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Brain Workout

Four pages of mind exercising puzzles, sudokus and quizzes

The Mail 2

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The truth about my father's death

David Dimbleby breaks a 40-year silence to reveal the extraordinary emotional impact of losing his 'Papa' — and the real nature of the cancer that killed him

Main picture: Richard Dimbleby with sons David, Jonathan and Nicholas in the Fifties. Above: David today

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They took our clothes and a blanket, put them over Ernesto and set light to him

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I made BBC cheer for Maggie

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It's like a glossy recipe book, only with pictures of delicious lakes and rivers instead of stews and souffles

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Is your brain in need of a workout? We've got crosswords galore plus Sudoku, Dingbats, Scrabble Meister and the fiendishly clever Brain Train

By **Laura Collins**

It doesn't matter how many times David Dimbleby has the dream. It is always every bit as disconcerting and strangely comforting as the last time. He is talking to his father – often as they sit, side by side, in the back of a car. 'Isn't it odd?' David is saying. 'Everybody thinks that you're dead when I know you're alive. How are we going to show them you are really alive?'

All the time David is utterly convinced that, somehow, this truth will be revealed. And every time he wakes it's the same.

'The feeling of the relationship is so strong that I'll wake up thinking he is still alive. That feeling stays with me and I have to remind myself that actually he's dead,' he says. 'That's what immortality is, of course. You live on in the memory of someone. He's just a presence.'

It is 42 years since Richard Dimbleby died of cancer. And it has taken until now for his eldest son David to talk about his father's life and the manner of his death.

But now, with Father's Day next Sunday and the family relaunching a fund established in Richard's memory, David has spoken for the first time about the man known to thousands as 'the voice of the nation', but known to him as 'Papa'.

In a remarkable interview he recalls the sheer energy that characterised his father and his own refusal to believe that cancer could ever kill him. He tells of the stigma that surrounded the disease and how his father's decision to speak up in his final months led to the Richard Dimbleby Cancer Fund. This is now being relaunched as Dimbleby Cancer Care – a body that both funds research and provides vital holistic care for cancer patients – with David as its chairman.

He explains: 'It has taken a long time to do this and to talk about this. My father died in December 1965 and his influence, his memory is such a warm and private thing. I was 27 and I remember it all clearly. But now I'm in my late middle-age I feel established enough, if you like, to change the name of the fund and to talk about it.'

'There was a private family funeral and, in January 1966, the BBC organised a memorial service at Westminster Abbey. The Abbey was packed. We didn't understand (until then) how wide his popularity went or how shocking his death would be.'

'We had known that he had cancer for five years. But his illness was only announced in October and he was dead in December. He was 52. Suddenly he wasn't there. It was as if he had been murdered. To us he was just a broadcaster. We had no idea quite what he had meant to so many people.'

For generations brought up in a world of podcasts and digital broadcast it is difficult to conjure the scale of Richard Dimbleby's professional influence. To them it is David, 69, and younger brother, Jonathan, 63, whose names are synonymous with broadcasting.

But, at the time of his death, it was Richard who dominated post-war radio and television, commenting at the funerals of King George VI and Winston Churchill, and the Queen's coronation. He literally talked the nation into a new era.

He was the man who presented Panorama, Down Your Way and Twenty Questions. He was the heroic figure who, as a war correspondent, squeezed his considerable bulk into a Lancaster bomber and flew on RAF raids. He was the first journalist to witness and describe the horrors of Belsen.

David says: 'He never spoke about those things afterwards. He was never boastful or pompous. He worked tremendously hard but, at home, he wore it very lightly.'

'He had this terrific energy for life. He was always planning expeditions, organising holidays for his mother, or his mother-in-law, even if he had to enjoy much of the things he arranged vicariously because he was away at work.'

Richard's own background was steeped in journalistic endeavour. The Dimblebys owned the Richmond and Twickenham Times and his father, Fred, was editor-in-chief

of that as well as holding a number of Fleet Street positions. Both his father and mother, Gwen, were Liberal, Non-Conformist and teetotal.

