

the press conference with (or without) RICHARD INGRAMS



by Rob McGibbon

I am interviewing Richard Ingrams because Ian Hislop graciously said no (can't imagine why), but then kindly invited me to lunch. No ordinary lunch: The Private Eye Lunch, a decades-old tradition above a Soho boozier. Steak 'n' chips with Eye staff and meeja liggers on the side. A decidedly convivial few hours.

Scrunched up there is Ingrams, in curly tweed lapels and a furry shirt collar. And he is "up for it". Sshplendid. Who needs the Sapper of Satire when you can get the Great General?

Ingrams co-founded The Eye in the 1860s [sic] and has been on the piss-take ever since. He is still chairman and he also edits The Oldie, the monthly mag he founded in 1992. Ingrams is also a newspaper columnist and author of loadsa books. He is 108. Minus 40.

With such a career, Ingrams must be an interviewer's dream.

Irreverent humour, anecdotes galore, acerbic views. What a hoot. Perfect for an Xmas edition. We meet somewhere round the S-bend of that public toilet called Tottenham Court Road. He is jolly and smiley. We shall go to a coffee shop, he says. Oh, really? Ok.

He steers me towards a typical West End sandwich bar-cum-greasy-spoon cafe. Please, no. I would rather do an interview on runway four at Heathrow. I wedge Richard into a "romantic" corner table, by the store cupboard, between the cases of Irn-Bru and a toxic espresso machine. The sandwich bar jazz quartet — cutlery, crockery, till and banter — begins freestyling in the background.

So, Richard, how are things? You have The Eye, The Oldie, your books and columns. You're a busy man?

Well... things are fine... good... (slurp. Cue chocolatey foam 'tache)

Do you mind elaborating a bit? That's a helluva combination for any journalist to juggle...

Errrr. I suppose you could say so... umm... (inaudible)

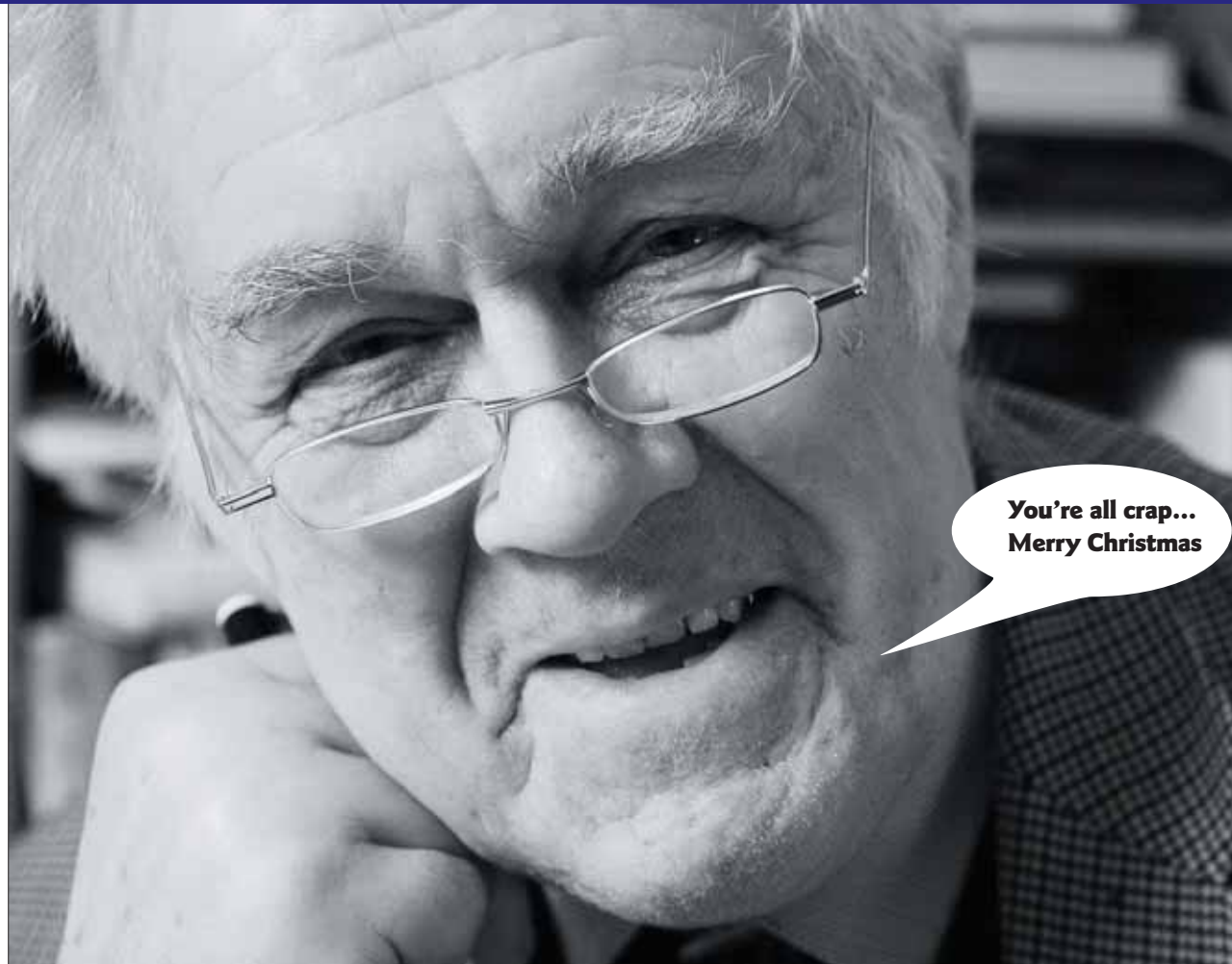
Can you give me an insight into your working week? This is read by journalists, I'm sure it would be of interest...

