

Poldark Country

MORE THAN 40 YEARS SINCE THE FIRST TV ADAPTATION OF WINSTON GRAHAM'S EPIC TALES, CORNWALL TODAY SPENT THE DAY ON SET OF THE LONG-AWAITED NEW BBC SERIES

Words by **Viki Wilson**, photographs courtesy of the **BBC**

I am sitting in a hedgerow beneath a towering engine house at Botallack, near St Just, which has been carefully transformed into Winston Graham's Wheal Leisure for the BBC re-make of Poldark, due to air in March. It is midsummer, and the sun is relentless. Its rays beat down not only from above, but are reflected from the vast, glassy blue backdrop of the Atlantic stretched out behind the ruins of the mine buildings.

Just a few feet away are actors Aidan Turner and Kyle Soller (playing Ross Poldark and his cousin Francis). Dressed in the garb of 18th century Cornish gentry, they are in deep conversation, surrounded by the BBC film crew, cameras, sound recording equipment and utter, utter silence.

It is at this point, that I realise, with growing distress, that I am definitely going to break into a loud, hacking cough.

Die-hard fans of the Poldark stories, either through the famed 1970s TV adaptation starring Robin Ellis, or the books written by Winston Graham, will appreciate the irony of this situation. Without wishing to give too much away to those discovering the tales for the first time, there is one character, in particular, who would identify with my predicament. Actor Alex Arnold, who plays Poldark's young miner friend Jim Carter, is sitting next to me on the hedge. In the story, Jim develops a lung condition with dramatic consequences. Thankfully,

someone passes me a bottle of water, and I avoid a similar fate.

Alex is understanding. He's spent a good deal of time on set himself, as like many other members of this stellar cast, he is an actor of calibre and experience. He is familiar to younger TV fans through his role in the popular E4 teen drama *Skins*, as well as playing roles in recent ITV and BBC dramas. Like many of the team here today, it is his first time in Cornwall. It has been the most glorious, hot summer almost since they arrived in April. But dressed in his miner's rags today, just before he films a scene, his thoughts are in the darker times and places of Poldark's Cornwall.

"Life was very hard for the likes of Jim Carter," Alex tells me. "At a young age, he's forced to become the man of his young family, and he works hard for them. Because he's chosen to work in the mines so he can earn more money, he has a horrible lung condition. It's very easy to romanticise the Cornwall of those times, but life was far from easy for many of these characters."

It's a theme echoed by the leading man: Irish actor Aidan Turner, who recently graced the silver screen as dwarf Kili in the *Hobbit* trilogy. Turner's casting as the heroic Captain Ross Poldark - handsome son of a Cornish mine owner who returns to his home from the American War of Independence - has been met with widespread enthusiasm. On set, Turner

certainly emits the dark, brooding presence that you might associate with Captain Poldark; at just under 6ft in height (despite his recent role in *The Hobbit*), he strides around the set in heavy coat, hat and boots despite the melting heat, with the aura of a man on a very serious mission.

In the six or seven hours we spend on the set, he barely has a moment to himself, and in those brief times, it is clear that he, like Alex, is very immersed in the life and times of a man in a Cornwall very different to the lazy summertime of 2014. "The Cornwall ►

poldark

of 1783, when the story begins, was a very different place,” he says. “Living was a lot harder, you have no idea how much until you start researching. Even small chores like washing clothes and getting fresh water were so hard.

“There is a scene where Ross is building a stone wall, but when you actually try to do that, your hands are destroyed immediately, the stones are so heavy. And that’s before you even start getting into the mining! Inside the mines it is so dark, there’s no air and if your candle goes out it’s impossible to light it again. Travelling and eating was so hard too. If the pilchards didn’t come in, no one ate, and that did happen a lot. Cornwall really was the wild South West and a million times different to London at the time.”

Despite his insanely busy filming schedule, Turner has found a great deal to enjoy in the Cornwall of modern times. “Every location was stunning, and we were welcomed so much,” he says. “At a beach near St Just where we filmed, they opened up the coffee shop and sold us pasties until 4am!” Sadly as leading man, he has not had as much time off to enjoy the beach as much as some of his co-stars. He’s a little envious to hear that Kyle Soller has enjoyed swimming in the sea a lot over the last few weeks. “He had time to do that!” he gasps.

