

You can fly it, listen to it, drink it, wear it, borrow money from it – when it comes to brand names, there are few harder to miss than Virgin. It's just as hard to avoid the face behind it, although Sir Richard Branson – the chummy, champagne-spraying tycoon – claims to be shy. As the boy wonder of British business turns 50, Christa D'Souza asks, will the real Richard Branson please step forward? Illustration by Simon Brown

Behind the grin

Lots of people do not like helicopters. I happen to be one of them, a casual admission that elicits much concern from the chivalrous, if slightly awkward, Sir Richard Branson. And as we sit here on the Tarmac at Westland Heliport in Battersea, south London, the pilot ready to take off, he keeps mumbling sweet words of assurance in my direction; how he himself used to harbour a fear of flying and how our ride over here on a pair of Virgin LimoBikes was statistically far more dangerous than the journey we are about to make.

As the rotors whirl and we start to rise above the ground, he suddenly grabs hold of my hand and does not let go for at least three minutes, perhaps even longer. 'There,' he says brightly, as below us the landscape gets increasingly green. 'Better now?'

Considering we have only just met, it really is most unnerving. But then unnerving people is very much Richard Branson's style. Remember when he picked up Ivana Trump and turned her upside down? When he flung his arms around an unsuspecting Princess Diana at Heathrow? Or threw Jimmy Goldsmith in a swimming-pool? Indeed the reason we are making the trip to Norwich on this muggy summer's day is because Branson wants to spring a surprise visit on the 1,000-odd employees who work for him there.

God knows, he doesn't really have the time, what with his second bid to run the National Lottery; a bid to buy up the east-coast rail lines; the domestic airline he is about to launch in Australia and – last but not least – having to deal with Tom Bower, the investigative journalist whose impending biography is supposedly going to 'blow the lid' off Branson's £4 billion Virgin empire, and who Branson is suing for libel over a newspaper article.

Our first two stops are the sprawling offices of Virgin Direct and a new internet portal called Virgin Money. Branson – fit and tanned with unusually wide-set blue eyes; dressed today in a beige Virgin shirt (naturally) over khakis and clumpy brown lace-ups – strides into reception. The two blondes behind the desk, sunburnt after the weekend, stop dead in their tracks. 'Halloo, halloo,' says Branson, leaning over the counter to give each one a kiss, and then he grabs a couple of jellybeans from a bowl and hurries through some swing doors to the main floor – a sea of computers topped with Beanie Babies – making sure to shake hands with a cleaner on his way in.

Very soon, the realisation sinks in that the big boss is here. Telephone calls are swiftly terminated and half-eaten sandwiches hastily stuffed back into brown bags as he works

his way through the open-plan room, patting shoulders, shaking hands, complimenting this person and that on the originality of their screensaver, each exchange trailing off into nothingness as he becomes lost for words. Creeping behind one unsuspecting telephone operator on the line to a customer, he gestures for her to hand him her headset. 'Hallo?' he says to the person on the other end. 'So you want to transfer from your current account to your deposit account, do you? Well, look before I go any further I should tell you it's actually Richard Branson here! Yes! It is! Really! But, er, let me pass you on to one of our money managers who's much better at all of this than I am.'

And then it's on to the next department, and the next one, and the next one, for more handshaking, shoulder-clasping and impromptu phone calls before a quick lunch with 10 or so lucky employees in the staff canteen. It leaves us just enough time for a spin across town to the loft headquarters of virginwines.com, and then on to Virgin One – the banking arm of the empire – where, it so happens, a camera crew from BBC Scotland has just pitched up. Sally Magnusson, the presenter of *Retail Roundabout*, wants an interview. It's a request Branson is only too happy to fulfil, despite the fact that it is just about to pour with rain and the crew is setting up outside to get the Virgin logo in the shot. When the skies open, the cameraman makes a move to call



it a day, but Branson waves away all protests and ends up delivering his rather halting spiel looking like someone has just thrown a bucket of water over his head.

