



CLOSE-UP

Doomwatch

**'At least half the stories we did came true!'
– Robert Powell**

The environmental clock stands at one minute to midnight – but fear not, there's a new quango in town and it's staffed by fag-puffing intellectuals, as happy debating ethics as embarking on a little breaking and entering ... before capping the evening off getting 'stoned' down the boozier, of course.

Boasting TV's most urgent theme ever (courtesy of Max 'Mind Your Language' Harris), *Doomwatch* was a shockingly prescient drama, created by Dr Kit Pedler and Gerry Davis. The duo had met on *Doctor Who* – where they'd created the Time Lord's second-best enemies, the Cybermen – and were now bringing things down to Earth with a series drawing on their shared interest in environmental issues.

As Pedler gravely opined: 'We're living on a leasehold planet and we don't ever pay the ground rent.'

In an interview for *Radio Times*, Davis set the scene. '[Doomwatch is] the code-name of a government department set-up to keep a private eye on the forms of research which can produce [environmental] hazards – and stop them from getting out of hand.'

'They're a highly strung, highly independent team, and this doesn't go down well with the authorities.'

Leading the charge was bluff, cardigan-wearing Dr Spencer Quist (John Paul). A brilliant academic with a clubby, post-War sense of fair play, he was all too aware the Department for the Observation and

Measurement of Scientific Work (to give it its posh name) had been set up as a sop towards 'green' issues. But he gave *Doomwatch* its teeth, and when not nipping off to Beeston, he was bullishly interrogating the Irresponsible Boffin Of The Week, or going toe-to-toe with the ruling classes – represented by the decanter-owning Minister (a pre-Reggie Perrin John Barron)

In contrast to Quist, colleague Dr John Ridge (Simon Oates) was a loud, brash, mutton-chopped evocation of the go-head '70s. Similarly intelligent, he was an unashamed drinker, dabbler in fashion (Oates once wore a dog collar throughout an episode simply to win a bet) and an enthusiastic exponent of the exclamation, 'Stone me!'

Plus, he had an eye for what he happily referred to as 'the fairer sex' ...

'I like ladies and I put myself about a bit,' remembers Oates. 'And why not? So [producer Terence Dudley] let me play with that in the series. He'd put me and whoever the lady was together, and we'd get on a bit.'

Completing the triumvirate was wet-behind-the-ears scientist Toby Wren (a breakthrough role for Robert Powell). A wide-eyed everyman – albeit a predictably intellectual one – he developed a

habit of helpfully explaining the plots to secretary Pat Hunnisett (Wendy Hall).

'Suppose science produced a plastic-eating agent to destroy plastic waste and stop it from clogging our rivers,' postulated Davis, by way of a preview to episode one. 'And suppose some of the stuff was inadvertently carried onto an aircraft. And suppose it got loose...'

Detailing the devastating effects of these suppositions, 'The Plastic Eaters' set out the show's stocks in trade: A frighteningly plausible scenario gone crackers, stonewalling government officials, lengthy moral arguments played at full volume and some throwaway sexism to tickle the dads ('[Pat] would have introduced us,' Ridge tells Wren, 'but I pinched her bum before lunch').

Doomwatch represented the first knockings of cynicism in mainstream drama. Everyone in a tie was suspicious, everyone in a cravat a revolutionary. Whitehall meant whitewash, big business was bad. Heterosexual men referred to other heterosexual men as 'darling' in a fashion that seemed terribly provocative. It was all rather exciting, and newspaper critics were begrudgingly impressed.

'It makes acceptable viewing, with an edge of alarm,' declared *The New Statesman*. 'It makes you think,' reckoned the *Morning Star*. And in *The Guardian*, Nancy Banks-Smith opined: 'There is no longer any need for thriller writers to invent a menace from Mars. Horror is here and now and in newspaper clippings.'

The blue touch paper was lit, and other subjects entered the programme's purview – genetic engineering, chemical waste, subliminal advertising, noise pollution, surveillance systems ... and the use of hormones in fish farming (in short: men with breasts).

Along the way, the show developed a reputation for the prescience of its plots – several of which were mirrored by real life news stories.

Above: The series launched with this striking Radio Times cover, showing a twisted model 'plane as if attacked by the plastic virus

DOOMWATCH

Created by: Kit Pedler, Gerry Davis and Terence Dudley

Starring: John Paul (Dr Spencer Quist), Simon Oates (Dr John Ridge), Robert Powell (Toby Wren), Joby Blanshard (Colin Bradley), John Barron (The Minister)

Debuted: Monday 9 February 1970, BBC1

Left: The Byronic pallor of *Doomwatch* poster boy Toby Wren (Robert Powell)



Above: *Doomwatch* stalwarts; left to right, scientific measurement's silver fox Dr Quist (John Paul), white-coated lab boffin Colin Bradley (Joby Blanshard) and ladies' man and wearer of rakish ties Dr Ridge (Simon Oates)



Above: Ridge discovers his latest squeeze has become rat food in the supper-spilling conclusion to classic episode 'Tomorrow, The Rat'

However, it was a botched contract negotiation that ensured series one ended on a headline-grabbing note ...

'Amazingly,' remembers Robert Powell, '[the producers] didn't make me sign an option for another series – so halfway through making *Doomwatch*, when it was actually on air, Kit Pedler and Gerry Davis came and said, "Well, obviously now it's a hit, you'll stay". And I said, "No, the bigger the hit, the more I want to go".

