'I'VE GOT SO MUCH MONEY IT'S RIDICULOUS'

Richard Desmond, the owner of the 'Express', still gets a buzz from business as he nears 60 – and he's not done yet. By **Ian Burrell**



t is just as well that Richard
Desmond has given himself the
unlikely soubriquet of Mr Badger. There are few who would
dare to suggest to his face that
he resembles a stockily-set
omnivore who has associations
with weasels and skunks.

But Mr Badger prefers that others use a different tag – "The Saviour of the Express" – in recognition of his achievements as a newspaper proprietor. In an industry where all around him are haemorrhaging money, Britain's most unorthodox press baron is laden with cash and hinting that he's on the verge of adding a new and famous prize to his portfolio. Both The Sun and ITV tempt him, and he is understood to have made a bid for Channel Five.

"I've got so much money it's ridiculous," he says. "I know exactly what I want and exactly what I'm going to do."

He has a fearful reputation based on legendary tales of his expletive-strewn, vein-bursting outbursts, of executives locked in cupboards or being attacked with cattle prods by enemies from the New York mafia. His sense of loyalty mirrors that of the Cosa Nostra. "As good a friend as I am," he once told a close associate, "I'm the worst enemy you'll ever have."

But he doesn't care that he's widely disliked, not when he is sitting in an office which former visitors have compared to a ballroom and a football pitch, with its 10-storey-high, 180-degree river view from Tower Bridge to the Palace of Westminster.

"It's great at night when you turn the lights off and see everything sparkling," he says. "I've been in this office now for six years and I still get a great kick. I have a little smile to myself. Fantastic."

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Each morning, by a quarter to seven, Mr Badger is taking the air on Hampstead Heath in north London, having emerged from "The Badgers" – his sett, if you will – a mansion on The Bishops Avenue, which is known locally as "Millionaires' Row". He has placed a deposit on a \$60m (£40.4m) Gulfstream G650, reckoned to be the gold standard in business aviation, but he's not beyond booking his holiday flight with easy. Jet or dining on fish and chips ("If you eat lobster all day long you forget about haddock").

Like the underground mammal with which he aligns himself – he has a company called Badger Property Partners – Richard Desmond displays contrasting shades of black and white.

He boasts of the times when he paid himself £52m a year ("One day I thought, 'Let's have some fun,' and for a few years I took out £1m a week"), but this year he'll take the wage of one of his desk editors.

"I'm taking out £50,000 as a salary. There's no point, the tax breaks as they are, the national insurance, it's just ridiculous. To effectively lose 70 per cent of your cash is crazy – let the business have it."

This is smart management, he would say. "Everyone calls me a cost-cutter and it's actually not true, we are cost-conscious." Commentators criticise the paucity of journalistic resources at the *Daily Express* (daily sales are currently 665,731, down 7.8 per cent on last year) and scoff at its front pages, but Desmond claims the title is "in tune with the nation".

"Everything we've been crusading for ... we were mocked, laughed at and ridiculed. [But] the immigration situation, the pension situation and inheritance tax were the three spoton things that frankly decided the election." If it was the *Express* what

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won it, perhaps he has no need to buy *The Sun*, an ambition he mischievously alluded to on Radio 4's *Today* programme. His current focus is on broadcasting.

"If ITV comes at the right price it's a trophy; however I still think it's overpriced," he says. In the meantime, he is believed to have chosen the cheaper option of making a bid for Channel Five, though he will not comment on the subject.

In the meantime, to make things more interesting, he will apply the cattle prod to his pressured rivals next month by selling the *Daily Star* for just 10p, thus embarking on a price war which could cost hundreds of millions of pounds in lost circulation revenue. "The most cost-effective way for us to get the numbers is to reduce price," he says, his eyes lighting up as he does the mental arithmetic. "It will only cost the *Mirror* – let's work it out – a million copies, so 35p times a million is 350 grand a day ... that's £100m a year."

He met Trinity Mirror's chief executive Sly Bailey recently and was surprised to find himself impressed by her business acumen. Why did he think he wouldn't like her? "Just the way she looked, she's got a funny look, a very bleached look, hasn't she?"

He is more disparaging of Carolyn McCall, who is leaving Guardian Media Group to head up his beloved easy-Jet. "I think she's a ridiculous appointment. This woman single-handedly ruined *The Guardian*, ridiculous!"

There is an underlying fear to his aggressive demeanour in business; he is scared of losing everything.



The 30 per cent fall in circulation of OK! when he launched OK!

television in 1998 was 'a great lesson'. 'You cannot give your content away,' he says

"Of course! And that's why, hopefully, I don't do too much flash," says a man with a personal wealth estimated at £950m. I was out for dinner last night, there were three people and the bill came to £300. On the way home I was justifying it to myself. Is that stupid?"

Desmond is famously parsimonious, a trait borne of a north London upbringing that necessitated his being a child worker for his own family. The memory of his first advertising deal, negotiated at the age of sixand-a-half, remains with him.

His father, Cyril, a senior executive for Pearl & Dean, the cinema advertising company, had been struck down by an illness which left him deaf; but he continued to try to work, using the youngest of his three children as his ears.

"The fella in the advertising agency was talking about Domestos and of course he couldn't hear. So I jumped in and pulled the contract out and went through it. That was where I was brought up."

Desmond's parents' marriage broke up and his mother, Millie, took him to live with her in a small flat above a garage. "I didn't have a back garden, I had windows that didn't open," he says.

