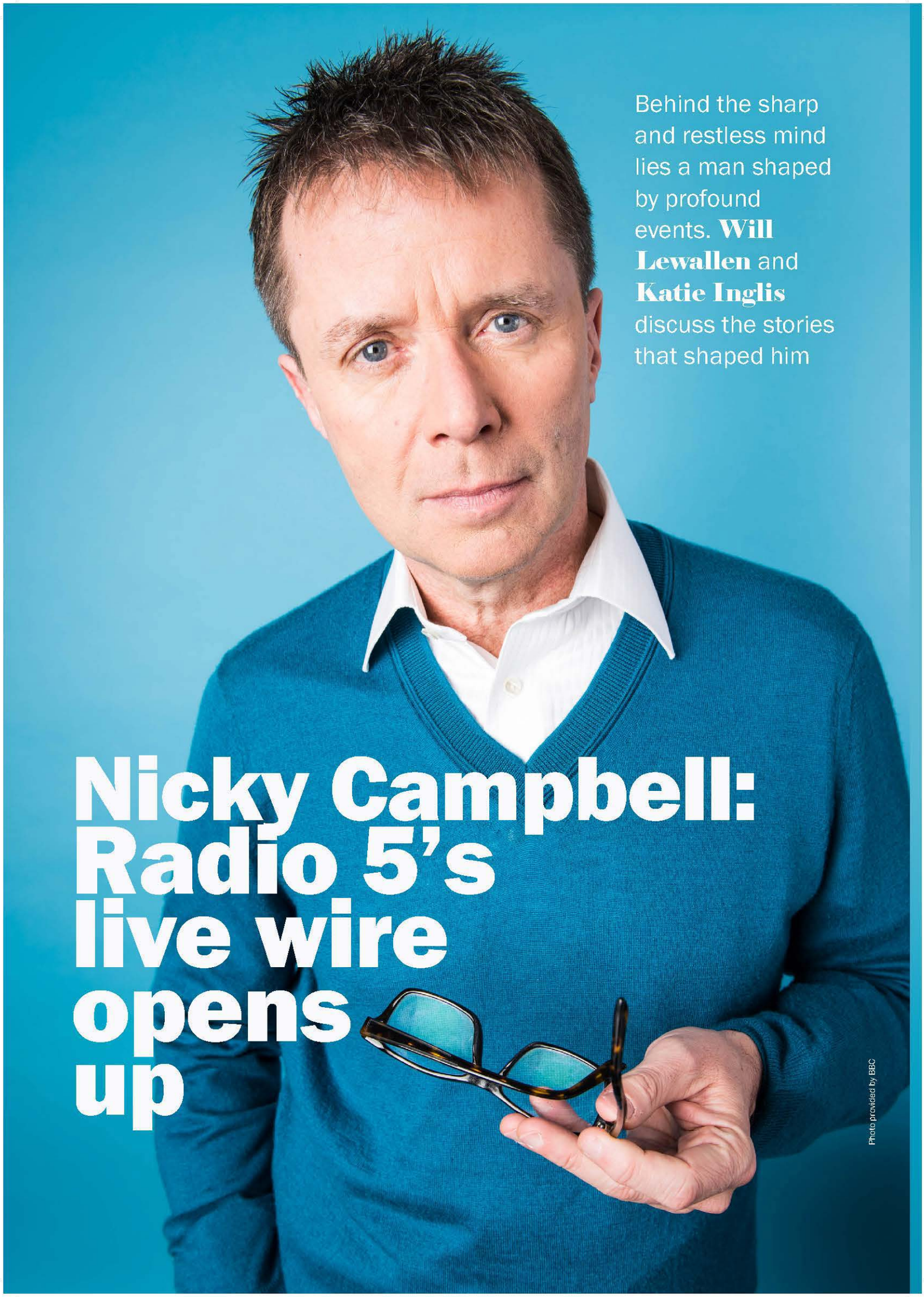

Nicky Campbell: Radio 5's live wire opens up

Behind the sharp and restless mind lies a man shaped by profound events. **Will Lewallen** and **Katie Inglis** discuss the stories that shaped him

Photo provided by BBC

The unmistakable voice of BBC Radio 5 Live's "Voice of the UK" cuts through the hum of the room before he even sits down. That familiar, expressive tone – laced with a slight Scottish lilt – belongs to Nicky Campbell, a veteran of British broadcasting. Ordering a soy latte with the ease of someone who has spent a lifetime commanding airwaves, he launches straight into conversation about his latest project – a new podcast, *Don't Say a Word.* ("That's the name of the podcast," he reassures us. "I'm not swearing you to secrecy.")

