there's anything untoward, they really didn't tolerate it. I don't think there was anything going on! They just put two and two together and came up with five.

So they came to IPC and it was a lot freer. There was quite a good atmosphere there. There was a pub directly opposite and a lot of time was spent in there. I think a lot of ideas were probably hatched in the pub. But basically, the early comics were not imitations, but set up specifically to rival *Bunty* and the rest – I think *Judy* was around at the time.

**Julia:** Yes – so they bring out *Bunty*, you hit back with *Tammy*. They bring out *Judy* and there's *Sandie*. You can see it in the boys' titles as well, I think. It bounces back and forth. "They've got a war title, we'll have one too", and so on.

**Wilf:** That's right, yes. Basically, that's how it started. They just set up as rivals. Then, of course, you started getting your own slightly different feel to the IPC comics. I think DC Thomson's titles could sometimes feel quite Scottish – I remember when I was a kid reading "Pansy Potter, Strongman's Daughter" in the *Beano* and it never made sense to me like the other story titles, because of course it doesn't rhyme unless you say it in Scottish! It's a small thing but it can make you feel a bit disconnected.

**Julia:** You say it was quite a good atmosphere at IPC and there was a lot of freedom. Were people taking their work seriously, or was it, "Let's knock out something quickly this week just to entertain"? Do you know what I mean?

**Wilf:** No, it was taken seriously. There was fun, obviously, along the way. You might come up with an alternative ending to a story that was completely flippant because it didn't appear. I mean, Pat Mills and I, on the wall we had a graph sheet with what we called a "Vomitometer", and if there was something that made you want to vomit, a real horrible idea that had come in from somebody, you'd put it up there and give them a score, and you'd look at the end of the day, and see how's the scoresheet going on the Vomitometer for terrible ideas.

You did have fun, but quite often you'd be sitting down, we'd have a chat, be asking "Where's it going to go from here, or what other gimmicks have we got?" There'd be a lot of ideas thrown around. A bit of head scratching, but at the end of the day, you're trying to get a good story, a sensible result.

I think the flippancy sometimes showed more in the little touches in the background. For instance, in one of our period stories, there was a shop, Gosnell's Pie and Mash Shop. Well, I put that in because Kelvin Gosnell, editor of *2000AD*, loved his pie and mash. So we just put that little thing in there, and then somewhere in one of his stories, there's a Prigmore's Parlour of Peace. So quite often there'd be little in jokes that nobody else would know, we all looked at each other's publications of course, and you'd say, "Oh, he's having a go at me this week."

**Julia:** It sounds from some of the reading I've done that the new stories that were being created and the ideas that were being thrown around were very much responsive to the audience that were out there. Obviously you had the voting coupon and letters page in each issue, but I've heard about *2000AD*, that there was a big chart that ran along the wall of the office that was showing how each story was doing each week. Was this sort of data used a lot?

**Wilf:** Um, no... I don't remember that chart. Obviously we looked at any feedback we got by way of letters and things and you try to gauge what was most popular, but we didn't have any sort of chart. You'd instinctively know, in *Tammy* for instance, that anything with ballet, gymnastics or horses would be a hit. Unless you'd set out to write it really badly, those three things would always be popular.

**Julia:** Did you get a lot of letters through?

**Wilf:** Yes, we used to get quite a few. I think kids responded in different ways. They seemed to particularly like things like “Bella [at the Bar]”, who was very down to earth. I remember when that started it was called ‘I Will Succeed’. That’s obviously what she always wanted to do, but it wasn’t really that catchy, and she had long hair. So Gerry’s brilliant idea, Gerry Finley-Day, he said Olga Korbut – she was incredibly popular at the time, wasn’t she? A little, very slight kid – he said we should have somebody like that with bunches and short hair, so I think she became a bit of an amalgam of Olga and John Armstrong’s niece. That’s how that came about and it just went from there. It’s a character that lasted for years and that probably was one of the most popular stories that we’d ever had.

**Julia:** Sure, it’s definitely one fans remember. When you think about *Tammy* that’s the one that springs to mind.

**Wilf:** Yes. We had quite a good contact with the Gymnastics Association, but it never got too formal. We got lots of invitations and they were quite keen to have the enthusiasm [in gymnastics] stoked up if you like, but because Bella was so unorthodox, she was a health and safety nightmare really, they couldn’t be seen to be too closely associated with somebody who’s willing to do gymnastics on scaffolding. I’m not sure if we’d even be allowed to do it nowadays!

