

# THE BIG CHANNEL 4-0

**Neil Anthony** was in at the start of the UK's first new television channel for 18 years and recalls the heady and hectic times of producing new programmes

**E**xactly 40 years ago this month, Channel 4 started broadcasting. It was a bold and exciting venture – the UK's first new television channel since the launch of BBC Two in 1964. As one of the Channel 4's original independent producers, I had an insider's view of those exciting and chaotic early years.

My business partner, Bryan Izzard, and I had met while working together at the former ITV regional company Southern Television. Bryan had a long and successful track-record of making television and was responsible for such shows as *Please Sir!* and *On the Buses*. I had been a professional dancer and choreographer, working extensively in the UK and Australia. In 1981 we formed The Bright Thoughts Company ([bright-thoughts.co.uk](http://bright-thoughts.co.uk)), and for the next few years made many of Channel 4's light entertainment and arts programmes.

I remember our first visit to Channel 4 very vividly. We had a peculiar address to find opposite Harrods, which was serving as the channel's temporary office. We thought we'd try to sell one of our ideas to Cecil Korer, Channel 4's commissioning editor for entertainment. We were both very nervous but came out of that meeting with not one commission, but four, including a televised version of actor John Bardon's one-man show about Max Miller, *Here's a Funny Thing*. We were in a state of shock, to the extent of having to find the nearest bar, and it wasn't even close to lunchtime.

Those were heady times. Channel 4

**Neil Anthony in the Channel 4 continuity announcer's chair. He had been a professional dancer and choreographer before joining forces with Bryan Izzard.**



was expecting programmes to be made on very tight budgets and for our first year of business we operated from my flat above Goodge Street tube station. It was utter chaos cramming everyone in when we were actually in production, but somehow we managed.

In those early days, one of our mainstays were televised adaptations of one-man stage shows. Our very first production was *Macready!*, starring the wonderful Frank Barrie as the legendary Shakespearean actor William Macready. There was *Hollywood Hits Chiswick*, which retold the life story of film comedian WC Fields in a supermarket (and featured a very early appearance by Caroline

Quentin). We even had Ron Moody reprise his iconic performance as Fagin.

One of our more unusual productions was *The Green Tie* on the *Little Yellow Dog* which featured a number of British comedy greats performing comic songs and monologues, while dressed in "black tie". The presumed setting was a sophisticated dinner party of the 1920s, and it was recorded on location in a swish London townhouse. Made in the summer of 1982, it featured performers such as Arthur Askey, Leonard Rossiter, Julie Walters, Maureen Lipman, and even Cilla Black. Keeping order was the much-loved, and much-missed, Barry Cryer, dressed in a smart white dinner jacket.

In hindsight, this was a remarkable piece of television, as it found many of the artists at significant moments in their careers. Julie Walters and Maureen Lipman were just about to head off to Dublin to shoot the multi-award-

winning film *Educating Rita*. Dame Maureen performed as Joyce Grenfell for the very first time, and later toured her very successful stage show *Re:Joyce!* for many years. Cilla Black was at a very low ebb in her career, a couple of years before she successfully reinvented herself as a presenter on *Surprise, Surprise* and *Blind Date*. She performed a heart-rending version of the Gracie Fields classic *Walter, Walter (Lead Me to the Altar)*.

The programme is now of especial significance, as it featured Arthur Askey's very last professional appearance. We had been told he was keen to participate, but his physical frailty meant he could only give us an hour. We were on standby for



Clockwise: Arthur Askey, pictured here with Barry Cryer, made his final professional appearance on *The Green Tie on the Little Yellow Dog* – an evening of comic monologues and songs with an all-star cast, *Hollywood Hits* Chiswick retold the life story of film comedian WC Fields, as played by Derek Newark, and featured a very early appearance by Caroline Quentin. *Interference*, a cobbled together idea for a weekly show that contained “edgy” humour about that week’s events, featured comedians such as Jim Barclay. Cilla Black joined in all the fun on *The Green Tie on the Little Yellow Dog*. Frank Barrie starred as the Shakespearean actor William Macready in *Macready!* Neil Anthony and Bryan Izzard brought *Here’s a Funny Thing*, actor John Bardon’s one-man show about Max Miller, to Channel 4.

his arrival and, like the professional he was, he did indeed give us some wonderful renditions in that hour. He performed his innuendo-laden tale *The Villain Still Pursued Her*, featuring Filthy Ferdinand and his dastardly deeds.

He also gave the final performance of his signature piece, *The Bee Song*. It was a joy to be there, watching this comedy great in action, and seeing Barry, Julie and Cilla all joining in the fun. It was an extraordinary moment – here was one of the shining stars of British music hall performing with a new generation of comic talent. Sadly, Arthur died exactly

a fortnight after Channel 4 launched, and this month also marks the 40th anniversary of his passing.

Over the years, we experienced some crazy situations working for Channel 4. One in particular comes to mind. We had made a one-off programme called *Book ‘Em an’ Risk It*, which was recorded in the foyer of the Royal Festival Hall.

