



The mouse that roared

Channel 5 has hit documentary gold, says Alison Graham

IMUST MAKE A confession. It's not a big confession, it's not Watergate, I'm not going to go on telly to insist there was no cover-up before it is revealed that there WAS a cover-up and I have to apologise publicly and leave *Radio Times* in a helicopter, with one last salutary wave.

No, my confession is that roughly this time last year I had a favourite show that I watched in my own time, not as part of my job. I'd decided it was just too frivolous to bring to anyone's attention, except my own as it turned out.

Dear readers, I watched a two-part documentary about Christmas shopping in Harrogate and I loved it. There, I've said it. I'm not ashamed. It was called *Harrogate: a Yorkshire Christmas* and honestly, there was nothing to it, just footage of businesses in the well-heeled spa town arranging their festive window displays for the year's best Christmas scene competition, and setting up the Christmas lights.

I loved it, and it was made by Channel 5. No other channel would have bothered, but Channel 5 will make documentaries about anything, and



BEST IN SHOW
One of the window displays in *Harrogate: a Yorkshire Christmas*

‘There is a place for documentaries with no frills and no fuss’

they do it jolly well. The Harrogate thing was pure escapism, but it was also heart-warming, a little programme about people who simply loved their town, were proud of it and wanted it to look its finest. What's wrong with that?

Channel 5 has suddenly, out of nowhere, become the home of smashing docs. Nothing fancy, just straightforward, informative stuff about disused railway lines, railway modellers, doctors, vets, farms (*Our Yorkshire Farm*, Tuesday: C5 clearly has a fascination with Yorkshire), *Michael Palin in North Korea*, and this week, Oxford Street (*Oxford Street 24/7*, Thursday). There's also *Egyptian Tomb Hunting* with Tony Robinson (Tuesday) and there are a load more *Inside* documentaries coming up.

There is a place in the television landscape for documentaries that have no frills and no fuss. There's nothing fancy about any of these shows, but they do a job. I love *Portillo's Hidden History of Britain* (Friday), which is packed with nuggets

of quotable information. Like the one about the abandoned nuclear bunker in Cambridge, and Britain's hopelessly inadequate plans for possible nuclear annihilation, which included civil servants handing out biscuits to whoever was left alive. Biscuits?

OTHER CHANNELS, PARTICULARLY the BBC, of course, do the Big Stuff, the Major Issues, and so they should (see *They Shall Not Grow Old*, right). But Channel 5 is good at nosing into corners and bringing us small stories, things that won't make us feel overwhelmed and despairing (just about any Channel 4 documentary). They might even make us feel good.

It's a valuable service and, more widely, it's heartening to see a channel that used to be a bit of a joke actually grow up, dump *Big Brother* and start stretching its limbs into not just documentaries, but new drama, too (see last week's *Blood*, which was really quite good). And I hope that there's a return visit to Harrogate this year...

UNMISSABLE TELEVISION

Wasn't *They Shall Not Grow Old* absolutely extraordinary? One of the most incredible things you've ever seen on television? I was completely lost in Peter Jackson's landmark film, where he and his team cleaned up, colourised and added audio soundtracks to contemporary First World War footage held by the Imperial War Museum.

It was impeccable and, in a strange way, beautiful. Jackson did not shy away from the slaughter (dear God, the injuries, the savage deaths, the young men and boys mown down as they went over the top), but there was a harrowing loveliness about *They Shall Not Grow Old*, too. All of those lads and men, endlessly smoking, grinning for the camera showing their terrible teeth, joking together, even in the sucking, endless mud.

It was so eerie to look directly into their eyes as many of the boys stared, fascinated, at the lens. I wanted to reach out across the years to offer my paltry thanks.

Please, seek it out on iPlayer if you didn't see *They Shall Not Grow Old* (shown on Remembrance Sunday on BBC2). It was fine and it was unforgettable.

