

MEET THE MAN
WHO'S CREATED
HIS VERY OWN
SCI-FI MUSEUM
IN HIS BASEMENT

Out of this world

Words David Ryan

As you step off the bus and gaze around Allendale's marketplace, it feels strangely otherworldly, like some quietly-eerie English village from a Seventies sci-fi TV show. Nestling in the North Pennines, not far from Hadrian's Wall, it's a corner of Northumberland that walkers and cyclists adore and has twice been crowned Village of the Year. The famously-gloomy poet Philip Larkin used to revel in its Tar Bar'l festival, where men parade through the streets with flaming barrels on their heads in celebration of the new year. But on the whole it's a sleepy place, untroubled by alien invasions – until now.

Teacher Neil Cole and his wife Lisa, a cognitive behavioural therapist, bought a four-storey Georgian townhouse just off Allendale's main

square a few years ago. The terraced property in the Tynedale district, near Newcastle, must have seemed like a tranquil spot in which to raise their two young daughters and was spacious enough for Neil to pursue his hobby, collecting costumes and props from geeky television series and films. He's crazy about classic *Doctor Who* – though the BBC's modern revival leaves him slightly cold – and many of his items would no doubt have ardent fans (known as Whovians) salivating. As a result, he's converted his basement into a science-fiction museum.

"Lisa's worked in the NHS for 20 years, I've worked as a teacher for 20 years and we're both getting fatigue," explains the secondary school head of art, who intends to pursue another of his sidelines, drawing comics, in the space he's created. "We're trying to get some balance back in life."

Once you start talking to people, he says, it's amazing how many turn out to be covert sci-fi fans, but he's quick to point out that he's not putting his household finances on the line. "I'll be doing it part-time," he says. "I love sci-fi but my head's not absolutely in the clouds."



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It was in 1976, on a visit to Blackpool's *Doctor Who* Exhibition, that he fell in love with imaginative TV props, aged six. "That blending of fantasy and reality blew my mind. We were quite a poor family, we didn't have a camera and so there was no record of it, but ever since, I thought I'd love to have a little exhibition of my own."

For many years, Bonhams has held memorabilia auctions in London, but because Neil can't use the internet at his school during the day, the best he can do is place bids online in advance. It's not ideal, but one way or another, he's acquired more than 200 items.

Along with his *Doctor Who* props – some of them painstakingly restored over months because the rubber was disintegrating – his museum boasts bits and pieces from the likes

of *Babylon 5*, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, *Dredd*, the *Alien* franchise, *Ender's Game*, *Edge of Tomorrow*, Gerry Anderson's *Space Precinct* and a personal favourite, HG Wells' *The Time Machine* (both the 1960 and 2002 versions). A yellow flight chair and suit from the live-action *Thunderbirds* film occupy an alcove in the stone basement, historically used as the householder's business premises. Next to them, among his Marvel superhero exhibits, is his most expensive souvenir; part of Chris Hemsworth's Thor outfit from *The Avengers*. "That cost a couple of grand. I sold my bass guitar to get it."

Lisa appreciates the boyish devotion. "We're both arty, so she understands the passion," says Neil. "She kind of likes sci-fi as well – she's not an enthusiast, but she likes it. When we met, I was living by myself. I had a normal house and one of the rooms was my man cave, full of sci-fi stuff. As an artist, I like displaying things properly, so I always had a nice display – it wasn't good enough just to shove it on any old shelving, it had to be nicely done."

Years later, having bought their home in Allendale, the couple had a flooded cellar to contend with. "It was a mess, it was appalling. You couldn't put anything in it." With the carpentry skills of Lisa's dad, Chris, however, it's been transformed into a visitor attraction.

Neil imagines interest will build gradually. "There's a sci-fi museum in Bromyard near Birmingham which is like this, stuck out the way. It's been open for 12 years. I'm not stupid enough to think I'll live off this completely but I think you've got several audiences. You've got the North East sci-fi community, which is quite a few. You've got people who will travel to see things, so I've already got bookings from the Dutch *Doctor Who* society, who want to come over and stay. I want to start pushing the village as a weekend destination. I hope in time, the museum will become a niche, quirky little place to visit."

The day that *Flight Time* drops by, he and Chris are hard at work, gearing up for the October opening. Not every exhibit is ready, the fantasy art and



spaceship-like wall panels still need installing and the glass cases have yet to be delivered. These cases are a necessity, unfortunately. "With the best will in the world, people want to touch things. It's just human nature," says Neil.

At one sci-fi show, he exhibited the prosthetic mask of the *Fantastic Four*'s Ben Grimm, better known as the Thing. Beside it, in clear view, was a 'do not touch' sign. "And the reason it has a flat nose now is that a guy, probably in his 20s, who was obviously a serious fan, went up and touched the end of the nose with his finger and pushed it in. Aaargh! Its foam rubber and it just collapsed underneath. The glass is a massive expense, but at least I'll be able to sleep at night."

"At the minute I'm getting calls from everywhere," he continues. "I've even got a couple coming from Australia, who are big Whovians. My gut feeling is if it's done well, this will become known as a place where the classic show is loved."

The best-case scenario, as he sees it, is that interest in the museum takes off, paving the way for mini *Doctor Who* conventions at the venue. He intends to open it four days a week – more in the school holidays.

"I am obsessed, I guess, but Lisa knows I'm not so far gone."

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