**Julia:** Were there many complaints received about any of the IPC girls’ comics? I know that obviously various boys’ titles like *Action* had problems, but when I look at comics like *Misty*, there is quite a lot of horror and trauma in there. Did the girls’ comics ever attract negative attention, or did they just sneak under the radar?

**Wilf:** I don’t remember really any complaints about *Misty*. I know we were fairly careful, we were pushing the boundaries with some of the stories but it was never intended to be a horror comic. I think if Pat Mills had had his way it would have been. I can tell you some stories if we want to concentrate on *Misty* some time, how it came about, because it’s not quite the way everybody thinks, according to Pat.

**Julia:** I’d really like to know how it came about because the book I’m writing is mostly about *Misty*.

**Wilf:** Pat’s obviously made a career out of being the Godfather of British Comics, but let’s just say his recollection of the start of *Misty* is slightly clouded. There’s a lot of truth in it, but the way *Misty* came about wasn’t exactly as he said. They’d set up this new scheme at IPC of having another tier of managers – it became very top heavy there in the end with managers and that – but they’d set up this whole group editor scheme, and one of my first tasks as a group editor was to come up with a girls’ mystery comic.

Now I don’t know how much Pat had been involved with John Sanders and the directors at the time. Things were always going on that you weren’t always privy to. So they might say, “I want you to do this that and the other” but they already had something in mind and they’d already been stirring the waters if you like, so there obviously was some talk with Pat beforehand, but *Misty* as such didn’t exist as an idea. Just “Come up with some mystery ideas.” So I got together with Malcolm Shaw, who was pencilled in as the editor, but he couldn’t start straight away because he was finishing off *Mirabelle*, one of the romance titles, that was about to

close. We had Bill Harrington who was a writer, and Jack Cunningham who was art editor of *Misty*. Jack was another Scotsman! So we got together and chatted about a few ideas. Bill thought that because we used to have a storyteller in *Tammy* and I think before that in *School Friend* – it's quite an old idea having a storyteller – he thought it'd be quite nice if we got some sort of a guide, a figure who can direct what we're doing and tell the kids what's going to happen next. So he came up with a character, I think it was Nathan somebody. He seemed to be a fairly spooky looking character.

We put this down as one of the ideas. Gradually as we had a few ideas we did take them to John Sanders and the directors, but Nathan was thought to be far too creepy and potentially a child molester, they didn't like the idea of him at all. So we thought, "Fair enough, shelf that one, let's just carry on". We came up with some other different ideas, we got some scripts from Pat and Malcolm. I've got one script that you're welcome to have a look at some time that I've kept – it's the original version of "Red Knee White Terror" in the first *Misty*.

**Julia:** With the spider in the box of bananas!

**Wilf:** Well that started off as "The Banana King" and it was really quite horrific. I've got the script here. What Pat really excelled in was he did all sorts of cuttings and he did drawings, he really laid out for the artist exactly what he wanted. There's a drawing right at the end of this with a very wizened old character who's got lines all over his face and he looks a bit like, it's a spider's web. It was really quite a frightening story.

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That was put forward with some of the ideas and we said no, no. We're definitely not looking for a horror comic, it's going to be mystery. So that was toned down to be the one that we've got. I know Pat has objected that these were all rather tame and went back to the old school of things. But we were talking about a reasonably young age group; it wasn't going to look like a teenage magazine. If it had gone out to teenagers you could have done something a bit more horrific. Or perhaps nowadays you could get away with it – I was just looking out the other night at Halloween, the way that goes on. It used to be quite fun, you know, with witches, and ghosts, and what-have-you but some of the people walking around now, look as though they've come from a car crash!

**Julia:** I think *Misty* was quite scary enough as it was, in all honesty. I read it when I was 7 or 8 and some of those stories have stayed with me, I've remembered them until this day. And when I finally found them and re-read them, the final panels and the final wording are exactly as I've remembered them! I don't know if I could have read Pat's horror comic – I think it might have been too much for me.

**Wilf:** I think so and I think they were right at that time. I think, when we eventually did get the *Misty* character it was quite nice to have somebody who, although she was obviously, not quite of this world, she wasn't at all intimidating, she was quiet and could've been your older sister, maybe. She was good looking. She was very calm, and kind, and reassuring. I think having that sort of character there was quite good.

