

# The Insider

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Your Connection to the BBC Sales Company

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## Editor's Rant

### *Why Bother?*

While writing about *Fawlty Towers* for this issue, I thought back to the recent attempt by CBS to clone that classic sitcom with the John Larroquette vehicle *Payne*. It was just another in a long string of unsuccessful attempts to adapt a British television series for an American audience. Anyone remember Rosie O'Donnell in an Americanized version of the hit Britcom *Birds of a Feather*? I didn't think so. Does anyone who's seen *One Foot in the Grave* think that the current Bill Cosby series on CBS can hold a candle to it? Not hardly. The British version of *Men Behaving Badly* has lasted six series, won numerous awards and was voted all-time favorite sitcom by BBC viewers. The American version barely lasted two seasons. NBC even tried to pawn off a version of *Red Dwarf* with Lister as a clean-cut Caucasian good guy.

There have been a few notable successes. Norman Lear turned *Till Death Do Us Part* into *All in the Family* and *Stephoe and Son* into *Sanford and Son*, but let's face it - the bad attempts have far outweighed the good and what made the British show special is almost always lost in the translation.

New, creative ideas are hard to come by, so it's understandable that U.S. producers would raid British television. Yet, if all they can produce are half-baked copies of the originals, then they should spend their money on something else. Preferably, better writers.

*Michelle Street, Editor*

## And Now For Someone Completely Different, It's...John Cleese

### The Man, The Myth, The Silly Walk

*"I was an immensely meek boy and I was bullied a lot. I remember my father coming down to watch me play in a football match and finding three people sitting on me. I had a lot of problems at asserting normal healthy aggression."*

*-John Cleese, speaking about himself.*

Well, well...those are mighty strange words coming from a man who is world-renowned for bashing a certain Spanish waiter. "A lot of problems at asserting normal healthy aggression?" Excuse me? This from the person who taunted King Arthur and his knights in an outrageous French accent? The same man who registered a highly vociferous complaint about a dead parrot? The man who in real life hit his co-star so hard with a heavy saucepan that poor Andrew Sachs was nearly knocked unconscious and had a headache for two days?



***I am not a screamer, although I would probably enjoy it if I could become one ----- John Cleese***

OK, that last bit was an accident, but meek isn't an adjective that springs to mind when describing the force behind the highly aggressive Basil Fawlty. It is, however, probably an accurate assessment of one John Marwood Cleese - especially as a child.

This portrait of the artist as a silly man begins in Weston-super-Mare, where Cleese was born on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1939. He grew up the somewhat mollycoddled only child of over protective parents, who raised him with the traditional middle-class values of reserve and propriety.

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## The Insider Mailbox



I enjoyed the first issue of *The Insider*. I don't watch much TV, but do enjoy the BBC programs. My favorite is *As Time Goes By*. It was that program that made me dash to my checkbook and send my PBS station a contribution. I hope there will be many more *As Time Goes By*.

Marion Meszar, NJ

***You're not alone. With its stellar cast and great writing, As Time Goes By is one of the most popular Britcoms to find a home on American shores. Dame Judi Dench is certainly having a wonderful year professionally, winning both the Oscar and the Tony. On a personal level, though, her year has somewhat marred by health problems involving her husband, actor Michael Williams. He has been diagnosed with cancer, but with the help of his wife, has vowed to fight it.***

***However, fans of As Time Goes By will be pleased to hear that there will be another series. You can also look for coverage of this show in a future issue of The Insider.***

Is there a way (publication and/or Web site) where I can find out where my favorite British TV stars are performing on stage in the United Kingdom and to order tickets in advance?

Louise Davis, NJ

***There are many sites on the Web, but one good place to start is at <http://www.thisislondon.com>. It provides links to information about new shows that are opening and where to buy tickets online. Also, many Barnes and Nobles or Borders Bookstores carry the London edition of Time Out magazine. This is another terrific source. Good luck! If anyone knows of other good sites, please let us know and we'll pass them on in the next issue.***

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***The Insider*** welcomes all correspondence. Send letters via e-mail to editor Michelle Street at [bcdigest@soltec.com](mailto:bcdigest@soltec.com) or by snail mail to: *The Insider*, c/o Julie Marshall, BBC Worldwide Americas, 747 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, New York, NY. Include your full name and location. All letters are assumed to be for publication unless marked otherwise. ***The Insider*** reserves the right to edit letters for reasons of space or clarity. Let us know what you think!

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## In The News



I didn't lie, honest. In the last issue it was mentioned that *Ballykissangel* stars **Dervla Kirwan** and **Stephen Tompkinson** were a couple in real life. However, the pair has recently split up.

We also reported that *Jonathan Creek* star **Caroline Quentin** was pregnant. We can now pass on the good news that in early September she gave birth to a baby girl named Emily Rose in London. The father of the child is Sam Farmer, a production runner she met while making her series *Men Behaving Badly*.

*Blackadder* and *Thin Blue Line* writer **Ben Elton** and his wife Sophie are also the proud new parents of twins named Charlotte and Albert. Elton has written a fictionalized account of the couple's struggle to have children in a new novel entitled *Inconceivable*.

If you'll be in London after the New Year, plan to catch **Blackadder Back and Forth** at the Millennium Dome. The *Blackadder* cast reunites for this short film that contains cameos by Kate Moss and Rik Mayall among others. The script, by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, has Baldrick building a time machine out of cereal packets and this sends the cast whirring through British history. Tickets went on sale September 22 and can be ordered by calling 0870 606 2000 (in Britain).

**The Last of the Summer Wine** was the big winner at the recent National Television Awards. It received the nod as Best Comedy while Best Comedy Performer went to **Nicholas Lyndhurst**.

In a mishap worthy of Mr. Bean, **Rowan Atkinson** recently drove his \$700,00 vehicle into the back of a Metro driven by a retired woman. In a somehow suitable ending to this story, Atkinson had to be rescued in the only vehicle available to him: a kebab van.

It has been announced that **Tom Owen**, 50, will replace his late father **Bill Owen** in the cast of *The Last of the Summer Wine*. The younger Owen will play the long-lost son of Bill's character Compo in the program's 22nd series, which will be shown on BBC One next year. **Bill Owen** passed away from cancer last July.

# Still Humphries After All These Years

## A Chat with John Inman

It took every ounce of restraint I could muster not to begin my talk with John Inman by using that famous refrain, "Are you free, Mr. Humphries?" I'm sure he's heard that a million times, but in the end, I got the impression that he might not have minded hearing it again. We all have those times in our lives that we remember with an inordinate amount of fondness and for Inman, it seems to have been his tenure as Mr. Humphries on *Are You Being Served?*

Like many of British comedy's biggest stars, John Inman hails from the north of England. He was born in the town of Preston and at 12 moved to the popular seaside resort of Blackpool. Blackpool can be described as a bit like Las Vegas. It's a place where you can see Elvis impersonators, ballroom dancing, cheesy B-list comics and, in general, be entertained. Somehow, the atmosphere must have gotten into Inman's blood because he knew from an early age that he wanted to make his living entertaining people.

At 13, he made his debut in the play *Freda* at Blackpool's South Pier Pavilion and to this day, the theater remains his first love. It was his work on stage that first caught the attention of legendary producer David Croft. Inman worked for Croft in a few small roles, but one day a script for a Comedy Playhouse production called *Are You Being Served?* came through the post and he hasn't looked back since.

What was his first encounter like with the character destined to make him a Britcomedy icon? "In the first instance, there wasn't anything there - just a description saying that he was a sales assistant in Gentleman's Ready-to-Wear." Inman said. "They took my mannerisms and things I did in rehearsal and went with it." So Mr. Wilberforce Clayborn Humphries came to life, based partially on shop assistants Inman worked with during his short stint as a window dresser.

*AYBS?* was originally to revolve around Trevor Bannister's character, Mr. Lucas, but it was soon apparent that Mr. Humphries was going to be a breakout character. This surprised Inman, because Humphries was not at first a "leading role." Given the show's immense popularity, it is also surprising to hear that the show wasn't an instant hit. "It was a slow burner," he said. "It was at least the third series before it was huge."

Incredibly, episodes went from rehearsal to film in only four to five days. The process started with the cast simply sitting around the table reading the script and laughing. "Reading it to yourself is one thing," Inman said, "but actually hearing the lines read, it was a thousand times funnier." The following days were set aside for blocking out the scenes and getting the technical aspects right. Then on the last day there was camera rehearsal, dress rehearsal and finally the studio audience came in for the taping.

This didn't leave much room for error. Videotape was very expensive at this time, so the possibility of multiple takes was slim. This didn't daunt the cast, however.

"Most of the artists in it were theater people, not television people," Inman explained. "We were used to getting it right the first time."

Not to say that there weren't the occasional break-ups. Arthur Brough (who played Mr. Grainger) was known to miss his lines quite often and Trevor Bannister would laugh at the drop of a hat. Unfortunately, these mess-ups were not saved for posterity, so an *AYBS?* outtakes video (similar to the ones done for *Red Dwarf*), is not a possibility.

The show's overwhelming popularity led to the inevitable spin-offs. The cast did a fifteen-week, twice nightly stint on stage followed by a movie loosely based on the stage production. In 1980-81, Inman was the only one of the *AYBS?* ensemble to travel to Australia when a network there decided to make its own homegrown production of *AYBS?* called *Bones Brothers*.

