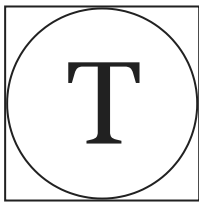


Seven Up! at 70 from those it followed – and why the show is finally ending

In 1964, ITV released a groundbreaking project documenting the lives of ordinary children and revisiting them every seven years. **Nick Curtis** meets two of the original boys – who are now 70



he two septuagenarian men on my Zoom screen, Peter Davies and Bruce Balden, have been part of the nation's life for over six decades. In 1964, they were among 10 boys and four girls, from different parts of the UK and wildly different social backgrounds, interviewed about their expectations and aspirations for the pioneering Granada film *Seven Up!*

Peter was one of two chirpy, bicycling, working-class Liverpudlian lads, and wanted to be an astronaut. Bruce was the haunted boarding-school boy and aspiring missionary who hoped one day to see his absent father, who was 6,000 miles away, soldiering in what was then Rhodesia.

The film was planned as a one-off, inspired by the Jesuit maxim “give me the child at seven and I will show you the man”. But director Michael Apted, a researcher under Paul Almond on the original film, turned Up into the world's longest-running documentary series.

Returning to film the “cast” every seven years – or at least those still prepared to take part – it grew from an examination of the British class system into, as Bruce puts it, “the story of a whole

life". We saw the kids grow up, marry, separate, have careers, suffer illness and depression.

Neil Hughes, who went to school with Peter in Liverpool, was homeless for a while but became a counsellor and a lay preacher. Symon Basterfield was the only person of colour featured: the son of a white mother with depression and a Black father he never knew; he grew up in a children's home and ended up fostering some 300 kids himself. Paul Kligerman, who grew up in the same London children's home, emigrated to Australia, where he still lives.

This month the series concludes with *70 Up*, directed by Asif Kapadia. Apted had early-onset dementia when filming *63 Up* in 2009 and then died in 2021.

Lynn Johnson, one of the trio of working-class East End friends chosen for *Seven Up!* – alongside token posh girl Suzy Lusk, who lived on a 4,000-acre Scottish estate – died after a short illness in 2013. Married at 19, she worked all her life as a school librarian. Her friends Jackie and Sue were married at 19 and 24, the former working several jobs and the latter as a university administrator. Suzy, meanwhile, married at 22 and became a bereavement counsellor.

Poignantly, Nick Hitchon, who was pigeonholed as a lonely Yorkshire farm boy in the first film but grew up to be a nuclear physicist in America, died of throat cancer three days after completing filming for *70 Up!* "Suddenly there are parts of the

jigsaw missing,” as Suzy puts it in the film.

Peter and Bruce agree it is right and proper to end the series here, with the symmetry of seven-to-70, but when we speak, they and the rest of the cast are yet to see the finished film. “I don’t know if I’m going to feel emotional, relieved, sad,” says Peter, who became a teacher, then a lawyer and is now a writer and musician. “I’m certainly aware of the magnitude of this being the final programme in a series that’s been going on for most of our lives.”

“I know there’s a clip of me reading a poem from my father [written when he was in Africa],” says Bruce. “Which was quite an eye-opener because it showed he was missing me just as much as I was missing him at seven. But that’s life: that’s what happens.

“Looking back [to the original film], I do recognise elements of myself in that little lost soul. But I’ve done OK: I’m surprised to be sort of contented.” His father only got back in touch with him after seeing him on *28 Up*. Bruce, incidentally, believes personality is firmly established by the age of seven, while Peter believes that’s “just not true”. He can see “the kernel of me in that little boy” that he was in *Seven Up!*, “but so much has happened over the course of my life, I’m a different person, almost”.

Bruce also became a teacher, initially sticking to his Christian, socialist principles in working-class Whitechapel and, for a spell, in Bangladesh, before moving at 49 to the private St Albans School. “I just thought, I can’t do this till I’m 60,” he says on

screen. He has now retired to Berwick-upon-Tweed, where he sings in the church choir and volunteers with the local lifeboat.

Peter dropped out of three instalments after *28 Up*, when he was monstered by the right-wing press for calling Margaret Thatcher's government "an incompetent, uncaring bloody shower" who undervalued education. "In hindsight it was quite mild compared to the stuff flying around on Facebook and the like now, but the language was vitriolic and it made me think: I don't want to go through this again," he says.

