

Pennant Roberts (Director)

"Survivors was certainly an interesting project, much more memorable than my time on Dr. Who."

Few people have contributed as much towards the overall success of Survivors as director Pennant Roberts. He has also been involved with many of the most popular drama and sci-fi series made by the BBC, directing no fewer than twenty-four episodes of Dr who, two of Doomwatch, and he was involved in both Survivors and Blake's 7 from the formative stages. For Survivors he directed nine episodes, five from the first series and four from the second.

Pennant had actually read physics at Bristol University, which he had found to be useful in his later career. "I had a certain amount of concern that we were telling a proper story. There were elements of the original story which were wholly far-fetched and others which were much more rooted in probability. One had to concentrate on those elements which were true science-fiction. I think that the big advantage of a scientific training is that you are able to conceptualise more easily than those who have a straightforward art background."

Was Pennant invited to direct Doomwatch, Survivors, Dr Who and Blake's 7 because of his scientific back-ground? "It is equally true of course that I have worked on Juliet Bravo and Professionals and Howard's Way and Tenko. What is interesting I think is the way in which the science-fiction programmes have been the ones to stand the test of time. Those are the ones that the BBC have promoted over the years. It is amazing to me that the BBC have taken all these years to getting round to releasing Survivors on video and I am amazed that they still have the recordings because so much of the work of the seventies was destroyed. To come across a complete set of tapes is incredible." But Pennant recalls how sad it is that Survivors sister series, Doomwatch had many of its episodes destroyed by the BBC. "What is interesting about Doomwatch is that it was much more scientifically orientated than Survivors. I remember the last episode of Doomwatch was about the dangers of having lead in petrol and young children being affected by lead pollution, and of course it was another fifteen years or so before unleaded petrol was introduced into the UK."

How had Pennant started out in TV? "When I left Bristol I realised I wasn't going to be a research physicist and so after graduation I applied for all sorts of various jobs and it seemed to narrow itself down to two fields. I was offered a job at the BBC, and then got offers from computer companies who were recruiting heavily in those days and I opted for the former, not for the BBC to start with, because I found that there was a company in Wales, which was starting out in television (an I'IV company) and I joined them first of all having left Bristol and then gravitated towards the BBC and drama and went to London in 1969. I was on the staff of the Drama Series department and then, having done some directing work in Wales, I got the opportunity to direct some drama series episodes, the first of which was Doomwatch."

How did Pennant become involved in Survivors? "Directly out of my relationship with Terry Dudley which went back to Doomwatch and The Regiment, a military series shot in Cyprus in 1973. In those days BBC first assistants would often be allowed the opportunity to take the first tentative steps towards becoming fully-fledged directors, allocated a place on the "Director's course" at Woodstock Grove and given a few series episodes to direct. They would then return to their original posts as first assistants until enough promises of further directing work enabled them to trade in their only asset - the BBC 'job-for-life' ticket - and take the plunge into the freelance market. In my case during this hiatus I worked for six months as Terry's first on Colditz."

The very first episode of Survivors - The Fourth Horseman - is rightly considered to be a classic piece of television, but filming it and getting the new series off the ground was not without its problems. "Since we were doing Survivors under the most straitened of circumstances, it amazes me that the videos are selling at all!! The timescale was so very short. The exteriors for the first six episodes were shot on film, with the studio interiors on 2" video-tape. The remainder of the first season and the rest of the series (with the exception of the Lights of London episodes in the second season) were all shot on video-tape, and this at a time when video was only just starting to be utilised for drama location work. For the bulk of the series therefore, following a two-and-a-half days' rehearsal period with the actors, we were allocated four and a half days to record each fifty minute episode. You couldn't match that turnaround today, even given all the technical refinements that have been adopted in the interim."

Did the outside broadcast cameras cause problems in bad weather? "Problems with cable insulation. Often the problems would occur the day after we had been out shooting in rain, and originate in the backpacks - the junction boxes where the cables were seated. Water would seep in and start to cause electronic disturbances to the pictures. The other major problem was that the scanner - the mobile control

room - was itself extremely bulky, and therefore you couldn't get it as close to the location as you might wish. While we carried about twelve hundred yards of camera cable on the unit, the further away from the scanner we were shooting, the greater were the communication problems."

In those days, couldn't the BBC planners perceive the aesthetic and technical difference between the use of film and video? "When we originally planned the series for the autumn quarter of '74 the Outside Broadcast Unit was only available as from the middle of October, which is why the stories were constructed the way they were. However, when the series was deferred for four months because of an industrial dispute we were obliged to carry the same set of facilities forward into the new quarter, especially since we were required to meet the new transmission dates, also knocked forward by an identical period of four months. Had we maintained a studio/film pattern we would have missed our end deadline by a couple of months, because they would have been recorded at fortnightly intervals instead of the nine day turnaround on video.

