

Who Knew? Mr. Bean?

When moviegoers in the U.S. saw the television ads for the October 21, 2011, release of the new Rowan Atkinson movie *Johnny English Reborn*, few, if any, knew that Atkinson, most famous for his character Mr. Bean, was a person who stuttered. Unlike some others famous actors, Rowan Atkinson's stutter is not widely known. However, stuttering still is a factor in his life. Fans of the British actor might have been surprised to read in the weekly "10 Questions" column of the August 23, 2007, issue of *Time* magazine that one of the ten questions for the famous actor was, "Did you ever overcome your serious stutter?"

His answer was simply, "It comes and goes. I find when I play a character other than myself, the stammering disappears. That may have been some of the inspiration for pursuing the career I did."

Rowan Atkinson was born on January 6, 1955, in Durham, England. Rowan was the youngest of four boys. He was sent to two boarding schools, both of which were run under the auspices of the Church of England. First, it was the Durham Choristers School, which had the reputation of trying to push students towards the Anglican priesthood. In his 1999 biography, *Rowan Atkinson*, author Bruce Dessau

quoted Canon John Grove as remembering Atkinson as 'shy with a slight stutter and a slightly rubbery face just like the one he has now.' Later, when at St. Bees School, Chris Robson, Atkinson's A-level physics master, said, "In class he was very middle of the road. There was nothing outstanding about him. I didn't expect him to become a fantastic scientist. And he was a quiet lad who walked his own path."

However, Robson remembered Atkinson's school drama career more vividly, "But when he walked on-stage he was exceptional." Dessau quotes another faculty member at St. Bees as saying, "Even an incipient stammer vanished whenever the young Atkinson stepped onto the stage."

In fact, a March 24, 2007, article in *The Independent* stated that a young Atkinson was bullied at the Durham Choristers School because of his stuttering and appearance. Future Prime

Minister Tony Blair, who also attended the school and was two years younger than Atkinson, has stated in the past that he vaguely remembers the treatment that Atkinson endured as a youngster there.

Following in his father's footsteps, Atkinson earned a M.Sc. in Electrical Engineering from The Queen's College at Oxford. Still acting on the side, he embarked on a Ph.D. in electrical engineering for awhile before deciding to devote his full attention to acting. While Atkinson was studying for a doctorate in electrical engineering, Richard Curtis remembered the young Atkinson showing up at workshops for sketch material for a summer review at Oxford and never saying a word. Then the silent one got up and did an original sketch in which his stuttering disappeared.

Curtis said, "He did a monologue about driving followed by the thing he does now, where he mimes and talks at the same time. It was unlike anything I had ever seen. It was pure genius."

He gained attention by doing a series

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