

Gordon Salkilid (Jack).

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One of the most amiable characters introduced in series two, and who carried on to series three, was handyman and ex-docker Jack. In his first sizeable TV role, the part was played with great aplomb by Gordon Salkilid, who is no less likeable than Jack himself.

How did Gordon get the part of Jack in Survivors? "I remember it well. To explain, I have to go back a bit. You see, I haven't been an actor all my life, in fact I didn't become an actor until I was forty seven, which is a very late start. I'd been a lot of things before that. I was born into poverty in Camden Town and later moved to down the road to the council estate in Morden. When I was thirteen and a half I went to work in a factory and at eighteen into the army because the war had started. I was in for three and a half years, mainly in Italy. I learned a lot there and after demob I was determined not to go back into the factory, so tried a lot of different jobs, including a stint as a professional musician.

"After a lot of struggles I'd worked my way up to divisional manager in a firm of pipework contractors building oil refineries, chemical plants and the like. Then with two other guys I started in the same business, eventually having three companies in London, Wales and Coventry.

"To be honest, I hated the rat race, especially as my two partners were only interested in grabbing as much money as they could and not in building a reputation or keeping the work force happy.

"Because of this there were big disagreements and eventually I'd had enough. I'd done masses of amateur work, acting, writing and directing and had a friend who was a professional, Windsor Davies who I knew didn't start until he was in his late thirties and had a tough time early on, so I knew the difficulties when I decided to become an actor.

"I went to my partners and had them buy me out, and set out as an actor. At first my wife was horrified at the idea of losing the comfortable life we had, but she supported me and went back to work and became the main bread winner. My daughter had to leave her private school and go to the state school, but she got ten 'O' levels and three 'A's and a University degree, and now she works in theatre in stage management.

"I'm a realist and as I started late I knew I would never be a star. Anyway, I'm not the type, I'm a character man.

"After a couple of small jobs I had a stroke of good fortune. I was seen in a fringe play, which I'd also directed, and offered a job at Butlins. In those days each camp had a theatre for plays as well as the usual variety theatre. I was offered the jobs of director, company manager and actor. We were a company of six and we had to do everything. Setting the lighting, putting the different scenery up and taking it down, everything. We did two performances a day, six days a week, and a different play every day. I ran that thousand seater theatre for twenty six weeks and as our reputation spread, we were full every night. It was great training.

"Jack Warner was President of one of our local amateur groups, and before I went away the Chairman of that group, who knew what I was up to, asked for a photograph and said he would have a word with Jack about me. Jack was a very kind man, and had a word with his producer and towards the end of the twenty-six weeks I came to London for an interview on my day off and landed my first television job, one episode of Dixon of Dock Green. I'd made a list of producers and directors from the Radio and TV Times and while I was home had a word with my mate Windsor, asking if he knew any of them and whether he would mind me mentioning his name. He didn't and ticked those he knew. I wrote to them telling my story and got six more television jobs.

"I'd seen the first series of Survivors and wrote to Terry Dudley who granted me an interview. That would have been July or August 1975 and he said there might be something in the second series for me. Later I got a call from Terry Williams' secretary asking me to make an appointment to see him. I went along and he said Terry Dudley had suggested me for a part. He asked if I was interested and I looked in my

diary, which was empty. I asked what length of time we were talking about, was it ten days - the usual period for a fifty-minute episode. He said no, December through to July, and a guaranteed eight episodes. I couldn't believe it, and must have sounded a complete idiot when I said 'That's more than ten days'. Windsor was in the studio recording *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* at that time and I couldn't wait to tell him.

"I don't think I played the part right. It had been told to me that in the first series everyone was either middle class or upper middle class and I was to be the common man. Talfryn Thomas played that part in the first series, but had been written out. They also brought in John Abineri; he was to be the shepherd and I was to be the handyman. I should have played Jack as a real cockney, which are my roots, and I could have cornered cockney parts for the rest of my life, but in my inexperience I decided that I was an 'actor'. I acted too much.

"One strange thing about it was that Terry Nation, who had created the series, was to write the first two or three episodes of the second series, but because of pressure of work, hadn't delivered by the time we started the four days' rehearsal in London prior to moving to location.

