

Sir Simon Jenkins Journalist and Author

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined by the editor and columnist Simon Jenkins. Simon might be the grandest of British journalism grandees. Knighted for services to the industry in 2004, he edited the London Evening Standard and the Times, covered politics for The Economist, and founded the Sunday Times book pages. Now known for his views on politics and culture as a columnist at the Guardian, he has also held public appointments at British Rail, English Heritage, and was a member of the Millennium Commission. Having recently ended his six-year term as chairman of the National Trust, he has written more than 15 books on topics as diverse as English churches, Thatcher, and of course, the media.

Simon, thank you for joining me.

Thank you!

Did you always want to be a journalist? How did you get started?

I think I wanted to be a politician – I know very few journalists who didn't really want to be a politician somewhere deep down inside them. But I started journalism at university at Oxford, I have a totally conventional education story, doing PPE at Oxford – that's philosophy, politics and economics – I worked on Cherwell, I left, went into academia, and was an academic for about two or three years, but I craved journalism. Went into journalism, I was quite political, I'd got involved in sort of left-wing Tory pressure groups and so on, but all the time I just thought, "Politics is boring compared to journalism," and it was just... journalism sucked me in.

How old were you when you got the journalism bug? Did you always want to be a journalist, ever since you were a kid?

No. I think probably... my father was an academic, I think I probably thought I was going to be occupying that sort of middle ground between academia and writing and politics and journalism... I mean, it's a fairly conventional, I may say, sort of London upbringing – a total Londoner. I was always fascinated by the buzz of public affairs. I never thought I was a very good politician; I didn't like speaking in public then, and I was very nervous at speaking, so I preferred the anonymity, or the back room job of being a journalist.

When you took your first step into journalism as it were, how ambitious were you? Did you know you wanted to be editor of the Standard or the Times? Did you think that was your destiny, or were you just kind of saying, "Let's see where the music takes us."?

I think probably at the beginning, I did see journalism as a vehicle into politics, as a way into politics. An awful lot of people of my generation went into politics from journalism; I think I probably saw it that way. It didn't help, I didn't really know what party I supported, but I think probably it was simply that I saw lots of my friends drifting off into politics and having a ghastly time of it, while I was doing better and better, or getting better and better jobs in journalism, and I just found it more attractive in every way. I mean, you're more uninhibited, you weren't constrained by party disciplines and loyalties...

The whips constantly wanting you to do this and that.

Exactly. And frankly, the people were more interesting! And I went into... I did various odd jobs like everybody does at the beginning, I sort of almost... I interned at Country Life magazine, much to my embarrassment and my friends' amusement, then I worked for the Times Educational Supplement as a trainee for the Times, but my big break was going to the Evening Standard. I was there in 68, in very, very exciting times, and that was it – I was hooked.

So how did you come to start at the Standard, then? How did that opportunity open up for you?

I am acutely aware that journalism is basically about contacts, London journalism is about contacts. It's not satisfactory, it is... I mean, it was someone meeting me somewhere, saying, "I gather there's a job going here," mentioning me to the editor of the Evening Standard...

Who was the editor then?

Charles Wintour, the great Charles Wintour, one of the great – I say talent spotters – but it was not a good system, frankly, and interesting, the one people who were against it were the trade union, I mean the National Union of Journalists was quite

strict in those days, and really quite powerful, and I had to make my peace with them, and that wasn't necessarily very easy.

So they opposed your personal appointment?

They opposed... well, to be fair, they opposed it, but they said, "Look, he's not trained yet, he hasn't done two years or anything, I mean, this is a national paper, the Evening Standard, you've got to prove yourself," and they made me go off and learn shorthand, I remember that, and I'm sort of glad they did. I mean, sooner or later it was all right, but there was that sort of hiccup. I'm not sure I thought it was a bad thing either, I mean, I got the point.

Charles must have been quite a talent spotter, if he was prepared to hire you given that you hadn't completed the training, as it were. He must have been impressed with what you did at the TES, and maybe even Country Life!

I don't think Country Life! I mean, fascinating though that was, that was my trying to get a job at the TES, and the editor there saying, "I haven't got a job, but my friend, who is the editor of Country Life, has got one." It was just like that.

It's still like that now!

It is more like that now. At least now there are journalism schools and there are formal traineeship programmes, but in those days it was much more casual. Although, when I tried to get a job on the Times, the then home editor of the Times refused to take people who hadn't been in the provinces – John Young – he was absolutely adamant: "I'm not taking you smart Alecs from the Times Education Supplement or wherever – I take people who've been on the Yorkshire Post, so go and work on the Yorkshire Post." He was blunt like that. So I didn't get a job on the Times, which I wanted. The Standard was much more casual, it was very much then, and still is, a part of London life. I mean, London wasn't the city it is now, it was a much smaller place, and the Standard was absolutely at the hub of it. I mean, any new restaurant that opened, we were all invited – we were kind of a gang, and the people who were there at the time, they stuck with it. They were good people.

