

Diaries 1969-1979

The Python Years

Michael Palin

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Extract

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Introduction

I HAVE KEPT A DIARY, more or less continuously, since April 1969. I was twenty-five years old then, married for three years and with a six-month-old son. I had been writing comedy with Terry Jones since leaving university in 1965 and, in addition to contributing material to *The Frost Report*, *Marty Feldman*, *The Two Ronnies* and anyone else who'd take us, we had written and performed two series of *Do Not Adjust Your Set* (with Eric Idle, David Jason and Denise Coffey) and six episodes of *The Complete and Utter History of Britain*. After the last one went out in early 1969, John Cleese rang me.

'Well, you won't be doing any more of those,' he predicted, accurately as it turned out, 'so why don't we think of something new?'

So it was that, quite coincidentally, Monty Python came into my life, only a month or so after the diary.

This was far from my first stab at keeping a regular account of how I spent my time. At the age of eleven I resolved to record each day of the year, and kept it up until the 18th of July. The style was staccato, and looking back now, quite surreal.

Letts Schoolboy's Diary, January, 1955

Tuesday, 18th. Big blow-up in prayers. Had easy prep. Listened to Goon Show. Got sore hand.

Monday 24th. Had fight with (form) VR. Got hit on nose. Did two sets of prep. Jolly hard! Cabbage for lunch. Watched TV.

At regular intervals I tried to resume the habit, but as I grew older keeping a diary seemed an irksome duty, like writing to one's parents, and anyway, there was far too much going on in my teens and early twenties to have either the time or the inclination to write it all down. Yet there remained a nagging feeling that it was a small failure to let life go by without in some way documenting it. The feeling persisted as I grew older. All I lacked was the will-power.

Then, one night, after a meal at the house with my wife Helen and Terry Gilliam, who happened to have dropped by, I found I'd run out of cigarettes (at the time I had a twenty-a-day habit). I looked for a half-crown piece for the slot machine up the road, but could find nothing. I rifled through drawers, flung open cupboards and slid my hand down the back of sofas with increasing desperation.

'You're an addict,' warned Terry.

I smiled wanly. 'I'm not an addict, I would quite like one last cigarette before bed, that's all.'

'Look at you,' Terry persisted, as I began rummaging in ever more unlikely sources, in the laundry basket and amongst the marmalade, 'you need your fix!'

'Look,' I hissed, tipping up the shoe-cleaning box and forensically scrutinising the contents, 'I don't have to have a cigarette. I never have to have a cigarette, it's just a small pleasure, all right?'

'Not if you can't sleep without one.'

The only way to face down these taunts was to deny myself the single thing I wanted most, a nice firm pull on a freshly-lit, deliriously soothing, pungently bracing tube of tightly packed tobacco coaxed from a brand-new packet of Piccadilly Tipped. And that's where the will-power came in. For the first time in many years I went to bed without a cigarette.

Not only did I survive without the second most satisfying smoke of the day, next morning I survived without the first most satisfying smoke of the day and I never bought a packet of cigarettes again.

So cocky was I that I looked around for other giants to wrestle. As it happened I had, for the first time in years, some free time on my hands. My writing partner Terry Jones was away and I had arranged to travel to Switzerland for a few days with Helen and the baby. Why not have another crack at the diary? It would keep my newly liberated fingers occupied and writing about my post-nicotine lifestyle could only strengthen my resolve to keep it that way. I bought a Ryman's reporter's notepad, smoothed down the front page, wrote the day's date across the top and underlined it. And I've been doing the same thing most mornings of my life for the past thirty-seven years.

There are times when I've resented the whole process, when I've felt lumpen, dull and inarticulate, when detail has slipped away and the whole exercise has seemed completely pointless. But the longer I've kept the diary the more inconceivable it has been to abandon it. It's become an effective and tenacious parasite, mutating over the years into something as germane to my life as an arm or a leg.

The motivation for keeping the diaries remains the same as it always was, to keep a record of how I fill the days. Nothing more complicated than that. Though this inevitably involves emotional reactions, I've never treated the diary as a confessional. Once I've noted the day's events, usually the next morning, there's little time left for soul-searching.

