

Sylvia Vetta talks to crossword compiler Don Manley

This month's castaway uses many aliases, including – Duck, Pasquale, Quixote, Bradman, Giovanni, and Izetti. To uncover his secret identity, think crossword clues – and if Don or Donald springs to mind you are close to solving the riddle.

Don Manley's agile mind likes to challenge us for Donald is a crossword setter.

In his foreword to Don's book the *Chambers Crossword Manual*, another well-known Oxford-based crossword compiler – his friend and rival, Colin Dexter – describes a train journey they took together to record a television programme, called *Crosstalk*.

"At Oxford station, Don bought *The Times*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Without any assistance from me he had completed them all before we reached Reading, 23 minutes."

But Don thinks the journey might have taken a bit longer than that.

Don's story begins in Cullompton, Devon, where he was born in 1945.

He said: "My father, Chave was a commercial traveller selling animal medicines to farmers and my mother Alma was a farmer's daughter, so my roots are rural.

"We rarely took a holiday so between terms, so I often accompanied my dad on his rounds visiting farms and came to appreciate the Devon and Somerset countryside.

"My father took *The Telegraph*, *The Express* and *The Daily Mail* and did all the crosswords. On Sunday afternoons we would solve the *Radio Times* puzzle together. I was beginning to get the hang of cryptic puzzles by the age of about 13," Don recalled.

"I attended the town's primary school and after passing the eleven plus exam I went to Tiverton Grammar School. My older sister Jean became a teacher and she suggested I take the entrance exam for a foundation scholarship to Blundell's."

Blundell's is an independent school named after Peter Blundell, a wealthy Elizabethan merchant who made his fortune principally in the woollen industry.

After Blundell's death in 1601 his legacy was used to establish the school in 1604. When the school was remodelled as a public school there was a stipulation that an annual scholarship was to be awarded to a clever boy whose parents were of limited means.

Don said: "In 1958, I was that 'poor boy' and I felt rather an outsider in the public school culture. In my time a lot of the boys went into the Army and everyone was 'volunteered' into the school's Cadet Corps. Thanks to my knowledge of physics I rose to the rank of sergeant.

"More my thing was the school play. I remember playing Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In the cast, as one of my henchmen, was Robert Fox who became a distinguished journalist and covered the Falklands War for the BBC.

Don went on to study physics at Bristol University in 1963 but not before he had his first crossword published, aged 17, in *The London Evening News*.

"A visitor drew my attention to the fact that anyone could submit a crossword for publication. I remember the excitement of receiving a Coutts bank cheque in the post for

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Bradman's famous Duck

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two guineas. I noticed that the cryptic puzzles in the *Radio Times* had a different setter each week so I assumed they were sent in by readers. I thought there was no reason why I should not send them one.

"I sent several, but when they were all rejected, I wrote asking the reason. They explained that they were too untidy and on scrappy paper.

"So I improved my presentation and it worked – they published the first one I sent in 1964. My first clue in the 15-by-15 grid for the *Radio Times* was: 'Doctor refuses to work for TV series (10) (solution: Moonstrike). After that they accepted several more.

"But on the day Neil Armstrong landed on moon, I received a letter from the *Radio Times* telling me that they would not be publishing any more crossword puzzles – so that was it for a while," Don explained.

Don wanted to follow a career in science – and loved astronomy.

"I read physics at Bristol. The department was led by a Nobel prizewinner, Professor C F Powell. After graduating in 1966, I went to work as a research engineer for the Standard Telecommunications Laboratories in Harlow.

"It was the birthplace of optical fibre communications. A lot of brilliant scientists – of whom I was not one – worked for the company. It was a good experience for me learning to live on my own and meet people of different backgrounds, beliefs and circumstances.

"I grew up fast in those four years but felt that I should look for a new career. I did not want to go into teaching, even though my mother had bought me an academic gown when I graduated just in case I decided to teach!" Don said.

"My first idea was to study computer programming, but then I thought 'Why not do something using my language skills?' I was offered a publishing job in Stevenage with the Institute of Electrical Engineering, but did not fancy living in another new town. Then I saw a post advertised also in publishing at The Institute of Physics in Bristol. I applied and was accepted. Since then I have been a verbal engineer.

