

Tony's history lesson

Famous for spoofing English history in the cult series *Blackadder*, actor Tony Robinson now travels the world making equally quirky documentaries about history, archaeology and the environment. He speaks to Mark Chipperfield about his passion for the Barossa.

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Tony Robinson (pictured filming in the Tanunda Cellars) was intrigued by the story of Max Schubert and his determination to produce a full-bodied red wine in the French style at a time when Australia was only known for its production of fortified wine. Luckily, Schubert ignored his bosses at Penfolds and continued to make his wine, Grange Hermitage, in secret. "Today, Grange is Australia's most sought-after wine," he says. "But Penfolds are no longer allowed to call it Hermitage. The French objected, which [lapsing into a French accent] I zink is a bit silly, don't you?"

It's mid-afternoon in the backroom of Tanunda Cellars and British actor-turned documentary maker Tony Robinson is recording a piece to camera about winemaker Max Schubert and the knock-backs he endured in the creation of Penfolds Grange.

"Each year he'd carefully lay down the new vintage, until one day he received a letter from his bosses asking to taste this mysterious wine," he says, looking up into the camera.

"Carefully he uncorks the bottle and slowly begins to pour [makes the glug glug sound]. They lift their glasses and take a sip. Pheewwhhh! 'It's disgusting' they scream. Max was mortified."

As soon as he utters the word Pheewwhh, you realise that Baldrick is alive and well – and walking down the aisle of your nearest bottle shop. It's 30 years since Robinson, Rowan Atkinson, Hugh Laurie, Stephen Fry and the cast of *Blackadder* first began their rampage through the pages of English history, but Baldrick's appeal is undiminished.

"Love your work, Tony – watched every episode of *Blackadder* and also your history shows," says a big bloke in a tan jacket, who walks directly into frame (narrowly missing the sound boom) to shake hands with the diminutive English TV star; oblivious to fact that the whole segment will need to be scrapped and re-recorded.

of the more eccentric episodes in Australia's (and New Zealand's) recent history is no walk in the park – even when they're filming in a park.

The 10-part series runs to a punishing schedule. The crew has just arrived from Kalgoorlie – the following day they'll hop on a plane to Launceston. By 3.20pm Robinson, 67, has already visited the farmers market in Angaston, had a long table lunch at Peter Lehmann Wines and is about to visit the Kegel Club to record another segment.

"How long have I been here?" he says, looking around for his producer Mary Wagstaffe. "Not quite sure. Oh, two days, that's right! I know we were in Kalgoorlie before that."

Rather than memorise a script ("I'm far too lazy," he says), Robinson digests a huge number of facts which he then regurgitates as a seamless narrative, delivered in his own distinct patois – the banter of a smart, well-travelled and extremely funny London cabbie.

The shambolic Baldrick-esque façade hides a well-stocked brain and deeply inquisitive personality. "I left school when I was just 16," he once said. "I have been surrounded all my life by smart-arsed, academically minded people who often talked a language I found inaccessible ... emotionally, I've always wanted to tell stories. That's probably my way of keeping the darkness at bay."

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Robinson, his wife Louise Hobbs and a Melbourne-based film crew are spending three days in the Barossa, filming a segment for the second series of *Tony Robinson Time Walks* which will be broadcast on Foxtel's The History Channel in 2014; the first series was one of the most popular shows ever to screen on The History Channel in Australia. His previous documentary work, *Time Team* and *The Worst Jobs in History*, also won high praise from viewers and critics alike.

While Robinson and the crew seem remarkably laid-back (dealing with over-enthusiastic fans, ringing mobile phones and revving engines is an occupational hazard) it's clear that making a documentary about some

While the *Time Walks* series ignores the normal strictures of formal history, Robinson is nevertheless clearly trying to dig down to a kernel of truth – and is determined to capture (and celebrate) the essence of each chosen destination.

Having visited the Barossa several times before, Robinson knew something of the history of white settlement and winemaking in the Valley, but was surprised to discover many other aspects of the Barossa story – including its deep agricultural roots.

"I'd always assumed that grapes had been the backbone of the place since the Seppelts arrived but to find out about the other farming that went on

here – such as the fruit growing tradition – has been a real treat,” he says.

