NOVEMBER 2021 EDITION

THE RTD ERA SONIC SCREWDRIVERS

A COMPILED HISTORY

by

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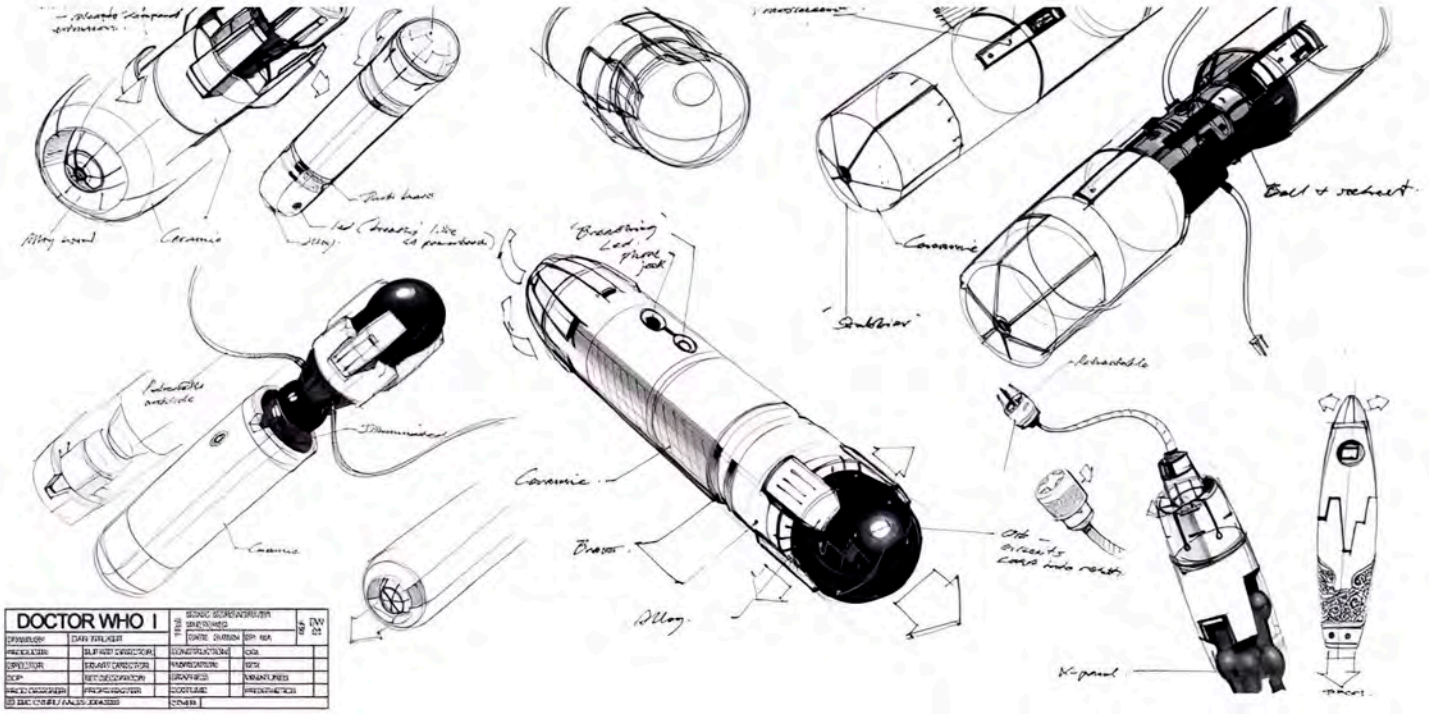
ORIGINAL CONCEPT ART

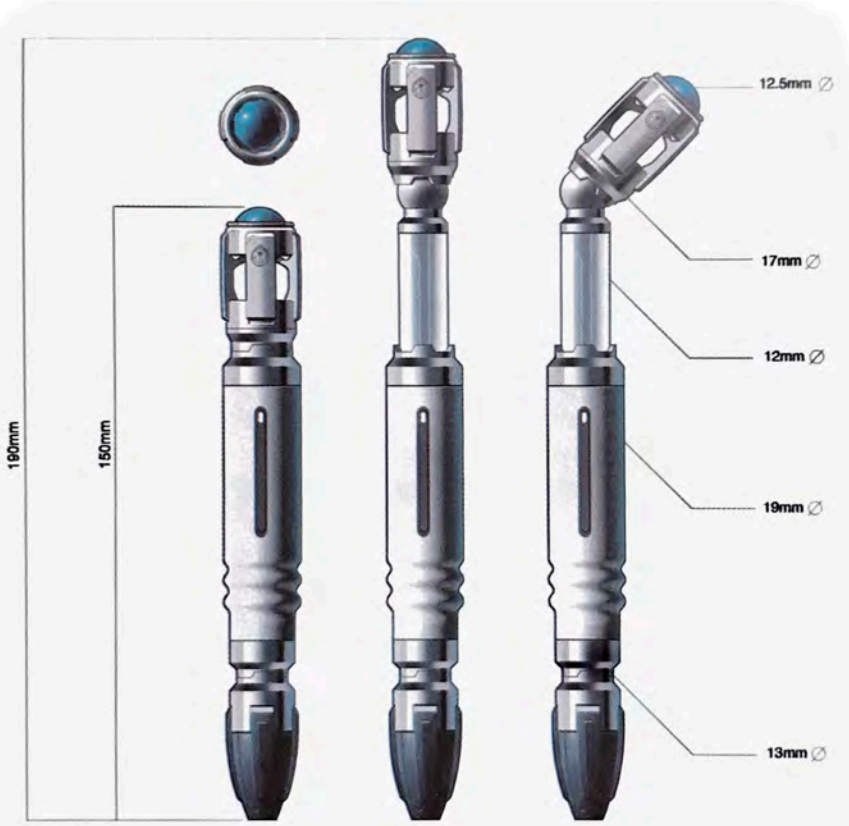
by DAN WALKER

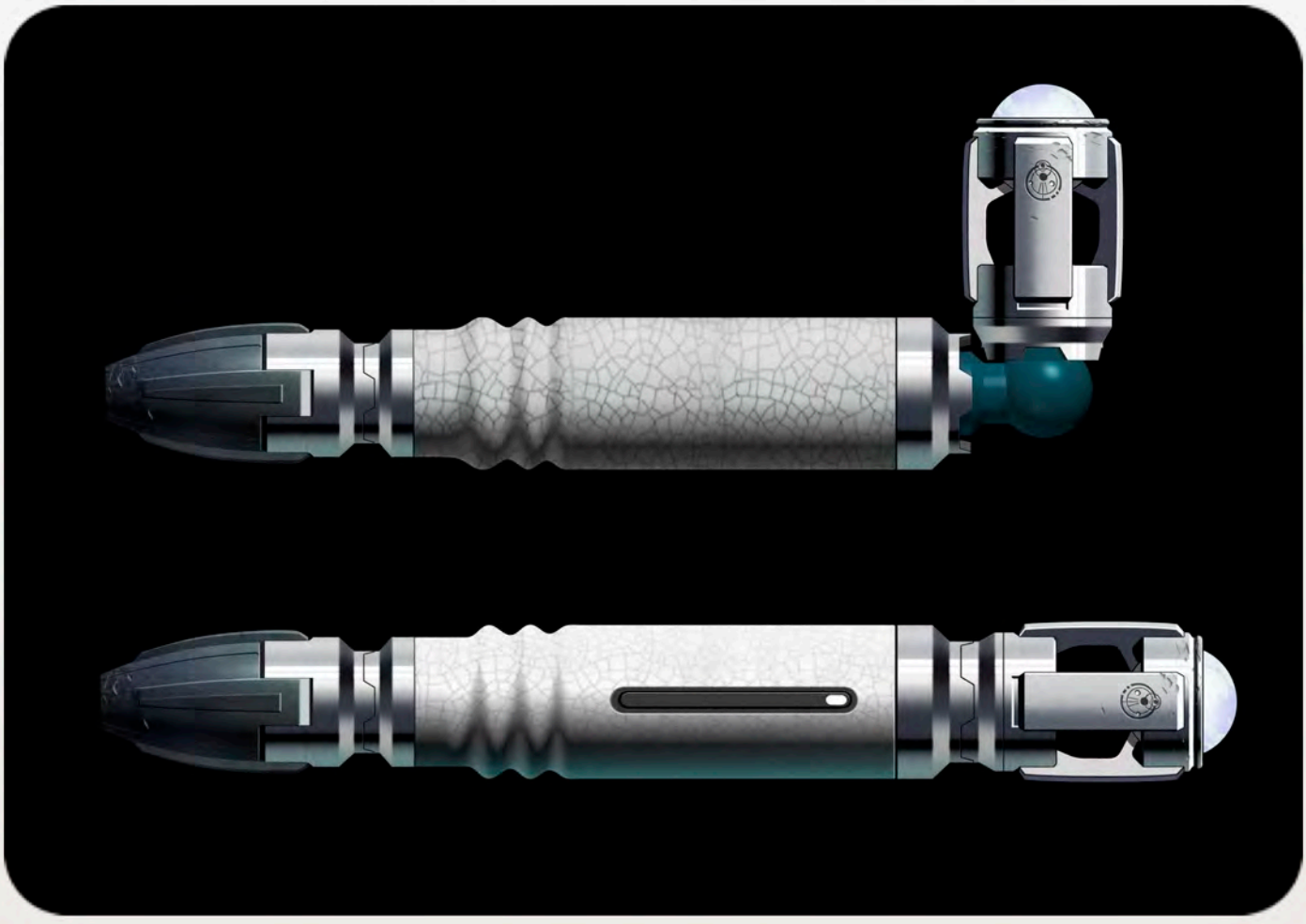


For the 2005 revival of Doctor Who, the Sonic Screwdriver was also revived and reimagined. The newly imagined Sonic Screwdrivers were designed by Dan Walker, and from these designs two filming props were made by Aztec Modelmakers. Because of this, fans have dubbed these sonics as "The Aztecs". To give the appearance that the Sonic Screwdriver was now an extension of the TARDIS, each prop was painted with a crackle finish that matched the surround of the TARDIS console. However, since the two props were made at different times, the crackle color differs between them.