The perfect, well-crafted, impeccably balanced entry persistently eludes

me. Prejudices bob to the surface, anger crackles, judgements fall over each other, huffing and puffing. Opinions and interpretations are impulsive, inconsistent and frequently contradictory. But I'm not sure if that matters. After all that's where a daily diary differs from autobiography or memoir. It is an antidote to hindsight.

It seals the present moment and preserves it from the tidying process of context, perspective, analysis and balance. It becomes history, but quite unselfconsciously. What proves to be important over a long period is not always what a diarist will identify at the time. For the historians' sake I should probably have noted every detail of the birth of Monty Python, but it seemed far more important to me to record the emergence of my new family than the faltering steps of a comedy series that would probably last no more than two years. And that, I feel, is as it should be. Legends are not created by diaries, though they can be destroyed by them.

This selection is culled from thirty-eight hand-written secretarial notebooks amounting to some five times the volume of material reproduced here. The early entries sit a little awkwardly as I search for a voice and a style that relies on more than lists of events. My reward for perseverance, often in the face of tempting discouragement, is to see the diary bed itself in and slowly begin to tell a story, with regular characters, a narrative, and a sense of continuity.

In the course of these diaries I grow up, my family grows up and Monty Python grows up. It was a great time to be alive.

MICHAEL PALIN
London, January 2006



'A nice firm pull on a freshly lit, deliriously soothing, pungently bracing tube of tightly packed tobacco, coaxed from a brand-new packet of Piccadilly Tipped.'

Michael Palin is not just one of Britain's foremost comedy character actors, whose inventive genius and astonishing versatility were vividly demonstrated in his widely acclaimed *Ripping Yarns* series; he also talks a lot. Yap, yap, yap, he goes, all day long *and* through the night, twenty-three to the dozen, the ground littered with the hind legs of donkeys, till you believe it is not possible, simply not possible for him to go on any longer, but he *does*. He must be the worst man in the world to take on a commando raid. You might as well take a large radiogram with the volume turned up. On and on, hour after hour, tiring the sun with talking and sending him down the sky, Michael chats, quips, fantasises, reminisces, commiserates, encourages, plans, discusses and elaborates. Then, some nights, when everyone else has gone to bed, he goes home and *writes up a diary*.

JOHN CLEESE

Publicity biography for Life of Brian, 1979

1969

Though the first entry of all was April 17th 1969, I've opened the diary on the first day of Python filming. All the entries were written at my house in Oak Village, north London, except where otherwise noted.

Tuesday, July 8th

Today Bunn Wackett Buzzard Stubble and Boot¹ came into being, with about five minutes of film shot around Ham House. It was exhilarating to wake up to the first day's filming of a new show, especially as the sun was streaming down the village and, despite it being only 7.00, I decided to travel to the BBC on the bus and tube. Sure enough, the clouds came up as I put my foot outside the door, and this April-like weather pattern of showers and sunshine was repeated during the day. We arrived at Ham House about 9.30.

It is a Jacobean house, of pleasing proportions, very restrained, but in a more homely and welcoming way than a classical building. A line of Greco/Roman busts in oval niches along the line of walls leading up to the house give you something to remember it by. We were filming Queen Victoria's slapstick film with Gladstone, and the beautifully kept lawn and flower beds at the back of the house provided just the right kind of formality to play off against.

In the afternoon the changes in light from sudden brightness to dullness caused us to slow down a little, but by 6.00 we had quite a chunk of 'Queen Victoria and Her Gardener' and 'Bicycle Repairman' done, and it had been a very good and encouraging first day's shooting.

Wednesday, July 9th

Arrived at TV Centre by 10.00, and was driven in a BBC car, together with John [Cleese], Graham [Chapman] and Terry [Jones], out beyond Windsor and Eton to a tiny church at Boveney. Dressed to the hilt as a young Scottish

¹ The name of a fictional forward line from a John Cleese soccer monologue, and the current name for what was later to become *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Among other titles we tried unsuccessfully to get past the BBC were 'Whither Canada?', 'Ow! It's Colin Plint', 'A Horse, a Spoon and a Bucket', 'The Toad Elevating Moment', 'The Algy Banging Hour' and 'Owl Stretching Time'. Increasingly irritated, the BBC suggested the Flying Circus bit and we eventually compromised by adding the name Monty Python.

nobleman of the Walter Scott era, I was able to cash a cheque at a bank in the Uxbridge Road, without the cashier batting an eyelid.

