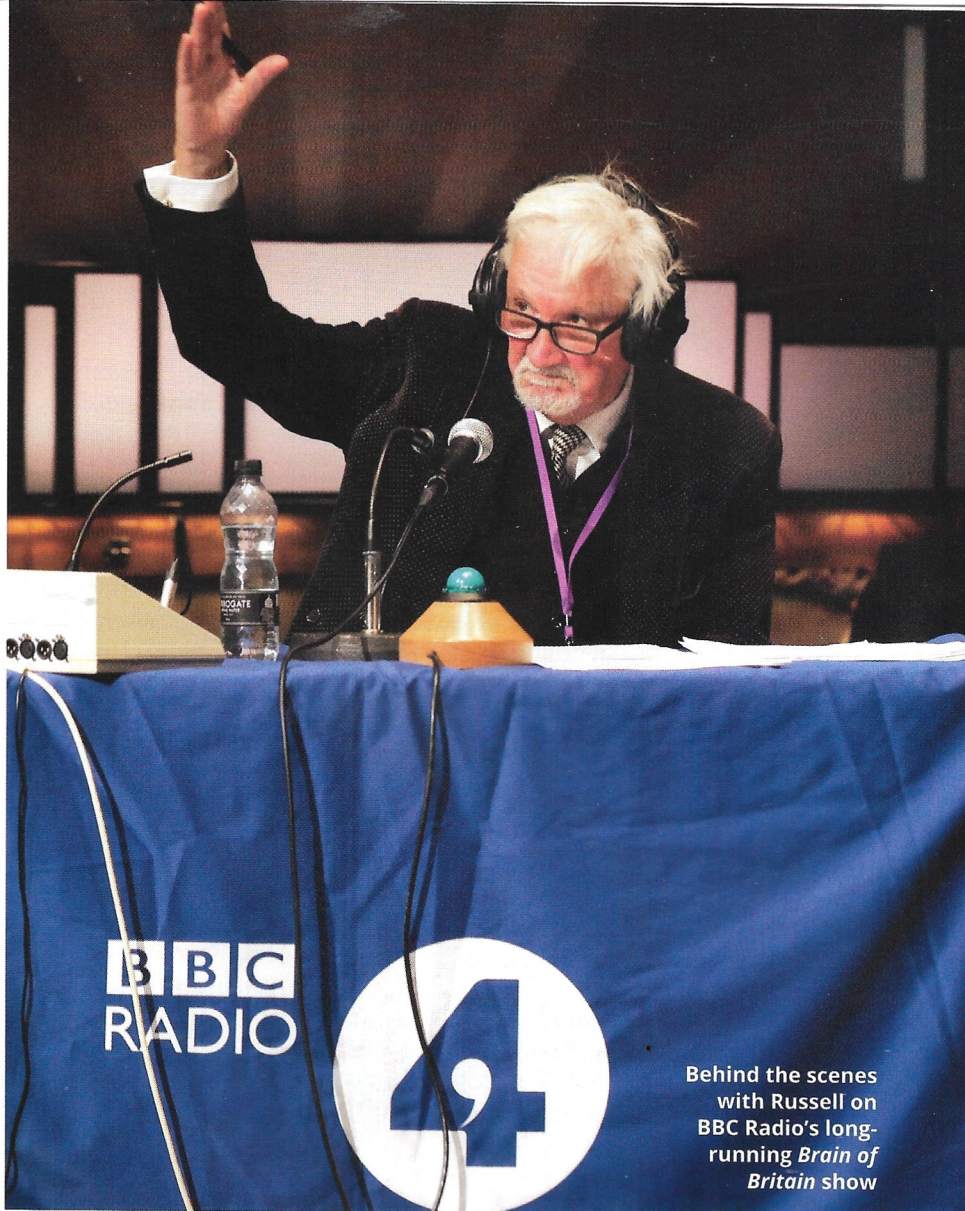




Behind the scenes
with Russell on
BBC Radio's long-
running *Brain of
Britain* show

QUIZZING THE QUIZMASTER

Brain of Britain host Russell Davies reflects on almost two decades of challenging some of the UK's brightest minds

WORDS KATIE CUTFORTH

What makes a successful quizzer? Russell Davies has had a lot of time to ponder that question. It's coming up to 20 years since

Russell first hosted BBC Radio 4's *Brain of Britain*, the delightfully straightforward general knowledge quiz that sees brainiacs from across the UK fight it out for a prestigious silver salver and an even more prestigious title.

