

# FREE NO MORE

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*It's no use asking 'Are you free?' No more will we hear the rather shrill reply 'I'm free'.*

Frederick John Inman was an English comedy actor who was best known for his role as Mr Humphries in the British sitcom *Are You Being Served?* in the 1970s and 1980s. He was also well known in the United Kingdom as a pantomime dame.

John was born on 28 June 1935 in Preston, Lancashire, and was a cousin of actress Josephine Tewson. At the age of 12, he moved with his parents to Blackpool where his mother ran a boarding house, while his father owned a hairdressing business. As a child, he enjoyed dressmaking. He was educated at Claridge House in Preston, and then at a secondary modern school.

John always wanted to be an actor, and his parents paid for him to have elocution lessons at the local church hall. At the age of 13 he made his stage debut in the Pavilion on Blackpool's South Pier, in a melodrama entitled *Freda*. Aged 15, he took a job at the pier, making tea, clearing up, and playing parts in plays.

After leaving school, John worked for two years at Fox's, a gentlemen's outfitters in Blackpool, specialising in window dressing. Aged 17, he moved to London to join Austin Reed in Regent Street. Four years later, he left Austin Reed to become a scenic artist with Kenneth Kendall's touring company at a theatre in Crewe so that he could earn his Equity Card.

John made his West End debut in the 1960s when he appeared in *Ann Veronica* at the Cambridge Theatre. He also played in *Salad Days* at the Windmill Theatre for 17 months from 1975, and as

Lord Fancourt Babberley in *Charley's Aunt* at the Adelphi Theatre in the Strand



in 1979. He also played in many summer shows, and established himself as a dame in pantomime, appearing regularly as one of the two ugly sisters alongside comedian Barry Howard.

He made his TV debut in the sitcom *Two in Clover* in 1970, but was asked by David Croft in 1972 to play a part in a *Comedy Playhouse* pilot called *Are You Being Served?* This was a sitcom set in a department store, written by scriptwriters David Croft and Jeremy Lloyd, and based

on the latter's experiences working at Simpson's in Piccadilly Circus.



John Inman in the final episode of 'Two in Clover'

Playing a minor role with only a few lines, John was soon asked to 'camp it up', despite initial reluctance from the BBC to include such a camp character. The pilot was broadcast in September 1972. The broadcast was followed by the five episodes of the first series in early 1973. The first series showing opposite *Coronation Street* on ITV attracted little attention, but repeats later that year were very successful.

*Are You Being Served?* depicted the antics of the staff of Grace Brothers, a somewhat old-fashioned and past-its-prime department store. The characters all sported affectations designed to make recognition and acceptance easier for an audience confronted by such a large cast. Captain Peacock (Frank Thornton) was the floor walker, a dapper, silky-voiced officious sort determined to keep the staff on their toes.

Mrs Slocombe (full name: Mary Elizabeth Jennifer Rachel Yiddell Abergavenny Slocombe, played by Mollie Sugden), head of ladies fashion, had ideas above her station and an unerring ability to say the wrong thing at the wrong time and in the loudest voice. Her assistant Miss Brahms (Wendy Richard) was the target of leering sexist remarks, usually

from junior shop assistant Mr Lucas (Trevor Bannister).

Mr Rumbold was the fussing manager and direct link to the board of directors and its chairman 'young Mr Grace'—who was actually fantastically old and, in common with the other members of senior management, lived in the past, still treating staff with a feudal arrogance and blissfully unaware of the rapidly fading status of the store.

John played the camp Mr Wilberforce Claybourne Humphries and his earlier career in the clothes retail business was good preparation for this role in a menswear department. He developed a characteristic limp-wristed mincing walk, and a high-pitched catch phrase, 'I'm free!', which soon entered popular culture.

Although the catch phrase and the character were popular, John came under attack by some gay rights groups for what they perceived to be his stereotypical portrayal of a homosexual. However, both he and David Croft stated that the character was 'just a mother's boy' and his sexual orientation was never explicitly stated.

'I'm free!,' shrieks Mr Humphries from menswear as, tape measure in trembling hand, he makes a beeline across the shop floor towards an unsuspecting male inside leg. Meanwhile Mrs Slocombe, sporting an outrageously dyed bouffant, wonders aloud whether anyone has seen her pussy (she was, *of course*, referring to her cat) - and the British nation knew what it was in for: half an hour of sub-*Carry On* innuendo, sauntering alongside rather than attached to the accompanying plot.

Broad, rude, crude and offensive were just a few of the criticisms levelled at this scatological sitcom, but the show had the perfect response to such highbrow jibes: ratings. It was loved by the public and they watched it in huge numbers, culminating in over 22 million viewers for a 1979 episode.

*Are You Being Served?* ran for ten series until it finished in 1985 when, after many minor cast changes, and umpteen

variations on the plots, Grace Brothers finally closed for business. To date, it re-

*The original cast of Are you being Served? Larry Martyn (d 1994) played Mr Mash in regular appearances in the series.*



mains phenomenally popular in re-runs. At its height, in the late 1970s, it regularly

*In a serious mood with Mr Spooner (Mike Berry) who joined the team after Trevor Bannister left the series.*



*The full cast of Are you being served? ham it up!*





*The cast of Grace and Favour.*

attracted British audiences of up to 20 million viewers.

John's portrayal of Mr Humphries won him the BBC TV Personality of the Year in 1976 and he was voted the funniest man on television by *TV Times* readers. From 1980 to 1981, John played Mr Humphries in the Australian version of *Are You Being Served?*, set in a store named 'Bone Brothers' to avoid problems with the real business named Grace Brothers.

