

MIKE DUGDALE

– a remarkable life remembered

Mike Dugdale was a leading light in the British TV industry who will be greatly missed. He was a top camera supervisor and highly skilled and creative operator and photographer whose extensive career spanned across a wealth of the very best shows and programmes over the past four decades. But he achieved so much more than that: establishing the hugely successful The Camera Crew agency and diary service, and being a constant source of support and friendship for everyone who knew him. Friend and colleague **Nat Hill** and Mike's son **Paul Dugdale** reflect back on this extraordinary life.

Popular, passionate about life, a hilarious raconteur, artistic, successful and community-minded. If any of us were to look back on our own life, I'm sure these are all words we would wish to be used to describe us. Mike was blessed to be all of the above, as well as to have a very close family. His son, Paul, was so influenced by Mike's passion for his work as a camera operator that he followed in his footsteps and is now an internationally renowned director. This was a great source of pride for Mike.

So, where do you start when writing about such an influential man? Well, maybe at the beginning...

A very good place to start

Mike's father, Douglas, was a keen amateur photographer; he'd regularly set up a makeshift darkroom in the family bathroom. Such activities didn't go unnoticed by his 6-year-old son, who would wander through the house grasping an empty cardboard box with its bottom pushed in, as he peered through it intently, pretending it was a movie camera. And with that, Mike's obsession with film and photography had been born and, even then, the young lad began to imagine it as his future job.

A few of Mike's favourite things

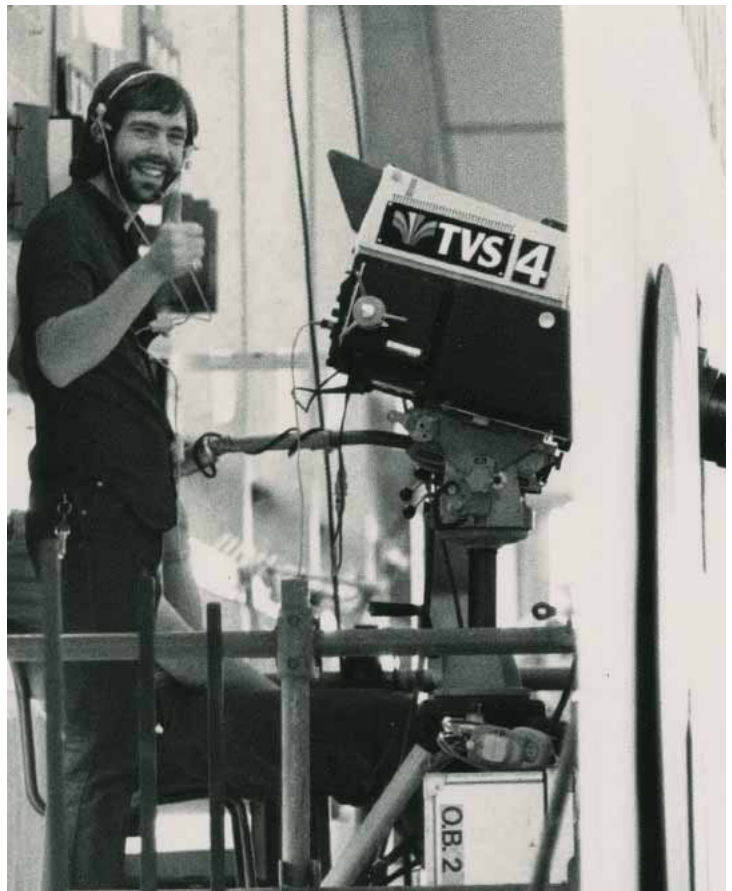
Once a year, as a special treat at Christmas, the whole family would take a trip to the theatre in London. It was in the Palace Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue in 1961, during a performance of *The Sound of Music*, that Mike experienced what he would come to describe as a major defining moment in his life. As the actors playing Liesel Von Trap and Rolf performed their rendition of '16 Going on 17', it wasn't their dance routine on stage that had Mike's attention, he was transfixed instead by the audience surrounding him. He later recalled how, as he'd gazed wide-eyed around the auditorium, he'd been amazed at how the performance had hypnotised all those around him, "*Even the grown-ups!*"

Indeed, it was fitting that his career would actually bring him full circle when, years later, he had the opportunity to work on *The Sound of Music Live* for ITV. Whilst, unsurprisingly, his and the whole team's efforts resulted in a groundbreaking live televised performance of the iconic musical, what was truly special for Mike on a personal level was that it had been the fulfilment of his boyhood dream.