Upstairs, staff are already pouring into the 'New Business' department for the early presentation of their 50th birthday present to Branson: a large, framed cartoon of him in his balloon flying over the offices of Virgin One. Jayne-Anne, the bouncy 6ft-plus MD of Virgin One, then gets up on a chair to announce the great news that it has just passed the £2 billion lending mark. Branson then gets up on the makeshift podium and clears his throat. He'd like to thank everyone for the fantastic job they are doing in turning the financial industry upside down and saying (not for the first time today) that he wished he worked here in Norwich himself, and 'er, gosh, oh yes, I almost forgot! Get back to your desks immediately!

As he steps down, to uproarious applause, a small line of staff forms with pocket cameras in hand. One of them is a young woman who has just quit after three-and-a-half years, and tells me the workload has been exhausting. Blinding smile still intact, Branson obliges as many of them as he can, and then makes a dash for the car waiting outside. We are already running very late.

Working backwards, he's got a dinner hosted by Prince Charles in Shoreditch, a Virgin Travel agent to call on in Great Yarmouth and a surprise visit he'd like to pay on his Aunt Clare – a great friend, Branson volunteers, of the late Douglas Bader – who happens to live about 12 miles away. In the car to the airport he calls his secretary and asks her to find out if Westland has a shower, and to get his wife to meet him there with his dinner jacket. Then it's a quick call to the financial regulator to see what's holding up the imminent launch of Virgin Money. 'Well, heh-heh, if you can get it off your desk as soon as possible, that would be super, heh-heh! Right then, sorry to trouble you, by-eee!'

As we arrive at Norwich airport, he suggests we get something from the coffee shop before we get back in the helicopter. Knowing his reputation for never carrying cash, I make a move to pay for our two coffees and the little pack of shortbread he picks from the display, but the offer is gallantly refused. After Jayne-Anne's encouraging news, he sallies, he can probably just about afford to dip into his own pocket. Watched in baffled amazement by the swathes of waiting passengers as he vainly attempts to put creamer in his coffee and answer his mobile phone at the same time, Branson eventually resorts to handing me his baggage – a black Banana Republic sweater and an A4 notebook filled with bits of loose paper. According to his secretary, Sue, a fax has just arrived in the London office from Tom Bower wanting to know the answers to various questions. Branson tells Sue he needs to see it as soon as possible; could she fax it over to the next point of destination?

As we are ushered on to the Tarmac, he emits once again that nervous – to the point of tic-like – laugh which so jars with his confident, champagne-squirting image. 'Not still scared, heh-heh, are we?'

When Branson was knighted in last year's Millennium Honours List for services to entrepreneurship, there were plenty of people who thought it had come a bit late. There were others, though, who thought that it had come a little too early.

The main accusations levelled by his detractors are that he spreads himself too thin; that the promises he makes – such as transforming Virgin Rail into the most efficient train service in Europe – will never be fulfilled; that his proposals to help Tony Blair improve the NHS and his bid to run the National Lottery in order to channel every penny of the profits into charity are driven by rather more than just idealistic naivety.

There are suggestions in the financial world that the business behind the extraordinarily strong brand name is not

as robust as Branson makes out; and that the reason he just sold 49 per cent of his most precious company, Virgin Atlantic, to Singapore Airlines was to compensate for losses incurred by the record retailing end of the business and his costly record company V2. The rumours are, of course, not helped by the fact that Virgin is a private company – the largest in the UK – and is therefore not as openly accountable as it would be if it were public.

But if there *is* trouble at mill, as Bower – whose former biographical subjects include Robert Maxwell and Mohamed Fayed – alleges, then it can't be anything that the Hippy Capitalist turned People's Idol cannot handle. As Branson himself described in his startlingly candid autobiography, *Losing My Virginity*, life has been one non-stop rollercoaster ride since Virgin (or Slipped Disc, as it was almost called) was founded in a dank Bayswater basement more than 31 years ago: from the time in the early Seventies when Branson spent a night in prison for illegally importing records; to the time in the mid-Eighties when an overdraft nearly put Virgin out of business; to the \$1 billion sale of Virgin Records to Thorn EMI in order to keep Virgin Atlantic in business. Let us not forget, either, the

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'dirty tricks' war he waged and won against British Airways, or the way he pulverised G-Tech's Guy Snowden in court, following Branson's accusation that Snowden had attempted to bribe him to withdraw from his first lottery bid.