The purpose of this write-up is to catalogue the introductions and changes to all versions of the Doctor's Sonic Screwdriver Hero Props, as seen in Series 1 through Series 4/The Specials, as well as briefly covering the alterations made for "The Eleventh Hour" in Series 5.

This file will also cover the replicas used for The 50th Anniversary Special; "The Day of the Doctor" (Series 7), as well as the Series 10 episode, "The Pilot", which were also variations of Dan Walker's original design for the 2005 revival of Doctor Who.





THE CREAM AZTEC

SERIES 1, RECORDING BLOCK 1

As previously stated, Aztec Modelmakers machined two Sonic Screwdriver props for Series 1, based off of Dan Walker's concept art. The two Aztec props were very similar in design, however they weren't exactly identical to each other. Because of this, each version of the Aztec will get its own section in this write-up in order to better illustrate the differences between them.

The first Aztec prop was finished by August 2004, and has become known as the Cream Aztec; a name derived from the color of its handle. The color itself being a combination of the top layer Colony Cream Plastikote crackle finish, and the gold base coat underneath, giving the handle a beige, or cream colored finish. The concept behind this paint finish was to make the Sonic Screwdriver feel like it was part of the TARDIS by matching the coral/crackle finish of the TARDIS console. Although the Plastikote is a crackle finish paint, the crackle effect is actually more vein-like than the cracked porcelain look we would later see on many of the Sonic props made for the Tennant era.

Although the Cream Aztec was made as an extending prop, it is never actually seen with the emitter section extended. In all of its screen time, and BTS photographs, the emitter head is only seen in the closed position, or with the emitter teeth separated by a small gap. Because of this fact, we can only theorize that it had red and black wires like its Grey counterpart.

BBC PHOTOGRAPH

Due to their solid body design, the Aztec props were notoriously problematic, as Christopher Eccleston noted on the Jonathan Ross Show in 2005: "We had a bit of trouble with the sonic". One of those troubles was that the internal design of the prop left the wires vulnerable to breakage. While another issue was that the batteries were hard to change, as the collar and aluminum end were held in place with glue. We can see the prop held with glue in the scene where the Doctor deactivates the Auton arm in "Rose"; one of the earliest scenes filmed for Recording Block 1.

ROSE

Sometime during the filming of Recording Block 1, the Cream Aztec body was altered so that the collar and aluminum end-pieces were now held in place by two black retention grub screws; located on the side of the prop, directly opposite of the blue strip. These side grub screws are most clearly seen in "Aliens of London" when the Doctor is repairing the TARDIS console from underneath. Given what little screen time this prop had, we were lucky that Christopher Eccleston held the prop the way he did in this scene, as it revealed both of the grub screws, but not the blue strip; which would have been visible from this angle had the grub screws been placed on the back of the prop.

ALIENS OF LONDON

One of the original concept features of the Aztec Sonic Screwdriver saw the black end cap opening up and fanning out as legs for the base to act as a tripod/stand for hands free functionality. The same end piece was also originally intended to plug into the TARDIS console to recharge the sonic, or download data between adventures. While the tripod legs were dropped, due to difficulty in realizing the function on the actual filming prop, the 'plug in' feature was used at least once during the RTD era. In "Aliens of London," the Sonic Screwdriver can be seen plugged into the TARDIS console just behind the monitor, soon after the Doctor returns from Albion Hospital, when Jackie, Mickey, and Rose join him in the TARDIS.

ALIENS OF LONDON

The Cream Aztec was used throughout Recording Block 1 of Series 1, which consisted of "Rose", "Aliens of London", and "World War Three"; episodes 1, 4, and 5 respectively. After the recording of these three stories, the Colony Cream Aztec was never used again, at least not in its original configuration that is.

ALIENS OF LONDON

For Recording Block 2 of Series 1, more extensive modifications were made to the Cream Aztec. These alterations initially lead fans to believe that there was a third filming prop made for Series 1, when in fact it was actually just the revamped Cream Aztec prop all along. The modified Aztec prop became known to fans as "The Wide Slider," although, given this prop's origin, it should more accurately be named "The Wide Slider Aztec".

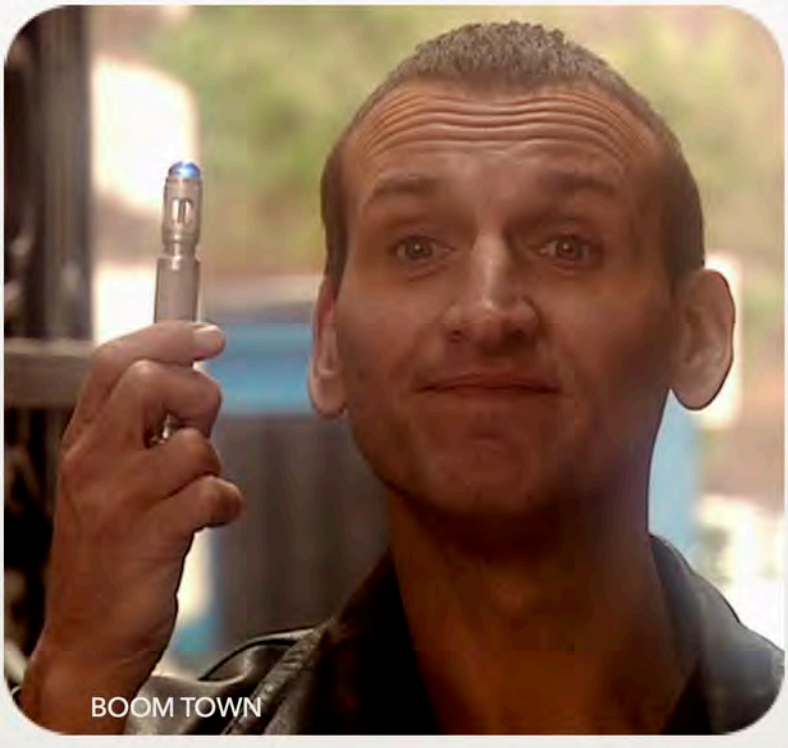
THE

WIDE SLIDER AZTEC

SERIES 1-2 | aka THE CREAM AZTEC Alterations Part 1

Although this version of the prop carries the name "The Wide Slider Aztec", it is actually the Cream Aztec prop, modified with a wide channel cut into the body, allowing the emitter head to be extended by simply sliding the microswitch up and down the slot, by thumb. This channel ran most of the length of the body, which is what originally earned this prop its fan given nickname. The modifications to this sonic were completed by October 2004, and the altered prop first appeared in this new form in Series 1, Episode 2, "The End of the World, which was the fourth episode of Series 1 to be filmed.

With no official word from Aztec Modelmakers, it has been difficult to get confirmation as to whether or not the modifications were carried out by Aztec Modelmakers themselves, or if they were done in house at the BBC. Whatever the case, it appears as though the Wide Slider Aztec was made to give Christopher Eccleston more versatility with the prop by allowing him to manually control the emitter length during a scene. The modded prop had also designed out the frailties of the Aztec props, by allowing the battery compartment to travel, self contained, within the handle.



BOOM TOWN

Although the prop was repainted after its conversion, the body dims and the side placed grub screws match perfectly with the Cream Aztec body, not to mention the fact that the Cream prop was never seen again after "World War Three". Although the ridges themselves do appear to have been altered during these modifications.

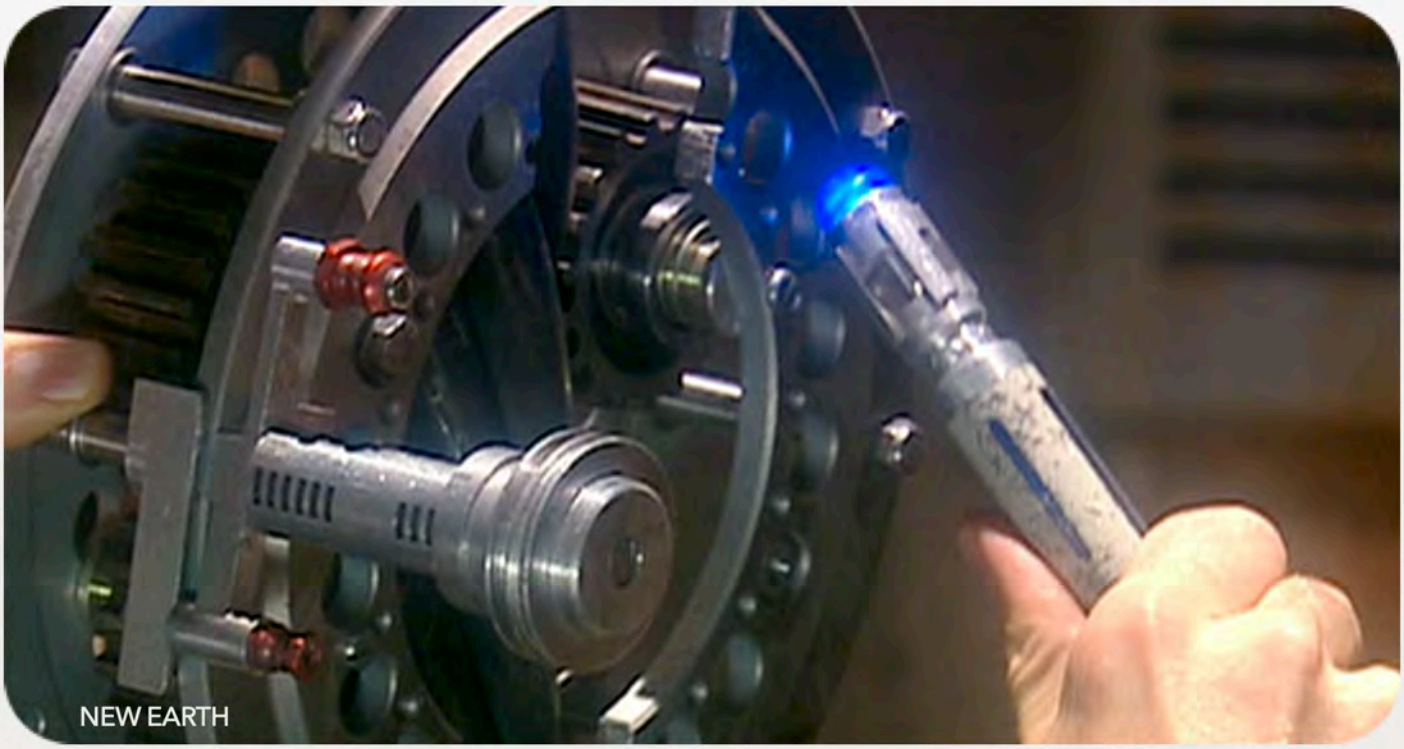
THE END OF THE WORLD

The Wide Slider handle was repainted with the same Colony Cream Plastikote crackle finish, only this time with a brown base coat, rather than gold. This combination of paints, the clear coat process, as well as various lighting conditions often gave the appearance of a grey finish. The Wide Slider Aztec would retain this new paint application all the way through to its final use in the episode "Doomsday", which was the ninth episode filmed for Series 2 as part of Recording Block 3, where the body can be seen with significant wear from use. For Recording Blocks 4, 5, and 6, it appears that only the Grey Aztec was used, based on detailed close up shots and the way that David Tennant typically would hold the Grey Aztec prop, in comparison to the Wide Slider Aztec.

