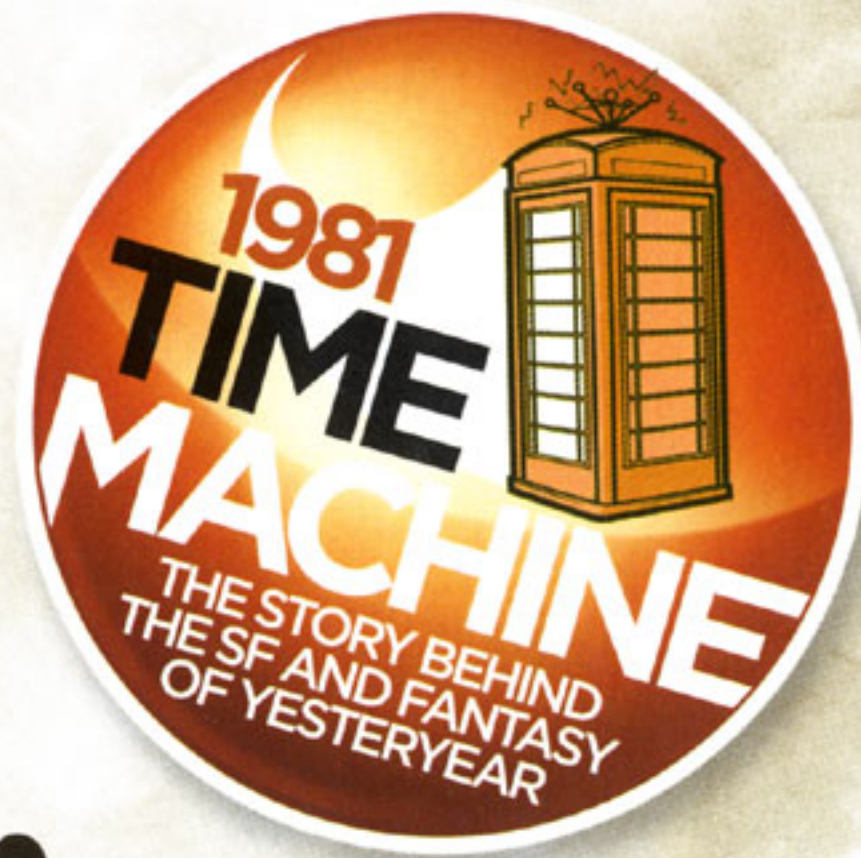


The Radio Lord Of The Rings



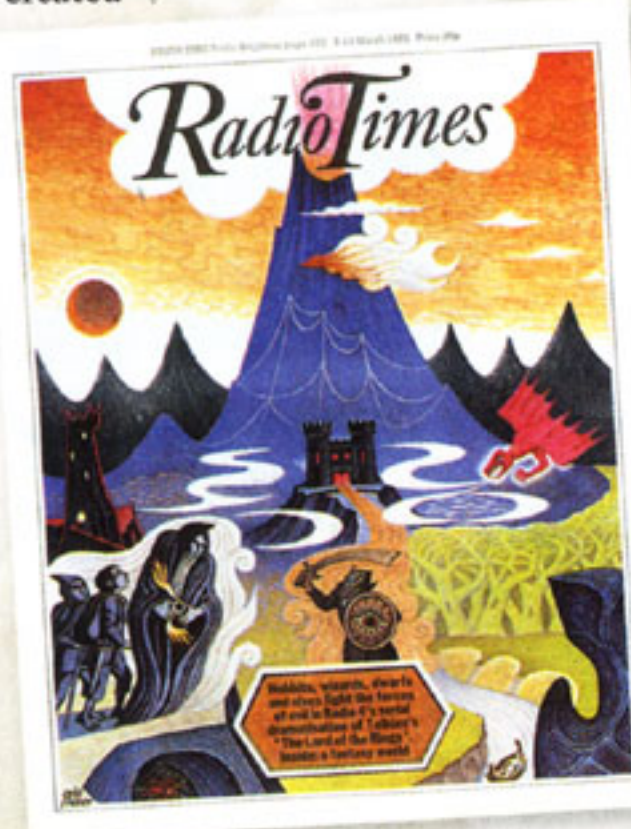
Before Peter Jackson, Tolkien fans simply switched on their wireless sets. Join Damien McFerran as he uncovers the genesis of this timeless radio classic

Before we start, let's get one thing perfectly clear: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a genius. A mild-mannered and incredibly learned Oxford scholar by profession, he created the fantasy world of Middle-earth – along with its races, languages and folklore – almost as a hobby to entertain himself and in doing so, he produced one of the 20th century's most significant pieces of literature.

However, although Tolkien was unquestionably a legendary egg-head, he was totally wide of the mark on one thing – the chances of effectively adapting his epic tale in other mediums. To be fair, when he infamously commented that *The Lord Of The Rings* was "very unsuitable for dramatisation" he had good reason to come to such a negative conclusion. He'd just listened to BBC Radio's less than auspicious 1955 series and wasn't all that enthused with the results. "I think I should find vulgarisation less painful than the sillification achieved by the BBC" the author would later comment.

