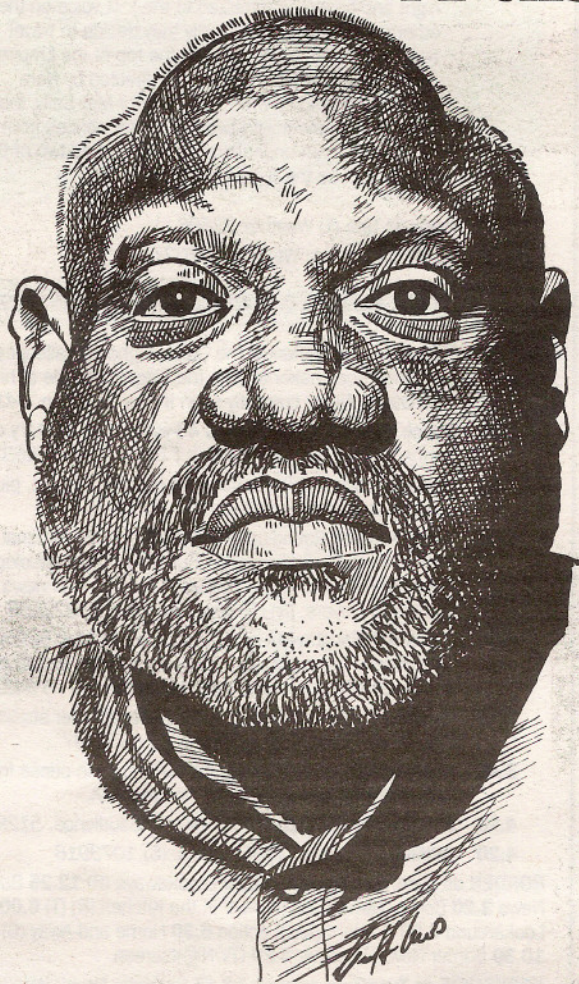


# A disappearing minority



WHAT does the term "Englishness" mean to you?

If *England My England* (Channel 4, 8pm) told us anything, it was that no two people in this country have the same idea.

For some reason, it came as no surprise to me that the two co-presenters of this documentary, Darcus Howe and Sir Peregrine Worsthorpe, went no further North than Shropshire in search of what we as a nation think of ourselves.

Neither of them seemed remotely aware that one message they were conveying to us all is that England apparently consists of London and the Home Counties.

Nevertheless, the mission with which the dynamic duo had been charged was to look at the way in which ethnic groups in England retain allegiances to non-English cultures.

Off they purred in Worsthorpe's maroon Daimler to visit his old public school, where both seemed quite surprised to note the significantly multi-racial profile of the students.

"Just the odd maharajah's son when I was here", said Sir Perry.

Everyone they spoke to there regarded themselves as being English.

In Brixton, the picture was very different.

One boy, born in London (but whose parents came from Pakistan), said he felt Asian. Trinidad-born Howe appeared quite shocked at this, and asked: "So what are you?" Another girl

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replied: "Confused."

Various other institutions were visited, such as the police (where Worsthorpe referred to a 40-year-old policewoman as "a nice girl"), and the army.

Perhaps least surprising of all was a very nasty conversation in a pub near Charlton Athletic where a group of beer-swilling football fans filled the airwaves with electronic bleeps. Howe was understandably very angry while Worsthorpe was quite visibly horrified by what was obviously a completely alien situation to him.

The two repaired to a Thames riverboat to calmly discuss the results of their search, but were able to agree only that the Millennium dome is "awful".

Whether such a programme could ever have reached any sort of conclusion is doubtful. And excuse me for being a parochial Geordie lad but why is the "Traditional" Englishman always represented by a refugee from some 1950s Ealing film comedy like Worsthorpe?

Thank goodness he and his kind are a minority decidedly on the way out.

*Christopher Goulding is a professional actor and writer.*

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# The parallel universe of Friends

## Last night

Review by Christopher Goulding



A NEW series *Sliders* started last night (BBC2, 6.45pm) in which a group of friends travel through wormholes in space-time to parallel universes.

Last night they landed in a world where mass entertainment is provided by extremely violent video games.

But why resort to potentially risky space travel when we can tune in to a parallel universe right here on earth?