There was one notable paint change that took place by "Bad Wolf" in Series 1; the two side retention grub screws seem to have been painted to blend in with the body paint of the sonic, while earlier in the series, they were black. Although for much of Series 2 the screws were black again, until "Doomsday", where they appear to have been painted once more.

As the Wide Slider Aztec was a functional prop, with a very clearly large slot in the middle, it was never meant to be the hero prop. The Grey Aztec was more aesthetically pleasing, and therefore was intended for use in the close-up, or glamour shots. However, as is often the case with functional or stunt props, the Wide Slider Aztec appeared in many close-ups, as it was the favored prop by both Christopher Eccleston and David Tennant during its time in the show, presumably due to its functionality.

BAD WOLF



NEW EARTH

While the Cream Aztec was given a new lease on life when it became the Wide Slider Aztec, it seems that this was not to be its final form. For Series 3 the prop would under go yet another major change when parts of it were repurposed, yet again, to make a new prop; The Tri-Slider Aztec , which would be used a handful of times throughout "The Runaway Bride" and Series 3.

THE GREY AZTEC

SERIES 1-3

The second prop made by Aztec Modelmakers - known as The Grey Aztec - was completed by August 2004, and differed from its counterpart in two big ways; First, the frame around the microswitch was much softer in appearance, with a wider, rounded edge boxed shape. Secondly, the body was painted in the same crackle finish as the Wide Slider Aztec, with the vein like Colony Cream Plastikote top layer, a brown base coat, and a protective clear coating, which together gave the sonic its grey appearance. Interestingly, the collar and the aluminum end pice on the Grey Aztec continued to be glued in place throughout Series 1 & 2, and it wasn't until Series 3 when the production added two slotted screws to the the back of the body, to better secure them in place for repairs or battery replacement. Although it had been speculated that the screws were always there, and that they were used to set the emitter length at various levels, this theory was debunked, thanks to a nice close look at the prop from a Series 2 photoshoot.

The Grey Aztec first appeared in "The End of the World" which was the second episode aired, but the fourth episode filmed for Series 1. Unlike the Cream Aztec, this version of the Sonic Screwdriver was used throughout the first three series of the Doctor Who revival, with only a couple of small modifications made to it for Series 3; as well as some heavy wear and tear due to years of use.

Both Aztec props (Cream Aztec/Wide Slider & Grey) had the emitter head aligned so that the space between the struts was centered with the activation button, although at a first glance of a 2004 production photo of the Grey prop, it appeared as though it could have been aligned differently, however this was actually not the case. A closer look reveals that the collar is set for an alignment with the space between the struts, which means that the emitter head had become twisted on the acrylic rod. This is also evident in various episodes from Series 1 through 3, where the Grey Aztec emitter head is offset from the collar alignment; which always stays true to the space between the struts. It should be noted that the two prop's body dimensions subtly differed from each other as these props were machined made by hand.

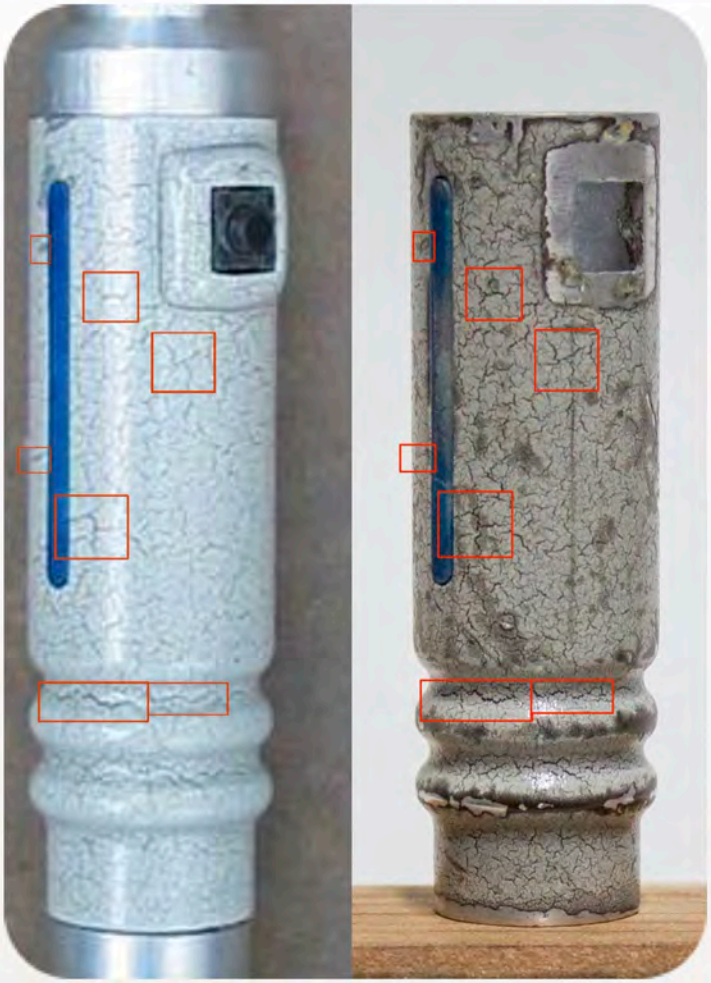
THE END OF THE WORLD

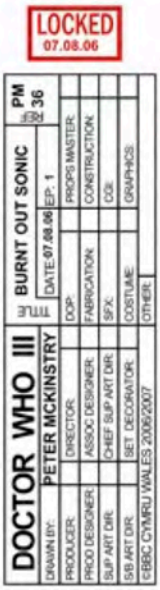
FREEMA AGYMAN'S BACKSTAGE TOUR

In early 2018, the original Grey Aztec body went up for sale by a private owner. In an effort to prove the lineage of the sonic part, the new owner - Brian Uiga - compared photos of the body in its current state to the 2004 BBC Photograph of the Grey Aztec Sonic. This comparison brought to light an interesting fact about the prop; even though the surviving body had significant wear, such as bare metal areas, black grime from hand oils and use, and the missing button frame, the aged Aztec body matched perfectly with the 2004 photos - crackle line, for crackle line. This side by side comparison proved that the Grey Aztec prop had never been repainted from its introduction in Series 1, through to its final use in the end of Series 3.

2018 AUCTION

Below are some comparisons between original production photos of the Grey Aztec prop, and the Grey Aztec handle from when it was sold at auction in 2018. From left to right, they are: the 2004 photo of the Grey Aztec, "The Runaway Bride" promotional photoshoot, and a still from "Human Nature".





Since we now know that the Grey Aztec was never repainted, the only intentional alterations to the prop took place for the filming of the Series 3. These changes were first seen in the Christmas Special; "The Runaway Bride", and were retained throughout the filming of Series 3. These included the previously mentioned addition of the slotted screws on the back - which had been confirmed thanks, again, to the Series 2 photoshoot showing worn paint, but no screw holes in the area where the screws would later be placed. In addition to that, the black & red wires were replaced with two yellow wires, while the acrylic rod had either begun to crack or frost, or was replaced as well. Lastly, the aluminum end section had been shortened on the top, where it meets the handle; most clearly seen in the still from "Human Nature" on the previous page, and in the burnt out sonic concept art by Peter McKinstry above, from "Smith and Jones"; which used a photo of the actual prop as a base.

SERIES 2 PHOTOSHOOT

SERIES 3 PHOTOSHOOT

SERIES 3 PHOTOSHOOT

In Series 3 it's clear to see how significant the wear on the prop truly became. Aside from the paint wear previously mentioned; the emitter head appears to have been hot glued in place with the teeth misaligned; from "Human Nature" through to the end of the Series. The emitter cage had large nicks on two of the struts - also seen in Series 2, and the micro switch frame had fallen off by the time of recording "The Lazarus Experiment", which was the fifth episode filmed, leaving a bare metal patch, where it used to be attached. The frameless button can also be seen in "The Runaway Bride" promotional photos; however these images project a false timeline, according to Will Brooks, who tracked down the original photographs. Will discovered that Catherine Tate was photographed separately, just two weeks prior to David Tennant, whose shots were taken during the filming of "Daleks In Manhattan". To clarify the timeline a bit, while "Daleks in Manhattan" & "Evolution of the Daleks" aired prior to "The Lazarus Experiment", and the frame can be seen missing in these episodes, the two part story was actually recorded after Lazarus was filmed.