"So we started filming for the first block of episodes on January 5th with two units shooting for the first fortnight. The scheduling was extremely hectic and complex, if only because the light would go at about three in the afternoon. Carolyn Seymour started on the first day with my unit and Lucy Fleming was with Gerald Blake. Gerald and I swore come what may that we would each release our actresses at midday so that they could be rushed across to the other location. My very first sequence had Carolyn driving her Lotus up the hill towards Malvern Link, and the afternoon's work showing Lucy running through the woods, was shot somewhere close at hand. Apart from the traffic jam scenes which had been grabbed documentary fashion on the London Westway before Christmas, the remainder of the London scenes were filmed in Cheltenham.

"The pattern was often very disjointed. I particularly recollect a peach of a day when our location was at a school between Monmouth and Abergavenny. I started my day with a sequence with Giles Melville and Lucy, following which Gerald inherited Carolyn and the bulk of the actors for Episode Two sequences for which of course he used his own camera crew. My unit had to wait around until nightfall before we were able to shoot the (preceding) night scene between Lucy and Giles. Nat Crosby and I drifted off to a famous restaurant nearby called The Walnut Tree and had a delectable and very long lunch."

Did Pennant have a hand in the casting? "The first three leads had been chosen by Terry, as I remember being introduced to Carolyn and Lucy for the first time at an inaugural luncheon in 'Waitress Service' at the TV Centre. Ian and I knew each other from an episode of Colditz that Terry had directed. I can't actually remember who jogged who's memory, and so I'm quite happy to believe that it was Terry's idea to cast Ian in the series. I probably had greater influence in selecting the regulars who came in halfway through that first series - John Hallet had been in The Regiment, and I'd worked with Julie Neubert on both Softly, Softly and Doomwatch. I also cast Peter Bowles. I deliberately wanted to cast the part of David Grant strong, so as not to telegraph what was going to happen later on in the story.

"I certainly was responsible for casting Denis Lill as Charles in Corn Dolly. The part had originally been offered to Gareth Thomas (Blake's Seven), who decided against accepting the role because he was worried about becoming typecast as a Welshman. Since one of the important location sequences had Charles rugby-tackling a piglet, I went for the next best thing to a Welshman - Denis was one of the few New Zealand actors that I knew who was working in London at the time, and he'd been one of the regulars in The Regiment. We were casting very conservatively even in those days!! Jack Ronder had written for The Regiment, and I knew his wife Anne and the family very well. Whereas Tanya Ronder is still a working actress, poor Stephen Dudley was more or less press-ganged into taking part. It was a bit of a burden for him I think."

Is working for TV very different now in the 1990's to what it was 20 year ago? "Certainly it is much less rough and ready - you have more time these days and because you're working to a higher standard the director needs to be able to demonstrate more skill."

If Pennant was to make a 1990's version of Survivors, would he do it any differently? "Certainly you wouldn't be asked to shoot material on two cameras, a great limiting factor to good storytelling and now considered to be very old hat (recording the combined output of both cameras by intercutting between them on location and thereby reducing the editing requirement). It always boils down to equations of time, financial resources and quality. To strike an average of twelve minutes a day you have to be recording substantial chunks of dialogue at a sitting, and this is the reason why so much of Survivors was "cross-shot" a minute and a half at a time. We evolved a number of techniques to make the most of our two cameras. Some of the time we would use them singly, maybe separated by as much as half of a mile, or indeed we might shoot the same scene twice with the two cameras in two pairs of positions and interdict between the two takes."

But was a lot of tape wasted? "Not in the least. In order to reduce costs and editing time, each location episode was recorded on two 90 and one 60 minute tape, a total of 240 minutes in all. Tape changes would take place on location so that the scenes occurring early in the assembly order would go onto the first tape, and the later scenes onto the third, in order to save time in the edit (directors were required to edit their episodes in a day). This is something you would never considering doing these days. For Glan Hafren - the series I'm currently shooting in Wales - each episode uses more than thirty 20-minute tapes, but because we're using Avid or Lightworks, reel-changing is no longer a significant factor, and the BETA-SP stock is no longer a significant cost element."

Does Pennant have any idea how much a typical episode of Survivors cost to make? "No, I wouldn't know and I'm sure even the BBC couldn't tell you. Cost structures were a combination of real above-the-line costs (materials and outside contributors) and notional below-the-line costs (facilities and other in-house costs.) Nowadays we talk in terms of total cost. Also, in those days the facilities themselves were costed in a different fashion, you received a notional allocation of man-hours for design, for example."