Thursday, July 10th, Bournemouth

Up at 7.15; Graham C called for me in a mini-cab; we got to Waterloo in plenty of time to catch the 8.30 to Bournemouth. We had breakfast on the train. At Bournemouth we were met by a mini-van and driven to the Durley Dean Hotel, where we were to stay that night. I don't think words can fully convey the depression that swept over me as I entered the Durley Dean. From outside it was bad enough – a five storey red-brick block of indeterminate date, but I should guess 1920s – it looked completely ordinary, if anything institutional. Inside there was firstly a dimness, secondly a pervading smell of gravy and thirdly a total lack of any colour – in the carpets, the lino in the passages, the paintwork in the rooms – everywhere the management had opted for the colour most like stale vomit.

One saw a few guests, mostly elderly, about half of them crippled, wandering about, as if looking for someone to tell them what to do. What with the grey weather, the lack of much to do (it was mainly Terry's 'Changing on the Beach' film) and the gradual realisation that all Bournemouth was as drab and colourless as the Durley Dean, I felt very low all morning.

After lunch we filmed on, collecting crowds of people watching Terry take his trousers down. Graham and I, finishing early, went back to the Durley Dean. The depression I had felt in the morning was lifted slightly by the sun shining into my room, and plenty of hot water for my bath. After that Graham and I drank at the hotel bar until the rest of the unit returned. I made the mistake of telling the barman that Graham was a doctor, and soon he was telling Graham about his insomnia and his sweating and his bad feet.

John C arrived from London and, together with Graham, a lady designer, a lady extra, a focus puller and one or two others, we sampled the nightlife of Bournemouth. We ended up in the Highcliffe Hotel night-club where, for 7/6 each we enjoyed 45 minutes sitting in dimness with a drink, whilst the band had their break. When they arrived back (three middle-aged men, looking like failed Sam Costa,¹ who played 'Fly Me to the Moon' in quite a forgettable way), Graham asked them to play 'Happy Birthday' for John Cleese (it wasn't his birthday at all). But the amplification was so bad that we couldn't hear the announcement and the point of the joke was lost.

¹ Sam Costa was a heavily moustachioed TV presenter, actor, singer and DJ.

Friday, July 11th, Bournemouth

Drive over to Shell Bay, beyond Poole, along a flag-lined route – the Queen is visiting Poole today.

In the afternoon filmed some very bizarre pieces, including the death of Genghis Khan, and two men carrying a donkey past a Butlins redcoat, who later gets hit on the head with a raw chicken by a man from the previous sketch, who borrowed the chicken from a man in a suit of armour. All this we filmed in the 80° sunshine, with a small crowd of holidaymakers watching.

We finished at tea-time and were driven to take our leave of Durley Dean and catch the 5.56 train back to London. On account of an unofficial signalmen's strike, the train took two and a half hours to get to London and left Bournemouth half an hour late. But John, Graham, Terry and myself took a First Class compartment and talked about Shows 4 and 5 and decided that we really had an excellent week filming. Ian Mac¹ is marvellous – the best director to work for and, with a fellow Scots cameraman, Jimmy Balfour, he really gets on with it.

Back in London 9.00 – taxi from Waterloo, end of one of the great days.

Wednesday, July 16th

Filming today in Barnes. The weather continues to be excellent – if anything a little too hot – 80°+ all day.

After lunch we watched Apollo 11 blastoff, on its trip to the moon.

Ended up the afternoon prancing about in mouse-skins for a documentary about people who like to dress up as mice. That really made the sweat pour down the chest.

To the many life-changing experiences around this time – fatherhood, quitting smoking, keeping a diary – must be added the alarming discovery that teeth I'd always thought of as glowingly healthy were found to be precariously attached to considerably less healthy gums – a legacy of poor care and too many sweeties in my misspent youth. Treatment involved a series of surgical procedures in which the gum was opened, cleaned up and stitched together again. These were undertaken by Mr Robin Powell, a robust Australian periodontist who once likened it to working on his rockery at home.

¹ Ian MacNaughton produced and directed all the Python TV shows, apart from the first three studio recordings and a few days of film, which were directed by John Howard Davies.