Do you look back fondly at your years at the Standard, then?

Well, I was at the Standard for some years, then I...

How many years were you there?

Well, I joined the Standard I think in 68, then I was offered a job on the Sunday Times, and I had been features editor at the Standard, I was offered a job on the Sunday Times by Harry Evans, I went to edit Insight at the Sunday Times, I was

there for a year and a half – it was not a happy period. I mean, the Sunday Times under Harry Evans is always regarded as one of the great journalistic golden ages, and it was...

I've met Harry many times. In fact, we gave him an award at the Media Society for services to journalism. All the stuff he did on thalidomide, all kinds of things – he was an amazing editor.

Ask people who served with him – he was an amazing editor. He was a courageous editor, he had money to spend, which was a great advantage for an editor, and do I know! I mean, to have money to spend, and the confidence of your employers – the Thomson's then – and Harry ran these great campaigns, which he was famous for, no doubt about it, and they became sort of part of the Zeitgeist. He had a very good lawyer, I mean he had good people round him, but he was hopelessly overstaffed, and the effect of overstaffing is always demoralising, it's never a good thing for a paper to be overstaffed. You had a features editor, you probably had 15 or 16 features writers who just never got into the paper, they were there for three months and nothing in the paper – good people. And Harry just didn't...

Compare that now to a newsroom that might have three people in it!

It's difficult to remember back! And these were people living well on expenses, they're writing books – I mean, Insight, I wrote two books while I was there, I think – yes, we worked quite hard, but it was so overstaffed that everybody was fighting all the time for space, and Harry was sort of wonderfully above it. He was a great guy, he gave me a great break, and I'm not going to complain, I've remained friends with him since, but I just... I learnt from that, that having lots of good people on your paper is a good thing if you've got the space for them. But Sunday papers are rarely happy places. Sunday papers are once a week, you've got a full staff with one paper a week to get your stuff into, and when I went from there back to the Standard, or onto the regular daily papers, it was like liberation; you had a paper to fill every day, and that was exciting.

Would you ever go back to a Sunday paper?

Well, I think I've worked for the Sunday Times four times! Certainly three, I lose track. But then as a columnist, which is totally different – you actually just have a straight column to write. The most important thing is, every journalist knows, you've got allotted space, and when you've got allotted space to fill, you're a happy man.

Just going back to your time at the Sunday Times, then. I literally am flabbergasted when you say that the paper was overstaffed, because that's something that my peers and I would never even be able to comprehend in

today's media environment. But what came next? Were your ambitions starting to form at this point, that you wanted the editorship? Where was your career heading at this point, or were you still wanting to end up in politics?

No, I'd given that one up. Where are we... we're in 74, 75, and then Charles Wintour asked me to come back as deputy editor of the Standard, and I sense at the time he was thinking of retiring, though I didn't know that. And I just wasn't terribly happy at the Sunday Times, I had to admit. The deputy editor of the Evening Standard was just wonderful, a very, very exciting time, and I went back for a year as deputy editor, and that was 76... deputy editor is another job I don't... cherish.

It's like vice-president!

It's like vice-president. That's exactly what it's like. I mean, you do the Sunday shift, I mean, you do the late shift, you're the mug.

It's all downside and no upside, because you still don't get to have to with the Queen!

You don't... I mean, that's worth... you're quite right. I was that for a year, then I became editor of the Evening Standard, and that was...

Was that a joyous moment for you? That's it, I've arrived?

Yes. Yes. I mean, what was I, 32? It was amazing, frankly. But I was too young, there's no question. I was too young. These were days... it's very difficult to cast back to those days. These were the days when newspapers were run by two people – the proprietor and the trade unions – and the editors, they were almost sort of negotiating between these two factors. And it was usually hell, largely because of the unions – I mean, they made your life really difficult. And on an evening paper, you needed new editions all the time, you know, bombs were going off, this was happening, that was happening, stop the presses, start a new edition, "Okay, boss – that's £100 each." Straight like that. I mean, complete blackmail – and that was relentless. It was all the time. And we were making lots of money out of classified advertising, and we were losing it all downstairs to the unions, and they were difficult times, and it culminated in the attempt to sell the Evening Standard to the Evening News, and that battle – basically to save the Standard – dominated my career at the Evening Standard, that they tried to merge it with the Evening News and I was, for about a week, out of a job, then we found another buyer, we fought back, Charles Wintour was upstairs, but he was... he had some executive job at the Express Newspapers, but the Express Group, under Justin Stephens, tried to flog off the Standard, and the Evening News would have been the only paper in London, it would have been the Evening News, not the Evening Standard, and we saved that,

and it was great fun, I mean, if you're very young and fighting, and the staff were with you, and we had meetings in the office, and these sorts of things.

