

Tony Hancock

Archives Magazine

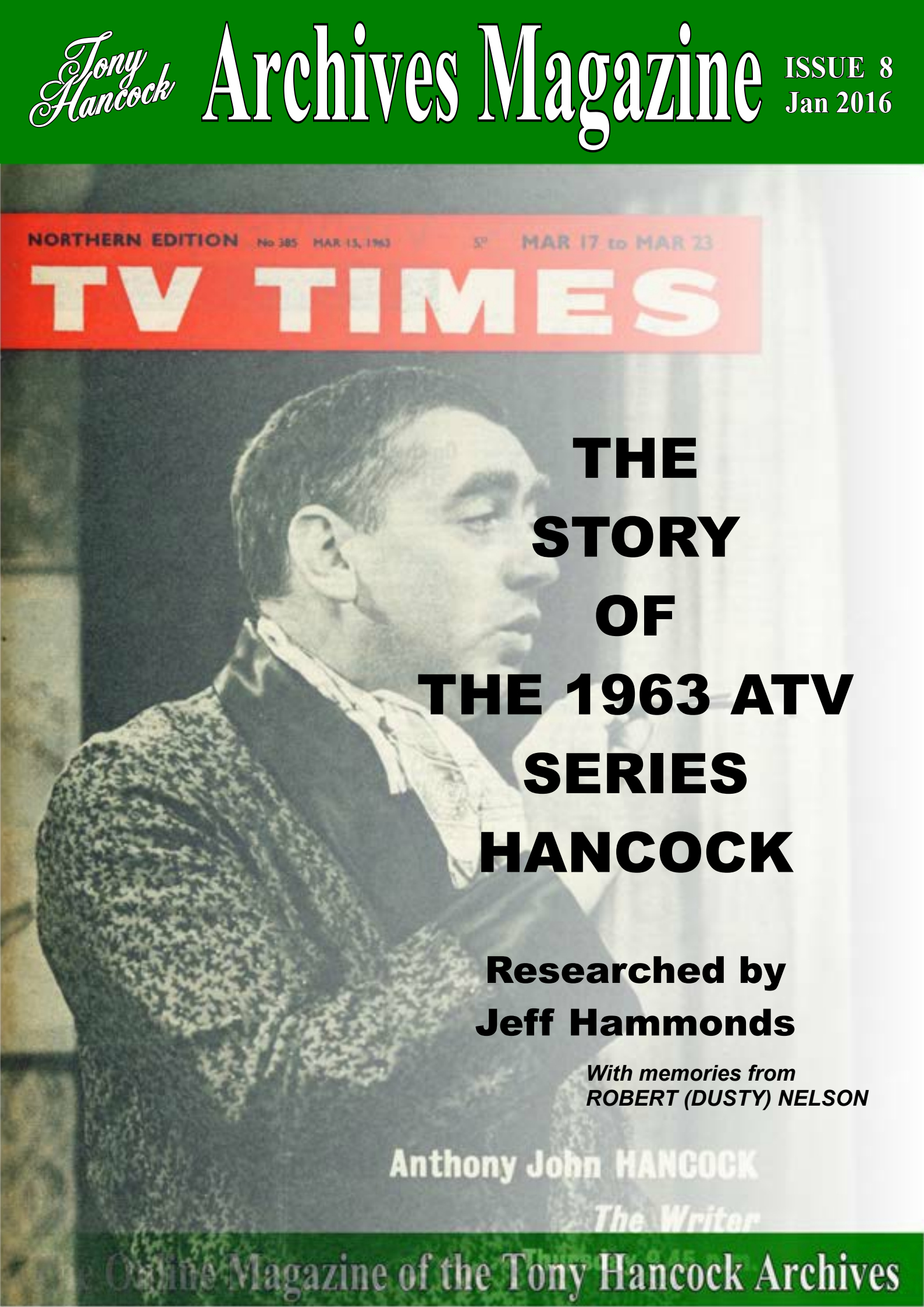
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TV TIMES



**THE
STORY
OF
THE 1963 ATV
SERIES
HANCOCK**

**Researched by
Jeff Hammonds**

*With memories from
ROBERT (DUSTY) NELSON*

Anthony John HANCOCK

The Writer

Online Magazine of the Tony Hancock Archives



"The, Succession - Son And Heir", recorded on 9th June 1961 was to be the last of the HANCOCK'S HALF HOURS for BBC Television. The next few months consisted of touring with his one-man show and with the making of the film "THE PUNCH AND JUDY MAN". Towards the end of 1962, HANCOCK was to embark on a new television series.