*The One Where Johnny Makes Friends* (Channel 4, 9pm) transported Big Breakfast presenter Johnny Vaughan into that freaky world of *Friends*, the big-budget US sitcom where a group of young data processors and cafe waitresses are able to afford to live in New York apartments with kitchens the size of Leazes Park.

The purpose of this one-hour special was to meet the cast whilst they were over here filming an episode set in London.

However, in this world of relentless irony and cynicism it was quite out of the question for Vaughan to do straightforward interviews.

Oh no, there had to be a tedious running gag about him being an unwelcome intruder on the set.

For some reason he also gave everyone a silly present when he had finished speaking to them - "I don't get it...", said a puzzled Mat Le Blanc (the one who always ends up naked) upon being

given a tin of wood varnish.

Quite...

I dare say the intention was to reveal the actors behind the characters, but Vaughan's approach saw to it that we didn't get much of that.

For instance, Courtney Cox (the one with the neatness neurosis) was encouraged to fuss over the arrangement of the things on the table they were sitting at.

The most genuine of the lot was Jennifer Aniston (the one with the hair) who coped with Johnny's jolly japes with a demure aplomb.

You may gather that I don't go totally overboard on this series the way four million viewers do every week.

I'm afraid it has always been a little too anaesthetised and soapy for me.

Yes, it is very well written and funny, but I like the situation in comedies to be a bit more down-to-earth.

Perhaps the ethos of *Friends* was best summed up by Matthew Perry (the one who makes the wise-cracks), when he said: "Basically, we drink a lot of coffee and say funny things to each other." Quite...

Christopher Goulding is a professional actor and writer

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# Clamping down on 'stars'

TRAFFIC wardens rank pretty high in the top ten of common hate-figures. But the documentary *The Clampers* (BBC1, 9.30pm) showed us what a selfish, foul-mouthed, and irrational bunch motorists can be. Some berks really do think they can park where they like with impunity.

Unfortunately, the image of wardens was not helped either, thanks to the self-conscious prima donna whom the camera was following for most of the time.

Ray Brown, an ex-Pontins bluecoat, obviously fancied himself as the latest star among that growing breed, the documentary personality, God help us.

Meanwhile, the documentary series *Reputations* (BBC2, 9pm) has acquired a bit of a reputation itself for doing hatchet jobs on the great and the good. For a change, Billie Jean King: Rogue Champion was sympathetic in its treatment of the tennis star and feminist icon.

When Billie Jean started out in the early sixties, tennis was described as "a game for housewives playing for fun".

The prize for her first Wimbledon singles championship in 1966 was a £45 Harrods voucher.

We were shown how she campaigned to elevate the status of the women's game into the million-dollar circuit it is today, transforming herself along the way from a shy kid with a toothy smile into a hardened and aggressive professional.

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Most fascinating of all were her exploits as a champion of feminism. This included a battle-of-the-sexes grudge match in 1973 against a self-confessed male chauvinist pig called Bobby Riggs (Anyone remember him?). He said any man could beat any woman at tennis. She obliged by thrashing him before a TV audience of over 50 million.

Unfortunately, this being the seventies, the event was staged as a cringingly tasteless circus. Riggs personified the zeitgeist of the occasion be entering the arena with a live pig under his arm (Geddit?). Oh lordy, what a tacky decade, that was. Nevertheless, a great documentary about a great lady.

Alas, I fear it will be Ray Brown and his ilk of whom we will be seeing more and more on our screens. TV schedulers obsessed with cheap output, and a society increasingly obsessed with itself both demand that supposedly, factual programmes look more like soap opera. A documentary? Hmm — I suspect that anyone seeing Ray's virtuoso performance repeated in 25 years' time won't know the meaning of the word.

*Chris Goulding is a professional actor and writer.*

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# A landmark series

WE'VE all come a long way over the past three billion years. Having evolved from colonies of bacteria around the edges of hot springs, we were just about intelligent enough to leave our stencilled hand prints on cave walls 30,000 years ago.

Now, we can use innovative camera techniques and electronic imaging to produce marvellous TV programmes about ourselves such as the *Human Body* (BBC1, 10.20pm).

This promises to be a landmark documentary series, and a welcome change from the fly-on-the-wall dross we have to endure so much nowadays.

It's the ultimate user's guide to the miraculous soft machine we all inhabit.

But this is no mere accumulation of scientific statistics and pretty pictures of the inside of your lughole.

In the coming weeks, Professor Robert Winston will take us from the womb to the very moment of death – a journey we all have in common.