"I enjoyed my time as a student in Bristol, but going back in 1970 it all felt different as my friends had left. I joined a church community where I made new friends and one in particular. Susan Richardson, from Northern Ireland, had a PhD in biochemistry and so we were introduced.

"That was 1972 and we married at Christ Church, Clifton, a year later."

Don and Susan's children, Richard and Gilly, were born in Bristol. Richard, 38, is now a tax accountant in Salisbury and Gilly, 36, is a television producer and lives in London. Gilly has directed episodes of *The Apprentice*. She has two children Ferris and Gilby and Jonathan has a daughter, Charlotte.

Don spent seven years editing *The Journal of Physics D: Applied Physics* – an important peer reviewed publication. In between being a dad, when the publishing became less challenging, he was tempted to renew his interest in crossword setting.

"I resumed with very hard crossword puzzles for *Games and Puzzles* and *The Listener*. I made 50 of them which were published under my new identity of 'Duck'," Don said.



When leading walks for the Ramblers, Don is known to stop and tap a tree – an action in honour of his late father

Don believes that the origin of the use of aliases by compilers probably came from the poet Edward Powys Mathers who, in 1926, assumed the name Torquemada for his puzzles published in *The Observer*.

The crossword puzzle in the form we know it today is a fairly recent invention. On December 21, 1913, Arthur Wynne, a journalist from Liverpool, published a 'word-cross' puzzle in the *New York World*. This puzzle is frequently cited as the first crossword puzzle, and Wynne as the inventor.

Later, the name of the puzzle was changed to 'crossword'.

Wanting a new challenge, Don and his family moved to Cheltenham in 1989. He joined a young educational company called Stanley Thornes, where he commissioned and edited their first successful science textbook for schools. From there he moved to Oxford to Blackwell and then to Oxford University Press (OUP).

Don said: "Thornes took over Blackwell's educational publishing and OUP took over Nelson Thornes, so all the books I ever published are now with OUP where I finished up!

"Thornes was probably my most successful period in terms of making income for a company but I felt isolated – apart from getting on well with my authors. That is why I moved to Blackwells in 1985 and from there to OUP.

"I was fortunate too in that I inherited a house from a maiden aunt. Once the sitting

tenants left, just before we moved to Oxford I was able to sell it and our Cheltenham house and use the proceeds to put a deposit on a house in Hayward Road. Without that, we could not have afforded a home in OX2. Susan went back into the academic world," Don added.

"On the day my daughter was born in 1977, I had a phone call from Gyles Brandreth (who was then working for Hamlyn) asking me to send him a proposal for a book on cryptic crosswords. Following five of these, I sent him a proposal for a book about crosswords.

"Nothing came of it, but five years later a friend contacted me saying Hamlyn wanted him to write a book, but he added 'I think it is more your thing.' He handed me the outline proposal – it was a photocopy of the one I had sent Gyles! Somewhat disgusted, I did not follow that one up!" Don said.

Oxford seems to be the beating heart of the crossword world as Jonathan Crowther (who ran the prestigious 'Azed' clue writing competition in *The Observer*) and Colin Dexter also live in Oxford.

Don says the crossword culture is friendly – but there are divisions of opinion when it comes to what is a fair clue.

Colin, Jonathan and Don are often known as the Oxford Mafia as the three of them follow Ximenes and not the 'libertarian' school where proper grammar is disregarded.

"In 1981 I was introduced to Betty Kirkpatrick from Chambers and a few years later, she commissioned me to write *Chambers*

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Don Manley and his desert island choice – his grandfather clock

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Crossword Manual. It was a gamble for them when first published in 1986 but it stayed in print until 2010. Now, to my surprise, I am working on a new edition, "Don said.

The year 2002 was an 'annus horribilis' for the Manleys. Susan had developed a successful research career as a biochemist. When her immediate boss died the research grant ended. At the same time, daughter Gilly and Don were made redundant.

