

*Down in the meadow where the wind blows free.
In the middle of a field stands a lightning tree.
Its limbs all torn from the day it was born.
For the tree was born in a thunderstorm.*



A tribute to a
Forgotten
TREASURE



A much revered 1970s television programme set in a horse rescue centre has been celebrated with a new book and a trip by the stars and fans to its beautiful Yorkshire locations. ANTHONY HAYWARD reports.



Follyfoot ran for three series and starred (left to right) Christian Rodska as Ron, Desmond Llewelyn as the Colonel, Gillian Blake as Dora, Steve Hodson as Steve and Arthur English as Sluggie.

Many of us who grew up in the 1970s will recall the Sunday-afternoon television programme *Follyfoot*, which was aimed at children but won over just as many grown-up viewers, with total audiences of up to 15 million. It told the story of Dora, Steve and Ron, who worked at a retirement home for old, unwanted or badly treated horses at Follyfoot Farm.

Such was its popularity that, in the age of the Internet, a fans' forum sprang up for those who have fond memories of the programme, which was inspired by the Monica Dickens novel *Cobler's Dream* and whose three series and 39 episodes ran from 1971 to 1973. To tie in with the publication of a book this summer to mark the 40th anniversary, the stars, 26 fans and *Follyfoot Remembered* author Jane Royston took a trip to the programme's stunning locations in the Yorkshire countryside between Harrogate, Leeds and Wetherby.

"When I met all these people, I was absolutely amazed," said Yorkshire-born Steve Hodson, who played his namesake Steve in *Follyfoot* and was accompanied by his two grown-up daughters, Eleanor and Jessica. "I had no idea what it meant to the fans. They remembered so much more about it than we did!"

"At the end, my daughters said to me, 'We knew you'd been famous in a children's

television series, but we never knew the extent. We've got a whole new respect for you, Pops!' Suddenly, they realised what it all had meant."

Gillian Blake, who acted Dora, was similarly surprised by the fans' enthusiasm and recollections of the series, which has been released on DVD in recent years. "Their knowledge was phenomenal," she said. "Also, they were expecting to see the person they saw 40 years ago, which made me very nervous, although they were all charming.

"For me, making *Follyfoot* was an amazing time and I have wonderful, happy memories of it. I had ridden from the age of five, growing up in Buckinghamshire, and when they were casting the role, it ended up between me and Zoë Wanamaker. I hadn't given the programme a lot of thought since it ended, until this came up."

Locations visited on the three-day trip included Hollin Hall, a farm on the Harewood estate that was used as the horse rescue centre, and Stockeld Park, which became the home of Dora's uncle, the Colonel, played by the late



A gymkhana was among the events filmed in Stockeld Park's grounds for the programme.



In 1971, Hollin Hall looked rundown, as required for the programme, but work on it still had to be done – including the building of stables – to make it suitable for filming.

Desmond Llewelyn, who took the role of Q in the James Bond films.

"Steve and I were impressed at what the new owners had done to the farm, whereas the fans didn't like it at all because it wasn't the rundown place they remembered!" said Gillian.

There was also a leisurely barge trip on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, which was seen several times in the series, a journey in a 1970s Wallace Arnold coach around various locations, a question-and-answer session with Gillian, Steve, Jane and Tamara Essex – daughter of *Follyfoot's* late producer, Tony – and an anniversary cake-cutting session.

As well as including another established actor, Arthur English, as the farm's "housekeeper", Sluggie, *Follyfoot* – which was shot entirely on film – boasted directors such as Oscar-winning Jack Cardiff, Michael Apted and Stephen Frears, who went on to find success



WHEN *FOLLYFOOT* FINISHED, GILLIAN BLAKE WAS GIVEN DORA'S HORSE, COPPER PRINCE, AS A PRESENT BY PRODUCER TONY ESSEX.

Top photographs: Linda Hartman & Anne Pirahnen/Follyfoot programme photographs courtesy ITV

in the cinema and Antony Thomas, who became a top documentary-maker, as well as David Hemmings, better known as a screen star of the 1960s.

The memorable theme song, *The Lightning Tree*, a Top 40 hit performed by The Settlers, was written by the producer's brother, Francis Essex, under the pseudonym Steven Francis – because he was contracted to ATV but the programme was made by rival ITV company Yorkshire Television.

Jane Royston was well placed to write the memorial book – assisted by Ray Knight, who conducted the cast interviews – because she was horse manager on the series, following riding experience in eventing, racing and hunting. While working at a Leeds printing company, she had met Tony Essex and was hired for the children's series *Tom Grattan's War*, helping its star, Sally Adcock, with her riding.

When Tony was planning *Follyfoot*, he asked her to read *Cobbler's Dream*, assist with ideas for storylines, source horses and locations, and run the yard on a daily basis. "He called me into his office one day," she recalls, "and said, 'Jane, if we don't find the farm location, there won't be a programme.' I was able to tell him about Hollin Hall, so he went with his daughter, Tamara, and just fell in love with it.

"It's somewhere that I had found while hacking and hunting, and I used to have a dream about what it was like in the old days. For a while, with *Follyfoot*, that dream came true."

Later, Jane – whose own horse, Austrian Sky, appeared in the programme – managed a stud farm and worked as a ward clerk in a hospital and house manager of Leeds retirement flats before moving to Buckinghamshire last year to be closer to her sister and nieces following the death of her mother.

"I had closed the book on *Follyfoot* until Ray Knight, a terrific *Follyfoot* fan, phoned me and suggested that I write a book," she said. "When I heard about the fans' forum, I thought, 'Yes, let's go for it.'"