Making show business his business

That particular dream began when, at the age of 12, Mike was so inspired by theatre that he joined the Folkestone and Hythe Operatic and Dramatic Society (FHODS – pronounced 'Fods'), and began singing and dancing in shows on stage at the local theatre. Soon afterwards, his father made him a fully working miniature model theatre which could fit on a tabletop. Complete with functioning tabs, fly bars and characters, it fired Mike's imagination to such a degree that he asked his father to wire in four spotlights on dimmers. Once installed, the illusion became that bit more real, as Mike could fade up and down to create even more professional and considered performances. This was all pretty sophisticated stuff for its time, and Mike and his friends would spend hours and hours planning, rehearsing, and putting on shows for friends and family. Along with his creative flair, Mike began developing a keen attention to detail and high standards too, as his brother, Peter, remembers: "*The theatre had been made by Pa and the red velvet curtains made by Ma, no doubt in conjunction with Mick, who I'm sure would have had a very precise view of what was required.*"

Mike quickly developed a passion for the entertainment industry and it wasn't long before he was charging the neighbours one shilling and sixpence admission whenever he put on any of his shows. *My Fair Lady* was a favourite, for which he created a performance with pre-recorded music beds and dialogue that would soundtrack the moving scenery, props, tabs, lighting and characters. From then on, it was clear that show business was in his blood.



Thumbs up! Mike on an OB with TVS Southampton; and on opposite page: with crew mates ready to do some aerial filming from a helicopter

Determined to make it happen

Aged 16 and becoming increasingly obsessed with photography, film and television, Mike sent off countless letters to TV companies, in the hope that eventually one of them would take him on as a trainee in the camera department. His headmaster's only career advice had been that he should stop wasting his time and "*get in the real world*". What the principal hadn't fully grasped was that the real world was not where this particular pupil was headed, and so Mike carried on regardless, with irrepressible determination.

Sure enough, such perseverance was rewarded by potential employers being keen to meet him, but it wasn't all plain sailing. He attended some dishearteningly stern interviews at the BBC, including one instance when, rather than Mike being quizzed on relevant topics such as cameras and composition, a humourless Churchill-like character had grilled him about cardioid microphones. However, when Mike was subsequently asked to attend an interview at ATV in Elstree, this proved to be a stark contrast as this experience could hardly have been more different from what had gone before. There, Mike met exciting and energetic young men who shared a similar passion and enthusiasm as his, and being around so many likeminded people clearly felt a better fit for him. Unfortunately, his application proved unsuccessful at that time, as he had yet to gain the relevant experience required to fill the vacancy. However, his potential was obvious to those who met him, as they offered their advice and actively encouraged him to enrol on a photography course at art college and, so determined to follow his dream, Mike did exactly that.



Mike, with reporter Mike Debens, covering the IRA bombing in Brighton in 1984 for TVS



Pete Edwards, Martin Hawkins, Mike, Paul Freeman and Tony Keene in front of a Telegenic truck during the recording of *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, in 2009. Martin recalls they were joking about how their combined ages must have made them the oldest camera crew in history...



Who else could have these special and sometimes crazy moments, and get paid for it? He taught us all to enjoy everything for the life experience and see the funny side when you might think all is lost.

Breakthrough at last

Throughout the ensuing years studying for his BA Honours in Commercial Art and Fashion Photography at Medway College of Art, Mike would begin to hone his photographic eye. To earn money between terms, he got a job with Panorama Holidays, where he spent an eye-opening summer as a 17-year-old boy, island-hopping whilst photographing holiday resorts around the Mediterranean. In doing so, he gained valid experience and, crucially, built up a worthy portfolio, which he could then take along with him three years later, when he attended another interview at ATV. On that occasion, the friendly and inspiring team that met him were so impressed by his photography they immediately invited him – out of the 144 applicants – to join their team as one of three recruited trainees. There, those likeminded cameramen he'd met the first time would go on to become his mentors.

Mike spent 12 happy years at ATV, where he worked on numerous prestigious productions throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, filming weighty dramas and glamorous stage shows for both the UK and USA. Some of his highlights included *The Tom Jones Show*, *Clayhanger* and the very popular *The Muppet Show*, and he even got to work on the classic Bing Crosby and David Bowie video for the Christmas classic, *The Little Drummer Boy*.

