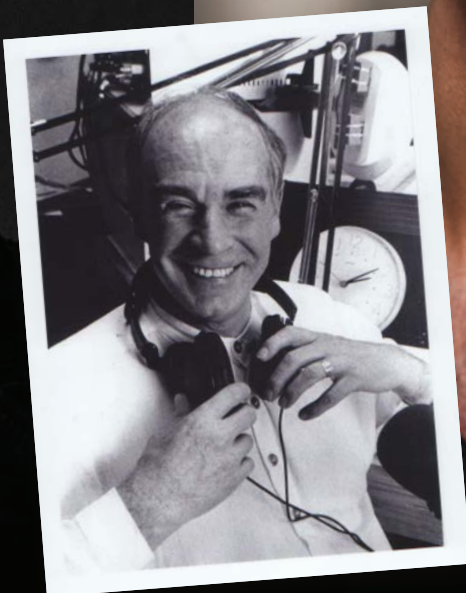
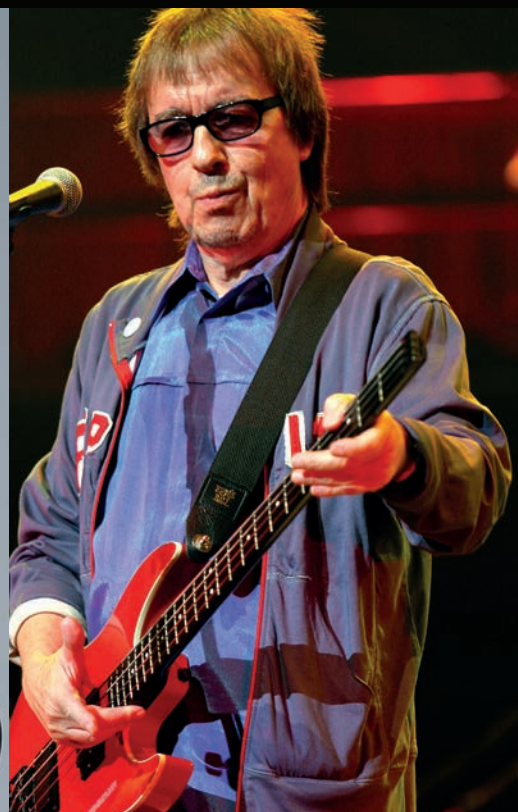


Beacon
MAGAZINE



John Hannam Meets



THE BEST OF THE BEACON!





Welcome to our John Hannam Meets e-magazine

A message from the Hidden Island team...

As many of our regular Beacon readers will be aware, over the years we've been privileged to run our monthly feature 'John Hannam Meets', in which Island-based interviewing legend John Hannam regales us with his fascinating tales of the celebrities he's come across and interviewed during his 45-year career. From Charlton Heston to Alan Rickman, from Dame Judi Dench to Bruce Forsyth, there's only a few A-listers he hasn't met!

So for April's e-magazine, we bring to you our favourite selection of John's interviews over the years, with an exciting insight into the lives of these celebrities. Read on, and enjoy...

**hidden
island** 
making the MOST of our island
from **Beacon**
MAGAZINE

Please note these articles were taken from Beacon's archives. Some listed events within the articles may now be outdated.

A day to remember with Helen George

Helen George has millions of fans as Trixie Franklin in hit television series, *Call The Midwife*.

She's just been seen in the show's Christmas Special and is all set to appear later this year in the ninth series. Away from Nonnatus House, her life has included Elton John, Aston Villa Football Club, singing the Queen's favourite song, *I Could Have Danced All Night*, live to Her Majesty for her 90th birthday and *Strictly Come Dancing*.

I caught up with Helen in Bath during the first week of the exciting new touring production of *My Cousin Rachel*. She could only just fit me in and was rehearsing when I got there before taking a break to talk to me for 30 minutes. Then she went back to rehearse before the evening show, at the wonderful Theatre Royal. The official opening night was just two days away.

Having watched every episode of *Call The Midwife*, I was excited to meet Trixie, one of my own personal favourites. Despite being extremely busy, she made me very welcome and her travelling companion, Charlie, the Jack Russell terrier she found in the street seven years ago, didn't even bark.

Helen had a wonderful childhood and both her and her sister had great support from their parents. Initially, she had dreams of becoming a ballerina but despite training she realised she wasn't quite good enough — and a love for pasta and burgers didn't help.

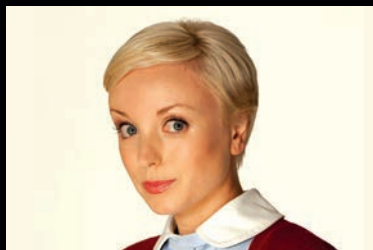
Early in her life, Helen had only ever seen ballets and pantomimes and the chance to see a stage version of *Les Misérables* gave her a new direction. That inspired her to both sing and act and eventually led to a one year course at the Royal Academy of Music.

"That was the best year of my life and I was able to do both singing and acting. Luckily, I was spotted during a production there and my first two jobs were quite amazing and really made it a very special year," said Helen.

Suddenly she found herself appearing as a backing singer for Elton John on his arena tour, which led to appearances at Wembley and the NEC



Birmingham and a few others. She described Elton as: "a lovely man." Then came the chance to appear in the world premiere of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Woman In White*. She also had opportunities to learn the art of screen acting via shows like *Hotel Babylon*, *Doctors* and *The Red Dwarf*. The Edinburgh Festival proved the unexpected turning point in her career. She was in a show with several comedians and was spotted by London agent, Debbie Allen. "Debbie was brilliant and so good at championing me. All of a sudden she



was pushing me into auditions for BBC dramas, which was new for me, and this is how I got Trixie in *Call The Midwife*."

Helen has been in the show since the beginning and has been signed for another two series. It's become an unexpected worldwide hit, thanks to the superb cast and the brilliant scripts and is sold to over 200 countries. The Americans love it. It's all been down to hard work both on and off screen.

For Trixie, life has had its problems and a few romances have never blossomed — and that makes Helen very happy. "If my character falls in love, gets married and settles down, I would have to leave Nonnatus House. I don't want to do that, so I'm happy to stay single and be on the shelf."

In reality, it's been just the opposite. On screen, her romance with the Rev Tom Hereward, played by Jack Ashton, finally fell apart. Away from the

cameras it was a different story. Their real-life romance blossomed and now they have a two-year old daughter, Wren.

Theatre life is not easy for working actors and Helen admits to just about coping. We met on a Monday and she had seen Wren on her Sunday day off but not for the previous week.

"When I left her yesterday she asked me not to go to work, which is heartbreaking. It's very difficult. I have a very supportive partner and we both take turns. We are both actors so we know the trade and how to be there for one another."

"I want her to grow up seeing both her parents working. I look at her now and wonder what career she's going to have. I don't look at her and think who is she going to marry. I think that's a good lesson for our modern women of today."

Helen is a great Aston Villa fan and last year the cast of *Call The Midwife* had quite a shock. On the day of the play-off final, for a place in the Premier League, she was on set but managed to fix a television up in her trailer. When Villa won, little Trixie was seen screaming out loud, which must have shocked a few nuns who were close by. Apparently, she won't make a habit of it!

Currently Helen is loving playing the title role in the brilliant new production of Daphne du Maurier's *My Cousin Rachel*. It's winning praise all around the country.

"It's such a superb book and the stage adaptation that Joseph O'Connor has done is so brilliant."

It is coming south and can be seen at the Chichester Festival Theatre from January 28th to February 1st. These include three matinee performances. It was so nice to meet Helen and not shed a tear. That doesn't normally happen when I watch *Call The Midwife*.

