Doctor Who
Saturday 6.30pm BBC1, 8.25pm BBC HD

CENTURIES AGO AT your Earth-time, a once proud race – or, to be honest, the Gatiss family in a small semi in County Durham – settled down to watch the telly. It was 1972. Raleigh bikes had been safely stowed. Beans on toast had been scoffed. And there was only one thing on my little mind: Daleks!

Aged six, I was already mad about Doctor Who and knew that the return of the Daleks meant something special. I’d seen the gorgeous Radio Times cover [overleaf] in the shops, but wasn’t allowed to have it as we only got the RT at Christmas. And I knew from whispered conversations with my brother and sister that the Daleks were both the Doctor’s archenemies and really scary.

Dreamt up by writer Terry Nation, the Daleks made their debut in 1963 in only the second-ever Doctor Who story. Two races inhabited the devastated planet Skaro, mutating into perfect, blond (and rather fey) pacifists called Thais and ruthless blobs of hate inside metal travelling machines: the Daleks. Obsessed with racial purity and the desire to “exterminate” all life that isn’t like them, the Daleks always bore more than a passing resemblance to the Nazis. Although the parallel can be overstated, there is something intrinsically WWII about the hate-spewing, tank-like monsters that has cast a long shadow.

The Daleks were an instant smash – a brilliant combination of Nation’s ideas, the chilling staccato voices, and their design, by BBC employee Ray Cusick. Through a combination of budget restraints and inspiration, he devised the familiar pepper-pot shape, ball-covered skirt, domed head and infamous sink plunger. (It’s a testament to the power of this design classic that, when the series returned in 2005, the largely unaltered Dalek immediately captivated a whole new generation of children.)

Our favourite baddies are back – bigger than ever! Writer Mark Gatiss in-vestig-ates the Daleks’ timeless appeal and their Nazi origins
Next, the Daleks invaded Earth, their fascist origins made explicit by sink-plunger weapons and a grim storyline featuring weary, battle-scarred human soldiers and a grimy story about the Daleks' origins. The invaders also find time to tour London, sightseeing and visiting famous landmarks. The Daleks were to be whisked away by a planet called 'Vulcan'. For once, the Daleks are cunning, sly, patient... and even more frightening. The Daleks invaded Earth, their fascist origins made explicit by sink-plunger weapons and a grim storyline featuring weary, battle-scarred human soldiers.

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And now, like any self-respecting archenemies who've been beaten for the final time, they're back. It was an honour and a daunting task to be asked to write a Dalek story for Matt Smith's new Doctor, but with all that history in mind and with a Second World War setting part of the brief, I wanted to bring back some of the thrill of the Daleks being cunning and manipulative, just as in that first Troughton story.

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FORGET DALEKS AND Cybermen. The most daunting challenge for a brand-new Doctor has always been to win over the Great British Public. Matt Smith has pulled off with honours the transition from the phenomenally popular David Tennant but, for many of their predecessors, there was no change without pain.

"Too stupid for words" reads one viewer's verdict on fourth Doctor Tom Baker's debut in 1974 - just one of many startling morsels unveiled this week by an online BBC Archive project (bbc.co.uk/archive). Dubbed The Changing Face of Doctor Who, it allows fans and TV historians access for the first time to a collection of internal memos, audience research reports and rare photos that shed light on how the BBC executed and monitored handovers between 20th-century Time Lords.

Changing the lead actor was a terrific risk, and a memo dated May 1966 shows that the Doctor Who production team envisaged the very first "metaphysical change" from original Doctor William Hartnell to Patrick Troughton as a "horrifying experience in which he [the Doctor] re-lives some of the most unendurable moments of his long life, including the galactic war. It is as if he has had the LSD drug..."

Troughton wasn't immediately popular, but the process - eventually termed "regeneration" - proved the lifeblood of Doctor Who and sealed the series' longevity.

Scan the research reports now online and you'll find an Appreciation Index (an average of scores out of 100 from a sample audience). It gives a gauge of the success of each new Doctor between 1966 and 1987.

RT takes an exclusive first look into the BBC's online archive to find out its top secrets.