"I certainly enjoyed being in Australia," he said. It was extremely enjoyable and I was excited being asked. The only catch was that all the characters were similar to the original, but had different names, so it took a bit of getting used to." *Bones Brothers* lasted two series, but the original *AYBS?* lasted from 1972-1985.

Inman offers a simple, true explanation for why *AYBS?* has stood the test of time and developed such a rabid following, especially among American viewers.

It's visual to start with," he said, "Colorful. Simple. A little bit naughty." Indeed, double entendres were the basis for much of the humor, though they were always done with an air of innocence.

Also guaranteed laugh getters were the silly costumes the cast was often required to wear. In fact, Inman says his favorite episodes were those in which the cast was able to dress up. He cites *Heir Apparent* (in which he plays his mother) as a particular favorite. When queried as to which episodes he remembers less fondly, he says there aren't any, but if you compare the early episodes to the ones made in the late 70s, the earlier episodes don't come off as well "because they look poor." There wasn't even enough of a budget for such later trademarks as the wigs that provided Mrs. Slocombe's ever-changing hair color.

One of the reasons for the success of *AYBS?* was the chemistry among the cast members. The employees of Grace Brothers may have taunted each other mercilessly, but in the

*(continued on next page)*

(John Inman - cont'd.)

end, there was a real closeness and affection among them. This translated into strong, lifelong friendships off screen as well and Inman keeps in touch with surviving cast members.

So, will the new millennium see a reunion of the Grace Brothers staff?

"We would like to do a one-hour special and would willingly get together," Inman said, "but ultimately it's in the hands of David Croft, Jeremy Lloyd and the BBC."

While fans pine for a reunion, Inman will return to the stage in December, starring as Wanda in a pantomime production of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Pantomime, more commonly known as panto, is one of Inman's loves and in the past he's appeared in panto productions of *Cinderella* and *Mother Goose*.

"It's a particularly British form of entertainment," he explained, "which, despite what Americans might think, isn't what Marcel Marceau does. Pantomime is a very big musical based on a nursery rhyme - a quirky thing with role reversal and up-to-date, popular jokes."

In fact, Inman will take on the role of Jack's mother, while Jack is being played by a young woman he described as "very attractive, with legs up to her armpits."

Otherwise, Inman claims he "shan't do anything for a while." Has he ever toyed with the idea of writing an autobiography? "Yes, I've considered it," he said, "but I wouldn't say it's in the process. There just might be too much to try to include."

He often travels to America and to meet fans and he describes them as "extremely kind," although hard-core loyalists have been known to correct him on lines and other details from the show. Like most British people, he seems to prefer the spots in America where there's plenty of sun and warmth. He recalls La Jolla, California, as a particular favorite and said when he visited there he thought, "I could live here."

Inman says he doesn't watch many of the newer comedy programs, but is a fan of *Keeping Up Appearances*. He is not, contrary to popular rumor, the cousin of *KUA* co-star Josephine Tewson, though the duo did work together on the 1977 ITV sitcom *Odd Man Out*. In this program, Inman played Neville Sutcliffe, the owner of a Blackpool fish and chip shop. Tewson played his half-sister.

In the end, Inman wistfully remembers his years on *AYBS?* as a "happy time" with a lot of laughter. Obviously so did the rest of the cast, whose infectious enthusiasm and camaraderie helped turn *AYBS?* into a timeless classic.

The Grace Brothers staff was once described as a family with Mr. Grainger as the grandfatherly figure and Mrs. Slocombe as the dotty Aunt. In that scenario, then, Mr. Humphries must have been the fun uncle - always a laugh and great to be around.

That pretty well sums up John Inman himself. Viva Mr. Humphries.



## Did You Know?

- **Inman played a male secretary to Rula Lensky in the 1981 sitcom *Take A Letter, Mr. Jones* . .**
- **There was to have been an episode of *Are You Being Served? Again!* during which Mr. Humphries tied the knot with Mavis Moulterd. The wedding was to have been interrupted by Wilberforce's mother. The script was written, but the BBC yanked the series before the episode was filmed.**
- **In 1976 Inman was named *Variety Club BBC TV Personality of the Year* and was also named the *TV Times* award for *Funniest Man on Television*.**
- ***Are You Being Served, Sir? The Record* was produced by DTM Records in 1975. This 45 record featured John Inman singing *Are You Being Served, Sir?* on the A side and *The Teddy Bear's Picnic* on the flip side. It peaked at 39 on the charts.**
- **In a pilot for an American version of *AYBS?*, the character of Mr. Humphries was played by former *Laugh-In* star Alan Sues. The show was called *Beanes of Boston* and it was never picked up by the network.**

# THE BRITTAS EMPIRE: A FAWLTY TOWERS FOR THE 90s

by Garry Berman

Unless you're from another planet, you've probably heard of John Cleese and Connie Booth's Britcom masterpiece, *Fawlty Towers*. For the past 20 years, *Fawlty Towers* has been praised to the hilt by audiences on both sides of the Atlantic as well as by other comedy writers, many of whom have used this series as a blueprint for their own efforts. Even Lise Mayer, who co-wrote the radical "alternative" 80s sitcom *The Young Ones* said that *Fawlty Towers* was an inspiration for that show not only because it was very funny, but because it had as its central character someone who was just plain unlikable.

Perhaps the most creatively successful of these successors to *Fawlty Towers* is a program called *The Brittas Empire*, starring Chris Barrie, who is better known as Arnold Rimmer in the BBC's tremendously popular *Red Dwarf*.

Since its premiere in Britain in 1991, *The Brittas Empire* has, by many accounts, earned the lofty title of "The *Fawlty Towers* of the 1990s." Quite a compliment, and a well-deserved one. A comparison of the two series reveals just how similar they are in spirit and quality.

First, let's look at the main characters of each show. We've come to know hotel owner Basil Fawlty quite well, with his mix of incompetence, rudeness and overall hysteria as his problems begin to mount. When not displaying outright contempt for his hotel guests, Basil is groveling for approval by those visitors who flash a bit of money or portray themselves as influential in some way. Inevitably, each episode finds Basil at the center of one or more self-made crises that threaten his very sanity. However, he prefers to blame his staff (especially the imbecilic waiter Manuel) and guests for his ever-escalating problems.

Gordon Brittas, on the other hand, is not a man full of seething rage, but a man with a dream of achieving world harmony through friendly athletic competition. However, as manager of the Whitbury New Town Leisure Centre (a health and exercise club to us Americans), Gordon rules over his empire with an almost neurotic sense of efficiency. He is a stickler for detail and proper procedure, and whenever he decides to take matters into his own hands, he succeeds only in irritating his customers and driving his staff to near-mutiny. Gordon also has a friendly but decidedly condescending manner towards all, which, despite his good intentions, doesn't win him any friends. Of course, he is totally oblivious to the effect he has on people.

Gordon is brought to life vividly by Barrie, who here creates a character every bit as memorable as the weasely Rimmer from *Red Dwarf*.

Like *Fawlty Towers*, any given *Brittas Empire* episode presents us with one problem to begin with, but before long Gordon and his staff must deal with two or three simultaneously. The mini-plots all seem unrelated at first, but find a way of interacting with each other to create a snowball effect. And, like Basil, Gordon's efforts to solve the various crises of the day tend to succeed only in his throwing gasoline (sometimes literally) on the fire.

We've seen Basil Fawlty in such predicaments as trying to move and hide a dead guest in the hotel, incoherently insulting a party of German guests with his Hitler imitation, chasing Manuel's pet rat across the dining room while the health inspector awaits his dinner, and thrashing his stalled car as he frantically tries to salvage his Gourmet Night with a take-out meal. But far too few of us have had the opportunity to witness Gordon Brittas being wheeled around the leisure centre on a hand-truck with his feet firmly embedded in a bucket of dried concrete (a gag pulled on him by a group of Rotarian conventioners), unwittingly beheading a drug dealer with a chainsaw (for which he stood trial, and was acquitted!), and overseeing his receptionist Carol deliver her baby in the sauna while a farmer's cow delivers a calf in the squash court. Oh yes, and the leisure centre building itself has suffered numerous structural collapses, gas leaks, and outright explosions with frightening regularity, all at the hands of Gordon and his well-meaning but unfortunate staff.

Gordon's underlings lean to the eccentric side, but, the above incidents notwithstanding, most seem able to run the centre efficiently when left alone to do their jobs. The major thorn in Gordon's side is his fiercely loyal but decidedly unhygienic and accident-prone deputy manager Colin, whom Gordon has described as "a dead pigeon in the jet turbines of management." Gordon's other deputy manager, Laura, provides the much needed pillar of reason amongst the inspired chaos that makes *The Brittas Empire* such a joy to watch.

Julia St. John, who plays Laura, explains, "In the comedic structure, you do need the voice of reason, the voice representing the audience in order for the audience to see the normality within the chaos. It's a function that needs to be fulfilled in that kind of comedy. It's a bit like in *Fawlty Towers* you had the maid. You had all these mad characters around and one character that was relatively sane and normal." It might be noted, though, that Laura and her constant frustration in having to restore order in the centre provides far more laughs that Polly ever did in *Fawlty Towers*.

The comic energy that flows from any given episode of both *Fawlty Towers* and *The Brittas Empire* is due in large part to the writing process that first allows the eccentric characters

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(Brittas Empire - cont'd.)

and bizarre situations to take shape. Most sitcom scripts are written in a week to ten days, but in the case of *Fawlty Towers*, Clease and Booth took an average of six weeks to construct each episode. They would sit with a large sheet of drawing paper and jot down ideas for a beginning or middle of a story, making notes off to the side, and gradually construct a plot over a two-week period. Their goal would be to torment poor Basil with the most dreadful situations they could conjure up for him.