It had long been a dream and my previous interview requests had been unsuccessful. Then, in 2015, a press release arrived from Judy Totton, one of the best PR people in Britain. She knew I didn't do telephone interviews and quickly arranged for me to meet him in his Sticky Fingers restaurant in Kensington High Street, in mid May. I could barely wait.

I was due to visit at 1.15pm. I arrived on time but Bill had been delayed en route. He was so thoughtful and had phoned to say he would be late. The legendary bass player duly arrived and was delighted to see the restaurant so busy. In reality, it was not quite the ideal location for a radio interview.

There were two radio interviews lined up for Bill that day. The other guy had come over from the Channel Islands and had also arranged to visit the Chelsea Flower Show, for another story, before flying back. I thought it would be much fairer if he went first, with a flight to catch. That, innocently, led to two pieces of luck. Bill was impressed with my generosity and told me to order any meal on the menu while I waited for my turn. It was easily the best Caesar Salad I had ever eaten.

Amazingly, by the time my interview was ready to roll, the lunchtime rush was over and the restaurant had suddenly become so much quieter with just the right atmosphere for a 30 minute conversation.

The only pre-interview advice I had been given was that it was, primarily, to be about Bill Wyman and not the Rolling Stones. That made sense because his first solo album for 20 years, *Back To Basics*, was about to be released. It was a gem, too. He also knew I was not interested in his private life, which was another obvious advantage.

Bill turned out to be the perfect host. He was genial, modest and very thoughtful. It was just like two senior citizens meeting up to reminisce — and we were.

I did have just a couple of Rolling Stones stories to get out of the way — and he was happy with that. Firstly, I wanted to take him back to that Ryde Pavilion gig on March 22, 1964, when the band had just enjoyed their first hit, *Come On*.

After their two shows, at which they had support from local bands the Cherokees and the Shamrocks, the Stones stayed right opposite at the Hotel Ryde Castle. They were told not to tell anyone — and kept their word. It didn't go to plan.

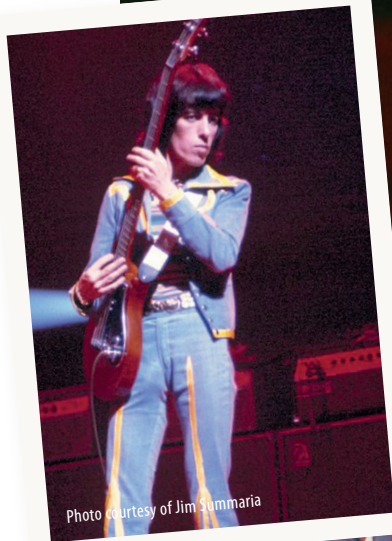


Photo courtesy of Jim Summaria

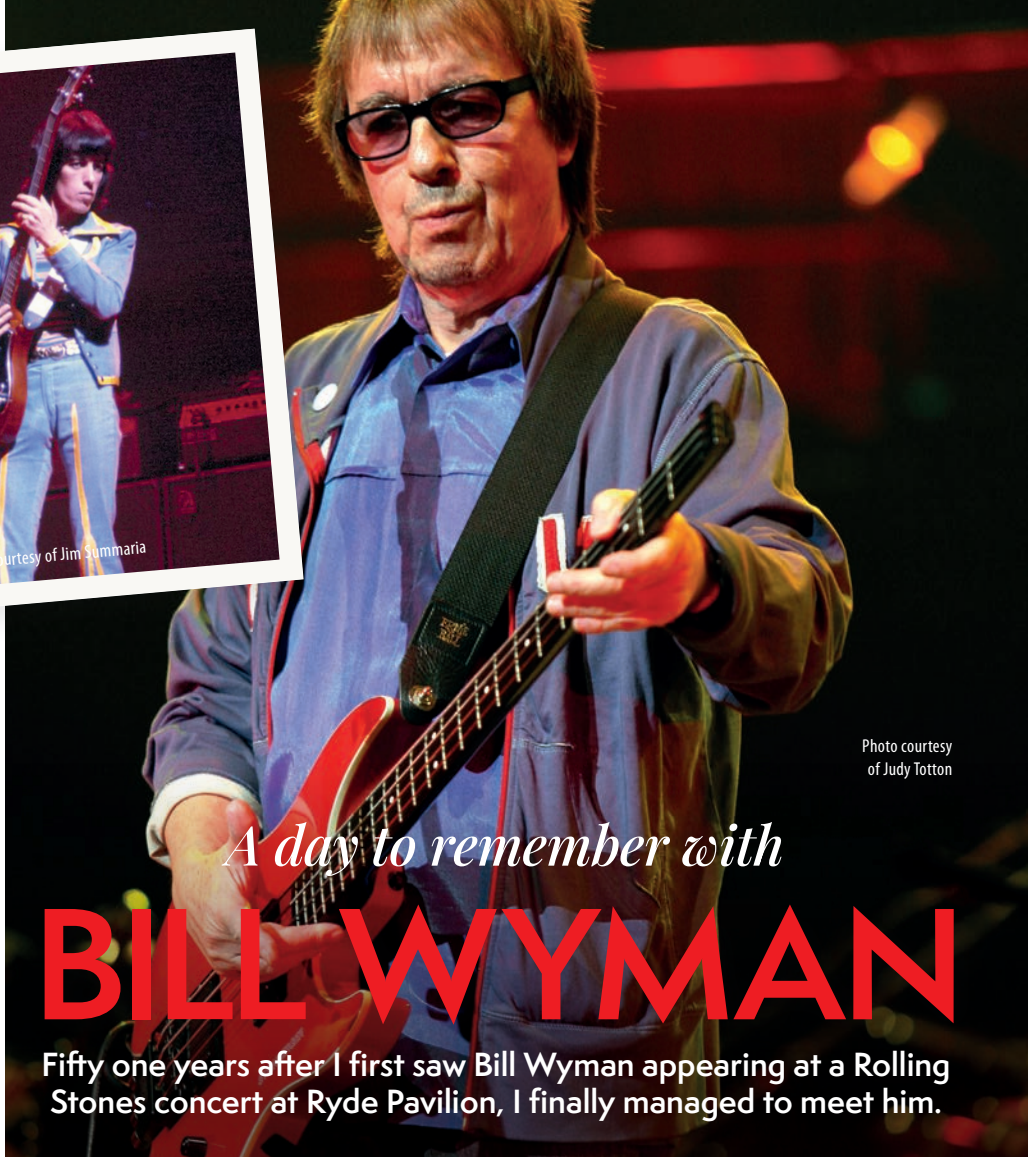


Photo courtesy of Judy Totton

A day to remember with **BILL WYMAN**

Fifty one years after I first saw Bill Wyman appearing at a Rolling Stones concert at Ryde Pavilion, I finally managed to meet him.

Bill explained just why: "Somebody at the hotel couldn't keep quiet about it and told everyone. The place was bombarded by hundreds of people and at 4am some fans were still trying to find us in the hotel." For the record, their line-up was Mick Jagger, Brian Jones, Keith Richards, Charlie Watts and Bill. They were paid £300 and the best seats cost 12 shillings (60p).

"I wanted to take him back to that Ryde Pavilion gig on March 22, 1964, when the band had just enjoyed their first hit, Come On"



I also wanted to find out the real story about the Stones and our own Newport-born major pop star Craig Douglas. By 1963, he'd had a dozen hits, including the number one *Only Sixteen*. He was asked by the Melody Maker music paper to review some new singles, which included *Come On*, the first Stones single. He didn't like it and gave it a poor review. Would revenge be sweet?

They later both appeared on the same *Thank You Lucky Stars* television show. The Stones found out he'd been a milkman before becoming famous and left two empty bottles outside of his dressing room with a note for two pints of milk. It was all quickly forgotten and years later they did socialise together on a few occasions.

