
Opening Extract from...

Only Fools and Horses

The Untold Story of Britain's Favourite Comedy

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CHAPTER ONE

This Time Next Year

Répondez s'il vous plaît.

It is September 1980. This time next year . . .

This time next year, a writer called John Sullivan will begin a labour of love, a producer/director called Ray Butt will commence an extraordinary adventure, a trio of actors named David Jason, Nicholas Lyndhurst and Lennard Pearce will take on the roles of their dreams and a brand new sitcom entitled *Only Fools and Horses* will start to enrich a great comic tradition. Nothing seemed inevitable back in September 1980, but, this time next year, something will arrive on British television that will end up being seen as very special indeed.

In 1980, however, the immediate future, to many British people, seemed bleak. The new Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was busy reassuring her monetarist minions that she was most definitely not for turning. After wrongly attributing her implausibly tolerant initial sentiments ('where there is discord, may we bring harmony . . .') to the medieval theology of St Francis of Assisi (they actually came from an obscure 1912 French prayer), and wrongly associating her modern amoral economics with the eighteenth-century moral philosophy of Adam Smith (she favoured the free market for its own sake; he favoured it because he believed good and decent

people would not abuse it), she proceeded to brand any colleagues who possessed more logic but less blinkered conviction than her as 'wet', and set about causing as much discord as seemed politically possible. There were bitter industrial disputes and violent riots, rising inflation and falling factories, and, while two million or so freshly 'unfettered' Britons remained miserably unemployed, self-interest was celebrated at the expense of civic virtue. Council tenants were invited to buy their own homes, so even if they were stuck on a low social rung they could at least console themselves with the thought that they now owned a tiny splinter or two of the ladder, and a few individuals who feared being stuck in dead-end jobs began to buy into the dubious entrepreneurial dream of class-free upward mobility, but in any other sense most ordinary working people were left alone to deal with the mounting mood of despondency and desolation.

British comedy failed, for a while, to be of much help. The Prime Minister herself had wasted no time in demonstrating that she had no real sense of humour (even before her election triumph in 1979, when handed a light-hearted line – 'Keep taking the tablets' – to mock her Labour rival James Callaghan's likening of himself to Moses, she attempted to 'improve' the joke by saying 'Keep taking the pills' instead[1]), and many in the comedy industry seemed to respond to such tin-eared forays into funny business by losing their own invaluable talent to amuse.

While most of the old bow-tied brigade now appeared more energised by the prospect of playing a round of golf than they were by the challenge of making people laugh, and several much-loved but ageing greats (including Morecambe & Wise, The Two Ronnies and Tommy Cooper) had already slipped into a slow but inevitable decline, the only notable sign that

a younger generation of comics might one day be ready to take up the reins was the recent arrival on television of the mildly irreverent sketch show *Not the Nine O'Clock News*. Not even sitcoms – so often the most humorously attuned to their times – seemed quite ready to engage with the start of the Thatcher era.

Some hugely popular and critically praised sitcoms had come to an end in the second half of the 1970s: *Dad's Army* and *Porridge* in 1977, *The Good Life* and *Rising Damp* in 1978, and *Fawlty Towers* in 1979. As the 1980s approached, the genre, slouching down somewhere between the humdrum and the ho-hum, was suddenly looking more than a little jaded.

'For the past couple of weeks,' one frustrated TV critic remarked, 'I have, in the line of duty, been sampling as many of the current crop of comedies as a body, if not mind, could bear without actual pain. I thought I might offer a considered survey of the scene, but in the name of charity, I've given that up. A critic cracking at one unlovable comedy risks sounding like a sledgehammer of pompousness descending on a lark's egg, but with a list a dozen long . . .'[2] A few new series were starting – most notably *To The Manor Born* and *Terry and June* in 1979 – but they seemed much safer, and more self-consciously and exclusively middle-class, than most of their illustrious predecessors. The great British sitcom was in danger of falling dramatically out of fashion.

All of this, however, was soon to change. All that it would take was a certain combination of talents and ambitions, this time next year.

The writer who would change things was John Sullivan. The producer/director was Ray Butt. The actors were David Jason, Nicholas Lyndhurst and Lennard Pearce.