A similar process sparked the *Brittas Empire* writing team of Richard Fegen and Andrew Norriss. Norriss says that like *Fawlty Towers*, a typical *Brittas* script required more time to develop than that of the average sitcom. "It did take rather a long time to write. We'd work about a month per episode, and that's a long time to be bashing away. And sometimes they got very hurried because we'd be given a film date and we still hadn't written a ruddy thing...But most of the time we were falling around laughing. We had a really good time writing it."

The setting of each series also allows the regular characters to encounter members of the public in a perfectly natural way. New characters can simply walk through the front door and within seconds become part of the story, usually acting as catalysts for some new emergency. Having lots of rooms and lots of doors to run in and out of are key ingredients to any successful farce, so the *Fawlty Towers* hotel and the Whitbury Leisure Centre both provide lots of elbow room for the staff and guests to deal with the situations of the day. In fact, many scenes in *The Brittas Empire* were filmed at a real leisure center, allowing for the swimming pool and gym to provide the backdrop for much of the action.

Julia St. John was thrilled when comparisons to *Fawlty Towers* began to surface in the British press. "It's a huge compliment!" she says, "And I think it has started to achieve a cult status. Strangely, the first one or two series didn't get that much attention over here. It was a bit of a slow burner. And then gradually the papers started saying, 'this is really good, what's this about?' and started to make some really intelligent remarks about it, and so from series three onwards it started to achieve a kind of respectability, and certainly attributes like 'the *Fawlty Towers* of the 90s' were hugely influential."

The *Brittas Empire* deserves its status as a most worthy successor to one of television's truly classic sitcoms. Once seen, a *Brittas* episode is not soon forgotten.

### Brittas Empire Main Cast

Gordon Brittas - Chris Barrie	Carole - Harriet Thorpe
Helen Brittas - Pippa Haywood	Julie - Judy Flynn
Laura Lancing - Julia St. John	Linda - Jill Greenacre
Colin Wetherby - Mike Burns	
Tim Whistler - Russell Porter	
Gavin Featherly - Tim Marriott	

## MINI BIO: CHRIS BARRIE

Chris Barrie was born in Germany in 1960 and educated at a boarding school in Dublin, where, shades of the ambitious Arnold Rimmer, he spent his last year serving as Head Boy.

Jobs as varied as digging graves and selling in the sports department of Harrods followed. He was fired from the latter when his keen talent as an impressionist got him into trouble. He called a fellow employee and set him up to take the entire fishing department to the office of a senior executive. The boss was apparently not amused.

After other false starts, Barrie decided to enter show business. He began his career doing stand-up and early on shared a bill at the Comedy Store with his future *Red Dwarf* crew mate Norman Lovett. His talent as a mimic eventually led him to a gig providing "voices" on *Spitting Image*, a series which used puppets to satirize leading politicians and celebrities. He did the voices of Jack Nicholson, Ronald Reagan, Sean Connery and Prince Charles, among others.

In 1982, he worked with Jasper Carrott on a series entitled *Carrot's Lib*. On the writing staff of this show were two men - Rob Grant and Doug Naylor - who would later make Barrie famous when they created *Red Dwarf*.

The characters of Arnold Rimmer and Gordon Brittas made him a star and this had made Barrie worry about being typecast. He once said of Brittas, "I don't really like him very much. He is a sort of school teacher nightmare, someone you meet in big corporations as head of paper-clips, a petty-minded, anally-retentive sort of person." However, he had to admit that Brittas was "great fun to play."

The truth is no one does pompous, weasely monsters better than Barrie, but in real life he shares few traits with the characters who've made him famous. He is interested in keeping fit and even did a series of six ten-minute programs offering advice on the subject, entitled *Keep Fit With Brittas*. He also has a passion for collecting classic cars and antiques.

Along with *Red Dwarf*, Barrie has made a number of outstanding cameos that are well worth searching out. He is memorable as a make-up artist for Jennifer Saunders in *Happy Families*. His ability with voices has also landed him steady work doing commercial voice-overs.

Barrie's one real career misstep so far has been *A Prince Among Men*, in which he played yet another self-obsessed, unlikable character. This 1997 series received a critical drubbing, but Barrie was welcomed back with open arms when he rejoined Starbug as a full-time member of the *Red Dwarf* crew for Season 8.

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**Garry Berman is a free-lance writer and author of the book *Best of the Britcoms*, published by Taylor Publishing.**

# BLACKADDER 101: A HISTORY LESSON

By Neil Hopkins

The teacher adjusted his gown and surveyed the chaos that was unfolding on the other side of the frosted glass door. He could think of better ways of spending the last hour of a particularly dismal Friday afternoon than teaching - well, attempting to teach - English history to the fifth form of a very minor public school.

They were, almost without exception, the most unpleasant, over-privileged and under-civilized bunch of spotty oiks it had ever been his misfortune to face. These were the sons of mediocre civil servants and assistant bank managers - not so much the cream of society as the clots. In fact, only the scholarship boy of unknown parentage and dubious personal hygiene showed the slightest streak of - well, not exactly intelligence, but a certain low cunning.

What was his name again?

"Silence!" he roared as the blizzard of paper darts, ink pellets and various unidentified objects gradually subsided.

"Right, can anyone tell me who succeeded Richard the Third to the English throne?"

"Henry Tudor, sir? He killed Richard at the battle of Bosworth Field."

"Percy - your answer is correct up to a point - the point at which you opened your mouth and began to speak to be precise. The truth is somewhat different - our lesson this afternoon concerns one of the most distinguished and yet strangely overlooked dynasties in English history.

This is the story of ... The Black Adder!"

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*Blackadder* takes a sideways look at English history over the last five hundred years or so. Series one starts with the premise that King Henry VII rewrote history to cast himself as the victor of Bosworth, to portray his predecessor Richard III as a hunchbacked villain and to erase entirely the thirteen year reign of Richard the III, father of Prince Edmund, the eponymous Black Adder.

Written by Richard Curtis (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*) and Rowan Atkinson (Edmund Blackadder), "with additional dialogue by William Shakespeare," *The Black Adder* gleefully turns every Shakespearean cliché on its head and is particularly enjoyable for anybody who was forced to endure, er, study with interest any of the Bard's work.

Thus we have such gems as "Now is the summer of our sweet content," a hunchback that turns out to be a sack of toys and three witches who tell Edmund that he will one day be king, and later say "I thought Henry Tudor would be better looking ... more like that man who rode by just before."

Even for those not well versed in the finer points of English history, the all star cast in the first series provides plenty to enjoy. Brian Blessed shouts for England as Richard IV, the late Peter Cook provides a magnificent cameo in the first episode as Richard III, Tim McInnerny plays the hapless Lord Percy and Tony Robinson is the simple yet cunning servant Baldrick.

In the title role of the Blackadder himself is perhaps the most versatile British comic actor of the last twenty years - Rowan Atkinson. He makes Edmund Blackadder the most devious, cunning, vain, larcenous, petty, cowardly, craven, sadistic and yet strangely compelling character ever found in the annals of history. His various plots to obtain power, money or self gratification (or more usually all three) invariably backfire, and yet somehow he lives to scheme another day. Until, that is, the first series ended.

At this point, Blackadder faced two threats - death being one of them, possible cancellation by the BBC being the more serious. The first series had featured a lot of expensive location filming and the BBC didn't feel it was getting its money's worth. After all, a character falling off a horse somewhere in the middle of nowhere takes a long time to film, can be quite painful and most importantly, is not really all that funny.

The decision was then taken to make the second series in the studio and to bring in Ben Elton as a co-writer. Elton's style, while somewhat more scatological, also played marvelously to Atkinson's gift for acid tongued sarcasm.

So, we find ourselves in the court of Queen Elizabeth I, where Blackadder constantly struggles to keep his head. Her Majesty is played with a beguiling mix of girlish insouciance and capricious cruelty by Miranda Richardson. Baldrick and Percy are also to be found in this era, although we see that as Blackadder becomes more cunning through the ages, intelligence is obviously a recessive gene in the Baldrick line.

Other notable characters to be found in this era are Melchett (Stephen Fry), Nursie (Patsy Byrne) and the first appearance of the noble Lord Flasheart played with remarkable verve by Rik Mayall.

In this series, the comic targets are again Shakespearean in nature, although this time it is Shakespeare as a contemporary figure rather than any particular play. The first episode takes the theme of forbidden love as Blackadder finds himself strangely drawn to his servant "Bob," although Bob is really the cross dressing Kate, so that's all right then, er, probably.

Gabrielle Glaister is wonderful as Bob/Kate, but the comic highlight, perhaps of the whole Blackadder saga, is the amount of comedic fun that Rowan Atkinson manages to wring out of the simple word "Bob."

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*(Blackadder - cont'd.)*

For Blackadder the Third, we fast forward to the reign of George III and arrive in the court of the Prince Regent. Blackadder is now butler to the spectacularly dense Prince George, played by Hugh Laurie.

The dynamic this time is certainly different, with no Lord Percy and no Melchett, although Tim McInnerny and Stephen Fry do get cameo roles as the foppish Lord Topper and a barking Duke of Wellington respectively. Other appearances of note include Miranda Richardson as an ingenue with a dark secret, Robbie Coltrane as Samuel Johnson of dictionary fame and even Ben Elton himself as an anarchist.