Saturday, July 19th

Up early to go to Mr Powell for the fourth and last of my dental operations. I was at his surgery by 9.10. He hadn't arrived, but the nurse sat me down and gave me her *Daily Telegraph* to read. He arrived about ten minutes later, cheerfully announcing that he'd had a late night and a lot of drinks, however he said his hand was steady. It needed to be, for this was the most difficult of all the operations. One tooth was obviously more badly infected than he had expected. I even had to go into the next-door surgery during the operation so that he could use the extra-high-speed drill there. He also took out one of the roots of the tooth, and also a nerve, which gave quite a lot of pain. Mr Powell kept apologising, but I felt at least that I was getting my money's worth. I was finally patched up at 10.10 and drove off to the TV Centre to have a look at the week's rushes

After the rushes, made the final organisational decisions about the Great Picnic, which Gilliam had suggested a couple of days ago and which was now becoming reality. Helen, Thomas¹ and myself, Graham and David,² John and Connie, Terry G and his girlfriend and Alison and Terry J set out in our various cars for Henley – loaded with food and wine. It was a very cloudy day, but warm, and along the motorway a patch of sun made us seem less foolish. We drove out to Remenham church, which I had chosen from pot-luck as being a convenient place for an idyllic riverside picnic. Everything could at this moment have gone hopelessly wrong – the sky was glowering, it was 2.30 and everyone was getting hungry – but Remenham proved to be just the right kind of place – through a gate and we were walking along a flat bank of pastureland with the Thames flowing beside us. We picnicked opposite Temple Island – ham off the bone, paté, salad, several kinds of cheeses, cherries, apples and strawberries, beer sausage, smoked pork, red and white wine and coffee – it was a wonderful spread. Thomas scavenged amongst the food, and was to be seen eating vast chunks of French bread on and off for about an hour. Everyone, Gilliam especially, became infected by picnic madness and there was a hopping relay race and a lot of fighting. The generous doses of wine numbed any possible after-effects of my gingivectomy.

Thomas stood without holding on today.

Monday, July 21st

At 3.00 this morning I woke Helen, and we both watched as the first live television pictures from the moon showed us a rather indistinct piece of ladder,

1 Our son, born in October 1968, so nine months old. The only Python child at the time.

2 David Sherlock, Graham's partner. They'd met in Ibiza in 1966.

then a large boot, and finally, at 3.56, Neil Armstrong became the first man to set foot on the lunar surface. He said the ground beneath his feet (I almost wrote 'the earth beneath his feet') was composed mainly of dust – for a moment one felt he was in danger of falling into a kind of quicksand – but soon he was reassuringly prancing about and telling us that the one-sixth gravity conditions were less hazardous than in simulation.

The extraordinary thing about the evening was that, until 3.56 a.m. when Armstrong clambered out of the spaceship and activated the keyhole camera, we had seen no space pictures at all, and yet ITV had somehow contrived to fill ten hours with a programme devoted to the landing.

To bed at 5.00, with the image in my mind of men in spacesuits doing kangaroo hops and long, loping walks on the moon, in front of a strange spidery object, just like the images in my mind after reading Dan Dare in the old *Eagle* comics – only this time it's true. A lot of science fiction is suddenly science fact.

Thursday, July 24th

Met with Ian and the two Terrys at the BBC. We listened to some possible title music – finally selected Sousa's march 'The Liberty Bell' from a Grenadier Guards LP. There's something about brass band music that appeals to me very strongly. Probably it's all to do with my subliminal desire to march along whistling national songs. It's very difficult to associate brass band music with any class of people. Most enthusiasts perhaps come from north of the Trent working class, but then of course it has high patrician status and support from its part in ceremonial. So in the end it is a brass band march which we've chosen – because it creates such immediate atmosphere and rapport, without it being calculated or satirical or 'fashionable'.

An hour is spent from 5.30–6.30 watching colour pictures of Apollo 11's return to earth. Again how old-fashioned a) the landing (they landed upside down), b) the scrubbing of the spacecraft and the space-suits, in case they are carrying deadly lunar germs, c) the whole business of helicopter rescues, appears. One is almost conscious of the laughter and amazement of viewers in thirty years' time, as they watch film of the first men on the moon returning home.

