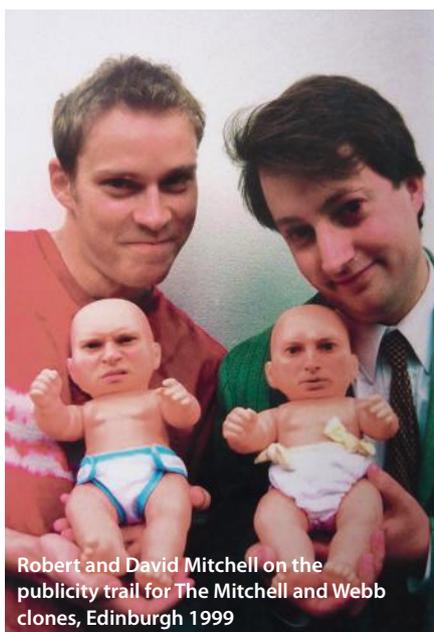


Robert Webb is a comedian, writer and actor, Tim Saunders found out all about his journey to acclaim, awards and nudist beaches!

CAUGHT IN A WEBB

A television favourite, Robert Webb is well known for his collaborations with David Mitchell and stars alongside him in the award-winning *That Mitchell & Webb Sound* and the Bafta award-winning *That Mitchell & Webb Look*. They partner up again when he plays Jeremy in the cult sitcom *Peep Show*. Along with all his television work, Robert is also a popular awards host, speaker and writer.

Robert attended Cambridge University and when he was a student there he visited Brighton. It wasn't long after he joined the renowned sketch troupe, Cambridge Footlights that he became one of a cast of five in the Summer Revue, which was going on a UK tour. At the last minute tour manager Simon secured the Brighton Dome for one night only. This meant that the show did not feature in the theatre programme and there were no posters anywhere. "What we got in Brighton was a 2,000-seat venue on the night of the 1994 World Cup Final," recalls Robert, who was used to playing 200 to 300-seat theatres that were half



Robert and David Mitchell on the publicity trail for *The Mitchell and Webb clones*, Edinburgh 1999

“What we got in Brighton was a 2,000-seat venue on the night of the 1994 World Cup Final

full. “When I asked how many tickets we’d sold, Simon conceded that the pre-sales were ‘on the disappointing side of brilliant.’ When pressed, he said that the actual figure, ‘if we really want to dwell on a literal figure’, was ‘something in the vicinity of fifteen’. When he came under some pressure to clarify, Simon admitted: it was twelve! He suggested we might need to go flyer-ing. I looked out upon the vast sea of empty red seats, disappearing into the distance on three tiers.” Robert took his allocation of 300 leaflets and when the others couldn’t see him, threw them away “and headed for the nudist beach.”

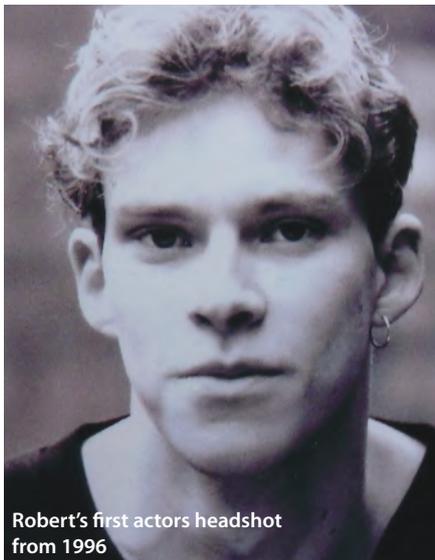
“I was seven when I saw a grown-up news report about the opening of Brighton naturist beach in 1980. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. But these people are bare! Outside! They don’t seem to mind that everyone can see!” Finding himself there in the flesh that hot day in 1994 Robert couldn’t resist. “It was a hot day, I hadn’t got any swimming trunks and I couldn’t think of anything better to do. I peeled off my Footlights Tour T-shirt before I



got there. Somehow it wouldn't do to be recognised as a Cambridge revue performer in such an environment... The clientele appeared to be 80 per cent single men."