Was it a kind of real 'us and them' mentality amongst the editorial staff as well? Did they have a lot of animosity toward the unions? Did they feel that their business and their livelihood was being put at risk because of the...

It wasn't the unions, to be fair, it really wasn't, no. The unions were just the same everywhere, I mean, the unions, you know, were dominating Fleet Street, and this was hot metal, I mean, these were the days when you went downstairs with the edition, and you smelt the linotype machines, you smelt the case workers. I mean, this was hot metal, there were foundries, there was molten metal flowing around the printing room.

When the phrase 'off stone' actually meant something.

And you heard all the banging out of... I mean, there was no way... I'm not a romantic; those days were not good days in many ways, but it was very, very exciting. In the loft of the Evening Standard, there was the pigeon loft for the football results when they stopped using pigeons, to come in from the London football grounds because they couldn't get to a telephone. I mean, they used pigeons in my lifetime! And downstairs there was the whole print floor, and then in the basement there were the great machines, and you heard them rumbling, you heard them starting up, and once they rumbled you knew you'd missed the edition. Quite unlike anything else.

So in a sense, although you were editor of the Standard, you didn't have much time for actually editing it because you were too busy trying to find a buyer and negotiating with the unions and spinning various plates and putting out lots of different fires.

It was true. And we staved off the sale to Rothermere and the Daily Mail, and the Evening News, and a whole series of weirdos tried to buy the Evening Standard, Olga Deterding, Jimmy Goldsmith... I mean, all these people tried to buy it. We ended up with Victor Matthews of the Trafalgar House Group; we bought the whole group. Justin Stephens, who was effectively the salesman on behalf of the Aitken family, sold it to them, and then Trafalgar House gave Victor Matthews the Evening Standard and the Daily Express as a sort of toy to play with.

Incredible.

A complete nightmare. He was a builder, he was... nothing against him personally, but he had no idea what he was doing, and that was terrible, and I lasted there for about six months or a year, then they got rid of me and Charles Wintour took over

temporarily. So it ended in sorts of tears, but it was a very exciting and exhilarating time, and in a funny way you can be too young as an editor, and I always think I was just too young.

We had Chris Blackhurst in that chair a few months ago, and he said there was many advantages of being editor, but he said in many ways, being editor is quite a lonely, quite an unhappy job. He said he was constantly having to deal with HR and legal issues for which he might have had a half a page of A4 briefing, or an afternoon's briefing, but he was completely ill-equipped to deal with these somewhat very highly strategic issues – but it fell under his purview, because he was the editor.

Well, he was later! He didn't have to deal with the union. I mean, by the time he would have been editor....

He had it easy.

He had it easy. I mean, these are people who operated a totally different code of conduct, and they were interested in the chapel, the mystery, the freemasonry, all of these things that were going on down there, and they were only interested in the money. They had a kind of romantic attachment to the paper, but the fact that it was this, the Evening Standard, was really tangential. I mean, they had jobs elsewhere in Fleet Street, they were doing shifts everywhere, they were rich men, many of them – they were doing well.

I'm not surprised, if they were charging an extra £100 just to restart the presses!

Oh, yes. Hmm.

I'm 40 years old and I just can't imagine it – it's just a completely different world, isn't it?

It was a totally different world. I mean, when I was editor of the Times, in totally different circumstances, and that was utterly unlike editing a hot metal paper.

You left the Standard editorship after two years. What came next?

I've always thought, "Always have your exit plan," and the Economist said, "Would you like to come and be political editor?" Again, it was someone I knew, but there you are.

Who was editor of the Economist at the time?

Andrew Knight. He was very kind to me; I've always felt well towards people who have offered me jobs!

And it was the political beat, of course, that you were still interested in?

Yes. And I'd been writing editorials and so on, and I wrote a column for the Standard when I left. I could have gone on doing that, but I thought I would break and do something else. The Economist was completely different – it was like going back to university. It was very cerebral...

Still is! I read the Economist, it's great at what it does, but it's a one-off.

It was fashioned in Knight's day, and it's really remained the same formula ever since. And it's very, very successful.

How long were you there for?

I was there until I went with Andrew Neil to the Sunday Times, and I went there in 79, and I think I went to the Sunday Times in 84, 85, I think, so I was there for five years. And it was a good time, frankly, it was very relaxed, I had joined the British Rail Board and I loved the railways; I was just fascinated by them, and I was doing other things as well. I've always sort of believed in journalists doing other things, but that's another story, but the Economist was a good place to work – I did a lot of travelling, I covered South Africa, I wrote two or three books... I mean, it was a sort of... I used to call it a 'rather upmarket monastery'. But anyway, I was very happy there.

The phrase 'portfolio career' is quite well known now, but it strikes me that even then you had a kind of portfolio career. As you said, you'd got other interests, you joined the board of BRB etc. Was that something that was always important to you, to have a diversity of interests?