Eventually Bill left to go solo and enjoyed a remarkable career with hits like *Je Suis Un Rock Star* and sell-out gigs with his highly acclaimed Bill Wyman's *Rhythm Kings*.

As a restaurateur he's also been very successful. He opened Sticky Fingers back in 1989.

He's worn so well for an old Rolling Stone? What's his secret? He told me back in 2015.

"No drugs and I take care about my alcohol. Otherwise, I just do what I please with no regimes, special foods or exercise. I don't do any of that stuff."

Back in 1983, when I was writing my Stage Talk column in the now defunct IW Weekly Post, I was invited to meet a television actor at Binstead Community Centre, where she was making a personal appearance.

Her name was Celia Imrie and she was known for playing Marianne, Bergerac's financial adviser in the hit television series, and had just emerged as Miss Babs in Acorn Antiques. At that time, Celia was staying with friends in Bonchurch but told me her dream was to own a home on the Island.

That wish came true within a couple of years, when she bought a small property in St Mary's Road, Cowes. Later, she moved to another house in the town. During her 30-year stay on the Island I interviewed her on numerous occasions. With her amazing career taking her all over the world it suddenly became harder for her to commute back to Cowes. It was a tough decision for her to make, as she still holds such an affection for the Island and its people.

We met up just a few weeks ago when she returned to London from her home in Nice, where she writes all her books. Her latest novel, A Nice Cup Of Tea, is published on May 16th. The success of her autobiography, The Happy Hooper, had led to three top-selling novels.

In the last few years, Celia has enjoyed great success across the Atlantic. She appeared in Legends of Tomorrow, a kind of Canadian Dr Who series, and an American film based around Cape Cod, called Year By The Sea. She is also

a regular in a hit American television series called Better Things, which is now being shown in Britain on BBC2.

Was her career in America planned?

"I decided many years ago that if you want to become internationally known you need to court America. I decided

to wait until my son, Angus, had finished his schooling and exams.

"I simply took a chance and just sailed on the Queen Mary 2 to New York and then crossed America by train. You need luck in this business and I was extremely lucky to have found some good work."

Angus is also an actor and he actually appeared with Celia in

John caught up with the star of stage and screen, who talks of recent film projects and fond memories of when the Island was her home

Look out for Celia in a new British movie, called Love Sarah, which is a story about a bakery.



A day to remember with

Celia Imrie

the television series Kingdom. He's also a regular in The Archers, playing Josh Archer, and has been seen in Father Brown, Fleabag and The Hollow Crown. He's also in the new movie, The Kid Who Would Be King, as the Young Merlin.

Celia has enjoyed great success in hit television series like Acorn Antiques, The Riff Raff Element and Dinner Ladies. In more recent years she's become quite a movie star - and Calendar Girls, with those famous bigger buns, certainly helped to establish her success on the big screen.

She particularly loved making the two Best Exotic Marigold Hotel movies in India.

"Wasn't I lucky making two movies with the Dames and being directed by John Madden," she said.

"I also loved working very closely with Ronald Pickup. He's another fine actor. I certainly fell in love with India."

Celia, who can also be seen in the opening scenes of the new Mamma Mia! movie, has enjoyed making a string of popular films, such as What We Did On Our Holidays, Nanny McPhee, Bridget Jones Baby and Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie.

I watched the recent Malevolent, a real horror movie, and was so surprised when Celia came on screen as the hateful Mrs Green. I even shouted at the screen, as she was so brutal.

"That movie was a deliberate effort on my part to make something different. I was evil wasn't I?" said Celia.

Finding Your Feet had slipped under my radar and I had missed it completely. She told me I would love it - and I did. I went out and bought it on DVD the very next day. I sent an e-mail to tell her I loved it - and how it had brought tears to my eyes. I won't tell you why, in case you haven't seen it. Her and Imelda Staunton are so electric as rather different sisters.

Celia's love for the Island is still very apparent.

"It breaks my heart not to be there anymore. It will always be so precious to me. It's always been a little like going back in time When I crossed to Cowes on the ferry my

shoulders always went down. It was bliss.

"Angus was born there and I thought that meant he could be called a caulthead but someone told me that's not the case. I don't understand why. I thought that was the whole point."



Celia Imrie in Binstead in 1983.



A day to remember with

Marti Pellow



Back on Sunday, February 17th 1991, I had the thrill of having the Beverley Sisters live on IW Radio's John Hannam Meets.

At the end of their slot, I asked them to choose a record by their favourite current singer. In total harmony, they all said Marti Pellow and predicted a long and successful career for him. At that time he was the lead singer of Wet Wet Wet. How right they were.

Twenty eight years later I finally caught up with him at the Mayflower Theatre, Southampton, where he's starring this Christmas as Captain Hook, in Peter Pan. I had met him briefly once before at London's famous Pineapple Dance Studio, when I was there to interview Emma Barton. They were rehearsing for a forthcoming show and he arrived just as I was about to leave. We exchanged a few quick words and he even told me he was not keen on doing interviews. How times had changed when I met him last month. It was a welcoming hug and then a non-stop 30 minute interview. He even told me he'd fallen in love with the Isle of Wight. More of that later.

It's no surprise that Marti's career has lasted 37 years - and there's a lot more to come. His early influences in music must have helped his eventual journey into being such an all round entertainer. His parents loved the songs of Bacharach and David and he became aware of great musicians like Nelson Riddle and Bill Evans. Marti's personal heroes included Elvis, Johnny Cash, Sam Cooke and Anthony Newley. Later he met and worked with others like BB King, Rufus Thomas and the legendary Sam Phillips of Sun

Records fame, who discovered Presley.

Back in 1982, Marti was a Scottish painter and decorator and he formed his own group, Vortex Motion, who sang anything their audience wanted to hear, including Clash covers. They became Wet Wet Wet and went on to enjoy 26 chart hits and eight Top Ten albums.

Did he have a dream before the band became world famous?

"When I first saw David Bowie, I knew I wanted to be a singer. I had dreamed of being on stage at Madison Square Garden and being on Top of the Pops. All the other guys in the band also shared my vision," Marti said.

Following the huge success of Wet Wet Wet, Marti decided to go solo. He had his own hits and a very successful album. He also was full of surprises. He recorded a jazz album and had seasons at Ronnie Scott's and The Pigalle, with top musicians. Then came stage appearances in the Witches of Eastwick, Blood Brothers, Evita, Chicago and War of the Worlds.

"I always wanted to work with other people and be part of a team. Whether that was in a band, working in musical theatre or as a singer songwriter. It's important to work with as many different people as you can and take yourself out of your comfort zone. I love to push myself into different places and that's where I find growth as an artist."

Marti still has a great enthusiasm for the business. The day before I met him he'd just returned from working in America on his new

2020 album. He's been working with a top arranger and is excited how things are planning out. Currently he's also writing his own musical.

He's written some great new songs for his character of Captain Hook in the Southampton pantomime. People will be surprised by his soundscape for the show. He describes it as very Disney-like but also maintains some old school qualities.

Marti remembers his first-ever visit to the theatre. He was just seven and he saw Stanley Baxter in pantomime at the Kings Theatre, Glasgow. He was enthralled and loved all the booing and hissing for the baddie. Now he's looking forward to the same treatment in Southampton.

He clearly misses all the great television variety shows where you could virtually become a star overnight. He was honoured to work with great professionals like Bruce Forsyth and Bob Monkhouse. He learnt so much from artists of that calibre.

When Marti discovered I was from the Island, he quickly wanted to talk about his first visit here, earlier this year.