Only a year earlier Robert had met David Mitchell at a *Cinderella* audition. They put together their first project two years later. As an actor Robert starred in comedy TV series *Bruiser*, was Robin in *The Smoking Room* and Bill Hathaway in *Blessed*. He had a recurring role as Jedrington Secret-Past in *The Bleak Old Shop of Stuff* and starred as Dan in *Fresh Meat*. In 2013 he starred as Neil Tilly in the TV mini-series *Ambassadors* and has also starred in the films *Confetti*, *Magicians*, and *The Wedding Video*.

Well-known for playing Bertie Wooster in *Perfect Nonsense*, Robert has performed at Chichester Festival Theatre. His performance helped the comedy win the Olivier Award for Best Comedy. Fellow Cambridge Footlight Alumnus Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie have also played Jeeves and Wooster and Robert points out



Robert's first actors headshot from 1996

“Robert was determined to go to Cambridge to pursue his comedy ambition

that theirs were smaller screen roles, whereas his was “very theatrical and very mad.”

Robert's mother died when he was just 17 and in the lower sixth form preparing for his A-levels. She had developed a cough, which turned out to be aggressive lung cancer. Robert had to deal with the “very painful weeks and months afterwards,” he explained, “She went from finding a lump to being bed-ridden in about five months. There was just enough time to get it into my head that she was going to die. Afterwards, there was just a black hole in the house – I was never going to hear her voice or see her face again.”

This devastating ordeal, which he says, shaped him, did not prevent Robert from academic achievement but not surprisingly he did have to re-take his A-levels. He had spoken to his mum about whether he would need to help stepfather Derek bring up his young sister, who was only two at the time. His mum had said that wouldn't be



Robert with Olivia Colman and David Mitchell at the Women in Film and TV Awards 2012



Robert and Abigail on their wedding day in 2007

necessary pushing Robert to pursue his dreams. Following his mother's death, Robert went to live with his dad who had become half-deaf from his work as a woodman wearing no ear protection making communication difficult. He confided it was often best over a pint.

Robert was determined to go to

Cambridge to pursue his comedy ambition; following in the footsteps of greats like John Cleese, Sir David Frost and Peter Cook and he secured a place at Robinson College where he eventually became vice-president of theatre club the Footlights.

Robert's mum was, "a working class woman who was certainly clever, but not clever enough to avoid getting pregnant before finishing her A-levels." Robert remembers how she always had a part-time job such as a school secretary, a hotel secretary or a bar worker, and wanted the best for her children in whatever they chose as their career.

Growing up, adults referred to Robert as painfully shy and quiet. His sense of humour gradually developed. His parents split up when he was five years old, his mother soon remarrying a man called Derek with whom she had a daughter, Anna-Beth. Robert chose not to refer to Derek as dad.

It was while Robert was at home in his bedroom that he came up with his early sketches including *The Price is Slight* (TV game-show parody) and *The GAY Team* (parody of children's TV action drama). "In my sophisticated opinion, doing 'the gay voice' has no place in the comedy of 1987, even in

Lincolnshire where literally no one is meant to be gay," he says.

His part-time job at Gateway supermarket earned him £1.36 an hour and saw Robert spending "the hours between five and seven on my sixteenth birthday in the same way as I usually would on a Thursday – stacking shelves." Although the youngest part-timer he was "as quick as Tony with a price-gun."

Born 10 months after the death of his eldest brother Martin, who was six, from meningitis to parents Paul and Pat (she hated Patricia) Robert has two older brothers, Mark and Andrew. In 2007 Robert married comedienne Abigail Burdess, who has also starred alongside him. The couple have two children, Esme and Dory. Of bringing up daughters, Robert says: "Parenting girls makes you quite gender-conscious – it's almost impossible to fight the power of pink. It's not such a terrible thing to want to be a princess when you're five, but it would be nice if there were some other options."

And how did his day sunbathing on the nudist beach turn out? Well, while there Robert met another nude man called Bryan with whom he had a conversation about local house prices. It bored him senseless, he confides. ●

