

70 Up: ‘It became a story of what it means to live a human life’

As the groundbreaking documentary series comes to a close, two of its participants look back and give **Ben Dowell** their verdict on the final films

The final episode of the magisterial *Up* series — and it really will be the final episode — ended last week with power and poignancy. We heard the last words from the contributors to this extraordinary TV endeavour, the music crescendoing before cutting to the gentle sound of playing children as the credits rolled. It was impossible not to well up.

“What we call the beginning is often the end,” TS Eliot wrote in *Little Gidding*, the last of *Four Quartets*. “And to make an end is to make a beginning.” This came to mind in the final heart-catching moment that took us beautifully back to the start of the series in 1964 when the seven-year-olds were interviewed by a director called Paul Almond and his assistant Michael Apted (who went on to take charge). They wanted to examine the state of Britain and to see whether the Jesuit dictum “Give me a child when he is seven and I will show you a man” held water.

The children, who were seen romping around London Zoo in the first programme, were carefully chosen to pursue what was essentially a study of class divides. Two of them (Paul and Symon) lived in a children’s home, while John, Andrew and Charles were privately educated. Three London girls, Jackie, Sue and Lynn, were friends from the start (Lynn, the lovely librarian, died in 2013), as were Neil and Peter, the two boys from Liverpool. Their lives went in different ways. Peter became a teacher and then a musician, while poor Neil struggled all his life with mental health issues. And who can forget Bruce, lovely little Bruce looking slightly lost and — as we soon discovered — desperately missing his father, who was overseas.

For viewers who followed the story from the beginning, it felt as if we knew them, almost as if they were part of our families. But even if you didn’t watch *7 Up*, which aired in 1964, or the following series *7 Plus 7*, which became *21 Up* and ran until the final, *70 Up*, all series included archive recaps of previous episodes. Apted died after

finishing *63 Up*, and while many of the participants thought the show might have ended there, the Oscar-winning director Asif Kapadia returned to complete the series.

If the end of the show was emotional for viewers, it was even more so for the participants. Jackie cried on camera and Suzy, the well-to-do girl from Scotland who was initially opposed to marriage but had a happy one and then worked as a bereavement counsellor, summed it up with the words: “I need a bloody gin.”

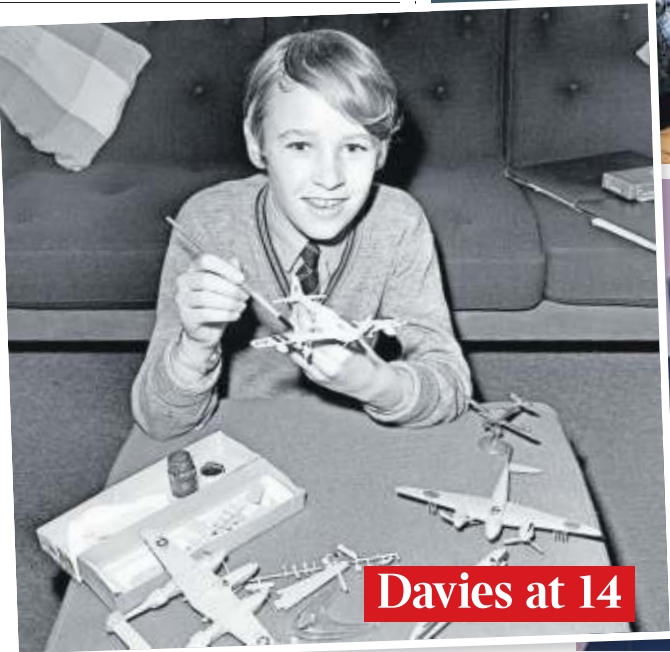
Two of the contributors, Peter Davies and Bruce Balden, spoke to The Times about their experiences, their memories of the other participants and their thoughts on the final films.

“I’ve always found it difficult to comment objectively on a series in which I’ve been fundamentally involved, but I was moved by *70 Up*: it evolved from a study of class into a story of what it means to live a human life,” says Davies, who lives in Liverpool with his second wife, Gabrielle.

Davies made no secret of the fact that he only returned to the show in *56 Up* for his own ends after a bruising encounter with the British press. As a socially conscious teacher in 1984 (*28 Up*), he had spoken about government cuts to the education system and was, he says, pilloried (“Not by The Times, I might add”). So he left the show only to come back, 28 years later, to publicise his creative endeavours, which include a novel, a musical, and his band, Good Intentions. He was also keen to speak publicly about his struggles with depression.

“I’m still the son of a guy who came from a working-class background, and men didn’t talk about that,” he says. “That’s become much better, I think. But it’s still something too many people struggle to hear and too many people struggle to talk about.”