"I did a show at the wonderful Shanklin Theatre. They looked after me so well and it's all run by volunteers. I used it as a warm-up gig. I played Glastonbury after that. I'd never been to the Isle of Wight but my brother had camped there years ago with the Boys Brigade and he spoke so highly of it and talked with great passion about it and told me I would love it. The day I arrived the sun was shining and it certainly had its best shoes on. It was so wonderful and pretty and the audience at Shanklin Theatre were brilliant. You are blessed to have such a lovely venue."

Marti just never stopped talking and was an interviewer's dream. Peter Pan is at the Mayflower, Southampton, from December 14th to January 5th.



The Wet Wet Wet days.

A day to remember with



SHERIDAN SMITH

Saturday June 30th, 2012, was rather special in my 47 year career as a showbiz writer and broadcaster. I still call it my Sheridan Smith day. I had breakfast with her, did a 35 minute interview, spent two hours in her company and we had a few photographs taken together. Originally, her agent had suggested I would even be lucky to get 15 minutes of her time. It all began the previous evening.



“In more recent years Sheridan has been in so many hit TV series and movies. These include Cilla, Cleaning Up, The Moorside, Black Work. The Widower, Love Soup and 7.39. On stage she was superb in Funny Girl.”

Sheridan was one of the stars of the new movie *Scapegoat*, made by Island Pictures, the company owned by two talented Islanders Sarah Beardsall and Dominic Minghella. They produced the movie and had persuaded Sheridan to come to the Island for the première showing at Newport’s Medina Theatre. I was thrilled to be asked to host the post show Q & A and, luckily, Sheridan was on the panel.

After the session she came over to thank me and, apparently, although I never realised it, she put her hand on my knee whilst we had a friendly chat. One or two keen-eyed people in the audience had certainly noticed it. Boldly, I asked her if she could spare me a little time the following morning at her Ventnor hotel. She agreed instantly and invited me to join her for breakfast at the Royal.

Sheridan, who instantly fell in love with the Island, was the perfect host and went out of her way to be helpful. There was no time limit on the interview and she was delightful company. I was invited to stay on and we had a walk around the garden.

Just before our interview I asked Sheridan to solve a puzzle. The day before, I had seen her in a daily paper with red hair. Now here she was next to me as a blonde. The answer was simple. She’d been in Australia filming *Mrs Biggs*, who had red hair, and she had gone blonde again just the day before.

My immediate impression was that Sheridan was so grateful for the

chances she had early in her career. Like our own Laura Michelle Kelly, she never went to a posh drama school. In fact, they did work together as young teenagers. Sheridan joined the National Youth Musical Theatre and was spotted at the age of 17 in their London production of *Bugsy Malone*. That led directly to *Into The Woods* at the Donmar Warehouse.

“After being in a large cast of children I was suddenly in a show with Dilys Laye, Sophie Thompson, Anne Reid and Jenni Russell. It was quite a shock coming from a little village but they really took me under their wing and I learnt so much,” said Sheridan.

She admitted to being a workaholic and told me I was just the same – and she was right.

Apparently, when Sheridan turned up for her first appearance in *The Royle Family* she expected a proper living room. Then discovered it was just three walls in a studio. She admitted to being nervous among so many famous actors she had seen in the hit series.

When she was James Cordon’s real life girlfriend they thought she would be perfect as Ruth, Smithy’s sister, the girl from Essex, in *Gavin and Stacey*. They were spot on.

Sheridan also notched an incredible double. She won Olivier Awards two years running for *Legally Blonde* and *Flare Path*.

In more recent years Sheridan has been in so many hit TV series and



movies. These include *Cilla*, *Cleaning Up*, *The Moorside*, *Black Work*. *The Widower*, *Love Soup* and *7.39*. On stage she was superb in *Funny Girl*.

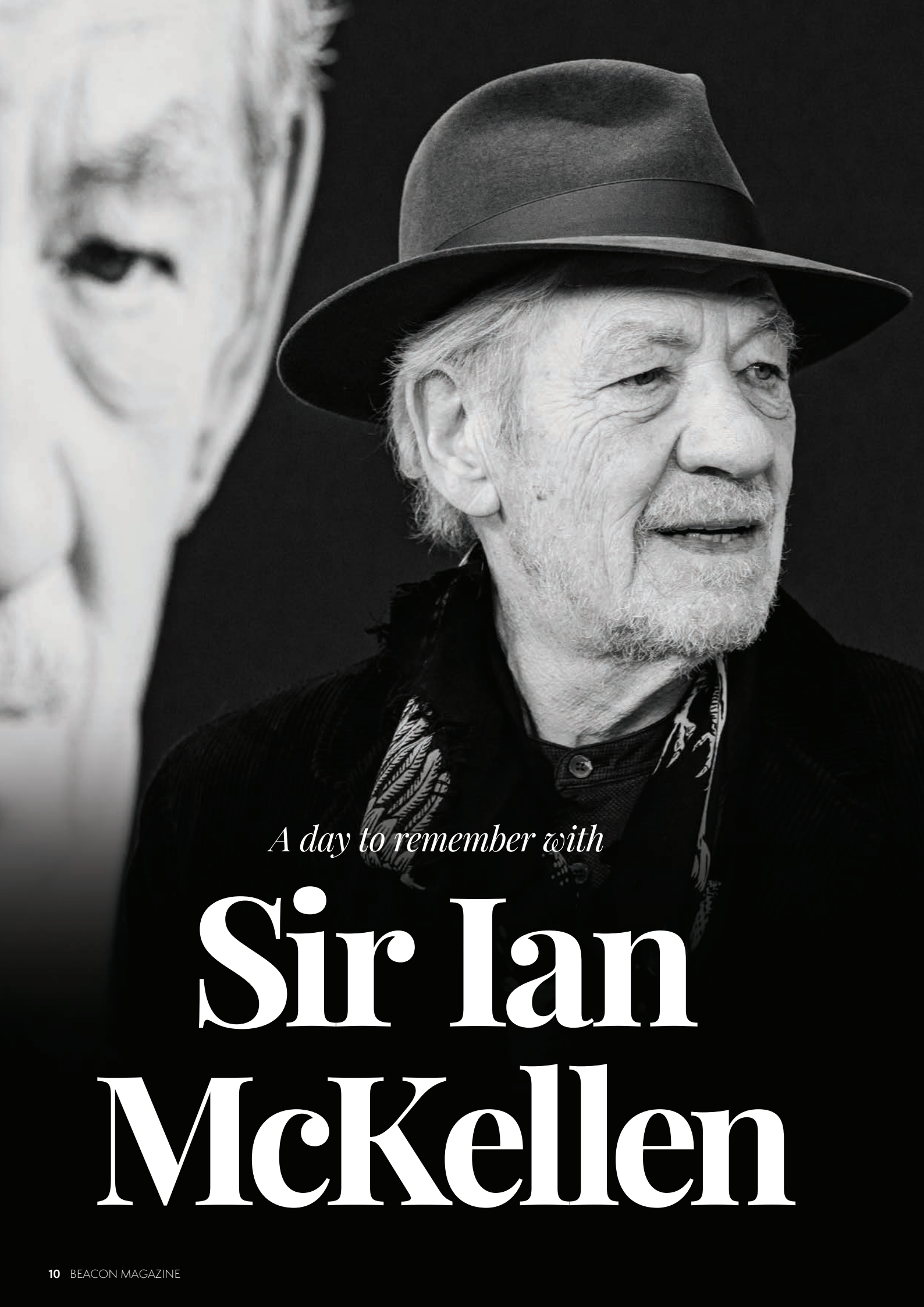
She almost cried with happiness when Dustin Hoffman visited her backstage after a West End show. He wanted her in his movie *Quartet*. Later when her phone rang she didn’t recognise the number. It was Dustin offering her the part.

