Selina Skipwith, curator of a recent exhibition to celebrate the 80th birthday of John Burningham at The Story Museum in Oxford, explores the illustrator’s extraordinary life and his work from the trail-blazing Borka: The Adventures of a Goose With No Feathers to his forthcoming Motor Miles.

BIRTHDAY BONANZA

One of the rewards and privileges of curating exhibitions is getting to meet artists and seeing what other work they have tucked away in their studios that might be used in future exhibitions. I first met John Burningham in 2008, when I was director of The Fleming Collection. I was curating an exhibition entitled “Bond Bound: Ian Fleming and The Art of Cover Design”, in association with Ian Fleming Publications Ltd, as part of a series of exhibitions and events marking the centenary of the birth of Ian Fleming. Additional artworks added to the exhibition as it toured included a wonderful selection of Burningham’s illustrations for Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang, Ian Fleming’s bedtime story for his son Caspar. Burningham’s witty and timeless artwork, along with Fleming’s imaginative text, made Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang the most famous and best-loved car in fiction.

So began a creative partnership with John Burningham, which has led to us collaborating on a number of exhibitions of his work over the past eight years including “Mr Gumpy and Other Outings” in Edinburgh and Newcastle and “An Illustrated Journey” at The Fleming Collection, as well as the recent exhibition, “Happy Birthday Mr Burningham!” at the Story Museum in Oxford.

Burningham’s first attempt at writing and illustrating a children’s book was about a goose called Borka. Tom Maschler, a forward-thinking publisher at Jonathan Cape, liked it and Borka: The Adventures of a Goose With No Feathers was published in 1963. The early 1960s saw a shift in attitude towards children’s books and, along with developments in colour printing, an explosion of graphic creativity. “If you had an idea, you could draw it on the back of an envelope and an editor like Tom Maschler would say ‘yes, we will publish it’,” Burningham says. Burningham’s fresh and imaginative stories combined with his bold and original illustrations helped to change the genre forever. Borka won the Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration and Burningham never looked back. “After that it was a case of, ‘When can we have another story?’ That was in 1963 and here I am inventing stories.”

Born in 1936 in Pimham, Surrey, Burningham spent his childhood on the move. His parents had avant-garde ideas...
about education and he attended nine different schools including Wynstones, a Rudolf Steiner school near Gloucester, Naunton, a boarding school near Dunfermline, and, from the age of 13, A S Neil's school, Summerhill, an alternative school where lessons were not compulsory, which was, to a certain extent, governed by the pupils who made the rules at weekly meetings. Fortunately, Summerhill had a good art teacher, Henry Hering, who made sure his pupils had plenty of bold colours and large sheets of paper and brushes, and then encouraged them to just get on with it. Burningham remembers spending “huge amounts of time in the art room because I could choose to do that, possibly at the expense of other subjects. I was drawing all the time.” He left Summerhill in 1953 with a School Certificate in English Literature, having failed the art exam and other subjects.

On leaving school, Burningham registered as a conscientious objector, rather than doing national service, to please his pacifist father. He completed two and a half years’ alternative military service doing a variety of jobs including slum clearance in Greenford, working for the Forestry Commission in Sussex, building a school in Calabria, Italy, and working for the American Quakers in Israel.

On his return to London in 1956, he enrolled on a three-year course in graphic design and illustration at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. There his tutors included painter Keith Vaughan, fabric and theatre designer Bernard Nevill, and painter and illustrator Laurence Scarfe. It was at Central that he met Helen Orenbery who was studying theatre design. They married in 1964. Orenbery later switched career to illustrating children’s books, as it was work she could do at home when their children were small. Burningham later wrote that “People sometimes say it must be difficult for us to have the same occupation. Perhaps we have survived as a couple because I think she is better than I am and she thinks I am better than her.”

Burningham won the Kate Greenaway Medal for a second time in 1970 with Mr Gump’s Oiling. His success continued with many titles for both Jonathan Cape and Walker Books, and he is now regarded as one of our most talented picture-book makers. His books have been translated and published all over the world, while successful international exhibitions of his work have been staged in South Korea and in Japan. He was invited by the West Japan Railway Company to write a story for the Expo ’90 world fair in Osaka, published as Oi'
Get off Our Train. In 2012 he was nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, which recognises living authors and illustrators whose complete works have made a lasting contribution to children's literature.

Although Burningham is best known for his many children's books, his creative output is wide ranging. A successful and varied freelance career has given him the opportunity to work in Israel on an animated puppet film, design posters including a series for London Transport and create covers for the RIBA journal, as well as doing exhibitions, models, magazine illustrations and advertisements. His adult books have included perceptive observations of life in England and France and he addressed the issue of ageing in *The Time of Your Life* and childhood in *When We Were Young*.

His most recent adult book, *John Burningham's Champagne*, is as cheering and restorative as a glass of fizzy itself. Part album, scrapbook, potted history and celebration, it includes a forward by champagne-lover Joanna Lumley, in which she writes: "It is time to feel the frisson of the chilled bottle in the hand, the throbbing pop of the cork, the soft swish of the pale gold liquid, the snap of the bubbles at the first sip; the sudden promise that all's right with the world, and if it isn't, what's wrong can always be fixed."

His latest book for children, *Motor Miles*, will be published in September and features his Jack Russell, Miles. Other books are already in progress.

"I probably work harder now than I did 20 or 30 years ago, I've always got four or five projects on the go. It's a short lease when you get to my age," he explains. "Of course, I am immensely lucky to be producing books after all these years, but I don't find the work any easier having done so many. When I start a new book, I think I am not going to be able to do it again. I can't draw. I can't use colour. It's rather a miserable process.

"If you are a craftsman, once you have learnt how to lay bricks by and large you can get up in the morning and lay bricks. It's more difficult to make colour, or words, or lines work. I have never understood it, and I probably never will."

The exhibition at The Story Museum, as well displaying some of Burningham's beautiful original artwork, also showed how he uses widely different techniques to suit the mood of each book - from whimsical flights of imagination to..."
powerful environmental messages – creating a lifetime of unforgettable illustrations.

Duncan Macmillan, writing a review in The Statesman of an earlier exhibition of Burningham's work, wrote that: "As this exhibition shows throughout, while he is certainly an illustrator, the implication that his art is somehow secondary to a given text is quite wrong. In fact, like the great illustrators of the past, his imagery brings the text to life and gives it an imaginative incarnation that becomes an indispensable part of the experience of the book."

The playful side of Burningham's illustrations was also reflected in the recent exhibition, with younger visitors able to sit and read in Mr. Gumpy's boat, imagine themselves in a corner of Burningham's studio and try their hand at drawing one of his much-loved animal characters. They were also invited to write a message in a very special birthday card.

Since his first book was published in 1963, Burningham's work has delighted and captivated generations of children and parents. Whether you're taking your first tentative steps into the wonderful world of picture books, or, like him, celebrating your 80th birthday, there was something for everyone in this very special exhibition.

Selina Skipwith is an independent art consultant and former director and keeper of art of The Fleming Collection. The Story Museum can be visited at Rochester House, 45 Pembroke Street, Oxford OX1 1BP. Call 01865 790000 or visit www.storymuseum.org.uk for tickets and upcoming exhibitions. See page 49 for current exhibition listings.