THE SOUND OF DRUMS

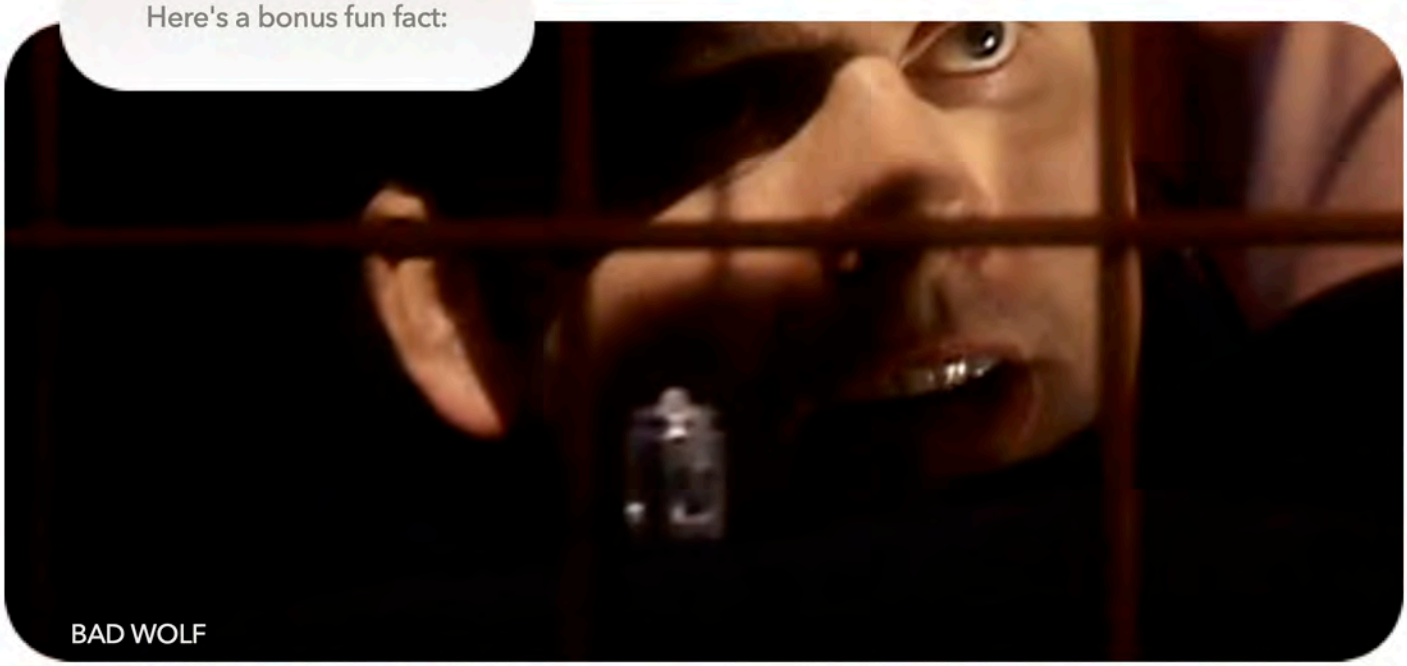
SERIES 3 PHOTOSHOOT

HUMAN NATURE

THE LAZARUS EXPERIMENT

Despite its battered appearance, the Grey Aztec was still used as the main sonic prop for David Tennant throughout Series 3, sharing some screen time with the Tri-Slider Aztec. Although the Grey Aztec was last used in the Series 3 story "Last of the Time Lords", parts of it were later harvested by Nick Robatto to make one of the two Robatto Props for Series 4.

Here's a bonus fun fact:



BAD WOLF

BAD WOLF

It appears as though Christoper Eccleston had a bit of a Tom Baker moment during "Bad Wolf" with the Grey Aztec. Many may recall the famous story from Tom Baker's first episode - "Robot" - where he pulled the sonic out of his jacket, and the emitter ring assembly had fallen off inside his pocket, which forced him to use the prop without it, in order save them the trouble of reshooting the scene. Similarly, "In Bad Wolf" after the Doctor, Jack, and Lynda are arrested, an officer pulls the Sonic Screwdriver from the Doctor's pocket and asks "What is the purpose of this device, sir?", as he does this it's clear to see that the emitter bulb is missing, presumably having fallen off in Eccleston's pocket, with the LED seen sticking out of the emitter head. While no ad-libbing was needed in this case, the similarities were too fun not to mention, and with the wonder of editing, the bulb was back on the prop in the very next shot.

THE

TRI-SLIDER AZTEC

SERIES 3 | aka THE CREAM AZTEC Alterations Part 2

The Tri-Slider Aztec - named because of the three screw heads on its slider plate - was first used by David Tennant as the main sonic prop for the 2006 Christmas Special; "The Runaway Bride", with the Grey Aztec as the secondary prop. Little is known of the exact origin of this prop unfortunately, although the handle was still in Nick Robatto's workshop as of January 2013, with what appears to be a stand-in resin emitter head and collar attached. Nick has worked on the series since 2004 as a prop maker, and has been responsible for making all of the Sonic Screwdrivers since "Voyage of the Damned" through to the Thirteenth Doctor's Era, as of the time of writing this piece.

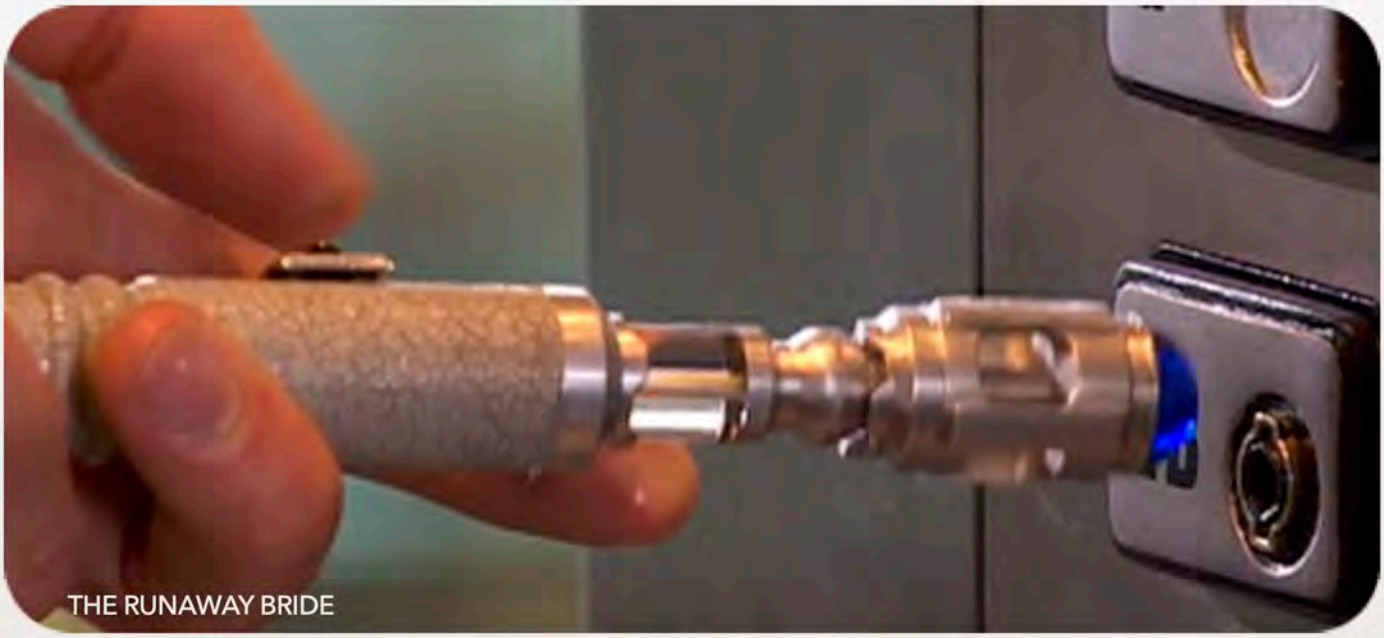
Since Nick had the body in his possession, I reached out to him to see what he could tell me. According to him, the Tri-Slider Aztec was made by Mark Cordory, who also worked on the show as a prop and set maker since 2004. However, when I contacted Mark, he could only recall making resin stunt props of the Sonic Screwdriver - one of which can be clearly seen in "The Lazarus Experiment" - but had no recollection of ever working on the Tri-Slider prop. Although the true maker of this prop remains a mystery to us, we were still able to piece together a pretty solid history on this Sonic, never the less.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY NICK ROBATTO

After going over each episode of Series 3, it became clear that the two scenes previously thought to use the Wide Slider prop, had actually turned out to have been the Tri-Slider, and the Grey Aztec instead. This knowledge allowed more puzzle pieces to fall into place, and it became apparent that the Cream/Wide Slider Aztec was once again repurposed to make yet another variation of the prop. This finally explained where the emitter head, ball joint, collar, and black end cap came from to make the Tri-Slider prop, but recently it was discovered that those weren't the only parts that were reused...

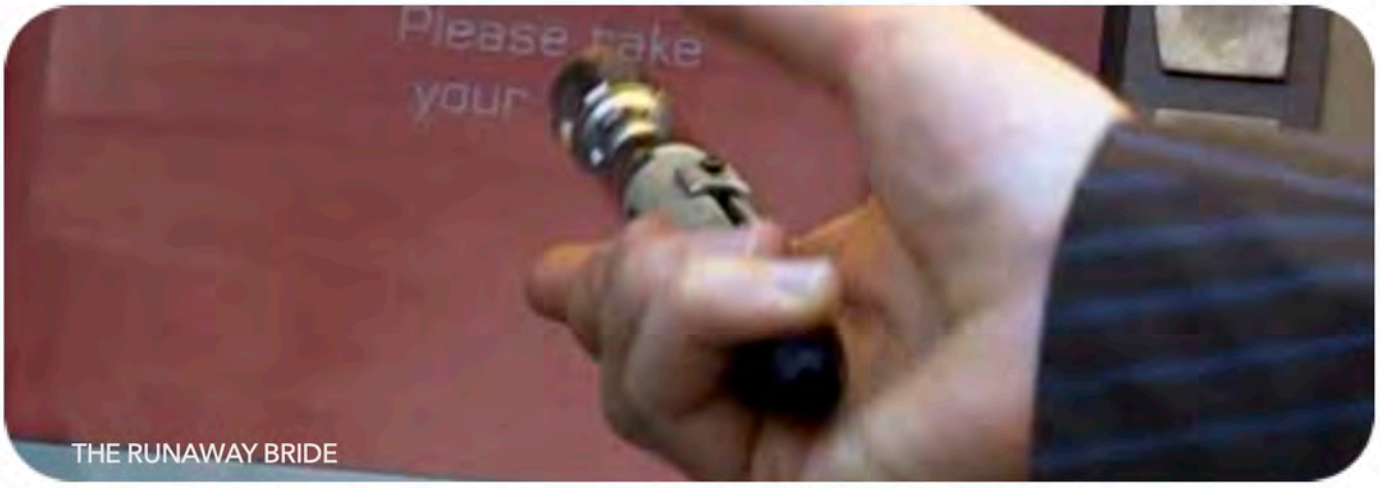
In October of 2021, James Sutton - aka Scarecrow Props, and Sonicbolt Props presented me with a new discovery they had made when they overlaid their CAD wire frame of the Cream Aztec body, as well as the modified Wide Slider body, overtop of the Tri-Slider handle. While the handle ridges were clearly altered, once again, as they appear more square edged, all of the body dimensions matched exactly with the Cream Aztec and the Wide Slider body, proving that the production team did not machine a new handle for the Tri-Slider.

