

INSIDE: YOUR COMPLETE 7-DAY TV GUIDE



**POLDARK'S
RETURN**

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INTERVIEWED**
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Master of Poldark

– Interview by Angela Wintle, photos by Susannah Binney –

It was some weeks before Winston Graham replied to my letter requesting an interview. "I must apologise, but I've been engrossed in writing," he wrote contritely. "Yes, you've guessed it – one more novel."

Poldark fans, rejoice! After a lapse of ten years, I can exclusively reveal that Graham is writing his 12th Poldark novel, which will take the 18th century Cornish family saga up to 1820.

"Occasionally I get the feeling I have to get on with it, irrespective of discipline, and this is what I've felt with this book," he tells me when we finally meet at his Sussex home.

Graham has a languid air and a nice line in dry humour. "Will I have to leave the country when this comes out?" he asks at the close of the interview.

Decidedly one of the old school, he fondly recalls a time when life was led at a more leisurely pace. "All the presenters on Classic FM keep telling me to relax," he says exasperatedly. "Why do I want to relax? Surely not everyone is biting their nails and waiting for the next Prozac?"

He lives in an elegant 18th century house set in extensive grounds in the heart of the Sussex countryside. The mellow stonework, the sundial, the rosebeds and the sweeping lawn leading to a meadow create a classic, timeless air, rather like their master.

Graham has a patrician bearing and looks every inch the country gentleman. His gold silk tie sets just the right note against his mustard tweed jacket, and the picture of timeless elegance is finished off with a pair of grey trousers and a knitted waistcoat.

When the photo-shoot is over and the housekeeper has brought in the tea, he settles into a comfortable armchair and tells me why he has taken up the Poldark saga again.

"Since my last novel I've had a persistent drip of letters from people wanting to know what happened to various characters and I thought it would be a pleasant little occupation for my old age. Now I'm up to my neck in it,

although my characters are finally drawing to the end of the road I've designed for them."

I sceptically raise an eyebrow because he has said this on the completion of the three previous Poldark novels. But if what he says does come to pass, it will mark the end of a long and eventful journey which began way back in 1945.



WG at home, late 2000 or very early 2001

The Poldark novels have sold in their millions and came to national prominence when the BBC TV series Poldark first hit our screens in 1975. It is hard to imagine the sensation it caused at its peak. Women went weak at the knees when Robin Ellis (Ross Poldark) came thundering into view on his horse, and in his tight breeches, he was the Colin Firth of his day.

The series also made a household name of Angharad Rees who played Demelza, Ross's feisty and spirited young serving girl who wins his hand in marriage, much to the consternation of the local gentry.

Twenty-nine one-hour episodes were filmed and much of it took place around Lostwithiel, near Liskeard.

"They used a big estate there called Boconnoc and, later on, I recommended a place called Port Quinn on the north coast," says Graham.

It was originally a fishing village but the trade died out and it became totally deserted. It was a beautiful place to use and a lot of people came to watch."

Ironically, Graham loathed the early episodes and even offered to return all the money he had received if they pulled the plug on it.

"The programme-makers took insufferable liberties," he recalls, grimacing.

"They made Demelza a little ruffian who took her pants down and let the men feel her bottom for sixpence. It went against the whole spirit of the novels. I had lots of arguments with the then producer, Morris Barry, and we weren't on speaking terms for the rest of the show."

In spite of his reservations, he was delighted when the BBC approached him about a second series because by then the programme was an outstanding success and had made him nationally famous.

"I told them if they wanted the same producer or the same writers or any of the same directors we'd just shake hands, have a nice lunch and go home," he said drily.

As it turned out, his pessimism proved groundless. A new producer came in who adhered much more closely to the books, and Graham was invited to join the cast on location. From then on he worked closely with the production team and many of the actors became firm friends, including the late Ralph Bates, Christopher Biggins and Clive Francis.

Angharad Rees remains particularly close, underlined by an elegant invitation card on his mantelpiece inviting him to a special shopping day in her jewellery shop in Belgravia.

