

ROBSON GREEN : ROCKET MAN

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Last updated at 16:33 30 June 2007

Houston, we have a Robson: Robson Green's stratospheric career in TV and music matches his weekend obsession with rocketry

Robson Green is very, very distressed. He's standing on a hill on the outskirts of Guildford in Surrey and the unthinkable has just happened.

As he puts it himself, "I've killed my rocket!" And it's not just any old rocket that's crashed and burned on its maiden flight, but Green's absolute favourite, a 3ft-high replica of Richard Branson and space pioneer Burt Rutan's SpaceShipOne.

"Two months!" wails Green. "It took me two months to make that rocket and look at it now – smashed into half a dozen pieces beyond all hope of repair.

"It's a complete disaster. Apart from anything else, that's £400 up in smoke."

Before disaster struck, our day out with Robson and his rockets had gone reasonably smoothly.

Sure enough, one of Green's small tester rockets had errantly zoomed off into the far distance, never to be seen again.

But Green seemed unbothered by this. "It only cost me £30 that one and I wasn't too emotionally attached to it."

Then there was the medium-sized rocket that started its trajectory promisingly, taking off in a puff of smoke like a cartoon stick of dynamite, only to prematurely eject its parachute and begin its descent at a paltry 20ft.

"A faulty ejection charge," Green decides. "The manufacturer is to blame for that. Nothing to do with the way I built it."

However, he's taking full responsibility for the spectacular demise of his beloved SpaceShipOne, which, instead of climbing to the expected height of 1,200ft, opted to shoot off horizontally like an intercontinental missile.

"The aerodynamics were all wrong," he says mournfully. "I just didn't design it right."

As he's explaining all this, the main section of the rocket lies on top of a hedge a few hundred yards from where we're standing.

I can't help noticing that it appears to be emitting smoke and sparks. Is this something to be concerned about?

Yes, it is. Green hares off across the field to ensure one of the best-loved areas of the Surrey countryside doesn't go up in flames.

Mission accomplished, he returns, clutching the various pieces of his SpaceShipOne.

By this time his mood has lightened somewhat.

"Part of the fun and excitement with rockets is when they go wrong," he says, philosophically.

"And I've had my share of rocket disasters. We avoided a fire today but I've set cornfields alight before now.

"Then there was the time I had a rocket party at my house and underestimated the power of some of the attractions.

"One of them flew into my neighbour's garden and the engine burnt a hole in their tennis net.

"Another time I was at a wrap party in Ayrshire, Scotland, and I put on a display for the cast and crew.

"I didn't properly test the rockets for wind direction so they were flying about all over the place.

"The scene was complete mayhem. I was yelling, "Run for your lives!" and there were people screaming, "We're all going to die!" It was a firework display with edge.

"There was an outbreak of post-traumatic Robson rocket syndrome after that."



It was 12 years ago that Green decided rockets would be the main hobby in his life. But his fascination with them is life-long.

"Growing up in north Tyneside," he says, "my dad worked as a miner and we never had money for things like fireworks.

"But I was always fascinated by the idea of something leaving the surface of the Earth and soaring into the sky.

"My first ambition was to be an astronaut. Also, I always had a fascination with building things and figuring out how things work.

"I was the kid who'd take a radio apart, put it back together again and find that I'd got all these bits left.

"I still do it today. If something goes wrong with the car I say, "I can fix that." I've ruined many a car that way."

By the mid-Nineties, Robson was already one of the most recognisable faces on TV after roles in *Casualty* and *Soldier Soldier*.

He was also about to become a somewhat unlikely international pop star. Teaming up with fellow actor Jerome Flynn, their debut single *Unchained Melody* sold nearly two million copies in the UK alone.

Further hit singles and albums followed. Suddenly, he found he was working nonstop and needed to find a way to relax in between intense bursts of acting and recording.

"I was watching a neighbour set off rockets in his back yard," he remembers.

"He was surrounded by friends and family and everyone was having a great time. I thought the whole thing was brilliant.

That's when I decided I'd have a go at rockets myself. My first purchase was a £30 replica of Alan Shepard's Freedom 7 Mercury capsule. After that, I never looked back."

Down the years, he's tried his hand at other hobbies but none succeeded in holding his interest quite like rockets.

"I bought a racehorse in 2003. I called him Magic Hour but there was nothing magic about him.

"He should have been called Dobbin. I put him in a race at Sedgefield. For all I know, he's still running.

"That was the end of my career as a racehorse owner. I'm a keen fisherman, however, and I do a fair bit of long-distance running.

"I'm also into astronomy. I was given a £1,000 Russian reflector telescope as a present from the producers of the show *Close & True* and I get enormous satisfaction gazing at the night sky.

