



**Head of Food Records
who signed Blur**
Andy Ross
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Obituaries

Bamber Gascoigne

Donnish presenter, author and quizmaster whose catchphrases on University Challenge became staples of British television

Bamber Gascoigne, with his donnish appearance and patrician voice, was an unlikely candidate for television stardom. As the first quizmaster on *University Challenge*, from 1962 until 1987, he regularly attracted more than 11 million viewers. In his quarter of a century on the programme, he became associated with several catchphrases that outlasted him — “starter for ten”, “fingers on the buzzer” and “I’ll have to hurry you”.

By 1962, after coming down from Cambridge, he had just published his first book, *Twentieth Century Drama*, when he was contacted by Granada Television to see if he would be interested in auditioning to host a new quiz show for university contestants based on an American show called *College Bowl*. *University Challenge* differed somewhat from existing quiz shows, with their cash prizes and questions of a more populist rather than academic bent. The idea was that teams of four contestants from various universities would compete simply for the honour of winning.

Gascoigne could never be accused of being a populist, what with his donnish air and Queen’s English pronunciation. And he never assumed the show would run for 913 episodes with him at the helm, as initially just 13 were scheduled. He was only 27, but was quick-witted, with a pleasant appearance and manner, although the producers were unhappy about his wardrobe. “Granada’s response to my clothes was very offensive,” Gascoigne recalled many years later. “I’d come up for my audition in my best cords... and they immediately sent me to Savile Row.” In the programme’s early days, Gascoigne set all the questions himself with initial contests staged over two legs, the second requiring team members to select questions from specific categories such as sport, literature or science.

He thought his career was going to end not long after it began on receiving what he believed was his first fan letter. Instead, it read: “Dear Sir, Professor Lovell calculates in *The Sunday Times* this morning that there must be at least 1,000 other planets in this universe equally as far developed as our own, but one thing I am certain [of]... that on all these planets there cannot be a single broadcaster with an equally pansy bastard strangled voice like yours.”

When the programme started, there were only 30 universities in Britain and there was a distinct Oxbridge bias in the programme as the two universities were permitted to enter up to five teams each from their different colleges. Yet it was an immediate hit and one of the very few ITV programme with no advertising breaks.

Gascoigne said that the success of the show was akin to having a rich godfather giving him “money for not spending much time doing something”, which allowed him to “spend the remainder of the year writing unprofitable books”. While at Cambridge he had written a successful play that had



Gascoigne at home in 1966; at West Horsley Place, the estate he inherited aged 80 in 2015; and with Stephen Fry in 2010



run in the West End for nine months. He continued to attempt a return to the theatre, although his 1968 play *Leda Had a Little Swan*, which dealt with bestiality, was banned by the Lord Chamberlain before it could even make it onto the stage. A subsequent attempt to produce a play that required a cast of 40 pygmies was abandoned due to the impossibility of finding suitable performers, although it was later turned into *Murgatroid’s Empire*, a satirical novel published in 1972.

Despite the lack of any prize money, university students were keen to appear on the programme, including a number who would go on to find fame in their subsequent careers, such as Stephen Fry, Julian Fellowes, Christopher Hitchens, John Simpson, Clive James, Miriam Margolyes and Malcolm Rifkind.

To begin with, the contestants and the student audience were invariably dressed in suits, though by the 1970s there was an air of casualness in the contestants’ dress and hairstyles, along with a mild act of rebellion. In 1975, a team from the University of Manchester, which included David Aaronovitch, now a columnist for *The Times*, wanted to protest against the alleged class bias of the programme, citing the fact that polytechnics were not allowed to participate while up to ten teams from Oxbridge colleges could enter. The team

lost to Downing College, Cambridge, when they started a round answering every question with either “Che Guevara”, “Marx”, “Trotsky” or “Lenin”, in the hope of making the episode un-broadcastable. It did, however, get broadcast, although Granada TV banned the University of Manchester for several years.

In 1979, due to his widespread popularity, Gascoigne was the witness to the burial by Kit Williams, the author of *Masquerade*, of a Golden Hare jewel in an earthenware jar “somewhere in Britain”. In the treasure hunt that followed, Gascoigne was inundated with pleas for help and was offered many bribes. He chronicled the events in a book, *Quest for the Golden Hare*.

Under Gascoigne *University Challenge* was one of the longest-running

He was ‘always a bit of a softie’ and approved of appointing Paxman

television programmes. It was occasionally the subject of other shows, including in 1980 when the BBC’s *Not the Nine O’clock News* broadcast a sketch pitting against each other two teams of prisoners from Wormwood Scrubs and Parkhurst, who scored time off their sentences by “grassing” on other criminals. In 1984, Gascoigne was parodied by Griff Rhys-Jones on the alternative comedy series *The Young Ones*, in an episode entitled “Bambi”. He was also portrayed by the actor Mark Gatiss in the 2006 feature film *Starter for Ten*.

ITV cancelled the programme in 1987. When it was brought back on BBC Two in 1994 Jeremy Paxman was

chosen as the host. Gascoigne refused to apply to present the new series, which has now run for longer than the original, as he was involved with other projects. He approved of appointing Paxman as someone with a different approach to his: “He couldn’t be more different than me, because he had this reputation of being a hard man, whereas I was always a bit of a softie, really.”

