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# Del Boy's secret sideline

Sir David Jason tells why his lifelong obsession with miraculous machines makes him the perfect presenter for a new show celebrating Britain's greatest inventions

# HELICOPTER PILOT, INVENTOR, ENGINEER...

## David Jason's lovely-jubbly life

When he's not acting, Sir David Jason loves nothing better than tinkering in his 'man cave' - fixing things, assembling, building, inventing. 'I'm fascinated by how things work,' he says.

Currently he has a few projects on the go. He's making a new seat for his dinghy (he has a small lake in the grounds of his Buckinghamshire farmhouse). 'It's very old and the seat has sunk so low I can't get out of it, so I'm raising it. I was thinking of building an armchair for it.' He chuckles. 'I've also got to repair the lamp in Grandma's room. It blew a fuse on Boxing Day,' he reminds his wife Gill of her mother's room at their home.

'I've never met anyone more industrious than David,' remarks Gill, who's accompanied her husband today. 'And he's so calm. When he does a job he focuses completely. It helps that he has a wife who takes care of his diary.' She smiles. 'He needs me to organise him. It frees him to do the things he's good at.'

Accolades are routinely lavished on Sir David. He has been voted the greatest comedy actor of the last half century and is elevated, thanks to the affection in which his characters are held, to the rank of national treasure. But long before he won our hearts as wheeler-dealer Del Boy Trotter in *Only Fools and Horses*, David (who, incidentally, qualified as a helicopter pilot in 2005 after Gill had bought him a flight in one for his birthday) worked as a mechanic and an electrician. This is at odds, of course, with

it,' he says. 'The jet engine, the hovercraft, the telephone, even the light bulb - they're all fascinating pieces of technology invented in the UK.'

In episode one of the four-part series, David travels to Yorkshire to visit a Victorian bicycle enthusiast who builds penny-farthings (our intrepid presenter tries - and fails - to ride one). He travels back to the birth of the steam engine, when Britain led the world in pioneering technology

and George Stephenson's Rocket, which reached giddy speeds of 30mph, heralded the golden age of the train. 'It was the most advanced technology of its day,' says David.

'Imagine seeing it steaming along through a field of cows. It would've frightened the socks off you!'

We progress through to the era of the motor car and learn about Frederick Lanchester, a 'genius engineer' who, in the early 1900s, invented the floor accelerator pedal, disc brakes and power steering. Less auspicious, we discover, in the field of great British inventions was the three-wheel car, a van version of which Del Boy famously owned.

When we meet, David is on sparkling form, dapper in a blue wool suit, the consummate performer running through his repertoire of comic voices. 'All this is mine, of course!' he hams, gesturing round the grand library at Hartwell House, the stately home setting of our photoshoot. I remind him that last time I inter-

*So who better then to host a new show about great British inventions? Here the comedy legend tells Frances Hardy about his passions - and why his greatest joy is his family*

viewed him - more than a decade ago - he was marvelling at the modern phenomenon of party bags. His daughter Sophie had just turned seven and he was incredulous that guests were given gifts just for turning up.

Now Sophie is about to celebrate her 19th birthday and her father will be 80 next month. He won't be marking the milestone with any fanfare though - he prefers not to acknowledge it. 'I enjoy working so much,' he says. 'I don't want anyone to say, "We don't need that old codger any more."'

Aside from being passionate about

his job, David is also a devoted dad. Now Sophie is in her late teens, fatherhood is bringing a new set of joys and tribulations. She is David and Gill's only child, born when he was 61 and she 41. They have raised her unpretentiously, away from the showbiz hoopla, and she's just won a place to study equine science at university.

'We tend to be quiet and homey,' he says. 'I've never been a fan of going to parties or red carpet events. I'll always love doing my job, but the fame side is difficult to cope with. So we keep our heads down and lead as

normal a life as possible, and I think that's rubbed off on Sophie.

'We should be proud of her, really. She's a good girl. She loves horses and has a little job at the local stables. It's menial stuff - clearing up what the horses leave behind - and she comes home with an aroma which isn't as nice as when she goes out with her boyfriend. But I'm delighted she's buckling down and has this job, starting at the bottom. She has pocket money too... not a vast amount.

'You worry, of course. She's got a boyfriend and that area of life is full of pitfalls. She's passed her driving test and has an old banger. Well, a safe, roadworthy old banger, but nothing posh. And like everyone her age, her mobile phone is practically glued to her hand.' He rolls his eyes.

'But I've enjoyed every minute of being a dad!' he beams. 'When she was little she'd make me laugh hysterically. I used to tell her the story of Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs and she couldn't say "dwarf", so she'd say "wharf" instead. It tickled me. Since then she's always been called "Wharf". She doesn't mind - as long as I don't say it in public,' he grins.

'David has a lovely relationship with Sophie. They're very affectionate,' adds Gill, showing me a photo on her phone of them larking around, gurning for the camera. 'I just wish they wouldn't pull silly faces all the time. I haven't got a single photo of them where one isn't messing about or making rabbit ears behind the other.'

Gill is the softly spoken Yorkshire woman to whom David has been married for 15 years (they tied the knot quietly at the Dorchester Hotel in London the day before he was



David today, and (inset) with Gill and their daughter Sophie in 2001

knighted, with Sophie as bridesmaid). They met on the set of the comedy drama *A Bit Of A Do*, where Gill was location manager, in 1989 and stayed friends. A relationship began after David's partner of 18 years, Myfanwy Talog, died of cancer in 1995.

Today theirs is a palpably fond, mutually supportive partnership. They bicker amiably, as long-married couples do. David tells me about the many projects that occupy him at home. 'I can't sit still for long,' he says. 'There are always running

repairs on the house and I assemble model kits. We were just saying I'll have to donate some to charity.'