And his exploration of our bones, brains, flesh, and blood will not ignore that which makes us human – feelings, emotions, and creative thought.

Last night we met two-hour-old Charlotte and an old man Herbie.

As the series progresses, we will see baby Charlotte coming into the world and Herbie leaving it, due to his inoperable cancer.

I suspect that we will grow very

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fond of both.

Another new series with a medical slant that started last night was *Out Of Hours* (BBC1, 9.30pm).

One of the blandest signature tunes ever synthesised heralded 45 minutes of mediocre cliché-ridden drama about the life, loves and emergency call-outs of a group of doctors and their quirky but loveable assistants.

A sort of Dr Finlay meets the Sweeney, if you like.

– Didn't work for me, I'm afraid.

This screenful of two dimensional medicos hurtled their way through a relentless string of far too many accidents and sore tummies for me to feel any involvement or sympathy at all.

Oh, and by the way – one of them has a troubled love life (ZZZZ ...).

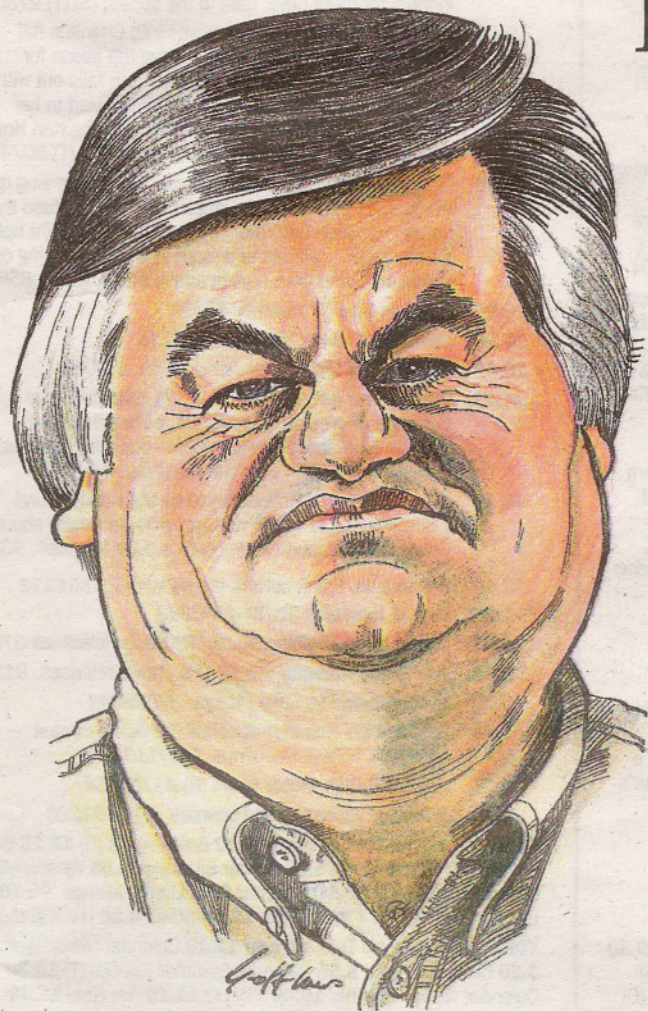
Will these characters grow on us in the weeks to come? Perhaps, but they have some stiff opposition.

The poverty of such second-rate formulaic drama is only emphasised by its proximity to the real life miracle of Charlotte's birth and the utter finality of Herbie's sickness and death.

Christopher Goulding is a professional actor and writer.

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# Roger's rogues gallery

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OSCAR Wilde once remarked that "All art is quite useless".

Well, that's as may be, but these days any half-decent objet d'art much over 30 years old is probably worth its weight in gold.

Be it an oil painting by an old master or that vase that's been in granny's china cabinet since before the war, you can virtually guarantee that someone, somewhere, will want it enough to shell out hard cash for it. Or steal it from you.

Indeed, it was this shadier side of the art and antiques market that was the subject of last night's *Cook Report Special: The Antiques Rogue Show* (Tyne Tees, 8pm).

With the dedicated antique squads of most police forces having been disbanded, the stolen art market is now one of Britain's most thriving heritage industries.

From door-to-door 'knockers' fleecing vulnerable pensioners to organised gangs that steal to order from stately homes, a large proportion of our nation's thievery are doing very nicely out of pinching our knick-knacks and what-nots.