Fifteen floors above Marylebone, at the Madera restaurant, Campbell gazes out at the city sprawled behind us, the sky a perfect spring blue. He is dressed sharply in a red three-quarter zip jumper layered over a bright blue shirt – the familiar uniform of the working man. We tumble into conversation, as if we've met before.

Arriving early, Campbell comes straight from his morning phone-in programme, which he has hosted on BBC Radio 5 Live since 2021. Before this, he spent 18 years co-presenting the station's flagship breakfast show, where his no-nonsense approach made him a cornerstone of British morning radio. Today's agenda? The US withdrawal from Ukraine, and the debate over whether Elon Musk should be stripped of his fellowship at the Royal Society.

"You get lost in the zone. It's almost like you forget you're on the radio," Campbell says of engaging with callers. "When I'm talking to them, I'm in a complete bubble. You become absorbed in it, you get sucked in."

His show, which airs weekday mornings from nine to eleven, must go on even when he doesn't feel "in the zone". On these mornings, Campbell admits, "sometimes, at one minute to nine, I'm thinking, 'What the fuck am I doing?' 'Why am I here?'" He pauses before adding, "not in an existential way, though." But the moment the clock strikes nine and he leans into the mic with his signature "Good morning," the doubt vanishes.

"It's all gone," he says. "[The phone-ins] can be quite performative. You're not manipulating or even manufacturing, but more leaving the gaps, making it happen, and creating radio moments."

While a degree of preparation goes into each show – Campbell arrives at work at 7.15am to "speed read" the morning's headlines – much of it unfolds live on air. "When the red light's on, that's when it really happens," he says. "You've got to react in the moment."

For Campbell, this fast-paced environment feels like second nature. Three years ago, at the age of 60, Campbell was diagnosed with ADHD, and now describes himself as a "square peg in a square hole". He recalls how his doctor even congratulated him when he was first diagnosed, affirming what he already knew: his brain was built for this. "I'm so lucky to have a mind that moves quickly, but I can't change the fucking plug," he says. "I can tune into everything that's happening at once," he adds, shrugging. "People ask, 'how do you keep track of all these callers, all these conversations?' It's just what you're good at."

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Ever the seasoned broadcaster, Campbell shares a handy trick for interviewing an author when there's no time to wade through all 335 pages of their book. "Open it towards the end – say, page 220 – read that section, and then say, 'You say in your book (on page 220)…'" He grins. "It makes them feel good. There are plenty of little tricks like that when you're interviewing."

Throughout our conversation, Campbell absentmindedly doodles on the notepad in front of him – scribbling words before he says them, sketching out ideas as they take shape. It's a revealing glimpse into a mind constantly in motion, brimming with thoughts that seem to spill onto the page as quickly as they form. Watching him shift gears is almost dizzying; he bounces effortlessly from one topic to the next, barely pausing for breath. With his natural storytelling instincts and magnetic presence, it's no surprise he has carved out such a successful career.

Having joined BBC Radio 1 in 1987, Campbell is well versed in the art of treading the fine line between political and personal neutrality. When asked whether it's ever difficult to maintain impartiality while hosting his phone-ins, Campbell is unwavering. He sees impartiality as both a "professional" and "moral duty", a core principle of the BBC: to listen to and fairly represent all sides.

"I take pride in it," he says, admitting that he relishes the moments when he's criticised for supposedly holding an opinion that, in reality, is "diametrically opposed to my own". "I love it," he says. "I love it because it means I'm doing my job right."

Language has always been central to Campbell's career, and *Don't Say a Word*, which is due to be released in May, delves even deeper into its power. The show will explore the ever-evolving boundaries of language, culture, and what is considered acceptable in today's society.

"It's a mark of a progressive, liberal society that we think about things as properly as ever," Campbell says of the podcast, which will see him and his guests tackle controversial topics, questioning who gets to decide what can and can't be said.

"We make allowances for certain people," he says. "Take Roald Dahl. He's deeply loved, a huge part of people's childhoods; he was also a vile antisemite. If someone else had said the same things without that legacy, they wouldn't have the time of day. And there are examples of that right across the board."

The question of who gets held to account – and who doesn't – is one that Campbell has grappled with in a far more personal way. In 2022 he shook the airwave after revealing, live on his phone-in show, that he was sexually and physically abused at the Edinburgh Academy, then a private boys' boarding school, in the 1970s.

This personal revelation led to a much larger national conversation, and three years later, it is the seed at the heart of another recent podcast from Campbell. *How Boarding Schools Shaped Britain*, released in February of this year, examines how these age-old institutions moulded our country's leaders, for better and for worse, and the ▶

trauma they inflicted on so many young men. The show represents the end of a monumental three-year saga where Campbell found himself as the subject of the news rather than a reporter.

What followed the pivotal phone-in was a cascade of other victims reaching out, testimonies in court, and months of sleeping tablets. "It was an extraordinary time, an extraordinary sense of solidarity, life-changing," says the Scot, in his fading accent, "but not without cost."