"I had lunch with her about a month ago," he says fondly, picking up a framed picture where she is pictured hugging him affectionately. "She's scarcely aged at all since her Poldark days. If she played Demelza 20 years on you'd have to put lines on her face to persuade people she was older."

This is all the more remarkable in the light of the personal tragedy she suffered in 1999 when her eldest son, Linford, was killed in a car crash.

"You can't tell how she's really coping, but she's putting a very brave face on it," says Graham. "She's very friendly with the actor Alan Bates and

they are talking about marriage. He's a delightful man and I think he might be just what she needs."



WG with Angharad Rees

"Robin Ellis is also remarkably well preserved. He lives in the south of France, near the Pyrenees, and is married to a very charming American lady. All he does now is occasional voice-over work, which is a great pity."

Poldark still retains a huge following in Britain and America, with several web-sites devoted to the books and TV series. The Poldark Appreciation Society boasts about 4,000 members and last year a masked ball was held in Cornwall to celebrate the programme's 25th anniversary.

In 1996, after a gap of 19 years, Poldark returned to the small screen in a feature-length episode made by HTV. It starred John Bowe as Ross Poldark and Mel Martin as Demelza, but enjoyed limited success.

"Originally, Robin and Angharad were going to be in it but none of us liked the script and it was thrown out," recalls Graham. "Then a second script came along and I accepted it, but the cast refused, so the whole thing had to be re-cast.

"No expense was spared, but the makers were totally ignorant of what Poldark meant and were at the dictat of their masters in America who said that the first episode had to be a two-hour blockbuster to see how it worked.

"It cost them two and a half million pounds and they wanted a ten million audience. They got seven million so they didn't go ahead with the TV series."

Graham was 30¹ when he began the Poldark novels – "newly married, very much in love, and enjoying life".

He opened the first novel in 1783 when the hero, Ross Poldark, returned from the American Revolution to find his father dead, his estate falling into rack and ruin, and his lady love, Elizabeth, engaged to his cousin Francis.

Subsequent books followed his marriage to Demelza, his struggle to establish a profitable copper mine amid falling copper prices, and his long and bitter feud with George Warleggan, a banker and member of the nouveau riche.

Graham snorts at the suggestion that his novels are overblown romances in the Daphne du Maurier mould, pointing to the detailed research he undertook for each one.

Jim Carter's arrest for poaching, his imprisonment in Launceston Jail, his fever and subsequent death were taken from a line in John Wesley's Journal; the description of the jail was drawn from the 1784 edition of Howard's State Of The Prisons; the account of two shipwrecks and rioting miners off the beach came from a report on such a double wreck on Perranporth beach in 1788, and the voting procedure in Bodmin for the election of two MPs in 1790 was based on fact. There are many more examples.

Graham also drew inspiration from the tales of old miners whom he met while growing up in Perranporth in Cornwall where the family moved after his father's stroke.

The places in the novel are a composite picture of the coastline he loved, stretching from St Agnes to Porth Joke and West Pentire.