He said: "At the time I was publishing textbooks and revision guides for minority A-Level subjects like psychology and religious education and OUP decided to stop publishing new ones.

"On the day I was told of my redundancy, they offered me a taxi home which I declined preferring to cycle up the Banbury Road calling on my friend Colin Dexter on the way.

"Colin and I are two of the most successful winners of the Azed competitions. The other most successful winner is Jeremy Morse of All Souls – it was Jeremy who gave his name to Colin's detective.

"Colin also persuaded me to be Quixote in *The Oxford Times* in the 1980s. At that time Colin also set for *The Oxford Times* under the pseudonym 'Codex'.

Colin made Inspector Morse a keen solver and also used crosswords as part of the plot for his novel *The Silent World of Nicolas Quinn*.

Don recalled: "We discussed the background detail for that book and I contributed ideas to a couple of others. Colin attributed a clue to me as *The Oxford Times*' Quixote even though he wrote the clue himself. It was 'Bradman's famous duck'."

The solution is, of course 'Donald'.

"Colin has also sometimes consulted me on matters scientific. I explained Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principal to him. Colin used it in an everyday, fun if somewhat ludicrous context

in *A Way through the Woods*. The *Guardian* reviewer commented on how refreshing it was to find science in a novel."

After being made redundant Don decided to take the risk of making crossword compiling my main occupation and an just an hour after his redundancy he called *The Telegraph*.

He said: "They agreed to take me on as a floater but, after two years, I replaced the retiring Ruth Crisp, the Friday setter. I also helped set up the new *Telegraph* tough-line puzzle where I am called Giovanni.

"In the *Guardian*, I am known as Pasquale and, when compiling *The Times*' Jumbo puzzle I am 'Anonymous' – but in T2 I am Izetti (from Donizetti). In *The Financial Times* I am Bradman.

I have set well over 1,000 consecutive puzzles for *The Independent* and *The Independent on Sunday*. For more than 25 years I have been the crossword editor of *The Church Times*. On a typical day I manage one puzzle per day at best two. Over the last 11 years I have over 70,000 clues stored on my computer database."

Since compiling crosswords is a solitary, mostly indoor, occupation, Don sought midweek exercise walking with the Ramblers. He soon became a walk leader. And until recently he was walks organiser of the Oxford Ramblers.

When he leads a walk he has two somewhat eccentric habits.

He taps a tree or post on either side with his stick half way round a walk.

"It is in honour of my father. He was not a great walker but he would take me on the same rather boring walk every Sunday up the A38 and when we turned back that is what he did."

Don's other habit as a walk leader is to ask walkers to stop talking and simply listen to the sounds of nature.

Don said: "I have had to resign from my organising role this year because of the work involved in the new edition of *The Chambers*

Crossword Manual. It will have a particular emphasis on the history of crosswords coming as it does 100 years after the first puzzle was published. It will be 101 years when it is published just before Christmas."

We had come to the time when Don had to select his desert island object.

He said: "I ought to take a cricket ball to practice my mostly unsuccessful leg breaks. I am mad about cricket. I used to be an enthusiastic cricketer – although useless at it. I heard England win the Ashes while sitting in my father's car on the Somerset levels in August 1953, which was a definitive moment in my youth along with the Coronation, the ascent of Everest and Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile."

At that moment the grandfather clock in the room struck. Don smiled.

"My father knew 50 poems by heart and every Sunday morning he recited them one after the other so that he did not forget them. They included some Kipling and the whole of Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. That is why I want to take that clock. He started reciting as soon as he had shaved and expected to finish when the clock struck the hour.

"If I heard it strike on the island it would transport me back to my childhood," he said.

"I go to Littlemore primary school each week and listen to young boys aged nine-11 read and do some word-building exercises. Words are important to me.

"The words I would want on the island would be Shakespeare or a book I have not yet read – maybe William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise*.

"I would also like to purloin one of the tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn* which Susan and I saw in the Musée de Moyen Age in Paris – that could be beautiful and practical on the island. But if I can only have one thing, it would have to be the grandfather clock." 