

Sylvia Vetta talks to Dai Richards, who reveals how an inspirational teacher and historian Eric Hobsbawm sparked his career in television documentaries

As a public schoolboy from a well-heeled background, documentary filmmaker Dai Richards started out on a predictable career path as a barrister, specialising in town planning law.

But, he said: "I could not see myself finding that work gripping for 40 years. I was a young idealist who imagined that television was the best vehicle for changing the world!"

Born in Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire, in 1951, Dai was not expected to live. He was even baptised in an ambulance on the way to London's Great Ormond Street hospital.

But Dai thinks the frequent bouts of asthma he experienced in childhood taught him resilience – and to love books.

Aged eight, he was sent to boarding school.

"At St Piran's in Maidenhead, I was often beaten by the headmaster for talking in the changing rooms. I guess that has contributed to my lifelong dislike of unnecessary rules."

In 1964, Dai went on to Harrow, later sitting his A-Levels aged just 16.

He said: "I did not do well. I was pretty ill at the time and spent two months in hospital after the exams. When I went back for the last term of the school year, I had an inspirational young history teacher, Mr Webb.

"He gave me Eric Hobsbawm's (the controversial Marxist historian) book, *The Age Of Revolution*. Until then, history had mainly been about battles and kings and dates. That book sparked my fascination in how society worked, how people treat each other. That book has to be a candidate for the desert island."

In 1969, aged 17, Dai headed for Florence where he was meant to learn Italian alongside other British public school boys, but soon quit the language school, choosing to learn Italian in an innovative manner.

"I got a part-time job in a grocer's shop. I used to eat in a cheap restaurant where I got to know itinerant workers from the south, and learnt how tough their lives were – they lived in dormitories away from home for 11 months a year."

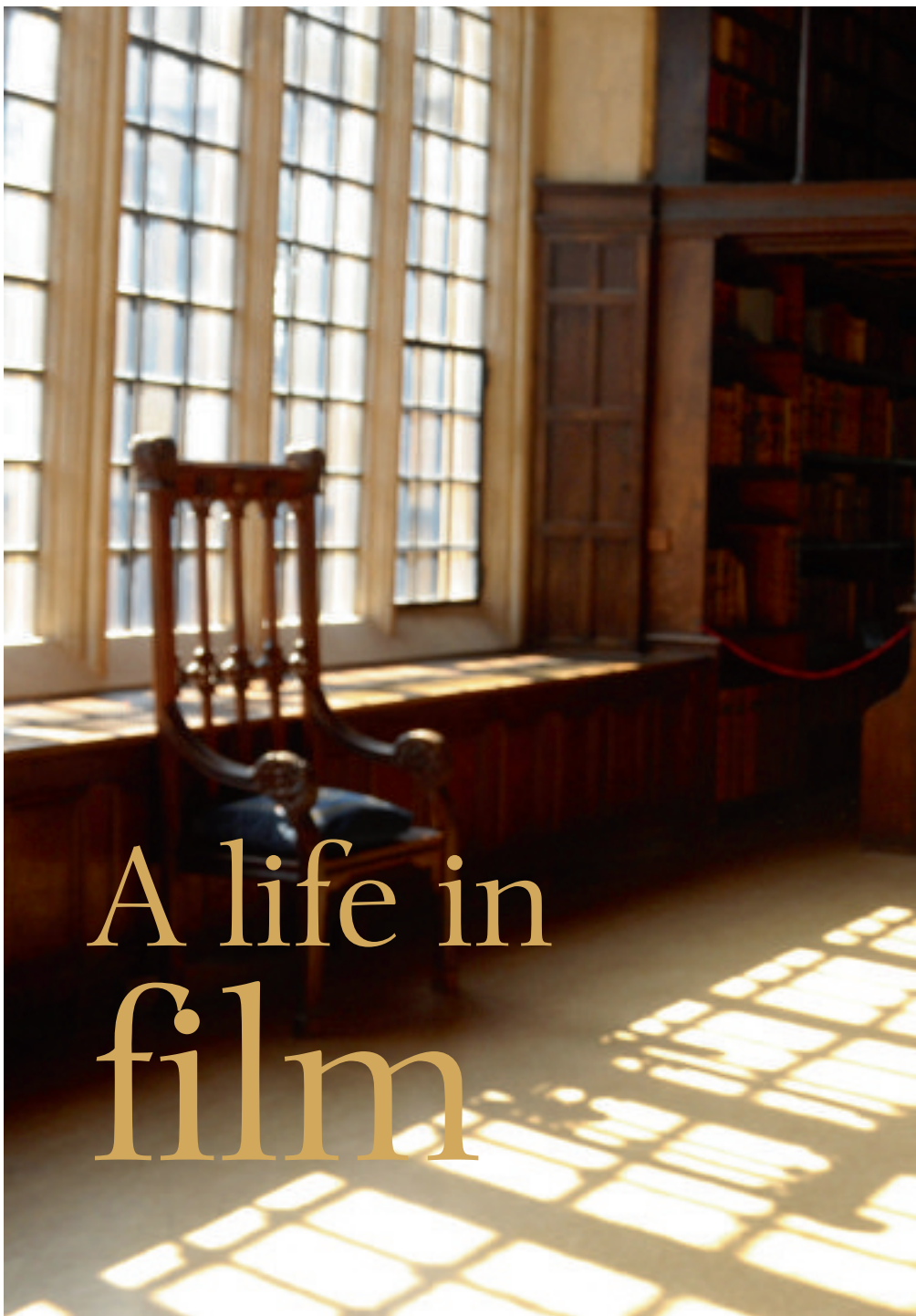
Dai also developed a passion for the Italian Renaissance.