Well. Ummm. Monday mornings I'm at The Eye and also two afternoons a week. Then I am at The Oldie. On Fridays I write my column for The Observer.

You mean The Indy? You left The Observer.

Of course, The Indy... (Surely indescribably boring? Ed)

You've been doing that for a month or so. Why did you leave The Observer? You were there for



You're all crap... Merry Christmas

18 years, it couldn't have been easy?

Well, it was... um... (slurp)
(Stage Left. Enter workman: "Allo my people, you aw'ight? Can't stop, on the move. Three plastic teas, please. One wiv' out, two wiv two and... gissa few of them [inaudible] ta...")

... very seldom he would ring up. It was nice they were not interfering. Some columnists get rung up by the editor and told what to write. I could not put up with that, but it would be nice if... um... err... I felt completely detached from...

You are talking about Roger (Alton. Ed of Obs). Are you saying you felt neglected?

No. I just felt... umm... (inaudible)
(*"Nice one. Ta. See yous all..." Add multiple farewells in various accents.*)

... well, yes, I suppose I did feel neglected.

Would you have stayed if he had been a bit warmer?

Yes. If I had felt more involved in the... um... paper... I did not... err... I knew one person well and he felt rather the same as me, quite excluded.

But, Richard, you are the great satirist. You've been winding people up for yonks. Surely, you don't give a monkey's about creative cuddles from an editor?

I don't know. It makes no odds to me, but one needs to... err. I don't want to slag off other hacks. He's (Alton) perfectly pleasant. I actually like the fellow. But... the other day, somebody said that talking with Roger is a bit like having a conversation with a cabbie. It is perfectly pleasant at the time, but it doesn't really go anywhere. That may be unfair, but do you know what I mean?

[Indeed. I call it work] Well, sort of Richard. When would you hear from him? Was it literally just the office Christmas card?

Yes. Absolutely.

But surely there was more to it? If all hacks got prickly about the lack of fluffing from the boss, the whole industry would grind to a halt.

There was also a feeling that, you know, the paper had gone downhill. I was very disappointed with their coverage of the war. It was the kind of thing you want The Observer to take a certain line on. There is — or rather there was — an Observer tradition, which was, you know, broadly speaking, a left-wing tradition. I really feel that has gone. There were a lot of instances of that. And there was a leader about Professor Roy Meadows. He was the man who... (see Press Gazette, Issue 19650)

But The Observer is fairly alright, isn't it? Plenty in it, what would you change?

There is no news in it. There are... um... a great many feature pages... too many...
(From over left shoulder: "S'cuse me." Shuffle. Bang. Clump. "Where's the mayo gone?"
[Off stage] "On the side. Nah, down a bit. Also need crisps. Get a mix. And Kit-Kats. Grab some corn and..." "Alright. Sorry, boys." "No worries.")