'There are a lot of big companies involved and a lot of highly paid PRs [employed by them] whose job it is to place stories about us,' says Branson when we meet the following day. 'Generally Virgin gets good press, but whenever we are leading up to something, whenever we are involved in something new, that is when we always seem to get negative press. I think there is also an element whereby if you are doing something to make lots of money for yourself, you never get criticised. If you're doing something to make money for other people, like the lottery, you get tons of criticism. That's a very British thing.'

'But this Tom Bower thing – it's like having a stalker, actually. He is desperately trying to find negative stuff about me; the seedier' – he grasps for the right word – 'the darker shades of pale. The point is we are Britain's largest private company and we have the strongest British brand in the world.'

We are sitting in the living-room of Branson's large villa in Holland Park, west London, a space cleared at a glass table overlooking the garden for us to have lunch. At one end of the dark high-ceilinged room is a yellow grand piano decorated with a large collection of framed photographs of his wife, Joan, and their golden-haired children, Holly, 17, and Sam, 14. At the other end are two slouchy sofas which don't match, a coffee table stacked with papers and a mantelpiece upon which sits a photograph of Branson in his balloon and a model of a Virgin Atlantic airliner.

Lunch itself is a very casual affair: a bottle of Aqua Libra split between the two of us and big chunks of blackened salmon served on cheerful, flowery china by a Scottish lady who has been with Branson ever since the days when he lived on a houseboat in Maida Vale. In other words, aside from the heavy Eighties-style curtains and slightly skew-whiff chandeliers, the atmosphere chez Branson is not grand at all. But then, Richard Branson isn't a particularly extravagant man when it comes to material possessions. With the exception of Necker (Branson's Caribbean island where he will soon be heading for his 50th birthday), he has none of the standard toys you would expect of a man whose personal wealth is estimated somewhere in the region of £2.4 billion. As for gadgets, forget it. By his own



admission, he is computer illiterate, using his precious stock of A4 notebooks whenever he needs to write anything down.

Of course he's always had an expensive appetite for ballooning and other dangerous sports. But, as he wistfully admits, even that may be waning. His friend, Steve Fossett, has just asked Branson to help him beat the transatlantic sailing record in a catamaran, and he thinks he is probably going to have to say no. Not because of his age, he hastens to add, but because he has too much grown-up work to do.

'I'm beginning to think I haven't got the same desire as I had even as recently as two years ago,' he says, studiously buttering his bread roll. 'I used to have tremendous difficulty saying no to something like that. I'd have to be on that boat whatever happens. But now, if there's a choice, I'd far rather battle for the lottery.'

'The most important thing I can do in my lifetime now,' he adds, eyes still averted, 'is to generate an extra £2 billion for good causes. It takes an awful lot of charity events to come up with that kind of money. A lot of people have stopped playing the lottery, but if it has that feelgood factor, more people might have a flutter again. Anyway, um, we've done everything we could have done, so... um...' And then, unable to finish the sentence, he dips his silvery head into his hands. 'Oh Richard,' he wails, 'come on, will you? I'm sure it's because I was up so late last night. Why am I always the last person to leave?'



He is talking about the Prince Charles dinner, and by all accounts it sounds as though Branson did indeed have a very jolly time, sitting on the top table between Camilla Parker Bowles and David Coulthard's lovely fiancée, Heidi. But he is being a little disingenuous here. For although Branson is always either going to a party or throwing one (tonight for example, there's a big bash for Virgin Atlantic; tomorrow is the launch for virginwines.com at the Virgin-owned Roof Gardens in Kensington, and then on Sunday it's his annual cricket match at his country house in Kidlington, Oxfordshire), he is not nearly as wild and crazy as he likes to make out. He never was. As friends will say, his penchant for drinking has always been minimal, his interest in rock music is scant and as for drugs, the one and only time he ever did LSD in the Seventies he had a dreadful panic attack. Indeed the only vice he has ever been guilty of is smoking – a habit which he kicked three years ago.