SECOND RADIO ADAPTATION

The fact that these recordings [none of which survive today, which would no doubt please Tolkien] gained the scorn of the great man himself didn't stop the Beeb from having another crack at shoe-horning Hobbits, Elves and Orcs into the British public's humble wireless sets. Almost 30 years later another radio production was on the cards, and the



driving force behind it was a fresh-faced youngster called Brian Sibley.

"The BBC had turned down an offer of mine to dramatised a book but were kind enough to ask if I had any other ideas," explains Sibley when asked how he became entrenched in Middle-earth. "I suggested *The Lord Of The Rings* simply because it was the longest possible project I could think of!" Sibley is now a renowned author and broadcaster, but back in the early '80s he was rather wet behind the ears. Thankfully, his somewhat hopeful suggestion was aptly timed. "I was totally unaware that the BBC was already pursuing the idea of making a radio drama series from the book," he reveals. "It was a fluke, but as a result of my cheekiness

Richard Imison – who was in charge of the project – invited me to break down the book for dramatisation and then to work with Michael Bakewell in writing the 26 half-hour

episodes. We took 13 episodes a-piece but occasionally collaborated where we handed over from one to the other."

Bakewell – who was already well established as a flourishing television producer – worked alongside Sibley in the unenviable task of breaking down Tolkien's immense tome into manageable chunks without sacrificing the flow and character of the tale. It was back-breaking work. "Firstly I had to create the outline for the episodes, which was about six weeks work, and then the scripting was done over a period of around three months," he remembers. "We had to compress things, tighten events and try to find a cliffhanger with which to conclude every half-hour episode."

Sibley was rather humbled by Bakewell's considerable knowledge of the industry and was well aware of how much was riding on the project. "Michael was highly experienced whereas I was practically a novice," he says. "The BBC took a huge gamble on my being able to deliver and with the confidence of youth I never gave it a second thought! However, they were >>

The (Mis)Adventures of Tom Bombadil



Early on in planning, it was clear that even with 13 glorious hours of airtime it would be impossible to condense the entire story; sections had to be cut and (as was the case in both Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated version and Peter Jackson's Hollywood trilogy) the oft-controversial character of Tom Bombadil was the obvious candidate for the axe. "Basically it was down to time," explains Sibley. "I had 13 hours and enough material to fill twice that length of broadcast time. Some

things had to go and one of them was Tom. I felt that it was permissible since the Hobbits encounter him on a hiatus on the journey. Other characters and sequences were also cut, but people only ever remember poor old Tom!" However, Sibley was able to make amends for this omission later on in his career. "I later dramatised the Bombadil episodes along with some of Tolkien's short stories in a BBC radio series entitled *Tales From The Perilous Realm*," he explains.

Main image © BBC, RT cover courtesy of Radio Times





The costumes might not have been up to much, but it's still a classic adaptation.



wise enough to team me up with Michael and I was smart enough to get Michael to do the complex battle sequences, which I wasn't sure how to achieve using only words and sounds whereas I knew he had done something similar in dramatising *War And Peace* for radio. Michael was amazingly supporting and encouraging; he knew just how important the project was to a 'new boy' like myself and allowed me to take the lion's share of the kudos, whilst always being on hand to help and advise. I will always be grateful to him for his great generosity of spirit."

NARRATIVE DIFFICULTIES

Predictably, trying to adapt such an epic narrative was problematic. Tolkien had steadfastly refused to intertwine the two main story arcs – the struggle of Frodo and Sam to get to Mordor on one hand, and the titanic battles of Helm's Deep and Pelennor Fields on the other. Sibley and Bakewell quickly decided that such a division wouldn't work on radio and the two plotlines were spliced. "Had we followed Tolkien's dictate we would have had half a dozen episodes with one group of characters followed by a similar number with the others – not a great device for a weekly serial!" laughs Sibley. "So, I used Tolkien's chronology in the appendices of *Return Of The King* to try and keep the events in reasonably true chronological order. Some elements of surprise were obviously lost, but it was – in terms of radio – essential." With the script completed the vocal work could take place. "The recordings took place over a period of probably three months in what was then Studio 6a at Broadcasting House – now long gone," Sibley recalls. "Each episode was rehearsed for half a day and then recorded over a day, although complex episodes were allocated two days. We began on day one rehearsing Episode One in the morning, then in the afternoon we began recording. We completed that episode the next morning and started a rehearsal for Episode Two in the afternoon. There was no taping at weekends but it was an exhausting schedule. One of the strengths, however, was that the series

"I always knew that Bill Nighy would go on to greatness"
 Brian Sibley PRODUCER

was recorded in 'real time'. The actors lived out the drama as it happened, achieving, I think, a real sense of the quest being experienced by the cast."