This brings us neatly and tidily to the fourth series of *Blackadder*, set in the muddy trenches of France during the First World War. While perhaps the most controversial, it is arguably the best of the lot.

Edmund has become Captain Blackadder of the British Army. He joined up in the expectation of a quiet life in some far flung corner of the Empire and was thus somewhat surprised when millions of heavily armed Germans came into view. Baldrick is a private in charge of the catering and you really do not want to know what goes into his Rat au Vin.

They are joined by Lieutenant The Honourable George Colhurst St Barleigh, who imagines that war is not really all that different from the Cambridge Tiddly Wink society. These particular lions of the army are led by the donkeys of Lieutenant Darling, played with a slimy malevolence by Tim McInnerny, and Stephen Fry as the magnificent General Sir Anthony Cecil Hogmanay Melchett.

The satirical artillery barrage falls this time upon such targets as the propaganda war, the Air Force (known as the "twenty minuters" for their average life expectancy), beautiful German spies and the Army's tendency to spend more time shooting their own side than the enemy.

The series treads a fine line in holding up a mirror to the lunacy of war and succeeds brilliantly, in a way that shows such as *'Allo 'Allo* and *Dad's Army* never did. The final scene where Blackadder, Baldrick and the others go "over the top" is as poignant and moving a piece of television as I have ever seen, and it is a tribute to all involved in the production that it works so well.

Hopefully, the Blackadder story has not ended yet. *Blackadder Back and Forth*, a short film described by co-writer Richard Curtis as "an irreverent trek through British history - a time travel adventure story consisting entirely of people who are either rude or stupid" has recently been completed for viewing in the Millennium Dome. Perhaps if all of the actors and writers can be assembled in the same place at the same time, then we may yet see our hero managing a sixties pop group called the 'Blackadder Five' with a drummer called "Bald Rick", or even my personal favorite - Blackadder as a schoolmaster in "Blackadder of the Fifth Form ..."

## **Blackadder at a Glance**

### ***The Black Adder***

**First transmitted:** 15 June-20 July 1983.

**Setting:** Middle ages 1485-1495.

**Episodes:** The Fortelling, The Queen of Spain's Beard, The Archbishop, Born to be King, Witchsmeller Pursuivant, and The Black Seal.

**Writers:** Rowan Atkinson, Richard Curtis.

**Main cast included:**

**Edmund Blackadder** - Rowan Atkinson

**Baldrick** - Tony Robinson

**Percy** - Tim McInnerny

**King Richard IV** - Brian Blessed

**The Queen** - Elspet Gray

**Prince Harry of Wales** - Robert East

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### ***Blackadder II***

**First transmitted:** 9 January - 20 February 1986.

**Setting:** Elizabethan England in 1560.

**Episodes:** Bells, Head, Potato, Money, Beer, and Chains.

**Writers:** Richard Curtis, Ben Elton.

**Main cast included:**

**Lord Edmund Blackadder** - Rowan Atkinson.

**Baldrick** - Tony Robinson

**Lord Percy** - Tim McInnerny

**Lord Melchett** - Stephen Fry

**Queen Elizabeth 1** - Miranda Richardson

**Nursie** - Patsy Byrne

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### ***Blackadder the Third***

**First transmitted:** 17 September - 22 October, 1987.

**Setting:** England 1760 - 1815.

**Episodes:** Dish and Dishonesty, Ink and Incapability, Nob and Nobility, Sense and Senility, Amy and Amiability, and Duel and Duality.

**Writers:** Richard Curtis, Ben Elton.

**Main cast included:**

**Edmund Blackadder** - Rowan Atkinson

**Baldrick** - Tony Robinson

**The Prince Regent (George)** - Hugh Laurie

**Mrs. Miggins** - Helen Atkinson-Wood

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### ***Blackadder Goes Forth***

**First transmitted:** 28 September - 2 November 1989

**Setting:** World War 1 - 1917.

**Episodes:** Captain Cook, Corporal Punishment, Major Star, Private Plane, General Hospital, and Goodbye.

**Writers:** Richard Curtis, Ben Elton.

**Main cast included:**

**Captain Edmund Blackadder** - Rowan Atkinson

**Private Baldrick** - Tony Robinson

**General Sir Anthony Cecil Hogmanay Melchett** - Stephen Fry

**Lt. The Honorable George Colthurst St. Barleigh** - Hugh Laurie

**Captain Kevin Darling** - Tim McInnerny

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**Neil Hopkins** lives in Sheffield, England and was a frequent contributor to the Internet e-zine ***Britcomedy Digest***.

# The Insider Episode Guide: Fawlty Towers

After his departure from Monty Python following the third series, John Cleese and his then-wife Connie Booth raised the bar for situation comedies immeasurably with **Fawlty Towers**. It was inspired by a stay the Pythons had at a hotel in Torquay called the Gleneagles. Its proprietor was a small man named Mr. Sinclair and Michael Palin noted in his journal that he viewed his guests as a "colossal inconvenience." He eventually became so rude (even thinking Eric Idle's briefcase had a bomb in it) that the troupe decided to move to another hotel without staying a single night. However, this didn't stop Mr. Sinclair's large, domineering wife from threatening to bill the group for a two-week stay. The memory of Mr. Sinclair stuck with Cleese and he used him to create the monstrous Basil Fawlty, the hotelier who certainly does see his guests as an inconvenience. Well, unless they happen to be of a certain social status that will add a luster to the reputation of Fawlty Towers. Sadly, only twelve episodes were made, but here's the inside scoop on all of them.

**Series 1, Episode 1: A Touch of Class.** Wanting desperately to add a little class to his hotel, Basil is ecstatic when one of his guests turns out to be "Lord " Melbury. What Basil doesn't realize is this man is a confidence trickster and guess who's the latest victim? The sign says: Fawlty Towers.

**Episode 2, The Builders:** Basil's desire to save some money on repairs by hiring cheap labor comes back to haunt him when the job is botched and he has to face the wrath of Sybil. The sign says: Fawlty Towers, with the L hanging down.

**Episode 3, The Wedding Party:** A young couple in town for their wedding cause Basil no end of worry about their alleged pre-marital impropriety. Basil gets on his usual high horse but ends up losing face when caught in a compromising situation with Manuel. The sign says: Farty Tower.

**Episode 4, Hotel Inspectors:** A visit from hotel inspectors puts Fawlty Towers - especially Basil - into an uproar. Basil thinks he knows who the inspector is (and it's a man he'd been rude to), but is he the actual inspector or just a very demanding customer? The sign says: Fawty Tower.

**Episode 5, Gourmet Night:** A new chef has Basil hopeful that he can attract a better clientele with a special gourmet night. As usual, though, things go horribly wrong when the chef gets a crush on Manuel and then hits the bottle. The sign says: Warty Towels.

**Episode 6, The Germans:** Basil is left with sole care of Fawlty Towers when Sybil goes in to have her ingrown toenail removed. He not only has to deal with a group of Germans, but he also has to hang the moose head that eventually knocks Basil out and leaves him with delusions about the war. The sign is not shown at the beginning of this episode.

**Series 2, Episode 1: Communications Problems.** Basil is trying yet again to keep something from Sybil, and this time it's his betting on the horses. Polly even tries to help him out, but Basil makes a big mistake when he entrusts his winnings to the absent-minded Major. Sybil finds out, of course, and Basil has some major 'splaining to do. The sign says: Fawlty Tower, with the L hanging down.

**Episode 2, The Psychiatrist:** Guests at Fawlty Towers this episode include a psychiatrist who finds Basil a very interesting case study and a debonair man Basil believes is smuggling women up to his room. The sign says: Watery Fowls.

**Episode 3, Waldorf Salad:** Basil is forced to deal with the stereotyped pushy American tourist who wants dinner after the chef has gone home. Money speaks, however, but Basil tries desperately to keep this fact from Sybil and find the ingredients for a Waldorf salad. The sign says: Flay Otters.

**Episode 4, The Kipper and the Corpse:** After a guest passes away in his sleep, Basil panics because he

thinks it's due to the kippers the guest was served at breakfast. Not wanting to alarm the other guests, he tries valiantly to hide the body until it can be taken away. The sign says: Fatty Owls.

**Episode 5, The Anniversary:** Things go terribly awry when Basil tries to plan a surprise anniversary party for Sybil. She, of course, thinks he forgotten. The sign says: Flowery Twats.

**Episode 6, Basil the Rat:** Manuel wants to keep his beloved pet mouse (or is it a Siberian hamster?), but Basil knows the health inspector who's coming to visit will have a very different view of this. The sign says: Farty Towels.

## Fawlty Towers regular cast members:

*Basil Fawlty...*John Cleese  
*Sybil Fawlty...*Prunella Scales  
*Polly...*Connie Booth  
*Manuel...*Andrew Sachs  
*The Major...*Ballard Berkeley  
*Miss Tibbs...*Gilly Flower  
*Miss Gatsby...*Renee Roberts



# Classic Flashback: Army

# Dad's

***Who do you think you are kidding Mr. Hitler  
If you think we're on the run?  
We are the boys who will stop your little game  
We are the boys who will make you think again.  
'Cause who do you think you are kidding Mr. Hitler  
If you think old England's done?***

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Jaunty tunes like the above helped the British keep their famed stiff upper lip during the bleakest days of WWII, so it's fitting that such a song begins every episode of perhaps *the* classic sitcom about that era, *Dad's Army*.