**Julia:** At least for me, she is one of the things that I remember most clearly about the comic and when you look at the readers' letters and the response to it, Misty herself is someone that they're all absolutely in love with. And in that was it's very different from what was there before, the Nathan character that you said Bill Harrington proposed, he's very similar to the Damien Darke, to the Mystery Storyteller, to Bones, to everyone who's been there previously really.

And what I like about Misty is that she's different from that. She's -- maybe a bit like Gypsy Rose [in *Jinty*, first appearance 29 January 1977] who obviously does her own hosting as well. She's much more -- she's reassuring. She's like your guide. In that sense, she's providing a buffer between the tales and reader, but not in an American comics comedy sort of way. Just in a sort of protective way. I think without her, the comic would've been a very different thing.

**Wilf:** No. She came about really by accident. We just couldn't come up with a title or something that was a bit different. So what happened was, we'd got a few stories together, and I thought, right, I'll go and see Pat [Mills], he lived in Colchester, so I went up for the day with John Stenning, he was a sub editor on *Tammy* and a friend of mine. So I thought well if the three of us go out, we can have a bite to eat and then we'll throw around a few ideas.

We went up to Pat's house, went out and had a bite, talked over a few story ideas, and then we came back and I thought, "Right. Really got to try and come up with a title now" because we've got stories but we've got no direction because there's nothing to hang it on. We just couldn't come up with anything. So it was always a favourite to look through a dictionary, a dictionary is a great source of story ideas, and encyclopaedias, film books, that sort of thing.

So we sit on the floor looking through magazines, I had a film book from Pat. I went through the entire index and eventually *Play Misty for Me* was there. Which is absolutely true, that's what Pat said, but I happened to spot it and I said, "That's it. Misty. Because it's Tammy. It's Jinty. It's Sandy. It's June. It's Bunty." It's a name that is a typical girls' comic name, but different, and of course you've got fabulous images, you've got your mist, you've got your mystery, it's almost mystery in itself -- Misty, isn't it?

I said, "The amount of atmosphere we can just get from somebody called "Misty", and that was it. When we went back, I typed out Misty's first letter, which I've still got here. Jack Cunningham actually then hand lettered them every week, which gave it a nice personal touch. But you can see in that letter that we still really didn't know quite what Misty was, at the time, because our last paragraph [in the first issue's welcome letter] is, "Who am I? My name is Misty. Maybe one day, I will tell you my story."

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Obviously, that time, I couldn't tell you the story because we didn't know who she was or what she looked like, or anything. And then Jack had this great idea of Shirley Bellwood who he'd known as an illustrator. She wasn't a strip artist but she did some romantic illustrations for the romance titles. So she came up with this rather ethereal looking character, drawn with the moon that we've got on the first



one. And it sort of went from there. Jack came up with the idea of the moon and the bats on the logo. I asked him, "Where did that come from? Was that taken from one of the drawings?" and he said, "No. To be honest, it was quite an obvious thing. We've got mystery and spooky. What goes together? Moons and bats. It's a bit corny, but it looks good."

**Julia:** It does look good. It's actually very similar to a story logo that appears in *Jinty* around then as well, I don't know if he was the artist, it'd be interesting to find out. I think the story's called "Dancing to Death" or something like that. You know how all the individual stories have their individual logo and particular font and stuff, there's one with a moon and bat logo attached to it. I only found it very recently, and it's not quite the same, the bat's a little bit different, but maybe he was involved in that too. But as you say, all that stuff comes out of the name really.

**Wilf:** That's right. Then eventually, she did some more drawings, we got the character. I don't quite remember where the Cavern of Dreams came from, but all these little touches then came about and Misty became a character and there were stories about her. But certainly for the first two or three issues we really didn't know quite what she was. We'd really thought so she was dead, but we'd be playing for time thinking, "What are we going to do with it?"

**Julia:** It seems to me from looking at the readers' letters that actually a lot of the snippets of information that come out are really in response to ongoing questions from the readers. There's this mystery that is sustained throughout the whole thing, so readers want to know, "Where do you live? Where do you come from?" She very seldom gives any detail but perhaps just throws more undefined terms at us like the Cavern of Dreams, like "I'm the daughter of the Lords of the Mist" and so on. So it just builds up this very mythological kind of world, without actually any detail attached to it, which is fascinating to me.