"In those days you could just wander into the Uffizi gallery. No queues, and free for students. I was enchanted by

Botticelli's *La Primavera*. That would be rather lovely on the island."

After three years studying at law school, he became a barrister – but took time out before starting on his career.

"I hitchhiked across the USA and Canada



A life in film

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– followed by trips to Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. After that, it was rather a shock becoming a barrister, because I had moved away from that conservative world.

"My hair had grown long on my travels and I was made to cut it three times before it was deemed acceptable."

Dai spent two years in the Inner Temple from 1974-76. He said: "Back then, it was an elitist, rather pompous environment, much like

being in public school again."

He decided the barrister's life was not for him, but his experience in town planning law helped him into television.

"It was the Silver Jubilee year (1977) and Thames TV was planning a project looking at how London had developed since the Coronation and how it should develop up to 2000. I got to work on it, largely thanks to my knowledge of town planning."

The project involved commissioning academic papers, writing a paperback book and organising a two-day conference at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

"I still wanted to make TV programmes. It took me a couple of years to make the move across. In 1979, I got a job as a researcher on



**Dai Richards
in Duke
Humphrey's
Library**

Photograph:
Denis Kennedy

current affairs programmes.”

One of Dai’s happiest experiences at Thames TV was producing on a twice-weekly Channel 4 afternoon studio series presented by Mavis Nicolson.

“It was a great team of people to work with. Mavis was a good listener and interviewer and Channel 4 allowed us a wide brief,” Dai said.

In 1988, after Dai had produced a series of half-hour films, BBC’s flagship *Newsnight* programme approached Dai.

“My first film for *Newsnight* related to an incident in Gibraltar where three members of an active IRA unit had been shot dead. It was due to go out at 10.35pm.

“Through a mix-up, we realised at 7.30pm that it had not been seen by the BBC lawyers. By the time we had made the changes they required, it was 10.30pm. New to Television Centre, I was led along its warren of corridors

at speed to the transmission room where I inserted the cassette just as the presenter was introducing the piece.”

By this time, Dai had met and married, in 1986, the artist Jane Strother. They have two daughters. Poppy, now 22, has just finished a history degree at Leeds; Rhiannon, 20, is currently at Sussex University.

After *Newsnight*, Dai worked on *Panorama* from 1990-1993, when Mark Thompson, who later became director general of the BBC, was editor.

