AND THEN THERE WERE THREE
John Hurt, Matt Smith and David Tennant play three incarnations of Gallifrey's finest in the 50th anniversary special

“YOU WOULDN'T EXPECT THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS TIME TRAVELLER TO GET HERE IN A STRAIGHT LINE”

Steven Moffat, the man behind Doctor Who, says the BBC could never kill the Time Lord...

Doctor Who
Saturday 7.50pm BBC1

“Did they know, the day they invented Robin Hood, that when he fired his arrow in the air it would fly for ever? When Dr Doyle picked up his pen to write the very first Sherlock Holmes story, did the pacing slabs of Baker Street rattle and heave? When Ian Fleming scanned his bookshelf for a name for his gentleman spy, and settled on James Bond, did that famous music echo faintly from the future? Most importantly, 50 years ago, when the Doctor was created in dull grey rooms at the BBC, did a shiver of fear pass through the heart of every evil-doer in the universe? Ah, 50 years. What can one say about 50 years of Doctor Who? Well, first of all, one can be pedantic. Doctor Who hasn't been on for 50 years — owing to the outright stupidity and unforgiveable blindness of the BBC (sorry guys, it needs to be said), there was a 16-year gap. But seriously, you wouldn't expect the world's most famous time traveller to get here in a straight line, would you? That gap is important, though. It confers something very special on this most special of all shows: immortality. Doctor Who, for once and for all, is the show that comes back. Axe it at your peril, someone like me is going to call you a fool, and lots of people like you are going to read along and nod.

Everywhere else this November, we'll be talking about the 34 years that the show was actually on the air. I'll be popping up everywhere exclaiming, "This is the Christmassiest Christmas special ever — no, hang on, this is the 50th special..." On screen, Matt Smith will do battle again, David Tennant will return to the fray, and out of nowhere acting legend John Hurt will arrive in his very own Tardis as a brand-new version of television's number-one hero. Everywhere you turn, those three faces will be looking back at you and Doctor Who will be — yet again — the biggest thing on television.

So, just for the hell of it, let's talk about the years when it wasn't. Because, in a strange way, that's when the magic happened. I remember it so vividly — it was back in the days when the news actually arrived in the papers, Glasgow, a rainy morning. I'd been...
<1 out the night before and I'd missed the news. And there it was, a headline in the Daily Record. Doctor Who was axed. In the end it was bit more complex than that, but the fact was the BBC was cutting loose the Tardis.

And then, the remarkable thing. The audience said no. Just, no. A nice, polite, terribly British, utterly final no. And the Doctor just kept on going. While the BBC folded its arms and shook its head, there were books by the likes of Russell T Davies, Mark Gatiss and Paul Cornell. There were audio adventures, starring all the old Doctors. There was an action-packed American tele-film, and endless rumours of Hollywood movies. Doctor Who Magazine, whose purpose was to document the making of the TV show, carried on perfectly happily without the TV show being made. Careers began, companies were launched and a show that should have faded away and been forgotten remained beloved and deeply missed, and the next generation of Doctor Who producers formed an orderly queue.

It's not supposed to work like that. You're not supposed to axe a TV show and find the next generation of producers forming an orderly queue. Ask the people who tried to cancel Doctor Who - it never works like that.

When Doctor Who was axed, the next generation of Doctor Who producers formed an orderly queue. Ask the people who tried to cancel Doctor Who - it never works like that.

When the grand return was announced, there was instant joy and a bonfire of publicity. When the show hit the screens, it was like a long-awaited explosion. And now it seems like the Doctor was never away - because, in fact, he wasn't. What William Hartnell, Verity Lambert and Sydney Newman began all those years ago is a very rare kind of miracle. Heroes hardly ever become legends. Stories hardly ever become myths. But now and then, when you fire an arrow in the air, if your aim is true and the wind is set exactly right, it will fly for ever.

Happy anniversary, Doctor Who.