

PART
TWO
OF A
SERIES
BY
LINTON
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SUPERSTAR

The incredible
story of Rolf Harris

**Recording, writing,
entertaining, gardening
—no wonder it's a
6 a.m. start six days
of the week...**

ROLF HARRIS had said that it would be a lot easier if he picked us up at East Penge Station and drove us to his home.

His house, in Sydenham, Kent, where he lives with his Welsh-born wife Alwen and seven-year-old daughter Bindi, is only about three or four minutes by car from the station.

"But for some reason or other people keep getting lost when they come to see us," he said. "They drive for miles, round in circles, without finding the place. I don't know why exactly, but it happens."

He said (after giving us a list of the train times) that he would pick us up at 10.30am — and at exactly 10.30am a red Austin Mini, with Harris at the wheel, pulled up outside East Penge station.

"Hullo," he said. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting. This is the wife's car. Did I have problems last night? My own car is still parked in a car park in the middle of London. I wish somebody would tell you how long those car parks stayed open, or there was a notice of something."

"I left a lot of my instruments at the BBC and I went to collect them at about a quarter-to-nine. I went to the car park I usually use — I had parked there earlier in the day — and it was closed. The thing is, I know the attendants there pretty well. We usually stop and have a joke. Still, I suppose it was a different shift. I had to get a taxi back here last night. That cost a couple of quid and it's going to cost me some more when I go to get it out today."

"It's the nuisance that is the problem, though, I will have to make a special trip to get the car — and that takes time."

His momentary annoyance disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. We were in a quietish, suburban, middle class-looking road — and Harris stopped the car to talk to three neighbours' sons. It was easy and natural. They were doing some work for him; clearing up ground in front of the house.

"Replanting," he said. "I like things to look nice. And Eucalyptus trees. I'm always planting Eucalyptus trees whenever I can. I have persuaded my neighbours to plant them as well. In a couple of hundred years time, when we are all gone, some historian will look at Sydenham and say 'Ah! This must have been an Australian colony!'"

Harris lives in a sort of studio-house. In fact it is really two houses joined together, in a line of studio houses.

At the bottom of his garden — which is adequate, but by no means vast, and decorated with figures made by his sculptress wife, eucalyptus trees and other ornaments — is a coach house.

We went up some narrow, winding stairs, past rows of paintings and drawings, done mainly by daughter Bindi, to the thickly-carpeted living room. Immediately adjoining this was a sort of large kitchen/drawing room.

It was all open. Harris likes space. There was plenty of space.

Outside, there was much hurrying to and fro of workmen and much hammering and banging. "It's all right," said Harris. "They're just putting in a new light switch." Then he roared with laughter. "Don't look so startled," he said. "Most of the activity is to do with the old coach house at the bottom of the garden. Alwen and I like to do our work there and keep the house free for living in. But, unfortunately, the ceiling in my part of the coach-house — the lower part — was so low in places that I kept crashing my head into it. You know, I would walk about deep in thought and then wham! I'd be sitting on the floor, seeing stars. So I've had the ceiling raised."

The Harrises are very happy with their home. And the location. "It's the quietness of it all," he said. "And yet we don't have to go all the way round the world to get here. It is within easy striking range of the centre of London yet it is — at the moment, anyway — far enough away from the bustle to be peaceful."

Rolf Harris's parents emigrated to Australia from Cardiff. His father, who bears the imposing name of Cromwell George Harris, worked as a turbine operator and saved every penny he could to buy a piece of land in the small township of Bassendean, Perth. His mother, Agnes, was born in Claude Road, Roath, Cardiff.

Harris has been back to see the city where his parents came from, but only once. "It rained and it rained and it rained," he said. "Everywhere was flooded. They had more rain in Wales during the time I spent there than they had for 300 years. I suppose it was coincidence."

"But do you know what was really a great thrill for me? Going to my mother's old school and being a gold plaque, with her name written on it, up the wall. It was because of an award which she had won. I don't remember what it was for exactly, but it was something unusual — like sportsmanship and mathematics, a couple of complete opposites joined together. I also met my mother's old schoolmistress, who was just on the point of retiring."