In 1992, Dai was sent to the USA to make a *Panorama* programme about how different states applied the death penalty. He was filming in Louisiana’s infamous Angola prison when he received a call from home that six-month-old Rhiannon had been taken ill with suspected meningitis.

“We were about to be shown around the

lethal injection chamber when I got the call from London.

“My team were supportive, but it was bizarre standing in that chillingly cold white room, worrying about Rhiannon while having the process of being put to death described meticulously by a large man with a surreal stutter.

“Thankfully, I learnt that evening that she did not have meningitis.”

Three of the four people whose cases they highlighted had their death sentences commuted but, Dai said: “It was not at all just because of us. We simply helped raise their profile.”

In 1991, *Panorama* decided to mark the second anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre with a film about its aftermath.

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Dai Richards with his Russian teapot

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"I went with Gavin Hewitt, the reporter on the film, to Hong Kong to try and find out how democracy activists had managed to flee China – and what happened to those who stayed behind," Dai said.

"We struggled to get leads and agreed we could give it only one more day if we were to meet the June 4 anniversary deadline. That afternoon a businessman agreed to talk to us.

"He explained how the Hong Kong Stock Exchange rallied round to raise \$1,000,000 in a day to pay the Triads to bring out dissidents and student activists who needed to escape.

"The Triads already had smuggling routes including safe houses, document forgers, and fast speed boats to cross to Hong Kong. Having got the start of the story, we were able to continue as planned, travelling incognito into The People's Republic.

"We managed to contact people linked to the underground movement. They put us in touch with dissidents who wanted to talk to us on camera, despite knowing the risk they were taking.

"The wife of a leading imprisoned trade-unionist told us on camera about her husband's show trial, and gave us the transcript of it. We reconstructed it for the film. I was guided by a Hungarian woman who had been to university in Beijing.

"We cycled around Beijing because it made it easier to avoid the plain-clothes security police. When they waved at us to stop, we pretended we did not understand, waved back, smiled, and cycled on like tourists."

In 1993, after making 14 films for *Panorama*, Dai moved to work on the BBC's history strand, *Timewatch*.

He showed me a teapot, beautifully shaped and elegantly decorated, which he had bought in Russia while making a film on the Battle of Kursk, a battle which turned out to have enormous significance in the outcome of the Second World War.

"I always brought back souvenirs from my trips for my daughters – and often for myself. I usually buy them in markets – I love markets!

"Life in Russia at that time was tough, the economy had collapsed. I was told about this

"It was the Soviets who found Hitler's body. A Russian unit in Berlin at the end of the war had found Hitler's remains buried outside his bunker but, remarkably, on their way back to Russia to present it to Stalin, they lost it."

craft market in the suburbs of Moscow.

"I bought hand-painted boxes, carved figures from Russian folk tales, and two pieces from a young couple who made ceramic teapots. I love tea, and often conduct off the record research interviews over a cuppa – people talk more openly if they relax."

While we were photographing Dai and his teapot he recalled a rather disturbing encounter he had with Hitler's skull.

Dai explained: "It was the Soviets who found Hitler's body. A Russian unit in Berlin at the end of the war had found Hitler's remains buried outside his bunker but, remarkably, on

their way back to Russia to present it to Stalin, they lost it.

"In 1946, when claimed sightings of Hitler were common, the Soviets conducted an investigation to confirm that he really was dead. The investigators dug up the area outside the Berlin bunker where he had been buried. They found parts of his skull."

The records from the investigation were kept in a safe in the basement of the National Archive in Moscow. When making a programme for the BBC about Hitler's last days in the Berlin bunker, and how he died, Dai had gained access to them.

"The records included photos of the blood-stained sofa where Hitler and Eva Braun had shot themselves before their bodies were burned and buried by SS bodyguards – and fragments of Hitler's skull."

In 1997, Dai decided to become a freelance producer. He worked as producer on a series about 50 years of Israel's conflict with its Arab neighbours for the BBC and the US Public Broadcasting Company. That series has since been used in preparing diplomats and intelligence officers going to work there.