They sent their son to Mill Hill School, London, where he was cheerful if reserved.

When he left he joined the family paper as a trainee. It was a path that brought an added boon when he met Dilys Thomas, an 18-year-old fellow trainee and his future bride. When he was posted to the Southampton Echo they wrote longing love letters to each other. After they married, home was a large house on Barnes Common.

But both loved to spend time in the country and it was Danley Farm, in Sussex, which would be home to the expanding Dimbleby family for 15 years. There was David, the eldest by six years, then Jonathan, Nicholas, now 62, and a

sculptor, and finally Sally, now 61. It was there that David enjoyed a childhood that 'rollicked between horses and boats and opportunities'.

He recalls: 'In private, my father was incredibly informal, full of life and warmth. I couldn't put my arms round him when I hugged him. He had an enormous ribcage. Even when I was in my 20s I couldn't reach around his back. He was always enthusiastic about life, family life in particular. He was a very attractive force in our lives.'

David's mother, Dilys – now 95 and a much-loved matriarch of the Dimbleby clan who is known to her grandchildren as Mimi – said of Richard: 'As far as the children are concerned, he's gentle, understanding and generous with time and hugs.'

Richard bowled through their lives, a man who David says 'liked

to cut a bit of a dash' with his Rolls-Royce and chauffeur. 'He sort of thrived on all that,' he says. 'It was very swish in those days. Nowadays, I suppose, it might be seen as a bit ridiculous.'

A smile breaks across David's face as he recalls the moment he realised his father was famous – and it still prompts an involuntary cringe.

'I was sent to prep school in Battle, Sussex. We used to have a day out at the weekend. He would pick me up and go to Hastings, to the ice-cream parlour. I must have been nine. We were in the car park when this charabanc arrived from London with a lot of women out for the day. They started dancing around when they saw him. They were so over-excited.

One of them had taken her knickers off and was waving them around.

'I remember thinking, "Is this what broadcasting is about?" My father was a bit embarrassed and a little pleased. He had a particular way of giving a wry smile. He never, ever lost a feeling of astonishment at being recognised. I remember thinking that wild horses wouldn't drag me into broadcasting.'

Indeed, with David's Charterhouse schooling and Oxford degree, Richard hoped his son might do rather better than broadcasting.

David said: 'I don't think he thought television in the Fifties was a proper job. He wanted me to be a lawyer or a diplomat. But in the end I needed some cash and with freelance journalism you effectively get cash in hand. My first job was as a news reporter in Bristol and paid £3. It might not have been his father's

great wish but, according to David, 'he was never very good at the business of discouragement'.

As far as he was concerned, he was not so much following in his father's footsteps as taking a necessary step of giving a wry smile. He never, ever lost a feeling of astonishment at being recognised. I remember thinking that wild horses wouldn't drag me into broadcasting.'

It should have been a thrilling time for David, then 22, as he embarked on his career. But the family was about to absorb some grim news.

He remembers the telephone call as clearly as if it were yesterday. He was working at Anglia Television in late August 1960 when his mother told him his father had cancer. It came as no real surprise. David knew his father had had a biopsy and he knew that his father had ignored the

swelling that was a symptom of his cancer for a long time.

'I knew straight away. We all knew. The treatment then wasn't as good as it is now, but he had testicular cancer which spread because he left it.'

'He had his operation and radiotherapy – five days a week for several weeks at St Thomas's in London – and he went back to work and told nobody because, I think, apart from the intimacy of revealing things about his own body, he thought that it would get in the way. People would think, "That's an interesting programme... and he's got cancer."

