

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum Information Sheet



The Muffin Man

The Wilson has seven small pencil and watercolour drawings showing full-length profile caricatures of this well-known 19th-century street vendor. The Museum also has a lithographic view of Cheltenham High Street, drawn and published in 1840 by George Rowe, in which the Muffin Man is shown in the foreground; Rowe also included the Muffin Man in a line drawing of the Plough Hotel in his 1845 *Illustrated Cheltenham Guide*. Each of the portraits shows the Muffin Man wearing a 'beaver' hat and a white apron over his coat or jacket. He holds a walking stick in one hand and carries a straw basket with the letters 'J M' or 'I M' over his other arm.



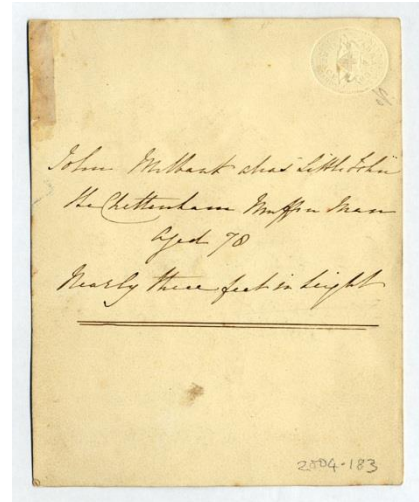
One of the portraits (1913.37.1) shows the Muffin Man standing on a clock with the hands at one o'clock, and the Latin inscriptions *Quota Hora Est Johannes?* and *Tempora Indicabunt*, which may be roughly translated as *What time is it John?* And *Time Will Tell*. The significance of this may be explained by a reference in a book entitled *Reminiscences of my Life. Memories of Charlton Kings, Cheltenham, Worcester and Coventry*, by John Bowen (b.1837), edited by Mary Paget and published by the Charlton Kings Local History Society in 1992. Writing in 1912, Bowen recalls his childhood in Cheltenham in around 1842-3, and notes that,



"We often met on our way, a noted character named 'John the Muffin Man', he was about 3½ feet high – wore a tall beaver hat, a short round jacket, and a white apron down to his feet – he carried a large square basket with muffins for sale – and in his hand a stick almost like a short broom handle. Many children were in the habit of teasing him – but would keep at a respectful distance but if any fresh child could be got who did not know his manner, to go up to him and say "What time is it John?" he would quickly raise his stick and bring it down sharp on his questioner and say "One o'clock!"

Bowen's description almost exactly fits the appearance of the Muffin Man in the Wilson's various portraits, but it actually raises as many questions as it answers!

Unfortunately, none of the seven portraits is dated, although the back of one of them (2004.183) has the words 'John Milbank alias Little John the Cheltenham Muffin Man Aged 78 Nearly three feet in height', in what appears to be a contemporary hand.



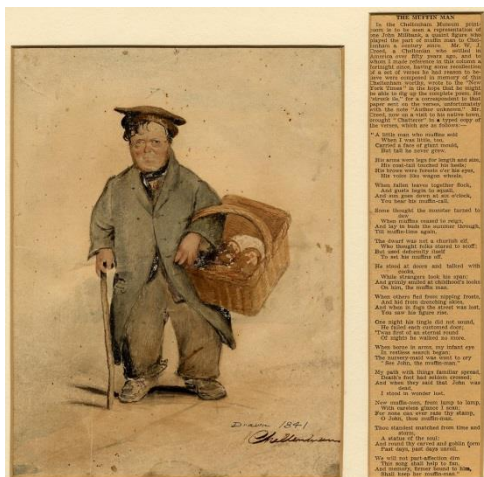
The Museum's history file on the Muffin Man also contains photographs of three other portraits of the Muffin Man in private collections, as follows -

1 One of the photographs has the accession number 1934.241 and was sent to the then Curator, D W Herdman, by Mr William J Creed, a former Cheltenham resident then living in the USA, who claimed to have purchased the actual portrait (which he claimed, perhaps erroneously, was an oil painting) in a Cheltenham second-hand shop many years before.

2 Another was given by Mr Leslie Bayley in 1928; it is annotated, in a contemporary hand, with the word 'John Milbank muffin man at Cheltenham height 3 feet 8 inches born at Colchester'.

3 The third photograph, sent to the Museum by Christopher Clarke Antiques at Stow in 2000, is very different from all the other portraits in that he is shown, in profile, wearing a frock coat, and minus his basket, stick and apron, although he still wears a beaver hat; this is annotated, again in what appears to be a contemporary hand, 'John Millbank. The Cheltenham Muffin Man 1851', while on the reverse is pasted a label repeating the inscription on the front, but adding the words 'Verified at the Local Museum by D W Herdman Curator Feb/ 1948'.

Another portrait of the Muffin Man, with the handwritten inscription 'John Millbanks The Cheltenham Muffin Man Aged 77 years. Born at Colchester in Essex stands 3 feet 9 inches' was sold by Simon Chorley Art & Antiques in November 2008; a photocopy of the portrait and the sale details are contained in the Museum history file.