Steve and Gillian perform the anniversary cake-cutting ceremony.

'THE FANS DIDN'T LIKE THE FARM BECAUSE IT WASN'T THE RUNDOWN PLACE THEY REMEMBERED!'

Hollin Hall, the location for *Follyfoot* Farm, has been extended and most of the stables demolished since the television series was filmed there in the 1970s.

The staircase at Stockeld Park – home to the Colonel in the programme – was a location particularly liked by *Follyfoot*'s producer, the late Tony Essex.



Below, right: ITV Yorkshire films the anniversary weekend for a report on the regional news programme *Calendar*.

Below, centre: Producer's daughter Tamara Essex mounts a presentation that includes *Girl in Lilac Jumper*, her video tribute to *Follyfoot*.

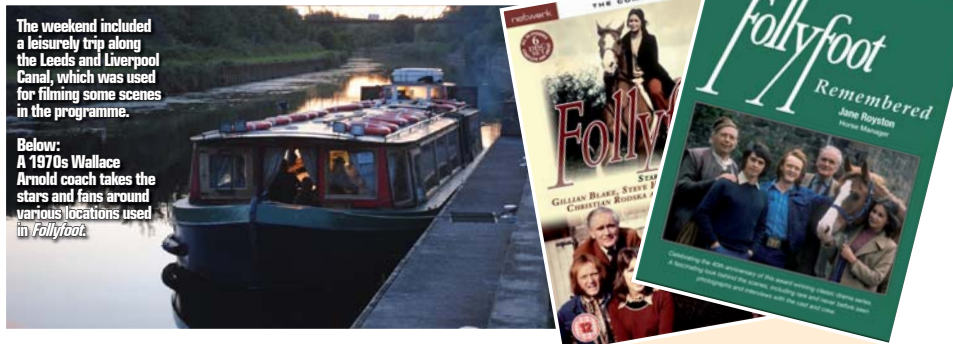


Stars Gillian Blake and Steve Hodson, plus horse manager Jane Royston (back row, far left), fans' forum moderator Linda Hayman (front, far right) and other fans descend on Stockeld Park for their 40th-anniversary trip.



The weekend included a leisurely trip along the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, which was used for filming some scenes in the programme.

Below: A 1970s Wallace Arnold coach takes the stars and fans around various locations used in *Follyfoot*.



The programme's title came from Tamara Essex, whose father produced a map and asked her to point randomly to a place name. The 11-year-old picked out the village of Follifoot, a short distance from the Harewood estate, and he decided to change the 'I' to a 'Y'. Tamara herself appeared as an extra, sitting on a horse, in two episodes and has now made a *Follyfoot* tribute video, *Girl in Lilac Jumper*, which can be found on YouTube.

Linda Hayman, a Salisbury hospital secretary and one of the moderators of the *Follyfoot* Forum website, helped to organise the special anniversary weekend. "When I was 13, the main reason for watching *Follyfoot* was Steve Hodson!" she said. "But it wasn't just Steve and horses that made it so special. It was so very different.

"You had *Black Beauty*, with all the happy endings, but *Follyfoot* just hit home on the real stories when I was a teenager. They didn't have parents who loved them, for instance. I remember storming off like Dora and crying. A lot of us were at that age where it just stuck with us."

After the programme ended, Steve Hodson continued his acting career but eventually decided to do no more television – partly as a result of being mobbed by *Follyfoot* fans in Sweden and feeling that the limelight was not for him. He has appeared in many radio dramas and directed fringe-theatre plays, and now frequently voices audio books and teaches acting at the Oxford School of Drama.

Gillian Blake left acting to concentrate on bringing up her son, Jake, in Norfolk. Her husband, actor-writer Peter Whitbread – who played an auctioneer in an episode of *Follyfoot* – died in a road accident seven years ago.

Christian Rodska, who took the role of the motorcycle-riding Ron and was unable to travel to Yorkshire for the anniversary weekend through illness, has appeared in dozens of television programmes, such as *The Bill* and *Casualty*, and even played former Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock in *Thatcher: The Final Days*.

The iconic *Lightning Tree* of the *Follyfoot* title song could not be visited by the stars or fans this summer because it is no longer at Hollin Hall. When Tony Essex was planning the series, he decided that the farmyard presented a featureless expanse of cobbles, so decided to plant a tree that had been hit by lightning from a location half-a-mile away. The contract with the Harewood estate stipulated that it should be removed once filming finished and a sapling planted in its place – which is now a mature oak tree.



BE A FOLLYFOOT WINNER!

TO WIN a copy of the book *Follyfoot Remembered* and the DVD *Follyfoot – The Complete Series*, a six-disc set featuring all three series and released by Network DVD, just answer this simple question:

Who played Dora in Follyfoot?

Send entries, on a postcard or back of a sealed envelope, to: *Follyfoot* Competition, *The Equestrian*, MAI Publications, Revenue Chambers, St Peter's Street, Huddersfield HD1 1DL, United Kingdom, to arrive by 23 September.

The first correct entry opened after that date will win the book and DVD set, with five runners-up receiving the DVD *Follyfoot – The Complete First Series*.

For more information on *Follyfoot*, log on to *Follyfoot Remembered*, www.follyfootremembered.co.uk (where the book can also be ordered, price £14.99), follyfoot-tv.co.uk or Follyfoot Forum, www.follyfoot.org.

Trip photographs: Linda Hayman & Rame Pirameen/Follyfoot programme photographs courtesy ITV