'Yes, we've got 15 or 20 models. They're filling up the house!' cries Gill. 'Then there are your penny arcade machines and all the automata [mechanical devices designed to follow predetermined actions] you've built. There are quite a few things in the house we need to clear out.'

'I thought you'd say that,' grumbles David affably.

I remark that it must have been a

paradise for Sophie, growing up in a home full of extraordinary and bizarre memorabilia, and they both agree it was. 'We'd have kids coming to the house, all Sophie's mates, and they'd be absorbed by the magic of it. It was really lovely,' says David.

Of course time moves on, and now Sophie's preoccupations are more grown up. 'She watches TV shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*,' says David. 'I used to say, "Why are you watching this rubbish?" but secretly I thought it was very clever, the way

## REUNITED WITH DEL BOY'S VAN

In his new series David is delighted, on a visit to Beaulieu Motor Museum in Hampshire, to be reacquainted with the Reliant Regal van he and brother Rodney, played by Nicholas Lyndhurst, owned in *Only Fools and Horses*. 'Did I imagine when we were filming in that very van that it would later end up in a motor museum?' he asks. 'Not on your nelly!'

He takes a spin in the vehicle. 'She's a symbol of great British eccentricity,

but she's a temperamental old girl - I have to treat her with respect,' he says, juddering along in the iconic yellow van emblazoned with the words 'Trotters Independent Trading, New York, Paris, Peckham'. David also reveals that he harnessed his car mechanic's skills to invent a way of making the old jalopy belch white smoke in *Only Fools*. 'I had the idea of mixing engine oil with Redex [a fuel additive] and putting a pump into the carburettor to make smoke clouds billow out of the back,' he laughs.



the drag artists transformed themselves. What I hate, though, is vulgar language, graphic sex and violence on TV. Why is there such a fascination with it? The BBC used to have very strict rules about profanity and swearing, and it forced writers to be creative. If a script is strong enough, you don't need bad language.

'We were watching the BBC's adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* with Gill's mum - she's 84 - over the festive season and there was quite a lot of unnecessary effering and blinding. Grandma threw up her handbag

and said, "Have we got to watch this?" It's such a shame they felt the need to use language like that. Dickens didn't. The best versions of the story don't. They stick to the original and there are wonderful performances, such as Alastair Sim's, without any unnecessary swearing.

'And when I was playing Frost [the curmudgeonly Detective Inspector Jack Frost who David portrayed in *A Touch Of Frost* from 1992 to 2010] we stuck to very strict rules. If Frost was really up against it we'd allow one "bloody hell", but aside from that we'd always ask, "Do we really need it?" And the answer, usually, was no.'

Unsurprisingly, he finds much of the modern world of social media unfathomable. 'Apparently these days you can get 10 million hits just from pulling a funny face,' he says, incredulous. He applauds me taking

shorthand notes of our conversation. 'There'll be people who say that's terribly old-fashioned, but I see it as a very useful tool. It suddenly becomes wonderfully efficient when the batteries on your Dictaphone run out.'

We're back to the series, and the ingenious minds that dreamt up Britain's most enduring inventions. 'These people had vision. They couldn't be still. Their minds were endlessly creative and buzzing with ideas. But perhaps more than anything they had imagination.'

Imagination, he concludes, is a wonderful commodity. 'When you read a book you have to conjure up pictures in your mind,' he says. 'That's why I always used to read to Sophie, and why it's a great loss young

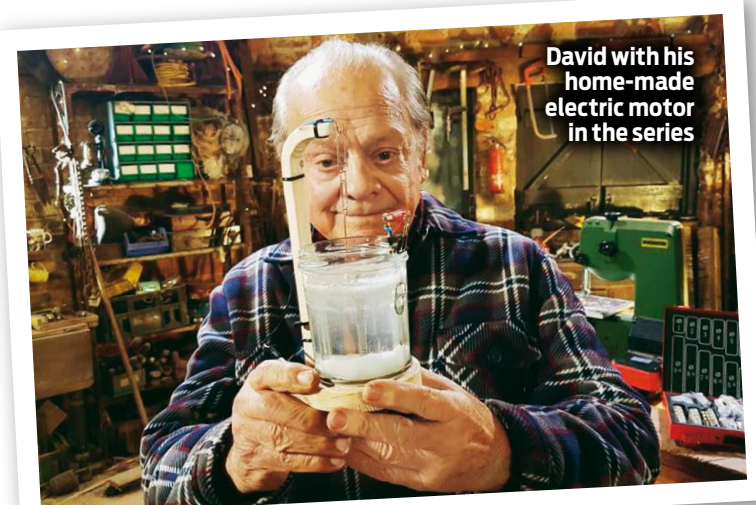
people do everything on their mobiles now. I don't think there's so much attraction in reading a book any more, and it's a disappointment.'

'I've lived through the days when it was mind-blowing to see moving pictures transmitted through the ether to a TV in our sitting room. There was a real sense of wonder about it. Now kids are very blasé. They can stream anything on their mobile phones. But we should be very proud of what we've invented and achieved in the world. That's why I loved doing this show that celebrates it all!'

David Jason's *Great British Inventions*, Tuesday, 9pm, More4.

**'There isn't much I can't turn my hand to'**

**'I'll always love my job, but fame is difficult'**



David with his home-made electric motor in the series

**GIVE HIM A MEDAL!**

As well as writing Oscar-winning music for *Jaws*, *ET* and *Star Wars*, John Williams also composed

the fanfare for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, winning a Grammy (*The Great Film Composers*, Mon, 9pm, Sky Arts)