

# Ex-farrier Robbie scores a hit with 'crolf'

In the latest in his series on those lucky people who succeed in making a living from their passionate interests, **Andi Robertson** meets eccentric inventor Robbie Richardson, who is the original Jack of all trades – and master of quite a few

**I** WAS chatting with some neighbours recently and we asked ourselves what had happened to all the Westcountry characters we used to come across? Well, I have found one!

Robbie Richardson is a farrier, a writer, an actor and an inventor. You could say he's a multi-tasking specialist; he's also one of the most energetic people I've ever met, so much so, his family call him 'Tigger'!

Robbie's business premises and beautiful home lie in a small, wooded valley tucked into the folds of South Dartmoor, near Holne, where he lives with his daughter Polly and wife Sarah, whom he met at a local pony club dance when they were in their early teens.

Robbie was born just around the corner from Holne, educated first at home by his parents and then at Ashburton comprehensive. At the age of 12, he decided he wanted to be a blacksmith. And, with characteristic fervour, he set about fulfilling this ambition as quickly as possible. It wasn't long before he had introduced himself to a well-known local master farrier who, impressed by the lad's enthusiasm, took him on as an apprentice.

Robbie learned quickly and over the next seven years worked hard to establish a good reputation. He was able to set up his own business at Poundgate, on Dartmoor.

He developed an interest in horse shoeing as surgical work and from about 1987 began to specialise in this area. So much so that he wrote a book on surgical shoeing and bio-mechanics for owners, farriers and vets. The book was taken up by training colleges and soon proved to be a success.

Robbie also has a long-standing association with acting. His brother started the popular Comic Strip Presents series for TV and this led to his being invited to play a number of small parts in the show. He has worked with some well-known comedy professionals over the years and a short while ago was invited by Jennifer Saunders to act in the BBC's *Jam and Jerusalem*, a

role which he thoroughly enjoyed.

Robbie eventually decided to quit the farrier business and he and Sarah took on a nearby tearoom at Holne.

It was then that Robbie also invented Carwithen's Game of Crolf, a cross between golf and croquet, to play with customers on the uneven lawn outside the cafe.

Robbie wanted everyone to be able to play crolf so he made sure the game was for all ages and abilities, and he kept it simple with only nine main rules (the last of which is that any disputes should be decided by a flip of a coin).

Employing his blacksmith's skills, Robbie started making sets of crolf to sell.

Each set of crolf has four hammers, balls and pins and six coloured metal hoops, or hools that are positioned around the garden and can be accessed from any direction. The game, like golf, depends on the number of strokes a player takes to hit their ball around the course, negotiating children's toys, banks, ditches, and even stone walls.

**'I enjoyed trying to negotiate the many obstacles in Robbie's garden'**

The equipment comes attractively mounted on its own trolley with a coloured parasol and – most importantly – space for a tray of drinks. Crolf can be played throughout the year. Robbie knows customers who spend winter's nights playing the game in wellies with a tray of steaming mulled wine to hand.

Robbie loved the way crolf seemed to bring people together and playing it, appeared to create a lot of laughter. Many people had a garden but not so many had a perfectly level space for croquet which, if you're bad at it, can be hard to enjoy.

Robbie managed to get the game of crolf off to a flying start by attracting attention from a national newspaper. Britain's first crolf club



**Robbie Richardson, the inventor of crolf, a cross between croquet and golf**

is already in full swing. The third British open championships were held at Ugbrooke House this year and Robbie is now offering corporate and charity crolf days.

The popularity of the game grew and I wasn't surprised to hear Robbie was busy making as many sets as possible.

My wife Jane and I strolled across the garden in the afternoon sun to play a game with our hosts and I have to say I really enjoyed trying to negotiate the many obstacles in Robbie and Sarah's garden. The solid thwack when you hit the wooden ball with the chunky hammer was especially satisfying and you can become quite absorbed as you start to compete with yourself as much the others in the game.

It was a great way to spend a

summer's afternoon and as Jane and I took our leave, I remembered that conversation with my neighbours about how there seemed to be fewer characters around in the countryside these days.

Perhaps we were mistaken? Perhaps all the characters are actually still there really – but just harder to spot them among the ever increasing numbers of residents and visitors? Perhaps these eccentrics take one look at the hordes of holidaymakers, caravans and newcomers pouring in from the cities and retreat into the more peaceful green corners of the Devon and Cornish countryside like Robbie and Sarah?

Perhaps the only way of finding out for sure was to go look for them?