John Sullivan was a somewhat stocky but rather shy and softly spoken scriptwriter who, by 1980, suddenly found himself at an unexpected crossroads in his career. After working hard to establish himself at the BBC by shaping a popular sitcom, he was now facing his first real professional crisis.

Born John Richard Thomas Sullivan in 1946 to an Anglo-Irish, Kentish-Corkish family based in the south London district of Balham ('Gateway to the South', as Peter Sellers' legendary cod-travelogue dubbed it), he had experienced an upbringing that, as he would later put it, was almost clichéd in its working-class character. His father, also named John, was a plumber by trade, and his mother, Hilda, worked occasionally as a charlady. They shared a small terraced house in the rough and tough area of Zennor Road with another family, and made do with such basic amenities as an outside lavatory and an old tin bath hanging up in the yard.

School struck John Jnr as an unwelcome and irrational distraction from both his early love of football and his mounting impatience to get out in the world and start earning a regular wage. The challenge of the eleven-plus examination therefore came and went without ever threatening to shake him out of his educational apathy. Feeling fated to become mere factory fodder, he reasoned that there was no real point in trying. The only 'encouragement' to at least appear to study, as far as Sullivan and his friends were concerned, was the prospect of avoiding a gym shoe being slapped across the backside and a piece of chalk hurled sharply at the head. His nascent gift for using his imagination was limited in those days to twisting the truth in the classroom: selling freshly tailored lies – cash up front – to those pupils in urgent need of plausible excuses to tell the teachers. It was only in 1958, when Sullivan reached the age

of twelve while at Telferscot Secondary Modern School in Radbourne Road, that he finally started taking an interest in something academic: English Literature.

The reason for this was that he found a new young teacher – Jim Trowers – who stopped making English Literature seem remotely academic. The Geordie-born Trowers looked somewhat unconventional – his hair was a little longer than the norm, he wore a patch over his right eye (which he would sometimes pretend to take out and clean) and seemed full of nervous energy – and, mercifully for Sullivan and others, he taught unconventionally, too. Instead of the robotic 'read, absorb and regurgitate' method employed by previous teachers, which had bored young Sullivan to tears, Trowers took each story and read it out to his pupils, adopting a range of voices and tones and rhythms to bring all the scenes and characters to life. Suddenly, for Sullivan (who had grown up in a home that contained just two books on its shelves – The Bible and a guide to the football pools), literature made sense – and, more than that, it started to matter. Dickens' *David Copperfield* sparked a real interest in English as a subject, and in writing. The mid-twentieth-century schoolboy found himself enthralled by colourful descriptions of areas, social groups and characters that were very familiar to him. Dickens became his favourite author, and Sullivan had something other than football to look forward to in his school day.

Structured and paced for the old shilling monthlies, Dickens' cleverly episodic stories had the kind of social scope, and humour, that engaged Sullivan's youthful imagination. Each fiction seemed to offer a broad range of characterisations that captured the full richness and complexity of the Victorian social hierarchy. In *Bleak House*, for example, level after level was

acknowledged and explored: there were the lofty Dedlocks in their West End mansion; lesser landowners like Mr Jarndyce and members of older professions such as the lawyers Mr Tulkinghorn and Mr Vholes and the doctor Allen Woodcourt; figures from the middling classes that included the northern ironmaster Mr Rouncewell, the campaigning Mrs Jellyby, the shop owner Mr Bagnet and the moneylender Mr Smallweed; the marginal types, such as the detective Inspector Bucket, the rag-and-bone man Mr Krook and the shooting gallery man Mr George; the servants, ranging from the superior housekeeper Mrs Rouncewell down through the ladies' maids to the poor dogsbody Guster; and, at the bottom, the manual workers, Neckett the sheriff's officer, and the inarticulate and homeless crossing-sweeper Jo White. No part of the community seemed excluded or overlooked; no aspect appeared under-appreciated. Such fictions struck Sullivan as powerful, plausible and persistently vivid visions of real life: 'Dickens wrote about areas I knew in London; although the writing dated back to the early 19th century, I felt this guy knew where I'd been and I began realising just how special his books were.'[3]