Remember that next time you visit a car boot sale or antiques fair.

It also transpires that even the most prestigious auction houses are not too careful about checking the provenance of goods they put under the hammer.

Nor were they shown to be experts at telling a real Lowry from

a fake.

Red faces at the Beeb too, I fear, as *The Antiques Roadshow* were unable to confirm or deny the authenticity of a painting that was later valued at over £30,000. (For some reason, I wasn't exactly gobsmacked to learn that).

But perhaps most depressing of all was the revelation that two of the most prominent criminal masterminds behind organised thefts were legal executives working for firms of solicitors. God help us.

A reminder of a more innocent age followed with a repeat of a classic episode of *Steptoe and Son* (BBC2, 9pm).

This was the one when Albert and Harold were the unwelcome hosts of two escaped convicts.

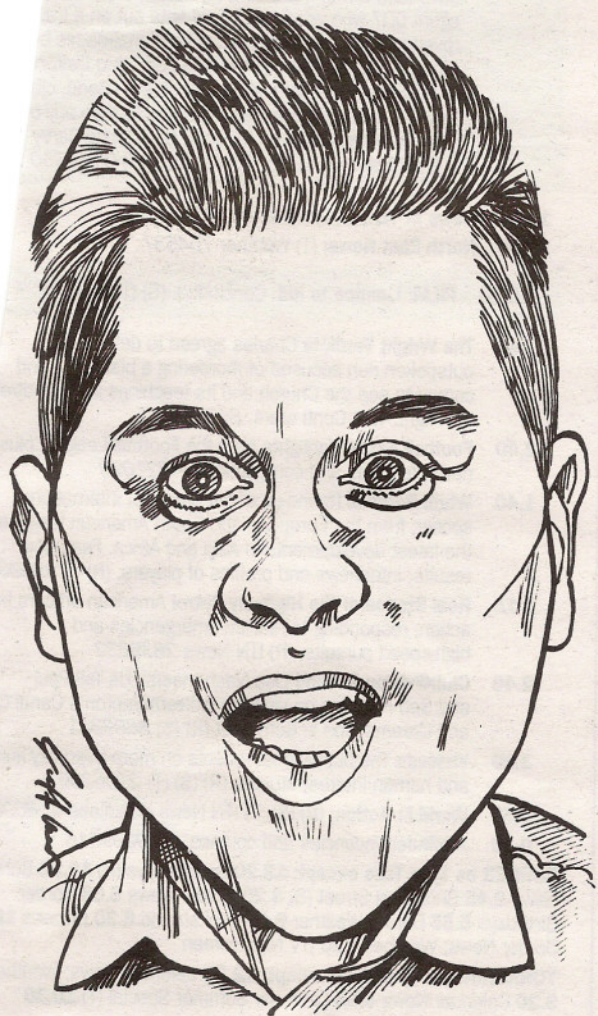
Perhaps, showing its age a little after so many years, this sitcom can still raise more than a laugh or two.

And somehow, I can't imagine Roger Cook kicking their door in and thrusting a microphone under old man Steptoe's nose, demanding to know where the hooky silverware is.

Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer

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# Just seriously unfunny

IN THIS wry and sardonic world, it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between what one is supposed to take seriously and what is a satirical spoof.

It's all a question of attitude and presentation, I suppose.

Take *Truth or Consequences* (ITV, Saturday, 6.50pm) as a case in point. This show was presented by DJ-cum-trickster Steve Penk, who hit the headlines some months ago by getting a hoax phone call through to PM Tony Blair and broadcasting the result on his radio show.

Having graduated to the small screen, Penk was given carte blanche to come up with a similar concept for TV.

The result was abysmal. In the past, shows such as *Candid Camera* were successful because they went out into the big wide world to fool the unwary on the open street or their own doorsteps.

The very fact that this dire production was entirely studio-bound with an already captive audience made the whole idea a loser from the start.

Not that they tried very hard in any case.

Among the treats served up to us, supposedly in the name of entertainment, were a woman who won a prize for recognising spare parts from a Rover 216, and a blindfolded man being kissed by a chimpanzee wearing a dress.

Wow.

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If this show had had its tongue planted more firmly in its cheek, it might have been able to pass itself off as one of those post-modernist shows such as *Shooting Stars*, which is tacky but funny, as it self-consciously take the mickey out of its own genre.