If all goes well Sheridan could soon be starring in a brilliant Bill Kenwright touring production of *Cilla The Musical*. It was a victim of Covid-19.

Sheridan, so often unfairly treated by the national press, loves a bit of fun. On the *Scapegoat* premiere night, on her own admission, the way she read out the raffle numbers was not quite an Oscar winning performance. I presented her with the list again just as I was leaving. She roared with laughter and promised to frame it.

John Hannam has just released his very first set of DVDs. *The Television Years* features fourteen local guests that John interviewed on his television chat shows on both TV12 and Solent TV. In all, he presented over 100 shows. They sell at £9.99 and volume one features Oscar Stretch, John Hayward, Alby Payne, Sylvia Jones, Morris Barton, Stuart Peters and Hilary Hall. Volume two features Keith Newbery, Bernie Cullen, Derek Hunt, Fred Price, Henry Adams, Colin Smith and Wally Edwards. *Stockists include Farnsworth’s, Newport, Glyn Morgan’s Shanklin, Godshill Old Smithy and Dalverton Garden Centre, Lake.*

Photo courtesy of Island Pictures



A day to remember with

Sir Ian McKellen



There are some years you just never want to end. In my case, it was 2019. I became the grandfather of twin boys, was privileged to attend a Buckingham Palace Garden

Party and had interviewed Dame Judi Dench live on stage, in the presence of the Lord Mayor of London. That honour led me directly to my last major interview of the year — Sir Ian McKellen.

The fact I had interviewed Dame Judi had not gone unnoticed. Suddenly, one or two influential people had approached Sir Ian and I was offered the chance to interview him backstage at London's Harold Pinter Theatre. I could barely wait. When I arrived, his company manager, Tom McCormack, went out of his way to be so helpful and put me at ease by stating that Sir Ian was en route to the theatre on a motorbike. The legendary actor arrived and quickly assured me that he was just the pillion rider, behind a former racing champion, who could get him from home to the theatre in 20 minutes.

He was certainly nothing like his character of Freddie in the television series *Vicious*. So much more humble and likeable. I inquired as to how I should address him: "Ian, of course. The rest is just a title. John, I'm Ian." I treasured the next 45 minutes.

At that time, his Ian McKellen On Stage show was selling out. Also his great new movie, *The Good Liar*, with Helen Mirren, had enthralled me a couple of days earlier. I'd also read an unauthorised biography on Ian and had not been impressed. He has no plans to write his own life story.

"I was offered a contract to write one, but when they told me I had to travel all around the world to appear on chat shows I turned it down. Just talking about myself and not acting. I didn't want that at all," said Ian.

He was impressed that I'd only taken just over two hours to get from the Island to the centre of London. Then he suggested I'd made him feel guilty.

"I was 80 earlier this year (2019) and decided I didn't want a party. I chose to tour 80 theatres so I would not be at home. We even went to the Orkney Islands and Jersey. I feel guilty about not coming to the Isle of Wight. I have been once on a day trip."

Ian, such a charming man, is not full of his own importance. I found him quite modest when talking about his amazing career and he almost played down any mention of his numerous awards. He never went to a drama school but appearing in 21 productions at Cambridge University shaped his future career. The critics from the national papers came in to review their productions and he won rave reviews which proved useful when he decided on an acting career and went for interviews. He was initially inspired by some fellow students at Cambridge, like Derek Jacobi, Miriam Margolyes and Peter Cook, who all wanted to be actors.

"When I started, my ambition was just to be in work. Coming from the north I was never obsessed by London. As it happened, I've gone all around the world working. I couldn't have gone further than New Zealand for *Lord of the Rings*. It's been a wonderful life and I have been so lucky.

"I've never been out of work, but I was never racing for fame or Hollywood. I was just happy to work anywhere and not worry about the money I got. I just wanted a good play, good director

"When I started, my ambition was just to be in work. Coming from the north I was never obsessed by London"



Ian McKellen as Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings* films.

and a nice part."

Ian had some real luck during the run of his first West End play, *A Scent of Flowers*, which starred Phyllis Calvert. A young actor called Maggie Smith came in to see the show and her friend Phyllis. She was impressed with Ian and recommended him to Laurence Olivier for his new National Theatre company.

During his early career, Ian made a few movies, but it was not until the 90s and beyond that he really began to make a worldwide impact. Appearing in a movie called *Apt Pupil* led him directly to playing Magneto in *X-Men*. Then came Gandalf in *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Suddenly a whole new generation,

who knew nothing about his reputation as the world's top Shakespearean actor, had discovered him. Now youngsters love meeting Gandalf. In New Zealand his character's face was on stamps, coins and dolls.

Ian has been a regular on the Graham Norton chat show and he is a little cautious about making too many appearances.

"I don't want to be remembered as the man on the Graham Norton show. Peter O'Toole was very entertaining on chat shows, but when he died people remembered him for being an oddball character with funny stories, instead of for all his great performances.

"I'm going to ease back on Graham Norton shows and, sadly John, ones like this. I'm sure there was a glint in his eye, but I knew where he was coming from.

Many were surprised when he turned up on *Coronation Street* to play con-man Mel Hutchwright. In fact, he loved it and had such admiration for their regular actors.

"In soaps now, they get more and more episodes. There is no time to rehearse with new characters. You just jump on the train with the rest of them. It was so alluring to be in the same room as those very familiar faces and characters. They are nothing like that in real life.

"It was an absolute joy and an ambition. They were terribly kind to me. I even broke a couple of Emily Bishop's chairs when I sat down. They had been there for the run of the show and I felt very guilty about that."

With that, he was off to prepare for another full house but not before he brought a tear to my eyes with a couple of unexpected compliments about what I do. They will stay with me forever.

A day to remember with **Dame Judi Dench**



Photo by Craig Sugden

On July 7th, completely out of the blue, I received an unexpected email from a guy called Neil Chandler, the venue and artistic director of the Fairfield Halls in Croydon, which was re-opening following a £42 million redevelopment.

The date set was September 16th. Dame Judi Dench was to be the guest of the day and would be up for interviewing her live on-stage in front of 500 people, in the Ashcroft Playhouse. I said yes straight away - and then thought what have I done. My normal interviews are in hotels, private homes or theatre dressing rooms, with just me and my guest.

In mid August I was summoned to Croydon for a 10am site meeting and was told I could bring my partner Roberta. We were invited up the previous day and provided with return rail tickets and an overnight stay in an excellent hotel. Neil, who was born on the Island, met us and took us for a meal. When we saw the far-from-finished complex we just wondered if it would even be ready for the launch day. To view it we all had hard hats, goggles, special boots and coloured jackets. It was also pouring in rain. I heard nothing for a while until just a couple of days before the event. Then my final instructions were sent to me. I was nervous and, thankfully a few close friends convinced me all would be fine.

Come the great day and we headed back to Croydon on an early morning train direct from Portsmouth. En route I had messages from Sean and Caroline to say how proud they were of dad and wishing me good luck. We had a lunch near the huge complex and it seemed right on cue when a Level 42 track was being played as we were having our meal. Island-born Mark King

had just written the foreword to my new book. Then we checked in to the hotel and our room number ended in 007. The third good omen, as I was soon going to interview M from the Bond movies.

We arrived early and nothing was too much trouble. We were shown my dressing room and there was everything we could have wanted. Then we were told Dame Judi Dench might just pop in to say hello. I was still waiting for my adrenalin rush to cut in and wipe out my nerves. That happened in an instant. Our British treasure walked in and we were immediately introduced. I told her just how thrilled I was to be interviewing Dame Judi Dench. Her first words to me were: "John, just call me Judi." Suddenly my confidence blossomed.