Sullivan's sudden interest in such literary works was soon spotted by Jim Trowers, who was intrigued by the kind of work that the boy was now producing. 'I gave the class an essay to write,' the teacher would recall. 'I said to them: "You have the Epsom races. Write me a short piece from any aspect at all. You know, perhaps one of the bookies, or someone laying a bet." And they all did this. Except John Sullivan. He wrote it as though he were one of the horses running the race. Which I found absolutely fascinating.'[4]

In spite of this belated academic enthusiasm, however, Sullivan still chose to leave school three years later, aged fifteen,

without sitting for any qualifications. This was the norm among working-class families, where the pressure to contribute to the family's income often outweighed any sense of individual aspiration. Staying on to sit for O levels was still largely a middle-class privilege.

Rather than being forced straight into one of the local factories, Sullivan found his first job instead working as a messenger for the news agency Reuters, in Fleet Street, in the autumn of 1961. A few months later, after a brief spell helping out in the company's photographic department, he reverted to being a messenger once again, this time at the new and very *à la mode* advertising agency of Collett, Dickenson, Pearce & Partners (CDP), a small but rather glamorous *Mad Men*-style outfit based in Howland Street, west central London, where the likes of future filmmakers David Puttnam and Alan Parker would soon be making a name for themselves (the former as an accounts executive, the latter as a copywriter) alongside the advertising *wunderkind* Charles Saatchi. In 1963, at the age of seventeen, Sullivan, attracted by the prospect of increasing his weekly wage from £3.50 to £20, was persuaded to join his old school friend Colin Humphries cleaning cars for a local second-hand car dealer. He and Humphries then went on to try their hand at selling cars themselves, but Sullivan soon realised that he was not suited to the vocation and drifted off to work for Watney's Brewery in Balham instead.

It was here during the mid-1960s, stacking crates in a large and noisy hall, that he first started to consider pursuing writing as a more fulfilling kind of career. One of his co-workers was another old school friend called Paul Saunders, with whom he shared jokes and funny stories during the many boring periods of inaction. In January 1968, Saunders told his friend

that he had recently read an article in the *Daily Mirror* about Johnny Speight: the famous working-class boy from Canning Town who grew up to write grittily realistic and socially aware plays, and then the hugely successful and notoriously controversial sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*, and, as a consequence, was now winning prestigious awards and commanding a fee of around £1,000 per script.[5] Sullivan was intrigued, and so, when Saunders suggested that they should try to follow in Speight's footsteps ('*We're* funny guys. *We* should have a go at this and earn a load of money!'[6]), he agreed, and promptly went out to buy an old typewriter from a local second-hand shop called The Treasure Chest.

For the next two months, the two young men worked on an idea – involving an old soldier whose pride and joy was the traditional gents' public lavatory that he ran, but who is now faced with competition from a brand-new modern rival down the road – and, when they felt it had developed satisfactorily, sent off a sample script to the BBC. Three more months passed, while the two young men packed beer crate after beer crate and dreamed of emulating Johnny Speight with his Rolls-Royce, big house in the country, champagne, cigars and glamorous celebrity lifestyle. Then a reply finally arrived: 'We are not looking for this kind of material.'

The brusque rejection sapped the spirit of Saunders, who decided to dream about doing something else, but Sullivan was undaunted: He had discovered that he enjoyed the process of writing and therefore continued to write and work on scripts: 'I so enjoyed the process of inventing characters and writing the dialogue that it just became a hobby. It kept me off the streets, and I didn't spend too much money on beer, because I was just writing every evening. And I suppose the dream was

that, yes, I still hoped I could get into this business.' Drawing from his own experiences, he based his plots and characters on themes and people that he knew and set them in familiar, local locations. One idea revolved around a family called the Leeches, who fiddled to keep feeding off the State; another featured a football team that always failed to find the winning formula. As soon as each sample story was completed, he sent them off to the BBC and waited patiently for a letter of acceptance. When all that he received was a rejection slip, he simply rewrote the script and sent it straight back in. 'Sometimes I'd change the titles, sometimes I'd even change my own name, to try to fool them'.[7] He refused to accept defeat.

