



The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

Storm Darragh and Tuffers both manage to bring the house down

I DO hope everyone escaped the damage of Storm Darragh.

I still have someone's fence panel in the garden, plus a crushed green plastic watering can and scattered leaflets on home insurance... ironically.

A roof was lost on a barn near me, the road to Totnes has been uprooted by a grand old oak toppling and there is a new river where a farm access road meanders behind me. But I notice that the magpie nest at the top of my ash tree does not have a twig out of place, proving that birds are better builders than humans. Might be an idea to employ them on the new towns!

When Darragh struck I was staying at The Soar Mill Cove hotel in South Devon and the noise of the wind took me back to 1987 and the hurricane. On the night, I was working for Television South West and was on duty till gone midnight.

In those days we only had three television stations... four at a stretch as most of the West Country could not get Channel 4 properly. We also had to shut down in the evenings... programme finished about midnight and my last job was to read the shipping forecast and then give out the message, "and don't forget to switch off your television sets".

On this October night I went to the newsroom and grabbed the telex shipping forecast... (If you're under 40 go and ask a responsible adult what a telex was)

I plodded back to my presentation studio and flicked on the microphone. As I started to read out Portland, Plymouth, Lundy, I noticed that some of the numbers were in red and I remember saying to my vision controller, the telex has gone wrong or is running out of ink. It was as I was reading storm 10, violent storm 11 and hurricane 12, that I realised that we might have a problem.

Due to the late time, I believe I'm still one of the few people who actually forecast the arrival of one of the worst storms in history. That night I drove home to Exeter from Plymouth, my foot flat to the floor of my car which could only manage 47 miles an hour in the incredible headwind. Mind you, I was driving a Rover so at the time 47 miles an hour was fairly standard.

I went to bed that night blissfully

unaware that the area would be touched by 100 mile an hour winds and leave a trail of devastation across the UK causing £2 billion worth of damage and very sadly leaving 22 fatalities in its wake.

Anyway, back to better times. I have just finished my annual hosting of the Lord's Taverners Christmas event in Devon.

I'm very proud to say that we, as a region, donate a huge amount of money to this charity, raised via two lunches, one in Plymouth and one in Exeter. They are always lively functions and this year our special guest of honour was the legendary cricketer, Phil Tuffnell.

As you would expect, he is a great raconteur with some fantastic stories from his varied career in sport and television. As a bowler, he had some impressive statistics. As a batsman, not so! (His words, not mine) As a dancer and a jungle dweller, he gave television audiences some wonderful moments.

I got talking to him about a past Lord's Taverners event when I travelled to Africa to film a celebrity team in 1993. We ended up in Kenya with Roy Virgin, Derek Pringle and Brian Close. Travelling with us was Richard Stilgo, now Sir Richard, Peter Skellern, sadly no longer with us, wicket keeper Faruk Engineer and Tim Rice, who would also go on to be knighted.

I can still remember standing on the edge of the Masai Mara safari park with Sir Tim telling me about a project he was working on at the time which involved Africa and lions.

Of course, the rest is history and every time I watch *The Lion King*, I am reminded of that strange conversation watching a pride of lions asleep in the dust with the noise of trees being shattered by a herd of elephants bulldozing their way towards a watering hole.

But the trip was about to get a little stranger.

I was staying at what can be described as possibly the most exclusive hotel within the country. Perched on the edge of Mount Kenya, the hotel had neighbours which included the actress Stephanie Powers and Donna Hurt.

On one particular evening I was wandering around this remarkable



Fitz catches up with cricketing legend Phil Tuffnell, special guest of honour at the the Lord's Taverners Christmas event in Devon



Fitz tells of a Rottweiler encounter while in Kenya in 1993

building when I came across a room set up for discos. There was a DJ booth, two turntables, speakers and a wonderful dance floor. Derek Pringle encouraged me to switch on the system and then announced to everybody there was going be dancing that night!

This was a little bit premature as the one thing that was missing was music, no records whatsoever. It was at this point that a rather charming young man popped his head around the door and said, "I've got a load of records, I live next door. Come with me and we'll see what we can get from the collection."

So off I trooped behind the man who appeared to be wearing riding britches and boots, looking every inch the international playboy. We entered his house and came across two of the biggest Rottweilers on the planet acting as security. They were doing their job properly as they took an instant dislike to me and followed closely, nudging and jumping as if trying to get me to run for a bit of sport.

They soon lost interest as I was guided towards the record collection and found some absolute classic albums from The Beatles, David Bowie and Elton John. This could be a decent disco after all, so I scooped up armfuls of magnificent music and wandered back with my host to the disco.

However, it was at this point I discovered that neither of the turnta-

bles had a stylus (again ask a responsible adult to explain). I dumped the records down and told everyone that this was just not going to happen. I asked the donor of the records if he wanted me to take them back but he said he would do it a little later on. I tidied the pile and climbed down from the DJ booth and promptly knocked them on the floor!

I scrambled to pick up these classic albums when I suddenly noticed that there was writing on them. What sort of vandal would write on an album cover? The answer quite simply was the artist!

The Beatles album was dedicated to John from John, Paul, George and Ringo. David Bowie had the same inscription, as did the album by Elton John. Then the penny dropped. I had been in the house of Donna Hurt who had been married to actor John Hurt and these were his albums. I very gingerly cradled this collection in my arms and inquired again if he wanted me to return them to the house.

The gentleman waved my offer of help aside; he would do it later and besides, he said, "the Rottweilers were not too keen on strangers in the house and at this time of the night the local leopard would probably be in the garden as he liked to drink from one of the ponds".

That clinched it. I can put up with fence panels, watering cans and magpies in the garden. But I think I am allergic to leopards!