So what was Britain's finest present day actress really like? She joined us and we had 30 minutes of enjoyable chat and fun. Just a lovely lady and you felt privileged to be in her company. It was just as well we are both touchy people - and this continued later on stage. Judi was just a delightful lady. Not a hint of any ego. She was even worried she would produce a whistle on stage, as she had a slight tooth problem. It never occurred.

We talked a lot about her love for the Island. She told me: "I just love the Isle of Wight and when I come over on the ferry they even let me steer the boat for a little while. Osborne House is so beautiful."

While we chatted I was just in my casual clothes. When she came in again I had my bright purple jacket on, dress suit trousers and purple winkle pickers. Judi suffers from limited vision due to macular degeneration but she suddenly

realised I had changed and began to tease me. Then she came close to look at my purple jacket. Then she got down and touched my shoes when she realised they were purple.

On stage we really hit it off and Judi was in fine form. I had done a lot of research and knew several amusing stories from her life. In fun she told me I was naughty to bring some of these up but the audience loved them.

During the hour-long segment we were later joined by Michael Billington, Britain's longest serving national theatre critic. It became a three way conversation.

I know Judi enjoyed our chat because she told me as we came off stage. She appreciated my research. The audience seemed to love it. I had forgotten London Mayor Sadiq Khan was in the audience. We met up after the show and Judi said

to him: "We were on John's show really." I felt quietly proud when he congratulated me, after Judi and Michael, who were the big names. Then he called me into a group photograph.

Judi did reveal she has no plans to retire. That made two of us.

I must congratulate our Island boy, Neil Chandler, who did such a wonderful job. He's enjoying a marvellous career in the theatre industry. He manages to keep so calm.

After the show he told me: "John I made the right choice you were brilliant. It was just like the old days and listening to one of your IW Radio interviews." I'd been frightened of letting him down.



Photo by Craig Sugden



Neil Chandler.

“The day with Dame Judi Dench will live with me forever.”

It's no real surprise that David comes here as often as he can. It's almost a family tradition. His mother was born in Newport's Hunnyhill, his brother ran a pub in Shanklin and he was born just across the water in Portsmouth. Sadly, the Coronavirus put an end to him spending a few weeks working on the south coast. He was due to appear in the Chichester Festival Theatre's production of *The Life Of Galileo*. This was obviously cancelled, which was a major disappointment for him. In fact, his career had started as a stage hand in a play called Armstrong's *Last Goodnight* at the Sussex theatre. The cast included Albert Finney.

Via the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, David has gone on to a very satisfying career. Luckily, he has made his mark in the vastly different worlds of stage acting, television and movies.

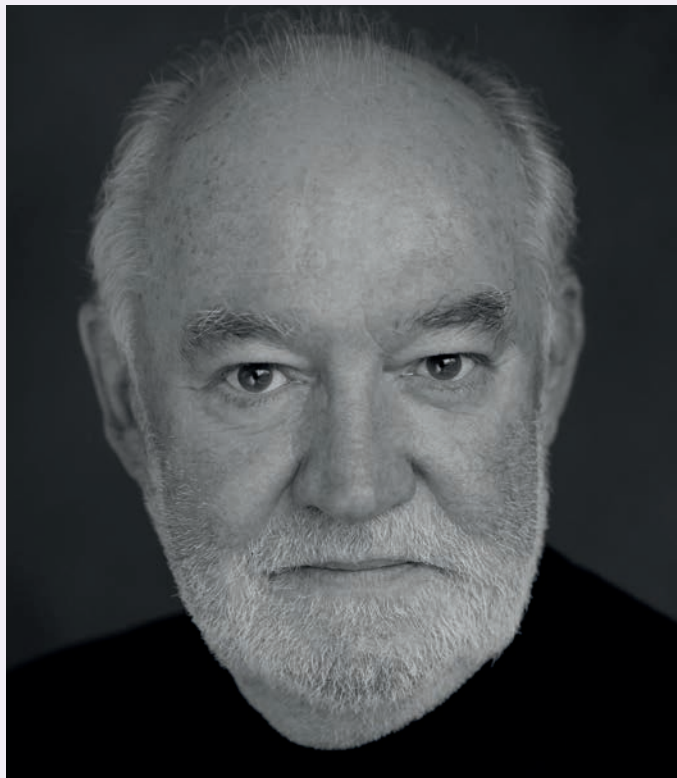
"I have been fortunate but I have never planned anything. Without being pompous, my ambition has always been to just be good at what I do," said David.

In the early days of his career, he worked with budding star, Ian McKellen, with the Prospect Players and later joined the Royal Shakespeare Company. Wonderful experience for a young actor.

His early TV appearances included playing DI George Resnick in *Widows*, which gave his small screen career a major boost. *Star Cops*, now considered a cult show by sci-fi fans, was a series that David considers the BBC should have done more with. It never reached its true potential.

Following guest appearances in all the major shows, from *Cracker*, via *Boon* and *Bergerac*, he was suddenly in the brilliant hit series *Bramwell*. He was cast as Dr Robert Bramwell, alongside his on-screen daughter Eleanor, played by Jemma Redgrave. That was compelling viewing and ran for four series.

His appearance as Sir Robert King in the Bond movie, The World is Not Enough, was rather unique.



A day to remember with

DAVID CALDER

Over the years, top actors like Celia Imrie, Jason Cumberbatch, Penelope Keith and Geoffrey Hughes have all fallen in love with the Island. The latest to join them is David Calder, whose credits include *The World Is Not Enough*, *The Hatton Garden Job* and *The Lady In The Van*.

Actually, his character went missing from the last series, which was only two episodes, and no-one knew where he'd gone. I found out why during my last interview before the lockdown. David was actually on stage playing Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Carlton TV waited until their very final decision day to confirm they would go for a fourth series. At 10am that very morning, David was offered the stage role of Prospero and an hour later, in came the offer for *Bramwell*. After a weekend to decide, he went with his heart.

Many still remember David for his role of Captain Smith in the television adaptation of *Titanic*. He was also in another memorable series called *Drover's*



Gold. His appearance as Sir Robert King in the Bond movie, *The World is Not Enough*, was rather unique.

"In the Bond movies they have this pre-title moment. That one was the longest introduction to the film, involving me, and I'm dead before the titles come up. I was blown up," revealed David. It looked good on his CV and after theatre performances he is still often asked to sign photos from the movie.

David was also in the movie *The Hatton Garden Job*, playing Terry Perkins. In total there were three movies made.

"We were even up against the blockbuster with Michael Caine. Ours was made for tuppence ha'penny in an old disused factory and has proved the most popular and the most played. No-one thought they would earn a penny from the film but now we get an income from it."

Many of his television roles have been as tough guys. In the early days it was coppers. For many years he was never considered for comedy roles. He is delighted this has now changed and it's due to his appearances in *Motherland*, *Inside No. 9* and *Plebs*.

In complete contrast, he was cast as an Alzheimer's patient in *Call The Midwife*.

It was a stunning and emotional performance. He is a great admirer of the series and how they create the past history of the NHS.

A London cabbie once summed up David's life as an actor. He said: "It's you, isn't it? You're one of those unsung heroes. Everybody knows your face but not your name." In reality, David quite liked that.





A day to remember with

BARBARA WINDSOR

Back in 1988, John Hannam interviewed Barbara Windsor – and this was long before Albert Square.

Her parting shot to me in the Cowes Corinthian Yacht Club, which is slightly more upmarket than the Queen Vic, was a possible hint of her future direction: “I never liked being a part of a team. I just wanted to be on my own. Now I’m older, I’d rather like to be part of a team.”

“As you get older, the confidence stops and you need familiar faces around you. It would be nice to be in a soap and see the same faces every Monday morning.”

