

TOGETHER ONCE MORE...

There's a big surprise for the Doctor (David Tennant) when he's unexpectedly reunited with Sarah Jane Smith (Elisabeth Sladen) and robotic dog K-9. But the Doctor's going to need more than a sonic screwdriver to sort out K-9 (inset)



FRIENDS REUNITED

Two famous companions return to *Doctor Who*, but it wasn't the easiest of tasks to get them to reprise their roles, as Nick Griffiths finds out...

WE HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY — WE CAN REBUILD HIM

Older viewers of *Doctor Who* will recognise another old friend this Saturday — K-9, the trusty robotic dog from the Tom Baker years. He's actually one of the original props from the 1970s, but K-9 is now three decades older and looks it. "He was originally made of fibreglass, which is why he's lasted well, while the latex props have rotted," explains Mike Tucker, who is in charge of miniature models for the show. "It was a nice job in that he had to look 20

years on from how we'd last seen him, so we added rust marks and coffee cup rings, and bits of paint that had flaked off."

There's even more of a difference between K-9's new innards and those of the original. As Tucker explains: "The traditional way of doing this was to stick in a load of printed circuit boards, but we decided that the interior workings should look a bit more as if they'd been designed by a Time Lord and less like radio spares!"



The last time Sarah Jane Smith was spotted on *Doctor Who* she was leaving the Tardis behind for suburbia, with a wistful "Don't forget me" to Tom Baker's Doctor. That was in 1976.

Time-travel forward 30 years and, against galaxy-sized odds, she's back, again played by Elisabeth Sladen, reunited with the Doctor — now in David Tennant guise — and causing the odd jealous pout from Rose in *School Reunion*, this week's *Doctor Who* episode.

But it took a lot of coaxing to get Sladen to reprise the role. "My agent phoned up and said that Russell T Davies and Phil Collinson [executive producer and producer] would like to take me out for a meal to talk about *Doctor Who*," she recalls. "My agent was far more excited than I was. I kind of thought I was going to turn it down."

As the 58-year-old, still instantly recognisable, actress, puts it: "I walked away from this character, but she never walked away from me." There were video releases, autograph signings, *Doctor Who* conventions, audio adventures and the BBC's 1981 one-off *K-9 and Company*. But she was wary of returning for a fleeting cameo ("A little hello as Sarah Jane wanders in," she puts it).

Davies and Collinson's plans for the character were far further reaching, Sladen explains: "I already had this idea of where Sarah Jane would be now. We sat down for dinner and they said what they thought she'd be doing... and I was gobsmacked!"

"We got on so well it became a very rowdy table, probably too much to drink, and I agreed to do it. They had such a love of the programme and I just thought, 'What a challenge!'"

Which, conveniently, is how it turned out. First there was the dinner invitation. "I was rung up and they said, 'Phil and Russell are going for a meal with Billie and David. Oh, and Stephen Fry's going to pop along.' I thought, 'Hell, I'm out of my league here!'"

Then there was the first read-through. "It was a read-through of the first block [of filmed episodes], so it was the Christmas story and two or three others. There were about 100 people in the room! The cameraman, bless, came up and said he used to watch me as a child, and I thought, 'I'm making a friend of you!'"

It's inevitable to feel trepidation attending a school reunion to which your alumni (bar the dog) fail to turn up. But the fears were unfounded: watching Elisabeth Sladen re-inhabit Sarah Jane Smith is like a too-short trip in your very own Tardis.



THE MANY FACES OF ANTHONY HEAD

In 2003, when the new *Doctor Who* was a glint in Russell T Davies's eye, the *Radio Times* 40th Anniversary Special asked readers which actor they would most like to play the Doctor. The first choice was Anthony Head, and now the former *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Little Britain* star has finally made it into the show – but on the darker side, as sinister headteacher Mr Finch.

Head's, er, head is "many-faced," he explains cryptically. "He is oleaginous."

Rather oily then? "Yes, Finch is particularly oily and at the same time

very controlling, and not so nice with the children," says Head. "He's a bit New Labour, a bit of a politician. You're just not sure of him or where he's coming from. I wanted him to be very much a suited headmaster, not a cuddly, tweedy chap."

They say never to work with children or animals, but what's it like acting with robot dog K-9? "A bit like talking to a box on wheels," he laughs. "No, it was fun, but it's like any radio-controlled model, it doesn't necessarily hit its mark every time. There were times when you'd think, 'Should I go on?'"

NO RUNNING IN THE CORRIDOR...

CGI monsters, the Krillitane, were described in the script as "bat-like creatures with leathery wings". The Mill's special effects experts turned the idea into this demonic beast. "If you're a writer, something 'metamorphoses' into something else," says visual effects producer Will Cohen. "But for us that conjures up images of Michael Jackson videos. We wanted to avoid that. This is something more magical and organic, and is keeping with the tone of the rest of the episode – rather oily."

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE WHITHOUSE?

"Until I started working on *Doctor Who*, I thought the fact that I could name the Doctors in order made me a sad anorak," says Toby Whithouse (left). "But when I met [fellow writers] Matt Jones, Steven Moffat and Tom MacRae, I realised I was paddling in the shallow end."

Whithouse, 35, grew up watching Tom Baker's Doctor and Elisabeth Sladen's Sarah Jane Smith, and owned a pushalong K-9. Now he must bring two of those three back for the new series. Any pressure?

"I would have felt more nervous had I been immersed in that world," he says. "Having Sarah Jane and K-9 was no more of a serial element than for any other show. There are always storyline threads to pick up. It's only when I read of my 'eagerly anticipated' episode, that I start getting the fear."

Whithouse actually started out as an actor – *The House of Elliott*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Holby City* – and turned to writing when he read scripts and kept thinking, "I could do better than this." He could. His CV includes *Attachments*, *Hotel Babylon* and creating *No Angels*.

Doctor Who proved a very different beast. "It was quite a long process," he admits. "They said they wanted to bring back Sarah Jane and K-9. 'Aside from that, do anything you want.' So I went away and wrote a story and they said, 'No, that's rubbish. Do anything you want, as long as it's not that.'"

After much reworking, *School Reunion* emerged, in which Rose (Billie Piper, right) sees in Sarah Jane her possible future – while becoming

jealous. "In terms of the Doctor's personal history, Russell [T Davies] was always keen to be moving forward, so mine is the only episode where there are moments of reflection," he says. "You always have to reduce it to a human level, and, in that situation for the Doctor, it's the current girlfriend meeting the ex-wife. Once you start thinking like that, it becomes much easier to write."

The final stumbling block was special effects. Whithouse's Krillitane monsters (see above) are CGI-based, and he admits it was easy to get carried away. "Writing special-effects was fantastic. I loved it. One tends to ask for the moon. They calculated how many days of special-effects work would be required and it was about seven years, so we pared it down after that."