[I will get drunk before I transcribe this effing tape] Can you tell me how the Indy job came up?

I have always had some appreciative notes from Kelner (Simon. Ed of Ind). He was at an Eye lunch quite recently and so was my recently appointed agent. He asked her about it... whether I would... I like the paper, I like the way it had reported the war...

How did Kelner go about signing you? Did he woo you with champagne and lunches at the Savoy?

He talked to my agent. He didn't say anything to me... (The General snorts a week's supply of air through audibly swollen sinuses)

But, Richard, didn't that get alarm bells ringing. You know, if you were looking for some editorial hugging...

Well, I don't know. Simon Kelner is a busy man...

But did he seduce you with riches to switch?

He didn't offer me a big advance, but he agreed to my huge demands...

Which were?

That I dictate my copy to a copy taker. I don't use a typewriter or email. I am going to be computerised (sic) in the New Year. I am not looking forward to it. He wanted me to do a column for the Monday paper, but that would bugger up my weekends. He settled for Saturday. That was about it. I'm happy. I like it. I like the people. (For full Luvvies quote, see page 967).

So, has Kelner been in touch and given you lots of feedback since you have been there?

No.

Oh, well, happy days. What advice would you give to your old boss, Roger Alton?

Well... I think it is important...

[What is that food stain on his jumper? Must be soup. Probably vegetable. That reminds me, must go to the dry cleaners on way home. Maybe I should drop Richard off there]

...I would...err...

[Oops, are we still going? I need a pint of Pride. No, I'll go for a run when I get back. Unwind. Then several pints. Shall I bother with a Christmas tree this year?]

... I think he should... umm... make himself better informed about things which...

(*"Two cappuccinos please and..." Cue horrendous whacking of coffee dispenser thingy, then the arrival of the 3.22pm Espresso steam train in my ear*)

... like politics. The first and foremost thing... well, is to at least have an interest in it...

(*Sciauuuuuuar. Shooooooshoosh. Tap. Whack. Tap. Clink. Clink. "There you go!"*)

[I need a holiday. A new direction.]

... he's supposed to have this reputation for being interested in news, but actually there is very little news that I can see. A lot of papers are the same, full of features...

What do you think of the newspapers generally. You know, the Street of Shame and all that?

I can't talk too well of it all actually.

Can you elaborate a bit for me?

Well, you know...

[Er, no]

Richard, have you seen my interviews in Press Gazette?

Oh, yes, I've read them.

They're these two-page things... [generally filled with words from the person being interviewed.] Hmmm...

Maybe you can talk me through your news schedule and the papers you buy...

For years — since university in my 20s — I used to buy the Telegraph (surely Torygraph? Ed). That was because it had a massive amount of interesting stories in it. It was a newspaper. All that has gone. I gave up while Charles Moore was the editor — I cannot pin-point any specific moment. Since then I can't say I have an allegiance to a single newspaper.

What do you buy on a daily basis?

I am a commuter during the week [Soon to be a computer]. One of the good things about that is it gives you time to read newspapers. Or maybe that is a bad thing. I get the Indy and the Daily Mail.

I am fascinated to hear what you think of the Mail. You obviously like it?

Yes I do. Well, actually, no. [So that's settled, then!] It has got a bit of a bite, which I like. You see a lot of people writing for the Daily Mail that would in the old days write for the Telegraph. Such as Stephen Glover, Keith Waterhouse... I like Peter McKay, he's a friend...

What about other newspapers?

I don't buy any others. I pick up whichever newspapers people leave on the train. I don't like The Times. Never liked the format and all the good things, like the letters page, have been destroyed and there are lots of bad columnists. I can't think of a single columnist in The Times that I would read, apart from Matthew Parris, but he is on Saturdays now and I don't get to read that...

Maybe you could get on a train specially one Saturday, see if you can find him? [Now, now.]

For some reason I have a block on The Guardian (surely Grauniad? Ed) and can never read it. Don't ask me why. [Agreed.]

(*"Oh, yeah, I love this one! Turn it up." I am now inadvertently making a bootleg recording of Capital Radio's broadcast of Shalamar's "There It Is"*)

Do you like the Daily Express?