Right from the moment we sat down, Campbell was open, imploring us to go with "anything we want to ask". By his own admission, he is "quite practised" in talking about these topics. At times, it feels like Campbell is reciting a well rehearsed script, uttering phrases that he has used regularly throughout the last few years on various podcasts since airing the allegations – "it was like someone had told the grownups". It's as though years of leaden weight are being lifted from his shoulders.

This isn't surprising. Campbell has become something of a conduit, a lightning rod, through which other people have been able to speak about their experiences for the first time. "A lot of stuff has been coming through me the last few years. I've been speaking to people [about their abuse] and I'm not trained to do that. It's been, really, really tiring."

In 2022, after he first went public about the abuse he suffered at the hands of one former teacher, Hamish Dawson (who was already dead), he opened up the lines inviting callers to discuss their experiences for the first time. Campbell still receives emails regularly from schoolmates and strangers, some of whom go on to become friends, others he never hears from again; he accepts that whilst some people "want to go there", others don't.

He finds it energising. "You're talking, you're lifting burdens," he says, the pace of his voice increasing, "you're energised by the fact that you're pointing people in the right direction."

It was not his intention to start a campaign, Campbell says, when he first spoke about it on air. Rather, it was a story, like any other, that needed to be told. Campbell's initial focus wasn't on his own alleged abuser Dawson, but on another former teacher, Iain Wares. (Wares has denied the accusations from former pupils and now faces extradition from South Africa.)

"I didn't suffer from his sexual abuse, though I saw it in very close quarters," Campbell says, gesturing to the metre of space between us. "As a journalist, I saw that happening, I witnessed it," he further alleges. "I had a kind of journalistic focus and

"It's heinous illegality that wrecks lives"

I still have that objectivity."

The troubling fact, however, is that Campbell was no seasoned journalist at the time, but a small boy. In all the years since the alleged crimes, Campbell had only really discussed it with his wife until he heard journalist Alex Renton's 2022 podcast *In Dark Corners*, which shone a light on abuse in elite schools including the Edinburgh Academy. Renton's storytelling unlocked something for Campbell, and then, shouldering the duty bestowed upon him by his microphone, he told a story that would open up dark corners in the hearts of men up and down the country.

"It's the power of being able to communicate stuff to people. I was just in a position where I had a microphone. That's the power of radio." Campbell also considers whether he used his show as a "Trojan Horse" for his feelings. "I've only thought about it like that just now for the first time," Campbell says, seemingly computing this in real time.

Sat in the chair, about to go live, Campbell hadn't fully considered, consciously at least, the Pandora's box he was about to open. "I was about to say, 'I need to speak to you about stuff that happened in school,'" the words clearly cemented firmly into his mind, but it wasn't until the name of his abuser left his lips that he realised "that this was actually about what I went through, and this was going to become significant." Nevertheless, he felt, maybe rightly so, that in order to ask callers to share their experiences, he had to discuss something he had also never shared.

The years since have been complicated, with each moment of connection stirring up something new. For an episode of his podcast *Different*, Campbell sat down with Jenny Pearson, Dawson's daughter, for a conversation that was as emotional as it was profound, earning a nomination for *Radio Times* Moment of the Year. "She carried a great deal of baggage herself from her parents," he recalls. "I came out of [the conversation], rang up a friend [at] about one o'clock," he says, laughing, "and said, 'Can we get pissed?'"

Technically, this was not the first time Campbell had gone public about the abuse he suffered. His 2004 book, *Blue-Eyed Son: The Story of an Adoption*, traces the journey to Ireland to track down his birth mother, Stella Lackey, who fled to Edinburgh, pregnant and unmarried. Frank and Sheila Campbell adopted baby Nicky nine days later. Campbell devoted just a page to the abuse he suffered at school but "nobody took a blind bit of notice". Readers skim over a page like a second in a day; it isn't enough to digest the enormity of what happened.