So if the body is the same as the Wide Slider Aztec, how do we account for the lack of the wide slot? The theory is this; the prop was modified using milliput, or something similar, to fill the wide slider channel, which necessitated them recreating the portion of the ridges that were cut through, and thereby reshaping the ridges altogether on the handle, when they sanded or filed the milliput into shape. Once this was completed, they then used the existing blue strip section as a guide for a new, slimmer slider channel to be cut in. This meant that the side placed grub screws were naturally rotated to the back of the prop, as the new "blue strip" slider channel had now become the front of the prop. From there they milled in a new, slightly wider, blue strip, and then modified the internal battery compartment with a unique square/rectangular slider plate. This new slider plate was seemingly held in place with two embedded slotted screws, positioned on either side of the activation button; which itself was also a slotted screw; hence the name "Tri-Slider Aztec".



THE RUNAWAY BRIDE

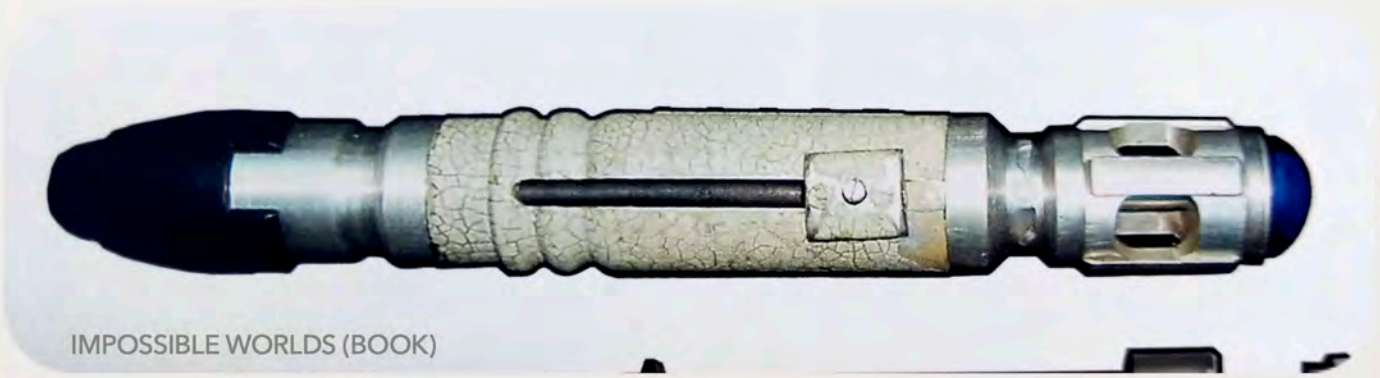
In "The Runaway Bride", the activation screw is larger than to the two screws on either side of it. Although it is a steel screw, it sometimes appears black, due to the way it reflects light. For the rest of Series 3, this screw was replaced with a smaller one, this time of the same diameter as other two screws in the slider plate.



THE RUNAWAY BRIDE

PHOTOGRAPHED BY NICK ROBATTO

Aside from the battery compartment and slider plate, the only other newly construction body parts would be the aluminum end-piece, which now had a much wider diameter at its narrowest area, when compared with the original Aztec sonics. The changes don't stop there, however, as the handle was now painted with a lighter grey crackle finish, this time looking more liked cracked porcelain than the vein-like pattern seen on the previous three variations. The emitter cage clearly doesn't sit all the way down on the ball joint any-longer, as we can now see a of couple millimeters of the top of the ball section. Lastly, the Tri-Slider Sonic was fitted with yellow wires within a frosted channel, through the center of the acrylic rod.



IMPOSSIBLE WORLDS (BOOK)

It should be noted that the Tri-Slider prop, as well as a couple of scenes in the Series 3 opener; "Smith and Jones", had caused some confusion as to when the two Robatto props were actually first used in the show. The two scenes in question involve the in-story destruction of the Doctor's Sonic Screwdriver, where the sonic - represented by the Grey Aztec - was destroyed after the Doctor used it to enhance the radiation output of a medical x-ray unit in order to stop a Slab from attacking him and Martha. Of course the "destroyed" sonic in the scene was only a resin stand-in made with battle damage, and not the real Aztec prop.

The second scene takes place at the end of the same episode where the Doctor tells Martha that he has made himself a new Sonic Screwdriver, and then causally flips the prop in the air. Because of the "destruction" of the sonic, and the Doctor's declaration of making himself a "new" one, many believed that the Series 4 Robatto props were introduced in Series 3 for "Smith and Jones", however this is not the case. When the Doctor show's off his new sonic to Martha, three screw heads on the boxy slider plate can just be made out as he flips it in the air, indicating that the "new" sonic was actually the Tri-Slider Aztec prop, which was used for the first time just one episode before.

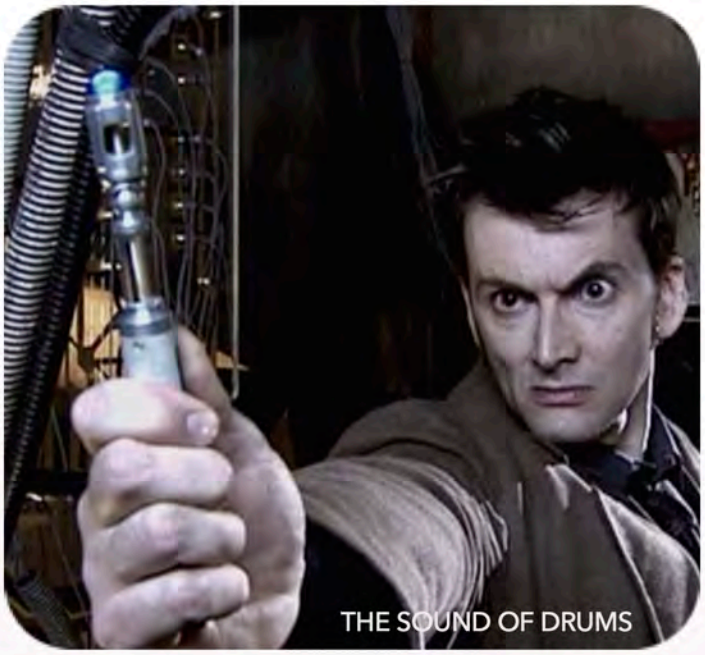
SMITH AND JONES

SMITH AND JONES

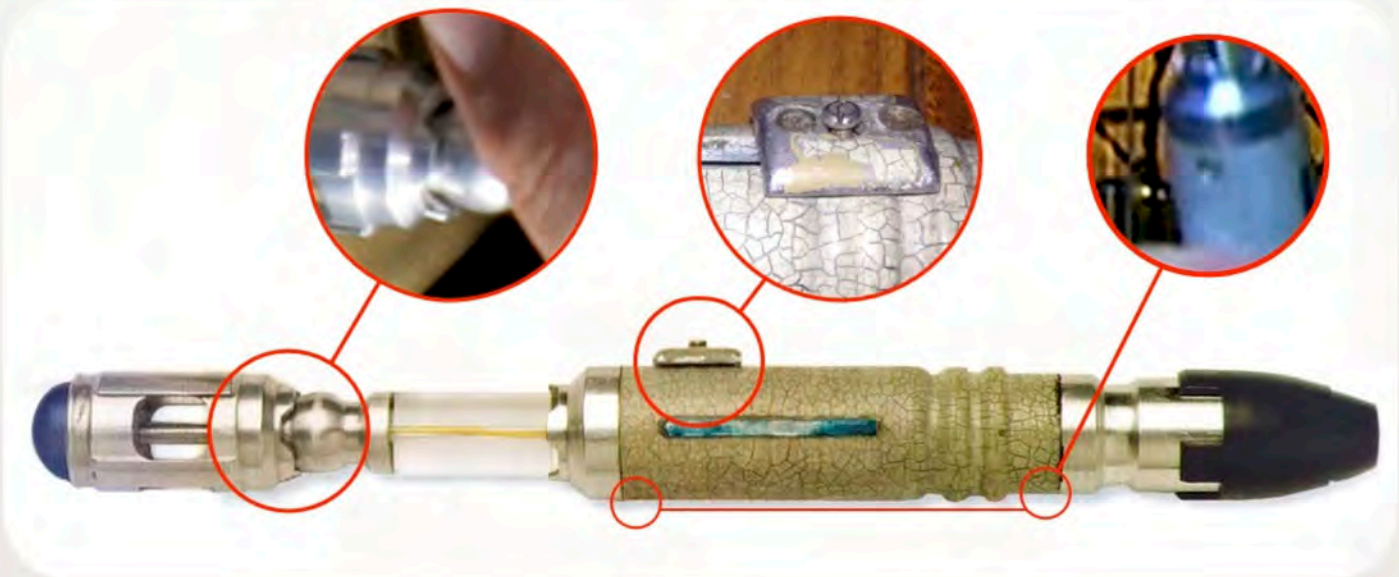
In fact, when taking a closer look at the individual scenes, it's apparent that the most used sonic prop for Series 3 was actually the Grey Aztec; looking the worse for wear, with the Tri-Slider prop appearing only a handful of times as a secondary prop. Given that the Grey Aztec was the main sonic for Series 3, it becomes evident that these scenes in "Smith and Jones" were never intended to explain any change in appearance of the sonic prop. They couldn't even have been meant to explain the yellow wires, as they were very visibly seen on the Grey Aztec prior to the sonic's "destruction" as well.

