

Desert Island Dave (Part 4) by David Barrie.

By coincidence, the dates of our convention this year included the 17th April, and this marked the 39th anniversary of our very first one-day convention back in 1977, when April 17th then fell on a Sunday. It was only fitting that the occasion this year was marked by a number of speeches (short) and readings just after the chess game on the Sunday afternoon.



So I recalled our first convention, explaining that Portmeirion then had a newly appointed publicity officer, Cate Williams, who had responded very warmly to our cautious approach that the members of Six of One might descend on 'The Village' and celebrate The Prisoner. I kept my comments short, and below is a bit more of the story.

After our formation in January 1977, ITC (the copyright holders of The Prisoner) had responded favourably toward this fledgling society, to the point of allowing us to borrow a 16mm copy of 'Arrival' to screen at Portmeirion. This screening would be the centrepiece of the convention, and for a number of us, it was the first time we had seen The Prisoner in colour. When, at 2pm, I bade everyone welcome from the Gloriette, eschewing the use of a megaphone, I announced this opportunity to see a Prisoner episode, and members actually ran toward the Hercules Hall...

Around 300 members came, from all over the UK. By this time local groups had been formed, and from one town a pensioner hired a minibus to transport his members, some in their teens, whilst another teenager hitchhiked from Devon, sleeping under a hedgerow, in order to make the journey. We were a committed lot!

It was, of course, the only time that members had the opportunity to meet Sir Clough, then in his 94th year, as he arrived to take pride of place for the screening. Naturally, he was besieged, and received a standing ovation. Afterward he remarked to me, "*The Prisoner shows Portmeirion off to its best advantage.*" He added that he had searched as far away as New Zealand for a suitable site, eventually finding it on his doorstep some 5 miles from his family home at nearby Plas Brondanw.

In the letters pages of our loose-leaf colour coded periodical 'Alert', summer 1977 edition, there were many complimentary and touching comments about April 17th. Here are a few, "*Congratulations on a very successful day at Portmeirion, the atmosphere in 'the village' was incredible and it was interesting to meet so many like-minded individuals,*" (Craig Murray.) "*Discussing the programme in the sort of informal group that developed by the café, could go a long way toward unravelling the programme.*" (Steven Leckie.) "*The fact that many of the people who attended were too young to have seen the first screening must be an indication that the series was before its time.*" (Mike and Sheila Simmons.) There

was of course much debate about the nature of our appreciation, with one member wondering how the two ends of the spectrum could be catered for, those who wanted to dress up and those who wanted to penetrate the philosophical undercurrents, and Roberta Dewa suggested, *"I like the idea of badges, it makes it easier for fellow-members to get together...I think the principle of no numbers on the badges is totally in keeping with the ideals of Number Six – we are not numbers."* Cate Williams of Portmeirion wrote, *"Just to congratulate you all for April 17th. We were all very pleased and look forward to your next visit, when I hope your membership will take an even bigger step forward."*

The 'official' report in 'Alert' said, *"There was a certain amount of white braiding visible on some blazers, and the occasional amateur "I am a free man" performances, but more stimulating were the informal groups that gathered for a chat or deep discussion. So many differing opinions coming together at one time."*

'Rover' also entered into the spirit of the occasion as *'At one stage a maverick Rover was seen bouncing along the shore'.*

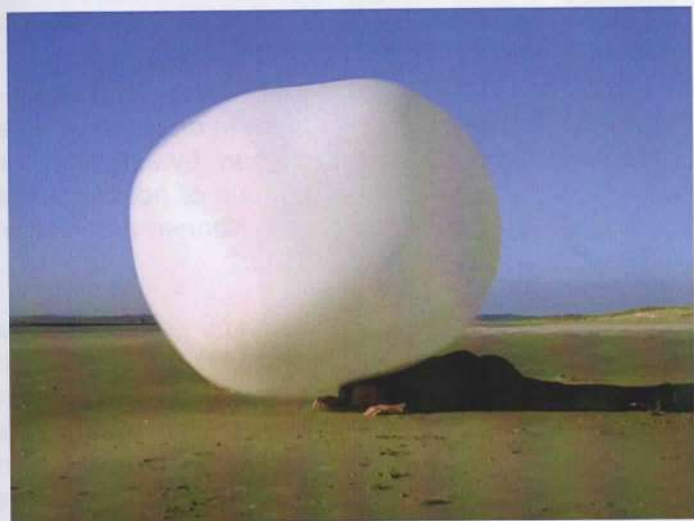
Truly, Rover is an iconic symbol of the series, and I can remember Max Hora, when proprietor of The Prisoner Shop, remarking to me the two most overheard comments by him were, *"Does he come ever back here?"* and *"You remember, he was chased by that big white balloon."*

Of course, we nearly didn't get Rover in this form, it was only the failure of the original prop which was a sort of 'Michelin Man' body mounted on a go-cart chassis, complete with flashing blue light and driven by a man inside which led to 'our' Rover. The go-cart was noisy, belched fumes, and got stuck in the sand. (I remember seeing it safely tucked away in a glass fronted garage whilst there during the filming.) So, how we got 'our' Rover is a lovely story.