As Tim Evans, his friend and physician of 10 years, puts it, 'Typically, we'll be on Necker, it'll be three in the morning, with everyone partying away, and suddenly we'll realise Richard isn't round. It's because he's slipped away three hours ago, in order to be up by six to beat me at tennis. He loves nothing more than being responsible for other people having a good time, but actually, if you watch his own glass, you'll see it never needs a refill.'

Richard Charles Nicholas Branson was born on July 18, 1950, in Surrey, the eldest son of an ex-cavalry officer and barrister called Ted, the grandson of a High Court judge, and a distant relative of Scott of the Antarctic. It is his daunting mother Eve, however, a former glider pilot and air hostess, from whom he probably inherits most of his drive. Terrifically ambitious for her son, she was always setting him physical challenges to build up his stamina – once, when he was five, she threw him out of the car four miles from home and made him find his own way back on foot. Another time, she challenged him to jump into a fast-flowing river when he didn't yet know how to swim. An undiagnosed dyslexic, Branson never excelled at his studies at Stowe, but he did have a burning ambition to start up a school magazine. The first issue of *Student*, as it was called, was published in 1968. Although it was a chaotic operation – with a covert office set up in a friend's mother's basement in Bayswater and distribution headed up by Richard's

mother and his little sister, Lindi – Branson had already managed to pull in some incredible names as contributors. One of their first interviews was Vanessa Redgrave; Mick Jagger, RD Laing and John Lennon soon followed. Lennon even agreed to compose a song for the magazine, which Branson planned to put on flexi-disc and then attach to the front of each issue. When it seemed Lennon wasn't going to deliver, the 18-year-old Branson, displaying an early litigious streak, immediately threatened to sue him and Apple for breach of promise. A couple of days later, Branson was summoned to meet Lennon and Yoko Ono and listen to the song they had eventually come up with – it was the heartbeat of their unborn baby who had just died.

Virgin came into being when Branson dreamt up the idea of using the back pages of the ailing *Student* to advertise cheap mail-order records, and by 1973 the 23-year-old Branson had expanded enough to own a chain of Virgin Records shops, a recording studio and a record label. The first artist to be signed was Mike Oldfield, and after the success of his album, *Tubular Bells*, a host of big names followed, such as Phil Collins, Boy George, the Sex Pistols and the Rolling Stones. But it was not until 1984, when he

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launched Virgin Atlantic, that Branson really hit the big time.

In the interim he had married and divorced his first wife, an American blonde called Kristen Tomassi (who now runs the Branson-owned hotel La Residencia, in Majorca). He had also met his second, a Glaswegian blonde called Joan Templeman, who at the time was married and working in an antiques shop. They started going out with each other in 1975, decided to get married 15 years later (on Necker, with their children in bridesmaid and pageboy gear), and have been together ever since.

Joan, according to the press cuttings, has only one thing to say about her husband. And that is: his two biggest weaknesses are sticky pudding and women.

'Oh, the pudding bit is definitely true,' stammers Branson disarmingly. 'Rhubarb crumble is a particular favourite. And women? Yeah, I love them! It's just unfortunate that Joan and I are as happy as we were 25 years ago. But she's no fool, she knows you can't chain your man up, you've got to let him go out, let him party to get it out of his system.'

'I'm not talking literally, of course,' he flounders. 'What I mean is you don't always have to be at your man's side; it makes sense giving both of you breathing space and, er, I'm sure that's the reason our relationship is, er, so strong!'

It's hard to think of a worse interviewee than Branson. Indeed, there are distinct moments during this taut, cliché-ridden lunch when I find myself wanting to grab hold of his hand and tell him to relax. Judging by the countless hacks who have been granted audiences with Branson before me, he can hardly hate the process. Which does beg the somewhat simplistic question: who is the real Richard Branson? The irritating exhibitionist who loves nothing better than to shave his legs and dress up in drag to promote a product? Or the man sitting in front of me who can barely look me in the eye?

