While Pertwee was able to use any gadget available to him, Nicholas Courtney (the Brigadier) was less adept at handling the roadster, Bessie.

Jon Pertwee
Daredevil Doctor, Gadgeteer Who

Dashing and daring, a veteran Time Lord zooms up in the Whomobile, unholsters his giant water pistol and offers a few memories of his tenure in the TARDIS.

BY JO BETH TAYLOR

Today, Jon Pertwee, the third man to regenerate into the Doctor, is as loved by his fans as he was when he daringly portrayed the Time Lord in Doctor Who more than 14 years ago (1970-1974). But then, so are two of the most popular Who-gadgets of the Pertwee era, the spacey Whomobile and the reliable Bessie.

Invariably, fans ask Pertwee if he still owns the sleek, ultra-modern Whomobile, originally conceived of by Pertwee himself, designed by a friend, but paid for by the BBC. Pertwee’s answer is, “No.” But, being a man of more words than few, he continues:

“When I left Doctor Who, the Whomobile took up too much room in my garage because it’s seven feet wide. There was a gentleman who wrote me a most enchanting letter in which he said that he had lost his wife, and he had a young son who had taken that death very, very badly, and would I be interested in selling him the Whomobile? His son was sort of dotty about the show and loved the Whomobile.”

Pertwee ultimately told the man to take the Whomobile away, but on the condition that Pertwee could still use it for personal appearances and Doctor Who promotions. These days, it is the man’s son who brings the car to these special occasions, and, according to Pertwee, “The Whomobile is in wonderful condition, and it goes like a clatter still.”

With Pertwee, one story leads to another, and his eyes gleam with humor as he begins to mimic the incredulous stares and double takes from passersby seeing the Whomobile for the first time. “After all,” he explains, “the thing looked like it had no wheels—like it was simply floating along.”

He recalls being stopped time and again despite appearances, Jon Pertwee insists the futuristic Whomobile was perfectly safe for modern motoring.
by the police. They couldn’t seem to resist taking a closer look at the strange contraption, trying to find some mechanical or structural illegality. “They were always looking under the skirts for the wheels, measuring the distance from the ground to the headlamps, fully believing they weren’t the regulation distance apart or high enough off the ground,” Pertwee says. “But the car had been built to the inch; it was all perfectly legal.”

However, it wasn’t the police who convinced Pertwee that driving the Whomobile in heavy traffic was a bad idea. It was a group of gaping, astonished German students who ran their Volkswagen into the back of a double-decker bus at Picadilly Circus and later a surprised Bond Street motorcyclist who swerved off the road and ended up in something very unpleasant. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but travel by Whomobile was appropriately restricted in the cause of public safety.

**On the Road**

Bessie is the second most-asked-about Pertwee Who-gadget. Making her official appearance in Pertwee’s second *Doctor Who* story, the yellow and black Edwardian roadster faithfully served as “conveyance companion” to the third Doctor. Innocuous though she may have looked, Bessie had some big surprises under her hood—namely, a 410 engine with a 10-to-one compression ratio which made her “extremely quick indeed.” Being made of fiberglass, she was also very lightweight, which allowed for greater speed and better handling. “She went over plowed fields very well,” observes Pertwee.

Pertwee says he and his second female *Who* companion, Katy Manning, had great times in Bessie, put-putting up beside expensive, fast cars and then gearing up and zooming past them with. With the thought of Katy Manning, Pertwee digresses briefly; he remembers, with particular delight, the day Manning was running helter-skelter through a sequence when she suddenly went sprawling. Her “knickers” had fallen down and tripped her up. She simply got up and kept on running. “Nothing bothered ol’ Katy for long!”

Though Bessie responded well to confident, even aggressive drivers, she almost lost her cool with Nicholas Courtney (Bridgadier Lethbridge-Stewart). As Pertwee explains it, “Nick and engines don’t get along terribly well. He always got it into reverse when he wanted to go forward. He would say, ‘Right, Sgt., forward!’ and he would go backwards every time.” Bessie somehow managed to make it through these trials, even when Courtney (STARLOG #105) insisted on driving back from location in second gear—“It’s good for the gas mileage, you know.”

At one point in her career, Bessie almost became a getaway car for pranksters Jon Pertwee and John Levene. The plan called for John Levene, at that time playing an injured Sgt. Benton, to keep both his uniform and his fake-blood makeup on and rush wildly into a Boots Chemist Shop (drugstore) while holding his “injured” head and asked for a “plaster” (bandage). Pertwee, also still in costume, was to leap out of Bessie and dash into the shop with cape flying, shouting, “Where is he? Where is the scoundrel?” The instant that Levene’s hobnail army boots hit the marble floor, things went wrong—his boots couldn’t grip the marble, and he careened, completely out of control, into the counter. Then, he really was hurt. The situation, to anyone other than the indomitable Pertwee, would have been embarrassing, but he merely gathered up his battered and bruised sergeant and quickly drove away.