While he is adamant that the show



Davies at 14



Peter Davies



Davies at 56

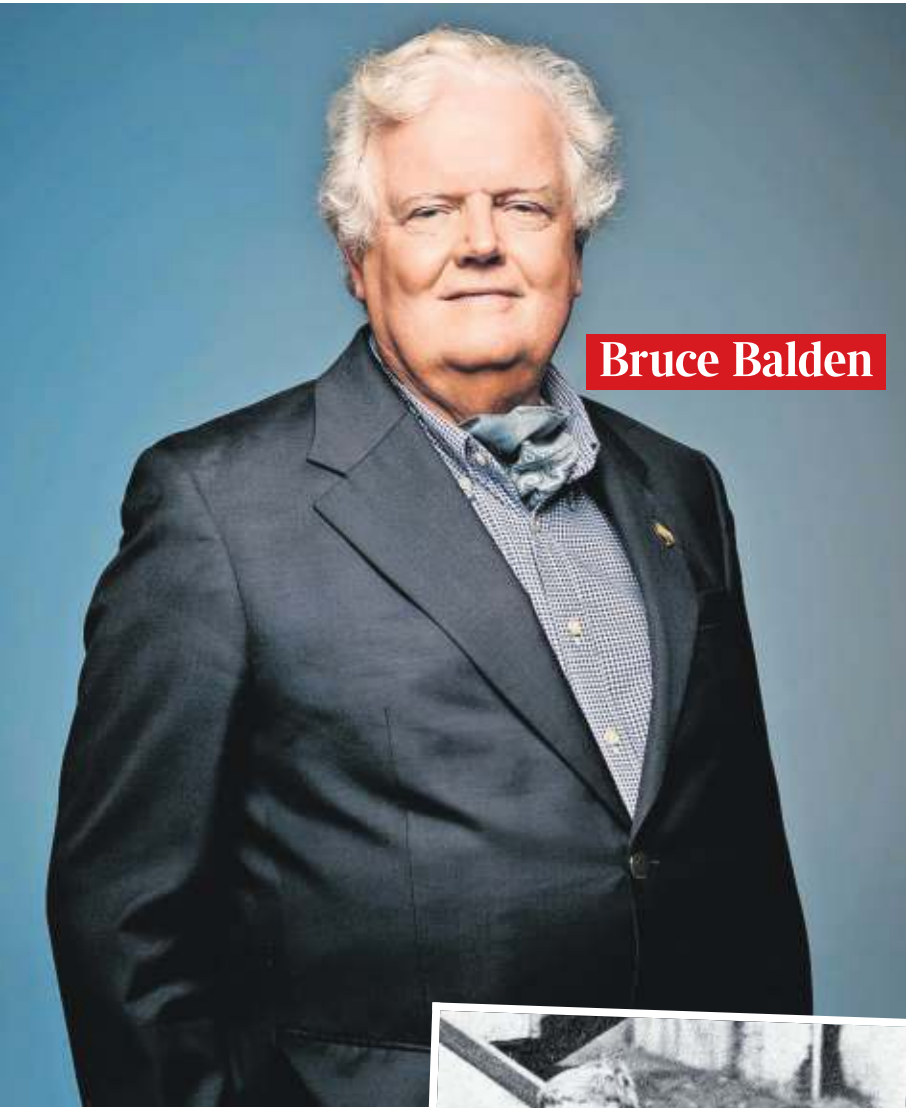
will now end for good, he thinks it will continue to be shown and discussed — and he will continue to be recognised. The experience used to “freak” him out, but he has come to terms with it. “People feel they know you, and you sort of owe them. It used to irritate me more than it does now.”

He thinks the show has demonstrated that the Jesuit maxim does not hold water. “Environmental, family, circumstantial events, things happen which can change you significantly,” he says, adding that his favourite moment of the whole series was when Jackie berated Apted for asking intrusive questions about her personal life. “I thought it was absolutely disgraceful, and I was delighted to see Jackie give him what for,” he says, chuckling, adding that the trio of women were probably his favourite characters.

“There were only four girls in the programme, and it was fascinating watching them grow up and become young women, and clearly have difficulties progressing in life, which were associated, and still are, with being a woman rather than a man.

“I’ve always been impressed with them. They got on with life, they don’t appear to have taken crap off the men, or given in to societal pressures to act

“People feel they know you and you sort of owe them. It used to irritate me



Bruce Balden



Balden at 35



Balden at 7

a poem from his father — the man the lost seven-year-old was missing deeply (he was a soldier in southern Africa). He was touched when recently someone stopped him in a supermarket and “choked up” talking about this moment.

His feelings now are “a bit of relief that it’s all over — tinged with a little sadness that I shall probably not see the gang again,” he tells me. He has a gentle calmness that derives from his Quaker faith (he used to be an Anglican). “As you grow up, as you get older, you care less and less about what other people think of you. So you grow a much thicker skin.”

He joked that he and his fellow Uppers might have enjoyed the second longest stint on British TV in the same role (after William Roache, who started playing *Coronation Street*’s Ken Barlow in 1960). So what did he think of the theological idea on which the show was based? “I recognise some essence of character, but this idea that you can shape somebody... Well, I find that a little sinister in terms of control, but I believe some parts of your character are formed, and who knows how they are formed? But I recognise some parts of that young boy in myself now.”