"We started with an episode later in the series, *The Witch* by Jack Ronder, and another episode. When we came to *Greater Love*, directed by Pennant Roberts, Arthur goes round ascertaining the skills of the community members. He says to me, 'You're Jack Wood the carpenter'. Can you believe that, Jack Wood the carpenter, talk about *Happy Families!*

"Then he asks me what I'd been before, and where I came from. The script said that I was a docker from Liverpool, and I'd already done some episodes in a London accent, so we changed it. I wanted to say that I was Jack Wood the carpenter from Elm Road, Poplar, but in the end said I was from Derby Road, Poplar."

Did Gordon enjoy working on O.B. as opposed to studio bound work? "Yes, I always prefer being in the open air, but it has its problems. Cameras find it difficult to cope with changing light caused by the Sun and clouds and the lighting designers prefer it to be overcast so they can create their own light. Cameras today are much more sophisticated, but back in 1976, although we had a wonderful summer, winter up at Callow Hill was extremely cold and the camera-men would take their cameras to bed with them, as they used to freeze up.

"Mainly the directors had worked in studios and on O.B., the big problem was the lighting. When you go for 'a take' the director sits in the Scanner Van, which is like a miniature control box in the studio, where he can see what is being video-tape recorded, on the screen. If there's a mistake, or he feels it wasn't right, he can re-do it straight away.

"Nowadays, film cameras have video cameras strapped to them so the same can be achieved. *Survivors* may have looked better on film, but just imagine how long it would have taken."

How did Gordon feel about the series in general? "I'd enjoyed the first series and I thought it was a big change for me. I got to meet many directors and the face became known. People would even recognise you in the street and restaurants, and you'd be given that extra treatment."

How did Gordon enjoy working at Callow Hill near Monmouth? "I enjoyed working there very much. I'd had a lot to do with Wales and spent a great deal of time there, but Callow Hill's a strange place. It has a strange aura. I remember things like the guy who owns it had a droopy moustache, popular in those days, and wore a long sweater with a large belt outside, a headband, Indian fashion and black gloves. I've seen him with a 45 strapped to his hip when he was expecting a call from the local planning department, who he refused to allow on his land.

"there was quite a community up there, and at times the air was thick with the smell of marijuana. How our establishment-minded, cricket-loving producer put up with it I don't know. We didn't sleep at Callow Hill, of course, but at the King's Head Hotel in Monmouth."

The first episode Gordon made was *The Witch*, by Jack Ronder, although it was not the first episode of the second series to be broadcast. Lorna Lewis speaks of the disorder while making this episode, with nobody quite knowing what they were supposed to be doing. What memories does Gordon have of this? "I don't remember it like that, but I've done a great many different things in my life, sometimes in dangerous situations, so I don't faze very easily but keep my head down and get on with it. Of course, starting a project like that, it takes time for the crew and cast to get to know each other and relax together.

"Lorna's American and maybe they do things differently out there. She's very sweet and one of my favourite people and in the American way, I knew her life story within four hours of meeting her. We became good friends, sharing little jokes and secrets.

"I remember Delia Patton as a very nervous person, so, difficult to know. I'm not sure if she's still acting, but even then she was adapting books for radio."

Gordon had a prominent part in *New Arrivals*, a Roger Parkes story directed by Pennant Roberts, in which the survivors of a flu-ravaged community are brought to Whitecross by Ruth. "I remember Heather Wright, June Page, Ian Hastings and, of course, Peter Duncan, whose father, Alan Gale, gave me my first professional job. My daughter did Panto for Peter last Christmas.

"My character got the 'flu as well in that episode and in a delirious state I dreamed of West Ham, singing 'I'm forever blowing bubbles'. The story called for me to be annoyed and irritable with Stephen Dudley's character John. I think Stephen was really hurt at the time, and thought it was me talking to him, not character to character. I don't think he was happy acting, and when we weren't filming, I'd take him by the hand and walk off with him, and we used to talk, so my irritableness upset him. We must admit that he wasn't a good actor, but they didn't allow for the fact that he couldn't see very well, and lived in a sort of ten-foot world, beyond which it was difficult to see, and he wasn't allowed to use glasses. Tanya was sweetness and light and was, and still is, a very good actress."

Several of the actors have remarked that it was necessary to change their lines. Did Gordon find that necessary too? "Sometimes you weren't comfortable with a line or felt that your character wouldn't quite say that, so you'd have a word with the director. Often he'd agree, but sometimes he felt that the line was necessary to the plot. I do recall having one strong disagreement with Terry Williams when we were filming *New World* by Martin Worth. Denis' character Charles comes to me and asks me to go off in the balloon. On this particular day Denis wasn't called and had the day off, but the weather was bad and we couldn't work outside, so we had to do what we call in the business 'weather cover' and film inside.