'He didn't want to be pitied. He told one person at the BBC and kept it a secret otherwise. There was an absolute refusal to countenance the possibility that he would die from this. It was partly for his sake. I never talked to him about the possibility that he might die. I behaved through-



SCREEN IDOL: The voice of the nation Richard Dimbleby, left, broadcasting in the Sixties. Above: David with his second wife, Belinda. Below: Richard and his wife, Dilys, with Jonathan, Sally and Nicholas in the Fifties



There was the dink of spurs in the hospital... a Royal equerry was bringing champagne for Papa

out his illness, and even in the last months of his life, in the same fashion. I think I wouldn't allow myself to show any emotion and I wouldn't allow him to think I was worried, to the point that I would chaff him. I'd talk as rudely as I would before he was in hospital.

'Once I was driving to St Thomas's and the traffic was terrible and the first thing I did was to tell him, "You've got to get out of here soon. It's a nightmare to get to, the traffic's terrible." That sort of thing.'

There is a certain irony in the fact that the man who is now chairman of a charity that offers the sort of psychological touchstones for living with cancer that were absent from Richard's care so resolutely adopted a strategy of denial as his own coping mechanism.

'Now I don't know if it was a mistake, but at the time it was a deep instinct to behave as if everything was going to be all right,' says David.

Over the next five years there were great stretches of time when it must have been difficult to believe that Richard was so ill. He carried on working even during spells of treatment – having his radiation after days in the studio, retiring to the pub with the junior doctors and nurses afterwards.

His treatment was never an aggressive attempt to cure and, until his final stages, he claimed his cancer caused him less pain than a bout of rheumatism.

In May 1962 another batch of radiotherapy was required. The following year a dull ache and an X-ray revealed there were tumours in his belly. More radiotherapy followed.

Then, from March 1963 until January 1965, there was a blissful period of normality. That January, Richard was preparing for what would be his last great broadcast: Winston Churchill's funeral.

It was the most complicated live broadcast the BBC had attempted and called for four hours of unscripted conversation never faltered.

Afterwards, he complained of a dull ache in his back – an X-ray revealed that two new growths had caused his 11th

and 12th dorsal vertebrae to collapse. Soon after, David was offered a television contract with CBS, which would mean going to America. His father's doctor, a close family friend, Ian Churchill-Davidson, advised him to postpone that trip.

David says: 'The point came when it clearly wasn't the case that it would all be fine, but I didn't change the way I behaved towards him and he didn't change the way he was towards me. I suppose I didn't want him to foreclose emotionally. I think it's important to make sure that there is support and therapy on offer, but also to recognise there are people who don't want it. It's a help to some, to others it's a source of extreme embarrassment.'

In October 1965, Richard was admitted to St Thomas's for the last time. Until then his recovery from treatment had taken place at the family's holiday cottage in Dittisham, Devon, a place he and Dilys bought shortly before his diagnosis and where they had fondly imagined growing old together. For David, as the adult among the children, there was a particular role to fulfil.

Today, David is careful to point out that he can speak only for himself as he recalls how he navigated that time. He cannot say what conversations his mother and father might have had. Nor will he begin to imagine or detail the upset of his brothers and sister, saying only that it was a raw time for them all. 'It was clear

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When he died, fans sent £1m

that he wasn't going to be back for the next series of Panorama,' says David. 'We talked about this quite a lot - my mother, my father and me.'

'People were going to ask where he was. If we were going to say he was ill, then it was obvious he wasn't having his leg chopped off. We decided we'd simply say he had cancer. We put a statement together and I made the call to The Press Association.'

The nature of Richard's cancer was not specified in the statement. In later years it would wrongly slip into the record that Richard had died from lung cancer.

'I don't know where that came from,' David says. Perhaps some journalist deemed it a more 'acceptable' truth. At the time the ignorance about cancer, never mind one so intimate, was such that, David says: 'It was almost viewed as shaming, like getting syphilis in the 17th Century. It was like the plague.'

'But still we hadn't quite realised,

though we'd been very private about it, how rare it was for a public figure to say they had cancer.'

In a culture inured to celebrities habitually sharing the details of bedroom and medicine cabinet, it is a struggle to comprehend just how extraordinary this decision was. The response was immediate.

