

Optimum Attenborough

Brian J Ford salutes a centenarian in whose life and career quality and quantity are combined

We have watched Sir David Attenborough on TV all our lives. His presentation style – warm, avuncular, captivating and clear – defines the very best in broadcasting. So many life science programmes have been narrated by actors (David Tennant, Morgan Freeman) or pop stars (from John Denver to Björk), yet the best are always David's. He knows his stuff, they just follow a script. And that's why he's healthy at 100; if you understand how biology works, then you know how to optimise your body.

David did National Service in the Royal Navy, then won a scholarship to study natural sciences at Clare College, Cambridge in 1945.

Two years later (they had accelerated degrees back then, to compensate for

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wartime losses) he was awarded an MA and was working for Hodder & Stoughton in 1952 when he applied to join the BBC as a trainee producer. They turned him down: "Not enough experience," they said.

His CV stayed on file, and Mary Adams wrote to him from the new TV service to offer him a place as a trainee.

In 1954 David filmed the first *Zoo Quest* programme in Sierra Leone, narrated by Jack Lester, curator of reptiles at London Zoo. Jack became ill so David was told to act as stand-in presenter... and never looked back.

His astonishing career has set some



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His astonishing career has set some curious records

curious records. He is the only person to win BAFTAS for programmes in black and white TV, colour, HD, 3D and 4K formats – and he won a Daytime Emmy aged 99. David is one of the longest-running television narrators ever, with a career spanning eight decades.

David is great company, always interesting, invariably interested. I always come away feeling refreshed after time spent together. We presented him with an Honorary Fellowship at the Institute of Biology, and he was so very gracious in his acceptance.

His family leaves legacies. Yes, his brother Richard was a great name in movies. Their father, Frederick Attenborough, became principal of University College, Leicester in 1932 and was a key architect in its transformation into the University of Leicester. My department there as visiting professor was in the Attenborough Tower, a lone skyscraper on a hill dominating the city skyline to this day.

Leicester can be proud of the family. The university, the top film star (and film director) and a superb television presenter with an audience of half a billion who's still going strong at 100. Power to your elbow, David. ■



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