

When Dr Who's arch enemy showed up in his local furniture shop, **Brian Logan** knew he had to take it for a test drive

# My day as a Dalek

**D**aleks! The very word strikes fear into the hearts of Timelords everywhere. It does to me too, ever since I peeked from behind the living room door to watch them trundle across my TV screen. Over the aeons between 1963 and 1989, those malign pepperpots terrorised the galaxy, or at least the parts of it that look like a quarry in Hertfordshire. According to Doctor Who, and I believe this implicitly, they're going to invade earth in 2150. So warn your grandchildren to warn their grandchildren, and together we can stop this thing.

In the meantime, Daleks are but a fond memory, beloved of ageing anoraks and those nostalgic for the days when the universe could be soothed by the efforts of a gent in a

flying police box. Last week, in McCullough and Dye, an eclectic furniture shop in central London, I realised a lifelong dream: I became a Dalek.

I saw it in the shop window, stunningly conspicuous. What once made it a unique foe now made it the last word in *objets d'art*. The Dalek is a design classic, the incarnation of our horror at mechanisation. But it's kitsch too: we laugh at it and at how credulous we once were. And so this Dalek's sink-plunger, symbol of its naffness, wilts despondently: one too many jokes about staircases and a decade on the dole have neutered it. Only we dyed-in-the-woollen-scarf fans stick by them. And so I entered the shop, reverentially.

First I verified the model: was this an original? There's a firm based in Crewe called This Planet Earth, which is licensed by the BBC to produce replica Dr Who props. It recently provided the Dalek for the Post Office's millennium stamp, and has shifted K-9s by the score since Channel 4's *Queer As Folk* established the Doctor's robot dog as a gay icon. Fibreglass Daleks sell daily for £1,700 each; Liam Howlett from the Prodigy and Jonathan Ross are among the celebs who've coughed up, says company founder Ian Clarke.

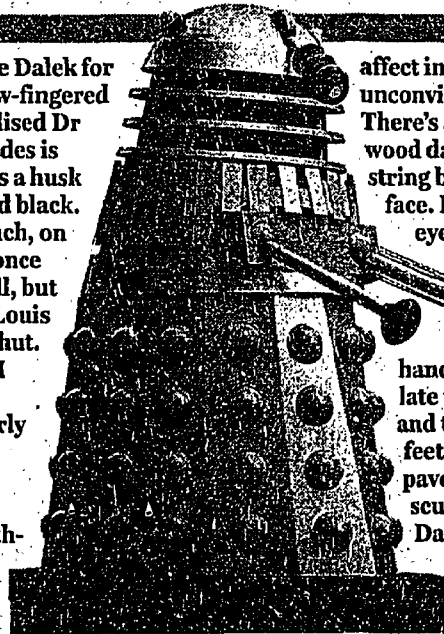
Original Daleks – the ones actually used on the TV series – are another matter. Few were ever made for the purpose: three Dalek props and a lot of mirrors tended to suffice. The oldest surviving

Dalek, a TV star back in 1963, is now in the Dapol Dr Who museum in Llangollen in Wales. There's another one at the BBC exhibition in Longleat. The remainder, the corporation auctioned off in the early 1990s. They sold for about £4,000 each.

The collectors' key to Dalek identification is that if it looks like it's falling to bits, it's the real thing. The Dalek in McCullough and Dye, incredibly, fitted the bill. This was no fibreglass replica; it was constructed from plywood, plastic and gauze. It looked as if it had been cobbled together on Blue Peter. And yet, it retained its mythic grandeur, so much so that I felt like I was violating some cosmic code of honour by prodding it.

Outside the shop, I ask Louis if

he'll prise open the Dalek for me. Inside the claw-fingered mutant that tantalised Dr Who fans for decades is gone. This Dalek is a husk of plywood painted black. There's a little bench, on which small men once sat. I'm six foot tall, but I squeeze in, and Louis lowers the dome shut. Through a gauze, I watch one or two pedestrians gingerly approach, torn between curiosity and rekindling childhood fear. Others, across the street, congregating for a lunchtime fag,



Meet Brian, intergalactic exterminator

affect indifference unconvincingly.

There's a stub of wood dangling on string before my face. I bite it, my eye-stalk

moves, and the onlookers freeze. My hands manipulate the plunger and the gun. My feet are on bare pavement; if I scuttle, my Dalek lurches forward. I am now the supreme power in the

universe, although I can't turn around very easily. I conjure with the word "exterminate", but it sticks in my throat; this is too holy an experience to trivialise.

When I clamber from the casing, spectators crowd around to peer inside. They greet with triumphalist mirth the Heath Robinson reality of a machine which terrified them, long ago. The demystification is complete.

McCullough and Dye sold their Dalek within hours of it going on display. It fetched a four-figure sum, and will now reside in the foyer of a design company somewhere in London. And so the intergalactic journey from cosmic oppressor to corporate toy continues. Until the year 2150, of course, when the Daleks will have their revenge.