Barbara and Gareth Hunt came to the isle of Wight to attend the Stone’s Ginger I 24 yachting championship. They both also took part in a tin bath race.

Those were the days when you could just turn up at an event attended by a few stars and virtually get an instant interview. There were no PR people to block your path or wind-up your interview after just a few minutes.

At the time Barbara was 50 and simply fed up with being offered the parts of 30-year-olds. Some ladies would have been so envious. “I just want to play someone my own age. The Carry On image has been hard to live down,” said Barbara.

We hit it off instantly and she told me it was nice to meet an interviewer more interested in her professional life than her private life – and told me why.

“The national tabloids have tried to make me a personality which I rather resent. I’ve not been able to get on with my job. I’m a working actress.”

“Suddenly they weren’t writing about my acting, just my private life. This is still with me and I don’t like it very much,” said Barbara, who admitted a fear of picking up the morning papers.

Thankfully her true fans stayed loyal and this had proved a great

comfort to her.

Babs, as she is affectionately known, was spotted at a charity concert given by her convent school. It was big-time impresario Brian Michie who liked the look of her.

“He said I’d got something – and I didn’t have the boobs in those days,” reflected Barbara.

With her father a bus driver and mother a dressmaker, it was hard to follow the advice to send her to theatre school. In the end, she went to Aida Foster for a term. At the age of

14 she was in the West End’s Love from Judy, at the Saville Theatre. Amazingly, before spending those two years on a London stage, she had no real desire to go into the theatre.

“This might surprise you, I had wanted to be a nun and then a foreign language telephonist,” Imagine Miss Windsor in a habit!

Like many others, who developed into fine actors, she spent some early days at the Stratford East Theatre with Joan Littlewood. Among her contemporaries there were Brian Murphy and Lionel Bart. It was Bart’s Fings Ain’t Wot They Used To Be that proved to be the turning point in her stage career. During nearly three years in that show she was also seen on TV’s The Rag Trade and, hence, often spotted on London trains.

“Most people associate me with Carry On films, but really they have played a minor part in my career. That’s the power of television. They’ve been cut up and used in so many programmes.”

At that time, she would sooner have been remembered for her creations of Marie Lloyd, Lucy Brown in the Threepenny Opera and Maria in Twelfth Night.

Twice in later years I tried to interview Barbara again, with no success.

“Most people associate me with Carry On films, but really they have played a minor part in my career.”

A day to remember with

John ‘Boycie’ Challis

On a cold January day I headed for Ludlow to meet up with Boycie, that notorious second-hand car dealer from *Only Fools and Horses*.

I decided to leave my car at home and let the train take the strain. In the end, I think even one of his dodgy motors would have got me there and back much quicker. My horrendous journey ended up a 15 hour round trip. The train was cold, late, over-crowded, had no drinks trolley and, due to a fault, it was finally pulled out of service at Bristol. Eventually I arrived an hour late at Ludlow.

I was so relieved to see John Challis waiting for me outside the station ready to rush me off in his posh Land Rover, obviously not bought from Aubrey Boyce, to join him and his lovely wife, Carol, for lunch at the local Cicchetti deli bar. They love John in that Green Green Grass setting and the proprietors even opened up their nearby Angel restaurant for us to use as a recording studio. That’s fame for you.

John’s first television break came in 1967 when he played Harry Kapper in *The Newcomers*. He learnt such a lot from that series.

I managed to surprise him by mentioning *Crossroads*. He had no record of it but he’d played the dodgy photographer, Jim Wright, in nine episodes back in 1971.

Initially, he was almost typecast as a copper. “Well I was so tall and good looking,” suggested John. His policeman credits included *Mr Rose*, *Softly Softly*, *Z Cars*, *Coronation Street*, *Bloomers*, *Law Centre*, *In Sickness and In Health*, *Roland Rat and Ratman*. It was just as well. Playing one in *Citizen Smith* changed his life for ever.



*Every minute of the day
Only Fools and Horses is
being screened somewhere
on the planet*

“I was at the National Theatre at the time trying to be a proper actor and apparently John Sullivan spotted me on television in *Citizen Smith*, playing a policeman with a curious way of talking. He phoned to say he liked the voice and would get back in touch. A year later he did and offered me a one-off part in *Only Fools and Horses* — and would I speak in the same voice.”

John only had the one scene in that first series and it was not even expected to go to a second. How times quickly changed and it has become one of the world’s most popular series ever. Every minute of the day it’s being screened somewhere on the planet.

Sue Holderness, who played Marlene, was only booked for one appearance. She was suddenly offered more and their superb on-screen chemistry had such an impact on the show. That eventually led to their very successful spin-off series *The Green Green Grass*. That all came about because John and Carol had moved to an old manor house in Herefordshire. John Sullivan, the writer of *Only Fools and Horses*, was invited to a party at their huge mansion and saw John in a different light and suddenly had the idea for *The Green Green Grass*. That ran for four years.

John was invited to Belgrade in Serbia to appear in their top TV chat show and was recognised in the street and virtually mobbed. *Only Fools and Horses* is also a favourite in

Bosnia and Montenegro.

In more recent years, John has played Monty Staines in *Benidorm*, in which he married Joyce Temple-Savage, played by Sherrie Hewson. He quipped: “Talk about high maintenance!” I assume he meant Joyce and not Sherrie!

Meeting Carol back in 1994 was a life changing event. He’d gone through three failed marriages and some very stressful episodes in his personal life. “I feel very pleased that it happened so late, after so much that had gone on. I ended up meeting the person I should have met a long time ago,” said John.

I love happy endings and they celebrate their silver wedding this year. John has certainly made his mark. The two volumes of his autobiography, *Being Boycie* and *Boycie and Beyond*, have been best sellers and written from the heart with warts and all. He’s now writing novels.

What a career he’s had. He’s permanently revered by *Dr Who* fans for his six-episode appearance as Scorby in *The Seeds of Doom*, with Tom Baker. He’s been seen in *Wish Me Luck*, *Last of the Summer Wine*, *Open All Hours* and even as Henry Witham-Smythe in *Sooty*.

It was then time to rush me back to the station. We passed a second hand car forecourt and I smiled to myself. I asked him if he had a part-time job there. In that very famous Boycie voice he replied: “I know nothing about cars.” Quite a few had found that out back in Peckham!

John brings his new show, *Only Fools and Boycie*, to Shanklin Theatre on April 22nd. He will also be playing Captain Hook in this year’s *Peter Pan* pantomime at Kings Theatre, Southsea.



During the final ten days before the lockdown, I'd been lucky enough to have pre-arranged five interviews. It was in Guildford on a very wet and miserable March day.

Would she be like Raquel in *Only Fools And Horses* or Mrs Maguire in *Grantchester*?

I'd been tipped off that Tessa had been to both Parkhurst and Albany prisons. It couldn't have been to visit the Driscoll brothers from Peckham, surely? Thankfully, it was with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

"I went into both prisons when the RSC visited the Island and felt it was a great privilege. We did workshops with the inmates. It was fascinating to watch them and one or two were in floods of tears when we dealt with Ophelia's father and daughter relationship in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It was such an important thing that the RSC did at that time," said Tessa.

Initially, Tessa had dreams of becoming a dancer but eventually realised her ballet was below par. Luckily, a drama teacher called Rita Christie joined the dance school and encouraged her in another direction. That stroke of luck led her to the Central School of Speech and Drama.

Amazingly, within a month of leaving drama school she was in the TV series *Telford's Change*. She told me: "Suddenly I was working with all these famous actors and I was terrified and sat in the corner and said very little at the rehearsals. They even rang up my mother to see if I was okay. She said it was not like me. It was just fear, I didn't have a clue about television work. At drama school it was more about live theatre and a bit of radio. Luckily, I had to play a terrified bank clerk on her first day at the bank, so it was perfect."