'Letters came by the sackful,' says David. 'There were too many for him to read. But my mother would bring some in for him and he would say, "Oh, how kind, how lovely." I remember one day there was the clink of spurs in the hospital corridors and a guardsman or equerry arrived with a present from the Queen: six half-bottles of champagne. He was very taken with that, though he was past the point where he could drink them.'

'When things like that happen you don't say, "Oh, by the way, let's talk

about what's going to happen when you're dead." I heard afterwards that he did talk to his night nurse about it. Perhaps it's just not a conversation for a son to have with his father.'

Speaking now from his perspective of being a father four times over - he has three grown-up children by his first wife Josceline and a son, Fred, now ten, with his second wife Belinda - David admits he can place himself more in his father's role back then. 'How odd it must be to look at your son and know that he'll go on but you won't be there. I was 27 then and 52 seemed a long way off. But every day I've lived since reaching that age I've sort of felt that it was borrowed time.'

Richard Dimbleby died on

December 22 and in the weeks following his death the letters of condolence poured into the BBC and the family's home. People wanted to send flowers.

The family asked them to send a donation instead, never dreaming that within a matter of months the donations would have reached close to £1 million. David admitted the family did not really know what to do with the money.

They considered donating it to an already established charity. But none quite seemed to fit. So they decided to set up a fund for St Thomas's, the London hospital where Richard had been treated.

'The trustees were any of us who were over 21. My mother chaired it. The first thing we did was to take a room in the basement and put armchairs in it so people having radiotherapy could sit there and have a cup of tea. When Papa was there, radiotherapy patients had to sit in a corridor and wait. Tiny things like that became a great thing for him and for us. He used never to be able to get comfortable in the hospital beds and would say, "If I could, I'd give everybody in St Thomas's a comfortable pillow." That became a bit of a slogan for us.'

For four decades the family never actively fundraised. The money that accumulated came in the form of legacies, unbidden donations and wise investments. As the 40th anniversary of Richard's death approached, they had £5 million invested in research and a professorship at King's College, London, and another £5 million to spend on care.

'We had decided to wind it up and spend that over a few years in a sort of last hurrah,' says David. 'But then we thought, "We can do better than this."

'This has always been a memorial fund for him. It still is, but we've taken on a director and we've changed the name to Dimbleby Cancer Care because we want to make it a broader appeal. I worried about changing the name. I felt it might be seen as trading on my father's reputation as opposed to honouring his memory.'

'We had some research done and it revealed that a quarter of all patients said they received only medical treatment, and nine out of ten patients said they weren't offered any psychological support in talking about death.'

'So we set up two committees - one looking into research, run by Jonathan, and one looking into practical care, run by Nicholas. We have two aims: funding research and providing advice and care

- from the practical stuff to psychological support.'

'We have a wonderful area in St Thomas's now. From that basement with chairs it's now a room that looks out across Westminster, the Thames and Big Ben. So you're not tucked away. It's magnificent, affirmative, optimistic.'

'It's a bit of a risk embarking on this now. But I feel my father would have said, "Why give up? If you've got the energy to do it and the family wants to do it, which they do, then why not?" I think it's only because time has passed that I feel freed up to do this. It's taken a long time.'

It has been said of David Dimbleby that: 'He doesn't feel. He only thinks. This is nonsense. He simply does not make a habit of offering up what he feels for public consumption. The fact that after so many years, he has now chosen to speak about the enormity of his father's life and death is testament to how deeply he feels and how fervently he hopes to make a success of the charity. It is a cause that he would never have sought out, but one that, he hopes will prove the most lasting and profound of the Dimbleby dynasty's legacies.'

To make a donation or for more information go to www.dimblebycancercare.org or write to Dimbleby Cancer Care, 4th Floor, Bermondsey Wing, Guy's Hospital, Great Maze Pond, London SE1 9RT. Tel: 020 7188 7889 or 07949 152 544.



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GOOD EVENING, SIR... I'M NOT YOUR USUAL SUPPLIER BUT I WAS IN THE AREA AND YOUR TUNNEL WAS OPEN

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