**Wilf:** I think it's quite a nice device – if you don't give too much away then you can go anywhere you like.

**Julia:** Absolutely and readers love it, there are at least two letters I found in the run where people really do say very directly, "I hope you don't tell us your story because I like to think of you as someone mysterious and it would almost spoil it if you told us who you are and where you came from and so on." I think even the readers are aware that this is a sort of a game they are playing to trying to find out something about her and they'll never get the full picture.

**Wilf:** That's right, and I think that really added to it, and of course it did make it a little bit easier from our point of view because you didn't really have to come up with a full backstory, if you like, and you could just sort of change things. So if you suddenly thought "Ooh, that's a good idea, we'll put that in", you could just do it because it didn't really go against anything you'd said before because you hadn't really said that much.

**Julia:** So you wrote all the inside cover welcomes?

**Wilf:** No. I certainly did the first one, and I might have done two or three, but by the time Malcolm had tied up *Mirabelle* he was there and I think he, possibly with Bill Harrington, would have started writing them... but I didn't continue doing those.

**Julia:** So Malcolm then took over as editor, quite early on, maybe a few months in on something like that. I will check when *Mirabelle* ended [October 1977] and then I would probably know.

**Wilf:** I don't know exactly when, but obviously because we were working roughly six weeks in advance, I'd got quite a few things set up. He was writing 'The Sentinels' and maybe "The Cult of the Cat" and doing all of the clearing up of the old title at that time so I would have been carrying on for a bit until he could come in. So there was a bit of an overlap.

**Julia:** I think "The Cult of the Cat" has also been attributed to Bill Harrington...

**Wilf:** Well maybe, but sometimes different things overlapped or people changed ideas and co-wrote some things. There is a story in there [*Misty* #1] called "Moodstone", that was a story of two ideas. I had this idea of this ring and Pat Mills had some other ideas, so we combined two ideas and so that was two ideas rolled into one there.

That was one of the few concessions I got for *Misty*: to have some colour. I got into all sorts of trouble with management, I kept arguing for a decent publication, decent paper, I said, you know, they've got nice glossy paper abroad and in America, why can't we get away from the horrible letterpress and pretty awful printing? I was always shouted down for that, but the concession I had got was to have 4 colour pages: the cover, probably the centre spread, and the last page. And so the idea of this first story "Moodstone" was a little bit "Yellow Brick Road", but while that was all black and white and then right at the end it became colour, for this one we reversed it so it was colour and it then became black and white at the end. I thought it was just another way of introducing colour, which the other comics didn't have at the time, and we could use it as a device for the story.

**Julia:** It worked very well on that story. I think it's a really good use of colour. Was that scripted by you and Pat then, "Moodstone"?

**Wilf:** Yes. Pat wasn't very keen. I've read on different sites that he didn't like the use of one-offs and the colour and things... he wanted it really gritty. He liked what he called a dirty look and he wanted it really black and white and smudgy. I can see that's got its place, but I was rather hoping for something a little bit different and perhaps a move away from what we had done before. But this was the best we could get and, as they say, he who pays the piper, and you know that's what they wanted and you either did it or you gave up, and unless we wanted to set our own publishing company up, what can you do?

**Julia:** Absolutely, and it sounds like you fought for some things that were really important at lots of different stages as well because you are responsible for putting the credits in *Tammy*, aren't you?

**Wilf:** Well yeah, but I can't really remember that much about it! I'm not sure when it was. It could be that I'd left being group editor, I'd had a few differences of opinion with the management, and I said, "Look, if you want me to do the job I'll do it, but I'm going to stand or fall by my decision, so I'm not going to do things I don't agree with and take the blame for them." So I sort of jacked it in and I went back to editing. And it could be it was at that time when I'd gone back to *Tammy*, I can't quite remember. Have you got any dates for when the credits first went in?

**Julia:** They appear in *Tammy* around 1982 I think [first appear 17 July 1982 and the last issue to have them is 11 February 1984.]

INSERT FIGURE 5

**Wilf:** It is a long time ago, but I know what we did. One of the writers, her pen name was Anne Digby, and Alan Davidson, they were a sort of husband and wife writing team. She wrote a series of books about the Trebizon school, they were sort of Enid Blyton type school stories, but a bit more modern, and they thought it might be an idea if we do a Trebizon book in picture strips.