“I went to the farmers market this morning and found it really exciting to see so many independent producers still operating today. No surprise that I bumped into a guy called Tetsuya [Wakuda] – who just happens to be Australia’s most famous chef. We were both blown away by the quality of the produce and the commitment and drive of the people.

“For example, Tetsuya wanted to buy all the lettuces off one person at a stall and they said ‘No, I can’t do that. These lettuces are for other people in the Barossa to enjoy’. I think that’s fantastic.”

As a Pom, albeit a famous one, Robinson is acutely aware that he is in no position to lecture Australians about their own history. But being an outsider perhaps gives him more licence to interrogate some of the nation’s myths – and slaughter its most protected sacred cows.

“I feel ignorance has an advantage because I don’t know what’s difficult territory,” he says. “I don’t know what’s politically correct.”

On this visit Robinson is once again struck by people’s strong, peasant-like attachment to the Barossa soil and their enduring sense of honour; a commodity which is becoming rare in the 21st century.

“I was talking to Peter Lehmann earlier today and I was really impressed with this notion of ‘my word is my bond’ – something which was incredibly important during the tough years for the wine industry in the 1970s and ‘80s,” he says.

“Even people who no longer attend church on Sunday still adhere to the whole Lutheran morality – a particular attitude towards land, animals and produce. France is the only country which shares this attitude to land – a combination of sophistication and almost child-like absorption.”

As a keen environmentalist and long-time supporter of the British Labour Party, Robinson is appalled at proposals by the current UK government to allow more housing to be built in the English countryside and admires the Barossa’s determination to protect its rural heritage.

“At the moment in the UK we’re backtracking on planning regulations [such as restrictions on building in the famous Green Belt around London] that we’ve had since the Second World War,” he says.

“This could be the legacy that everyone remembers about the Cameron government; in the same way people remember a previous Tory government [in the 1960s] for Lord Beeching and the destruction of the country’s railways network.”

Despite what he admits is just a “whistle-stop” trip to the Barossa, Robinson clearly feels very protective towards the Barossa and worries about the negative impact of increased tourism on a region which revels in its sense of isolation.

“Part of me wants to say [to a global television audience] ‘come here, come here!’” he says, lapsing back into Baldrick mode. “But there’s another part of me which says ‘Well if everyone does that the Barossa will lose its individual character’.”

Not that *Tony Robinson Time Walks* could ever be accused of being a superficial travelogue. As its irrepressible host explains, the whole point of the exercise is to bring history to life, warts and all – not to gloss over the embarrassing chapters.

“I really want to celebrate the Barossa,” he says. “But you need to be realistic about the history of the place. It wasn’t settled by a bunch of intelligent, kind saints. There were plenty of loonies. But that’s part of human nature, isn’t it?” **11**



A staple device in the British series *Blackadder* (1983–1999) were the verbal stoushes between Lord Blackadder (Rowan Atkinson) and his dim servant Baldrick (Tony Robinson).

Here are some of their exchanges:

Blackadder: Baldrick, your brain is like the four-headed man-eating haddock-fish-beast of Aberdeen.

Baldrick: In what way?

Blackadder: It doesn't exist.

Baldrick: I have... a plan, sir.

Blackadder: Really, Baldrick? A cunning and subtle one?

Baldrick: Yes, sir.

Blackadder: As cunning as a fox who's just been appointed Professor of Cunning at Oxford University?

Baldrick: Yes, sir.

Blackadder: For God's sake, Baldrick, take cover!

Baldrick: Why, sir?

Blackadder: Because there's an air raid going on! And I don't want to have to write to your mother at London Zoo and tell her that her only human child is dead!

Baldrick: My uncle Baldrick was in a play once.

Blackadder: Really? ... And what did he play?

Baldrick: Second codpiece. Macbeth wore him in the fight scenes.

Blackadder: Am I jumping the gun, Baldrick, or are the words "I have a cunning plan" marching with ill-deserved confidence in the direction of this conversation?

Baldrick: They certainly are, sir!

Blackadder: Well, forgive me if I don't do a cartwheel of joy. Your record in this department is hardly 100 percent. So what is it?

Baldrick: We do nothing.

Blackadder: Yup. It's another world-beater!