"When I came back for *56 Up* I was more comfortable with myself and had a clearer idea of the relationship I wanted to have with ITV." Then, he wanted to promote his band, The Good Intentions.

In the final film, he talks about his novel *Valediction Records* and his musical *Under the Mersey Moon*, but he also mentions his problems with depression, encouraging others to seek help. Bruce thanks him for putting this out there. Of the other participants, perhaps only cheeky cockney Tony tried to use the semi-fame and the exposure that the series bestowed to his advantage, working as an actor and an extra as well as a jockey and taxi driver.

Apted kept in touch with the participants between films, but there was little contact among them individually. Tony, by design or chance, picked a few of the others up in his cab; Sue, Lynn and Jackie were, and stayed, friends; Bruce let Neil stay with him and helped him get a flat when he fetched up in Hackney.

Weirdly, Bruce ended up teaching at Tony's old school, "and his

The Up series is sometimes cited as the first reality TV show. Both Peter and Bruce admit it was intrusive at times. They got recognised by the public, particularly each time a new film went out or when older ones were shown in schools (which is where I first saw *Seven Up!*, in the 70s) or used in teacher training. They clearly hold Apted in great affection. "He wasn't well on *63 Up* and we all sort of looked after him," says Bruce. Tony, whose infidelity was exposed in the show and who was accused of racism by Apted, calls him a "jewel".

However, over the years, some participants have accused Apted of pursuing an agenda and have been intermittently unhappy at how they were portrayed. In those who dropped out and returned, you can see a reluctance to continue to appear on screen warring with a sense of duty – a generational one, perhaps – not to disrupt a historic enterprise.

John Brisby felt he was misrepresented as part of a trio of prep-school toffs initially seen singing *Waltzing Matilda* in Latin, and absented himself from 28 and 42, but came back for 35 to promote charities linked to his Bulgarian heritage and later saw the rest of the series through. Another in this threesome, Charles Furnaux, left the series after 21 and became a journalist and BBC producer: he contributes only a voiceover and photos to the final show. The third, Andrew Brackfield, a solicitor, appeared in every film.

Suzy Dewey nee Lusk didn't take part in *63 Up* because she felt "picked on" but later regretted it. Symon didn't appear in *35 Up*! Jackie Bassett appeared in every episode but is often seen sparring with the off-camera Apted, whom she berates for sexism. "When I was 35, Michael said, 'Oh, you're not married yet, aren't you getting on a bit,'" says Bruce. "He asked the girls that at 21." (Bruce eventually married a fellow teacher. Peter is also married and each has two adult children.)

In their focus on class, Peter thinks that Apted and the production team "missed a couple of things. It's outrageous that only four girls were picked, which Michael, to be fair, later acknowledged. But the 1960s were a time of huge societal change and I think they also missed the emergence of almost a new class of children, who had working-class parents, like mine were, but who, helped by a fully resourced welfare state and education system, were able to move away from that background."

Both men believe the world has changed immeasurably since they were seven. Bruce says the class system still exists – "it definitely helps to have a good start in life" – but "things are less rigid now, more fluid, the middle class is a lot bigger and the differences between us are smaller". In his first teaching job in the East End he found it inconceivable that the boys weren't taught Latin.

"It's too easy nowadays to think: Trump, Putin... the world is going to hell," says Peter. "And there are still tremendous

amounts of prejudice and bigotry about, and tremendous levels of inequality. But I think the arc of humanity is still going in the right way.

“When we were kids, for example, it was effectively unlawful to be a gay man. You couldn’t have an abortion. If you were letting rooms, you could put a poster up in your window saying ‘no blacks or Irish’. So I think we are most definitely in a more accepting, more inclusive society than we were.” At which point our Zoom, along with the glorious 63-year experiment of the Up series, comes to an end.

‘70 Up’ starts Tuesday 15th September at 9pm on ITV1 and ITVX

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Every seven years since, cameras have returned to capture the journey from childhood to retirement (*Photos ITV*)



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Peter Davies wanted to be an astronaut but became a teacher then a lawyer and is now a writer and musician