



Even his mother won't reveal her real name

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ing out work that would now probably fetch tens of thousands?

It was in 1998 that Banksy and Inkie collaborated with other graffiti artists on a 400-yard Walls On Fire hoarding around Bristol's Harbourside.

In local writer Steve Wright's unofficial biography, Banksy's Bristol: Home Sweet Home, Inkie

SUBURBAN WARRIOR: The semi in Bristol where Robin grew up



said: 'I helped Banksy organise the event but took a bit of a back seat and got pretty drunk on the day if I remember rightly.'

In 1999 Banksy painted the now famous Mild Mild West sign, which shows a teddy bear with a Molotov cocktail in his hand, on a wall opposite Subway Records in Stokes Croft, Easton. Jim Paine, founder of Subway Records, held the ladder. 'I knew Banksy from a while back, from the mid to late Nineties when he was sharing a house in Easton, a couple of streets from me,' he said in Wright's book.

After spending some months in London, Banksy returned to Bristol in February 2000 for his first art exhibition, at the Severnshed restaurant – a former boatshed designed by Brunel. His work sold out on the opening night.

'It was the first time he had done work on canvas,' curator Robert Birse told us last week. 'He didn't have a clue how to make canvas stretch or prepare the artwork so we helped him with that side of it, but he had a very strong idea of what he wanted to do.'

'I don't even know his name. He has a number of pseudonyms he gives to people he's working with, but at the time he only let his oldest mates in on everything. I presume I gave him cash [the proceeds of works he sold]. I could have written him a cheque without a name on it or I could have given him cash.'

Banksy moved to London around the turn of the millennium, once again at the same time as a certain Robin Gunningham. Robin lived in a flat in Kingsland Road, Hackney, East London, with Jamie Eastman, who worked for Bristol's Hombre record label. Banksy drew a number of the record company's album covers.

In 2001 Banksy had his first unofficial London exhibition at which he spray-painted 12 works on to the whitewashed walls of a tunnel in Rivington, Shore-ditch. But it was his show Turf War, in July 2003, held in a warehouse just yards from Robin Gunningham's flat, that put Banksy on the map. The exhibition included live pigs and a heifer sprayed with an Andy Warhol likeness. The Queen was depicted as a chimp. An animal rights activist chained herself to the railings in protest but the RSPCA gave its approval to the show.

That same year Banksy shuffled into the Tate dressed as a pensioner and glued a picture to the wall – it stayed there for two-and-a-half hours – and demonstrated against the Iraq War. He had arrived.

He has since sold works to singer Christina Aguilera, who bought three, including a pornographic picture of Queen Victoria with a prostitute, for £25,000. Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie blew £200,000 on his art in 2006 – among the works was a £120,000 twist on a Manet painting in which a white family lunch under an umbrella watched by 15 starving Africans. Banksy's works have also appeared in movies such as Children Of Men and Shoot 'Em Up, and he has sold Space Girl & Bird, the artwork for Blur's Think Tank album, to a bidder from America for a record £288,000.

For someone so anonymous he has a very high profile.

But where is Robin Gunningham, the mysterious figure whose whereabouts no one now knows but who crops up in numerous official records and always in the same place as Banksy, and at the

same time? The man whose photograph was recognised by his former neighbour Anthony Hallett – although the same photograph was identified by several other sources as being of Banksy? The man who Camilla Stacey, along with several other contacts who wished to remain anonymous, told us actually was Banksy?

It was time to find Robin's parents to see if they could help. His mother Pamela lives in a neat modern bungalow in a village outside Bristol. After identifying ourselves, we asked her if she had a son called Robin. Her reaction was very odd. We showed her the Jamaica photograph and she was visibly startled, but said she didn't recognise the man in the photograph, to whom she bears more than a passing resemblance. We asked if she could put us in touch with him.

'I'm afraid I don't know how to get in contact with him,' she said.

So she did have a son called Robin? 'No, I don't. I don't have a son at all.'

We asked her if she had any other children. 'Yes, a daughter.'

But no son and certainly not a son who went to Bristol Cathedral School?

'No,' she said, and went on to deny she was Pamela Gunningham, insisting that the electoral roll must be incorrect.

Our conversation with Peter Gunningham, who now lives in a gated development in the suburb of Kingsdown, was equally baffling. Again, we presented the photograph of Banksy/Robin Gunningham. Mr Gunningham said he didn't recognise the person in the picture. We told him that we believed his son to be Banksy. 'No,' he replied. 'I can't help you, really.'

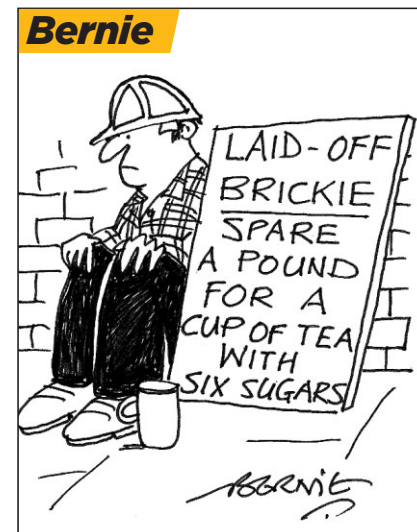
Mr Gunningham politely continued to deny that his son was Banksy but his manner was almost playful. He refused to give us any information about Robin. It was all very strange. Had the couple never heard of Banksy or Robin Gunningham, one might have expected a reaction of complete bewilderment. This did not seem to be the case.

We then contacted Banksy's public relations officer who, in the best Banksy tradition, neither confirmed nor denied the story but promised to get back to us. At the time of going to press, we were still waiting to hear.

Banksy once told Swindle magazine: 'I have no interest in ever coming out. I figure there are enough self-opinionated a**holes trying to get their ugly little faces in front of you as it is.'

Given Banksy's long-standing success at covering his tracks, there is, of course, the possibility that the trail we have been following is a red herring, a complex set-up. But if it is, it must be the most elaborate such ruse ever concocted. And if it is, where is Robin Gunningham?

Additional reporting and pictures: Simon Trump, Ewan Fletcher, Adam Luck, Jason Buckner and Craig Hibbert.



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