'They said, "Are you sure? How do you want to go?" "Irrevocably".'

Thus, come November, Toby Wren was blown up trying to defuse a bomb. The result was the biggest postbag *Radio Times* had received since the war, and Robert Powell was wheeled out to pen a

Below: Scriptwriters Pedler and Davis wrote three novels based on the series. These were published in paperback by Pan – these books were not officially endorsed by the BBC and so featured none of the regular *Doomwatch* characters



missive in an effort to calm the readership.

'The reaction to Toby's death surprised me,' he confessed. 'I didn't realise people took it that seriously – there really were tear-stained letters.' Further change was in the air for series two ... When a Mr Cloake wrote to the publication highlighting the show's lacklustre female quotient, Terence Dudley was next with the calming words.

'Let me hasten to assure Mr Cloake that I share his enthusiasm for the ladies,' he declared, 'and that in the next series, *Doomwatch* recruits an attractive woman scientist to adjust the balance. Those poor cloistered lads won't know what's hit 'em'.

The newcomer was Dr Fay Chantry (played by Jean Trend – a 'real dish' reckoned Gerry Davis), who'd join the line up from the fourth episode.

Having notched up audiences of around 12 million first time out, *Doomwatch* returned with all due haste in December. 'We intend to discomfort, shock and provoke,' warned Davis. The first episode certainly had a fair pop at that. Entitled 'You Killed Toby Wren', it saw an embittered Ridge laying full responsibility for his colleague's death on Quist, who – wracked with guilt – succumbed to a departmental investigation. However, when the histrionics were out of the way, it was business as (un)usual for the team ... Except that, with Robert Powell gone, things just didn't feel the same.

'[He was] a great loss to me,' remembers Oates, 'to us – to the series.'

In addition, behind-the-scenes tensions were flaring between producer Dudley and script merchants Pedler and Davis. The result? Storylines became progressively less gripping – one pre-title sequence sting simply being The Minister declaring, 'He's drunk! Dr Quist is drunk!' (alas, even that turned out to be just jet lag).

Eventually Davis and Pedler quit, leaving Dudley in sole charge of the third series in 1972. But they didn't go quietly, lambasting the run's opening episode, 'Fire and Brimstone', as 'absolutely awful – a mad scientist gone amok yet again'. That effort, coincidentally, had been written by their former producer ...

Oates, too, was keen to jump ship. 'The ideas were harder to find for the writers,' he



recalls. 'It got to a point where I thought enough's enough.'

Fittingly, the 'mad scientist' in 'Fire and Brimstone' had been good old Ridge himself, who – having gone a tad potty (from paint fumes, if you can believe that) – threatened to destroy humanity unless the world's governments got behind his anti-pollution campaign. Understandably, he didn't show his face around *Doomwatch* much after that.

There were other problems too. An episode about censorship, 'Sex and Violence', was (with no sense of irony) banned. This was ostensibly because it featured footage of a genuine military execution, but was more probably thanks to its unsubtle and possibly actionable parodies of Mary Whitehouse, Cliff Richard and Lord Longford.

It was also a rather dull affair, kicking off with a Women's Institute meeting in which Dot Cotton off of *EastEnders* addressed the throng: 'Well, today's subject is permissiveness. We all agree, I think, that it's getting too much. You look around you today and all you see is nudity and filth.'

Another tale – 'The Devil's Demolition' – was abandoned before production, and the final

story, 'The Killer Dolphins', turned out to be a mundane treatise on mammals turned malicious.

'Last night's close-of-the-season episode ... was a fairly mediocre affair,' wrote Richard Last the following morning in the *Daily Telegraph*. 'If *Doomwatch* survives, and on the whole I hope it does, [it needs] to secure a tenable balance between the elements of ecology, science fiction and melodrama.'

Alas, it didn't. Yes, there had been a 1972 feature film spin-off starring Ian Bannen, but that had only sported walk-ons for the regular cast. And, yes, Davis and Pedler made much talk of creating a similar show for ITV, however nothing came of that. *Doomwatch* just ran out of puff.

It had been a series characterised by a searing, self-conscious intelligence, which blazed a trail through a slew of credible issues. Dramatically, at its peak, nothing could touch it. On other occasions it all got a bit too much – how many shows would feature a dad moaning his son had been expelled from school for 'quasi-biological psycho-genetic reasons'? But even in the doldrums, there was always something to enjoy – normally a tart exchange between our heroes and some Rotarian from the cabinet.

'We're very broadminded in Pall Mall these days, Ridge,' says another Whitehall weasel. 'Well,' says the dashing doc, ready to go to war on this week's big issue, 'make mine a large brandy!'

Left: Pipe Smoker of the Year 1970 (Scientific Action Hero Section) – Dr John Ridge



Above: The producers of *Doomwatch* before their fall out; left to right – Dr Kit Pedler, Terence Dudley and (in Ridge-style neckerchief) Gerry Davis

Below Left: *Doomwatch*'s second *Radio Times* cover recounted the last sticky seconds of Toby Wren's life as he attempted to defuse a bomb. The third showed a desperate Ridge poised to bring the world to ransom with a fistful of deadly anthrax spores.