Even so, he has enjoyed filming in beautiful locations all around the county. “It’s just fantastic here. The Botallack mines are amazing to see,” he says. “This is where they shot the original Poldark. To see the mines and scale of them, although quite bare and run down now, what they entailed up close was really insightful into how this area worked.”

Put together this very talented cast, alongside an award-winning crew and the charm and depth of Winston Graham’s original characters and stories, and there is real promise that this new BBC period drama will be an enduring success. It’s also an exciting prospect for raising the profile of Cornwall, which appeared at its absolute finest for the filming of this series – much of which took place in the county. Poldark’s house, Nampara, is set in a cottage on Bodmin Moor; mining locations are spread along the north coast and around St Just; and the historic port of Charlestown also features in the series.

The cast also includes Cornish actors. Tristan Sturrock plays Jim’s father-in-law, Zacky Martin. Now Bristol based, Tristan was born and bred in Cornwall; well-known for his work with Kneehigh, he also starred in the film Saving Grace as well as TV hits including Doc Martin and last Easter’s BBC remake of Jamaica Inn. “Many of the cast and crew haven’t been to Cornwall before,” says Tristan. “It’s a wonderful time to visit for the first time, and everyone down here has been so friendly and welcoming. It does make me feel proud. And the cast

really are incredible - it’s very exciting to be a part of this.”

The initial adaptation of Poldark, aired by the BBC between 1975 and 1977, was one of the most successful TV series of all time, averaging audiences of 15 million and sold to 40 countries around the world. So it is little wonder that news of this new production has been greeted with such delight. “When we initially pitched the idea to the BBC, they commissioned it straight away, which is practically unheard of,” says producer Eliza Mellor. “But when you consider how successful it was for them, along with the fact that it has been 40 years since the first series, you can understand why there is so much enthusiasm for this production.” Once again, rights have been sold globally and the series will run in the USA from June 2015.

This first series covers the first two Poldark books: Ross Poldark and Demelza. These were adapted by award-winning writer Debbie Horsfield who, until now, was better known for modern tales including The Riff Raff Element and Cutting It, the latter set in a Manchester hairdressing salon. “It’s true that Debbie was known for more contemporary works,” says executive producer Karen Thrussell. “But she was the first person to come to mind. If you read the books, the story is very much centred on the relationships between the main characters, and the essential nature of those relationships is to some extent timeless. Debbie is hugely talented at writing about those relationships, which is why we felt she would be the right person for this job; happily, she was very keen to do it.”

Horsfield admits she was shocked at the approach, but quickly came around to the idea of writing what will be her first period drama. “I had never watched the original TV series,” she reveals. “As I was about to go on holiday, I took the books with me so I could see what all the fuss was about. I think by page three or four, I had decided that this was a project I definitely wanted to do.”

She continues: “When you write for television, a good deal of the characterisation has to be created through dialogue. If you go back to the first few pages of Ross Poldark, and read the exchange between Ross’s father, Joshua and his uncle, Charles, you can see immediately why any scriptwriter would be drawn to his books. In a script, you should be able to tell who the characters are even if the names are taken out, because the way they express themselves and their pattern of speech should reveal who is speaking. Read that short introduction and you can see how Graham writes this way instinctively. As a result, the characters come alive, off the page.”

Very deliberately, Horsfield delayed watching the original TV series until she had written at least four new episodes. “I wanted to start by going back to the book, and write it as the



book told the stories,” she says. It is also very clear that both Horsfield and Winston Graham were extremely thorough in their historical research. “When I started to do my own research, I quickly discovered that Winston Graham had done most of it already, in extremely thorough detail. For example, I would look into the common epidemics of the times. What sort of symptoms would you see? What does fever actually look like? How would you accurately describe a gangrenous arm? I would find the answers, then go back to the books and see that Winston Graham had already done it all.”