Working-class heroes continued to offer him hope as the 1960s edged towards their end. Apart from Johnny Speight, Sullivan could also look at Ray Galton and Alan Simpson – two other hugely gifted writers from very modest London backgrounds who had reached the top of the profession (and whose 1962 pilot episode of their sitcom *Steptoe and Son*, which had featured bright comedy mixed with raw emotional drama, had dazzled Sullivan when he first watched it) – along with such inspired musicians and lyricists as the Muswell Hill-born Ray Davies of The Kinks and the Chiswick-born Pete Townshend of The Who, and, right at the heart of the decade's pop culture, Lennon and McCartney of The Beatles were continuing to confound Britain's old class prejudices. 'I can remember lying in bed and hearing one of their songs, "From Me To You", playing down the street,' Sullivan would recall fondly about the so-called Fab Four. 'I'd never heard anything like it before, it was such a different sound. I'll always remember thinking: "Aren't the Americans clever." I automatically assumed that any new sound, anything good, originated from the States,

so when I found out that they were four working-class boys from a few hundred miles up the road, I was really inspired.'[8] It was still possible, Sullivan kept telling himself, in spite of the old social bias; there was still a chance for an 'ordinary' young man from Balham to make it big via the uses of literacy.

While the challenge of writing continued to inspire him, however, the dull routine of the day job continued to bore him, so he left Watney's and, for want of another way to earn a regular wage, went to work with his father as a trainee plumber. It did not take long for him to realise that he had made a great mistake: he had no real interest in plumbing and was consequently careless, causing frequent floods.

Determined to find a way to better himself before it was too late, he resolved to teach himself some of the things that he had allowed to pass him by during his days at school, devouring books on a wide range of subjects and trying his best to broaden his knowledge. He also continued to write in his spare time, still hopeful that, one day, an idea would spark something genuinely special. As what he called a 'brain exercise', he would open newspapers on random pages (just like he had heard that John Lennon had done prior to conjuring up such songs as 'A Day In The Life') and pick out a story to use as source material for a script. The ambition remained unabated.

He was still labouring as a maintenance plumber while striving to develop as a writer when, in 1972, he met an attractive young secretary called Sharon in the upmarket Chelsea Drugstore pub (mentioned, rather ominously, in the Rolling Stones song 'You Can't Always Get What You Want') on the King's Road. They got on well, and started dating, but Sullivan went out with her a few times before daring to mention his dream of exchanging his tool kit for a typewriter. Sharon was

earning more than he was at the time, but, in spite of any misgivings she might have felt, she continued seeing him and listening to his writerly ambitions, and, two years later, they married.

Sullivan – now living with Sharon in a two-roomed council flat at Rossiter Road in Balham – kept up his strategy of bombarding the BBC with sample scripts, and refused to be disheartened by any rejection letter that came back: 'I used to drive past the BBC's TV Centre in west London and I used to look at it like a castle that I had to somehow or other breach.'[9] One day, he came up with an idea for a sitcom that really captured his imagination: an unemployed young man from south London who had convinced himself that he was a dangerous revolutionary and the self-appointed leader of the 'Tooting Popular Front'.

'I knew it was my best idea yet,' said Sullivan, who had known such a character in a local pub (The Nelson Arms) who was always spouting radical political clichés while never seeming to do anything remotely practical. During an era in Britain when there seemed to be a bewildering array of Marxist, Western Marxist, Marxist–Leninist, Trotskyist, anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, revolutionary socialist and neo-communist splinter groups arguing angrily amongst each other, and it almost seemed *de rigueur* for students to decorate their walls with blood red Che Guevara posters while parroting some or other type of clumsy political jargon (a fashion mocked with great relish by *Private Eye* via the umming and erring character of 'Dave Spart'), the relevance of the comic theme was abundantly clear. Calling his proposed sitcom *Citizen Smith*, Sullivan worked hard on the sample script – believing that its topical revolutionary theme had real potential – and then pondered

the most appropriate strategy for submitting it. Knowing that the script represented his best work yet by far, his greatest fear was rejection, and what he would do if it failed to work out.