Alwen was making tea and Bindi was making a cake out of nutshells. "When we do go back to Wales," said Alwen, who was born in Wrexham, North Wales, but came to England when she was a child, "I think you will have to wear dark glasses and a particularly long false beard." Rolf nodded. "Yes," he said, "we will have to go in disguise."

Everywhere we went we had an army of schoolchildren... literally an army... following. They wanted autographs, which is very nice and, of course, you wouldn't dream of saying 'No' — but meant that you had hardly any time to see things."



LEFT: Rolf Harris relaxes at home with wife, Alwen, and daughter Bindi, aged seven. Autograph-hunters are a problem: "Would you do me one favour," said Rolf. "Don't take any pictures of the front of the house." BELOW: Rolf in the garden at the BACK of the house. The Harrises like the "Quietness of it all."

■ Pictures by Nick Rogers and Chris Capstick

Autograph-hunters are always knocking on the Harrises door, particularly during the school holidays. With Rolf away working it is Alwen who bears the brunt of them. It isn't just the occasional schoolboy who calls in. Alwen has, during the school holidays, to take this into consideration as a major part of her day.

"I can almost time it to the second," she said. "There is a knock at the door and down the stairs I go. A little boy or a girl wants an autographed picture of Rolf, and I give it to him. I turn round and start up the stairs again. I know that as soon as I put my foot on the top step there will be another knock on the door."

She added: "It's not so bad when it is a different child, but when it is the same one saying 'Can I have one for my sister?' or 'I don't like this one. I've already got one of them at home already' you tend to feel a little exasperated."

Said Rolf: "I only remember getting cross once. That was when we gave some children a lot of autographed pictures and then, a bit later on, found the pictures all ripped up; lying outside the house. That only happened once, but I was a bit upset. It wasn't my ego that was upset — I don't think so, anyway — but I don't like people tearing up things that other people have given them."

At one time they tried putting a notice on the door. "It was a pretty terrible notice," said Harris. "It said something like 'Autographed pictures of Rolf Harris cannot be obtained from these premises. Applications should be made in writing to his agent, care of so-and-so.'"

"We tried it for a little while and I said 'Oh no! We can't do this.' It is a perfect example of the kind of behaviour that I can't stand at any price. You can't tell kids to make formal applications in writing for autographs. It isn't natural. It is phoney."

He roared with laughter. "But would you do me a favour? Would you not take any pictures of the front of the house... just in CASE there are some people who haven't been round for autographs because they don't know where we live."

The Harrises get on very well with their

neighbours. "I am very glad to say that people accept us," said Harris. "It's not a question of having to go into a shell. I would hate to have to go into a shell. In fact, I would never go into a shell."

They have found one drawback in living where they do, however. "All our friends in the entertainment world live north of the river... in striking distance of the studios," said Harris. Val Doonican, Roger Whittaker, Anne and Vince Hill, and Harry Secombe are among the Harrises show business friends. "We never manage to see Harry Secombe as much as we would like," said Harris, "probably because we both seem to be working all the time."

At the moment, Harris is getting up at six o'clock in the morning, six days a week. He is writing two books. One is called *Songwriting from Rank Amateurs*, which is self-explanatory, and the other is also about songwriting — only it is aimed at schools in the United States and Canada.

He usually manages to put in a couple of hours work before Bindi decides to wake up. After that it is usually time for breakfast, and the schedule after that varies.

When he is doing the Rolf Harris Show it's a matter of being at the studios from 10.5.30pm; again six days a week. This particular day his schedule had gone a little astray, partly because of the car problem the previous night and partly because of the interview. It was near noon when he asked Alwen to make him some breakfast.

Harris is always doing something. When he isn't recording or entertaining he is making things, or planting, or gardening — or something.

I asked Alwen if she found this constant versatility tiring... if she ever wished that he would slow down. "Not really," she said. "You see, we manage to do most things together."

"When he goes abroad for any length of time, Bindi and I usually go with him."



TOMORROW:
Harris the artist
and craftsman