I don't know. I mean, I totally respect journalists who say you should not have anything to do with anything in, you know, any other world but journalism, and you're a reporter... I used to have great rows with a friend of mine who was dean of Columbia Journalism School about what a journalist really is – Osborn Elliott, a great man – and he gave this great commencement address, it was about that time, he showed it to me and he said, "What do you think?" And this address was unbelievable, it was addressing the great talents that were coming out of the Columbia Journalism School, and he said, "You are the unofficial legislator of America, you are as important as senators and congressmen. You hold in your pen the future of the American constitution. Without you, America decays and collapses. What do you think?" So I said...

Rather grandiose!

All I could say was, "I don't think anyone in Britain would believe a word you've just said!" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "If journalists leave journalism school in Britain, they are told they are the lowest form of human life, you're the rats in the gutter. You're scum. Your job is to dish the dirt." And they never think of themselves that way – it was a complete difference in journalistic culture, and it remains, to a certain extent, that today.

You went to the Sunday Times with Andrew Neil, is that right? Was he editor then? Did he move with you to become editor?

Andrew went to edit the... I know how he got the job... he went to edit the Sunday Times, that was Murdoch, and he asked me to go, and shortly afterwards, I went with him to write a column, quite straightforwardly, it was the kind of beginning of my career as a columnist, and to found the book section, which was just starting.

This was a change, wasn't it, from being a kind of journalist covering stories, you're now moving into commenting on them and being a columnist. Was that a deliberate change? Was it something you welcomed? Did you always want to do that?

I think something in me has always been a columnist! I wrote a column at Cherwell I wrote a column for the Evening Standard almost the whole time I was there, except when I was editing, I missed it when I was at the Economist – it's an anonymous place, and it really was, there weren't even those flagship columns – so I really did miss it.

They don't have a masthead, do they? I mean, they don't even say who the editor is, you have to google it, I think.

Yes.

I think there's an email once a week that says it comes from the desk of Zanny Minton Beddoes, but it doesn't actually say she wrote it. It's a strange culture, that.

Well, it was a strange culture, it was a formula that was basically evolved under Andrew, maybe his predecessor, but the formula was simply of the digested writing, and you had a team of people who rewrote everything, it was very annoying to see your copy rewritten, it was very annoying for other people to see you rewriting their copy, and it all had this kind of spin to it; slightly knowing, slightly upmarket, but very well-informed, and it was just intellectually seductive. All I can say it is worked, it works.

Absolutely. What works, works. So back to the Sunday Times, then. So you're writing a column... I mean, clearly the Sunday Times is a huge seller, massively impactful. So that must have felt quite good at that point then, that you felt you had an audience and a platform to start to speak truth to power, as it were, and of course you founded the book section as well.

Yes. I mean, it was a difficult time, the Wapping riots were still on. I mean, you went past, by then, some very jaded pickets.

How long did that last, the dispute?

It went on probably two years. I mean, it was... I forget when they started, 83 or 84, I think I went in 85...

It's one of my earliest memories, because I was 10, and I can remember scenes of pickets from Wapping being on the TV news, and Frank Bough introducing them, so that just shows you how long ago it was! And it lasted two years?

I think it did, yes, a good two years. By the time I went there, the dispute was sort of over, largely it was the Electricians' Union were in, but there were still pickets there, but they were very unpleasant, I'd got no sympathy for them at all – I mean, they were defending the indefensible, they were exceptionally rude to women, they were sort of foul-mouthed and everything, they were drunk, and they were being paid. It was not a nice thing to do.

Who was paying them, the union?

Yes... well, I have to say, not the union, the chapel. I mean, you've got to understand, they were not bone fide trade union pickets, they were chapel pickets. It was tough times, and Wapping was not a nice place to work, all that. But anyway, it was a good paper to be on, Rupert was... I always thought that Rupert was not a bad proprietor to work for. When we started the book section, I always remember him saying, "I want a book section like the New York Times. I can't stand the fact we haven't got a New York Times book section. I want a New York Times book section." You know, "Right, Rupert – that's a lot of money. I mean, they haven't got no ads, and that's 32 pages..." "I want 32 pages!" I said, "Well, I don't think your staff in London take that view." He said, "Oh, well they will." I always remember we started with 32 pages, the next week was 24 pages – fighting, fighting, fighting – next week 16 pages, we had to go to Rupert, Rupert would overrule the management, and eventually they knew it had run out of steam, so it came down to 16, I think, eventually. But it was still... it as a very prolific section.

And lasted many years, of course.

Oh, yes. There were 30 reviews... I mean, it was really as substantial as the TLS, or as good in its coverage as the TLS, but they weren't as long, obviously. They were very good reviewers. I mean, it was bloody good.