Determined not to squander this opportunity, Sullivan considered his options as carefully as possible and concluded that his best chance would be to adopt a Trojan Horse-style strategy: get a very basic job at the BBC, learn from within how the organisation functioned and then seek out a suitable patron. He thus applied to the Corporation, on 19 September 1974, and, much to his surprise, was not only invited for an interview but subsequently (on 18 November) given a position in the props department at Television Centre. Feeling emboldened by his good fortune now that he was finally inside the 'castle', he soon engineered a move to scene shifting, which brought him closer to the actual business of filming, and started studying who did what on the set.

One evening, as he went about his usual duties, a colleague pointed out someone – a tall, stick-thin, chain-smoking individual – who was deemed to be very special indeed: Dennis Main Wilson. The name, at least, was well-known to Sullivan, as indeed it was, at the back of their minds, to millions of other comedy fans. Dennis Main Wilson was the name that had been heard, as producer, at the end of countless popular radio shows, including *Hancock's Half-Hour* and *The Goon Show*, and was the name that appeared at the conclusion of some of the BBC's most admired television sitcoms, including *The Rag Trade*, *Sykes and A . . .* and *Till Death Us Do Part*. He was one of the Corporation's most experienced, influential, outspoken and independent-minded producer/directors, having worked there since the early 1940s and battled long and hard to keep the meddling 'management' a safe distance

away from himself and the talent. The running joke among some of his colleagues was that he was rarely to be seen without sporting two pairs of glasses – one on the bridge of his nose and the other pair, one containing beer and the other one whisky, in his hands – but nobody doubted his passion for programme-making.

Sullivan knew, immediately, that this was a man who, if he liked a new idea, would really fight for it to reach the screen. Somewhat intimidated by the double-barrelled name and what seemed from a distance to be a brash and brusque 'RAF officer' sort of manner, the would-be scriptwriter was anxious about making contact with such an eminent broadcasting figure, but, eventually, he plucked up the courage to sneak into the crowded BBC bar – where Main Wilson was known to go through the daily lunchtime ritual of sipping half a pint of bitter followed by a small glass of Bell's whisky – and make himself known. 'I said, "I thought I'd introduce myself, my name's John Sullivan, because we're going to be working together soon."'[10] Main Wilson, understandably, thought Sullivan would be working on one of his shows, but, upon discovering that this props man was actually proposing a script, was sufficiently impressed by the sheer gall of Sullivan's approach to offer some friendly advice and encouragement over a drink.

Main Wilson was a good choice as a potential patron. Born in Dulwich and grammar school-educated, he remained, at least by the traditional standards of the BBC, something of a maverick (acutely suspicious of authority since the war, when one of his jobs was writing satirical anti-Nazi propaganda for broadcast all over Europe, he empathised instinctively with the workers on the studio floor no matter how high he rose up the TV hierarchy), and he rather enjoyed the unpredictability

that came with the more unconventional of creative spirits. This, after all, was the man who had won the trust and respect of the likes of Spike Milligan, Tony Hancock, Eric Sykes, Peter Sellers, Marty Feldman, John Fortune, Barry Humphries and Johnny Speight. He was no romantic – having been through a hard war, he was realistic to the verge of seeming cynical – but he seized on anything and anyone that struck him as genuine and lifted his spirit.

He had been the one, for example, who in the late 1940s had responded to an audition from a young scriptwriter/stand-up named Bob Monkhouse by eschewing the standard BBC marking system and simply sending on a memo that said: 'WOW!'[11] He had also been the one who, early in the 1960s, had spotted the potential in a modest production exercise by a trainee director called Dick Clement (who had co-written a comic story with his friend Ian La Frenais), and thanks to Main Wilson's enthusiasm and energetic support the project ended up growing into *The Likely Lads*. Writers always fascinated him and, when he found good enough reasons to have faith in them, he became their finest and fiercest ally.

Main Wilson's immediate advice to Sullivan was for him to sharpen his skills and heighten his profile by going off and attempting to write sketches for shows such as *The Two Ronnies*. Sullivan did as he was told, and, once he had some material (revolving around two Cockney blokes – Sid and George – chatting in a pub), he took advantage of the fact that he was currently working on the set of *Porridge* by slipping the scripts to Ronnie Barker. The following week, Barker called Sullivan over, asked him if he thought he would be able to come up with any more material, and then arranged for him to be put on a contract. The budding scriptwriter was suddenly in business.