So we went along with that. But Anne said, look it could be a good idea if you put "Anne Digby" on it, because that's going to help sell it to the kids who buy Trebizon books – apparently they were quite high selling books at that time – that would possibly sell more copies. It was a little bit groundbreaking, we went and checked on that and we said why not. Because up until that point, you've probably heard stories of editors with paintbrushes whitening out artist signatures. I have to admit I have done that [laughs]. That was part of the job, we'd paint out signatures. So it was a bit revolutionary to have a by-line and I think I must have said at that time, "Well look, why is everybody anonymous? If we're doing it for one why don't we do it for all?" and I think it might have stemmed from that.

If it was 1982 I think I must have given up being group editor. I must have gone back to *Tammy* and all of that time different things are happening. I think it probably was to do with the Trebizon stories and that was also like a trigger for really identifying everybody. I wish we'd thought about that earlier and done it on *Misty* actually because I look through it and I think, "I do remember that but I can't remember who wrote it or drew it."

**Julia:** Yeah, it's a real shame. There are apocryphal stories of people like Anne Digby and Alan Davidson leaving because they weren't getting credited, or enough money, but I haven't been able to confirm those – I spoke to Anne Digby and she says the only reason she and Alan left IPC was because the market for children's paperback books really opened up.

**Wilf:** Well it's true that we probably didn't pay well enough, and certainly Pat Mills was always looking for more credit and sort of saying "Well look my story is popular, I think I deserve a bit more money." And you know, fair enough, he came up with the goods and we thought, well you know you've done a good job, he knows the story, he's worth a bit more.

But we did have budgets. All the comics had a tight budget – we used to get round this by paying newbies slightly less for their first script to keep some money in hand.

So I'm sure some people may have got a bit extra but there wasn't the superstar status at those time where somebody could demand double the fee for example. It just wasn't possible.

**Julia:** As a researcher looking back on the comics now, identifying the writers is incredibly difficult, especially because so much of it was freelance and so on.

**Wilf:** Now I can't always put a name to a particular story but I can give you a list of different writers that were used over the years, and you know if something comes back I might be able to relate a story to a name. So someone like Bill Harrington, he wrote 'Waifs of the Wigmaker', a *Tammy* story, that is the sort of thing he did. So if you come across similar period play type stories, the chances are it would be a Harrington.

I am also trying to track down some other different bits of paperwork. You can imagine, you know, forty years later, some things have been tucked away...

**Julia:** I'm impressed you remember so much!

**Wilf:** Well, it might or might not be interesting but on the new comics we always had a free gift.

**Julia:** Yes, yes.

**Wilf:** Well the first one [on *Misty*] was a horrible thing, it was a blue fish bracelet. Because we had a department that specialized in getting gifts and doing promotions and what have you, and a chap whose job it was to go out to Hong Kong and different places in the far East and pick up gifts as cheaply as possible.

Obviously he had been sent out to get something for this new comic so he came to me with this horrible blue fish bracelet. I said, "No, no, it's horrible, we can't, what are we going to do with that? It's no good." He said, "It's too late I've bought them in Hong Kong." 250,000 or whatever it was. I thought bloody hell, how am I going to justify this?

So, inside [*Misty* #1] there is quite a nice little cartoon of a character who's gone to see a fortune teller who says a dolphin will bring her luck, I think if you've got a copy there you'll find it in there. The artist on this was our art assistant Ted Andrews, he was a really clever lad. I said, "Do something for god's sakes with this horrible blue bracelet to justify it." And so he came up with a nice little cartoon and it ends up with her saying "Oh, you know, it's my lucky day after all. This blue dolphin has brought me *Misty*." So it's an introduction to the comic.

So that's why that little lightweight strip is in there. It was just such a horrible gift we thought we've got to justify it.

INSERT FIGURE 6

**Julia:** The irony being that people loved it I think! It went quite well.

**Wilf:** Well I think possibly I wasn't a good judge of girls' taste because also in my career I'm the chap who turned down My Little Pony.

**Julia:** Oh!

**Wilf:** They came to me with this thing and I thought “God, what’s this awful purple horse with a red mane? Nobody is going to like that, it’s ghastly.” So I had the opportunity of either having free gifts or doing a strip or something with My Little Pony and I turned it down.

So possible that blue dolphin thing was something that was appreciated but not by me.

Luckily, the next free gift [in *Misty* #2] was a black cat ring. That actually was incorporated. Now I really don’t remember whether the story ‘The Cult of the Cat’ already had a girl with a cat ring, or we may have managed to get them to get a ring to go with the story, but it’s obviously not coincidence. But that is one of the few occasions where something really could be closely linked.