**With Water Pistol**

Pertwee, the master storyteller, has dozens of anecdotes and recollections at his fingertips. He fondly talks of his friend, the late Second Doctor, Patrick Troughton, and their water gun mania. With each confrontation, their “water weapons” kept getting so much bigger and better that they eventually were able to splat one another at 100 paces. “The last water gun I had,” relates Pertwee, “was enormous! I had a six-gallon tank of water strapped to my back to make it work! We had a great time with all that.”

If the image of two grown men playing with giant water guns isn’t mind-boggling enough, then consider Pat Troughton commanding a torpedo boat during World War II with an insulated covering for a tea pot on his head to keep warm. Says Pertwee, “I love the idea of Pat wearing a ridiculous pink tea-copey on his head!”

Then, there are stories like these: Producer Barry Letts riding an uncontrollable pint-sized hovercraft up and down a waterway for hours until the fuel ran out; cast and crew rearranging Pertwee’s cue cards for “hysterical” effect; *Doctor Who* cast

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members hiding on a rooftop competing in a paper airplane contest in lieu of having rehearsals; the fun, outrageous and otherwise, that four of “The Five Doctors” enjoyed with a Madame Tussaud statue of the absent, time-warped Doctor during that special’s making.

Pertwee has been the proverbial daredevil from his boyhood, when he “borrowed” a motorcycle only to wreck it 30 minutes later, to his thrill-seeking adult years. Almost any challenge will do: flying small aircraft, scuba

Always willing to lend a helping hand, the Doctor (Pertwee) aids some astronauts in defeating the dastardly Daleks.
Dashing and daring, Pertwee’s Dr. Who always stood up to mirthless menaces. diving for sunken treasure, racing fast cars, motorcycles and speed boats. He does his own stunts, even now, so long as they aren’t life- or limb-threatening. “I’m an adventurous bugger,” he explains.

Jon Pertwee is not only Jon Pertwee; he is also Jean de Perthus de Lavallault, the latter being the original French Huguenot family name brought to English shores by his ancestors. The illiterate Englishmen of the times pronounced the name as “Perwis.” “So it was changed to Pertwee, and now they pronounce it ‘Pee wee, Pet witt, Parr née, Pat ried and anything else,’” he laughs.

Pertwee descends directly from a family with strong theatrical ties. His father, Roland, was an eminently recognized writer in both America and England, and his mother, Avis, was a well-known actress. His brother, Michael, is today a celebrated playwright and screenwriter. After his mother left, it was Jon who became the rebellious family member, the impetuous one who got himself expelled from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA).

A few years later, after gaining some experience with touring companies, Pertwee found himself serving a six-year stint with the Royal Navy during World War II. Only a last-minute transfer saved him from being one of the 1,700-plus casualties of the H.M.S. Hood when it was sunk by the Bismark. After military service, he honed his comedic talent to razor sharpness through a long list of movies (including several in the Carry On series), numerous stage performances, plus a 20-year stint with a radio program called The Navy Lark, and years of cabaret shows. (Pertwee also discussed Who and his career in an interview in STARLOG #79.) His image as dandy on

Doctor Who reflects his taste for good port wine and his predilection toward flamboyant attire, exotic pets (bush babies, alligators, cheetahs), and gadgetry of all kinds.

To the Future

Off and on through 1987, when he wasn’t filming episodes of his latest TV series or appearing at conventions, Pertwee toured the southern United States with the Doctor Who Exhibition, a 48-foot trailer filled with Doctor Who memorabilia and exhibits. He felt quite at home on the tour because one of its star attractions was his old “running buddy”—his four-wheeled companion of yesteryear, Bessie. The tour ended in December at New Orleans where it had begun some 78 weeks before.

Pertwee has recently concluded filming six new episodes of the long-running TV series Worzel Gummidge on location in New Zealand. A character of fantasy, Worzel is Pertwee’s unique conception of a talking scarecrow with many “heads” (personalities) whose vocabulary is heavily peppered with Elizabethan swear words, “really filthy ones,” he says, “though the ordinary viewer has no idea what they really mean. To them, they sound like nonsense words.”

At present, he is gearing himself up for the multitude of activities anticipated in celebration of this, the 25th anniversary of Doctor Who. And what “gadget” could possibly be as fascinating as this quartercentennial—what else but a voice-activated computer that can answer questions in any language requested. How appropriate for a Time Lord like Jon Pertwee.