

From top: The Eiffel Tower, Laphroaig whisky, Angry Birds, Sir David Attenborough, Tristram Shandy, Monsieur Hulot's Holiday, Mandela being sworn in as president and Deanna Durbin

The prized possession you value above all others... A 12th-century Chinese bowl I bought in Beijing in 2000. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

The unqualified regret you wish you could amend... When a young man called Kamran was killed in a bombing by an American F-15 in Iraq in 2003. He was 24 and working for me as an interpreter. It was the worst thing that's ever happened to me professionally.

The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions... I'd wake up with my wife Dee and our six-year-old son Rafe in our flat near the Eiffel Tower in Paris and go for coffee and a croissant. We'd rent a pedal car by the Tower for Rafe, then maybe see some art before heading to Johannesburg, where Dee is from. We'd go for a long lazy lunch and I'd have Mozambique prawns and a bottle of white South African wine. We'd then go back to our home in Chelsea where we'd meet my daughters, Julia, 43, and Eleanor, 41, from my first marriage and my six grandchildren. We'd all go for noodles at New Culture Revolution restaurant on the King's Road. I'd have a quiet night in after that watching a DVD with a glass of Laphroaig whisky.

The temptation you wish you could resist... Books. I have about 4,000 and I love the smell and feel of them.

The book that holds an everlasting resonance... Tristram Shandy by Laurence Sterne. It's very funny, and quite rude, and I take it everywhere.

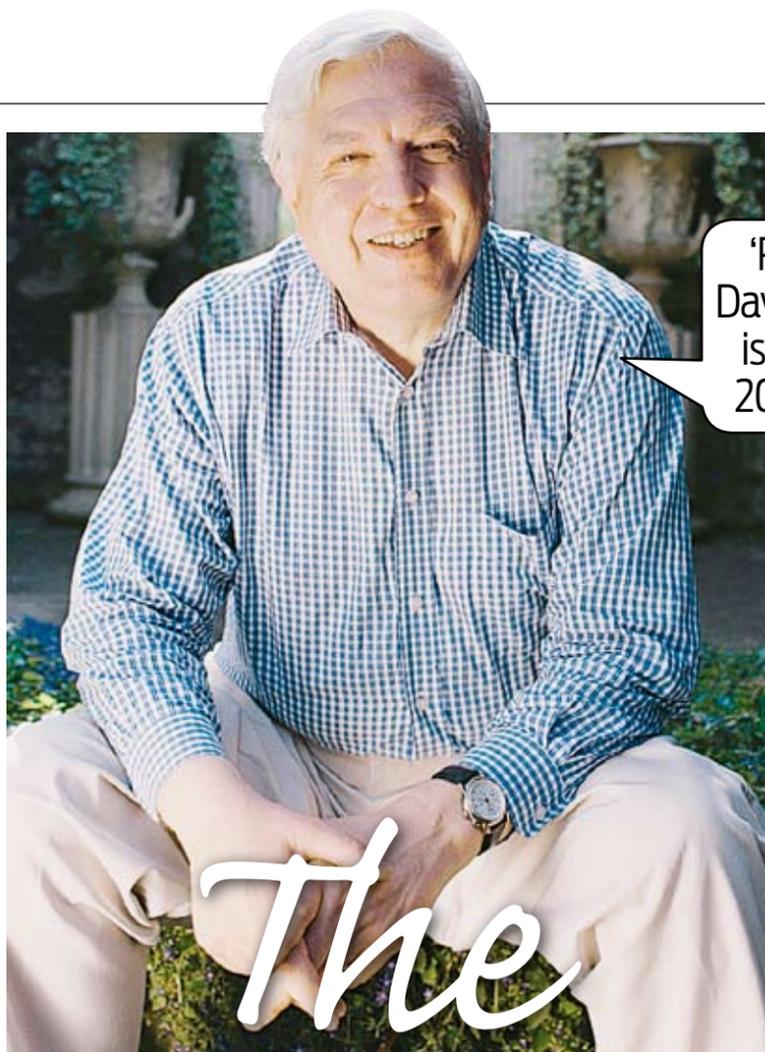
The priority activity if you were the Invisible Man for a day... I'd hang out with Rafe to see how he interacts with his friends when I'm not around.

The pet hate that makes your hackles rise... People speaking loudly on mobile phones – unless, of course, it's me!

The film you can watch time and time again... Monsieur Hulot's Holiday, with Jacques Tati. I've loved it since I was a boy and now my son loves it.

The person who has influenced you most... My uncle, Brian Brooks, who helped bring me up when my parents separated when I was seven. He's in his 80s now. He's very cultured and taught me about books and music.

The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint... I'm interested in dictators, the crazier the better. I'd love to interview Joseph Stalin and ask him about the death and destruction he caused.



'People often think I'm David Attenborough, which is irritating because he's 20 years older than me!'

The DEFINITE ARTICLE

We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week it's BBC journalist John Simpson

The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child... It's from the poem Santa Teresa's Bookmark by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: 'Patient endurance attaineth to all things.' If you hang in there, everything comes right.

The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity... The video game Angry Birds! You wouldn't expect a bloke of 68 to be interested in that, but Rafe introduced me to it. I do my best to win, but he'll often get double my score.

The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again... A gold Roman ring I bought in Damascus in 1997, which was stolen two years later at a hotel in Algiers. Amazingly, it came up for sale on eBay in 2002 and I bought it for £50, but when it arrived it had been altered and flattened, so much of its charm was lost.

The unending quest that drives you on... Taking the next breath! I'm determined to have a long life and see my son and grandchildren grow up.

The poem that touches your soul... Tennyson's Ulysses, which is about an old king striking out with a bunch of elderly followers. It's a blueprint for my life.

The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase... That I'm David Attenborough! I'm half-flattered, but half-irritated because he's nearly 20 years older than me!

The event that altered the course of your life and character... Choosing to stay with my father when my mother, Joy, left him. She was devastated and never recovered. She died in 1983.

The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it... I'd bankrupt the property companies building awful glass towers across London.

The song that means most to you... Always by Deanna Durbin from the 1940s. My father sang it to me and I have sung it to my kids.

The happiest moment you will cherish forever... Watching Nelson Mandela become president of South Africa in 1994. I'd just interviewed him and as he was swearing the oath he caught my eye and gave me a little wink.

The saddest time that shook your world... The death of my father in 1980. He was 65 and died from a massive heart attack. He was a difficult bloke but full of invention and wit.

The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you... To be reporting when the next country becomes free.

The philosophy that underpins your life... Acceptance, forgiveness and love. Woody Allen says it in the film Broadway Danny Rose.

The order of service at your funeral... A fairly solemn service at Chelsea Old Church with some readings and hymns people can belt out. After that I want everyone to go to the local pub – The Pig's Ear – for drinks and some stories.

The way you want to be remembered... As someone who was light-hearted, jolly and adventurous.

The Plug... John Simpson's new series, BBC News: The Editors, will be on BBC1 in the spring. ■

As told Rob McGibbon

PS...

Kelly Reilly stars in Denzel Washington's new thriller Flight – in cinemas now. A Chorus Line – the 1975 Broadway hit – gets a revival at the London Palladium from Tuesday. And Love Songs, a new Destiny's Child compilation album, is out Monday



NEXT WEEK

● Miranda Richardson takes us backstage on medieval epic World Without End ● Can the Fabulous Baker Boys breathe new life into Britain's cafes? ● Jamie Oliver perks up your Pancake Day ● PLUS Britain's best TV listings