Friday, August 1st

The days seem to merge one into another without particular distinction. It's tending to feel like that with the writing at the moment. We have four

shows completed, but apart from the two weeks' filming in July, there has been no feeling yet of concerted effort on behalf of the show (now, incidentally, renamed *Monty Python's Flying Circus*). Partly because John and Graham have fingers in a lot of other pies – especially their film, *The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer*.¹ However, it seems that the next two weeks will be much harder work. At least, there is some kind of urgency. August 30th is our first recording date and we have another week's filming starting on the 18th. Time is getting shorter. But at least it's nothing like the hectic pace which we were starting on this time last year with the first *Frost on Sundays*. Accordingly, I've had much more time at home and, as I write this, I'm in the sitting room with Helen sewing and Thomas being fascinated by the sewing machine.

Terry took Helen and myself and Quick and Ken, Philip John, Gerald² and a girl from Germany whom Terry and Al had met on holiday in Crete, to the Hiroko Japanese restaurant in Wigmore Street.

Before entering our room we had to remove our shoes. Here Ken and myself made what I expected to be the first of many faux pas. After taking our shoes off, we noticed some oriental style slippers nearby and presumed that we ought to put these on in true Japanese style. Grumbling that they were all too small, we eventually selected two pairs and were tottering to our room when one of the Japanese 'attendants' – it wouldn't be quite right to call them 'waitresses' – stopped us excitedly and told us to take off the shoes. Then we realised the awful truth – that they belonged to people already eating there.

Sunday, August 3rd

John C rang up in the morning to ask if I felt like working in the afternoon, so I ended up in Knightsbridge about 3.00. It's funny, but when one has written in partnership almost exclusively for the last three years, as Terry and I have done, and I suppose John and Graham as well, it requires quite an adjustment to write with somebody different. Terry and I know each other's way of working so well now – exactly what each one does best, what each one thinks, what makes each of us laugh – that when I sat down to write with John there was a moment's awkwardness, slight embarrassment, but it soon loosened up as we embarked on a saga about Hitler (Hilter), Von Ribbentrop (Ron Vibbentrop) and Himmler (Bimmler) being found in a seaside guest house. We do tend to laugh at the same things – and working with John is not difficult – but there

¹ Directed by Kevin Billington, executive producer David Frost, it came out in 1970. Surely the only comedy in which Peter Cook and Harold Pinter appear in the acting credits?

² Diana Quick and Ken Cranham – actors, friends, neighbours of Terry J, and, at the time, an item. Philip John was a work colleague of TJ's botanist girlfriend Alison Telfer. Gerald was a friend of theirs.

are still differences in our respective ways of thinking, not about comedy necessarily, which mean perhaps that the interchange of ideas was a little more cautious than it is with Terry. However, by the time I left, at 7.15, we had almost four minutes' worth of sketch written.

Tuesday, August 5th

Another workday at Eric's.¹ A good morning, but then a rather winey lunch at Pontevecchio in Brompton Road. That is the trouble with working at John or Eric's – both are surrounded by a very good selection of restaurants, temptingly easy to go to, especially after a good morning's work, but debilitating and expensive.

Wednesday, August 6th

A thought struck me as I saw a man in an open-necked shirt walking up Oak Village – and that was that, for at least twelve successive years, the first half of August has meant Palin family holidays – either at Sheringham in Norfolk or, later, at Southwold.

I have some wonderful memories of those holidays. Of sitting in the lee of the hill above Sheringham where the golf course was and watching the steam train pulling away towards Weybourne. Of enormous games of tennis on the beach with the Sanders family, of plastic macs and wet days (they do seem to be predominant), of sitting excitedly in the back of the Austin 10 (which we inherited when Granny Ovey² died in 1951) and the yearly thrill of seeing a pebble-house, and of seeing the sea for the first time.

Now August 6th has no special significance, it's another working day – but it's a token of the enormous difference between my life and that of my father or most people in the country. I have no fixed timetable. I may go away any time of the year, for any length of time, at little more than two weeks' notice. This degree of unpredictability is beyond the sphere of most people – it is an awful thought how regular people's lives contrive to be.

On this August 6th 1969 I am at home. Terry and I are determined to make this a really productive day, to make up for the semi-productive, rather frustrating Monday and Tuesday. We work on till 8.00, finishing our big 'Them' saga. An 85% success day. Very satisfying – and we really worked well together.

¹ Eric Idle.