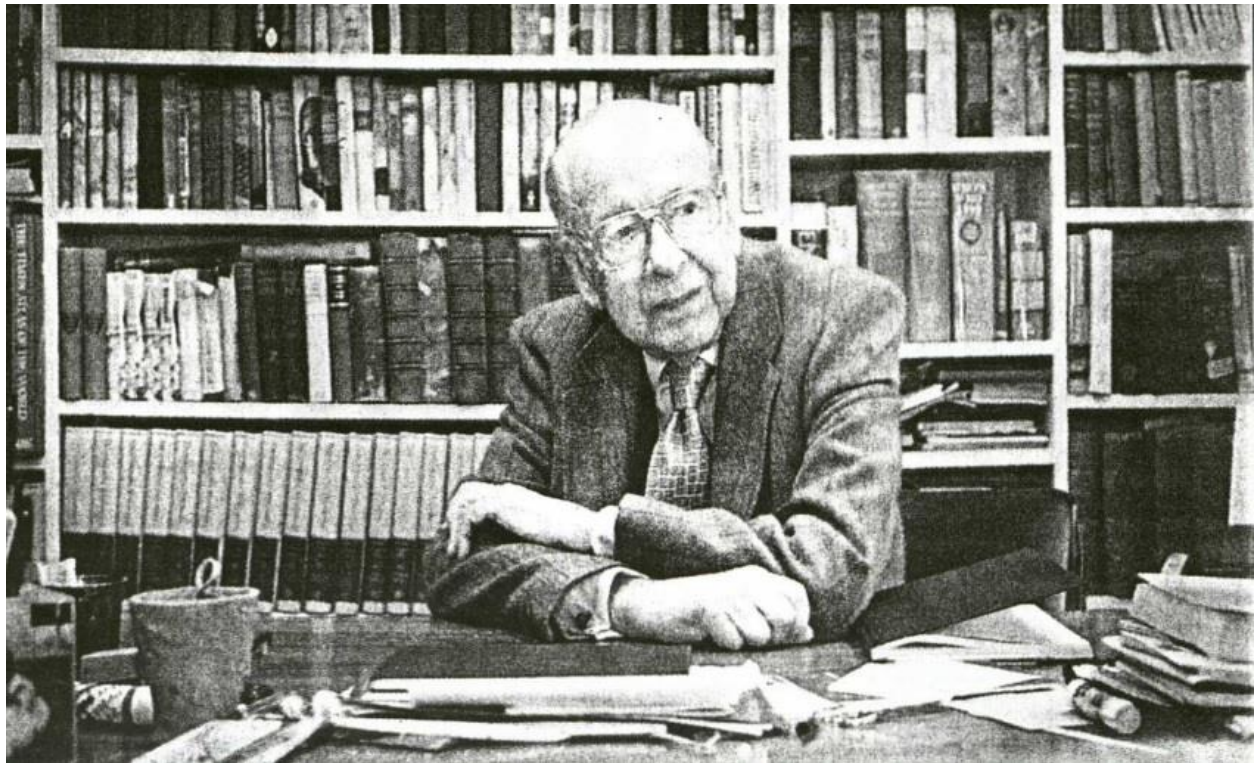
"As soon as I got to Cornwall I loved the place and the smells and the wild scenery. But it was quite a number of years before I got to know the Cornish. They are a bit clannish, but once I grew to know them I got to like them and they seemed to like me."

He takes about 18 months to write each novel and has produced a staggering 1,000 words a day for his latest book. He writes in longhand because he thinks the rhythm between his pad, pen and brain is vital to the creative process.

"I always distrust people who say word processors are marvellous. I'd rather do it my own dirty, difficult way."

His first Poldark novel was intended as a one-off and never in his wildest dreams did he envisage 12.

"I wanted to do a love story with a happy ending and that was it. But when I got to the end I realised there was so much more I had to say and it occurred to me I might write a second and a third."



The fourth, seventh and eleventh Poldark novels were supposed to have been his last but something impelled him to continue – even after a break of 20 years.

"When I'd finished the seventh² I concentrated on ten modern novels which made me a lot of money and I thought I'd given up Poldark forever. But one day I decided I'd like to know what happened after 1794³ and started again.

"It was like breaking the sound barrier to begin with because my contemporary novels were more succinct, bonier and less romantic and I wasn't sure if I could go back to the other style. But I did, and then I became as deeply involved as ever."

The huge success of Poldark has inevitably overshadowed his other work, chiefly taut suspense novels and psychological thrillers set in the present day. They have nevertheless enjoyed a large measure of success.

Angell, Pearl and Little God, his most serious and satirical book, about Angell, a fat greedy solicitor; Pearl, who works behind the perfume counter at DH Evans; and Little God, a featherweight boxer.

