

## CHARLES CROMBIE

Some of you may have come across the work of the artist Charles Crombie decorating the walls of pubs, hotels or golf clubs. He was famous for his comic caricatures or cartoons, particularly a series of humorous full colour prints called *'The Rules of Golf'* (1906) in which the players were depicted in 17<sup>th</sup> century costume. Crombie was born in London in 1880 and his working life as an illustrator of books and magazines was mostly spent there during the 1920s and 1930s, but in about 1935 he came to live in Letchworth, first at 78 Baldock Road and then, by 1940, at 11 and then at 7a Norton Way North by 1947. Quite what happened to him after that is not clear; the directories show his wife Helena still living at the last address in 1953 but not in 1962, while he apparently died at Hitchin in 1967. However, his favourite watering hole was the George and Dragon, and it is said that he was a regular there into the late 50s or early 60s.

At that time the George was in its heyday as one of the best known inns on the Great North Road. A former Letchworth resident of the time recalled that in the wartime Forces it was easier to say that you came from Baldock than from Letchworth because people were more likely to have heard of the George.

Among his drinking friends and other habitués of the George, Crombie was known as "Scrum" and he painted a series of cartoon portraits of friends and locals which he called the "Laughing Cavaliers". The best known of these was of Sid Grey, the landlord of the George (1935-48), wearing an Armada-era helmet. Among his drinking cronies were Mr. O'Brien of the Manor House and Dr. Suggitt, whose house (now the site of Elmwood Court) Crombie dubbed "the Waldorf." He also did a cartoon for the George itself which hung in the saloon bar and which he called "Fifty-fifty". This was a new take on the George & Dragon story which showed St. George spearing the dragon according to plan but, having done so, being pitched off his horse into the dragon's mouth.



Crombie's talents were also in demand elsewhere and, in 1938 he painted all the "many scenes" for a production of the pantomime "Babes in the Wood" at Baldock Town Hall in aid of charity. As the picture from the Citizen of the time shows these were quite elaborate and probably no one had quite seen the like before.

*If anyone remembers or knows of a "Laughing Cavalier" cartoon please let us know.*

*Much of the information in this article came from the recollections of the late Rory O'Brien.*