But quite often you just had a penny piece of plastic and you just had to make the most of it. It’s a funny little story but it’s all part of how the comics were made up and what you had to do with quite often what you were given and not what you wanted. So there is a lot of compromise and you were quite often trying to justify something and make it work for you and not be counterproductive.

**Julia:** Absolutely. Can I ask you about some of the other business practices – do you remember anything about the rates of pay for example?

**Wilf:** Things like the payments, I really can’t remember what we paid the artist. I think a total figure of about £150 in mind but I could be wrong on that. Generally we sort of paid for a set, which was usually three pages, but if it was a two pager or a one page then there would be a *pro rata* payment.

I was making payments for years. I don't know why I've forgotten that [chuckles]. But some things aren't so important.

**Julia:** I was also interested in the make-up of the editorial teams. You've told me most of the people involved in *Misty* I think, because now you've mentioned Ted Andrews as the Art Assistant as well. So you were the original editor, and I spoke to Brenda Ellis [Malcolm Shaw's widow] quite extensively, and it sounds like he was the editor for the bulk of the run of it, but that perhaps someone else took over at the end when Malcolm moved to Spain, which he and the family did at some point. I've got that down as Norman Worker. I don't know if you know if that's true or not?

**Wilf:** Yes he was. I think he worked with Mavis Miller some years back on probably, *School Friend*, or *June*, or one of those. I mean, he looked a little bit like one of the old storytellers – he always had a pipe on the go – shirt and tie and jacket and he really looked very much like that Storyteller [from *June and School Friend*, and later *Tammy*].

**Julia:** Interesting. Pat Mills doesn't rate his input very much, he has this as the time when *Misty* became very stuck in its ways and so on.

**Wilf:** Yes. It probably was getting towards the end then and probably Norman wasn't very innovative. Malcolm had gone... I've no idea why *Misty* ended really, I'd moved on by then. It could well be falling sales – *June* folded on a circulation of 200,000 but they still said it wasn't making enough profit. Or maybe the enthusiasm had gone – the stories seemed less dramatic at the end.

I think as well, there were disputes. We had industrial disputes during the period. We had the three-day week. I remember clearly, sitting on *Tammy* with a candle stuck on my typewriter in the afternoons, trying to work. I suppose that's just an indication as well of how keen we were because I think nowadays you'd say, "Look, there's no light, I'm going off home", but you know, we wanted to get the things done and we actually went out and bought candles to stick on top of the typewriter [laughter].

**Julia:** That's dedication!

**Wilf:** It was like something from a *Misty* story, sitting there by candlelight. It's bonkers, isn't it.

**Julia:** It's atmospheric...

**Wilf:** That's the sort of time. Everybody was keen, wanted to do it, not let anybody down. It was a bit of a laugh as well. I think certainly by the time Norman went on *Misty*, things weren't as exciting as they had been.

**Julia:** And that probably translated too, to falling sales and thus the *Tammy* merger, I suppose. Because *Tammy* always seems to be doing well, so this would be to prop up *Misty*. A sad end.

**Wilf:** Basically, on your team was an editor, a sub, an art editor and the art assistant or the "bodger" as we unkindly called him. The bodger was there to do a lot of stuff. If the balloons had gone on in the wrong place they'd have to be moved and the art work all repaired and things like that. There was a lot of touching up going on.

There'd be things like where we did have some colour, we had spot colour in some of the stories, they had red bits on them. That was done as an overlay. The artist would do his stuff in black and white and then it would come back and there'd be an acetate to put on it and the colour would go on that. That was another part of the process.

The artwork was drawn "twice up" in size, and balloons and story titles were added onto the original artwork. It was sent to the printer this size and reduced there. We only reduced artwork in our photo labs to "same size" for special things like the dummy of the launch issue, and for the cover and colour or spot colour pages, so it was easier and quicker for the colourist. But it could be coloured full size if time was pressing.

Then it was printed using letterpress, at Southern Prints, they were based between Bournemouth and Poole.

**Julia:** What about the page layouts and the story titles, do you remember how they were put together?

**Wilf:** Story titles were often done with Letraset dry transfer instant lettering – those big sheets of alphabet letter transfers in different fonts. The lettering on the comics themselves was originally done by hand, then it moved to typesetting.

At this time I think the lettering was still sent out to be done. You can tell from the shape of balloon which lettering company was used.