"Denis was roused and had to do that scene a couple of days ahead of schedule, which of course he hadn't read. He tried to learn it while they were setting up the cameras, but it was impossible to learn in so short a time. I told Terry that we couldn't do it, but he thought we could. He said that we would shoot the lines individually and Denis could look at his lines between shots. I insisted that it wouldn't work, that there would be no feeling between us and I didn't want to do it. He said he was sorry but it had to be done. In the end I reluctantly agreed, and you can see by the results that it turned out fine. Terry Williams is a super director, and I've worked with him many times since. Denis also showed how he could work under pressure.

There was a tremendous change in the direction of *Survivors* in series three, when our heroes became wanderers in search of Greg. How did Gordon feel about these changes? "Ian McCulloch, Sally Osborne and I actually went up in that balloon, but we didn't go up all that high. I think it would have been better to have kept the series centred inside the community and concentrated on the conflicts inside that community. Instead it became very much 'Boys Own Paper' stuff. When I asked to be in series three, I didn't know which direction it was going, and I've never been one to turn down work, so I agreed. In the end I only got three episodes. I thought I was going to get more."

Gordon's first episode in series three was *Manhunt*, written by Terry Dudley and directed by Peter Jefferies and shot near Ipswich in Suffolk. "That's the story where I come back in the balloon and get attacked by a pack of wild dogs. What happened was we were waiting for the rest of the crew to turn up and rehearsed some of the later scenes in the barn, where Dan Meaden and June Brown, who later became Dot Cotton in *East Enders*, were nursing me. The boys had made up a bed of planks, which was all that Dan and June were supposed to have. Anyway, the planks collapsed and I injured my back badly. I was taken to an Osteopath for treatment and had a few days' break. Although I was in great pain, I drove home giving June a lift as she lived in Croydon not far from me. At home, I had more treatment and had to sleep flat on the floor because of the pain, but it didn't do much good.

"Dan Meaden, being the nice guy that he was, came from his home in Blackheath, picked me up, took me to location and brought me home again. I had to have strong pain killers to complete the filming.

"In the scene where I was to climb the tree to escape the dogs, I was very slow, so they put pegs into the tree to help me up, but still, because of the pain making my movements so slow, one of the dogs bit the toe off my boot! Peter said it was fine, it made it look real. I thought well it ought to, I nearly lost a foot! Still I enjoyed the episode. It's surprising how real it looks when they put undertaker's wax on your legs and then dig into it and fill the gash with stage blood, known in the business as 'Kensington Gore'. As they did it, I used to actually wince!"

Gordon's second episode in the third series was *Reunion*, written by Don Shaw and directed by Terry Dudley. "We filmed that just outside Brecon in the foothills of the Beacons, in a beautiful house of a Major Evans, ex-South Wales Borders; a lovely man. It was quite a nice story and I remember Jean Gilpin, George Waring and John Lee, who recently did a stint in the Australian soap *Neighbours*, with affection."

Gordon's final episode was The Last Laugh, an Ian McCulloch episode directed by Peter Jefferies, in which the character of Greg is supposedly killed off having contracted a smallpox-like disease. "In that I didn't know that Greg is deliberately going off with the villains to save us, knowing that he has a fatal disease so when I go to attack them, he shoots me - but only in the arm.

"I believe that Ian very much wanted Survivors to be an action-adventure type series, but staying within the two communities. At the end of the first series Ian's community moved and joined Denis', of which I was part. I think Ian resented the fact that they were bringing in another hero figure. I don't know whether it's true, but I heard that Ian and Denis had in their contracts the number of close-ups they each had in each episode."

Does Gordon recall any funny or unusual incidents which occurred while filming Survivors ? "There are a lot that I couldn't possibly repeat. I do remember one incident near the house on stilts. There was a pond near that house so overgrown with duckweed that it looked like grass. The P.A. on that episode was Tony Virgo, who is now a well known and respected producer. He was always keen and eager, and when the director asked him to get something, he turned and ran straight into the pond up to his waist and, without a pause, came straight out the other side.

"I also remember that when we were filming New Arrivals in a field just outside Callow Hill, we could hear someone in the distance using a chain-saw, something that wouldn't have happened in the story. An A.F.M. was dispatched to ask whoever it was to stop for the day, and gave him a tenner for his trouble. The next morning there were four chain-saws on the go, all wanting a tenner!"