

Picture: BBC

REVIEW

Edited by **CLAIR WOODWARD**

SOME CALL themselves Cumberbitches, while others prefer to be known as Cumberbabes. Whatever the name, they will be out in force in London's Docklands next weekend for the Sherlocked fan convention at the ExCel centre.

For three days they will have the chance to hob-nob with the show's heroes (and villains), but access to Benedict Cumberbatch himself depends on willingness to pay. Holders of the basic £44 weekend ticket stand no chance of getting an in-person autograph from the star, but might be able to have their picture taken with him for a price if they get in quick. Platinum (£595) and VIP (£2,995) pass holders are given Benediction as part of the package.

Sherlocked is a big, official, corporate, affair; more like the Ideal Home Exhibition or the Boat Show than anything else. The bread and butter of the cult TV and film convention circuit are the smaller beans organised by fans themselves. "They're always in the most unlikely places," says Bob Fischer, broadcaster, Doctor Who fan and author of *Wiffle Lever To Full*, an

affectionate book about a summer of attending such events. "There's something very appealing about celebrating a futuristic science fiction programme in a Holiday Inn by a dual carriageway."

This year Thunderbirds enthusiasts have the choice of the official Andercon in Leicester, in June, organised by Gerry Anderson's son Jamie and his company Anderson Entertainment; and the FAnderson convention at the Holiday Inn just off the A404(M) in Maidenhead, in October.

ALTHOUGH science fiction and fantasy dominate – particularly Doctor Who – comedy fans get their weekend jollies too. Every October a throng of Hi-De-Hi lovers converge in Harwich to meet their favourite Yellowcoats and those who worked behind the scenes. Or for those who like a bit of everything, the London Film Convention, held six times a year at the Central Hall, Westminster, is a very good bet.

Pop fan conventions happen, but the objects of fascination are rarely in attendance. You won't find Cliff Richard or Rod Stewart doing interviews on a panel or signing 10x8s by a ring road. The cult TV conventions are a different matter. One major star who died at a convention is rumoured to have done so while pleasuring a female fan in his full costume.

"You can find yourself in the bar, sitting next to Greg Preston from *Survivors* (actor Ian McCulloch), and saying, 'Can I buy you a St Clement's?'," says actor, comedian and convention performer Toby Hadoke, "There's very little demarcation, and no attempts to monopolise the guests. I was talking

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As the first Sherlock fan convention takes place in London next weekend, **Louis Barfe** takes a look at what happens when the stars meet superfans face to face at these very special events...

SHERLOCK

ANYTHING BUT CONVENTIONAL

Review: FILM & TV

'Conventions are joyous occasions'

Picture: ALBERT L ORTEGA/Getty



NOT JUST FOR BOYS: Fans dress up as Amy Pond and Matt Smith's Dr Who, while another poses in the Tardis

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to Philip Madoc once about *The Brain Of Morbius*, and evidently somebody had given him an action figure of *Morbius's Monster*. Suddenly, in mid-conversation, I noticed that there instead of a pocket square, he had this monster poking out of his jacket."

Sometimes the conversation strays from the main topic. "I've discussed the cruciate ligaments of former Crystal Palace midfielder John Salako with Paul McGann," says Bob Fischer, adding: "I've also had Tom Baker look me in the eye in the geography classroom of a Barking comprehensive and tell me that you've never known unconditional love until you've owned a lurcher."

Cumberbabs notwithstanding, it might be assumed that conventions are overwhelmingly male affairs but this is increasingly not the case. "Since the new *Doctor Who* series began, and Billie Piper set it all off, it's been a delight to see young girls coming to conventions," says Hadoke. Fischer estimates a 50/50 split now, with many whole families attending.

For his book, Fischer attended a *Robin Of Sherwood* convention, which was "predominantly female", noting that "the men there tended to be husbands, dragged along and dressed up as medieval peasants to accompany their serving wench wives".

Fans Lisa and Andrew Parker have many fond convention memories, the best of which involve actors who played feared characters turning out to be charming and enormous fun. Anthony Ainley, the fourth actor to play the dreaded Master in *Doctor Who*, was

a gracious individual who offered Murray Mints to his fans, greeted ladies by kissing their hand and merrily offered a Masterly "What an unexpected pleasure" to people who pointed their camcorders at him.

Michael Sheard, a *Doctor Who* regular, best known as the humourless Mr Bronson in *Grange Hill*, "was an extremely nice man with a great sense of humour", remembered for japes like lobbing "God-knows-how-old sausage rolls" into the audience and taking over the evening entertainment. TV historian John Williams recalls observing a "dance floor full of *Who* fans at 1am" from a safe distance, anaesthetised by the surfeit of alcohol that fuels the best fan gatherings.

WE WERE abruptly seized from behind," Williams recalls. "A husky voice said, 'Boys, are you fans? Mr Bronson's here' and after a brief struggle Sheard let us go, sprinted to the dance floor, berated the DJ and then demanded dances to the strains of *School's Out*. The next morning at about 8am, I struggled down to breakfast and there was Sheard, bright as a button, signing autographs. Remarkable man."

A recurring theme is the friendliness that abounds. "I went to conventions for things I wasn't a massive fan of, and was made totally welcome at all of them," says Fischer. "The fun of it for me is that you get a broad spectrum of fan-dom, from dilettantes dipping a toe to people who clearly think about nothing else all day." Hadoke observes a wider purpose: "Conventions can be a social thing for people who might not be sociable

otherwise. At one, a parent said her son wanted to meet me because he listened to all of my [podcast] shows. He was very quiet, but anywhere else he might have been apologising for himself.

"Being surrounded by like-minded people gives these people confidence. *Doctor Who* is emphatically a good thing, it facilitates creativity and promotes a benign world view."

For the TV guests, there is a fee and possibly a chance to sell merchandise but, while this is clearly a moneyspinner at *Sherlocked*, Hadoke is not sure it is much of a pension boost at the more homely conventions. The old actors turn up for the fun.

"The ones that don't enjoy it don't do it," he says, adding that many who would have left *Doctor Who* off their CV 15 years ago are now proud of their contribution.

"Many who really should be asked about more than just *Doctor Who* now say it's nice to be remembered for anything," says Hadoke, "Ray Lonnen's Twitter biography mentioned his appearance in *Frontier In Space*. He was in four scenes, but he knew that a lot of people would be interested in that more than *Harry's Game* or *The Sandbaggers*."

Often anything but conventional, conventions represent fun and camaraderie in an increasingly fractured world. "Conventions are joyous when so many things are cynical and miserable," Toby Hadoke concludes, "It's easier to deconstruct something than it is to find the joy within it." Give it 20 years, and Benedict might well be finding joy with the fans by the A404(M). Just keep him away from the sausage rolls.