How did it work in terms of your autonomy, then? Because you were the editor of a section. How big an influence was Andrew on that section, and clearly Rupert obviously had a few things to say about it as well.

Rupert didn't except when his wife wrote a novel – that I will not forget! –

Were you gently leant upon to give it a favourable review?

He was very good... he could see our potential embarrassment.

Because he is a newspaper man, at the end of the day.

Yes, exactly. Rupert was always a newspaper man. I mean, it was not easy to work for him – we can come on to that – but he was a newspaper man to his fingertips, as was Andrew. No, it was a good time. I mean, Andrew... it was the lead review, he and I just thought alike, it wasn't any problem, and I was quite close to him, I mean, I was part of the team. So those were happy days.

What do you think the qualities are that make a good newspaper proprietor? Presumably a limitless pot of cash and dedication to editorial independence at all costs, and then someone who never gets involved and occasionally gives you a call from their yacht? Or do you want someone that's more hands-on, like, for example, how Rupert was?

It's impossible to answer the question – every single newspaper proprietor is different. They're all usually in it for something, there's no good pretending they're not in it for something. Most of them are in it for glory, they want some sort of access, some sort of fame, some sort of power, there's something in their make-up that wants to be a newspaper proprietor. I cannot understand – I have to say, the Berkeley brothers at the moment, they profess to be anonymous, they're shy of publicity and everything, what the hell are they running the Telegraph for?

Can you tell us?

I don't know! I asked them once, and they didn't ever reply. Whereas most people, you know, you've got the Rothermeres, who are really ancestral owners, as well as Aitken, I mean, when Max Aitken ran it he was a rather sad figure really. He was doing it out of honour to his father really, he wouldn't even take his father's title, you know, he felt so strongly. In Rupert's case, he was undoubtedly a sort of... a genius. He was a fidget, as someone said, he couldn't sit still. He doesn't like words, he likes

headlines. He has tremendous flair for a gamble – I mean, the gambles he's taken, the money he's lost. But his ability to take a decision, which I saw at close quarters, was often phenomenal. And actually, when things are going well, he's a very good man to work for. Nothing went to a committee, nothing ever went to a meeting, he just decided – and he fired people and he hired them, and he fired them and he hired them, he was often difficult... he also was a very emotional man. I mean, when Harry was there, I talked to Harry about his time, he had an awful time with Rupert because Rupert really wanted to edit the paper. When Rupert had it, which was the 70s, when Harry was there, Rupert was still young and he was terribly pleased to have the Times, he was over the moon to have bought the Times. By the time... I'm talking about the Sunday Times... he was doing very well, he was buying into America, his mind was always on other things, and he got on with Andrew very well, so at that time it was a good relationship.

What newspaper proprietors other than Rupert have impressed you? I'm thinking as well, the modern breed of proprietor, someone like Evgeny Lebedev. I mean, clearly, as you've just said, all proprietors are in it for something, but he just seems to be a... I don't want to focus on him, but a bit of a dandy and wants to meet Hollywood celebs, and that's his reason for owning the Standard, as well as the occasional thing. But do you ever look back fondly to the proprietors like Robert Maxwell and Conrad Black? They were out and out crooks, but at least you knew what they were there for!

Er, no... because they were out and out crooks. I mean... I can't...

Wrong 'uns.

Those characters, they were kind of spivs, and they were there... real power, they loved the fact they had power over journalists, who are powerful people, I mean, journalists are powerful people, and they excuse an aura of influence and presence and being where it's at that these nouveau riche proprietors just want to dust themselves with, in my view. The old ones, the famous Thomson family, I mean, God knows why they want to be proprietors, but anyway, they did, but they were completely hands-off, totally hands-off – and that was fine, provided the money was being made, but when Roy Thomson bought the Times in whenever it was, 64, I mean, it was losing a quarter of a million a year, which in those days was big money. And he did things to the Times that Rupert never did, and I mean, you know, great chunks of the Times resigned – the famous Black Swan letter, when the senior whatever it was, 20 people, on the paper, signed this letter protesting about what Roy Thomson had done to the Times – people forget that. He was a grand old man by the time he got to the end. But it's difficult – every single proprietor is different. Some of them have strengths, most of them have weaknesses. All I know is, that as against countries where governments run newspapers, give me the British system any day.

This is imperfect but it's less terrible than the other systems, as it were.

It's plural. It's plural. It means you've got a choice. I mean, there was a time in the 70s when there was a genuine risk, if Maxwell hadn't bought the mirror, that it was just possible that every British national newspaper would have been Conservative – that would have been a really bad thing. I mean, when I became a journalist, there were seven national papers, there are now eight. It's amazing, the continuity of this industry.

It is. It's amazing that it even carries on, given the losses that it makes.

They've always made losses, and the title of my book was *The Market for Glory*. The market for glory is a very potent market – it dominates racehorses, West End musicals and newspapers. People would lose vast amounts of money – and mistresses – on these things happily, as long as they get the glory.