During WWII, many of those who could not serve in the Army due to age or other factors signed up as Local Defense Volunteers in what became known as the Home Guard. This morale-boosting stroke of genius from the government of Winston Churchill made everyone feel as if they were doing some part to keep Britain safe from German tyranny. The truth of the matter, was, though, that like a geeky high school hall monitor who asks you for a pass, the Home Guard didn't have much authority or heft to back it up. What they did have, though, was a lot of heart.

One of those who volunteered was 16-year old Jimmy Perry, who would later relive these experiences as co-writer of *Dad's Army*. He and David Croft fashioned a motley squadron whose members included:

**Captain George Mainwaring**, who has the unenviable task of turning this collection of disparate loons into a lean, mean fighting machine. A bank manager by day, Mainwaring has a tendency to be pompous and overbearing. These qualities, along with his rotund build, cause his detractors to refer to him as Napoleon.

Mainwaring was played by Arthur Lowe, who entered show business at the somewhat late age of 30. Like most television actors of his generation, he had his beginnings in the theater. When television called, however, the character of Mainwaring proved to be a perfect fit for Lowe. He was in the Army himself prior to World War II and served in the Middle East. Before joining *Dad's Army*, Lowe appeared in such films as the Ealing Studio classic *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, with Alec Guinness. He also played Mr. Swindley on the long-running soap opera *Coronation Street*.

Mainwaring, however, is constantly outclassed by the dignified, laid back **Sergeant Wilson**, played with great aplomb by John Le Mesurier. As in many Britcoms, *Dad's Army* broaches the subject of class differences, and in this one, it's Mainwaring's second-in-command who actually has the status and Hyacinth Bucket style social connections.

The character of Wilson was not unlike Le Mesurier himself. He came from a comfortable background and like Arthur Lowe had a relatively late entrance into the world of show business. He considered following his father into the legal profession, but the lure of the theater proved greater.

Le Mesurier could also relate to the era portrayed in *Dad's Army*. He was an air raid warden in Chelsea and then joined the Army, spending much of his time in India.

Next in the platoon was the ditzzy but sweet **Corporal Jack Jones**. As with all the men, Jones had a day job and his was as a butcher. His duties with the Home Guard, however, seemed to consist mainly of running around yelling "Don't panic! Don't panic!" or asking Captain Mainwaring for permission to speak. In fact, *Permission to Speak* would later be the title of the autobiography of Clive Dunn, the man who played Jones.

Dunn came from a show business family with roots in the music hall tradition. His mother, Connie, was a comedienne and his father Bobby was a singer. Clive trained at the Italia Conti stage school in London and he, too, served in the Army. His experience was more traumatic than the others, however, as he was taken prisoner by the Germans while stationed in Greece.

Along with *Dad's Army*, Dunn also has to his credit a hit record called *Grandad*, which reached number one on the charts and landed him a guest appearance on the popular show *Top of the Pops*.

In stark contrast to "Jonesey" is **Private James Frazer**, played by John Laurie. By day, Frazer works as a mortician, but in the evening, he provides the voice of cynicism and gloom for the platoon. He also provides Mainwaring with plenty of headaches as he often questions the Captain's authority. In one episode, he even takes over as platoon leader. "We're doomed! We're doomed!" is his war cry, and with his wild-eyed stare

(*Dad's Army* - cont'd.)

and disarming Scottish brogue, he can make his horror stories come vividly to life.

Off screen, Laurie was from all reports your typically reticent Scotsman. His humility covered up a very distinguished pre-*Dad's Army* career, including study at Stratford-on-Avon and playing all the major Shakespearean roles on stage. His talent for Shakespeare led to film roles alongside Olivier in *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and *Henry V*. He also appeared in two Alfred Hitchcock films - *Juno and the Paycock* and *Thirty-Nine Steps*.

The gloom and doom of Frazer was offset by the roguish charm of James Beck as **Private Joe Walker**. This "spiv" character was your basic con man who was somehow able to get whatever he - or Captain Mainwaring - needed via his charm and perhaps slightly illegal methods. Thus, he's able to do things like chow down on a steak while the others have to make due with Toad in the Hole. He also seems to have plenty of money in the bank and women who adore him.

Things were not so happy for Beck off screen. His role in *Dad's Army* brought him his own series on London Weekend Television called *Romany Jones* and his career was ready to take off when severe stomach pains led to an operation for a suspected ulcer. During the surgery, however, his pancreas burst and Beck passed away at the young age of 44. This tragic event occurred in 1973, between series five and six of *Dad's Army*. His character was never replaced, and though the series went on without him, he was still sorely missed by fans and by his fellow co-stars, who had all formed a great bond.

Perhaps the most endearing member of the Walmington-on-Sea Home Guard was **Private Charles Godfrey**. Godfrey is the frailest member of the platoon, constantly asking to be excused to use the bathroom or to go to doctor's appointments.

Godfrey didn't have a whole lot to do onscreen, but Arnold Ridley, the man who played him, was the cast member with perhaps the most impressive off-screen resume.

After deciding to take up an acting career and training at the Theatre Royal, Bristol, Ridley was called for service in WWI. He fought in France and suffered numerous injuries, including blow on the head that would leave him continually susceptible to serious blackouts.

After the war, he tried to return to acting but his injuries forced him to give him it up. This didn't keep him from writing, however, and he authored a wildly successful play entitled *The Ghost Train*. This play would eventually run for over 600 performances in London's West End and be brought to the big screen on three occasions.

Ridley authored numerous other plays during the 1920s and 30s, but when WWII broke out, he enlisted in the Army again. He never mentioned his wounds from WWI to the authorities, and sadly ended up shell-shocked. Yet the Army's loss was the theater's gain.

During the 60s, Ridley appeared on the long-running radio program *The Archers* as well as *Coronation Street*. Like his co-star John Laurie, Ridley's role in *Dad's Army* opened up an entire new phase of his career when he was in his 70s. He was eventually honored with an OBE in the 1982 New Year's Honour List for service to the theater and passed away a couple of years later at the age of 88.

The youngest member of the platoon by far is **Private Frank Pike**, played by baby-faced Ian Lavender. Frank's mother is very close to Sergeant Wilson (whom Pike refers to as "Uncle Arthur") and Wilson indeed keeps an eye out for the youngster. There is even gossip that Frank may be Arthur's child, but this is never confirmed. Frank is most definitely a naive mummy's boy, whose frame of reference for what he's going through is movies or comic books. He is constantly referred to by Mainwaring's famous line, "Stupid boy."

Lavender came to the attention of producer David Croft because he was a client of Croft's wife, Ann. The character of Pike was based on Jimmy Perry himself and his experiences as a teenage volunteer in the Home Guard.

Also important to the cast was Bill Pertwee as the other thorn in Mainwaring's side, **ARP Warden William Hodges**. He and Mainwaring are constantly at each other's throat over use of the office or which of their jobs is the most important. Their relationship is basically one long game of "Can you top this?"

Less visible but no less important are **Frank Williams** as Reverend Timothy Farthing, Vicar of St. Aldhelms in Walmington-on-Sea, and Edward Sinclair as **Maurice Yeatman**, the Verger. The Verger is extremely loyal to the Vicar and is possibly the town's biggest gossip and snitch. He is often caught in the crossfire between Mainwaring and the Warden, usually siding with the Warden.

Jimmy Perry came up with the idea for *Dad's Army* because he was an actor and wanted to create a good part for himself. Until this time, he'd only done a small amount of writing, but he drew on his personal experiences for a comedy about a facet of the military that hadn't been explored before. He finished the first script and went back to acting until his agent, who happened to be Mrs. David Croft, called to offer him a small role in a show her husband was directing. During rehearsal, he took the opportunity to "pitch" his script to Croft, who agreed to co-write and got a green light for the series. The rest is history.

*Dad's Army* deserves its place in British television history because like a well-oiled platoon, each soldier worked together for the sake of the whole. Through nine series, a feature film

## **PRODUCER/DIRECTOR HAROLD SNOAD ON *DAD'S ARMY* AND MORE**

*Harold Snoad is one of the most prolific Producer/Directors in British television. His name is best known over the end credits of Keeping Up Appearances, but he has also been instrumental in a number of other programs, including Dad's Army. He spoke with Tony Pritchard, Paul Carpenter, David Jeffries, Stephen Poppitt and Jack Wheeler of the Dad's Army Appreciation Society about his life and his involvement with this classic sitcom.*

### **How did you become involved with television?**

Even as a young lad I was fascinated by show business and at the age of twelve I started working backstage unpaid at my local theatre in Eastbourne during my school holidays. I loved it. When I reached fourteen they said they couldn't let me work for nothing any more and began to pay me. I was in the drama club at Eastbourne College and from there I went on to drama school. Those were the days when you had to do National Service and I went into the RAF, where I continued my theatrical interest by resurrecting a defunct drama club. I did a lot of direction and we won the Drama Festival twice, which was pretty good. I was then posted to the to the RAF recruiting center at Brighton and one day I was called in by the commanding officer, who said "I don't know if I should leave this to you, Harold, but there's an annual RAF window display competition and we've never gotten anywhere, but I'm going to put it in your hands. "

I decided to dress the window with desks similar to those used on *What's My Line*, which was very popular program at the time. On these desks I was going to put large photo blow-ups of the panelists. I suddenly remembered that Gilbert Harding (*a panelist on the show -Ed.*) lived in Brighton,, and although he didn't know me from Adam, I rang him and asked if I could discuss it with him.