The final appearance of the Tri-Slider Aztec was in "Utopia" when the Doctor used it to fuse the coordinates of the TARDIS, locking them permanently so that the Master could only travel between the year one hundred trillion and the last place the Tardis landed; present day Earth. While the front of the prop is not visible within the scene, it is still easy to tell which prop was used; since David extends the emitter head within the scene, this tells us that the prop used could only have been the Tri-Slider prop. This scene also revealed the grubs screws used to secure the collar and aluminum end, were replaced with silver grub screws when Tri-Slider prop was made.

UTOPIA

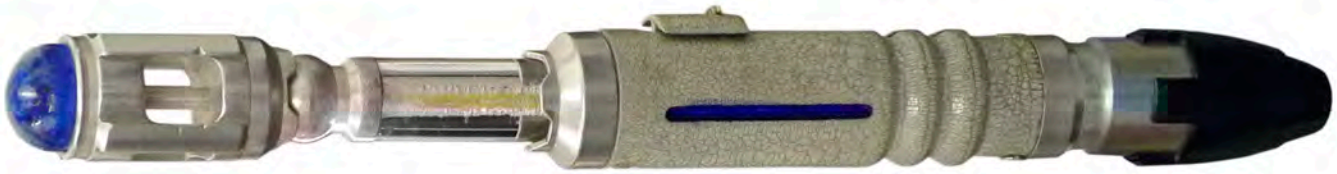

THE SOUND OF DRUMS

It could be argued that the final appearance of the Tri-Slider Aztec was actually in "The Sound of Drums", however as these shots were a flashback sequences from a scene in "Utopia", the last episode to film with the prop was of course, "Utopia". That said, while we have established the final use of this prop as a whole, a few parts of the Tri-Slider (once known as the Cream Aztec and the Wide Slider Aztec) were later used to make the second of the Series 4 Robatto hero props.



THE GREY ROBATTO

SERIES 4 - THE SPECIALS



For Recording Block 1 of Series 4, which consisted of the Christmas Special; "Voyage of the Damned", two new Sonic Screwdriver props were constructed by long time New Series prop maker; Nick Robatto. Since these new props were made by reusing existing parts from the original Aztec props, along with newly constructed components, each prop will be referred to by the parts that were recycled for their builds: The Cream Robatto, and The Grey Robatto.

This entry will largely focus on The Grey Robatto, in an effort to more easily track the alterations made during its usage in the show. It all starts with the 2007 Christmas Special, a timeline that we were able to pinpoint thanks to a special feature on the Series 3 DVD/Blu-ray boxset. In the special feature, Freema Agyeman takes us on a backstage Studio Tour of the BBC, including the props department, where we get our first proper look at the two newly made Robatto props. This tour would have taken place four months after Series 3 had wrapped filming.

VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED

While on the tour, Freema is excited to speak with Barry Jones - the Props Fabrication Manager - and says to him "You're revamping the Sonic or something, are you? I've heard.", to which Barry replies; "Yeah, um, Nick's (Robatto) been re-machining it." We then see a close up of the Cream Robatto sonic in its case, disassembled, and painted only in grey primer. Barry continues; "Its got an old body there" and then proceeds to pick up the old Grey Aztec body - the same one that surfaced for sale in 2018 - which is very worn and battered. He then says "You know, it's all got a little bit dog-eared where David's been throwing it around", followed by a montage of David Tennant using the various Aztec props (Grey, stunt, and destroyed resin) from Series 3.

After the montage, Barry continues again; "We are just in the process of just revamping it" and then he shows Freema the Grey Robatto sonic, from another case. This one is fully assembled, minus the blue bulb, and it is painted only with a grey primer, aside from the slider plate which is bare brass. He continues one last time; "and it's this little LED in there", which we can see is the usual clear blue LED that the other props have used before. Then Barry concludes, "And uh, so that's just gotta be painted now and the crackle grey put on it and what have you."

This last line is important, as Barry refers to the paint as "crackle grey". The actual paint used on the Robatto props in both Series 4 and The Specials was Aleene's Crackle paint, which is actually just a clear varnish top layer that dries into a cracked porcelain finish. The color of the handle is all based on the paint used under the crackle finish, and the accent wash to fill in the cracks. The paint is quite different to the Plastikote used on the Aztecs, in which the top crackle layer is a defined color. That said, both props were painted with a grey paint, and the overall finish started to yellow throughout filming Series 4 due hand oils, and buildup in the top coating. I say yellowed, but the end result was more of a beige tone to the grey finish.

In August of 2014, I had the chance to ask Nick Robatto what he remembered about making these props; According to him he reused many of the parts from the previous props, as well as other parts that he had constructed from scratch. For the Grey Robatto prop, Nick used the emitter cage, ball joint, collar, and black end-cap from the Grey Aztec. He then machined a new handle, battery compartment, slider plate, blue bulb, and the aluminum pommel end. When fully constructed, the Grey Robatto's head was aligned so that the space between the struts was centered with the slider plate. The activation button itself was a unique brass microswitch with the top cut flat. However the switch was either cut too short, or it had recessed from use, so they used a dab of glue on the button top, giving it a rounded top appearance, in order to help it protrude further out of the slider plate. The collar and pommel end were held in place with two black hex head grub screws. Much like the Tri-Slider Aztec before them, the Robatto props had two yellow wires that ran through a frosted channel, within the acrylic rod.

VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED

Since Nick machined the new parts by hand, the two handle bodies differ from each other in subtle ways. Most notably the ridge profiles. On the Grey Robatto prop, the ridges are softer, almost rounded, with a belled shape to the top of the ridges. While the blue strip section of both props were done the same way as they had been on the Aztec props; with a clear acrylic strip that had been painted with a translucent blue paint on the side attached to the body.

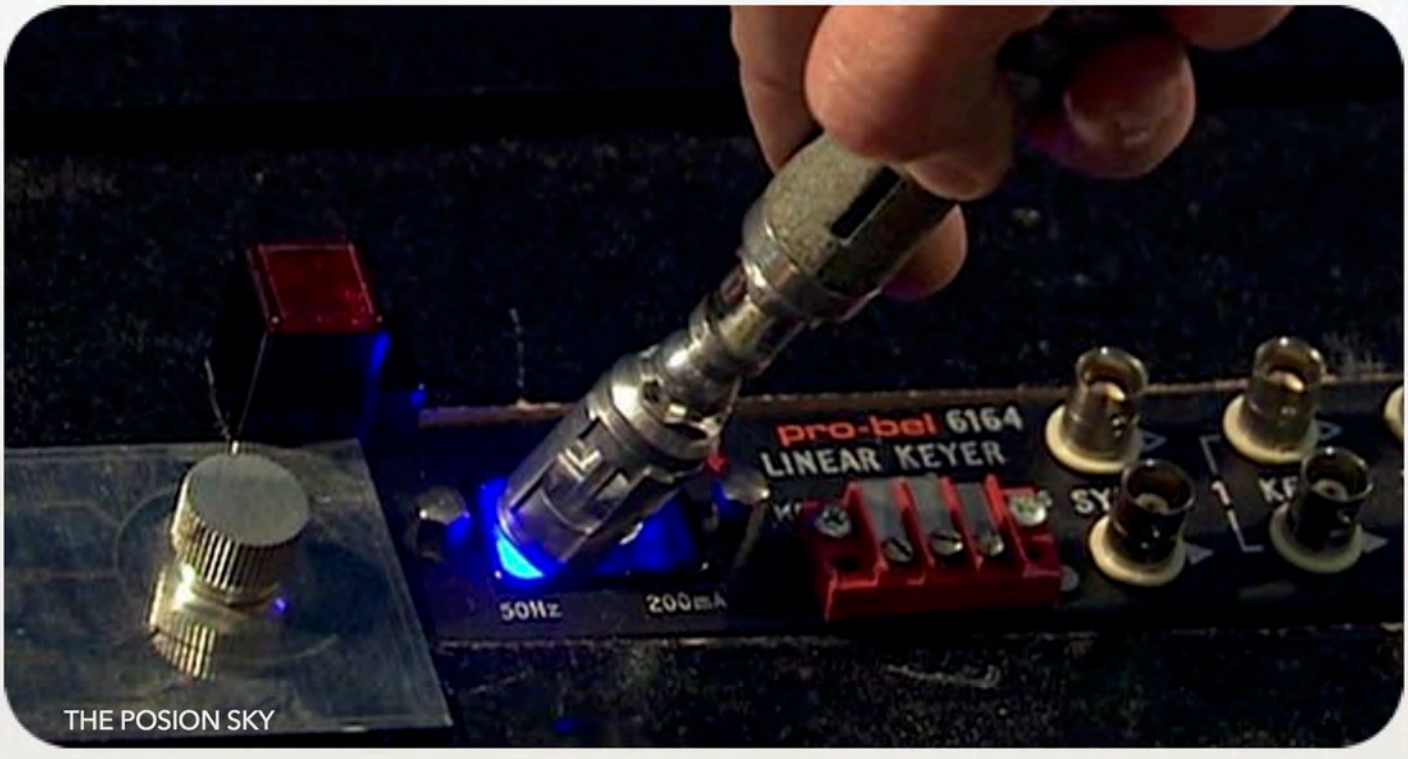
PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE WAND COMPANY

Although the design was inspired by the Tri-Slider prop, the Robatto props slimmed the slider channel even further, and reduced the size of the boxy aluminum Tri-Slider plate, opting instead for a more elegant curved brass plate.

