



# The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

## It's a funny old world... thanks to some very talented people

I have always loved comedy and admire comedians.

Anyone who can stand up and make people laugh is a hero in my book. It's a difficult task and highly painful when it all goes wrong. I know, I've been there.

A short while ago I sat in front of Paul Sinha, stand-up comedian, an ITV Chaser and a truly remarkable person. He was in Devon for just three gigs around the county. His half hour set on stage took you through his achievements, the tragedy that he's faced health wise and the stark reality of his life... and all with a remarkable sense of humour to carry you from one story to the next. But it got me thinking about the parade of comedians I have met and worked with over my life, very different individuals reflecting the ever-changing face of comedy.

The very first stage event I was asked to host was back in the early 1980s with Larry Grayson. He had just moved to Devon, to Torquay, having had a wonderful summer season in the bay.

He thought it would be a good idea to move here permanently. Sadly, the reality of a Devon winter with a gale blowing open his cat flap and the dark, damp streets offering little in the way of shelter or warmth meant that Larry moved back home to his beloved Nuneaton after a very short stay.

But he was a pleasure to work with, had the obligatory champagne-coloured Rolls Royce and a poodle called Arthur Marshall named after his dear friend the writer, raconteur and broadcaster who lived on the edge of Dartmoor. Years later, when the poodle passed away, some newspapers printed the story that Arthur Marshall had died. The only comment from the very much alive team captain on *Call My Bluff* was "Oh dear, no, no, that's wrong..."



Larry Grayson on the Generation Game

as you can see."

In the 90s I was asked to be a director of the British Comedy Society, a dedicated group of charity fundraisers who put up the blue plaques to our famous comedians. It was a great idea and with plaques dedicated to generals, scientists, film stars and the occasional 'very dull' person, why not whack one up for someone who had made us laugh.

The very first plaque unveiling that I attended was from one of my heroes, Tony Hancock, on a house that he had owned in London. It was here that I met Ernie Wise, Barry Cryer and the surviving members of the Carry On team, including the remarkable Jack Douglas. Jack became a great family friend and loved his trips back down to Devon from his Surrey base.

He called the county his second home and we would welcome him whenever he wanted a break... having first put away anything breakable and objects that could be deemed a trip hazard. Without a word of a lie, he was the clumsiest individual I have ever met and entering a house turned into one of his Carry On scenes.

His character of Alf Ipptimus needed little acting as that was the way he was. I remember leaving him in my kitchen for a moment and on returning saw him tip used coffee grounds down the plug hole with the words... "This is a neat trick; your sink will never block again if you tip these into the U-bend."

A plumber and £145 later, we got the kitchen sink back in use.

Occasionally, I get strange looks from people when they notice my right hand which carries my wedding ring. I believe in some European countries the right hand is a standard place but not in Great Britain!

Was I starting a new trend? No, it was because of Father Jack from the *Father Ted* series. Frank Kelly, the Irish actor and comedian who played Jack in the Channel 4 series, was also a great friend of mine and loved Devon dearly.

Naturally, I invited him and his wife Bairbre to my wedding and just before the great day drove to Bristol Airport to pick them up. Frank was walking through the customs area on his mobile phone talking to an Irish



At a plaque unveiling for comic genius Tony Hancock, Fitz met Ernie Wise, Barry Cryer, pictured above and the surviving members of the Carry On team. Below left: Mick Miller, one of the very last of the original acts from TV's *The Comedians*. Below right: Phil Jupitas with Fitz, who gave him a blown ostrich egg. Bottom: Fitz with Frank Kelly, the Irish actor and comedian who played Father Jack in the Channel 4 series, *Father Ted*



taxi driver asking him if his pyjama bottoms were on the backseat of the vehicle? They were! Bairbre just looked at me and shook her head slowly. At some point, Frank had started rummaging in his suitcase and the pyjama bottoms had become dislodged and were now travelling around the north circular road of Dublin, later to be posted through the letterbox of his home in the south.

On the wedding day itself, he sat in the front row of the church where my own priest, Father Dennis, was conducting part of the ceremony. Halfway through the blessing of the wedding ring he looked over my shoulder and spotted Frank.

"That's the antichrist," he muttered... "That's Father Jack!"

He was so excited to see him that he slipped the wedding ring on the wrong hand and rushed off to buy Frank a drink. I never had the courage to take the ring off after that. I would say it was welded to my finger ever since, but it's been missing for the last three years only to be discovered in the wood basket a couple of months ago...

Phil Jupitas will never forget me. I gave him a blown ostrich egg, which I believe he still has today. Joe Pasquale has a framed pair of my boxer shorts... the story ends there... and John Cleese asked me if Torquay had a statue of him on the seafront. I said yes, in bronze, 12 foot high of him beating the bonnet of an Austin 1100.

Barry Cryer was the quickest wit I ever witnessed. But even he was left speechless when we put a blue plaque up to Benny Hill. With a lot of hard work, the chairman got Phil Collins to do the unveiling. He pulled the cord, accepted the applause and climbed down from the ladder.

"I never knew Benny lived here," he said. "He didn't," muttered the chairman. "We've got the wrong flat!"

One of the very last of the original acts from *The Comedians* from Granada Television in the 1970s is Mick Miller. He is a regular in the county and is still working, with perfect timing, new material and the golden oldie Noddy sketch.

His comedy has lasted as it was never offensive, just plain silly but beautifully presented. The same could be said of Ken Dodd. I sat through an hour and 40 minutes of his brilliant act in Torquay, met him backstage at the interval where he went to get me a tickling stick and signed a photo for me. But I must admit I did not go back for the second half. I had been warned. Years later I ran into the man who had been sitting beside me, he had stuck it out... for a further three hours!

And if you want another true story of endurance, I once gave a lift to Frank Carson from Plymouth to Paignton. Every time we stopped at traffic lights, he would tell passers by jokes. Thankfully he nodded off just after Berry Pomeroy.