



## 'IN THE SPOTLIGHT'

Each month we put a different person 'in the spotlight' and pose 12 wide-ranging questions to them. This month, we feature **Tony Conder, who gave a Festival presentation 'Gloucestershire's Chosen Trio' in March 2020.**

**1. Tell us an interesting fact about yourself that not many people know.**

I have to admit that I enjoy reading railway timetables in bed, that may not be interesting but it's a fact. I regret that today they have disappeared onto computer and most journeys are planned by putting a choice of stations into a screen. I think there is a romance in looking at possibilities in a published timetable; counting off the cathedrals, the castles, the passages of countryside you will pass through. Then in older timetables, the heartbreak of the journeys you can no longer make after Beeching. Where would Sherlock Holmes or Lord Peter Wimsey be without the railway timetable?

**2. What book made most impact on you as a child?**

I think it has to be the Hobbit. The voice of David Davis reading the book in children's hour wedded me both to Tolkien and to the BBC. Reading the book for myself I loved it, I have gone back to it time and time again over 60 years. It is wonderfully escapist, but as you begin to understand the roots of the tales and the lore which Tolkien based it on you can expand your horizons. Radio and words allow your own pictures, far more satisfying than films which fix things in your brain.

**3. What is your favourite film, and why?**

Local Hero has already been cited (Sue Ablett, June 2020) but it vies with my choice, M.A.S.H. The anarchic world of the backscene to the Korean war, with conscripted doctors and nurses in a mobile hospital and no actual fighting. I love the humour and the deep cynicism about war, politics, marriage, and the American way. It has a couple of OMG moments where the comedy is torn apart by the reality. It is funny and savage and helps that healthy questioning of authority vital in society.

**4. What are your main hobbies/interests, apart from reading, of course?**

Researching talks and cooking keep me sane alongside reading. I find cooking an organised and methodical activity. It requires concentration and produces either something delicious or at the least exciting in its awfulness.

**5. What would be the three things you would like to have if you were stranded on a desert island?**

I hope the island will be warm, I can imagine searching it for food and cooking fuel. To do this I must have a pair of everlasting beach shoes, I hate the feel of dry sand on my feet. The various fruit trees will provide flavour and of course fibre, the huge phial of dried beer yeast that I take with me will allow the production of alcohol one way or another so that I can relax into yet another gorgeous sunset.



Third will have to be a book. When I get the chance to read it will be Rogues, Villains and Eccentrics by William Donaldson, an A-Z of the low lights of Britain over the centuries. For example, there is an entry under the E's for Elton, Gladys, an octogenarian. When she decided to dance a striptease at the Haslemere Home for the Elderly in Great Yarmouth in 1960, one man died and 5 more had less severe heart attacks!

**6. What would a look at your bookshelves tell us about you?**

My bookshelves are an eclectic mix. My favourite section is the diaries, especially those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second world war features in many and in particular the character of Winston Churchill, viewed from so many eyes. Its fascinating to hear history unfold in many different ways from many different commentators; Harold Nicholson, Duff Cooper, John Colville, Joseph Goebbels, Galeazzo Ciano and others. It should be a lesson to politicians who ape the Churchillian manner to see just how he actually was in the war, and for the rest of us how he was in peacetime!

Railway and Canal Histories are another theme, a collection of cookery books and maps. Escape is into classic detection with Martin Beck, Sjowall and Whaloo's Swedish detective and for warmer days Salvo Montalbano, Andrea Camilleri's Sicilian policeman. Fantasy with Anne McCaffrey's dragons on Pern. My absolute favourite is the two volume Mordant's Need by Stephen Donaldson. Set in a fantasy world with crazed wizards making huge mirrors to deliver plagues, armies and themselves across a medieval world.

There is so much more, this is a house of books.

**7. If you could invite any three people, dead or alive, to a dinner party, who would they be, and why?**

I'm looking for a mix that will entertain and enlighten, just as Lady Cunard or the other makers of dinner parties might. I would like to invite Elizabeth Bennet from the pages of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. Her society of the 1810's with its own rules and manners would be so different, but with her intelligence and impudence to challenge Oscar Wilde, my second guest. He would prepare meticulously for encounters, if they overran, he would have to go round his material a second time, a dinner should be just the right length and how would he stand up to questioning? I need a diarist to record the event so I will have Chips Channon, not my favourite man but so well connected and informed. I do not expect to get a word in edgeways.

**8. What kind of music do you like, and is there one favourite soundtrack?**

I love live music, I can listen to nearly anything if it is played in front of me, I'm afraid I do draw the line at Jazz and most musicals though I'm happy to sing along to the Sound of Music. If I have to have one piece then its probably Smetana's Ma Vlast. The tour round Bohemia and especially his voyage on the river in 'Vltava' are sublime.

**9. What are your favourite charities/good causes, and why?**

We contribute to charity, cancer research and especially money that helps others pull themselves out of problems and find their own way forward. My charity luxuries if there is



such a thing is the Shropshire Union Fly Boat society and its boat Saturn, celebrating 200 years of canal transport and the craftsmanship of wooden boat building; the other is Herefordshire minor counties cricket and days spent at Colwall, and Eastnor watching cricket and talking to strangers with a shared interest, canals and cricket, quintessential England for me.

**10. Who is the person who has influenced you most/you most admire?**

I don't by and large have heroes. If anyone shaped my life, he was an English teacher called Mr Nye. He was at school in my last two years. He made me look at the same set of facts through the eyes of several commentators and not to draw conclusions too easily.

**11. What is your connection to Evesham?**

I have talked at Ecgwin's Club in Evesham, and always had a good time with Sue Campbell and the Civic Society, but it was through Edward Thomas that I came to the Dymock poets and Linda Hart. When Linda moved to Evesham, she introduced me to the festival and the rest was inevitable.

**12. What would you list as your greatest achievement to date?**

Most things that I have done have not come out exactly the way I expected so I find achievement difficult to pinpoint. Anything I have ever done has really been a joint effort. The thing I was most pleased about was opening the Waterways Museum at Gloucester in 1988 and bringing together a team of 25 people to run manage and administer the museum from scratch. It was such a joy to work in that team for two or three years as the place came to life. Many of the staff have remained friends with one another and look back on those as great days, as I do, that will do for me.