

COLLECTOR'S DOUBLE ISSUE: BEST OF BRITISH SUMMER

The Lady

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Late Getaways
& The Ladygram
Challenge

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'AYO GORKHALI'

Joanna Lumley is not only one of our most familiar and most loved actresses, but, on their 200th anniversary, she is determined to continue fighting alongside the Gurkhas, she tells Alex Bryson

Six years have passed since Joanna Lumley stood on the steps of Parliament and proclaimed the notorious Gurkha battle cry: 'Ayo Gorkhali!' But her passion for the project remains undimmed, and she slips easily into an enthusiastic description of the phrase, wrapping her tongue around the words with much gusto and impressive pronunciation.

'Ayo Gorkhali, it's their battle cry. It's 'here come the Gurkhas', and it sets fear into people's hearts. They say that in the Falklands War, when the Argentines heard the Gurkhas were going to be deployed out there, they just packed up and left, it's just too frightening for words.'

It takes mere moments in her company to get an idea of how fascinating she finds the heritage of the Brigade in which her father held a commission, a heritage played out in the context of what she terms 'an extraordinary relationship, which is that they're not part of the Commonwealth and yet they fight for us, and have done for 200 years'. Relative to their achieve-

an introduction. It's by Major General JC Lawrence and it is absolutely fantastic.'

She encourages curiosity in the Gurkhas and their culture. 'It's an interesting world that doesn't boast about itself, but the more you read about it, the more fascinating it is.'

Given that the Gurkhas are largely Nepalese and that Lumley possesses very personal ties to the region, it is unavoidable that conversation should turn to the April earthquake, for which she recorded an appeal video. She plans to return, but only once she can go in a greater capacity than that of 'faffing well-wisher', citing the professionals needed to bring the nation back from the brink of chaos.

'The thing to do is to give the people who know how to do it, the means to do it. I've travelled with the Gurkha Welfare Trust out there in Nepal and I've seen all their outposts far deep into the country and they're already established there, and they'll be there long after all this has settled down, they'll be there administrating, doing welfare, health care, education.'

can. Also, I get asked to do stuff a lot, I get asked more than most people would because my head's above the parapet, so you get to hear about things. It's very hard once you've heard about something to turn it down, although I have to turn down 95 of every 100 requests that I get.'

She clearly has a new reputation and role: Joanna Lumley, activist. It's a title well-earned through the hours she invests in numerous charities. When we met recently she was supporting the release of a special collection of luggage called G200, made by American bag manufacturers Gurka - with a percentage of all sales to be donated to the Trust.

Meanwhile, away from charity work, she shows no sign of applying the handbrakes to a career that has spanned generations and genres. First and foremost of these, she says, is 'driving on with the Garden Bridge', the vegetation-lined pedestrian bridge over the River Thames conceived by the actress in 1998, designed by Thomas Heatherwick and due to open in 2018. Other plans are of a more thespian persuasion, including a sitcom pilot, a new Christmas show with David Walliams and a forthcoming documentary on Elvis Presley, who would have been 80 this year.

And then, of course, there is the not inconsiderable matter of the Absolutely Fabulous film which, she reveals, is being shot some time between October and Christmas, at an as yet unspecified location.

'It will be the same gang as ever, Mother and Bubbles and Saffy and all those people, and I think it will be, fingers crossed, fabulous.' ■

◆ *The Gurkha Welfare Trust, 2nd Floor, Cross Keys House, 22 Queen Street, Salisbury: 01722-323955, www.gwt.org.uk*

◆ *The G200 luggage collection is available at www.gurka.com*

'Love for people, love for creatures, love for the world. Longing to make things better, wherever you can'

ments, the Gurkhas' history is little known, and Lumley suggests that some of the books released this bicentenary year proves an excellent way to familiarise oneself with the topic.

'One is *The Gurkhas: 200 Years Of Service To The Crown*, and it's exemplary,' she says in that inimitably mellifluous voice. 'I would say that, wouldn't I? It's gorgeously photographed, it's illustrated massively, it's not just a great heaving history book and it's a riveting read, beautifully written and prepared. The Prince of Wales has done a foreword. I've done

In addition to her M&S recycling drive and approach to animal welfare, which takes in anything ranging from live animal transportation to her recent, well-documented claims to care for stray foxes ('they're so beautiful'), Lumley appears to have lent her name and time to a dazzling array of good causes. Where does she get her charitable drive from?

'Nosiness; I love finding out what's going on. In my heart, compassion and love. Love for people, love for creatures, love for the world. Longing to make things better, wherever you

Welcomed rapturously in Nepal in 2009, Joanna wears the badge and scarf of the Gurkha Army Ex-Servicemen's Organisation (GAESO)

