

It's 50 years since the Doctor regenerated, into a young and eccentric curly-haired, fedora wearing, jelly baby eating incarnation. Sean Egan revisits Tom Baker's reign as the Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey

Go fourth Doctor

It's 1974. After four and a half years battling monsters and villains across time and space in the role of the Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey, known only as the Doctor, Jon Pertwee is vacating the Tardis for pastures new. Once again, BBC television is faced with the tricky issue of recasting the central character in Doctor Who when, to much of the show's largely child demographic, the incumbent actor is the only one they've ever known.

A full half-century on when 15 (depending on how you count) thespians have filled the role, it's not such a big deal. Back then, however, there was still a concern at the Corporation about just how long they could continue with this revolving-door process, ➔

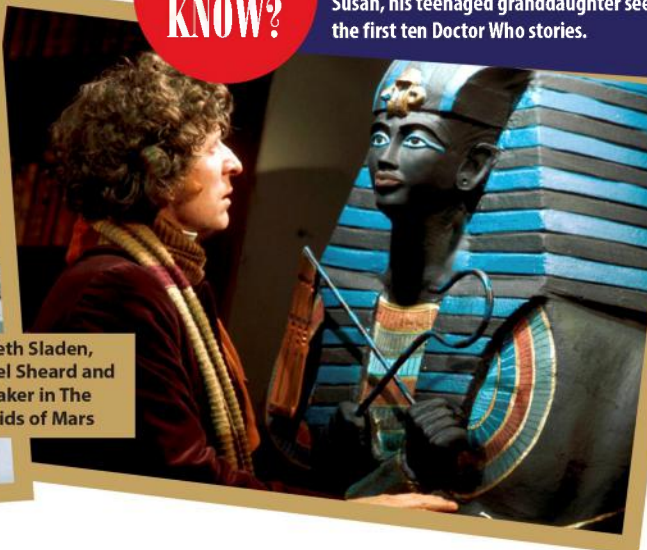


DID YOU KNOW?

Romana was the Doctor's first Tardis companion of his own Gallifreyan race since Susan, his teenaged granddaughter seen in the first ten Doctor Who stories.



Elisabeth Sladen, Michael Sheard and Tom Baker in *The Pyramids of Mars*



The Master and engaging in a brawny battle against surreal illusions in a nightmarish zone known as the Matrix.

Yet for all the craft and thoughtfulness, Doctor Who still couldn't completely transcend the Beeb's meagre budgets. Rubber monster suits and wobbly spaceship models continued to abound, while a laughable new low was reached in *Horns of Nimon* (1979/80) when a guest actor's underpants were visible through a rip in his costume.

Baker decided not to renew his contract. An unusually poignant regeneration storyline was devised wherein the Doctor was gravely injured falling from a great height while in conflict with the Master. On March 21, 1981, the stricken Baker iteration of the Doctor transformed before the viewers' eyes into a more sombre incarnation played by Peter Davison and a new era in the show was under way.

Whatever his failings, Tom Baker participated in some of the greatest Doctor Who stories of all time while making his Doctor surely more iconic than any before or since. Moreover, it was an interpretation that graced television screens for seven seasons, giving him to this day the longest stretch of any actor to take on a role that is irrefutably a national institution.

Hinchcliffe and script editor Robert Holmes. Ratings soared, but the unprecedented levels of horror and grit saw morals campaigner Mary Whitehouse become a regular complainant about inappropriate content. The show's greater artistic ambition was underlined by increasing use of location shooting and higher production values.

There were several outstanding stories in this era. One was the six-part *Genesis of the Daleks* (1975) wherein Terry Nation, the creator of the Doctor's titular arch enemies, proffered an origin story in which their mastermind was revealed as the shiver-inducingly hideous Davros. The 1976 four-part *The Deadly Assassin* was another, a remarkably hard-core science fiction tale that found the Doctor being framed for murder by his long-time Time Lord adversary

JELLY BABY ANYONE?

Baker himself worsened this laughability problem with an increasingly pantomimic approach involving adlibbing and speaking directly to camera, although it's not clear whether it's he or scriptwriters who should be blamed for the notion of danger being consistently undermined as villains were nonchalantly offered a jelly baby or admonished for treading on his scarf. The fact of a nervous BBC demanding a lighter touch after the controversies didn't help matters, nor the loss of the Holmes-Hinchcliffe axis.

It was possibly some relief to John Nathan-Turner, appointed Doctor Who producer in 1980, that

Michael Wisher played Davros, creator of the Daleks



DID YOU KNOW?

Tom Baker was the youngest person to play the Doctor, starting aged 39. He didn't hold on to the accolade long – his successor Peter Davison was a full decade his junior.