But Mr Penk's efforts were merely pathetic, and I found myself thinking that even the appalling Jeremy Beadle would be an improvement.

Indeed, the most dignified performance amidst the whole sad parade of dross came from the chimpanzee.

Later the same evening, Chris Tarrant took another of his regular looks at the wackier side of world television in *Tarrant on TV* (ITV, 10.25pm).

The standpoint of this sort of programme has traditionally been to give us all a good laugh at what a funny load of rubbish foreign telly is, and to rest assured that ours is the best in the world.

Sadly, if the Steve Penks of this country are let loose on our screens much more, the joke may well be on us.

*Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.*

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# Some we made earlier

## Weekend

by Christopher Goulding

OH dear . . . another weekend of old programme material repackaged and presented to us as a "theme evening". Inevitably, ladling out vintage excerpts ain't necessarily entertaining telly. The latest offering of *Blue Peter Night* (BBC2, Saturday, 6pm) was a case in point.

As a wee kiddie during the 1960s, the legendary flagship of BBC children's TV was required viewing for me. Would it be able to rekindle that lost childhood magic for me now? Whenever I chance upon it, the *Blue Peter* of today - with its whooping presenters, acid-funk theme tune, and right-on streetwise attitude - is very different from the one I remember.

So it was with mixed feelings that I tuned into what the trailers had led me to expect might be an ironic self-deprecating hatchet job upon the BP of old.

The Beeb had wisely decided on the classic line-up of Valerie Singleton, John Noakes and Peter Purves to anchor the show.

But unfortunately, there just weren't enough of the right sort of clips to justify the tongue-in-cheek tone the team had decided to adopt for the whole evening.

Oh yes, there were those classic moments we all remember so well; Lulu the elephant doing a whoopsie on the studio floor; the brownie campfire nearly burning down the studio and Simon Groom being

bitten by that ferret.

But none of what we saw quite captured that innocent, unintentional silliness and magnificently sanctimonious style for which the show became legendary in the sixties and seventies.

This was what made it such a ripe target for lampooning in the sketches we were shown from the likes of *Monty Python* and *French & Saunders* - which were by far the best part of the evening.

*The Clintons* (Channel 4, Sunday, 8pm) is a new series charting the rise of the eponymous Bill to the White House, with last night's episode concentrating on Hillary's role during their early political years in Arkansas.

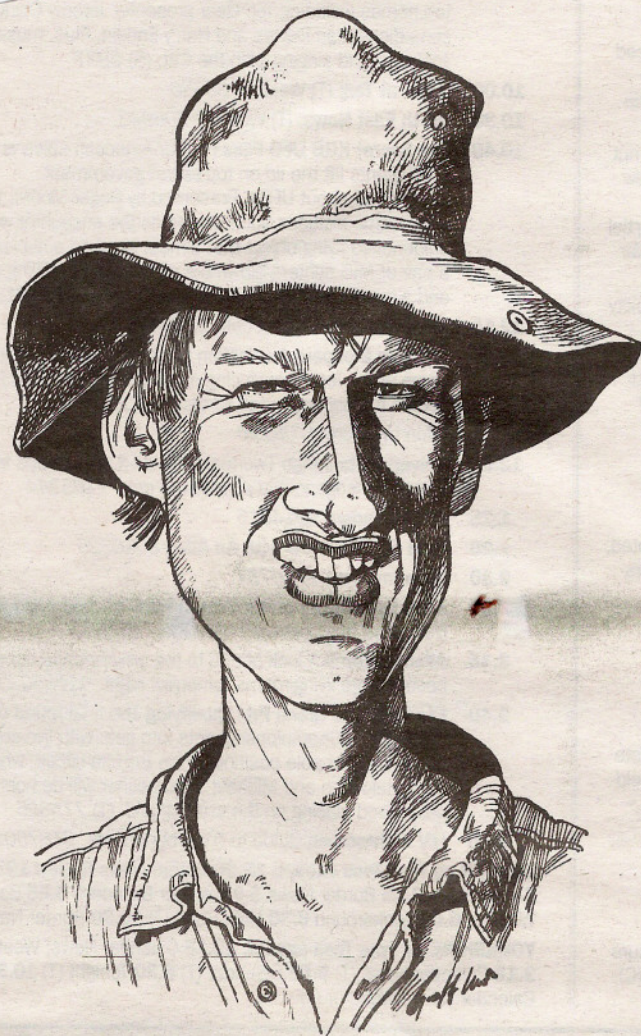
We were shown how even then the president-to-be was never very far away from sleaze and scandal.