A natural leader and mentor

It didn't take Mike long to appreciate how lucky he was to be working during the golden era of television, and he felt a real responsibility to both work as part of a team and help those around him. This was one of his many great attributes that is often referred to by all who knew him. Friend and colleague Jerry Hoare remembers: *"I was taught by some brilliant cameramen. The lessons I learned, I did my best to pass on to everyone that followed me. There were so many but it was always Mike, of all the trainees and assistants, who pushed me in very subtle ways to be better, and I was always grateful to him for that."*

Another great friend and colleague Paul Freeman recalls: *"Mike was extremely kind to us juniors, to whom he would pass down information and tips on how to assist, to drive and swing the cranes but, more importantly, how to enjoy the job – after all, it was the best gig in the world. I remember him doing a handheld camera on Let's Rock, a rock and roll show that was very fast and great fun to work on; his skill was amazing and it was the first time I had seen such creative work on a handheld camera. It was talked about by the whole department."*

Mike continued to support and encourage assistants and operators throughout his whole life and was always very enthusiastic to hear how people were progressing and on what projects they had been working. He was a huge champion of young talent and was always on hand to give advice and support no matter what the question.

Being at the forefront of new technology

When ATV transferred its whole base and operations from Elstree to Nottingham in 1982, Mike and his family decided instead to relocate to Bearsted, back in their home county

of Kent. He got a job as a senior cameraman at Maidstone studios, which involved work that was altogether different from what he'd been doing at ATV. The move had coincided with the birth of ENG camerawork, which saw his role shift principally into the single camera field where he would predominantly shoot news and documentaries, during a rather turbulent time. He was one of the first crews to arrive on the scene after the IRA's hotel bombing in Brighton in 1984, he covered the Zebrugge ferry disaster, travelled to the Falklands to report on the end of the conflict there, and followed Ian Botham on his charity walk with elephants from Perpignan through the Alps to Turin. Alongside these, Mike was also very proud of his work on more comprehensive long form projects such as the *Native Land* series and *Frocks on the Box*.

Watch your headroom!

Life on the job wasn't without its hairy moments, as great friend and colleague Ian Hembury recalls: *"Undoubtedly, the most rewarding times of my career were spent assisting Mike. Just playing a small part in helping him to create visual masterpieces was such a thrill and such a phenomenal learning curve. On one occasion, during a shoot at an amusement park in Great Yarmouth, we were about to film a piece onboard the rollercoaster. Whereas everything had been calm at the start of the ride, Mike saw to it that it wasn't by the finish! During the ride, he had slightly raised himself up out of his seat to get the shot he wanted. With his eye glued to the viewfinder as the carriage hurtled around its track, Mike was horrified to spot a fast-approaching section of the ride's support structure in the shot that he was convinced was so low that he was going to be decapitated as the car sped underneath it. There was a mixture of hysterics and relief when they reappeared at the finish line, all intact and Mike still holding the camera... just!"*

Leap of faith

1989 saw Mike choose to take a landmark step in his career. Sensing that the nature of TV and crewing was changing, and feeling that there would be greater opportunities if he was no longer staff at a studio, he took the brave, but huge decision to go freelance. Although strange to think of now, freelancing was rare in the 1980s, but a colossal shift in the industry was on its way, with the birth of independent production companies heralding the arrival of 'new wave TV'



Mike with his son Paul assisting him on *The Brit Awards* in 1997

on British screens. Being freelance gave Mike the freedom to work for many different channels and production companies on a huge variety of projects. He always spoke about how lucky he was to have been there at the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as to film David Frost interview Nick Leeson in jail.

It was whilst working on Channel 4's hit sitcom series *Drop the Dead Donkey*, as he was shooting the location VTs, that Mike came to be written into the show. He became a star in his own right, through playing the character 'Gerry the cameraman'. The show's creator Andy Hamilton remembers: *"Mike was the first cameraman who had to put up with me as their director. I remember being quite nervous at the start of the day, but after a few hours I felt relaxed and confident, and Mike was the reason for that. He was so calm and positive – and such a good laugh – that he made me feel like I'd been doing it for years."*



He was a hilarious and gregarious dinner party guest or mischievous drinking companion, whose huge, contagiously joyous laugh could be heard through walls, an exemplary camera operator and photographer. A true gentleman who always saw the best in people, and wished them to see the best in him.

