

Top: The filming of the Vogan Constructor Vessel for the first episode of the Hitch Hikers tv series. Above: The initial concept sketch for one of the tv Hitch Hikers models. Right: The finished model.

# DON'T NIC

WITH DOUGLAS ADAMS

Top: *The incredible Zaphod Beeblebrox, president of the Galaxy.*  
Above: *Martin the Paranoid Android and friend.*



In the first half of a two part interview John Fleming talks to Douglas Adams, author of *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* and *Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, about his career and the various versions of *Hitch Hikers Guide*.

**D**ouglas Adams has made it big. He's 6'5" tall. He was born in Cambridge in 1952. When he was born his father, a postgraduate theology student, was training for Holy Orders but friends persuaded him this was a bad idea and he gave it up. He wanted to do it again recently but was again dissuaded.

This philosophical bent seems to have been passed on to young Douglas because, at school, he says, "They could never work out whether I was terribly clever or terribly stupid. I always had to understand everything fully before I was prepared to say I knew anything." It was while still at school that he decided to become a comedy writer-performer after seeing John Cleese on BBC TV's *The Frost Report*. "I can do that!" he suddenly thought. "I'm as tall as he is!"

He appeared regularly in school plays and sometimes was asked to write. "I felt I ought to," he says. "I used to sit and worry and tear up pieces of paper and never actually write anything. It was awful. I've always found writing very

**The original idea for *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* had come to Adams before he went to university, when he was drunk at a camp site near Innsbruck.**

difficult; I don't know why I've wanted to do it. Sheer perversity. I really wanted to be a performer and I'd still like to perform. I was a slightly strange actor. There tended to be things I could do well and other things I couldn't begin to do. I couldn't do dwarfs; I had a lot of trouble with dwarf parts."

He went to Cambridge University largely so he could join The Footlights, the student group which had spawned many of the people he most admired — the writer-performers of *Beyond the Fringe*, *That Was The Week That Was*, *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* etc. During university vacations, he built barns and cleaned chicken sheds to make money and, for the first time, started to write seriously (if that's the word). He was involved in the creation of two Cambridge revues — *Several Poor Players Strutting and Fretting* and *The Patter of Tiny Minds*.

The original idea for *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* had come to him





before he went to university, when he was drunk at a camp-site near Innsbruck, while travelling round with *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to Europe* in his rucksack. But it was years before the idea came to fruition.

*After you left Cambridge, one of the things you did was collaborate with Graham Chapman of Monty Python's Flying Circus.*

That's right. I wrote with him for about eighteen months on a lot of projects that mostly didn't see the light of day. And those which *did* actually didn't work awfully well.

*Which ones did see the light of day?*

Well, we wrote and made the pilot for a television comedy series. The series itself never got made because Graham got more involved back in *Monty Python* again.

This was really during the *Python* lull and nobody was quite sure what the future of *Python* was going to be. So we wrote this sketch show called *Out of the Trees* which actually had some very good material in it, but just didn't hang together properly. Graham was the sort of lead and there was also Simon Jones (who plays Arthur Dent in *Hitch-Hiker*) and Mark Wing-Davey (who plays Zaphod Beeblebrox). It was shown once on BBC2, late on Saturday night, against *Match of the Day*. I don't think it even got reviewed, it was that insignificant. There were some very nice things in it; it just didn't stand up. The structure for it hadn't really been found.

*What else did you do with Graham Chapman?*

Curiously enough, the thing we virtually came to blows about was his autobiography. He wanted to co-write it. He actually went through about five co-authors, of which I was the first, and really I didn't think it was getting anywhere because I didn't think it was the sort of thing you could do as a pair. It came out recently (*A Liar's Autobiography*, pub. Eyre Methuen) and it's good. I think there's one very bad section which was the bit he and I co-wrote. *It must have seemed a great opportunity. Writing with one of the Monty Python stars.*

Yes, the promise of that period. I thought *This is terrific! This is my great break!* And, at the end, there was nothing to show for it except a large overdraft and not much achieved. And I suddenly went through a total crisis of confidence and couldn't write because I was so panicked and didn't have any money and had a huge overdraft paying the £17-a-week rent. So I answered an advertisement in the *Evening Standard* and got a job as a bodyguard to an Arab oil family. *But you were still sending off ideas to The Burkiss Way on Radio 4.*

Yes. Simon Brett, the producer of *The Burkiss Way*, asked me if I'd like to write some bits for it and, at that stage, I just felt *I'm washed up. I can't write. I may as well accept this fact now.* But he insisted, so I sat down and wrote a sketch which, I

thought, would prove to everybody once-and-for-all that I could no longer write sketches. And everybody seemed to like it rather a lot. (Laughs) The one thing I'd spent all the summers since Cambridge trying to interest people in was the idea of doing science-fiction comedy; I couldn't get anybody interested at all. Simon was the only person I hadn't gone to with the idea. And, after I'd done these bits for Burkiss, he said to me, quite out-of-the-blue, *I think it would be nice to do a science fiction comedy series.* It was extraordinary. And so it carried on from there.