He said by all means, so I went round to his house and the servant answered the door. "I've come to see Gibert Harding." I said "Oh yes," the servant said," he's up in the bathroom." I said, "Oh well, I'll wait," to which he replied "No, he's only having a bath, you can go up and speak to him there."

Although this sounded a bit odd, I thought I'd better not decline, so I went and sat on the loo alongside Gilbert in the bath and we discussed the project. He was recording a couple of shows the following weekend and he invited me to go up to London with him, where he would arrange for the large photographs I needed. So I went up to London and, in fact, stayed at Gilbert's flat. overnight - although I was extremely careful!

I got the stills and the Brighton office won the RAF Recruiting Window Display Competition. I wrote to Gilbert thanking him for his cooperation and he rang me to congratulate me. He asked what I was going to do when my RAF service finished and I said, "I'll probably go back into the theatre and acting." "Have you thought about going into television?" he asked. I said that I hadn't until then, but he said he'd get me

and a radio show, *Dad's Army* gave an always funny, often poignant portrait of England and its people as they were and consequently earned a deep place in their hearts.

an application form and I could take it from there. So I applied and joined BBC Television in a very junior capacity and then steadily climbed the production ladder until I was made a Producer/Director.

### **When and how did you become involved with *Dad's Army*?**

At the time, I was working with David Croft as his Production Manager on things like *The Benny Hill Show* and *Hugh and I*. In fact, David let me direct an episode of the latter. So, I was already with David when he started on *Dad's Army* and because the two of us got on very well and he liked my work, he wanted me to work on that as well.

### **What is your favorite episode and character?**

This is very difficult. I couldn't really say that I've got a favorite character because they're all so different. I think episode-wise I enjoyed *Don't Forget the Diver* and *Don't Fence Me In*. I seem to be coming up with the ones that I actually directed. I also like *Put That Light Out*, but I may be slightly biased there because I came up with the idea for that one! It's very difficult because there are so many wonderful episodes.

### **Can you remember how many episodes of *Dad's Army* you worked on?**

I haven't counted them, but I was with the show for the first five series including directing, I think, nine episodes.

### **Are there any funny anecdotes or tales you can tell us about while you were doing the filming?**

I still particularly like the one where Colonel Cleasby - the commanding officer of the Stanford Practical Training Area - accidentally fell into the bog whilst walking his dog because the hole that we had dug for Pike was under water and we hadn't filled it in after we had finished filming. We had planned to do so the next day when the surrounding water had subsided.

### **With regard to the outside film locations for the series, how did you decide to a given spot was a suitable location for the scene in question?**

I realized that the location work was going to involve an awful lot of filming on roads and in open areas, so it was necessary to take into account that this was a "period" piece and we

couldn't have traffic or members of the public in the background. I did a bit of research and then chose the

(continued on next page)

(Harold Snoad - cont'd.)

Stanford training area because this offered us plenty of opportunities and was a private area. It's also necessary to be able to accommodate the artists and members of the unit not that far away from the location because every hour spent traveling is an hour's less filming.

I didn't always choose the first option. I generally looked at about four or five possibilities for a particular scene and then made a decision. Having based the majority of the filming in a specific area, it was then necessary, for logistical reasons, to keep all the rest in or around a twenty-mile radius.

**How did the radio series come about and how did you become the writer?**

I honestly don't know. Presumably, someone in BBC radio thought it would be a good idea. I became involved because David and Jimmy had a lot on their plate and really couldn't cope with any more. I think Michael Knowles and I teamed up together because Jimmy knew that I liked radio and writing and he was aware that I had come up with story lines for *Up Pompeii!* and done the same thing for *Bless This House* with Sid James on ITV. We had also written together before - including cabaret material for Bill Pertwee.

**When you adapted the TV show for radio, did Jimmy Perry and David Croft have any sort of input?**

No, not really. John Dyas would send them the scripts before they were issued to the artists, but, if my memory serves correctly, I can't remember them objecting to anything. They were always perfectly happy with it.

**Did you have anything to do with the feature film?**

I was consulted about certain locations and I did turn up to advise at one point, but I've forgotten what it was on. I was really not involved to that extent.

**Can you tell us about any other programs you've been involved with?**

Over the years, I have worked with a lot of well known people. In the early days in the theatre this included Peter Sellers (when he was an impressionist), Sandy Powell and Benny Hill. In TV there was the *Ted Ray Show*, Charlie Chester, Benny Hill, Dave King, *The Black and White Minstrels*, Terry Scott and then, of course *Dad's Army*.

Then I started directing numerous comedy series starring, amongst others, Derek Nimmo, Ronnie Barker, John Inman,

Eric Sykes, John Cleese, Martin Jarvis, Roy Kinnear and Dick Emery, with whom I worked for eight years.

In more recent years, I worked on *Ever Decreasing Circles*, *Don't Wait Up*, and *Keeping Up Appearances*.

**Apart from *Dad's Army*, what are your favorite comedy television programs?**

Well, I suppose *Fawlty Towers* takes a lot of beating, plus *One Foot in the Grave*, *Porridge*, and, of course, *Only Fools and Horses*. I do also rather like certain things I did, for example, *Ever Decreasing Circles*. Richard Briers is one of our greatest comedy actors. I think he's marvelous and great fun to work with.

**Now that you have retired, do you still undertake work and have anything coming up?**

It's very difficult because, well, it sounds very immodest, but I can only tell you what Richard Briers said to me the other day. He said, "They are going to be very reluctant to take you back, Harold, because you were very good and, basically, they don't want anyone who knows more than they do." I think in a way he's right and this has proved to be the case. You now have these people who direct programs perfectly competently from the point of view of getting the thing on the screen, but have nothing to give the actors in terms of direction. I understand that some of them come into a rehearsal room without any ideas regarding the blocking of the piece - artist moves, business, etc. - and are no assistance whatsoever to the artists when it comes to getting the best out of a script.

They put it together afterwards as a rough cut, then they have another version and sometimes several more rough cuts. In between there are associate producers, associate directors, executive producers, etc., who all give their opinion. In America they also record the dress run in front of a studio audience and use bits of this in the final show if a certain element went better than in the main recording.

Simon Williams was talking to me the other day about an episode of the Victoria Wood series *Dinnerladies* that he'd just done. Apparently, they record that over two days with the normal rehearsal on the first day and the audience that evening. Then the following day everyone goes in again, they have a sort of brush up of the whole thing and do it for another audience that evening. So having everything - set, crews, etc. - for two days instead of one can be very cost effective. Why do they need to do it that way when the likes of David Croft and myself never needed to and we still finished up with very funny, polished programs.

# *Antiques Roadshow: Roll Up For the Hottest Show on Three Continents*

There was a couple from the town of Barnstaple who had no interest in antiques and didn't believe they had anything of value anyway. However, their dog needed a walk so they decided to take him for a stroll past the building where an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* was being filmed. On a whim, they brought along a watercolor to get its value. They expected to hear that it was worthless, but instead discovered that it was valued at over 100,000 pounds. The painting now hangs in the British Museum.

Goes to show you just never know, do you? But with *Antiques Roadshow*, people are finding out. Things in the attic, things passed down from relatives - these objects sometimes have a value only dreamed of.

This feeling of suspense and anticipation, along with its value as information and entertainment, are among the reasons *Antiques Roadshow* has been a staple on British television for more than two decades. Each year, its popularity continues to grow as the Roadshow visits a wide range of cities in the UK and abroad with experts who provide detailed information about the antiques and give owners an estimate of its value. Not only that, the show also gives viewers a chance to peek into some breathtaking buildings and learn more about some beautiful English villages and towns.

It starts with a notice in the local newspaper that *Antiques Roadshow* is coming to town. On the day of the taping, experts in pottery, jewelry, furniture, paintings and miscellaneous are available from 10:00 a.m. until 4 p.m. During that time they sift patiently through items brought by the estimated two thousand people who attend.

Sometimes the experts have good news, but other times you can see the look of disappointment on people's faces when what they have doesn't turn out to be valuable after all. In fact, one lady from the Isle of Man was convinced that she had a painting by Constable and huffed off in disgust when she was told she didn't, believing the experts to be wrong.

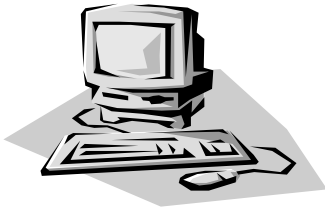
What makes the cut for the televised version are things that are rare, of great value and those objects that have a good story behind them. Over the years the Roadshow team has seen it all, including moustache clippings from a member of the Royal family and chocolate from WW1. The show can also provide some usually touching moments. In one episode, a Japanese vase turned out to have somehow survived the force of the atomic bomb that hit Nagasaki in 1945.

*Antiques Roadshow* is hosted by the affable Hugh Scully, who has spent over thirty years as a television presenter and producer. He began his career as a radio newsreader, first contracted to work only one week as holiday relief, but this led to other work as a reporter. He then presented *Nationwide* before he became the first host of *Watchdog*. Before the televised version of *Antiques Roadshow*, Scully spent nearly twenty years on a Radio 4 program called *Talking About Antiques* and then went on to present *Collector's World* before joining the Roadshow.

Why has this show become so popular? Antique hunting has always been a popular hobby and the boom in Internet auction sites such as E Bay makes it timely. But in a sense, it's also like watching the Lottery - there's always the chance that a visitor may have the winning number and something apparently worthless is actually valuable.