ACCOMPLISHED CAST

And what a cast it was; Ian Holm (Bilbo), Bill Nighy (Sam), Michael Hordern (Gandalf) and Jack May (Theoden) all contributed timeless performances that lent the series a priceless sense of grand scale. Sibley is cautious about singling out individual stars, though. "Ian Holm's performance ran the gamut of emotions so splendidly, but there was also Bill Nighy, Michael Hordern and Peter Woodthorpe... it's invidious to pick out anyone from what was a stellar cast." Ian Holm would later appear in Peter Jackson's live-action *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy, but as Bilbo rather than Frodo – something that Sibley was pleasantly surprised by. "Prior to the radio series Ian was already a very successful actor on stage but I had no idea that a film career would eventually take him back to Middle-earth," he says. "I found it hard to think of Ian as anything other than Frodo, but he was wonderful in the

part and I was thrilled that he was given the role, and that the radio series had triggered that piece of casting." He also has kind words to say about the actor responsible for bringing to life Frodo's trusted companion and fellow ring bearer, Samwise Gamgee: "I knew that Bill Nighy would go on to greatness; the passion – and compassion – in his performance was amazing."

Peter Woodthorpe might be a name that is familiar to hardcore *Lord Of The Rings* fans; he reprised his role as Gollum in the BBC radio production after so memorably lending his vocal talents to the same character in Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated version of the tale. "I think the producers Jane Morgan



The recording took around three months.

and Penny Leicester – as well as Michael and I – were all in agreement that Peter had to be Gollum," explains Sibley. "Peter was a great actor – a member of the original casts of such important 20th century plays as *The Caretaker* and *Waiting For Godot*. He could be temperamental and didn't hit it off with everyone, but his work on the play was masterly." To give the production an official seal of approval, Tolkien's son Christopher was involved. "He was asked to read the scripts and, whilst he didn't have script approval, his comments and thoughts were given due consideration," reveals Sibley. "He was, in fact, hugely supportive and very constructive in any comments he made. He also provided in

"Tolkien's son was hugely supportive and constructive in any comments he made"

with audio recordings of the names of people, places and things, to help the actors with pronunciation." Support for Sibley's interpretation of Tolkien's classic came from closer to home, too. Naturally, with the books being so loved, it was inevitable that some members of the cast could be counted as fans. The fact that they gave their endorsement was encouraging for Sibley. "David Collings – who played Legolas – knew the book and so did several of the others," he explains. "Those who were readers or fans were supportive because I think they realised that it was being made out of love and respect for the original source material." However, not everyone in the cast was as familiar with the lore of Tolkien's world, which led to some

time the production was surprisingly met with a rather frosty reception. "Some radio critics slammed it, especially condemning what they thought were the pseudo-*Archers* Hobbit characters of the first episode," explains Sibley. "Others ignored it. Later, some of those who had dismissed it rewrote history when the series was a success and was being repeated, by heaping it with praise. It is often described as 'award winning' but I didn't win a thing, except the affection of millions of listeners."

THE MOVIES ARRIVE

Over the years the stature of the production has skyrocketed and it has been repeated numerous times on various stations, but Sibley's work was far from over. As the 21st century dawned, new fans were being introduced to the magic of The One Ring thanks to Peter Jackson's big screen efforts, and this naturally reignited interest in all things Tolkien. "The BBC wanted to re-package the series in the form of a trilogy to tie in with the films," Sibley explains. "This was difficult because the episodes based on *The Two Towers* and *Return Of The King* had become somewhat intertwined by making the material chronological, but it coincided with the film trilogy scenarios so that was okay."

This move to divide the series up into three chunks also necessitated the writing and recording of some new dialogue and so, 20 years after working on the production, Sibley found himself plunged once again into Tolkien's realm. "To make each recording self-contained I had to write new opening and closing scenes for Frodo," explains Sibley. "He was reflecting on his adventure towards the end of his time in Middle-earth, and that's how Ian went back from being Bilbo to being Frodo again!"

In the light of Jackson's big-budget movie trilogy it's easy to lose sight of just how amazing an achievement the relatively humble BBC production was. But how does Sibley feel about his work after all these years? "Well, many years ago, I used to get a bit fed up with being referred to as 'The Man Who Did the Radio *Lord Of The Rings*', mainly because I'd gone on to do a lot of other things and I felt I was known only for that and for nothing else," he sheepishly admits. "Nowadays I feel very proud of having been involved in creating what is clearly a radio classic. I've worked for more than 30 years in what is a totally ephemeral medium – radio shows are here today and gone today! To have contributed to something that will probably live as long as people want to listen to stories being told is something I feel truly honoured to have done." SFX

Return to Middle-earth
 When New Line Cinema released *Fellowship Of The Ring* in 2001, Tolkien-fever hit the world in earnest. As well as recording new dialogue for the CD re-releases of the BBC production (commissioned to tie-in with the Hollywood films), Sibley was also asked to write a series of official movie companion books for Peter Jackson's movie trilogy. From 2001 onwards he penned *The Lord Of The Rings: The Fellowship Of The Rings - Insiders' Guide*, *The Lord Of The Rings: Official Movie Guide* and *The Lord Of The Rings: The Making Of The Movie Trilogy*, thus cementing his reputation as one of the leading authorities on Tolkien's fantasy world.