



The Fitz Files

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

25 years ago in the Millennium Dome, in a right royal muddle

MAY I be the very last person to wish you a Happy New Year and I sincerely hope that the beginning to 2025 has been a slightly more successful event than mine.

The year started with me coughing like a cart horse, something I have since discovered affected about half of the population. But the enforced recuperation and house arrest meant that I could tidy up a bit and by chance I came across these two old tickets.

Not particularly inspiring to look at but they are now a piece of history and point to the fact that 25 years ago I spent New Year in a unique situation.

On December 31, 1999, I arrived at the opening of the Millennium Dome in London as at the time I was filming a documentary series for ITV on our then Chief Constable of the Devon and Cornwall force, Sir John Evans.

In fact, it was that New Year's Honours List that saw his award of a knighthood. At the time, he was head of ACPO, the Association of Chief Police Officers, and as part of his remit, he was invited to the opening of the great building.

Very kindly he allowed me and the film crew to join him, having already filmed him in charge of South West policing and further afield in Bosnia and Croatia, overseeing the international police force keeping peace in The Balkans.

I thought that the oddest memory from the series would have been waking up in Sarajevo in The Hotel Holiday... and reading the sign... In order to preserve our environment, please use the towels more than once!

I remember looking out of the bathroom window and noticing that the nearest tree undamaged by shell fire was about three miles away... so much for the environment... but the next couple of hours would also be a little strange.

Approaching the venue, I noticed that someone was playing Simply Red at full blast, and I mean 'FULL' blast! As we drove past a stage with 20-foot speakers, I almost lost a filling, so loud was the rendition of *Something's Got Me Started!* I remember saying... what sort of idiot would play Simply Red that loudly? The answer was... Simply Red!

I found myself staring at Mick Hucknall and returning a wave as we slid past. This was not going to be a standard New Year's event.

Security was tight, as you would expect. I stumbled from the car with camera equipment and tapes and sailed through the checkpoint. Sir John, who was in uniform, was stopped, questioned and searched!

Next, I entered this cavernous space, the ninth largest building in the world by usable volume and wandered towards my seat, mouth open.

There was a massive screen which was showing a concert by The Corrs, a group I have always wanted to see, and I wondered for a moment if they were appearing that night. I mentioned this to my producer who kindly turned me round away from the screen and pointed out that they were standing in front of me and by the angle of the cameras, I was now part of the 'live' concert.

The world and its aunt had been invited that night, every star of stage and screen seemed to be there. What I was not aware of was the fact that I was standing in the wrong place and due to my bulk, looked like a member of security.

As The Dome began to settle down, I was approached by what turned out to be a very large police officer in plain clothes who informed me that there had been a security issue.

"We are on Channel 4. And you should be on alert for the main body!" he said, glancing around him.

I looked at him rather blankly and said: "Channel 4... no I'm with ITV!"

This was not what he wanted to hear.

"Who the hell are you?" he spluttered. For a moment I was lost for words and then the penny dropped.

"Oh, I'm not Special Branch, I'm just grossly overweight."

His expression was of alarm and slight confusion and again asked who I was and what I was doing standing in a restricted area. I hastily explained my role with ITV and the reason why I was filming within The Dome.

He looked at me again and reluctantly explained that he had been



Two 25-year-old tickets reminded Fitz of a New Year to remember. Below: Fitz found himself gate-crashing a Simply Red sound check at the Millennium Dome © Wikipedia



Fitz mingles with Prime Minister Tony Blair on New Year's Eve 1999 © Wikipedia



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called to another part of the building but...

"Can I trust you with this," he said, handing me a short twisted 'official looking' red rope with a shiny metal hook on the end. "Do not let anyone you do not recognise, up these stairs."

Behind me was a dais with a hundred or so empty seats. I was about to ask... "like whom?" but he vanished into the crowd.

I then had a strange feeling that I was not alone and glanced behind me as even bigger 'police officers' had begun to appear closely followed by people I definitely recognised.

Her Majesty The Queen, Prince Philip and the rest of the Royal family strolled past along with Prime Minister Tony Blair and wife Cherie. I clicked the rope and hook into place and made sure that no-one was about to cut in line as William Hague and John Prescott tottered by, along with Peter Mandelson, Mrs Prescott and most of both sides of the House of Commons.

It was all going well; my security career was about to take off, the only slight stutter was when my local MP walked past, nodded a greeting, did a double take and missed the first step. I heard him say "That looked like Fitz!" But the crowd of VIP's enveloped him.

Next to squeeze past me were Greg Dyke and Michael Grade. I hesitated and wondered if I should ask for identification but I thought about future employment so let them off and besides, it was approaching midnight and a new millennium.

Suddenly there was a scuffling and panting behind me and two famous politician faces, husband and wife, came bustling up, obviously very late. One I knew had just lost their seat, the other was now in the opposition.

"How do we get up there," said the now unemployed partner pointing to the dais.

"Get re-elected," I said and went and sat down. My career as security advisor had come to an end.

The chimes of Big Ben were beginning and the strangest New Year of my life was about to come to an end. As the strains of Auld Lang Syne started to echo around the chamber of the ninth largest building in the world by usable volume, my last and lasting image of the evening was of Tony Blair crossing arms with Her Majesty.

I left the event, jumped into my car and heard Concorde fly over the capital. Heard was the word as the fog was so low and thickened by firework smoke that nobody got to see it.

I arrived back in Devon at about 5am and the family asked at breakfast how my New Year had gone.

"Oh, it was quiet... just me and... and..."

I never did tell them, but they know now.