Jonas Hanway and his ‘portable roof’ by Jan Church.

Have you ever wanted to be famous? This is the story of a man who led a life of adventure and achieved great charitable works, but who became famous for something quite different...

Have you ever heard of Jonas Hanway? He was born in Portsmouth in 1712 but he didn’t stay there. He was apprenticed to a merchant in Lisbon. Then he lived for a while in St Petersburg from where he traded with Persia. In one seven-year period he travelled thousands of miles. Once, having sailed over the Caspian Sea to Persia, all his cargo was seized by the ruler and it was only after a long struggle and much hardship that he was able to retrieve it. Then, returning to Russia he was attacked by pirates. In 1750, he left Russia and made the long journey home. Hanway then settled down to a life in London. The stories of his travels, written a few years later, were well received.

He went on to write other books about trade, religion and charitable works, but he preferred to express his more controversial views in small pamphlets. In one pamphlet he proposed a ban on importing tea. This brought an irate response from the great Samuel Johnson who described himself as ‘a hardened and shameless tea-drinker’.

This didn’t stop Hanway. He was a tireless campaigner. Here’s a list of some of his charitable works:

- He founded The Marine Society which recruited men for the Navy
- He was a governor of the new Foundling Hospital which cared for abandoned babies.
- He established the Magdalen Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes.
- He supported the Stepney Society, apprenticing poor boys to marine trades.
- He supported The Troop Society, providing clothes for British soldiers.
- He campaigned on behalf of the boy chimney sweeps. His pamphlets on the subject prompted changes to the law.

What is more, whilst doing all this, he also worked as a commissioner for the victualling of the Navy.

When he died, aged 74, he was a notable figure. A monument was erected to him in Westminster Abbey, describing Hanway as ‘a Friend and Father of the poor.’
But who remembers Jonas Hanway today? And, if he is remembered, is it for the good deeds that were of benefit to so many?

No, he is remembered because of an umbrella.

On his travels he had seen umbrellas used as parasols providing the ‘little shade’ needed from the sun. But now he found himself in rainy London. What could be more useful than an umbrella to provide shelter from the rain? So, he set to, and made his own. He made it from animal ribs with stretched cloth as a covering. But when he emerged with his umbrella onto the muddy streets of London, passers-by laughed and jeered. Umbrellas were for women, not men, or for foreigners, especially Frenchmen. Catcalls and missiles were thrown at him.

Two groups of businessmen were particularly outraged by the umbrella: hansom cab drivers and sedan chairmen. They realised that if the umbrella became fashionable, anyone could walk through the streets in the rain without needing to hire them. One hansom cab driver even tried to run Hanway over, only to find himself at the receiving end of the despised umbrella. Others mocked Jonas as being part of the vulgar crowd that could not afford the cab fares. Jonas Hanway was, however, not to be beaten. He continued to walk in the dry under his ‘portable roof’ despite the mockery.

Gradually, over the next thirty years, people began to think he was not so much a figure of fun but a sensible man with a good idea. By the time he died in 1786, umbrella usage was spreading. The umbrella was even known for a while as a Hanway. The first advertisement for umbrellas appeared a few months after Hanway’s death – proof that commercial success was about to happen. Even today a ‘Hanway classic’ umbrella can be bought for £150.

Jonas himself may have thought that his writing or his good works would be his claim to fame. He would probably have been amused that he is now more famous for the umbrella that made him a figure of fun.