

## PalAss vs. Paxman – the full story

The reputation of PalAss is intact. The Association has not been shamed. I just wish the same were true of myself.

In the last edition of the *Newsletter* I mentioned that a quartet representing the UK's finest fossiliferous organization had made it through to the televised rounds of *University Challenge: The Professionals*. I also declared that if the team—Tim Palmer, Norm MacLeod, Richard Fortey and myself—performed particularly badly members would hear nothing more about it. So from the existence of this piece you can make a reasonable deduction: we didn't get annihilated. But, although this article will tell the story of our adventures in TV-land, I shan't reveal the result of the match itself. For that you'll just have to wait until it goes on air later this Summer.

Unlike the regular, student version, *University Challenge: The Professionals* is not simply a tough TV quiz. It is also an opportunity for the various societies and august bodies who qualified to make themselves known to an audience of millions and explain a little about what they do. Hence, Granada Television, who produce the show, asked each team to choose a location that 'best reflects the traditions of your society' for a spot of introductory filming. Alehouses being ruled out, we selected a quarry on the Isle of Portland, and on a chilly Tuesday in February the four of us were to be found scrabbling about among blocks of Jurassic limestone, pursued by a camera crew.



*Tim is being interviewed by the film crew, whilst Norm finds fossils for Philippa the researcher and Richard loses interest and wanders off.*

This was fine in itself, but, almost inevitably, good specimens proved hard to come by and our cameraman became more interested in filming the various items of machinery in explosive action. Since relatively few palaeontologists collect samples by gunpowder, we were somewhat concerned of the impression this would give, so it was a relief when the quarrymen told us

they would not be using the equipment that day. However, when the camera was turned back on us our slightly uneasy feeling didn't dissipate. Being filmed 'finding' fossils we'd actually picked up earlier that morning wasn't too bad, but having to gaze blankly, smile, then laugh to camera, each time for a minute, was excruciating. I didn't get into palaeontology for its comedy potential, and I can't believe the Granada team, who were a pleasant bunch, thought the footage made for good viewing.

They seemed content enough with it all, though, and we were soon able to swap hardhats, wellies, and fluorescent jackets for a pub lunch. Richard and Norm departed immediately afterwards, but Tim and I stuck around to inspect the rest of the shoot. Having been unable to dig up any dazzling material, the crew wanted to film some fossils, and this necessitated the help of a local eccentric. In an old quarry building, assisted by a gang of servile men, she rambled incessantly at us about her plans for a combined art and geology theme park on the island. To say she had no understanding of geological science would be to besmirch the reputation of someone who has no understanding of geological science. When I mentioned fieldwork I'd done studying Jurassic oysters around Weymouth, she said "Oh yes! The oyster bed!" and gave me a book on the creation of the universe. But she did have some photogenic specimens and the team was able to film them unmolested. Eventually I told Tim I had a train to catch and we fled, wondering whether the 90-second introduction would accurately reflect either our day or our science.

The show proper was filmed a month later at the Granada Studios in Manchester. Having been repeatedly refused any information on our opponents, we arrived to find we were up against the Eden Project, in a Biology-v-Botany clash (of sorts). Their team included the project founder, Tim Smit, and whilst waiting for instructions on what to do and where to go, we had an entertaining discussion on how to make natural history attractive to the general public. Norm suggested that the NHM should invest in animatronic dinosaurs that devoured every 50th child, which would certainly add a new dimension to school trips. And if that thought didn't unnerve the Eden Project team sufficiently, Norm had another trick up his sleeve: our mascot, a rather malevolent-looking *Pteranodon* dubbed Terry.

Ours was the last of the first round matches to be filmed, so there was a fair amount of sitting around required. Watching the Welsh Assembly do battle with the Scottish Parliament killed some time, before we were led off to make-up and then for some food. As we walked into the canteen, the people already in there (presumably involved in some way with *Celebrity Stars In Their Eyes*, being filmed in the studio next door) turned and stared at us, trying to work out if we were famous. One small boy tugged his father's shirtsleeve.

"Look Dad!" he whispered, "it's the expert on late diagenetic carbonate cementation in the Mesozoic, Dr Tim Palmer!"

"Don't be daft, lad!" retorted his father. "That's Norm MacLeod, the leading authority on morphometric variability in planktonic foraminifera!" They returned to their dinner.

And finally it was time to get on with it. In the studio, a warm-up man whipped the audience into a sub-orgiastic frenzy as we waited in the wings and when we walked out into the bright lights it seemed the crowd was almost exclusively on our side. It turned out this was true,

as Paul Selden had persuaded a gaggle of Manchester University geology students to queue for tickets and join the various members of the Association already invited to attend. I was honoured to find myself seated closest to presenter Jeremy Paxman, thereby enabling me to hear the questions that vital fraction of a millisecond earlier than anyone else, although it did mean I couldn't see the scoreboard.

The make-up ladies gave our faces a final powdering, the soundmen did a few last tests, Sir Jezza of Paxo sauntered in, and we were ready to roll.



*Nil points? They must be the Brits...*

With it being the last match, we had the luxury (or misfortune) of knowing what score would take us through to the semi-finals: over 180 points and we'd claim a place. Inevitably, I can't remember many of the questions, but Tim correctly interrupted the first starter and off we went. Or at least we did until it came to the dreaded, inevitable, geological question, which went something like this: "Existing between 250 and 200 million years ago, what was the name of the only ocean of the time, taking its name from the Greek for 'everywhere' and 'sea'?" I thought of Tethys and Iapetus, knowing neither was right, and waited for one of my senior colleagues to buzz in with the answer. They didn't, so I took the plunge. "Thalassia?" I enquired. "No," responded Jeremy witheringly, turning to the Eden Project team for an answer. They gazed blankly back at him until he announced "Panthalassa," just after Norm had turned and whispered the same word to me. Oh dear, close, but still wrong. I might never live this down.

Thankfully my knowledge of pop music provided redemption of sorts, whilst our expertise on television superheroes amused Mr Paxman. The Eden Project, meanwhile, got lumbered with bonus questions on male reproductive organs. There were one or two incorrect interruptions, a

few educated guesses and a good deal of blank expressions, before Norm whispered 'We have to get this right,' as Jeremy prepared to read another starter for ten. He began, Richard pressed the buzzer, and was just about to give the right answer when the end-of-match gong rang. It was all over. I still couldn't see the score, but Jeremy commiserated us on a valiant effort and after one or two re-takes and a few gratuitous audience shots we trooped out.

Consolation came with free drinks in the legendary Green Room, this one even more legendary than usual, being the Rovers Return of *Coronation Street* fame. OK, so it was a mock-up, the real one being in a studio somewhere, but it was novel enough. And when the hospitality ran out, we went off to the hotel for dinner. Outside it was mildly disappointing not to be mobbed by the screaming hordes, especially since I'd suggested the Birmingham PhD posse should buy all of Richard's books and demand them autographed, but it wasn't too awful to rejoin the real world. Fifteen minutes of fame is quite enough for the time being.

*University Challenge: The Professionals (Palaeontological Association v. Eden Project) is scheduled to be broadcast on Monday 2nd August at 8:30pm on BBC2 [subject to confirmation].*

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