No. It is a just a bad imitation of the Daily Mail.

How about the red tops?

Crap. [Yes, this is.]

You mean you don't like The Sun, not even for a bit of titty fun?

I think The Sun is disgraceful.

The Star?

Worse. [Excellent. I only need 2,000 more one-word answers and the spread is sorted.]

The Mirror?

Same. That I find actually very sad. The Mirror did have... until Montgomery came in... even when Maxwell was there, the Mirror did have something. I am a friend of Richard Stott's, who was editor. He is a very intelligent, well-read person. Someone like that would never be editor now. It is funny how you get this mix up between the people running The Sun and the people in EastEnders. They are the same sort of people...

What did you think of the Ross and Rebekah bout? It must have been a satirist's dream?

Absolutely. It shows you what sort of people they are...

But surely everyone's entitled to a Barney now and then? Have you ever met her?

No.

(*Cue the waitress tinkling on cutlery tray drunkit*)

Would you like to?

No.

How about the Sunday papers, what do you get?

I don't like Sunday newspapers. In the old days I used to get several, but they got so big you couldn't get through them. You'd have them all over the house. I narrowed it down to The Observer, but now I have stopped writing for that I don't get anything. It is quite interesting because I have had no withdrawal symptoms at all. The Sunday Times has good things, but I wouldn't buy it. The Sunday Telegraph has been ruined by this woman (Sarah Sands). She's just mucked about, re-arranged the layout and got rid of all the good columnists. It's a total mess.

The Mail on Sunday?

Not bad. It has many of the qualities of the Daily.

The News of the World?

Urgh! I don't look at that. I find it quite depressing.

Sunday Mirror, The People? Come on now, be honest...

No.

So, it's all a bit of a disaster really?

Yes.



No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull The Blatant Plug...

Please do visit The Oldie's website: www.theoldie.co.uk.

I have two books on the go: The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett (HarperCollins £20) and My Friend Footy — A Memoir of Paul Foot (Private Eye £9.99).

Thank you.

What would you say is your greatest journalistic achievement?

I can't answer that.

Well, how about Private Eye? What are your proudest memories of that?

Some of the names we have made up for people are quite good...

Have you ever had a nickname?

No, not that I know of.

Tell me a bit about The Oldie. It has a circulation of 25,000. What is the ratio to shop sales and subscriptions, and how much of a success is it?

The Oldie sells 5,000 in the shops and the rest through the post. It makes a small profit these days. I think it could comfortably sell around 45,000 if we could get it into more shops. But WH Smith won't stock it in their railway station shops, which is a huge disadvantage. They have a monopoly of those outlets and they aren't sure where we fit, so they won't take us. It is a shame. That is why we focus on subscriptions.

You champion the rights of older people in The Oldie. What would you say to journalists who are getting on a bit and are being sidelined for younger blood?

It does happen. I think it is awful that nowadays there is a feeling that anyone over 50 must be senile. I would say to them that there is a home from home for them at The Oldie. We have excellent writers who will appeal to them. And we welcome unsolicited articles — probably more than any other magazine, so do keep us in mind.

You take the micky out of people mercilessly in Private Eye. Any regrets about certain targets, and have you been on the receiving end at all?

I was subjected to savage attacks by Nigel Dempster (surely Dumpster? Ed) which were quite unpleasant, but it may have been a salutary lesson.

Sometimes we have picked on little people for no particular reason, so maybe that is not such a good idea. But all people in positions of power should be... umm... a lot of media people get very self-important. They think they can influence the course of events, which they cannot. They need to be reminded that journalism goes in one ear and out the other, or in one eye and out the other. I think one always has to keep in mind the ephemeral nature of what you do. It really is here today and gone tomorrow and there is nothing you can do about it.

(*With that — and I exaggerate not — someone off stage drops several plates and I bolt into consciousness with such force that I jam my knee into the metal stanchion of our immovable Formica table*)

In closing, Richard, would you say you can still take a joke — even at your expense?

I sincerely hope so.

[And so do I. Irreverently yours!]

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Richard Ingrams' FANTASY FLYERS
There are no Flyers this week as they were pisspoor.

Portrait Phil Adams