It featured some of the acts who were making a name for themselves in London’s Comedy Store venue, such as Mark Arden and Stephen Frost (performing as the Oblivion Boys) and cult Scottish comedian Arnold Brown. It seemed to go down very

well and some weeks after it was broadcast in August 1983, we were at a press conference that was to announce Channel 4’s autumn schedule.

We were shocked to hear that, as a follow-up to *Book ‘Em an’ Risk It*, a new topical comedy series was being made by *Bright Thoughts*, going on air in just a few weeks. The only problem was they’d completely forgotten to tell us. We had to meet the press and give informed comment about a show that we didn’t even know we were making.

We cobbled together a wild idea for a weekly show that would go into



From left: Dame Julie Walters appeared in *The Green Tie on the Little Yellow Dog* shortly before shooting the multi-award-winning film *Educating Rita*. Leonard Rossiter was another guest on the programme, which had a presumed setting of a sophisticated dinner party of the 1920s and was recorded on location in a swish London townhouse. Dame Maureen Lipman performed as Joyce Grenfell for the very first time on *The Green Tie on the Little Yellow Dog*. With director James Roose-Evans, Dame Maureen would later devise the one-woman show *Re:Joyce!* – a personal homage to her childhood heroine.

production immediately and have “edgy” humour about that week’s events. The programme that came from this, *Interference*, was not our finest hour. But given that we had to drop absolutely everything to start churning out a weekly topical show on a budget which almost amounted to petty cash, we did a pretty good job, and saved face for Channel 4.

One of our programmes, *Top Cs and Tiaras*, was an outright hit. Recorded on location at Wrotham Park in Hertfordshire, it featured operetta, sung by performers such as Benjamin Luxon and Julia Migenes, in a country house setting. Our music was under the supervision of our dear friend Burt Rhodes, who had made his name in the West End and on Broadway, perhaps most known as musical director at *The Talk of the Town* and bandleader to great legends such as Judy Garland and Johnny Mathis. Each one-hour episode was a themed tour of the operetta canon and set Channel 4’s switchboard ringing every week with calls from appreciative viewers. It is a programme I remain very proud of.

After Bryan and I wound down our activities with Channel 4, for many years I regarded this as a closed chapter in my life. In recent times, however, it has become clear that there is still a great interest in older television programmes. It is intended to make available many of the shows we made back in those early days of Channel 4, on DVD and to stream or download. The time is ripe for them to be discovered by a new audience.

Looking back, it was a great time to be around and to be part of the birth of a new station, and to work with so many gifted performers and writers. We all had a sense of being a part of the change, a willingness to take chances and to innovate, and a shared optimism. 🇬🇧



Neil Anthony (right) with business partner Bryan Izzard who was behind hit shows such as *Please Sir!* and *On the Buses*.

# SOFA SURFER

Chris Hallam pays tribute to former BBC Breakfast presenter Bill Turnbull whose long career enabled him to build up an easy intimacy with his audience



After two decades as a radio and television journalist, Bill Turnbull hosted BBC Breakfast between 2001 and 2016 and became a hugely popular figure to millions of viewers.

During an interview, TV presenter Bill Turnbull was once asked how he would most like to be remembered. “As a half-decent journalist,” he replied. It was a typically modest remark. The reality is that Turnbull was not only much more than “half-decent” in his chosen career but that by the time of his death, at the age of 66 in August 2022, his long years of broadcasting, particularly his hosting of BBC Breakfast between 2001 and 2016, had ensured he had become a hugely popular figure beloved by millions of people. Many viewers came to feel they knew him personally.

As it turns out, another major aspect of his legacy came as a result of the shock news of his diagnosis with prostate cancer. In November 2017, he had been filming a celebrity edition of *The Great British Bake Off*, when he discovered he had the illness himself. He had been suffering from pains in his legs but had convinced himself this was just another symptom of old age. In the end, his son persuaded him to go to a doctor but, as he explained in an emotional message inserted into the *Bake Off* show, it was already too late.

“A black curtain” descended after the

diagnosis, he said. “If I had been tested a few years ago, we would have knocked it on the head.” Bill urged men everywhere to get themselves tested for the illness as early as possible. Turnbull’s words had a major impact and undoubtedly saved many, probably thousands of lives.

“Thousands and thousands of men have come forward as a result of him helping us raise awareness of Prostate Cancer UK – and him just telling his story,” said Laura Kerby, chief executive of the charity.

The son of a commodities broker and a teacher, William Robert Jolyon Turnbull was born in Guildford, Surrey, on 25 January 1956. He was sent to public school at the age of eight and then went onto Eton. He failed to get a scholarship: his performance in the school’s entrance exam was undermined by a head injury received courtesy of a croquet mallet to the head shortly before taking it.

He disliked the experience of boarding school likening it to “prison” and felt of Eton that: “The drawback is that people can think you’re a toff for having been there. And we were fairly low down the socio-financial scale of families who send their sons.” Among his fellow pupils attending Eton at