Apparently – according to an ITC press release –

"On it's first outing, Rover roared off into the sea and never came out again. Production manager Bernie Williams and Patrick McGoohan looked up into the sky in despair – and saw a meteorological balloon. "What's that?" "I think it's the new Rover." "How many can you get in two hours?"

And Rover, as we know it, was initially imported from a weather station in North Wales. One estimate is that some 6,000 balloons were used, with helium, air, and a little water, to give the desired effect, along with some fishing line.



However, when a props man, Sydney Palmer, who was back at the studios, was interviewed some years later. he talked about experimenting with balloons, and gave the impression that he was already working on the concept before the idea occurred to those at Portmeirion. We all know, with time, memory fades, so perhaps we are destined ever to wonder. Another theory was that the idea came about after someone noticed the bubbles of oil floating around inside a Lava Lamp...

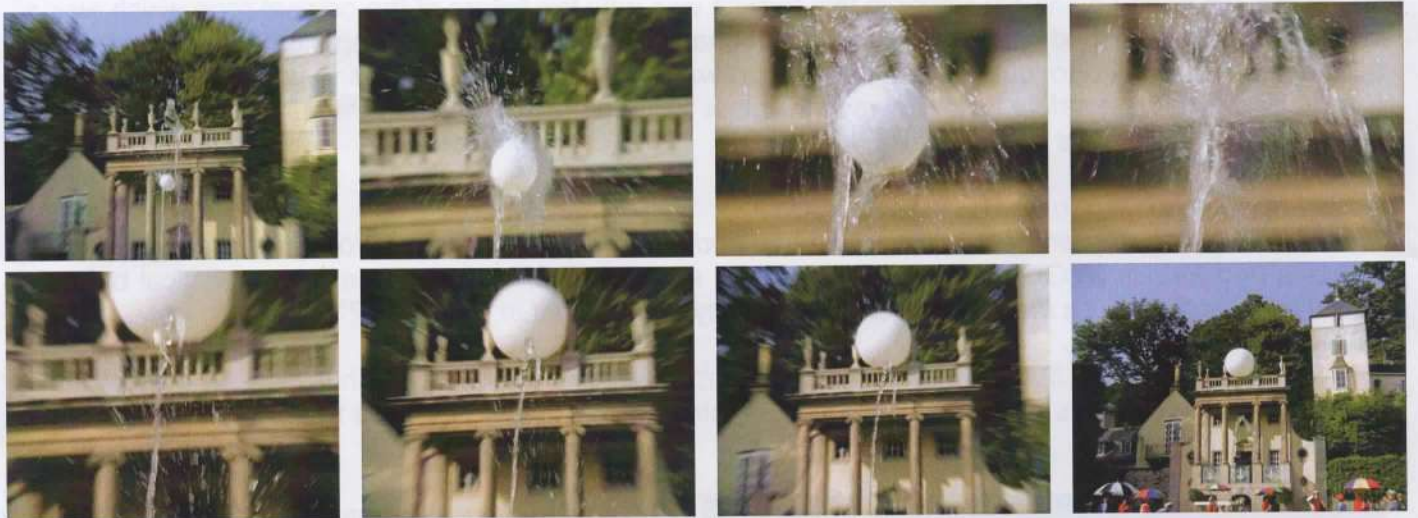
But, what is Rover? What does it mean? Here are a few ideas that members offered back in 1978.

"Readily Observant Village Electronic Retriever,"

(John Gilder.) *"Rover is the force of mindless, faceless servants of the regime of The Village – the law enforcers."* (Tony Baldock.) *"Rover is some sort of robot. It is the watchdog, hence the nickname of 'Rover'".* (Barry McCann.) Getting into deeper territory, *"Rover is basically a law-enforcing remote-controlled balloon, and is probably the most biting commentary on power for power's sake, and the means of enforcement – it's loud, overwhelming, deadly - and empty. It's also the final link in the chain of*

command. Mindless, it obeys orders from a No. 2 who obeys orders from a No. 1 who might not even exist." (Steven Leckie.) "Is Rover a large weather balloon with a very irritable disposition? I doubt it." A non-Prisoner fan friend offered, "Is Rover meant to be the law?" In a way Rover also suggests the dangers of science gone awry, which is a major theme in *The Prisoner*. It is an unknown quantity, created by the super science of *The Village* with the sole purpose of confining the inhabitants. It is almost like a scientific cancer cell moving about the infrastructure of the village, preying off human inhabitants in its nocturnal and diurnal wanderings. It represents the forces of things yet to come, yet to be developed by Governments, by foreign powers, by Westminster to keep society in check." (Jon Older.) If that wasn't dark enough, taking a symbolic interpretation, Marney Allen went even further. "Rover is the personification of negative emotion; the mental blank which fills with doubt, fear, despair. His method of attack continues the symbolism: he is fear, which suffocates, who has not felt a hint of suffocation when trapped or threatened? Even in the surreal world of *The Village*, even fear is allotted its proper shape." A final word, from amongst many contributions, to Frank Andrews of St Paul, Minnesota. "I always felt the Rovers were simply the finest, most efficient 'guards' the Village could have. They can't be reasoned with; they can't be bribed; they have no sympathies to be preyed upon. They are ruthless and virtually indestructible, demonstrating better than anything else that the Prisoner will never escape his prison."