² My grandmother, Rachel Ovey, from whom we inherited our first fridge as well as our first car.

Thursday, August 7th

Drove down to Camberwell Grove (where Terry was living) at lunchtime. Lunched with Terry and D Quick, who has a week's break from filming *Christ Recrucified* for BBC2. In the afternoon we worked rather slowly – lots of diversions, e.g. Terry's telescope, which he has bought for his father's birthday, a film which Terry bought that morning, and finally a walk. It seems at last, after almost a year of waiting, that Terry and Alison may have got the house they made an offer for in Grove Park, Camberwell. We walked past it – tall, solidly suburban, in a quiet road on top of the first hill you come to going south from Westminster.

In 1966 my parents (Edward 'Ted' Palin and Mary Palin, née Ovey) retired to the village of Reydon, just outside Southwold in Suffolk. Southwold had already played a big part in my life, for it was on the beach here in 1959 that I first summoned up the courage to talk to a tall, slim, mischievous-looking girl called Helen Gibbins. This led to a holiday romance, which led to marriage, in 1966, and birth of son Thomas (now known to everyone as Tom). The different names I use for my father show, I suppose, how my relationship with him changed as I grew older and the children came along. In these early entries he is, as often as not, 'Daddy', as he had been throughout my childhood, but I was also trying out the more formal (and grown-up) 'Father', and later, seeing him through my children's eyes, he was to become 'Grandfather'.

Sunday, August 10th, Southwold

The weather again very fine and warm, and the lunchtime bathe was once more an enjoyment rather than a challenge. In the afternoon, Daddy and I walked from Potter's Bridge, on the Lowestoft Road, across uncharted fields to the sea at Easton Bavents – the seaward limit of Reydon Smear. Here I bathed again. The sun was shining down, undiluted by any wind, as we walked back through the barley fields to the car, the road smelling of melting tar. In the evening D went to sing his second anthem of the day at S'wold Church – his activities as a chorister seem to be about the only outside activity he can partake in. He can't swim, or pull the bells, or even ride his bicycle. Suddenly, from being very active, he is a spectator. Since his coronary in 1964 he has had confirmed Parkinson's Disease (for which a possible cure, L-Dopa, was mentioned in the *Sunday Times* today), back ailments, etc, etc, and has aged very rapidly.

We ate salmon and drank a bottle of white wine for supper, and afterwards Helen and I walked along the sea front. For the record, it is ten years, almost to the day, that we first met here.

Monday, August 18th

Started off for the TV Centre in some trepidation, for this was the first day's filming, and, in fact, the first day's working, with John Howard Davies, our producer for the first three shows. However, as it turned out, the day could hardly have gone better.

John has an unfortunate manner at first – rather severe and school-prefect-ish – but he really means very well. He consulted us all the way along the line and took our suggestions and used nearly all of them. He also worked fast and by the end of the day we had done the entire 'Confuse-a-Cat' film, a very complicated item, and we had also finished the 'Superman' film. All this was helped by an excellent location – a back garden in a neat, tidy, completely and utterly 'tamed' piece of the Surrey countryside – Edenfield Gardens, Worcester Park.

Wednesday, August 20th, Southwold

At 8.30, John and Terry, in the Rover, and Eric and myself, in Eric's Alfa Romeo, set off for sun, fun and filming in Suffolk.

Terry and I went round to the Lord Nelson, a pub almost on the cliffs. A step down took us into a warm, low-ceilinged room, which seemed to be mainly full of locals. The barman recognised us from 'Do Not Adjust', so we felt even more at home there. Ended up drinking about three and a half pints each and leaving at ten past eleven in the traditional convivial manner.

Back at the Craighurst (Hotel), Terry giggled so long and loud that Heather, the production secretary, thought I had a woman in my room.

Thursday, August 21st, Southwold

A very plentiful, well-cooked breakfast at the Craighurst, and then out to Covehithe, where we filmed for most of the day. The cliffs are steep and crumbling there and the constant movement of BBC personnel up and down probably speeded coastal erosion by a good few years.

Mother and Father turned up during the morning and appeared as crowd in one of the shots.

In the afternoon heavy dark clouds came up and made filming a little slower. We ended up pushing a dummy newsreader off the harbour wall, and I had to swim out and rescue this drifting newsreader, so it could be used for another shot.