HANCOCK - THE ATV SERIES from Ray & Alan to Ray Alan

A research article by Jeff Hammonds

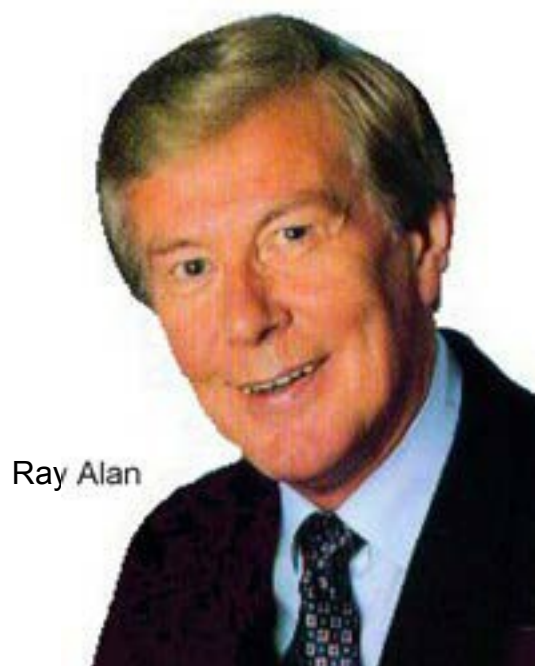
By 1962, Hancock had parted company with 23 Railway Cuttings, Ray Galton, Alan Simpson and the BBC. Tony was now on his own and preparing for his new thirteen-part series for A.T.V. He acted as his own producer, which placed additional demands upon him, which were no help to his performance. The director was Alan Tarrant, who had been a producer, but was happy to take what was in effect a step down in order to work with Hancock, whom he admired greatly.

Tony had retained Philip Oakes (his co-writer for "The Punch And Judy Man") as script advisor on the ATV series, but Oakes did not like the scripts which HANCOCK then commissioned from other people, and they split up.

HANCOCK approached ventriloquist Ray Alan, who writes under the name "Ray Whyberd", and a draft of the script emerged, which later became "The Assistant". Ray Alan remembers, "I had been asked by Tony's brother Roger if I would meet Tony to discuss the possibility of writing for him. It appeared that he had enjoyed the scripts I had written for "Bootsie And Snudge" and thought that I would be the person to write his new series."

"His wife Cicely met me at Redhill Station and drove me to their home. During the journey, she warned me that he was drinking early and not to be surprised if he was a bit under the weather when we arrived. Sadly, Tony was very much "under the weather" and despite my efforts to interest him in two ideas I had been working on, it was not until after lunch and a long sleep that he was at all responsive.

"That afternoon, he listened to my ideas and became enthusiastic about them. I spent most of that weekend working on a script I called - "The Assistant". It had Tony being confused as the new manager in a department store. When he read it for the first time, he became convinced that I was the person to write his new series. But that was to change very suddenly by the following weekend.



Ray Alan

I arrived at the house on the Saturday morning to be told that he had decided to change his image.

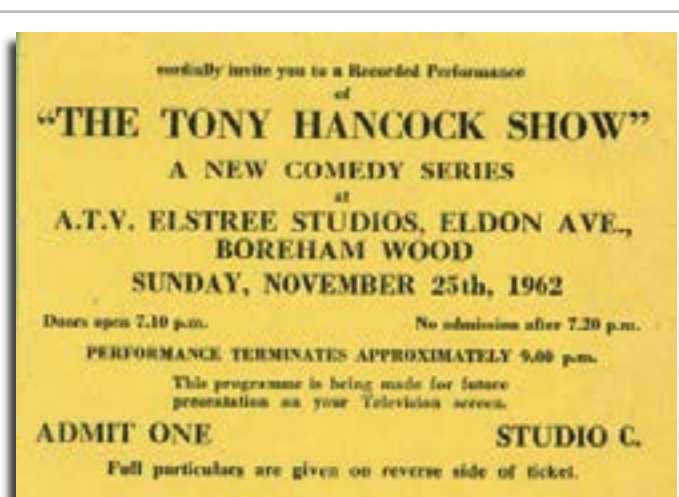
He wanted me to do a rewrite on the script and cut out all the old Hancockisms that had made him the character we loved. He wanted to change his appearance too and become smart and more "withit". I suggested that, had Laurel and Hardy changed their image, they would have been a disaster and that the same would happen to Hancock. After Cicely had agreed with me, he became thoughtful and opened another bottle of wine. I knew then that I could never work with Tony and I left, taking my two scripts with me. I agreed that Terry Nation could rewrite my scripts, providing my name (Ray Whyberd) was only on the credits as "story by". I simply did not want to be involved with what I believed to be a disaster.

The initial handful of scripts for the ATV series were written by Godfrey Harrison, a skilled writer of long experience, who wrote "A Life Of Bliss" for radio. Harrison wrote some good material for Hancock, but tended to overwrite and also turn in scripts late. After six programmes, he was replaced by Terry Nation not yet famous as the creator of the Daleks in Doctor Who and then, in an increasing atmosphere of worry, by Richard Harris and Dennis Spooner.

Their scripts were not of a very high standard, but it would not be fair to judge them on these programmes, because they were writing under pressure for a performer with whom they were not familiar and, inevitably, they could not hope to match their work to Hancock's character.

TV series began recording on 4th November 1962. One of the difficulties during series is that some shows suffered from a lack of balance between Hancock's pomposity and aggressive behaviour against his more likeable characteristics. As Galton and Simpson have said "You had to have a reason for his being pompous and nasty, and we always provided that as a matter of course. But that was thrown away and Tony was unnecessarily nasty, you can't be nasty without a reason and be funny."

