

John Ebdon

Director of the London Planetarium who became one of Radio 4's most famous broadcasting voices with his archive programme

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John Ebdon, who has died aged 81, was a broadcaster, writer and speaker, with an exceptional gift as a humorist. Above all, he relished what he saw as the whimsicality of the one race in the world with the most eccentrics, a sense of humour second to none, and an ability to laugh at themselves - the English. Despite being born and partly educated on the continent, he was himself the quintessential Englishman. His rich "port wine" voice became a legend to Radio 4 listeners, as he trawled around the BBC Sound Archives and, as the announcer would say, "came to no serious conclusion whatsoever". The voice belied the appearance however; he was tall, slim and good looking, with what his successor, the late Glyn Worsnip described as, a raffish Tony Curtis quiff of hair.

John Ebdon was born in Brussels, though with strong English West Country roots. The son of an army officer, he was educated in Switzerland, at an English public school (a period in his life he described as "appallingly unhappy" and about which he refused to talk), London University and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

He spoke with pride of his contemporaries at Rada, all of whom became fine actors: Nigel Green, Robert Shaw, Cyril Shaps, Barbara Jefford, Dorothy Tutin, John Neville and Paul Daneman. John Ebdon's early roles were with HM Tennent, and included working at the Old Vic and acting with Roger Livesey, Alec Clunes, Paul Rogers and Richard Baker, who later became a BBC newsreader.

During John Ebdon's wartime service in the RAF, he suffered flash blindness, and on trying to return to the stage after the war, the bright lights of the stage caused such problems that he was forced to seek an alternative career.

Through a connection of his father's, he spent the years 1952 to 1957 in Kenya, as an honorary game warden, buying and selling skins and mastering Swahili.

As a young boy, an interest in astronomy was encouraged by his nanny, a lady addicted to, in order of precedence, gin, the stars and her young charge. Despite his discovery that most of her observations were wholly inaccurate - as a result of her seeing most of the constellations in double vision - astronomy

was to become an enduring passion. In 1960, Ebdon became the narrator at the London Planetarium, and, in 1968, its long-term director; some of his hilarious moments there appeared in his beautifully crafted collection of essays about the eccentricity of the English race, *Ebdon's England* (1985).

While at the planetarium, he was heard by a BBC producer, Denys Geroult, who invited him to compile a programme of snippets from the BBC Sound Archives, adding his own commentary between each excerpt. And so began those famous 15-minute perorations, cameo glimpses of the English at their most whimsical, masterminded by Ebdon with wry wit and mellow tone. Opening with the words, "How do you do?" and closing with the delicious throwaway line, "Anyway, if you have been, thanks for listening," the programme was broadcast on Radio 4 at 8.45am, on the first Monday of each month, and ran for 26 years.

A lover of cats, especially Siamese, the views of one of his pets, Perseus, were often sought on all kinds of matters, to the point where Perseus qualified for an obituary in the *Times*.

Sometimes just whimsical, sometimes a little satirical, Ebdon said of his broadcasts: "I like to think that I have never done any real harm." These programmes remain a broadcasting legend, fondly remembered to this day.

During the 1960s, Ebdon complemented this programme with *A World Of Sound*, *Nonsense At Noon*, *April Foolery*, *Near Myths* and other radio appearances.

Since boyhood he had nurtured a passion for Greece: its history, its culture, its people, its climate and above all, its skies. He spent some time lecturing on holiday cruise ships in the Aegean, and the characters he met, at sea and on the Greek islands, provided hilarious material for his three books on Greece: *Ebdon's Iliad* (1983), *Ebdon's Odyssey* (1979) and *Near Myths* (1989).

As well as Swahili, he spoke Ancient and Modern Greek, French, and Middle English. A private man, whose faith meant everything to him, he relished good food, wine and company, cricket and rugby.

He battled against cancer over several years, nursed by his second wife Mary. He is survived by her, and a son and a daughter from his first marriage. Another son predeceased him.

John Ebdon will go down in the annals of broadcasting as a "national treasure", with superb skills as a mimic and raconteur. To everything he did, he brought one very rare and very special quality, style.

• John Ebdon, broadcaster and writer, born December 22 1923; died March 19 2005.