

DOG WEEK FOR SPINNING

Roger Law's puppets attracted 15 million viewers at their peak but the financial rewards were meagre — even the most famous puppets fetched only £1.0 million when they were auctioned. He makes far more from the giant porcelain pots he makes now, he tells **Nick McGrath**

How did your childhood experience influence your attitude to money?
I must be about fourth or fifth-generation self-employed. My grandparents ran a grain dairy and my father started a building business with his three brothers.

My mother did all the paperwork from home and we had — all money, but where I come from in Norfolk you don't have to be looking to change to get the work ethic; it's ingrained, it's in your genes. So I had a milk round with my grandad at the weekends, and I had a paper round. I had a grocery round, and I used to have to go to work with my father on Saturdays too.

One of my teachers once said to my father: "He's not stupid, you know, we could do something with him, but we can't [he's doing paper rounds, milk rounds and grocery rounds]." My father said to him: "The first thing he has to learn is how to — ing, work. So there you go."

Are you a spender or a saver?
I'm as tight as a fisted artist or an artist, I was at Cambridge School of Art in the Sixties, and by that time my father was actually earning good money. He tolerated me! I'd go to art school but he wasn't happy about it.

My parents were very helpful, very supportive, but I never had huge amounts of money because you don't make lots of money working as a journalist or as an artist.

When I was freelancing at the *Sunday Times* I was getting about £70 a week, which I guess was not much money in those days. But I got married really young and was married by the time I was 20. I had two kids. So we weren't awash with money and we used to know how to look after it.

And when you launched your creative partner Peter Pack, how dramatically did life change financially?
Spinning Image was a whole other experience. When I worked with Peter, we were last role of Solitaire was accounted for.

And then, years before the new technology, you didn't get massive amounts of money. We loved what we did, but we had to run a pretty tight ship to stay in business because everything you saw on television was handmade. So we often had 15 people in the workshop, sometimes more, doing no-hour weeks. It was insane.

Our partner was John

Lloyd, who was a frightfully good producer but he wasn't a businessman, and the only thing that kept our afloat was our success. We'd owe money all the time.

The money came in like the tide, and then it went out again, because the computers was so labour intensive and we didn't use processors. We were paid on contract by Central Television, and my initial salary was about £600 a week. The most I was ever paid was £200 a week.

I think the best year Peter and I had was turned over £10,000, so we weren't earning a lot but we were doing it because we wanted to. John Harvey Jones was considering doing a programme on *Spinning Image* but after a visit he said: "That isn't a business, it's a hobby."

Your salary seems surprisingly low for a show that attracted 15 million viewers at its peak in 1985
Well yeah, but it was run by Spinning Image as a company. At that one point, towards the

Nineties, Spinning Image owed about £2m.

You seem incredibly sanguine about that level of debt
It was a really sobering experience. And I had a brilliant accountant at that time called Richard Bennett who is still my business partner — who went on to become the accountant for Philo Foa. He won't mind me saying this but he's absolutely brilliant at going into a company that no one else will go near, and sorting it out.

Did you have any time to spend any money on yourself during the Spinning Image era?
I'd actually try operating because shopping suddenly arrived. Occasionally I'd get a day off, when I would find myself up, looking for something for the show.

And of course I'd go in and buy whatever it was usually books, I'm afraid. I'm now looking at a bookcase full of suspended books but there were no Ferraris or Porches because I can't drive.

By the time the show ended in 1986 after 18 series, 10 *Buffalo* and two *Erinyes*, were you financially stable again?

I've always worked hard, and the moment I don't have to go out there and make bricks, if I have any toys tend to make money.

I went to Australia in 1986 with five grand and I survived and had a great time there for 18 years, but like everybody else in my generation I'd never retired properly. I'd bought them.

"That's proved quite useful as I've got older. The first house I bought in Cambridge when I was 19 cost me £200 and I sold it some time ago for £600,000."

Puppets to pots: Roger Law and his oversized ceramic pots: above the Spinning Image puppets, whose subjects included the Queen, below, sold for up to £13,000 at auction

But what they did think was they got someone else to put the order in and I have a feeling that somebody bought the Paul McCartney puppets for £13,000 because he hated his puppet so much he wanted to make sure it wasn't ever, ever seen again. And Michael Winner complained that the reserve on his puppet was high enough, so we had anyone

could have for five quid, which he was very upset about. Eventually he raised the price to about £12,000 and donated the money to charity, as we had been able to sell at the two auctions — the one that you can remember without having to concentrate, sold for £10,000-£12,000 apiece.

Did any politicians or celebrities buy any?

At the time they said they didn't, and when you looked through the Sotherly's sales records they didn't seem to have done.

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Does money make you happy?
No, of course not, but it gives you a certain amount of freedom. Money frees you up from needing water and allows you to move wherever in the direction you want to go — from doing all manner of — you don't want to do.

How do you prefer to pay: cash, card or cheque?
I have a card but I don't have a great deal of money on it. I don't use the internet to pay for anything as it's too boring giving all your card details. I only try by cheque and I usually have a wodge of cash on me.

How much might you carry in your wallet in an average week?
I'm not talking about that, I'll get dug in the — ing credit.

Do you have any credit cards?
No, I just have debit cards, so you're talking to somebody who's going to be in the Fifths, so basically you don't buy anything unless you've got the money. The only exception that was buildings, because you have to get a mortgage if you've got money in the bank.

What's currently the biggest drain on your finances?
Getting off, 71 pots back from me. I was really young, and then off the docks here, you have to be really young, and then you get terrible lines if you don't. And moving them around. I'm getting a lot too old for carting round half a ton of porcelain.

What do you like least about dealing with your finances?

What I find really annoying is if you've got a few thousand quid in the bank, which is carrying about half a per cent if you're lucky, you can't have more than that.

It's not like you can't have it if they bust, otherwise the Government doesn't repay you money. So if I had more than £100,000 I'm going to have to open up other banks and I would find a whole new place to put my ill-gotten gains from my own finances.

What are your financial plans for the future?

I'm 73 now. I don't want to go back to work, but I see a rise in things. I've got a workshop again with people in it, which I love, and the health and safety rules are not quite as good as they were at Spitting Image, so you can get on with it.

The biggest part we ever made was 428, high, and it's still affordable, just.

What do your ceramics cost?
From £350 for a Mulhuller Plant, up to £125,000 for a Large Porcelain Pot.

© Roger Law, Oct 30-Nov 15, at Sadlers' Wells, Oxford, and at Sadlers' Wells, Oxford, and at Sadlers' Wells, Oxford, and at Sadlers' Wells, Oxford.