He remains particularly impressed

by Symon, the hesitant boy from a children’s home who as an adult grew in confidence and went on to foster children of his own. “I’ve always been inspired by Symon, who did not have family love at all, but he’s recognised the need in that, and he and [his wife] Vienetta have provided it dozens and dozens of times.”

He was also drawn to John Brisby. “Because he was set up as a bit of a fall guy, at 21 saying, ‘Of course, someone working in a car factory could send their child to private school, but they choose not to.’ And yet, he does an awful lot of good work... and will probably readily admit what a prat he sounded like. He’s actually a very nice chap. And looks back with kind of chagrin and embarrassment. He has lived a good life.”

That’s Bruce. Kind and solicitous to the end. Both men are adamant that there won’t be a *77 Up* — they can’t abide the idea of the series visiting some of them in frail old age, but like all the contributors are looking towards the final chapters of their lives. They deserve it. And as for life after this life? Peter doesn’t have a religious faith, but Bruce does: “I like the CS Lewis idea that it’s not a body that has a soul. It’s a soul that has a body.”

70 Up is available on ITVX

‘It’s not you, it’s my ADHD’: how ‘diagnosis creep’ entered our inbox

Signing off emails with a neurodiversity disclaimer is becoming a trend. Is it going too far, asks **Helen Down**

What does your email signature say? If you’re a *Sent from my iPhone, please excuse any typos*, I’ll wager you’re a boomer or haven’t bothered with an update since 2007. If you’re more *Please think of the environment before you print this*, you’re living in denial about the scale of climate change or an obedient corporate slave. If you’re a fan of *he/him, she/her, they/them*, you’re a classic millennial or, God forbid, a wannabe millennial. If your emails end with a note about your neurodiversity, congratulations, you’re ahead of the curve.

Whether that’s a good thing depends on who you ask, but perhaps it’s not surprising given the news last week that the number of young people receiving personal independence payments for ADHD and autism has more than tripled from 16,045 in 2019 to 51,148 last year — and that the rise was fastest in wealthy areas of the country. The NHS says that 2.5 million people in England have ADHD, and demand for a diagnosis has surged tenfold in a decade.

With this “diagnosis creep” comes the desire to reduce workplace stigma around neurodiversity, and proponents argue that there are legitimate reasons to flag a diagnosis — explaining typos and potentially brusque communication — especially because emails strip away audiovisual clues such as tone and body language. Yet to some it can look performative or like an excuse for slack standards.

When Bethan Davies, the founder of Cause Collective, who is autistic and has ADHD, reread her emails she was shocked by their bluntness. “Sometimes my assistant, who I copy on emails, would say, ‘Do you hate this person?’ And I’d be like, ‘Erm, no, that’s one of my best friends,’” she says. So she added a disclaimer: *My email style can feel a bit direct for some. We’re all good, it’s just AuDHD* (autism and ADHD).

Suzanne Edmond, a former communications director for the Department for Transport who is now a burnout coach at Moxxy Communications, signs off with *I’m #madewithdyslexia so expect big thinking, creative ideas and some curious typos*. She believes in “being honest about who I am and what people can expect. I make typos, so it’s good to get in front of them.” She hopes that by being open, people will be more understanding, adding: “If it puts people off working with me then it’s probably better we both know sooner rather than later.”

“From bluntness to typos, autism and dyslexia’s impact is clear

Meanwhile, Kinga Kubiak, the operations director at Exceptional Individuals, a recruitment company, believes her specific autism and dyslexia diagnoses are less important than “simply acknowledging that I operate differently”. So she opts for the more generic *I’m neurodivergent — expect dedication, small typos and preferred written communication*.

Not everyone is convinced. An “Am I being unreasonable?” post went viral on Mumsnet for asking whether neurodivergent people should be encouraged to disclose their diagnoses on emails. Some 95 per cent of the 1,032 responses agreed that it was, to use the poster’s language, “ridiculous”.

From bluntness to typos, autism and dyslexia’s impact on email communication is clear. But scepticism is sharper when applied to ADHD. Rachel Morgan-Trimmer, a neurodiversity training consultant, explains that ADHD’s effect is less visible. “People with ADHD get overwhelmed very easily, so long emails or those that are hard to



decipher can get put on the back burner,” she says. “Responses might be fast if people can read and compose them quickly but very slow if there’s a lot to unpick.”

This is when a plea for understanding may start looking like a cover for poor performance. As one anonymous naysayer on Mumsnet put it, “if you struggle to reply in good time but your job demands it, don’t ask me for sympathy, find a job that suits you”. Eye-rollers see the manoeuvre as identity-based — a successor to pronoun peacocking, which, in the backlash against woke, feels at best outdated, at worst virtue signalling. Yet the two things are different. It’s hard to think of a situation where someone’s gender identity affects their email communication.

A search for LinkedIn profiles flagging “neurodiversity” returns so many results that it’s hard to know whether disclosure is a workable plea for compassion or a new professional flex. Suddenly, declaring a variation in neurological functioning is starting to feel like identity politics, and the humble email signature is entering the fray.