Arthur Bamber Gascoigne was born in London in 1935. His family were originally Norman, arriving in the early 13th century. One ancestor was lord mayor of London in the 18th century. The name Bamber was the surname of the lord mayor’s wife and was given to their son, an MP for the Cornish seat of Bossiney. According to Gascoigne, his ancestor was “a bit of a rogue” as he represented the most rotten borough in parliament, where the only qualified voter was the local vicar, who returned two MPs. Later, a Gascoigne daughter, an heiress with an alternative spelling of her name, married the second Marquess of Salisbury, whose surname remains Gascoyne-Cecil to this day. Other Gascoignes were prominent military men in the Grenadier Guards, which was also Bamber Gascoigne’s regiment during his National Service.

He retained fond memories of his life in the regi-

ment, which after his parade ground phase was very pleasant. He “spent six months dancing with debs in London and guarding the Queen in Buckingham Palace” before being posted to Berlin and Düsseldorf for the remainder of his service. Before this he had attended Sunningdale School, winning a scholarship to Eton and subsequently to Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he read English literature. It was at Cambridge that he met Christina Ditchburn, a photographer who he married in 1965. They had no children.

At Cambridge he had initially wanted to be an actor but found it too tiresome to have to play the same part for more than a week, so instead was involved in directing and ultimately writing plays. He firstly submitted scripts to the Footlights sketch troupe, but failed to have them performed. In his second year he wrote a college review, which had never been done at Magdalene before. It was seen by Michael Codron, then a young producer, who put it on in London as a musical called *Share My Lettuce*, which ran for nine months in 1957-58 and starred Maggie Smith and Kenneth Williams.

After spending a year as a Commonwealth Fund Scholar at Yale University, Gascoigne was employed as a theatre critic for *The Spectator* and later *The Observer*. He was one of the first critics to review a performance by Barry Humphries at The Establishment. Continued on page 54



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ment Club, which he found “distinctly soporific”. By the time Granada TV approached him he was still writing plays but they were failing to attract interest from theatrical producers.

During the period in which he was involved with *University Challenge*, Gascoigne continued to make other television programmes and write accompanying books, including a 13-part series on the history of Christianity and others on China and the history of the Mughal Empire in India. In all, he wrote more than 20 books. His wife Christina, who was also an accomplished ceramist, frequently provided the photographs and illustrations for his books. While filming *The Great Mughals* in India, Gascoigne noticed a copy of his book in the window of a bookshop. When he told the bookseller that he had written it, the man smiled at Gascoigne and replied: “No sir, I am afraid you are sadly mistaken — the author is a very distinguished older gentleman.”

His 1987 appearance on Radio 4’s *Desert Island Discs* was unique in that Christina had chosen all of his eight musical excerpts without telling him in advance, because they had identical musical tastes. Gascoigne served as a trustee of the National Gallery and the



Gascoigne and his wife of 55 years, Christina, in their Notting Hill flat in the 1960s

Tate Gallery; he was also a member of the Council of the National Trust and was on the board of directors of the Royal Opera House.

From 1994, he was for the most part preoccupied with his online history encyclopaedia, *History World*. He had already written a single-volume encyclopaedia of British history, but saw the

arrival of the internet as an unparalleled opportunity to reach billions of people. He characterised the worldwide web as “the biggest gear change in human communication since the development of writing, and certain to be larger in its effect on society than printing”. Comprising more than a million words and constantly expanding its

chronological narrative and extensive background links, historyworld.net ensured that Gascoigne’s considerable intellect remained stimulated, though it has been overtaken by other sites such as Wikipedia.

In his 80th year, Gascoigne was surprised to inherit West Horsley Place, a large country house in Surrey, from his great aunt, Mary, Duchess of Roxburghe. It was assumed that the house and its 300-acre estate would be left to a closer aristocratic relative but the duchess disapproved of his personal behaviour and messy divorce. To make matters more complicated, the property required several million pounds of repairs to prevent it from falling down and to make it habitable.

Gascoigne had no intention of moving from his house at Richmond Hill. He and his wife wanted to turn West Horsley Place into an arts and crafts centre, so £8.8 million of its possessions were auctioned off, but this still left the exquisite walled gardens and surrounding grounds without a specific role.

The couple were passionate opera lovers and as luck would have it, Wasfi Kani, the founder of Grange Park Opera in Hampshire, had just had her lease terminated by the Baring family.

Feelers were put out by Kani to see if the Gascoignes might consent to having a new opera house built on their grounds. Initially, Gascoigne was sceptical but his wife convinced him by saying that he would think of it as a rare and beautiful bird that had just landed in their garden and would like to stay. Within months, a 99-year lease was signed and one year later, in 2017, Grange Park Opera was reborn as a 700-seat opera house modelled on Milan’s La Scala.

In 2018, Gascoigne was appointed CBE in the birthday honours list for services to the arts.

He and his wife lived in their large book-filled house on the Thames in Richmond for more than 55 years, where they entertained their wide circle of friends. Until ill health overtook him, one of his favourite pastimes was to go a mile or two upriver on the Thames in a rowing boat, and allow the tide to float him back to his front door.

Bamber Gascoigne CBE, television quizmaster, playwright and author, was born on January 24, 1935. He died after a short illness on February 8, 2022, aged 87.

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