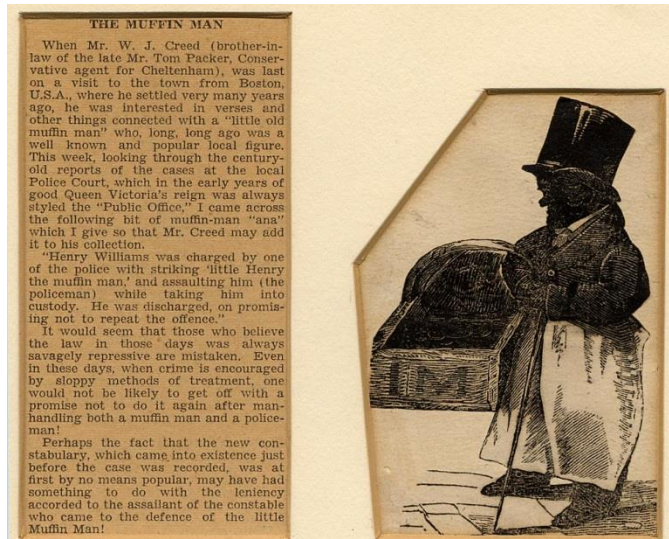


The Museum also has a watercolour of a dwarf hawker with a basket and stick, attributed on the reverse to 'J Thomas Artist Cheltenham' and inscribed, in two different hands, 'Drawn 1841' and 'Cheltenham' (1913.37.5). This is in a totally different style to the other portraits and may or may not be of John the Muffin Man.

That so many portraits of the Muffin Man are known suggests that he was certainly a local 'celebrity' and that visitors (and perhaps also residents?) wished to purchase a portrait of him as

a souvenir. Indeed, a portrait of the Muffin Man, which appears to be identical to one of the Museum's seven portraits (1913.37.3) was published in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* for 8 July 1830, as part of an advertisement for 'the celebrated Master Hubbard's Papyrotomia', at which people could have their portraits taken in ink, pencil or colours; it is accompanied by a note that the portrait of 'Little Johnny' had been taken at Hubbard's premises, 375 High Street.

Apart from that advertisement, the earliest published reference to the Muffin Man appears to be in the *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic* for 11 September 1907, which includes a portrait of the Muffin Man, very similar to several of the Museum's portraits. The caption claims that the photograph was taken from an original watercolour painted "in the early 40s" and noted that "The old fellow was a dwarf, not over 46in. high, but stoutly built, named John Millbank, or as he was called in those days 'John the Muffin Man'. His round was Great Norwood Street, Suffolk Parade, Suffolk Road and Bath Road, Cheltenham". The paper noted that the photograph had been sent to it by a Mr W H Watts of Tewkesbury "who...remembers the old man very well, and knows it to be an excellent likeness".



The photograph sent to the Curator by Mr Creed in 1934 was accompanied by a note from Mr Creed stating that the Muffin Man lived in the Lower High Street, and "of whom as a boy I bought muffins (between 1865 and 1870)". Then, in 1935, Mr Creed sent the Curator a 13 verse poem entitled *The Muffin Man* from a book entitled *Simple Rhymes for Happy Times* (Cassell, Petter and Galpin, London, 1877). Although the poem refers to the Muffin Man as John, there is no mention of Cheltenham and it may not therefore refer to Cheltenham's Muffin Man – which is something that Herdman pointed out to Mr Creed at the time. It does, in fact, appear that the poem, with an additional two verses, had already been published on several previous occasions, including the following –

- 1 An item in *Notes and Queries* (5th series, volume IV, pp.87-88) by one Cuthbert Bede noted that it had appeared in George Cruickshank's *Omnibus* (1842), in which it was accompanied by a woodcut of a muffin man carrying a basket and a bell.
- 2 In *Poems and Pictures*, published by James Burns of London in 1846, the poem is attributed to 'A J'.
- 3 In *Jewels gathered from painter and poet. A selection of poems*, compiled by William James Linton, c.1864.

The poem was also later included in Edward Verrall Lucas, *The Friendly Town: A Little Book for the Urbane* (1906).

From the two Rowe views of 1840 and 1845, as well as from the recollections of Mr Bowen and the 1841 and 1851 portraits, it would seem that the Muffin Man was alive until at least 1851, although there is no trace of him in either the 1841 or 1851 Census Returns. However, an obituary in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* for 20 March 1834 would seem to contradict this, as well as throwing doubt on Mr Bowen's account. It records the death, on 15 March 1834, at Newman's Place [High Street], "after a long and severe illness" of "John Milbanke, aged 85, well known in Cheltenham as 'Little John the Muffin Man'."

Presuming that this obituary is correct and that the portrait published by the newspaper in 1830 is of this person, all the Museum's portraits are of a Muffin Man who died in 1834 – how then could Mr Bowen, who was born in 1837, remember seeing him? Was his memory at fault: had he merely been told about him, and had he perhaps seen one or more of the portraits? And why did George Rowe include a street vendor who had been dead for several years in his 1840 and 1845 views, unless it was as some sort of 'tribute'? Or were there in fact two Muffin Men?

To complicate matters further, John was clearly not the only 'Muffin Man' working in Cheltenham at this time. There are also references to one Henry Clarke (or Clark), a dwarf who was referred to in one undated Court Report as 'Little Henry the Muffin Man'. He is recorded in the 1841 census as aged 50 and from Worcester, and in the 1851 census as aged 67, at which time he was living in the Cheltenham Workhouse, where he died in September 1851. The Art Gallery & Museum has a watercolour showing a female hawker with a basket, accompanied by a dwarf wearing a threadbare coat and walking with two sticks (1913.37.4). Although identified as 'John the Muffin Man' in the accession record, could this perhaps show Henry Clarke?



To find out more about the collections held by the museum contact:
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Visit our website: <http://www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk/>

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