When researching Cornish dialogue, Debbie was assisted by Merv Davey, deputy grand bard of Gorsedh Kernow, as well as using lexicons of Cornish dialogue and surnames common in the late 18th century. “I have loved writing this series,” she sighs, gazing at the activity along this beautiful stretch of the coast path. “I love being here in Cornwall right now. I’m aware there was a huge following for the previous series, not to mention those who love the original books, but I can tell you that the reaction to this new adaptation has been fantastic. People are very excited.”



FIND OUT MORE

Read extended interviews with cast and crew, including Aidan Turner and see a map of the filming locations around Cornwall at www.cornwalltoday.co.uk/poldark



A rising Cornish star

MEET POLDARK CAST MEMBER GRACEE O'BRIEN, FROM TRURO

Words by **Viki Wilson**



A face to watch in the new series is 17-year-old Gracee O'Brien from Truro. Gracee landed the part of one of the characters, Jinny Carter after auditioning through the Cornwall Youth Theatre.

"I was so, so shocked to receive the call telling me I had the part and it did take a long time to sink in," says Gracee. "I had attended an open audition for Demelza which was spread out to several Cornish youth theatre groups. Then a few weeks later, the casting team called me to ask if I would go to London and audition for the part of Jinny." After getting the role, Gracee then spent the summer acting in her first TV role alongside a

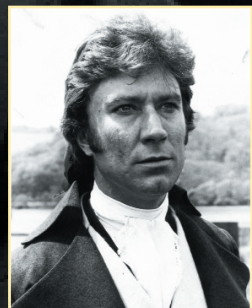
cast of well-known actors. "They were all so welcoming, Beatie Edney who plays Prudie was exceptionally good to me. Aidan has been lovely too and I had a lot of scenes with Eleanor Tomlinson, who plays Demelza. She was so helpful and generous towards me, and I will always be grateful for that.

"I do enjoy acting on TV more than the stage now, I think, it's a much more subtle performance. Jinny's story involves some very adult and emotional scenes and I was worried about how I would do that. I am young, and I wondered if I could cry on demand and express the kind of emotion that complex and very traumatic scenes needed. But when we were filming, in the scenes, with the costume, lighting, I found I was able to work off the other actors performances and really reach those places that I needed to go to so that I could portray Jinny." ■

A word from the Captain

ACTOR ROBIN ELLIS RECALLS THE 1970S BBC PRODUCTION OF POLDARK

Words by **Viki Wilson**



The much-loved star of the original 1970s adaptation of Poldark has his part to play in the new series.

Robin Ellis appears as the Reverend Halse and filmed two scenes – courtroom and ballroom – both in Bristol where Mammoth Screen Productions are based.

"The cast and crew are spending a lot of time in Cornwall, however – more, in fact, than we did when we filmed

the original series," he told Cornwall Today. "In this series, I actually act alongside the new Ross Poldark, Aidan Turner, which was a wonderful experience. In the courtroom scene, I play a crusty old judge, and Aidan is the one challenging me, telling me what a nasty piece of work I am. The funny thing is, I remember the scene well from when I was playing Ross Poldark myself. The director came up at the end of the day and said that it was extraordinary to have two Ross Poldarks in the same room. He was very sweet and charming."

Ellis is enthusiastic, about both the new adaptation and his successor to the role. "I think Aidan Turner is going to be terrific. He is about the same age that I was, he looks wonderful and he was terrific in the scene. And I have to say this adaptation is very good, and very true to Winston Graham's books."

The original series covered the seven books Graham wrote before 1977. By the time of his death in 2003, he had penned another five books – the last, his twelfth, at the age of 92. "It's called Bella Poldark and it is very, very good, very energetic and extraordinary,"

says Ellis. "We didn't carry on the original series because there weren't the books; when there were more books, we were keen to continue, but it didn't happen. With any luck, this production will stretch to cover all the books."

The inaugural series also had the benefit of working with the novelist himself. "It was good that we had the original writer, writing characters who seemed to have a life of their own," recalls Ellis. "They were organic, and I think Winston felt if he wrote outlines of his stories, they wouldn't be true to his original characters and I think we felt the same."

