

LLEWELYN, DESMOND WILKINSON (1914 - 1999), actor

Name: Desmond Wilkinson Llewelyn
Date of birth: 1914
Date of death: 1999
Spouse: Pamela Mary Llewelyn (née Pantlin)
Child: Charles Ivor Llewelyn
Child: Justin Cather Llewelyn
Parent: Ivor Llewelyn
Parent: Mia Llewelyn (née Wilkinson)
Gender: Male
Occupation: actor
Area of activity: Performing Arts
Author: Robert Hyde

Desmond Llewelyn was born on 12 September 1914 at Blaen-y-Pant House in Bettws, Newport, Monmouthshire, the eldest child of Ivor Llewelyn, a mining engineer, and his wife Mia (née Wilkinson). He had a sister Mia Noreen born in 1918. Desmond's grandfather Llewelyn Llewelyn was the General Manager of the Powell-Dyffryn Steam Coal Company, and High Sheriff of Monmouthshire from 1913.

Llewelyn was sent to board at the Priory Preparatory School at the age of 9, and then to Radley College from the age of 12 until 18, where he was gradually more and more involved with theatrical productions, originally working behind the scenes and in staging, but eventually picking up roles. He shared his time at Radley with fellow actor Dennis Price, who encouraged him to take to acting. Whilst there, Llewelyn was known as a better sportsman than academic, and was a very good rugby player, a game for which he never lost his love throughout his life.

Against the wishes of his father, Llewelyn decided on an acting career, and was accepted into the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 1934, gaining his Acting Diploma in 1937. He stayed in London, and began work in the burgeoning television service and in smaller stage roles, working with the Little Theatre Company and then the Forsyth Players (Matthew Forsyth). He met Pamela Mary Pantlin (1916-2001) through working with the Forsyth Players, as her sister was also in the company. They married in May 1938 in Kensington, and had two sons, Charles Ivor (b. 1949) and Justin Cather (1953-2012).

His first acting appearance on screen was in 1939 in the Will Hay film *'Ask a Policeman'* where he plays a coachman. Llewelyn was tall, had high cheekbones, and often played roles of a gentle but knowledgeable character. He himself was a humble, gentle man, who often said that he was always slightly baffled at his own success. Llewelyn's acting career was paused by the outbreak of war in 1939, when he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, and saw active duty in France. In 1940 his unit was engaged in fighting an entire Panzer division for several days near Lille, but they were overrun in attempting to retreat to Dunkirk, and captured. He spent the remainder of the war in the Laufen and Colditz prisoner of war camps, being transferred to Colditz for his role in attempting to escape from Laufen by tunnelling out.

After Llewelyn was liberated from Colditz in 1945, he returned to London, and set up home with Pamela in Chelsea. He found work almost immediately and continued to be very busy in character roles for the rest of his career. Early in 1946, he was cast in the role of Theseus in *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* for television with Sir Robert Atkins, a role that was also reprised the following year. He played many roles on television, notably as the lead (Mr Hyde) in *'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'*, and in many series, such as *'My Wife Jacqueline'*, *'Robin Hood'* and *'The Invisible Man'*. In 1950, Llewelyn took a supporting role ('77 Jones - a tank commander) in the war film *'They Were Not Divided'* directed by Terence Young. This was a fateful decision which would come to define his career much later on, as Young would take the helm of the James Bond series of films. He appeared in a number of smaller film roles, such as *'The Lavender Hill Mob'*, *'Valley of Song'*, *'A Night To Remember'*, *'Sword of Sherwood Forest'*, and *'Cleopatra'*. The family moved to East Sussex in the 1950s, living for many years at Whitelands, Battle, and latterly at Osborn House, Bexhill on Sea.

In 1963 Terence Young asked Llewelyn to come in and read for the part of the Quartermaster Major Boothroyd in *'From Russia With Love'*, having remembered him from *'They Were Not Divided'* many years before. Although Ian Fleming and Young wanted Llewelyn to play the role as a Welshman, he put on the thickest Welsh accent he could muster to put them off the idea, and it worked - although in later films he gradually allowed a small amount of his lilting accent to appear. He would play the role of 'Q' for virtually all the *Bond* films until 1999, appearing in more films of the series than any other actor and playing opposite some of the finest actors ever to grace films, including Sir Sean Connery, Sir Roger Moore, fellow Welshman Timothy Dalton, and Pierce Brosnan.

Llewelyn did not concentrate solely on the *Bond* films, although they did provide most of his work in latter years. He also appeared in other television shows and films, such as '*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*', '*Dixon of Dock Green*', '*Follyfoot*', and '*Merlin*'. Llewelyn was also friends with Sir Christopher Lee, and made 6 films with him over a 25 year period.

On 20 November 1995, Llewelyn was the subject of '*This Is Your Life*', where many of his colleagues gathered to celebrate his life and work, including the stars of the recent film '*Goldeneye*', Pierce Brosnan and Famke Janssen. The production had surprised him in the reception of the Hyde Park Hotel, after the press day for the film. One of the contributions to the programme was from Lord Peyton of Yeovil, who was incarcerated with Llewelyn, and recounted the story of the prisoners digging a tunnel in the prisoner of war camp. In the programme, Llewelyn admitted that although he played a quartermaster renowned for giving out gadgets, he himself was fairly technophobic.

On 19 December 1999, Llewelyn was returning home from a book signing from his recently published biography, when he was involved in a car accident at Firle in East Sussex. He was airlifted to hospital, but died of his injuries a few hours later. A memorial service was held in March 2000 in St Paul's Church in Knightsbridge, where tributes were paid by Sir Roger Moore and Sir Christopher Lee.

Although Llewelyn gained worldwide fame through his role in the seventeen *Bond* films he completed, his time on screen in them actually adds up to less than an hour in total. He was, though, a great fan favourite, and often was considered to 'steal' the scenes he is in. Llewelyn gradually built a substantial backstory for Q that he managed to distil into the stories as they progressed through the series, and he maintained that Q settled in Gwent when he retired, as a nod to his own past. If one carefully watches some of the *Bond* films, it is possible to see him wear both a Newport RFC tie and Malpas Cricket Club tie, in an affectionate acknowledgement of his roots as a proud Newportonian and Welshman.

Author

Robert Hyde

Sources

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BFI Screen Online profile: [Llewelyn, Desmond \(1914-1999\)](#)

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IMDB: [Desmond Llewelyn \(1914-1999\)](#)

'Q - The Desmond Llewelyn Story', BBC Radio Wales, 31 October 2012 (narrator: Roger Moore)

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Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Desmond Llewelyn](#)

Additional Links

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