"I've found that there is a definite quizzing temperament," says Russell.

"My theory is that finding success on *Brain of Britain* has less to do with remembering things than with being unable to forget things! Having a brain that won't let go of new information."

People often ask Russell how they can prepare to be a contestant.

"An elementary precaution would be to know about, say, the kings and queens of England, the sky at night, the periodic table, the works of some great writers, and the map of the world. But the truth is that the range of questions we ask is so broad that it

'NOT ONE TO BE PIGEONHOLED, RUSSELL FREELANCED AS A CARICATURIST, FILM AND TV CRITIC AND FOOTBALL REPORTER'

would be impossible even for me to predict what they will cover!"

Appropriately, Russell's career has been as varied as the questions he asks. It began with acting – he joined the Cambridge Footlights in 1964 alongside Clive James and Germaine Greer. After writing a one-off book review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Russell enjoyed seeing his name in print so much that he decided to pursue a career in journalism. Not one to be pigeonholed, Russell freelanced as a caricaturist, a film and TV critic and division football reporter, in addition to a stint as the deputy editor of *Punch* magazine.

Having moved into the world of broadcast by the 1980s, Russell has presented a plethora of BBC radio shows, including *Jazz Century* and *Word of Mouth*, and appeared on television as the presenter of the BBC Two arts series *Saturday Review*. He began hosting *Brain of Britain* in 2004, initially as sick cover for Robert Robinson, and became the permanent host in 2010.

70 YEARS OF BRAIN OF BRITAIN

Created in 1953, *Brain of Britain* is the UK's longest-running broadcast quiz show open to the public. "The show arose among that crop of radio series during the war or shortly after it, alongside the likes of *Desert Island Discs*, *Housewives Choice* and *The Archers*," says Russell. "It was initially a slot called 'Ask Me Another' within the quiz show *What Do You Know?*; it wasn't until 1967 that it took on the name *Brain of Britain*."

"I did come across a memo that the producer Joan Clark wrote back in 1954, which outlined the show's purpose – 'namely, to find a Brain of Britain' – so that was at least a phrase at the time!"

With only three permanent presenters in its long history (Franklin Engelmann, Robert Robinson and now

Russell), the show is inextricably tied to the personality of its presenter. It's clear that Russell's warmth and humour are integral to putting the contestants at ease and ensuring the listening pleasure of the audience.

"While in one sense it's just a reading marathon, it's also a performance," says Russell. "There are two audiences to play to simultaneously: both a large and potentially noisy live audience and the audience at home. It's crucial to bear them both in mind."

"Meeting the contestants is always fascinating, particularly because they do vary very much. Some of them have even said to me, 'I'm not really intelligent, I just organise facts well and I've got a good memory'. I hugely enjoy the 'Beat the Brain' section of the show (when questions submitted by listeners are tackled by the contestants together) –

that's often fascinating as they work together to find the right (or wrong) answer. Some of my favourite moments are when a question I thought was very difficult is resoundingly polished off by a contestant," laughs Russell. "There's a real satisfaction in that."

SIMPLE PLEASURES

Far from being on their way out, the Royal Television Society reported in 2020 that quiz shows are entering a "golden age". Programmes such as *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?*, *Pointless* and *Mastermind* are dominating the TV schedule, while radio shows including *The News Quiz*, *Counterpoint* and *Round Britain Quiz* are proving enduringly popular. The competition is fierce – so what is it about *Brain of Britain* that has stood the test of time?

For Russell, the answer lies in its simplicity. "I think the appeal of *Brain of Britain* is its unfussiness," he says. "You get one point per question, with only one deviation of an extra point for getting five questions right in a row."

"Creating a new quiz format these days is a heck of a job, and the complicated and labyrinthine ones don't tend to catch on. There have been some outstanding creations in recent years though, with some of them, like *Pointless*, already getting into the veteran stage."

"*Brain's* format has stood the test of time, with very little adjustment to the show's basic concept in its many decades of broadcast."

One thing that has changed is the likely contestants, Russell says; encouraging gender diversity has been a long-standing priority. "We've campaigned throughout my time on the programme for women to come forward in greater numbers – nobody wants to listen to an endless parade of dull men! It's always great to get a female 'Brain', as we had last season in Sarah Trevarthen."

Russell has been a household name and voice on our radios since the 1980s