Tim Evans's diplomatic assessment is that the one feeds the other. All that dressing up and turning people upside down, in other words, is merely 'an extension of his shyness'. A big cheese I know in the city, who refuses to be named, sees it slightly differently. He says I should beware of confusing inarticulacy with shyness, and that actually Branson is not shy at all, but a dauntingly confident human being who is very good at putting on a show for journalists.

And what is Branson's theory? Well he doesn't have one, really. 'I think I am a contradiction,' he eventually tells his strawberry shortcake, 'and I think I am shy, I do. I mean I

am terrified of giving public speeches and I find it difficult to think hard about something and look someone in the eye. It's, um, quite distracting, especially if it's a beautiful face, heh-heh!

'My mum always used to say you had to be suspicious of people who didn't look you in the eye,' he adds rather helplessly, 'so on that basis you should probably be very suspicious. Gosh, I've been looking down all this time and I've suddenly noticed you've got lovely eyes.'

Joan, who is six years Branson's senior and has borne him three children (the first, Clare, named after Branson's aunt, died when she was just four days old), is clearly the key to Branson's inner psyche. She is, according to most people who know them socially, the rock of Branson's life, as are his children, of whom he is so unashamedly proud. Indeed, he tells me, one of his main regrets is the decision Joan and he made not to have more children.

When I say I'd like to meet his wife, Branson says he'll see if he can find her – she's just got back from a trip to the Middle East with a few girlfriends, and is pottering about in the house somewhere – but only on the understanding that she never gives interviews. Minutes later, Lady Branson appears – a pretty, voluptuous woman with savvy eyes and flaxen hair piled up into a haphazard chignon. Sprinkled across her tanned fingers are an assortment of rings and around her neck a Tiffany-style diamond cross. She agrees with her husband; it *was* much too late last night but, och, wasn't the food wonderful? And didn't Camilla look fantastic in that Versace dress?

We all meet up again on Sunday at the aforementioned cricket match. It is, as Branson has promised, a very casual affair with lots of babies and children, and a bouncy castle in the driveway. Among the crowd are his family: Holly, an arrestingly beautiful young woman dressed today in a baby-

blue sweater and white trousers; Sam, who has just had all his white-blond hair shorn off à la David Beckham; and, of course, Joan, who is floating around with a pink cardigan tied casually around her shoulders, making sure everyone has what they want.

Over in the Balinese pavilion, by the lake, a team of caterers is busily preparing a buffet lunch of Chinese chicken, smoked salmon, potato salad and pizza. Around 70 people have gathered today – a number, Branson says, that grows each year. Among them is one of his closest friends, Peter Emerson, the former Dean of Westminster, and Tim Evans. Then there is Coco, Branson's fluffy, chocolate-brown spaniel cross who never leaves her beloved master's side.

Branson is, as one would expect, the consummate host, fetching cups of coffee, getting plates of food for everyone and roaring loudly when a cricket ball spins in the spectators' direction. Eventually he sits down to lunch himself with a bottle of white wine in one hand and some plastic cups in the other. Looking especially fit and tanned today in his cricket garb, he pours everyone a large drink and informs the table to go easy, he is still hurting from the virginwines.com launch party on Friday. Too many NTs, apparently, the new vodka and ginseng drink which Virgin has just brought out.

As the afternoon wears on and I make a move to leave, guests are still meandering in. One new arrival makes a beeline for Branson's table and introduces his date, a long-haired American lady who has just this morning flown in from New York. Not, the friend hastens to add, by Virgin. Branson, who is in the middle of stuffing a forkful of potato salad into his mouth, leaps up to introduce himself. 'Well,' he says, warmly shaking the woman's hand, 'you just better, er, f*** off then!' upon which everyone breaks out into peals of slightly squiffy laughter. Branson's drink, I notice, is untouched. **T**