So just back to your time at the Sunday Times, then. How long were you there for as a columnist, and how long did you work there for?

I was at the Sunday Times what, from about 85 through to 89, when Rupert said, "Do you want to edit the Times?" I mean, they were pretty hectic times at Wapping, and Rupert was approaching serious financial difficulties, and the independent then had started, and was making huge in-roads into the Times.

Was that Andreas Whittam Smith?

Andreas Whittam Smith. That was a really successful operation. And I almost joined him when he founded it, and I had long talks with him about it, and I just thought, "I'm safe at the Sunday Times, I'm not going to move and end up as his competitor." We were always on good terms. But it was...

But were you excited to be an editor for a paper that had left its troubles... you know, when you were at the Standard you were distracted by all kinds of trouble as it were. Did you think, "This is my chance to be a full-time editor."?

At the Times?

Yes.

Yes. Oh, I mean... there was no argument there. I mean, the Times was... Charlie was a good man, he's a great editor, Charlie Wilson, but I mean the paper had gone right downmarket, it was like the Daily Mail. And it was being taken to the cleaners

by the Independent, I mean, Andrew said to me rather proudly once, “The Independent is now the paper that bishops write letters to.”

It’s interesting now, given the current plight of the Independent. Don’t get me wrong, Lebedev has stopped it haemorrhaging money, but as you’ve just said then, it could have... it was the paper of record when it started.

Andrew was really first class. He was editor and a businessman. He set it up, he staffed it brilliantly, he ran it very well, and the Times was being taken to the cleaners.

So you felt on the back foot as editor.

Well, that was why Rupert asked me to edit, I think. I never got to the bottom of it, but anyway, that was why he did. I said to him, “Rupert, these relationships tend to end in tears. What is your requirement?” He said, “I’ve got to stop the independent. It’s clearly gone too far down market, I think you can take it back up market, we can get some new writers; I want you to see off the Independent.”

In a one-line brief, that was it: see off the Independent.

Yes.

So did you feel energised by the opportunity at that point? Because you are then editor of the Times. You can hire, you can fire, you can put people in who you respect, and get off people who you think are doing it down. It must be quite an exciting opportunity really, to kind of make your vision for what the paper should be real.

I had a specific remit. I had no money, but I had a specific remit, and we were in Wapping, costs were fairly low at that point – I then discovered that costs were being loaded onto the Times to make The Sun look good, but that was a different matter – and we really had to re-cast the Times, and it was a major undertaking. It was exhausting, it was fun.

Long hours?

You just worked all the time – and that was... I mean, I just think editing a newspaper is the most exhilarating thing any journalist can do, I really do, and it’s quite different from writing. It’s exhilarating. I can’t put it any other way.

Did you write a column at the same time?

Oh, lord, no.

You just didn't have time?

Well, you were an educational leader. The leaders mattered to me and I felt Times leaders needed, in some sense, re-establishing. We had good leader writers, and I brought in new columnists and so on, Peter Riddel and Anatole Kaletsky and people like that, who came from the FT and so on. We had raiding parties, it was a big operation. It was great fun, but about nine months in, Rupert hit potential bankruptcy, and there was no way that didn't impact on the papers – he was just close to disaster. He'd seen Bond and Holmes à Court and these other Australian businessmen who had got too big for their boots, all went under. Heavily over-borrowed, he was buying into 20th Century Fox, he was buying into these big American companies, he was acquiring things fanatically – almost bought the FT – and he was crazy. And you asked me about Rupert Murdoch – Rupert Murdoch was a hopeless manager, he was a brilliant dealer, and he couldn't stop doing deals, and nobody knew how exposed he was because these people didn't reveal how exposed they were. But the shit hit the fan, and he was going around begging for money, and he turned around (??32:11) the Times and he said, "I want you to take 10% out of your costs and I want you to double your cover price." That was just devastating in those days. You know, we're fighting the Independent, we're going to double our cover price and lost 10% of the staff.

But doubling the cover price, it's simple economics, wouldn't double the revenue, because you're going to get a loss in readers who won't pay the increased price.

It was desperate measures. It wasn't quite doubling, but it was effectively doubling. No, it was a very tough period, and we did take a hit on that.

How close do you think he came, teetering to the edge?

I think – I haven't read the relevant biographies very closely – but he came very close. He came very close. And indeed, in many ways, it was Rupert at his best, because he went round – I mean, the others just left it to their bankers and their agents – Rupert went round personally with one assistant to every one of the 60 or 70 banks he owed money too and pleaded with them. That took some doing.

I bet. genuine entrepreneurial pluck.

He said to me afterwards, "I'll never, ever, ever use a bank again." He pulled through, but it really was... I mean, all the papers at Wapping had a very tough time then, and it was a difficult period of being editor.