*It was around this same time you got involved with Dr Who.*

Well, after we'd done the pilot of *Hitch-Hiker* it took a long, long time before BBC Radio decided to go ahead and I was desperate for money. So I sent the first copy of that *Hitch-Hiker* script to Bob Holmes, who was then script editor of *Dr Who* and he said *Oh yes, we like this. Come in and see us.* So I talked to them



Opposite top left: Special effects designer Jim Francis and unidentified friend pilot Starti Bardfast's flying vehicle. The contraption which was suspended in the air from a crane was piloted by Francis. Opposite above right: One of the *Dentrassi* aboard the *Vogan* ship. Opposite below: *The Heart of Gold* after landing on *Magrathea*. Below left: Douglas Adams. Below right: The cast of the *Hitch Hiker* radio show. (Left to right) Alan Ford (Roosta), Geoffrey McGivern (Ford Prefect), Douglas Adams, Mark Wing-Davey (Zaphod) and Simon Jones (Arthur Dent). Right: Graham Chapman as the mighty Ghengis Khan in *Out of the Trees*.





for a long time.

*You sent it in as a Dr Who idea, or...* No, just to sort of say *Here I am - This is what I do*. And I ended up getting a commission to write four episodes of *Dr Who* (*The Pirate Planet*) but it didn't really work out as something which was going to fill in that gap, because that took a long time to come through too. I eventually ended up getting the commission to write the rest of *Hitch-Hiker* and the *Dr Who* episodes simultaneously in the same week. So that became a serious problem. (Laughs) And I got through the first four episodes of *Hitch-Hiker* and then I had to break off to get the *Dr Who* episodes done - so I did those at a real gallop. And, at the end of that, I was totally zonked. I knew a lot of what was going to happen in the last two episodes of *Hitch-Hiker* but I just couldn't sort of get myself to a typewriter and just needed help and a sounding-board just to get it done.

*So John Lloyd (now producer of Not The Nine O'Clock News) helped you write parts of episodes 5 and 6.*

John Lloyd and I had known each other for years and, at one stage, actually shared a flat together and kept on half-producing ideas which never really came to fruition... Actually, there was one thing! About two or three years ago, he and I wrote a couple of cartoons for a

Dutch television company. They were making a series called *Doctor Snuggles*. (Laughs) It was being made internationally, so the scripts were being written by British writers and it was being performed in English with Peter Ustinov doing the voices. I gather one of the episodes we wrote actually won an award last year. I think it's eventually coming to British television and it'll be rather curious to see it.

*What was it about?*

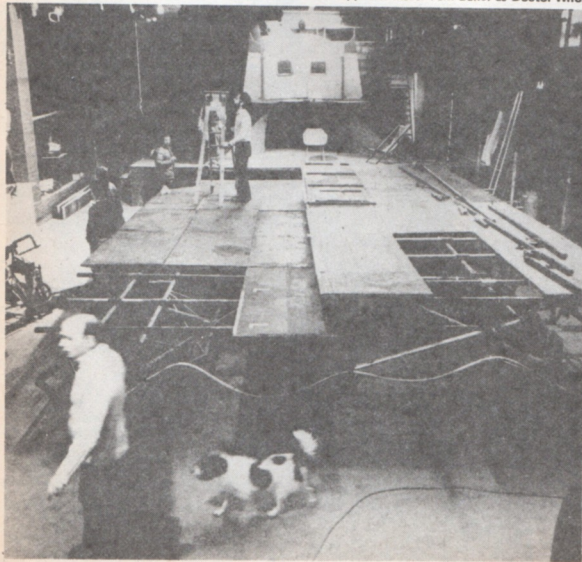
Well, if you can imagine a cross between Professor Branestawm and Dr Dolittle... It was quite fun working on that, actually. The writers' fees were rip-off time. But it was immense fun - there were all sorts of things we could do in animation.