**Julia:** What about colouring the covers, would this have been an art assistant job as well? Because I noticed that a lot of the images on the covers are either of *Misty* or they're panels from stories that have then been blown up and coloured.

**Wilf:** Yes because you couldn't always get something drawn in time, or there was always money to consider as well. A lot of covers were actually from the stories. One or two of the early *Misty* ones-- they might pick a panel out-- I think there was a locust one [*Misty* #9]. I think Malcolm was editing by that time and said, "Right, we'll put this on the front. Here's a picture, can you write a story to go with it?" So, there were quite a few occasions where I was given a picture, and I'd sit and write something to justify that picture on the cover.

**Julia:** You were writing some of the stories as well, for *Misty*, at this time?

**Wilf:** I did, yes, in the early days. I did eight or nine scripts and eight or nine of the text stories. Then I went on and did other things later and there wasn't always the time for that.

**Julia:** That's really good. Am I right in thinking that Bill Harrington was the sub-editor throughout this time as well then?

**Wilf:** Yes. For quite a bit of the time-- he also used to write for *Tammy*. He was quite a theatrical character, he liked a period story.

**Julia:** Did he used to be an actor? Was I right in thinking that, or that he used to be a radio actor--?

**Wilf:** He used to be involved in the stage in some way, yes. We had somebody else called Robin May, who worked on the *Look and Learn* titles. He was another theatrical one. Bill was a lovely bloke. Now, unfortunately, he died in a sort of a *Misty* sort of way. He was out on Wanstead Flats walking his dog one day in a thunderstorm, and he was struck by lightning and killed and his dog wandered off home.

I'm not saying we laughed, but we had a sort of wry grin at his funeral and said, "Well, this is like one of his stories – if he had to go, this is probably the sort of way he'd want to go". Because that was the sort of ending that he would have written about.

**Julia:** Dramatic.

**Wilf:** I don't remember much more about what happened after that. I left in 1984 on the back of an NUJ strike. They used it to get rid of troublemakers like me. I took my redundancy and went back to journalism.

There was no respect for working in comics, really. People would laugh, or say things like “So you just write the words”, or they’d only know the *Beano* or *Dandy*.

So I’m surprised at the amount of interest nowadays, to see it [comics] being taken academically is quite astonishing because certainly in the early days, people were quite disparaging. They’d think, you must have a laugh, you just write in these bubbles as they called them. Even at the time within IPC it really wasn’t recognized amongst the other magazines because any time there was a pay dispute or any sort of trouble, the women’s magazines always vetoed it – we thought they were hobby journalists, the lot of them. They had enormous staffs... *Woman’s Own* used to have something like 120 staffers and a comic would have 4 and so the amount of workload we got per head was far greater than somebody in *Woman’s Own*.

I’m sure if we’d had for want of a better word, branding, which I sort of hate the idea, but if you’d thought, well, “IPC produces really good women’s magazines therefore the kids things were equally good”, I think we might have had a better chance, but you just couldn’t do that.

**Julia:** Did the IPC publishing model put the emphasis more on individual titles then? It wasn’t about “Here is another great IPC magazine or comic,” it was more like “This is *Woman’s Own*, this is *Sandie*”, it stands on its own?

**Wilf:** Yes, that’s right. I did try to – I got a little scheme going – “Three is Company” we called it, where we got some quite nice hessian bags with the logos of *Misty*, *Tammy* and *Jinty*, the idea being if you’d liked one of them you’d like all of them. I dunno, it might have had some sort of short-term effect. But there just wasn’t that idea of being supported within our own industry really.

I’ve got a nice little book here that you can have a look at some time, it’s the IPC Directory of Publications and Services from 1979, and it names everybody who was anybody, if you like – all the editors, group editor, the publishers, and the titles that they worked on. I was looking through it yesterday, and I’d forgotten how many layers of people we had. Whereas at one time it was Sanders and Purdie and you reported to them mainly, they then started getting in assistant publishers, so there were layers and layers of people and it all became very complicated. It was a little bit like an inverted pyramid and the creatives, who should have been on top, were actually at the bottom, and we were being weighed down by all the hangers on.

I mean, even teachers at the time were saying things like “Don’t read comics, it’s bad for you.” I mean when I think back it was all throwaway, like newspapers really, saying today’s comic is tomorrow’s fish and chip wrapper. Well, that’s the way it went, but we’ve got people like you now looking at it and thinking there was some merit in it and it’s quite nice really! It’s amazing. I’m astonished.