Certainly Rover makes an impressive entry. First a ping-pong ball balances on top of the piazza fountain, (and props man Mickey O'Toole uses an air rifle to shoot it off its perch,) then the camera spies Rover full size, descending with a roar toward an unnamed victim, smothering him.



Rover's demise is equally memorable, shrivelling to a few small bubbles before disappearing. That effect - and we have Alexis Kanner to thank for that - was mentioned in a Roger Langley review in an issue of *Free for All Society* magazine. It goes like this. "Alexis Kanner claimed to have stumbled upon, by accident, the way in which Rover's demise could be arranged. He was spooning sweetener into a cup of hot chocolate and the rising and falling frothy morass had him running off to McGoohan. According to Kanner, McGoohan needed to know the exact proportions of liquid and sweetener, plus the temperature, etc."

As for me, the first thing I thought when I first saw Rover back in 1967 was, "I wonder if someone got the idea from the film I'd seen when a boy, 'The Red Balloon?' (*Le Ballon Rouge*.) This was a 1956 French fantasy comedy-drama featurette written, produced, and directed by Albert Lamorisse, in which the balloon of the title comes to life and follows a boy around the streets of Paris. I wondered if the creative minds behind *The Prisoner* had ever seen it, and drew inspiration from it. Mulling it over, I do wonder. I discussed the film at my Brain-Bash this year, and of all the topics I covered, this was the only one where a number of people asked me about the film afterwards. To my knowledge discussion of this film has never appeared in our many publications, so, if you wish to be utterly charmed, do either buy the DVD or watch it on YouTube. Oh, and at the end; he escapes...

From one Prisoner icon to another. The Lotus Seven. The story is that originally the thought was that the Prisoner might drive a Lotus Elan, but when McGoohan saw the 'Seven' he thought that it was more in keeping with the spirit of the series.

An early member, Keith Gould, did some research. Keith was very keen on The Prisoner, much to his wife's dismay, so much so, that although they had to go to a party on the night of the screening of the final episode, Keith insisted they left early, and sitting in their car late on a cold December night, on the top of the Chiltern Hills, they turned on their portable TV and watched 'Fall Out', with my contact details transmitted after the final credits. The following day, Keith hotfooted it to my door. Over to Keith, writing in 1977.

"I had assumed the KAR number was 'fake' made up specially, and was therefore pleasantly surprised to learn from an index of suffix marks that the KAR___C series was in fact issued by Hertfordshire County Council from May to August 1965. In their reply to my subsequent letter, Herts. C.C. told me the Lotus was 'last shown as being in the possession of a Mr Byrne of London on 1st May 1967, and we imagine it is no longer in existence."

"It took no time at all to establish that Mr Byrne had not been heard of at his London address for almost a decade. Undeterred, I looked around for a further lead. I knew that 'Sevens' were still produced in small numbers by Caterham Cars Ltd, and on a visit to Surrey I called in on Graham Nearn, M.D. of that company, to check whether he knew anything about 'our' vehicle.

"Oh my God, another Prisoner freak," were his first disquieting words, but a few beers later I had placated him sufficiently to drag the history from him. According to Nearn, 1967 must have been a good year for the company, "Everyone was buying Sevens, and spraying them yellow and green!" As to my thoughts on tracking down the original car, he said, "You'll have a long journey – it's in Australia!"

"Apparently the car had been sold in April 1967: the opening sequence had been made and it was thought the car would no longer be required. Mr Byrne had kept it only 2 – 3 months, and had then sold it on to a visiting Australian. When it was realised that the car would be required for 'Fall Out', Caterham Cars were commissioned to provide an exact replica in the autumn of 1967 – and thus the opening Arrival sequence and the closing one in Fall Out use identical twin cars. (Incidentally, the 'copy' was written off in a high-speed accident in 1969.)

"A call to Mr Byrne's current home confirmed the export of the 'original,' and if anyone was thinking of acquiring the registration number, that of an exported car can never be reissued."

And if you want to know what Graham Nearn looked like back when he met McGoohan, that's him polishing the Lotus in 'Fall Out'.



So, this issue, one series, the first convention, two Prisoner icons, and still so many ideas, so many questions, so many views to be explored. More next time.