While in Egypt, he used to visit Khan El Khalili, a large market in the narrow streets of Cairo. "I used to buy small coloured glass perfume bottles for Poppy and ceramic figures for Rhiannon. One I bought for myself depicted the old adage 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil'.

The saying comes from the Far East and is usually depicted by three monkeys – but this one is of three Arab gentlemen in long robes. It illustrates how sayings are adapted as they

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travel the world. It reminds me of my favourite city outside Oxford, Cairo. So this is another possibility for the island.”

In 2002, Dai produced and directed a series of 90-minute films about the fall of Milošević for the BBC.

He said: “Serbia was still in a state of flux. Slobodan Milošević had just lost power but was now leading the opposition. We had to tread carefully.

“Our movements and telephone calls were monitored, which quite often happens when working in countries with authoritarian governments. Serbia was a new democracy, but many of Milošević’s supporters were still running sections of the police.”

One key contact Dai made was the man who had been Milošević’s head of security. Dai described their meetings.

“He would invite us late at night. He lived on a boat 30 miles outside Belgrade, the only one at a riverside pier surrounded by security gates and armed security guards in 4X4 vehicles.

“I discovered I had things in common with this man who had such a dark side. He loved early-1960s rock music, and gave us his rendering of *Tobacco Road*, a hit for The Nashville Teens in 1964.

“Back in England I came across a copy of the book *Tobacco Road*, with a lurid cover, which I gave him. He was delighted,” Dai recalled.

“He gave us his version of how the Kosovo war began and details of who was in charge of what. It helped us piece the story together.”

Reporting on wars inevitably involves hearing harrowing tales. A schoolteacher in Kosovo was able to do more than recount his traumatic experience. When the Serbs attacked his village he buried a camcorder. His family fled but he remained behind, hiding in a nearby forest.

“When the Serbs had left, he returned to the burning village and recovered his camera. His first shots were of a friend dousing the flames in what remained of his house, Dai said.

“Going outside, he filmed bodies strewn on the ground. He never switched the camera off. He found his wife’s car abandoned where Serb paramilitaries had taken the fleeing villagers away in trucks.

Then he heard his uncle’s village had been attacked and headed there. On the way he met a friend who was speaking incoherently. The friend led him to a field where lay 30 mutilated bodies, including that of the teacher’s uncle.”

I asked Dai about the process of making these research-intensive documentary films.

He said: “For every amazing moment, there are days of searching through documents, and of unrewarding contacts and research interviews. And when you have got the story, you still need to be able to bring it to life on the screen. Good journalism, holding people to account, does not always make good TV.”

Keen to pass on some of what he has learned, Dai, 60, is now trying to embark on a new career – teaching documentary production. Several books on the subject were piled on his desk.

“Lots of authors have affected how I see things. For instance, Primo Levi. My mother, Barbara, was Jewish by ethnicity, some distant relations died in Auschwitz.

“Primo Levi was a camp survivor who wrote about the experience in an understated and



Dai Richards
with the painting
used as the cover
of Primo Levi's
novel, *If Not
Now, When?*

affecting way. The illustrator of his book covers lived near us in East London, and my wife Jane bought the original painting for the cover of *If Not Now, When?*, showing shadowy figures of partisans walking through woods in Eastern Europe.

“It is also a snow scene and I love the snow. So that picture has to be an option for the island,” he added.

What was Dai’s final choice, Hobsbawm’s book, the Botticelli, the ceramics – or the illustration?

“The original illustration – it has so many connections – art, literature, family connections and snow,” Dai decided.

Dai explained why he chose the Bodleian for

our photoshoot for this magazine.

“I go there after finishing a film or series, when looking for a new idea. I also go to flesh out an idea, to source contemporary accounts and quotes about events, read the experts’ take on whatever story I am researching.

“There is a lot more information there than you can find on the Internet, and you can probe deeper into events and ideas.

“It is also a great place to work quietly in, and has less distractions than working at home,” Dai said. “The libraries of the Bodleian are quite special. Some give unique views of Oxford, as where you gaze from a window and see the gargoyles on a building across the street.”