From top: Turner's Snow Storm, Steam-Boat Off A Harbour's Mouth; A Matter Of Life And Death; Tony Weller from The Pickwick Papers; Timothy's barge; a ten-shilling note; Marie Lloyd; a drum

'I love morris dancing. It's an ancient ritual that celebrates life – I even shed a tear when I see it'

The DEFINITE ARTICLE

We ask a celebrity a set of devilishly probing questions – and only accept THE definitive answer. This week it's actor Timothy Spall's turn

The prized possession you value above all others... A silver-tipped cane that belonged to Bram Stoker [the Dracula author]. It was given to me in the late-80s by the journalist Daniel Farson, his great-nephew, who was a dear friend of mine. The stories it could tell…

The unqualified regret you wish you could amend... I still feel bad about taking a ten-shilling note off a smaller boy when I was five. He'd just found it and I bullied him. I felt so ashamed I gave it to an Asian woman with a baby.

The way you would spend your fantasy 24 hours, with no travel restrictions... My wife Shane and I would wake up on our barge, The Princess Matilda, on the Helford River near Falmouth in Cornwall, then sail with dolphins in the Irish Sea. After lunch with our three kids and two grandchildren at The Palmerston pub in Dulwich, south London, I'd nip home to watch Flog It!. Afterwards Shane and I would watch the sunset on safari in Zimbabwe, then on Kent's Isle of Thanet (where I'd have a beer with my mum and three brothers), at The Lobster restaurant in LA's Santa Monica, then on the Isle of Kerrera in western Scotland, and Margate. We'd end the day in Banff in north-east Scotland watching the 20ft rollers come in.

The temptation you wish you could resist... Sausage rolls. But I throw the last third away to prove I have self-control!

The book that holds an everlasting resonance... Dickens's novel The Pickwick Papers. I read it when I was recovering from leukaemia in 1996. Its wit and beauty stopped me worrying about death. It became part of my treatment.

The priority activity if you were the Invisible Man for a day... I'd listen to David Cameron and George Osborne talking in private, so I'd know what they're really like before they put on the masks they present to the public.

The pet hate that makes your hackles rise... General bad manners.

The film you can watch time and time again... A Matter Of Life And Death with David Niven from 1946. It grips you in the first 20 seconds.

The person who has influenced you most... My school drama teacher Helena Mietz. After I played the lion in The Wizard Of Oz when I was 17 she said, 'I never say this to my students because acting is a horrible profession, but you should definitely be an actor.' Those words changed my life.

The figure from history for whom you'd most like to buy a pie and a pint... Jesus. I'd like to know if he's happy with how the past 2,000 years have turned out.

The piece of wisdom you would pass on to a child... Being kind and polite makes the world a better place. And adults are only grown-up children.

The unlikely interest that engages your curiosity... I love morris dancing. It's an ancient ritual that celebrates life. I even shed a tear when I see people doing it.

The treasured item you lost and wish you could have again... My dad Joseph's pocket watch. He died from stomach cancer when he was 55 and I was 24. I used to wear it but it was stolen in a burglary about 20 years ago.

The unending quest that drives you on... To keep getting better at acting, so it never looks like I'm acting.

The poem that touches your soul... Tarantella by Hilaire Belloc. It paints an amazing picture of a love that's gone.

The misapprehension about yourself you wish you could erase... That I'm an everyman and a man of the people who you can always talk to in the pub. In fact, I'm an intellectual snob of rich royal Prussian ancestry!

The event that altered the course of your life and character... Getting seriously ill made me realise what is and isn't worthwhile. Looking over the precipice of life stopped me worrying about my career, and from then on it seemed to take care of itself.

The crime you would commit knowing you could get away with it... I'd steal Turner's painting Snow Storm, Steam-Boat Off A Harbour's Mouth.

The song that means most to you... Dido's Lament from Henry Purcell's opera Dido And Aeneas. It's about death and is one of the saddest songs of all time, but I could only enjoy it again after I was feeling better.

The happiest moment you will cherish forever... When I got the letter saying I'd got into RADA when I was 19.

The saddest time that shook your world... It was unspeakably horrible being ill and thinking about leaving Shane and my kids. But I kept saying to myself, 'You are *not* going to die.'

The unfulfilled ambition that continues to haunt you... To play the drums properly. Drumming is very cathartic because you can have a good bash when you're angry about something.

The philosophy that underpins your life... Always see the funny side.

The order of service at your funeral... A Little Of What You Fancy Does You Good sung by Marie Lloyd, plus Dido's Lament to add some misery. I'd also want Onward Christian Soldiers, then all my mates telling stories about me at a big wake with a huge bar tab. No burial – I'd want to be fired out of a cannon from a boat off the Isle of Thanet.

The way you want to be remembered... As a good actor and quite a nice bloke.

The Plug... My wife's book, The Voyages Of The Princess Matilda, is published by Ebury Press, priced £11.99. ■

As told to Rob McGibbon

PHOTOGRAPHS: XXXX