FREEMA AGYEMAN'S STUDIO TOUR

SERIES 4 PHOTOSHOOT

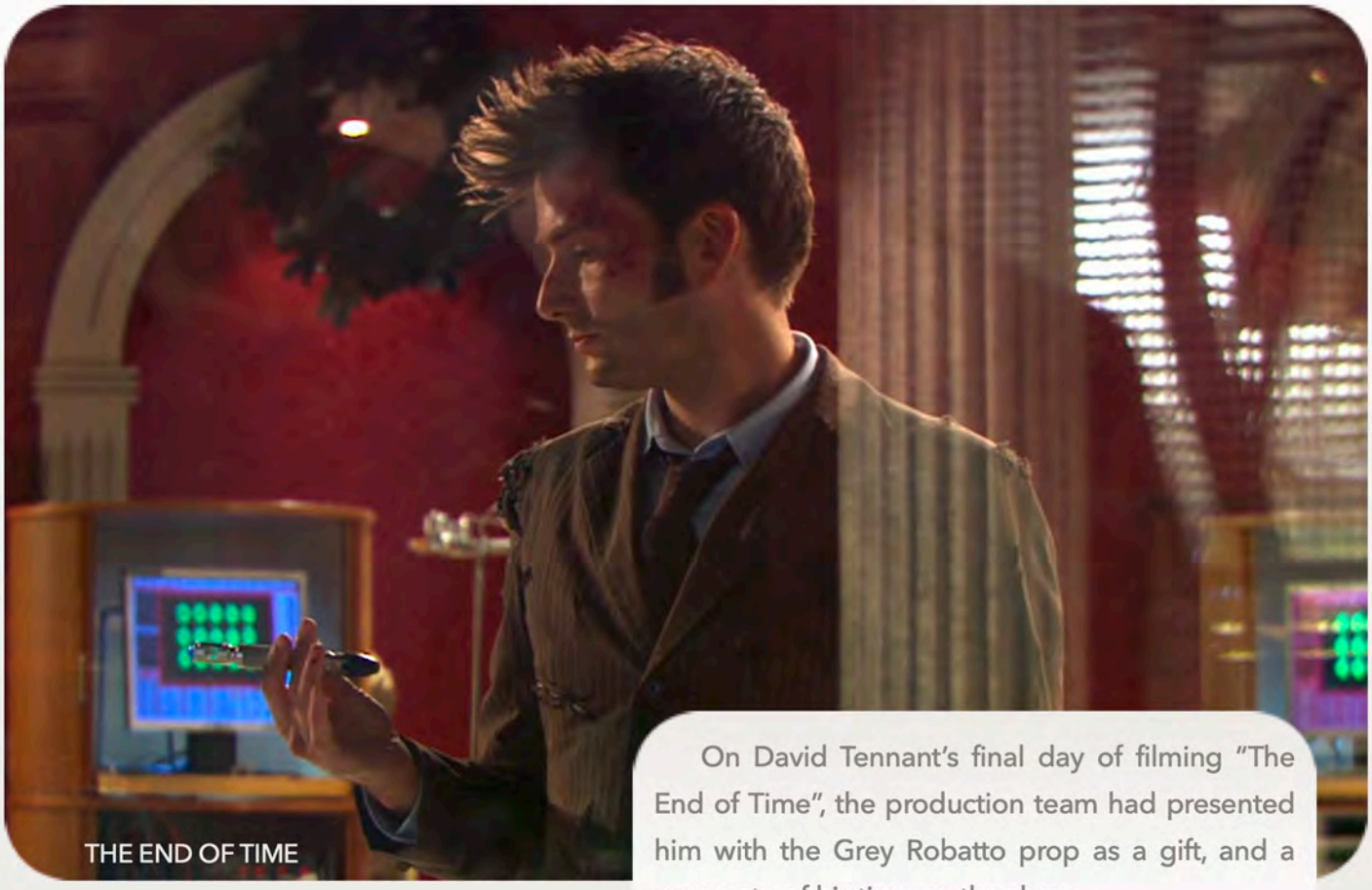
The two new Robatto props remained largely unchanged from their first use in "Voyage of the Damned" all the way through to the end of Series 4 for "Journey's End", and even then those changes were only due to wear and tear from use. In January 2008, a "Silence in the Library" photoshoot took place with David Tennant and Alex Kingston. Here the Grey Robatto prop can be seen with extensive wear to the ridges and body paint, with even the slider plate being almost completely bare metal, if not completely bare. And of course, the paint finish had darkened into the beige grey tone that can be made out in many episodes, such as "The Poison Sky".



THE POSION SKY

By April of 2008, a few alterations were made to each prop for the filming of "The Next Doctor", including a fresh coat of the crackle grey finish. A shared alteration between the Grey and Cream Robatto props, saw a small slotted screw added to the front of the prop, just bellow the slider plate, which can be seen in a behind the scenes photos of the Cream Robatto prop from "The Next Doctor". The back grub screws on the Grey prop were also replaced with slotted screws, and the top screw hole had been countersunk to allow the screw to recess into the handle, allowing it to be more flush with the body. These changes remained in place throughout the filming of the Specials.

VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED BTS PHOTO

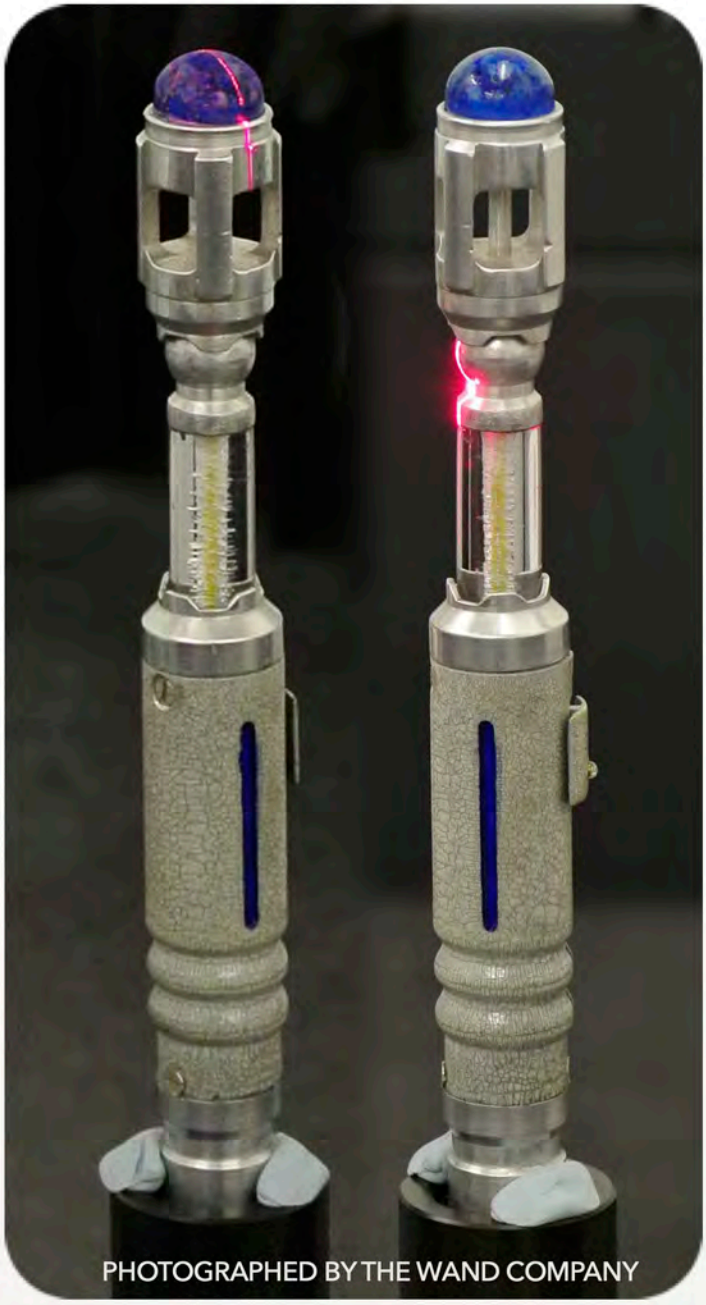


THE END OF TIME

On David Tennant's final day of filming "The End of Time", the production team had presented him with the Grey Robatto prop as a gift, and a memento of his time on the show.

In 2013 David lent this sonic to The Wand Company to be 3D scanned, in order to make the second officially licensed replica of the Tenth Doctor's Sonic Screwdriver; the Universal Remote Control. The Wand Company very kindly shared four high resolution pictures of the screen used prop on their website, where all of the alterations made for the Specials Year can be seen. Because of these photos, other details had become very clear, such as the crackle finish presenting as very fine cracks, rather than the larger cracks seen in Series 4. The pictures also confirmed Nick Robatto's recollection of reusing Aztec parts for the Tennant props, since the photo shows a clear view of two nicks in the emitter head struts. These same nicks are clearly seen on the Grey Aztec in Series 3 while the Doctor makes the Perception Filter TARDIS keys in Episode 12, "The Sound of Drums", as well as when Martha presented John Smith with the Grey Aztec in Episode 8, "Human Nature".