*It sounds a busy time.*

The way things went, yes. I was writing *Hitch-Hiker* (the first radio series) for a lot of 1977 and we were making it at the end of 1977/beginning of 1978 and it went out starting in March 1978. During that time, I was living at home with my parents and the fee for writing the first radio series was miserable - something like £1000 for the six episodes - which is not a lot for something over six months' work. So I was thinking *I'm such a slow writer* and it looked as though *Hitch-Hiker* might do ok; but there was no precedent for a radio series meaning very



Above centre: Zaphod Beeblebrox as he appeared in the stage play of *Hitch Hikers*. Below: The hovercraft for the stage play under construction. Opposite: Douglas Adams pictured during the production of the *Hitch Hikers* radio series. Opposite inset: Tom Baker as *Doctor Who*.



much in the long run. So I was then offered a job as a BBC Radio producer and I thought I ought to do it for the money. During the six months, *Hitch-Hiker* began to be a success and I was producing *Week Ending*, which was quite fun. In fact, the first job I was given was compiling a programme about practical jokes. I had to go out and interview Max Bygraves and Des O'Connor. I thought *What am I doing here?* But I knew people had put themselves out to help me get this job and it was a staff job, not a contract job, so to leave after six months would be ridiculous.

*Then you were offered the job as script editor on Dr Who.*

Yes, which caused an immense rumpus. And I did *Dr Who* for fifteen months and it was a terrible, terrible time. It was great to begin with, while I felt I was actually managing to juggle all the balls at the same time. Because, at the end of 1978, I was writing the first *Hitch-Hiker* book, trying to get down to writing the second radio series which kept getting put off and put off and I was script editing *Dr Who* and having to produce lots and lots of storylines for writers. And I was also doing one fairly major last job as a radio producer - a pantomime show for Christmas called *Black Cinderella Two Goes East*. Everyone involved in it - the writers and all the cast - were ex-Cambridge Footlights. So we had Rob Buckman playing Prince Charming and Peter Cook was his brother Prince



actually getting it done. Having all these different storylines in your mind simultaneously. A writer suddenly phones you up at midnight and you've got to know *exactly* what he's talking about and exactly what *his* problems are and sort them all out. You actually get very high on that, as long as you cope. But, as soon as you stop actually coping [*Laughs*], it becomes a nightmare.

*You finished working on Dr Who in January 1980 and by then Hitch-Hiker had really taken off and become a cult. It had even been on stage.*

Well, it's been on stage three times and the one which got all the notice was the one that didn't work. Ken Campbell did two. His first one at the I.C.A. (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London) went very, very well. The audience was put on a hovercraft and the action all took place round the edge of the theatre. I didn't believe it till it actually happened. We were turning away 1500 people a night from that show, but only getting 80 people in, because that was all you could fit on the hovercraft. Then Theatre Clwyd did Hitch-Hiker with a touring company in Wales. They would sometimes do two episodes in an evening and, at other times, the whole lot — which was a *long* evening. That went very well. I didn't know anything about Theatre Clwyd: I just thought it was

going to be a load of Welshmen going round saying *Hello, boy-oh!* But it wasn't at all; it was a very good production. So they were then offered The Old Vic but, by then, I'd already offered the stage rights to Ken Campbell, who wanted to do another production. He decided to go for broke and put it on at The Rainbow (in Finsbury Park, London). I should have known better, but I had so many problems to contend with at that time I wasn't really thinking awfully clearly. The thing at The Rainbow was a fiasco.

**Don't Panic** The second part of the Douglas Adams interview will appear in next month's *Starburst*, along with rare production designs for the tv version of *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*.

Disgusting and John Cleese played the fairy godson. John Pardoe M.P. played the Fairytale Liberal Prime Minister — on the grounds that you only get Liberal Prime Ministers in fairy tales. The Goodies played the Ugly Sisters, Jo Kendall played the wicked stepmother and Richard Murdoch was in it too. It was terrific, but the BBC gave it no publicity whatsoever.

*And after that you were able to devote more time to script editing. What exactly does a script editor on Dr Who do?* Everything. Oh god! I was very naive when I wrote *Pirate Planet* because I'd always assumed that, basically, writing the script is the writer's job and coming up with all the ideas is the writer's job. So I worked very, very hard on *The Pirate Planet* scripts. Then, when I came to be script editor, I discovered other writers assumed that getting the storyline together was the script editor's job. So, all that year, I was continually working out storylines with another writer, helping yet another writer with scripts, doing substantial re-writes on other scripts and putting yet other scripts into production — all simultaneously. When you're doing 26 half-hours in a year, that's a helluva lot. And, at the same time, writing the first Hitch-Hiker book. And also trying to do the second radio series. It was an absolute nightmare year. For four months when I was actually in control it was terrific — when you feel you're actually in control of all that and

