



In 1841, the weekly magazine *Punch*; or the *London Charivari* was founded at 85, Fleet Street by Henry Mayhew, Ebenezer Landells and Mark Lemon, among other shareholders : it kept its popularity until the 1970s, before being permanently shut in 2002.

What is the story behind this almost two-centuries long journalistic phenomenon?

The idea for the magazine is said to have emerged when Landell noticed the popularity of Philippon's Paris newspaper *Charivari*. The name of the periodical in itself already sets the tone : the term "charivari" generally refers to a loud noise, but also, in a more specific sense, to the booing of someone whose behavior is being reprovved. Indeed, *Punch* was a satirical paper intended for the bourgeois intelligentsia, inspired by the famous puppet *Punch*, from the street show *Punch and Judy*. The magazine mainly criticised the upper-class and the government, but did not hesitate to mock habits and practices, regardless of social position. For all that, the paper was much wittier than the name suggested and rather suited the claims of its publishing team in the very first article of the first number that *Punch* was not merely motivated by mirth but above all by a desire to instruct its readers. This moralist anchorage can be best perceived in the newspaper's involvement in the fight against capital punishment along with the Chartist movement, through articles and cartoons ridiculing the taste of the English for what they regarded as bloody and inhuman spectacles. From that perspective, Pr. Richard Altick argues that *Punch* was 'not only a weekly purveyor of laughter but a critic of neglectful society as well' in *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841-1851*. Far from simply recording the events of the 19th and the 20th century, the study of *Punch* also shows that the

magazine had its share in the shaping of opinion and, therefore, history. By the time of Owen Seaman, who became editor of *Punch* in 1906, the newspaper started getting a strong conservative undertone and was acknowledged as a "National institution (...) aligned with the upper ranks of society" according to Helen Walasek in *The Best of Punch Cartoons*. In 1954, the cover drawings that made *Punch's* style so recognisable stopped being used, and the paper started losing its popularity, going through a few scandals in the 1970s after being accused of purposely maintaining

a "sexual apartheid" within its team, until it was no longer published in the year 1992. A bold entrepreneur bet on a possible revival, which ultimately failed in 2002. Its premises in Bouverie Street now house the Consular section of the Embassy of Poland.

In the most prolific period of the magazine, famous writers and illustrators contributed to *Punch* and its notoriety including William Thackeray, George Du Maurier and Charles Keene. It was said the time at the office was one of joy and exuberance for its members; the lunches were marked by long and sumptuous meals, only punctuated by the notorious

reminder of the editor in chief: "Gentlemen, the cartoon!" *Punch* is regarded as the instigator of the term "cartoon" in its contemporary sense. While a cartoon initially referred to the preliminary sketch of a painting, *Punch's* journalists gave it the sense of a humorous illustration. The use of cartoons in the section "Punch's Penicillings" dedicated to the display of comical sketches slowly replaced the initial pervading presence of political articles and instrumental in the paper's increasing popularity. *Punch's* long history was unprecedented in the usually short life of periodicals at the time of its creation, which makes it all the more fascinating. The paper was part of the life of London for a century and a half and still continues to live on through the memory of its existence and the nostalgia of its now elderly readers.



"Gentlemen, the cartoon!" at the Mahogany table in Punch's Fleet Street office.



Punch

Additional notes

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