The Roadshow has become an international phenomenon, even showing in Australia and New Zealand. It has made road trips to countries such as Jamaica, which Scully once recalled as one of their more memorable jaunts. "When the local people were given their valuations, they did not move, unlike the British viewers, who normally say thanks very much and get up and go," he explained. "We wondered why this was. It turned out that the people of Jamaica had expected us to arrive in their lovely island with suitcases full of cash, and they thought it was illogical that a program based upon valuations would then not provide an immediate reward."

The craze for antiques is usually equated with older people, but *Antiques Roadshow* is introducing it to the younger crowd as well, with a spin-off entitled *The Next Generation*. It also inspired an American version produced by WGBH in Boston that has become one of the most widely syndicated shows in PBS history. This virtually guarantees that there will be an audience for the Roadshow well into the future. After all, you never know what unknown masterpiece or treasure might be lurking in the attic.



## SPOTTED ON THE INTERNET

*Web Reviews by David Bibb*

### **The Fawlty Towers Multimedia Page**

[http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/8373/home\\_e.htm](http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/8373/home_e.htm)

A very well done site featuring facts, episodes guides, background, quotes, sound bytes, a quiz, and links to other sites. What makes the site exceptional is that it was created by someone in Germany. If it were not for the fact that there is an episode schedule in German and a German translation one would not know it. The interface is fast and easy to understand. The sections are well thought out and informative. Fans of the show should definitely give this site a look.

**Rating: 4 out of 5 mouse clicks**

### **The Unofficial Guide to Fawlty Towers**

<http://www.btinternet.com/~c.tomlinson/fawlty1.html>

The Unofficial Guide is a frames based site which is able to be accessed by text based browsers such as LYNX. It contains a lovely version of the theme song, a rather detailed history as to how the show came about, links to newspaper articles on the show, Episode Guides, and biographies of all of the people associated with the show. There's also a guide to the locations mentioned in the show, and, perhaps the most fun, a list of hotels named after the one in the show.

Another section of the site has reproductions of the hotel sign from each episode (for those not in the know, the sign changes throughout the shows run). The site has won a number of awards (which are displayed on their own page) and I must agree the awards were well-deserved.

**Rating: 4 mouse clicks**

### **Internet Movie Database**

<http://www.imdb.com>

<http://www.imdb.com/Name?John+Cleese>

There is a lot of information on John Cleese on the net. Probably the best overview can be found at the rather misnamed Internet Movie Database.

The database contains information on movies and television shows and has detailed professional information on most performers. Where else can you get a complete listing of all movie, and television guest appearances? In addition, the database allows one to purchase videos and DVDs online.

The pages provide links to data on all of the programs listed. You can also access pages that provide memorable quotes, goofs, summaries, and movie links from individual shows.

In short, there is no more reliable method to find out what a performer has done.

**Rating: 4 1/2 clicks**

### **The Brittas Empire Episode Guide**

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/7916/brittas01.html>

A good source for a guide to episodes but very little other information is offered. It has good links to other sites and is a good place to start a search for a more extensive site.

**Rating: 2 1/2 mouse clicks**

### **The Brittas Empire Cast List and Bio Page**

<http://pages.prodigy.com/PA/mrbrittas/index2.html>

Another page that has great potential but which only has one feature, a very good listing of the characters with biographical information about them. The descriptions are well written and do include some information on the actors who portray them.

**Rating: 3 mouse clicks.**

**Are You Being Served? and Are You Being Served? Again!**

<http://www.clever.net/rice/www/aybs.shtml>

One of the best sites on the web, this site serves both shows and serves them well. It includes two interviews with John Inman, excellent episode guides to both shows, cast pictures, sound clips, a bookstore featuring both the videos and books, a FAQ, how to contact the actors, links to other pages, fan fiction, chat rooms, and, my own personal favorite, canteen recipes.

The interface for this site is very well executed and response time is fast. The site could be used as a how-to guide on creating Web pages that work.

**Rating: 4 1/2 mouse clicks.**

#### Andy's Dad's Army Web-page

<http://www.btinternet.com/~howejam/dadsarmy.htm>

Informative but brief site devoted to the show. None of the pages, except the episode guides, go over one page but the information is useful and presented well.

**Rating: 3 mouse clicks.**

#### Melanie's Dad's Army Page

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/Stage/6410/>

A more in depth description of the show can be found at Melanie's Dad's Army Page. This site offers an excellent description of the show and the radio spin-off. Melanie runs a listserv dealing with the show and provides an easy way to join the list. This site does not attempt to reinvent the wheel but, instead, does a fine job of providing links to various resources on the Web.

**Rating: 3 1/2 mouse clicks.**

#### British TV Comedy Resources

<http://www.phill.co.uk/>

The British TV Comedy Resources has details on over 400 programs from A J Wentworth, B.A. to The Young Ones. None of the listings are in depth but they do provide good resources and, more importantly, links to other sites, some of which are in depth. If there is a British comedy you're interested in, chances are good that there is information about it on this site.

**Rating: 4 mouse clicks.**

### ALSO RECOMMENDED

- **The AYBS? Virtual Vault:**

<http://www.geocities.com/~emilyj/>

- **Sup's Blackadder Page**

<http://www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/8889/bladder.htm>

**Disclaimer: Please remember that the World Wide Web is an ever-changing place. Sites close down or move on a regular basis. The sites reviewed and recommended in**

**this issue are operational at the date of publication. The Insider regrets any inconvenience caused by sites that move or close.**

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**David Bibb is a Missouri-based Internet and British comedy addict.**

## New In Syndication

**UP POMPEII!**  
*Starring Frankie Howerd*



Before *Are You Being Served?*, David Croft produced the first series of this raucous sitcom set in ancient Rome. It contains all the trademarks that would later become synonymous with a Croft production, but there's a big difference. Whereas *AYBS?*, 'Allo, 'Allo and *Dad's Army* were all ensemble pieces, *Up Pompeii!* belonged to one man and that's the late, great Frankie Howerd.

Howerd (né Francis Alick Howard) was an almost constant presence on British television from the 1950s until his death in 1992. His career was a series of ups and down as there were periods when his leering, risqué, "oooh er" style of humor was out of favor. Yet he worked consistently as a stand-up comic and as a television, film and theater performer. One of his roles was in the London production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and this paved the way for *Up Pompeii!*

Howerd plays Lurcio, the slave of Roman senator Ludicrus Sextus and his well-endowed wife Ammonia. The plot, setting and characterization are secondary, though. They're just background noise allowing Howerd to do what he does best - breaking that "fourth wall" to step out of character and speak directly to the audience. In other hands, this could easily disintegrate into a cutesy gimmick, but Howerd was blessed with a marvelous ability to create a rapport with the audience. His constant asides about the implausibility of the plot, other cast members and the standard of writing are priceless, as are his exasperated expressions and rolls of the eyes.

The scripts are full of the same broad, innuendo laden humor that is the hallmark of most David Croft sitcoms. Sharp-eyed viewers will also be able to catch early glimpses of Nicholas Smith, Wendy Richard and other members of the Croft "family." You'll even see a younger, thinner, less slovenly Geoffrey Hughes, who would go on to play Onslow on *Keeping Up Appearances*.

Two series and several specials of *Up Pompeii!* were made. Like most popular sitcoms of the era, three feature films were also produced that took Howerd's character out of Rome and into different time periods à la *Blackadder*.

Though treasured in the UK, *Up Pompeii!* is not as well known as other Croft sitcoms in the United States. Now Americans have a chance to see this overlooked gem and get to know the wonderful Frankie Howerd.

*John Cleese (cont'd. from page 1)*

His parents had him relatively late in life. Reg Cleese was 46 when John was born and his wife Muriel was 40. Cleese's childhood meekness might be attributed to his overly cautious parents, but it might also come from his height. He had reached 6' by the age of 12 and, feeling like something of a misfit, began to use humor as a defense mechanism. This is a normal pattern for many comics, who grow up feeling it's always better to get the joke in yourself before anyone else can.

So Cleese grew up in comfortable, conservative circumstances and sometimes that sort of a background spawns nature's true rebels. The Monty Python troupe all came from solid middle-class families where conformity was the rule. But when they entered showbiz, they were determined to break the rules.

Yet it was a rather polite, subtle *British* rebellion that came from working inside the system. The BBC hired Cleese not long after he graduated from Cambridge University. He'd studied to become a lawyer, but also became a member of the legendary Footlights Club. This dramatic society, which has been in existence since the 1800s, is responsible for putting on large-scale theatrical productions. Cleese came into Footlights during one of its greatest periods, following in the heels of such legends as Peter Cook and David Frost.

However, you have to be elected into The Footlights, and Cleese's meekness/fear of embarrassment almost cost him his chance. When he first approached them about auditioning, they asked if he could sing or dance. The answer to both was no. When they asked what he could do, he replied that he tried to make people laugh. He was so embarrassed by this lame reply that he beat a hasty retreat and didn't go near the organization again for a couple of terms. Urged by a friend, he finally tried again and was elected.

One of the Footlights productions, the oddly named *A Clump of Plinths*, brought Cleese to the attention of the BBC. He was offered 30 pounds per week to go to work for them, which was substantially more than he would have earned at a law firm. His parents gave their blessing to the job because after all, this was the BBC and they had a good pension scheme.

He met Graham Chapman while still at Cambridge and the pair began working together when they found themselves both employed by the BBC. Cleese admits that he didn't like Chapman at first and felt uncomfortable with him. In fact, he found him "unlikable," but they were soon writing and performing as a team. They also wrote for David Frost's program, *The Frost Report*.