Joining the cast of *Up The Garden Path* was another great early moment in her career. It also set up a long term friendship with Imelda Staunton. Just a week before I met Tessa, Imelda had cooked her a Sunday roast.

"I used to drive her home after we'd finished filming. She always grimly hung on, she told me I drove too fast on the motorway."

When John Sullivan was looking for a more mature women for Del Boy in *Only Fools and Horses*, Tessa was chosen. In fact, in the show Raquel was cast under age and made to look older. She was only booked for one Christmas special, as a strip-a-gram girl for Uncle Albert's party.

It lasted a little while longer than that and she was in some epic episodes.

That legendary series is still loved by people of all ages and is always being shown on the nostalgia channels. There is nothing these days to come anywhere near it.

Of course, I was keen to mention *Grantchester*, a series created for television by the Island's Daisy Coulam. The last series, the fifth, had the largest viewing figures so far. Plans are in hand for another series. Like me, Tessa has been so impressed by the way Tom Brittney has come in to take over from the charismatic James Norton in the lead role. He plays it so differently but already has a huge fan following.

"I also claim that Al Weaver, who plays the difficult role of Leonard so brilliantly, has learnt all he knows from me. When I used to monitor last year students at the Guildhall School of Acting, he was one of my last young actors. I'm not sure he agrees," added Tessa.

Her character of Mrs Maguire, now Mrs Chapman, rarely smiles, is rather nosey and never misses a trick.

"I love playing this role. I'm normally a very happy and smiley person. Not having to smile much in *Grantchester* is great."

Tessa loves the opportunity to work for six months on *Grantchester* and then another six working in live theatre. Sadly, the tour of *Bang Bang*, which was due to run until May, was pulled due to the lockdown. I saw it at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, Guildford and loved the French farce adapted by John Cleese.

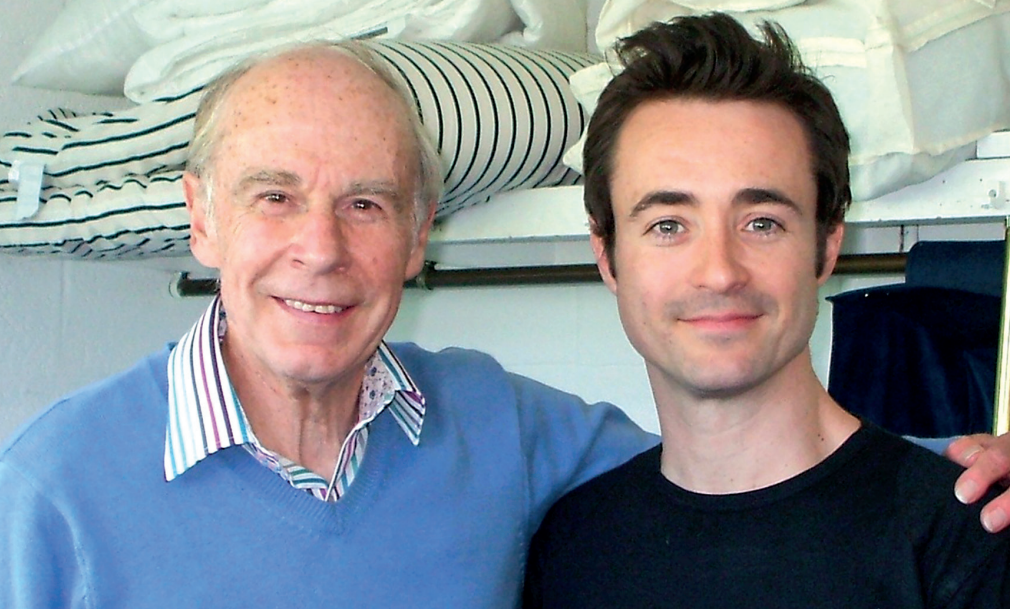
Why do real television stars, like Tessa, still yearn for live theatre?

"I love hearing the audience coming in, their buzz of excitement and mine of waiting to go on and then their response from what's happening on stage."

I actually joined her on stage for a pre-show photograph — and she smiled!

She was only booked for one Christmas special, as a strip-a-gram girl for Uncle Albert's party. It lasted a little while longer than that and she was in some epic episodes.





“He still had plenty of time before he was due to slip into Mitzi’s dress, which did suit him, by the way.”



A day to remember with **JOE McFADDEN**

Life has been wonderfully unpredictable for Scottish actor Joe McFadden. Before winning *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2017, he’d been a rock star in *Sex, Chips & Rock ‘n’ Roll*, cast as maverick cop, Joe Mason in *Heartbeat* and surgeon Raf di Lucca in *Holby City*.

Nowadays, since wooing Saturday night television audiences alongside Katya Jones, he’s come back from the dead in *Holby* and toured as drag queen Mitzi in *Priscilla*.

Joe is always up for a challenge and this has made him one of Britain’s busiest actors. For him and many others, the Covid-19 lockdown brought flourishing careers to a premature halt.

He’s an actor who always has the time for you. It was the third occasion we had met and both of us had looked forward to it. Not many actors run for an interview. He rushed into the stage door at the Brighton Theatre Royal gasping for breath and apologised for being late. He still had plenty of time before he was due to slip into Mitzi’s dress, which did suit him, by the way.

It was the first time we had met since *Strictly* and I could barely wait for his memories of that night when millions of Britons were cheering for him. In fact, he’d been one of the last to be announced for the show.

“There is a lot of juggling with that show. They put out a lot of offers and you have to wait until you see who’s been accepted. They like a wide demographic of people to appear on it. I was so shocked to be even asked to do it and never expected to be there at the end.

“I didn’t even know what the dances were. I had never heard of a foxtrot. It was as nerve wracking as it looks. Every Monday you were told of the new dance

and you had to perform it by Thursday afternoon. I was so lucky to have a perfect partner like Katya,” revealed Joe.

Winning the show introduced him to an even wider audience and led to tours like *Priscilla*. Joe admits to having learned a lesson from *Strictly*. When he first became an actor they would never be associated with any form of reality television shows. They just never mixed but times had changed and he was prepared to go with them.

I love teasing the likeable Joe about some of his on-screen love scenes, with beautiful actors like Gillian Kearney, Lisa Kay and Patricia Kerrigan. I must admit to being a little jealous. Apparently, they are not always what they seem.

“A lot of them can be highly embarrassing for us actors, especially in front of a film crew. In *Crow Road*, Patricia was as embarrassed as I was. That seduction scene was a baptism of

fire. I was 19 and she was 14 years older,” admitted Joe.

When Joe burst into *Aidensfield* in *Heartbeat*, the script demanded he play a maverick copper. He’d come from a big city and was always looking for a good punch-up. It was only a short term idea and his character soon mellowed into the more secure image of the good old friendly Yorkshire beat bobby. It was just as well, as he stayed and became the show’s very last new policeman. He drove away on his motorbike from the last episode he did, not knowing, like the rest of the cast, it was being axed after 20 years.

He was in it long enough to finally fall for the nurse — a real tradition in the series. He didn’t realise for two years that in *Heartbeat*, the heart represented the nurse and the beat was the local copper.

Millions loved him as Raf di Lucca, the registrar general surgeon, in *Holby City*. Before starting the part, he visited a real hospital to watch open heart surgery. He loved every minute.

In that hit show he had some strong storylines and ended up dying from gunshot wounds. When I told him he obviously couldn’t go back he hinted it might just happen. Obviously, he knew he was going back in as a figment of Essie’s imagination. Very clever.

What about Mitzi in *Priscilla*? It was such a challenge and he was a revelation. It would have certainly shocked the regulars in the *Aidensfield Arms*.



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