I suspect that by the end of this series America's First Lady may well emerge as by far the better person to have been sitting in the Oval office, instead of her upward and decidedly dodgy husband.

Christopher Goulding is  
an actor and writer.

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# Help! Stop! Emergency!

BENEDICT Allen, the man with the most weather-beaten face on telly, continued his 3,000-mile trek across the forbidding steppe of Mongolia in *Edge of Blue Heaven* (BBC2, 8pm) last night.

Every episode of this shoestring documentary series reveals yet another fascinating layer of that other-worldly country and its resilient inhabitants. As factual travelogues go, this seriously rivals Michael Palin's bigger budget jaunts for entertainment and information value.

Meanwhile, the plethora of flashing blue lights on our TV screens grew yet greater with the first episode of *Picking Up The Pieces* (ITV, 9pm).

This time, ambulance paramedics were the emergency service expected to provide the thrills and spills for us in a formulaic drama which was obviously derivative of other already successful shows – in this case, *Casualty* meets *The Bill*.

Created and written by former nurse Anita Pandolfo, the calm professionalism of the front line medics was sympathetically portrayed, and I am sure that the technical detail of the action we saw was procedurally correct.

But it was all of those oh-so predictable stock character types that depressed me – the firm, but fair, station boss pestered by irksome bureaucrats; the young rookie torn between pragmatism and the rule book; the handsome one with the

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troubled love life; and finally, our old friend, the slightly dodgy but lovable old sweat who's seen it all before and is just hanging on for his pension.

I mean to say – this lot have been with us in various combinations since *Z Cars*. Sorry, but they need to come a bit quirkier than that in the 1990s.

It's seriously depressing to witness the polarisation of TV drama into a stark choice between 999 action shows and period costume romps.

Whatever happened to the one-off television play?

Complacently churning out video wallpaper like we had last night can only make drama itself the ultimate casualty.

If wailing sirens and human suffering are all you want to watch, real life documentary does just as well as scripted drama, and TV schedulers are all too wide to the fact that it is cheaper to produce.

If they're not careful, fly-on-the-wall rivals such as *Children's Hospital* and *Police, Camera, Action!* could leave blue-light drama in need of a life support machine.

Christopher Goulding is an actor and writer.

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# A rocky foundation

GEOLOGY perhaps isn't the most fascinating of the sciences, but Ray Mears, presenter of *The Essential Guide to Rocks* (BBC2, 8pm) promises to bring the subject to life by using vivid similes to get his message across.

A good example was drawing a comparison between rock formation in primaeval volcanoes and the manufacturer of sweets – both involve heating, melting, and folding. (So now you know why candy rock is so called).

The show was also peppered with practical facts on the use of rock, such as in building.

We were told how the Palace of Westminster is now crumbling because the government of the 1830s were too stingy to hire a limestone expert who would have told them that it should always be used in construction the same way up as it lay in the ground.

The politicians wouldn't listen, so the Houses of Parliament are falling down. Sound familiar?

Next we moved to the bonny hills of East Lothian, whence came the revelation that 400 million years ago, Scotland and England were once separated by a vast ocean.

Fossils found within 40 miles of Edinburgh tell us that 'Auld Reekie' was once part of prehistoric North America. Eventually, the relentless gradual drifting of the earth's crust united us with our northern

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neighbour. Echoes of this turbulent geological past remain in the strikingly different landscapes to be found within only a few dozens of miles of each other in the Border area.

One thing we in the North-East still have in common with our Scots cousins is the popularity of our regional accents.

The current affairs programme *Here and Now* (BBC1, 7.30pm) conducted a viewer's telephone survey to find out what our opinions are of the way we pronounce what we say.

Sociologists have known for years that accents from certain parts of the county provoke irrational assumptions about the person speaking it.

Say anything in Brummie or Scouse, apparently, and a Londoner will assume you've come to pinch their car. Speak in the Lallans tones of Burns, however, and you will be labelled either a poet, a doctor, or both.

We Geordies came out of it pretty well. The phone poll produced a popularity table with the Toon fifth from the top and Manchester at the bottom. Wish I could say the same about the Premier League.

Christopher Goulding is  
an actor and writer.

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