The Walking Stick is his most successful title – a suspense novel about a girl with polio who is convinced of her physical unattractiveness until gradually she is persuaded of the reality of one man's love for her. Needless to say, the course of true love does not run smoothly. In 1963⁴, one of his best known suspense novels, Marnie, was made into a film by none other than the master of suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, with Sean Connery and Tippi Hedren. Graham recalls his agent ringing to tell him they'd been offered a substantial sum for the screen rights – but the buyer wished to remain anonymous.

"He suspected it was one of Hollywood's leading ladies who wanted to play Marnie and thought she's get it for less if she remained anonymous," he says. "We decided to ask double."

To his surprise the answer came back "Yes", but their suspicions couldn't have been farther from the truth. The buyer was Hitchcock himself.

"If I'd known, he could have had it for the first price, just for the sheer joy of the film being done by him," says Graham. "But I didn't tell him because I thought it would spoil his dinner."

Ironically, he wasn't overly pleased with the film and claims the subtlety of his novel was lost – even though it has come to be regarded as one of the director's seminal works.

Graham spent a great deal of time in Hollywood during the fifties and sixties⁵ and knew many of the leading actors and directors of the day. One of his rooms is lined with signed photographs of Fifties and Sixties starlets who appeared in his films, and he counted Charlie Chaplin and Gregory Peck among his friends.

It was all a far cry from his Mancunian childhood. The youngest of two sons, Graham's father was a chemist⁶ whom he describes as a solid rock until he unexpectedly suffered a stroke, aged just 54.

Clumping into the house from school one day, Graham was scolded by the maid who told him to be quiet because his father was ill.

"Don't you mean mother?" he said, not believing his father could be ill.

Graham suffered from repeated attacks of pneumonia as a child and his schooling was sporadic but he believes confinement nurtured his writing talent.

"I think a modicum of ill-health is a good thing because it makes you introspective," he says.

His broken schooling failed to curb his natural writing flair and he won several prizes.

"I won the first prize each year with sickening regularity," he says, matter-of-factly. "It wasn't really because I was clever. I was just cleverer than anybody else."

His first novel, *The House With The Stained Glass Windows*, was published when he was 23⁷ and sank without trace.

"Sales were appalling but I thought it was out of this world because it justified my existence."

His mother supported him until he became firmly established but he is dismissive about his early novels and refuses to allow any of them to be re-published.

Graham moved to Sussex with his wife, Jean, about 30 years ago but she died in 1993⁸. They were married for 53 years and he misses her a great deal.

"I came to discover she had a wonderful sense of humour and strength of character. I only remember two quarrels in the entire time we were together and even those ended in laughter," he says fondly.

He has two children; his daughter lives in California with her American husband and three children and has a high-powered job as a director of human resources in local government and his son is Master of Balliol College, Oxford.

Since his wife's death, Graham has settled into a comfortable groove, dividing his time between his Sussex home, where he employs a live-in housekeeper, a part-time maid and a gardener and his three London clubs – the Savile, the Beefsteak and Pratt's.

He admits he lies repeatedly about his age⁹ but refuses to make any concessions to his years or to let standards drop. Deep into his latest novel, his enthusiasm for writing continues unabated but when I ask how many

more Poldark novels he plans to write he looks askance.

"Oh, no more Poldarks," he says, resolutely.

But you said that three times before, I tease him gently.

"Yes, I suppose I have," he admits, sheepishly.

But 13 is an unlucky number, I persist.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" he says, contemplatively. "I think I'll settle for a baker's dozen."

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NOTES

¹ He was 32 when he began writing *Ross Poldark* and 37 when it was published.

² He means the fourth, 1953's *Warleggan*.

³ 1793

⁴ Another sketchy date. Hitchcock bought the rights in 1961 and released the finished film in 1964.

⁵ He did not.

⁶ In 1967, WG described his father rather more accurately to Arthur Pottersman as "a wholesale merchant" (*Argosy*, December 1967).

⁷ It was published in October 1934, when he was 26.

⁸ She died in 1992.

⁹ See, for example, ¹ and ⁷ above.

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