Alan Simpson, "To be nasty after you have been rejected is reasonable: to be nasty before you have been rejected is gratuitous." Galton, "It's an unbelievably basic mistake that everybody made, including Tony."



A recording session entrance ticket from Nov 1962

Throughout the series, Hancock was surrounded by straight actors rather than comics and actors of a high calibre, including Martita Hunt, Allan Cuthbertson, Denholm Elliot, Geoffrey Keen, James Villiers and Derek Nimmo. Derek Nimmo recalls : "it was a sad experience working with a falling hero. I felt the situation was exasperated by those around Tony. When learning his lines, it wasn't "Why haven't you" but more "Don't worry about it, you are too good to bother with that. We'll put it on idiot boards etc." However, provided that direct comparisons with the best of the BBC work are avoided, several of the shows in the ATV series are well worth watching, with their very high production standards. In "Shooting Star", Hancock gets involved with a team making a documentary film and his complete failure to cope with the simplest instructions once the cameras are turning is extremely funny. In "The Politician", he strikes up an acquaintance with a street corner speaker (John Le Mesurier). He is encouraged to heckle the speaker as a means of drawing a crowd, but the speaker is well able to cope with Hancock's interruptions and Hancock finds himself under attack from a woman in the crowd for insulting an older man : "You ought to be horsewhipped." Hancock : "Well that dates you for a start." The next day, Hancock, fancying himself as a public speaker, attempts to get an uninterested elderly passerby to heckle him in the same manner, but Hancock tries to use the same ripostes that the original speaker had used on him. The passerby will not cooperate and Hancock finds himself under attack from the same woman, once again for insulting an older man. Then the original speaker arrives and helps Hancock to get started, but a crowd of rough's attempts to pick a fight. Hancock, unwilling to admit to cowardice, ("I could sort you out with one hand tied behind me back") agrees to fight, but only once the meeting is over and keeps it



THE ASSISTANT



SHOOTING STAR



THE MAN ON THE CORNER

going until a policeman comes by, two hours or so later. The next day, the original speaker is unable to persuade Hancock to have another go Hancock has lost his voice.

Alan Tarrant found working with Hancock a fascinating, if increasingly fraught experience: "He was a very interesting chap when he was relaxing. I remember him talking about philosophy and he gave a sort of Cockney version of various philosophies, which were hilariously funny. And he was like the character he played in a strange sort of way. He was a nervous man he started off in the Forces, of course, and he told me that once, when he was having a big dinner with Harry Secombe after a show, he said to Harry "You know we should be at the NAAFI now." He could not get over the fact that he had got so far so fast. He could not believe it."

The first shows began transmission in January 1963, at the time when Harris and Spooner's shows were being recorded. By a quirk of fate, the BBC started showing the second series of "Steptoe and Son" earlier on the same night as the first "Hancock" series. Hancock's name was



THE WRITER

enough to ensure good viewing figures for the first show. It got mixed reviews. The Times reviewer said that Hancock had shown that, if Galton and Simpson did not need him, he did not need them, but in general, critical opinion was not enthusiastic. Neither was the public.

By the end of January, the show was out of the Top Twenty in the viewing figures. Hancock blamed the difficulties with the public electricity supply, which was causing voltage reductions. He told The Daily Express, "All the viewers could see on their sets was a postage stampsize Hancock and so they switched off. There is nothing, absolutely nothing wrong with the series." More probably, the public simply did not like the changes, however slight, which had been made to the Hancock image. Whatever the reason, Hancock was having to record the remainder of the series with the knowledge that even the better shows at the start of it were not as successful as he had hoped.

It is a little alarming to watch the whole series. The early shows, if not in the Galton and Simpson class, are still well performed and highly enjoyable. The second half of the series, once the strain had begun to have its effect, is surprisingly different so much so that it is almost difficult to believe that it is the same series. One wonders how things would have gone, if more time had been allowed for recording the series and if the original script difficulties could have been overcome.



THE NIGHT OUT



THE CRAFTSMAN

Ray Alan says, "It was during this series that I last met Tony. It was so sad to watch this once great comedy giant becoming such an insecure man, completely lost in his quest to be successful again. If only he had remained the wonderful character that Galton and Simpson had created and, thank goodness, we still have the old HANCOCK shows to delight us."

But the NEW Hancock ? "Stone me...You must be joking."

Robert (Dusty) Nelson in 1962



. When I left school I joined a TV station in Melbourne.

Three of the best shows I worked on in the UK were:

Morecambe and Wise, series which I did for several years.

Benny Hill show again for several years.

. I first met Tony when he did the series for ATV.

When Tony came out to Australia to do the series for Channel 7, I was already here and because I had worked with him at ATV, I was assigned to the show and spent a lot of time with Tony and you know the rest from there!

Concerning his death, I was absolutely shattered and deeply saddened, I personally felt I had lost a dear friend. I believe Tony was a very lonely man deep down in himself.

but as I said before if you wish to know anything more please contact me.

Thanking you once again Jeff for your kindness.

Regards and best wishes

Dusty Nelson

Robert (Dusty) Nelson in 2009