"But nothing gives me more pleasure than rockets."

"Once I'd let the first one off, I knew I'd found my hobby. But it wasn't just about the excitement of lighting it and seeing it whoosh up into the sky.

"Early on I made the decision that I didn't want to be one of those rocket enthusiasts who buys them ready-made and sets them off.

"The appeal for me was putting something together, trying it and seeing if it worked. I wanted to be involved every step of the way."

In this he is ably assisted by junior rocket expert Taylor Green, his seven-year-old son from his second marriage to former model Vanya Seager.

"Taylor was four when I first introduced him to rockets and he took to it immediately.

"He wasn't remotely bothered by the loud bangs and whooshes. Rockets are a great way for me to relax but they're also a perfect way for me and my son to spend time together.

"It's fun for him but it's also a great education. He loves the building aspect to it.

"He also gets to learn about orbital mechanics and the physics of rocket flight. He understands that the principles applied to our model rockets are the same as those used by the bigwigs at Nasa.

"The laws of motion are exactly the same. Through rockets, he knows how many planets there are in the solar system and that the sun is the nearest star to the Earth.

"Nothing gets past him. Nor does he let me off lightly if things go wrong. On average I lose at least one rocket a week so I'm always hearing him say, "You're clever, Dad, but not half as clever as you think you are."

"Newlands Corner is a wide and breathtakingly beautiful expanse of open chalk moor, and it's here I meet up with Robson Green.

Five miles from Green's Surrey home, this is one of his preferred rocket sites. He turns up full of enthusiasm, relishing the prospect of a day's rocket-launching.

It's been a hectic 12 months for him, filming not only another series of City Lights but two entire series of Wire In The Blood.

"Now James Brown has popped his clogs," he says, "that makes me the hardest-working man in showbusiness." This is one of his rare days off and he's determined to make the most of it.

He opens his car-boot to show off the seven rockets he's brought along and explains some of the dedication that's gone into making them.

"Some of the bigger models can take up to seven or eight weeks to build. You start with a cylinder, then the fin assembly, then the engine housing has to be installed, which is the most fiddly part.

"The glue takes ages to dry so you need to take three-day breaks. Get one detail wrong and that rocket is unlikely to be heading to infinity, it's more likely to be a damp squib.

"Right up to the last minute, you're making sure everything is absolutely as it should be.

"I was in my garden shed until 2am this morning ensuring that all the engines were properly primed and fused for firing."

The day's sunshine has drawn a small crowd of picnickers and dog-walkers. Given his fame, Green's arrival does not go unnoticed.

He happily signs a few autographs and seems unperturbed by the ready-made audience.

"I actually quite like having a crowd when I'm setting up rockets," he says.

"Maybe there's something about the activity that appeals to the performer in me."

An old lady passes by with her beagle and observes Green setting up the first rocket of the day.

"Boys and their toys," she chuckles. "That's exactly it," Green decides.

"Stick me out in a field with a bunch of rockets and it's like I'm seven years old again."

He painstakingly explains the procedures. The first two to go up will be small C-stage rockets, employed purely to test the electronics and the wind direction, reaching a modest height of 400ft.

All being well, three D-stage rockets will follow, burn for five seconds and hopefully peak at 500ft. Two E-stage rockets, with the potential to climb to 1,500ft, will provide the grand finale.

As the picnickers move in closer for a better view of proceedings, Green explains that all of these rockets work on a similar principle.

"The rocket is placed on the launch pad. The lead connects the igniter to the rocket's motor.

"When the launch button is pressed, the motor burns and propels the rocket upwards.

"At peak altitude, the engine fires an ejection charge that triggers the parachute which, hopefully, will bring the rocket safely back to ground.

"The main objective is to get the rocket to return as close to me as possible. Three yards is my all-time record. "But the beauty of it is that you never know how any rocket is going to behave until it's launched. It's a leap into the unknown."

As the day's events prove. Over the course of the afternoon, I observe Robson Green's emotional roller coaster.

He looks utterly crushed when events don't go to plan and his SpaceShipOne comes a cropper.

Then he swells with pride when his sleek black E-stage rocket whooshes up to its expected height of 1,500ft and lands no more than five yards away.

"Result!" he shouts as applause rings out.

He couldn't look more chuffed if he'd just scored the winner in a cup final.

"That's what it's all about," he explains.

"Months of planning has to go into a rocket like that. The preparation is like foreplay. When it comes off, that's the orgasm."

With this sexual analogy in mind, he sums up the afternoon's fun.

"Out of seven rockets, we've had two minor disasters, one major disaster and four great results.

"On balance, that's a success. After all, four triumphs count as a multiple orgasm. I'd say that's pretty good going.'