In fact, if there's one person who was most instrumental in John Cleese's early career it was David Frost. He provided him with his first big breaks and for his trouble, the Pythons would later skewer him mercilessly as the fatuous television personality Timmy Williams. The chance to write and perform on *The Frost Report* and in another sketch show called *Not the 1948 Show* would eventually cement the Cleese/Chapman writing partnership.

The BBC then gave Cleese a standing invitation to have his own show and, in something of a chain reaction, the team that would become known as Monty Python was brought together.

*Python* premiered in October of 1969 and those who fell under its spell were destined never to view parrots, hedgehogs, Spam, or the everyday act of walking in the same way again.

C'mon, Python loyalists, con-**FESS**. You can't go into the cheese section of a supermarket without smiling and perhaps looking about for Greek musicians, now can you? Or see the plaid flannel shirts favored by lumberjacks and not want to burst into the chorus of a certain song? Doubtful, because that's just the kind of effect Python has had on people.

The first episode went out late on a Sunday evening in a time slot usually occupied by a program devoted to religious discussion. So imagine the shock of those who tuned in expecting to see that only to be confronted with Picasso doing a painting while riding a bicycle, the deaths of famous historical figures judged in the manner of the Olympics, and the story of a joke so funny that anyone who heard it literally died laughing.

So the Python series began and would continue for the next five years, during which time they broke most of the rules about what television and comedy should be. From ex-Goon Spike Milligan came the idea that sketches didn't necessarily need a beginning, middle and an end. This, along with the advantage of having Gilliam's animations to connect disparate sketches, took the emphasis away from the punch line and allowed the free-flowing stream of consciousness that would become the Python trademark.

The first skit Cleese appeared in was the one where he and Michael Palin discussed flying sheep. Though he and Chapman usually wrote together (using the Bible

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(John Cleese - cont'd.)

and a thesaurus when inspiration waned), it is actually Cleese and Palin who made the best on screen pairing. The cheese shop, the dead parrot and other skits show their ability to work together well and live performances proved the genuine fondness the two men had for each other.

At its best, the Python partnership was something akin to a good marriage, where one partner's strength compensates for the other's weakness, and the result is a harmonious whole.

In this case, the verbal strength and logic of Cleese, Chapman, and Idle was perfectly complemented by the imaginative visual flair of Jones, Palin, and especially Gilliam. Though they have all gone on to do successful solo projects, there was an synergy at work here which will never be duplicated.

However, Python was not enough to keep his attention for long. Cleese has shown himself time and again to be a very restless, easily bored individual, though this has helped his growth as a creative artist. It only took until the second series of Python for him to become bored with it and after the third series he bailed.

He told the others while on a flight to Canada. They weren't surprised, as they'd been able to sense his restlessness.

Cleese then set about with his then-wife Connie Booth to create what would be their masterpiece, *Fawlty Towers*.

Cleese and Booth worked extraordinarily well together as a writing team, even as their marriage was falling apart. Four years elapsed between the first and second series of *Fawlty Towers* and the second series was at least as successful - if not funnier - than its predecessor.

In the interim, however, Cleese continued his association with the Pythons. He left the series behind, but teamed up with his former cohorts when they made the leap to feature films.

The Pythons made a less than memorable movie debut in 1971 with *And Now For Something Completely Different*. This was simply a compendium of Python's greatest hits recorded again for the big

screen. Its intent was to break the Pythons in America, but that really wouldn't happen until their next feature, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. *Holy Grail* was made between the two series of *Fawlty Towers*, and during its filming, Cleese's divorce from Booth became final. Directed by the two Terrys, *Holy Grail* is visually oriented, but Cleese nevertheless has a lot of fun playing everything from the outrageous French taunter to Tim the Enchanter.

The Pythons would follow up *Holy Grail* with the biblical epic *Life of Brian*. *Brian* was bogged down almost from the beginning by controversy and financial problems. Based on the performance of *Holy Grail*, the group was able to obtain financing from EMI to the tune of 4.5 million dollars. Supposedly secure with this backing, they set to work on their biblical epic, which Eric Idle jokingly stated was going to be titled *Jesus Christ, Lust For Glory*.

Over the course of a year a first draft was put together. It changed from the story of St. Brian, a kind of thirteenth apostle who was always a bit too late, to the story of Brian Cohen, who had the misfortune to be born in the manger down the way from Jesus.

As the script went through the rigid process of change and scrutiny that was the Python norm, a conservative watchdog group, "The National Viewer's and Listener's Association" were extending the sphere of their influence.

Led by Mrs. Mary Whitehouse, an ex-schoolteacher, this group was determined to safeguard the morals of Britain by putting pressure on radio, TV, and movie companies to "keep it clean."

In 1979 this group won an important case against "Gay News," a periodical which counted Graham Chapman among its supporters. The case revolved around a poem the paper printed dealing with the supposed homosexual attraction between a Roman Centurion and Christ on the cross.

The court decided in favor of Mrs. Whitehouse and her influence became even more pervasive. As early as April of 1979 she was raising a ruckus over *Brian* for being blasphemous and portraying Jesus as an "ignorant zealot" who used obscene language.

This furor caused EMI to back out of the deal. It looked like *Brian* wouldn't be made, but to the rescue came ex-Beatle and Python fan/friend George Harrison. For no other reason than he wanted to see the film himself, Harrison and his former business partner Denis O'Brien set up Hand Made Films as a way of getting the movie made. Filming then began in Monastir, Tunisia.

The uproar surrounding *Brian* often bordered on the ludicrous and the *Not The Nine O'Clock News*

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(John Cleese - cont'd.)

team parodied the stupidity of it in a brilliant skit. The sketch has Pamela Stephenson moderating a debate about a fictitious film entitled *The Life of Christ*, which she explains has been criticized as "a thinly disguised and blasphemous attack on the life of Monty Python."

A riotous debate ensues with Mel Smith claiming that the character of Jesus Christ in this film is clearly a lampoon of "the comic messiah, our lord John Cleese," citing as evidence that "Even the initials, J.C., are exactly the same."

Rowan Atkinson (as the Bishop who directed the film) counters the argument by saying "The Christ figure is *not* Cleese. No, he's just an ordinary man who happens to have been born in Weston-super-Mare at the same time as Mr. Cleese."

Yes, the skit was silly, but so was a lot of the uproar caused by *Brian*. What its detractors failed to see is that it is not an attack on Jesus and religion. Its message is simple: Think things out for yourself. Do not follow anything, be it a religion, revolutionary group, or political party, blindly.

The Pythons took a bit of a breather after *Brian* by releasing *Live at the Hollywood Bowl*, another "greatest hits" compilation that is far more successful than the first one. Of course, thousands of adoring fans (some dressed as Python characters) greeting every skit as if it were a classic rock tune didn't hurt either.

The only other output of the Pythons together on film together is *The Meaning of Life* - a bold, audacious work that showed the six men at the peak of their power. Who can forget Cleese as the unflappable French waiter persuading the world's fattest man to finish an enormous meal with a wafer, promptly causing him to throw up everywhere? Undaunted, Cleese calmly orders a bucket for Mr. Cresote and "perhaps a hose." Or how about Cleese as the teacher who can't even make sex interesting when the lecture includes a live demonstration?

Not only was *The Meaning Of Life* Python's biggest box office success, it was respected enough to win the prestigious Jury Award at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival.

Yet, in future, it may not be for a Python film that Cleese will be best remembered. *A Fish Called Wanda* (billed as "a tale of lust, revenge and seafood") was released in 1988 to massive critical acclaim and great box office. It ended up receiving Academy Award nominations for Best Screenplay and Kevin Kline won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.

Indeed, Cleese is in fine form in this romantic caper about a second rate group of robbers. The script is both funny and touching, allowing Cleese to turn in possibly his best performance and get out all his frustration about British reserve.

The re-pairing of the *Wanda* team in 1997's *Fierce Creatures* was not nearly as successful, but having to follow in the footsteps of one of the most acclaimed British films of all time made disappointment almost inevitable.

Along the way, Cleese has also given terrific performances in such films as *Privates On Parade*, and *Clockwise*, in which he played a harried headmaster. He also won an Emmy for his guest role as a marriage counselor on *Cheers*.

However, not everything he touches turns to gold. If we may register a complaint, movies such as *Yellowbeard* and *Splitting Heirs* may have looked good on paper, but were not what you'd consider smart career moves.

On a personal level, Cleese appears to be as restless emotionally as he is professionally. He is currently on his third marriage (all of his wives have been American), has supported several political causes and is also a great believer in therapy, co-authoring two books on families and life with Robin Skinner. He has made a fortune from Video Arts, a company he helped form that makes humorous corporate training films.

Now that he's turned 60, you'd think Cleese would be thinking about retirement or at least slowing down, but he doesn't show any signs of either. His recent appearances include being probably the best thing in the Steve Martin/Goldie Hawn remake of *The Out of Towners* and you can see him in the new James Bond film, *The World Is Not Enough*. He is also reportedly to star in a comedic look at the life of George Washington.

After decades of critical acclaim, being named the Funniest Man in Britain, winning an Italian Academy Award (Best Screenplay for *Wanda*), playing Petruccio in Jonathan Miller's production of *The Taming of the Shrew* and (in general) being considered one of the most talented men on the planet, what's left for John Cleese?

Probably not much, except to find those guys who sat on him and give them a dose of Basil-style aggressiveness, even if they're not from Barcelona.