Presumably Survivors, with its lack of expensive sets and the special effects required for sci-fi series would have been cheaper to make than Doctor Who or Blake's Seven. "No, not much cheaper. The amazing thing is that all those series were so extremely cost effective. Remember when Blake's Seven started out it inherited the same facilities and budget as Softly, Softly, the police series it replaced. We would achieve the whole programme in a short day and a long day (a two o'clock start for the crew on Tuesday afternoon, say, with the scenes recorded between 7.30pm and 10pm on the Wednesday night)."

There were drastic changes in Survivors at the start of the second series. The first highly successful series followed Abby Grant in her quest for her lost son Peter. The second season sees a much more settled lifestyle on a farm near Monmouth. Does Pennant recall the background to these changes? "I'm sure that the first series had been largely planned by Terry Nation before he presented it to the BBC. In this the search motif was very strong, and the belief that in extremis what you have is what you are prepared to defend - a philosophy which obviously appealed to Terry Nation at the time - and manifesting itself through what I described as Terry's 'four men in a Land Rover' device."

"Producer Terry Dudley wanted to extend the philosophical scope of the series. His thinking and mine sometimes tended to differ in matters of detail, however. Terry postulated that in the aftermath of the plague people would revert to the technologies of the Middle-Ages. The series' agrarian approach concentrated on the problems of living in a small community if unprepared. My belief was that the survivors would still seek to benefit from the accumulation of technological and scientific progress that had taken place from these early days up to the present times. Not just a matter of how to generate methane, for example, not just a matter of how you went back to filling the soil."

"I postulated that not of necessity need there be acute food shortage, because sufficient quantities would exist in store up and down the land. On the basis that only a thousandth part of the populace had survived, then the store available per survivor would be multiplied a thousand-fold. Assuming you could actually gain access to these stocks, there would be enough to provide for all. The most interesting storylines would spring from calculating what materials would perish and what wouldn't. For instance, if society has at any one time a month's imperishable goods in store in various forms, and assuming that sell-by dates are more a matter of stock control than indications of putrefaction, these supplies would suffice for 90 years. I felt the series needed the services of a full-time young post-grad researcher to draw up a schema of the goods likely to be available, and the transportation problems that would undoubtedly remain - somebody who would present us with a host of problems which were in themselves completely original."

"More than any other single factor we were governed by the logistics of recording a series in a short space of time, and where obviating the need to relocate the OB unit became a primary consideration. This is why we finally decided on Callow Hill Farm outside Monmouth, where all the shooting could be done within a mile of the farm."

One of the most memorable first series episodes was Clive Exton's Law and Order, in which the community have to decide the fate of a murderer in their midst. Eventually they decide to execute Barney, a mentally retarded member, but it soon becomes apparent that the wrong man has been killed. Does Pennant have any particular memories of the episode? "My strongest recollection is of the rabbit who wouldn't run - I don't know if I've told this story publicly before I was concerned as to how I could persuade a rabbit to stay in frame for a sufficient period of time for John Hallett (Barney) to raise his bow, shoot at it - and miss. We got in touch with John Holmes (the animal supplier) who assured us that it wouldn't be a problem. Sure enough, on the day, the rabbit stood his ground bold as brass and we got the shot. Of course I now needed the rabbit to scamper away unharmed, and asked John Holmes if he could arrange it. John grimly shook his head. Although the unit started taking pot shots, tossing stones and small clods of the earth, the rabbit absolutely refuse to budge."

"Animals often caused a few headaches - the dog pack in the first season episode Starvation for example. When I was asked how I envisaged a dog pack I suggested that forty mongrels might be appropriate, only to be told that we couldn't afford forty. I said that I would try to shoot in such a way as to make twenty look like forty. We calculated that we actually required the dogs on four of the five shooting days. John Holmes lived in the Home Counties, and of course we were filming in Herefordshire, so we would need to kennel the dogs locally for the whole period (why they couldn't be obtained locally I'll never know!) The production calculated that at the "going rate" for dogs, the budget could only afford twenty dog-days. If I reduced my schedule so that I needed the dogs for only three days, then I could afford a pack of six. 'Only if they look to be ferocious and hefty', I said. In the end a motley bunch turned up on location looking for all the world as if they were straight out of Cruft's Dog Show. In the first sequence they were required to terrorise Hana Maria Pravda's character (Mrs. Cohen) outside her cottage. I assured Hana that the dogs were well trained and under control, that she would come to no harm, that it would all be a matter of acting. When we put the six dogs into the garden they immediately started to sniff for buried bones, and absolutely refused to come anywhere near Hana. Eventually I was reduced to shooting a low angled shot of Hana's top half with myself, Annie Faggetter and Chris Green out of shot plucking in a random fashion at the edges of her skirt!"