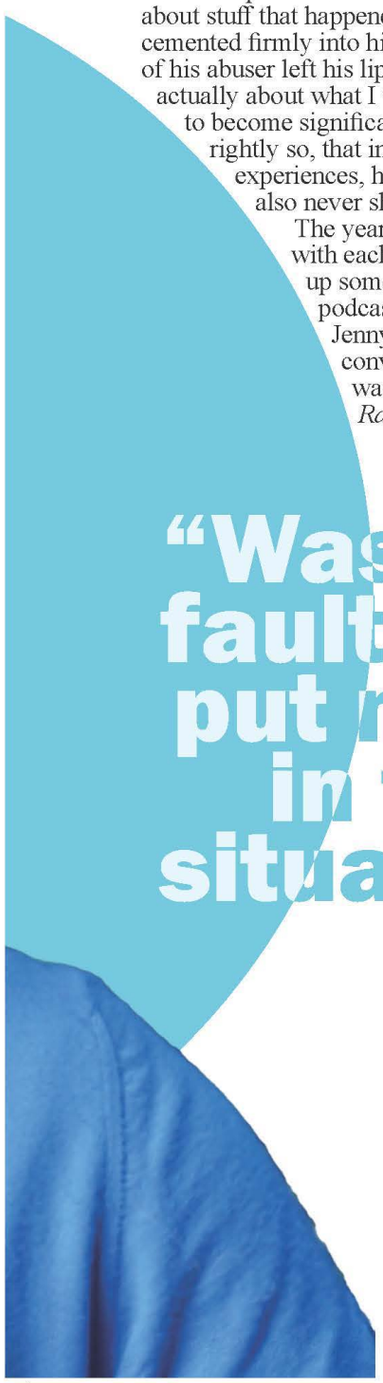
Then, there's the shame. "Was it my fault? Did I put myself in that situation? Why was I lying on his lap? That sort of victim blaming can be self-blaming as well when you're a little boy." Campbell talks about how some people prefer the term "survivors". He scrawls down the words "victim" and "survivor" in black ink in his notebook, looking down at the page, circling each one frantically.

"[It] has an effect on you, ongoing in lots of ways, some of which are quite deep." One shouldn't create a hierarchy of abuse – this is something Campbell knows – but he views himself as fortunate. There were "incidents", but as a day pupil he avoided the "industrialisation" of abuse that his peers in the boarding houses experienced.

For a long time, it wasn't something he was able to discuss, but at that time, the world wasn't ready. "Even 20 years ago [when *Blue-Eyed Son* was written] people were like 'Oh well, shit happens.' It was crossing the Rubicon and doing it on the podcast that I knew would make waves."

It's this blending of personal and professional that always makes journalism the best it can be. But "this is not journalism you have to be impartial about," Campbell says, bringing us back to where we began. "It's ▶

"Was it my fault? Did I put myself in that situation?"



Photos provided by BBC

heinous, absolute illegality that wrecks lives," the passion breaking through his voice before he reins himself back in, as he explains that the BBC were incredibly careful to double check their legal position before broadcasting. This degree of restraint is not always easy to accept. "It was frustrating [not naming some abusers], because I saw it, I saw it, I fucking saw it," he says, the 60-year-old opposite us transforming just for a second into that terrified little boy.

Despite its flaws and a blur of changes over the decades, Campbell thinks the fundamentals of the BBC remain the same: good journalism, honesty, and integrity. "I think authenticity is what we strive for, and sometimes achieve," he says.

"It's a hostage to fortune, the BBC treads very difficult lines on that"

One gets the feeling that the BBC holds a place close to the broadcaster's heart. Though he encourages open questions, when we ask about the future of this national behemoth, Campbell is guarded. He wonders how long the licence model will last, he worries what would no longer be programmed with a subscription model, but ultimately, "it's, it's not for me to say," he stutters. "I'm proud of the BBC, if you want "impartial", it is as good as it gets."

Campbell insists that when he and his colleagues walk into their editorial meetings, everyone "drops their opinions at the door". There are, he admits, difficult topics, the situation in the Middle East being one issue which has caused the BBC trouble of late. "It's a really difficult one, anyone who says it's not complicated…" he trails off. "It's a hostage to fortune, the BBC treads very difficult lines on that."

After commanding the BBC airwaves in the morning, Campbell isn't one to spend his afternoons with his feet up – that's just not his style. Alongside preparing *Don't Say a Word*, Campbell's day is set to be packed, matching his boundless energy. Today, he plans to write, compose music – something he finds "very relaxing" – and juggle a few personal projects. "I'm writing a speech for my wife's [Christina Ritchie, also a journalist] 60th," he says, "and also creating a game show with my daughter, who works in television." His four daughters, all in their twenties, keep him busy, but he wouldn't have it any other way. "I always have something to do," he says, clearly thriving on the rhythmic chaos of it all.

Back in the restaurant, as our 90-minute conversation winds down, Campbell seems to be tiring and snaps his notebook shut, slipping it into his leather satchel, his pages of scribbles and profound thoughts disguised as idle doodles. Rising from the table, he booms a cheerful "thank you" to the staff, flashing a broad smile and offering a theatrical wave. As we descend in the lift, heading back to the busy streets, Campbell pulls out his phone, instantly locked onto a new task, another idea demanding his attention.

Before stepping into the warm March afternoon, Campbell lingers in the foyer to thank the staff once more. He shakes our hands and then pauses, as if to say something, before spinning on his heels, off to follow his next train of thought. ■

Photo: Nicky Campbell