His father's sudden illness still frightens him, as he has had severe problems with his eyesight. "Without Moorfields [Eye Hospital] I could be blind. I had acute angular glaucoma. And you know, with my father going







Britain

deaf, I'd always had this fear, Ian, of going deaf or blind at my peak." Music gave Desmond his way out,

Music gave Desmond his way out, aged 13, when he saw blues musician John Mayall at a local club and was so mesmerised that he persuaded the owner to give him a job checking coats. A year later, having left school without qualifications, he applied for another cloakroom role at Thomson Newspapers, but eventually talked himself into a job flogging classifieds.

An obsessive drummer, Desmond started promoting dances. That was how he acquired his nickname. "I said to my mate 'We will call it 'The Badges' and I was going to give everyone a badge. He said, 'Oh Badger, that's a good name because that's what you do, you badger people.'

"See? So we had a drawing of a badger and we used to call it, 'Mr Badger presents ... When I bought the house, I thought it was a good gag. What a laugh that this guy has come from putting on a dance on a Friday night for tu'pence ha'penny and bought a great pad. We'll call it The Badgers."

a great pad. We'll call it The Badgers. The young Desmond was also known, prophetically enough, as Rich. In 1974 he combined music and advertising to found his first magazine, *International Musician*, followed by *Home Organist*, whose editor contributed the old school motto Forti Nihil Difficile ("Nothing is difficult for the strong") which is still used by Desmond's Northern & Shell publishing empire.

There is an irony to the way he first hit the national press in 1981. "The man who has made it to the top at the age of 29," ran the admiring



'I visited Conrad Black [left] in prison in the US. Ooh, it was bloody horrible.

They had three huge factories full of prisoners in orange uniforms and shackles'

headline, alongside a picture of a bearded Desmond, Montecristo cigar in mouth, standing alongside his two-tone gold Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow II with his left hand gripping the car's Spirit of Ecstasy radiator ornament as if terrified it was suddenly going to disappear.

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That article, purring at Desmond's ethic of "long days, long weeks and no time for hobbies", was in the *Daily Mail*, of all places. But that was before Desmond began selling sex. By the time he entered the national newspaper industry in 2000, he had many enemies and Associated Newspapers, owner of the *Mail*, was among the most powerful. "Porn Publisher to Buy *Express*", ran a headline in the *London Evening Standard*, then part of Associated.

Badger-baiting was outlawed in Britain in 1835, but many thought Desmond, who had expanded his publishing empire to include a large catalogue of adult titles such as Asian Babes and Horny Housewives, had it coming.

"They tried to destroy me," says
Desmond, who, when cornered, came
out snarling by publishing stories
about the personal life of Jonathan
Harmsworth (Lord Rothermere),
chairman of Associated. Though he
still makes reference to the "Daily
Malicious", Desmond claims that the
war is over. "Jonathan Harmsworth
and I are quite friendly, we'll have a
Chinese meal together."

Another old rival, the former Daily

Telegraph owner Lord Conrad Black, is now in prison in America. They are on good terms too. "I visited him.
Ooh, it was bloody horrible. They had three huge factories full of prisoners, and that was low-security; my goodness, what the high-security must have been like? They had orange uniforms, shackles, it was horrible."

It was a claim by author Tom Bower that Desmond had been "ground into the dust" by Black that prompted the *Express* owner to launch an expensive libel claim which he lost last year. During that case, Roy Greenslade, a blogger for *The Guardian* and professor of journalism at City University in London, described him as having the worst reputation of any newspaper proprietor since the Second World War.

"Very, very, very upsetting. I don't get upset very often but that really upset me," he says, accusing Greenslade of hypocrisy. "They call him Roy Greenslime and I understand why."

t He is wounded by continuing references to himself as a pornographer – his material has been distributed via WHSmith and Freeview, he says. "If it was pornography you would end up in prison because pornography is illegal," he says, suddenly addressing the female photographer. "I've published everything from bicycle magazines to venture capitalist magazines."

He has invested minimally in digital technology. The 30 per cent fall in circulation of his beloved *OK!* magazine (now selling 6 million a week in 23 international editions) when he experimented with *OK!* television in 1998 was "a great lesson", he says.

"You cannot give your content away."
Even now he is fretful about the
cannibalistic tendencies of even the
basic websites his group produces.
"It worries me that the punters are
using it more, it's a huge worry." He is
not a technophobe, he claims, though
he gave his iPad to his son to decipher. "I love my BlackBerry, I love my
Apple Mac, I love technology."

The old cigar-chomper has even fallen in love with exercise gadgetry. "I've got a great bike I just bought, 255 quid. Bargain it was," he says. "It's great isn't it, all this exercise lark? I used to laugh at people on treadmills, now I love it."

Mr Badger is looking leaner. He seems disappointed that *The Independent* declines his pot of green tea. "Tve got a bit more balance, a bit more gym, a bit more running, a bit more drumming and a bit more charity," he says of his healthier lifestyle.

These days he drums for charity in a star-studded band. When you're playing with the likes of Roger Daltrey and Robert Plant, he says, "You don't really want to fuck it all up do you?" It's the first time the man who *Private Eye* calls "Dirty Des" has used the "f" word. 67 minutes into the interview.

He seems remarkably calm – perhaps due to the fact that he has a new girlfriend – as he approaches his 60th birthday in 18 months' time. The other press barons thought they'd finish him off years ago.

Desmond talks excitedly of another new pal, a ball of energy whom he met eating fish and chips in a London club. This friend is 98 years old. So what next for Mr Badger? "I'd like to do a big deal, yeah I really would," he says. "I've got to, I've only got another 30 years left before I retire." I'm laughing. But when I look at Richard Desmond, he isn't.

Media Studies, Viewspaper, page 5

Journalists and power do not mix