The series also became popular in the United States, where Inman became a gay cultural icon. Once, in San Francisco, a passing cyclist spotted John and fell off his bicycle in surprise, crying 'Mr Humphries, I love you!'

During the 69-episode, 13-year run of *Are You Being Served?*, John also appeared in the 1977 film of the series, in which the characters visited the fictional Spanish holiday resort of 'Costa Plonka'. They also appeared in a popular stage version.

John also toured with his own shows, and he released two records, *Are You Being Served, Sir?*, which reached number 39 in the UK singles charts, and *The Teddy Bears' Picnic*, both in 1975.

In a typical example of a BBC comedy star going to ITV and falling flat on his face, John starred in *Odd Man Out*,

his own sitcom in 1977, playing the owner of a fish-and-chip shop who inherits half of a rock factory. He probably wished that he hadn't bothered.

Following that absolutely abysmal series, ITV created a new series for him, written by Wolfe and Chesney, *Take a Letter, Mr. Jones*, a 1981 sitcom where John played Graham Jones, who is secretary to Rula Lenska's character Joan Warner. He was less camp here than before, but only just: he still pouted and distributed quips with a merry twinkle.

Warner, the business-efficient head of the British arm of an American leisure corporation, was a divorcee, mother of a seven-year-old daughter, Lucy, and owner of a shaggy dog. Jones felt that his duties should extend beyond the office to embrace Ms Warner's home life too. Without such extension, one suspects, the premise could never have stretched to a full series.

He made a cameo appearance in the film *The Tall Guy* in 1989, and was one of five of the *Are You Being Served?* cast to be reunited in character for the sitcom *Grace & Favour*, which ran for twelve episodes from 1992 and 1993. Seven years after the final episode of *Are You Being Served?* five of the characters returned in this sequel.

In the opening episode, the staff of Grace Brothers department store are appalled to discover that, in his will, the late 'Young' Mr Grace bequeathed all of his money to a charity for fallen women, and invested the staff's pension fund by buying an old house, Millstone Manor. The penniless quintet of Slocombe, Peacock, Humphries, Brahms and Rumbold decide to move in to the manor house and open it up as a hotel. Thus they remain together but in a completely different environment.

The location aside, however, everything was much as before, with double entendres, mass confusions, broad slapstick and a good re-airing of old catchphrases being paramount. Mr Humphries

gaily minced about hollering 'I'm free!' and Mrs Slocombe once again held forth on the condition of her pussy. The first series concentrated on the alteration of the manor house (actually Chavenage House in Gloucestershire) as a hotel, the second showed the staff dealing with guests.

[The term Grace and Favour traditionally applies to residences that the sovereign offers rent-free to those persons whom he or she wishes to repay for outstanding service.]

After the end of *Are You Being Served?* in the 1980's, he became one of the nation's best known pantomime dames and appeared in over 40 pantomime productions across the United Kingdom. In 1999, he appeared in a *French & Saunders* Christmas special. He appeared as Father Chinwag in the 2000 film *The Mumbo Jumbo*. In 2004, John made additional television appearances in *Doctors* and *Revolver*.

John suffered from poor health in his later years. He was hospitalised with bronchitis in 1993, and collapsed on the stage in 1995. He was admitted to Paddington's St Mary's Hospital in 2001 after suffering breathing difficulties and spent three days in intensive care.

In December 2004, he was forced to cancel an appearance in a pantomime as he was suffering from a hepatitis A infection, which he had contracted from contaminated food. Following this, he never worked again and he suffered complications from the infection for the rest of his life.

John lived in a mews house in Little Venice for 30 years. On 23 December 2005, he entered in a civil partnership at Westminster Register Office with his partner of 35 years, Ron Lynch. John Inman died early in the morning of 8 March 2007, aged 71, in St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, London.

He was chosen to be the subject of *This Is Your Life* and was later honoured by the Variety Club of Great Britain as BBC television personality of the year. He

was also voted funniest man on television by the readers of *TV Times* in 1975. He appeared in six *Royal Variety Perform-*



*As Mother Goose with Priscilla the Goose at the Victoria Palace, 1981.*



*A late photo of John with his partner, Ron Lynch.*

*ances*, before most of the members of the Royal Family. John worked unceasingly for charity; he is past King Rat of the

Grand Order of Water Rats and the 2002 President of the Heritage Foundation.



Summer seasons also formed an important element in John's varied career.

*John camped it up during one of his frequent tours to Australia.*

His favourite show was pantomime, of which he did over 40 and was firmly recognised as the best dame in the business. In spite of his world tours, he still returned home each Christmas for his pantomime appearances.

'John, through his character Mr. Humphries of *Are You Being Served?* was known and loved throughout the world. He was one of the best and finest pantomime dames working to capacity audiences throughout Britain,' said John's manager, Phil Dale.

Tributes from across the acting and stage professions have been coming in since his death was announced. According to the *Londonpaper*, dated 8th of March, John's long-term partner, Ron Lynch, was said to be 'devastated' at his death.

His co-star, Wendy Richard, MBE, who played opposite him in the BBC show, told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, 'John was one of the wittiest and most inventive actors I've ever worked with. He was a brilliant, brilliant pantomime dame and he was a very good all-round actor, really. He was a true professional.'

Mike Berry, who played Mr Spooner in *Are You Being Served?*, told

the BBC: 'I felt like going home at the end of the day and ironing my face, he made me laugh so much! As funny as he was in front of the camera, he was funnier off.'

It was revealed on Friday, March 9 that Australia's premier gay and lesbian publication, *SX*, would publish a special tribute in John's honour, commemorating the actor with a feature article written by the magazine's star journalists, Katrina Fox and Peter Hackney.



*Probably the last photo taken of John Inman.*