And did that change something in you? Did you start to think about moving on? Because you were only there for about two years, weren't you?

About two and a half years. I mean, yes. My original deal with him, when he asked me, I said, "Look, Rupert – you've got to leave me alone for two years. I want two years of non-intervention."

And he agreed to that?

Rupert's word wasn't worth a lot! But it meant something to me.

He notionally agreed then.

Yes. I said, "After that, do with me what you will – but that's what I really want." I didn't want it to be just a mess.

You were kind of a fatalist even at that point, or a realist, you could say, because you knew you were going to be fired at some point, even going in. It's the fate of all editors I suppose.

I'm a total realist. But I always wanted to write a column for the Times, curiously. And that really had me, always, for a long while. I always thought the Times was the best place to write a column, and in fact I think one of the things I think I said to Rupert, and also to Andrew Knight, who was then his aide in this endeavour, "I want to make the times I want to write a column for." And at that stage I wouldn't write; I think they had offered me a column and I'd said no. So, "I'd like to make the Times the kind of paper I'd be proud to write a column for." That was my personal test – and I think I did that, but the circulation was not doing well, the money was appalling, everything was a mess, and Rupert characteristically thought, "I think I really want Paul Dacre to edit the Times," and that's what he tried to do. It was a close-run thing.

I was going to say!

Hmm.

And did Paul have as formidable a reputation as he does now.

He had the reputation of being David English's successor, and Rupert was obsessed with David English – he thought David English was one of the greatest editors. He longed to have David English working for him. Well, he longed to run the Mail and have David English working for him there. So... and Dacre was English's...

Sidekick.

Apostle on Earth, yes. And English was kind of a genius. Dacre, I don't think he was a genius, but he ran the Daily Mail to the formula, and it was very successful, no doubt about it. And Rupert, having done that with Charlie – editors at the Times swung; you had Douglas-Home, who Rupert didn't touch because he was ill, Charles was very lucky in that sense – terrible mess of Harry Evans, in comes Charles Wilson, takes it downmarket, doesn't work – the Independent comes in to prove that – I see off the Independent, which ultimately we really did, and now it wants to be more like the Daily Mail. Typical Rupert, he falls in love... and it was great, being close to Rupert, I mean, my wife loved it, and he liked her, and we used to visit them in America and so on...

Are you still friends with him now?

No.

What was your last day at the Times like, then? Was it a cordial moving on? Had you already worked out what was next, or was there a kind of... I've known quite a few editors that have worked for Rupert, and sometimes they have been sacked in quite an unpleasant way, and others have said, "Yes, it came to an end and we both knew it was at an end and we both moved on." Which one was it?

Oh, very much the latter. I mean, you know, "Thank you very much," and, "You've done what I wanted you to do," –it was all reasonably cordial. And he said, "Do you want to write a column?" and I said yes. So he said, "We can keep your contract and go on writing a column." It was as simple as that. The one thing that was really a bitter dispute was over Dacre. I said, "If you get Paul to edit at this time, you will undo everything I've done. You've got a deputy editor in Peter Stothard, I really feel you've got no excuse to not give him the editorship."

And he subsequently proved to be a great editor, of course.

He did! But I mean, of course then what happened was, the immediate thing he did was he slashed the price by half.

That's quite commercial.

And no, I mean, Rupert did. Peter persuaded him to, whereupon the circulation surged. And I was a little bitter about that, but only frankly, come on... no, it was very... to edit the Times is just a wonderful thing to have done as a journalist, so I've got no complaints at all.

Do you still consider yourself a journalist? Because you obviously clearly have a portfolio career, as it were. You mentioned already that you had, you know, you joined the Railways Board, you became chair of the National Trust for many years, having been a bit of a critic of them for many years. Was that something that, when you left the Times, that you wanted to increase, that diversity of your appointments?

I never, ever thought I wasn't a journalist. I mean, if anyone asks what I am, I'm a journalist.

Even now, you would say?

I'm almost shocked by your question! Absolutely. I mean, I am on the staff of The Guardian, and very happily so. I think that really, in many ways, and like many of my contemporaries have gone on to do something else, and many of them half think you stay a journalist at this age, what on earth are you up to. I just can't imagine being anything else, I really can't. It doesn't cross my scanner.

Have you ever viewed it as work, or has it always been a lifestyle? Has this been your calling?