Of course, the show was hugely popular, and Ellis' portrayal of Ross Poldark remains a seminal moment in period television drama. "It didn't feel like a huge show when we were originally filming the series. It was just another job, albeit a good job – the stories were good, the characters were good and people were beginning to like us a lot, but you can't legislate for that kind of success," he recalls, modestly.

"It is very touching in an actor's life to have that kind of legacy and I have always been extremely grateful that that happened to me. I look back with enormous pleasure and warmth on those times, and it is very nice for me that the interest has been revived. I think the production company has chosen the right moment; you can do costume drama with a straight face now, whereas in the times of Monty Python or Blackadder, it wouldn't have felt right. But the recent success of Downton Abbey and similar period dramas has laid the groundwork for more, and they have become popular again."

Hear Robin talking about Poldark and his book Healthy Eating For Life at www.cornwalltoday.co.uk/poldark ■

Poldark's treasure trove

THE WINSTON GRAHAM ARCHIVE AT THE COURTNEY LIBRARY

Words by **Viki Wilson**, Photograph reproduced with the kind permission of **The Royal Institution of Cornwall**

Fans of the Poldark novels, and indeed Winston Graham's many other books, can discover hidden gems about the stories and the author in the wonderful archive of papers and books which belonged to him, and are currently held at the Courtney Library in the Royal Cornwall Museum.

The archive was donated to the museum by Dr Andrew Graham, Winston's son, following an exhibition about the author's life and works at the museum in 2007. It comprises a wealth of material, including original handwritten manuscripts, research notes, editions of his novels, and also very personal documents, such as the rejection letters for his very first novels, and the first letter of acceptance. There are even school reports, complete with ironic commentary from his headteacher, and what appears to be his very first attempt at writing a story as a young child.

It is fascinating to look through the handwritten manuscripts of the Poldark novels, which match almost perfectly the finished text in the published books. Written in leather-bound books, the manuscripts offer a marvellous insight into how the author put his stories onto the page, with the various notes and crossings out all carefully documented so the books could be translated into print.

There is also much evidence of the incredibly detailed research that Winston Graham carried out. For example, in just one folder, relating to one small part of a story, there are vintage books on steam engines, schematics of mining equipment along with photographs and academic journals on the subject. At other times it seems Graham has drawn his inspiration from a simple postcard with a photograph of an 18th century stagecoach on the back.

Some of the notes that Graham made also reveal telling insights into the inspiration for the stories. In one document, Graham has sketched out the Poldark family tree, going back not just one, but two generations from brothers Joshua and Charles, who are the older generation at the start of the very first book. The extent of this family tree caused Andrew Graham to remark that it almost seemed as if it was based on a real family, and that perhaps it was.

There are also various editions of Winston Graham's books, which numbered more than 50, beginning with 1934's *The House With The Stained Glass Windows*, through to his final, poignant *Memoirs Of A Private Man*, published the year he died in 2003. It is notable that Graham's novels were published throughout the war years – the Poldark series began with *Ross Poldark* in 1945, and ended with *Bella Poldark* in 2002.

Despite his enormous success and huge following, Winston Graham never sought the limelight, remaining – as the title of his final book reveals – a private man. But as Graham himself writes at the end of his book: "I have now written a great many novels, and must through them have surely revealed a

fair amount of my own nature and personal feelings. Let that suffice."

For those who were enchanted by his stories, the intricate detail of his research, the vivid descriptions of Cornwall and the characters who seemed to step off the page straight into your imagination, this archive is an incredibly valuable legacy which sheds even more light into the life and works of this much-loved author. ■

The Winston Graham Archive is available, with prior appointment, to the public through the Courtney Library at the Royal Cornwall Museum. If you are not a member of The Royal Institution of Cornwall then in order to access the library and its collections, you will need to purchase a Library Research Pass (£4.50) from the museum. For an appointment, call 01872 242786 or e-mail ric@royalcornwallmuseum.org.uk Information is available at www.royalcornwallmuseum.org.uk