It was in that episode that the travellers first established themselves in a dilapidated mansion, the location for which was Hampton Court at Hope-under-Dinmore near Leominster. Why was this particular house chosen? "We based ourselves in Monmouthshire and Herefordshire because the two counties weren't heavily overflown and a silent countryside was a necessary prerequisite for the series. Once again we had to consider the best use of our facilities. Since we had to videorecord at least twelve minutes of material a day (at a time when the output of the average filming day was around three minutes of cut film), the only way we thought we would be able to achieve this was by parking the scanner in one spot for the greater part of each episode. Hampton Court was brought to our attention by one of the local estate agents in the summer of 1974, and in its almost derelict state it certainly held some interesting pictorial possibilities for us, with its extensive gardens and grounds. By the time we actually came to shoot there, following the deferral of the series, it had changed hands and the developers had to move in wanting to refurbish the house into a business centre. We were forced to agree a very strict schedule with the developers - 'please don't touch that bedroom until we've completed episode eight and please don't start on the kitchens until we've finished episode ten, etc.' The house was convenient for the actors in that there was plenty of shelter when it was cold and wet, and very pleasant lawns to lounge about on when the weather was fine. The house wasn't, of course, available to us for the second season as by 1976 the face-lift was complete and had completely changed character."

Does Pennant have any favourite episode, or one that sticks out in the mind more than any other? "I certainly enjoyed Jack Ronder's Corn Dolly. One of the most technically difficult was the episode in the second season where the youngsters climbed the chain in Skenfrith Mill."

The final episode of the first series was Terry Nation's A Beginning. This story sees the exit of Carolyn Seymour as Abby Grant from the series. Abby, tired and worn out by the responsibility of leading the community, seeks out Jimmy Garland, for whom she had developed a deep affection, if not love. The episode shows a love scene between the two, which posed problems for Pennant. "Originally, we had a bedroom love scene between Abby and Jimmy Garland. Ronnie Marsh, who was Head of Series at the time, got in touch with me and said that under no circumstances could we go ahead with the bedroom scene as Abby and Garland had not been married by a priest! I explained to him that in the scenario depicted by Survivors finding a priest would have been somewhat difficult, but he would have none of it. So we ended up by doing the scene on a sofa, with the result that the transmitted version looked even more erotic than if we had used the bedroom version!"

The only second series story to recapture the horror of The Fourth Horseman was Jack Ronder's two-part Lights of London. Part I was directed by Terence Williams, the second part by Pennant. This story sees our heroes return to a rat-infested London, to rescue Ruth who had been taken there to help the 500 strong community left in the capital. A storyline which was to some degree reminiscent of the first series' 'Four armed men In a Land Rover' device. Talking about the two episodes, Pennant remarks "They were really two completely separate episodes as far as production was concerned. In Survivors we had three different production teams in each season. Each director and his team would have only sixteen days between the end of one shooting cycle and the start of the next to complete post-production, all the recces and pre-production for the forthcoming episode."

For Lights of London Part II Pennant had chosen locations in Camden Town for the underground tunnels, in point of fact tunnels that had been constructed as emergency accommodation for American troops in the Second World War. Notes Pennant "They were somewhat limiting pictorially in that these massive tunnels ran straight for over half a mile, but there were relatively few linking tunnels and not many interesting nooks and crannies - I remember a particular staircase which led to nowhere. As in other stories we encountered some problems with our animals, in this case the rats. I really didn't fancy taking a horde of rats

underground for fear they might escape, and that we might lose a goodly few of them at a critical time. So while John Holmes contacted his own rat supplier in Guildford, I took out insurance by asking the BBC Special Effects Department to supply a few stuffed rats as a standby measure. But while the BBC rats were regulation-size rats, brown and inanimate, John Holmes' rats were only half the size and white. Make-up kindly volunteered to spray them darker for us, but unfortunately the rats didn't take kindly to the spray, and every one of them died. An ethical lesson for up-and-coming ambitious directors. We had to resort to threading the brown BBC rats onto piano wire and jiggling them up and down, and this is what you watch when Denis Lill is attacked by rats in the episode."

How does Pennant feel about the recent repeat showings of Survivors on the satellite channel UK Gold? "Of course I would have preferred it if the BBC had repeated the series earlier on one of the terrestrial channels, or indeed paid some financial acknowledgement for the satellite re-transmissions. However, it is quite nice to learn that some of my early work is still accessible to the general public twenty years on. Survivors would not get made today, because no programme commissioner would perceive it as a successful formula. The basic reason why Ian McCulloch's attempts to revive the series have come unstuck is that it wouldn't be the commissioner's 'baby'. Survivors would not be expensive to do. Even if you gave it the '90's treatment it would still be far less expensive than many contemporary series. It would still be necessary to select quiet locations, so there would be no need to incur the commercial pressures that arise when you are shooting in urban areas. By its very nature the series wouldn't require hordes of characters or extras. Survivors was certainly an interesting project, much more memorable than my time on Dr Who".