I would have said it was my life. I can't imagine not being a journalist and not going into the office occasionally. I love the smell of a newspaper. I mean, even as antiseptic a paper as the Guardian, I just like going into the office, which I try and do every fortnight or so, I go to conference every fortnight, I go to the Standard occasionally, I write for the Standard. It is the most exhilarating profession I can imagine, all of the things I'm interested in – politics, the arts, culture, London – it's providing me with an outlet for my views on, I've been able to write books, I've been able to join boards – I don't do any more – but all that sort of thing you can do. I do feel journalists do broaden their horizon by doing other things, I really do – but I also feel that there has to be an absolute Chinese wall, and I have never, ever written about a subject that I'm also involved in professionally or in any other way. In fact, I was at the Railways for 10 years and I never wrote a single article about railways. I was mortified, but I didn't, and I feel that very strongly. I was always shocked by William Rees-Mogg, who was an old-timer columnist who wrote for the Times, and shamelessly promoted his other interests to... the general electorate. I mean, it was outrageous, I thought. I feel quite moralistic about journalism.

How do you feel about the plight of journalism currently? Do you feel sorry for someone starting out in journalism now? Because in a sense it's easier, isn't it, that you've got Twitter and LinkedIn, and blogging, and it's easier to get your name out there – but there are so fewer positions available and the competition is incredibly intense, and also there is no job security whatsoever in journalism these days. Would you agree?

Well, I don't know. I mean, journalism has been very good to me, I spent 15 years at the Times, then I was poached by the Guardian, and that was a big decision because I was very much part of the Times; I had edited it, I wrote a column for it, I had been trained by it, I was a total Times person, and it was only being a certain age and wanting to give myself a kick up the seat of the pants that made me move, and I'm very glad I did. I am often asked your question by young people who want to go into the profession – I go and talk to journalism schools and so on – and the professors always say to me, "Please don't depress them too much." I say, "I'm not going to!" I mean, in the first place, I bet you anything – and I always quote two statistics. One is that more quality newspapers – newspapers – are being sold and bought in Britain today than when I became a journalist. Nobody believes it, but the fact is there are more of them. There's the independent, plus the FT's gone big, and the Guardian's gone national – I mean, all these things have happened in my career in journalism, and people buy them. They aren't buying them like they were in 2000, there's no question about that, you can't argue about that, but you could argue that the Wapping revolution in the 80s led to a surge in newspaper bulk – I mean, newspapers went from being sort of six pages to 60 pages, I mean, it was just extraordinary, no one remembers this – thousands of journalists were hired to write newspapers as a result of Wapping. Wapping, and I'll say this for Rupert, was the best thing that ever happened to this industry. Newspapers in America were killing, were just killed at that time – two in New York, three in New York – I mean, they were just wiped out. In Britain, we have more newspapers now than then. I mean, that's the one thing. Secondly, as a result, there are more words written, there are more journalists employed, all these things are the case now than was the case when I became a journalist, so I just don't buy into this gloom thing. It's a very different profession, it's highly digitalised, I mean, all the things are different. There are huge threats, I find native advertising, as it's called, advertorial and all these dodgy deals that every paper is doing, really worry me. I'm a bit of an ethicist about this.

I agree with you – there's a lot of blurring of the lines.

A lot of blurring of the lines, yes – there really is. But the jobs are there, people are getting employed, too many people are being trained as journalists, there's no doubt about that, and that wasn't the case before, so it's like acting – people are coming out of journalism schools in their thousands, and if they're lucky they go into PR. I don't know, you know, the Guardian employed God knows how many hundreds of people now. All right, it's not making money, but they never did. And as you say, it is less secure, and there's no doubt about it, many people are freelance, the competition is intense, pay is not very good... I don't know. All I can say is that, you know, there now must be a dozen columnists on the Guardian, and there sure as hell weren't when I joined the Guardian, or when I read the Guardian as a student.

Well, not just a dozen columnists in print, but of course they've got Comment is free, and there's hundreds of columnists – providing you are reasonably engaging as a writer, and you've got a good point of view, you can basically get on Comment is Free.

This is not a bad profession to be in – it never has been, and in Britain it is a particularly good one. You are in a city like London, which is a world capital, you're an English-speaking capital of the world – along with New York – but the industry in London is much more flourishing than it is in New York. It is curiously supported by this strange Hinterland, which is made up of digital media, made up of the lecture circuit, it's made up of events in London, made up of book-writing, which is as vigorous as ever, magazines aren't what they were but there are plenty of magazines, then there are things like literary festivals... I mean, the world of the cultivated Londoner, the world of the London intelligentsia, easy to ridicule, is nonetheless far more fruitful and active than it has ever been before. So although it's easy to think that things aren't as good as they used to be in the good old days, I just don't buy into it.

What's next for you? Final question.

I am always writing a book, I'm usually writing two...

How many books have you written so far?

I don't know, about 50.

It's a lot, isn't it?

I try to write one on politics and then one on architecture or the environment, which is my other sort of love, at any one time, so that's always on the ball. And I work for the Guardian and the Evening Standard and I'm very happy – I'll do it until I drop.

Simon, I feel like we've only covered about half the things that we should do – I have tons of questions that I'd like to ask, but unfortunately we have run out of metaphorical tape as it were. It just remains for me to say thank you ever so much for your time – I've learnt a huge amount.

Thank you.