*"I remember him as being extremely open-minded and patient, even when I was proposing something stupid. That patience came to the fore on *Drop the Dead Donkey* when he became Gerry, the doomed cameraman who was forever being attacked by animals, plunged into rivers, maimed, or blown up. Mike virtually became a stuntman, as we used to drag him across the ground, push him over, submerge him and, on one occasion, some ludicrously overexcited extras nearly ran him over with a jeep!"*

"Whenever I picture Mike, he's laughing. He was very good at his craft, and I was always very pleased to see him. He made me feel everything was going to go well."



Nat Hill, camera supervisor Neil McLintock and Mike inside Westminster Abbey, for coverage of the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011



Mike: laughs for days and sorely missed

Never a dull moment

Mike's life was full of amazing stories and experiences, the kind you wished you had been part of or that would make you jealous that you could never remember the little details about the crazy moments you've experienced in life and your career. One such experience was when Mike was working on *Wine Hunt*. He would often recount, with great hilarity, about the time they had travelled to the Champagne region to interview one of the owners of a prestigious vineyard. The plan had been to do the interview in one of the few Champagne caves in the region. Now, stored in that particular cave was a bottle of each vintage champagne dating back hundreds of years. Delighted to be shooting in such a beautiful location, Mike had decided to light the cave with hundreds of candles that would create a film-like sparkle across the whole scene. The candles were alight, the chairs for the interview had been set and lit with great subtlety, and Mike was ready for the host and expert to join the scene...

As Mike walked back into the cave with the host, he wiped the sweat from his brow, at which point the host looked at him in horror. Mike's face dropped as he instantly realised what he had done. The caves are ideal for champagne storage because they remain a perfect 10 degrees Celsius all year round. In the space of a couple of hours, Mike had managed to raise the ambient temperature quite significantly, so much so that if just one cork were to pop it would most likely set off a chain reaction with all the other vintage bottles joining in! The host rushed to keep the owner distracted while Mike and the small team frantically blew out every candle, turned off the lights and wafted as much hot air out of the caves as they could. It was a narrow escape but, as Mike used to readily confess, if things had gone differently it would quite possibly have resulted in him being banned from ever visiting France again. Needless to say, the interview was filmed in a slightly different way and went very well.

It was just the sort of close shave that any of us can occasionally find ourselves in, when we push the boundaries for art. But, as Mike would admit, it is these experiences that

are invaluable and make our jobs so much fun. Who else could have these special and sometimes crazy moments, and get paid for it? He taught us all to enjoy everything for the life experience and see the funny side when you might think all is lost.

The Camera Crew

Throughout his career, Mike was never shy in taking new steps wherever he felt it necessary and so, in 2009, when he felt a change was needed in how camera teams were represented, he believed the best way to do this was with a new diary service. He worked tirelessly to build a website and company that would be able to represent some of the best operators in the world and he took a huge risk in setting up The Camera Crew. Initially, it was just nine-strong but this quickly grew to become an incredibly successful legacy of 80 camera operators and assistants that work on a variety of projects, from drama, light entertainment, documentary, music and sport. He was very proud of the team he had helped bring together and support.

Hobbies away from work

Outside work he made time to pursue many interests and one of his more noteworthy passions was history. He would always ask people about their past and would delight in hearing stories of their ancestors. More recently, Mike spent time researching Saltwood, the village where he lived, which resulted in him building a website for it (Saltwoodkent.co.uk).

A highlight of his investigations into the local area was his extensive research into the history of the East and West Sandling Army camps. Tolsford Hill is an area of rough land on the outer edge of Saltwood, on the South Downs. Mike discovered that, in around 1914, the location had been the temporary home to several thousand Canadian troops, who had used the area for trench training before being sent off to the battlefield frontlines. Many military historians agree that the Canadian expertise in trench warfare, for which Tolsford Hill played a major part in perfecting, contributed hugely to the outcome of the World War I.

In light of this, the Honorary Colonel of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, a battalion of Canadian soldiers, wrote to thank him for collating such comprehensive information. Some of the trenches are still visible today and Mike applied to Historic England to schedule the hill as a historic monument, which, to his great delight, they did in 2018.

One of a kind

Mike was always full of effervescent positivity and enthusiasm, endlessly inquisitive, a strict, confident and wise sage, deeply contemplative, and a compassionate listener and teacher. He was a hilarious and gregarious dinner party guest or mischievous drinking companion, whose huge, contagiously joyous laugh could be heard through walls, an exemplary camera operator and photographer. A true gentleman who always saw the best in people, and wished them to see the best in him. He will be missed by all that knew him, but his legacy has made the industry a better place in so many ways.

Michael Dugdale 3 February 1949–2 July 2020