David Tennant rather wisely chose to keep the Grey Robatto prop safe while filming the 50th Anniversary special, so the production had to find a few alternate props to stand in for the iconic device. For more on those, see the MFX entry.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY THE WAND COMPANY

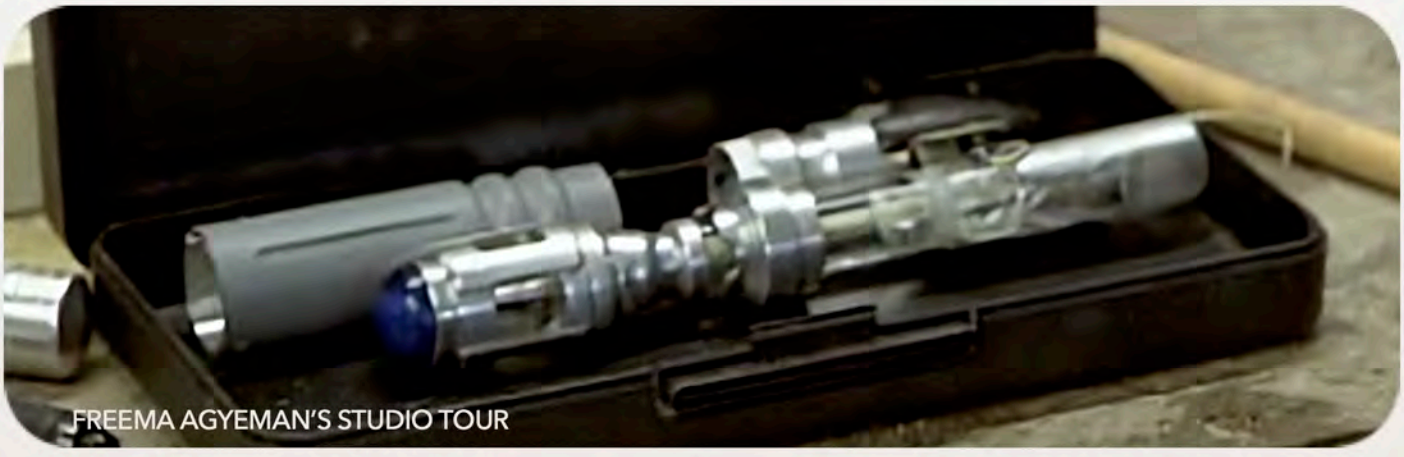
THE SOUND OF DRUMS / THE GREY AZTEC

THE CREAM ROBATTO

SERIES 4 - THE SPECIALS, THE SARAH JANE ADVENTURES, & SERIES 5

As has already been established, the two Robatto props were made together for the 2007 Christmas Special, "Voyage of the Damned", by Nick Robatto. Just as Nick had reused Grey Aztec parts to make the Grey Robatto prop, he had also repurposed parts from the Cream/Wide Slider/Tri-Slider Aztec to make the second Robatto sonic. Because of this fact, the second Sonic Screwdriver made by Nick Robatto will now be referred to as the Cream Robatto.

Like the Grey before it, the Cream Robatto had yellow wires that ran through a frosted channel, within the acrylic rod, the same curved brass slider plate and slim slider channel, and the prop was painted in the same grey crackle finish. The Cream Robatto also used the same black hex head retention screws that were used on the Grey Prop. While the parts harvested for this prop include the emitter cage, ball joint, collar, and black end cap from the original Cream Aztec, as well as the aluminum pommel end that was originally made for the Tri-Slider Aztec modifications. From there, Nick machined a new handle, battery compartment, slider plate, and then finished it off with a newly crafted blue bulb.



FREEMA AGYEMAN'S STUDIO TOUR

The ridges on the newly made handle differed from its Grey counterpart in that they were more boxy, or flat edged, while still having a similar belled arch to the top of the ridges. Interestingly, the head alignment was a deviation from all the props that came before it. Rather than having the space between struts aligned with the slider channel, this version of the sonic had one of the struts positioned just to the right of the key in the slider channel (the little rectangular spacer at the top of the slider channel, underneath the collar). So not perfectly aligned with the slider channel. Remember this fact, it'll be important later.

Aside from the same handle discoloration and similar wear and tear issues seen on the Grey prop, the Cream Robatto sonic was unaltered during the entirety of Series 4, as we can see in the photographs taken by Millennium FX, when they measured the prop in November 2007. What's surprising is that the condition of the Cream Robatto prop seems to have faired better than the Grey, which itself is interesting, since it appears to have been more heavily used during Series 4, from what we can tell.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY MILLENNIUM FX

Like the Grey prop before it, the Cream Robatto was refurbished for the filming of "The Next Doctor", where a small slotted screw was added to the front of the prop, just below the slider channel. It was then repainted with a clean coat of Aleene's crackle grey paint, just like the Grey prop again, however the Cream prop retained the black grub screws on the back, rather than having them replaced with slotted screws. The prop appears to have been used like this from "The Next Doctor" through the filming of "The End of Time".

PHOTO BY MFX

TURN LEFT

By the time David Tennant began work on The Sarah Jane Adventures two-parter, "The Wedding of Sarah Jane Smith", the prop underwent two more modifications. The first involved at least the top grub screw on the back, which had been replaced with a silver slotted screw. While the second, more interestingly, saw the head alignment altered so that the space between the struts was now centered with the slider channel, just like the Grey prop that had at this point been given to David Tennant. It's important to note here, for a proper timeline, that even though "The Wedding of Sarah Jane Smith" had aired before "The End of Time", it was filmed after Tennant had wrapped on Doctor Who.

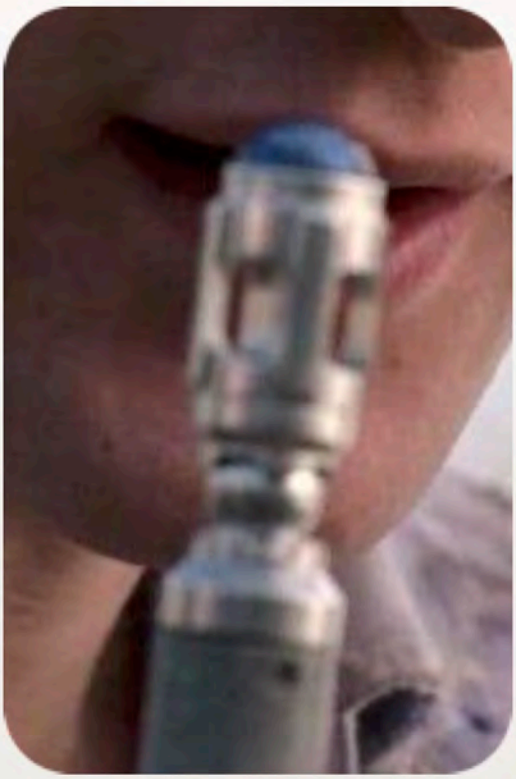
THE WEDDING OF SARAH JANE SMITH

The final on screen appearance for the Cream Robatto sonic was in Matt Smith's debut story, "The Eleventh Hour" for Series 5. When the prop first appeared on screen in the episode, Amy Pond had to free it from some clear goo on a table top. Whatever clear gel was used on set proved to be very harsh on the prop, as it ate away at the crackle finish, causing the paint to look pocked or dimpled in many places, rather than cracked porcelain. The props department either tried to fix this with some blue paint, or the gel used in the scene - possibly even the cleaning agent used to remove the gel - caused a chemical reaction in the grey crackle to turn it blue in tone. Unfortunately, we may never know which is the case. Either way, intentional or not, this gel bath brought about another alteration for the prop since its use in The Sarah Jane Adventures.

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

The paint coloring was not the only change to the prop for the filming of "The Eleventh Hour", however, as the emitter head was once again positioned with the emitter strut to the right of the key, and the back screws appear on screen as the original black hex head grub screws. Although these hex screws did not last very long as they were each replaced, during the filming of the episode, with two Philips heads screws; painted to match the body.

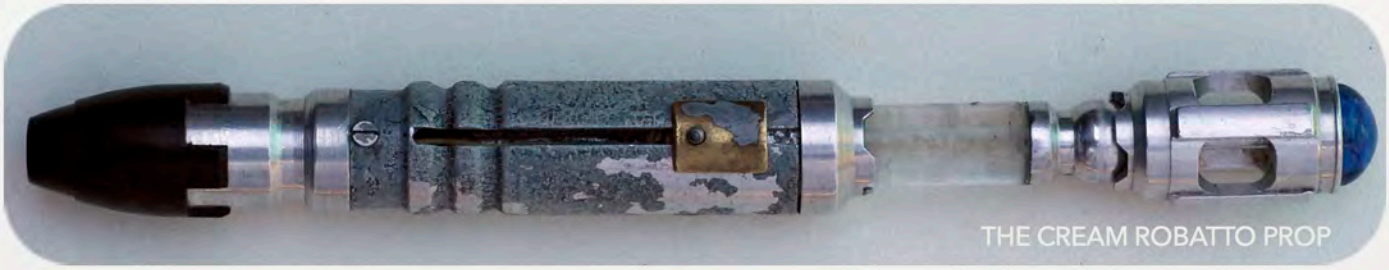
THE ELEVENTH HOUR



The regular usage of the Dan Walker designed RTD era Sonic Screwdriver came to an end in "The Eleventh Hour" after the in-story destruction of the Doctor's sonic, while using it in an attempt to gain the attention of the Atraxi. Of course, the destroyed sonic was portrayed by two resin props; one made to look destroyed, and one specifically made from molds of the Character Options prototype toy, for use with the pyrotechnics in the scene.

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

RESIN STUNT PROP



THE CREAM ROBATTO PROP

As of early 2018 the Cream Robatto prop had been confirmed to be in a private collection, although the owner has chosen to remain anonymous. The paint work has worn off even more than what was seen on screen, and at least one of the screws had been replaced after filming. The wires no longer appear to be in place, but otherwise the prop is intact.

THE MFX REPLICA

SERIES 7 & 10

In 2009 Millennium FX released the first officially licensed replica of the Tenth Doctor's Sonic Screwdriver - based off of the Robatto Props - with a limited run of 500. Although Neill Gorton and his team at Millennium FX have worked on the show since 2004, they never actually made a Sonic Screwdriver prop for use in the show in that time. Instead, their department was usually in charge of the latex makeup special effects, and robot suits (which may be an over simplification). In 2007 Neill Gorton won the bid for the license to make Doctor Who replicas, which granted him access to photograph and measure the two Robatto props in November of that year.

MFX PROTOTYPES

This brings us to a fascinating discovery that came to light when James Sutton saw a few high resolution pictures from a well known Series 4 photoshoot, taken in February of 2008; with some further clarification provided by Richard Clayton. After reading the October Edition, Richard reached out to me and shared a picture of an MFX Prototype made by Chris Trice, which shows a weathered version of one of the two replicas from the previous page. The weathering on this sonic matched the shots that James had seen of the prop in David Tennant's Hand. What's even more interesting, is that these prototypes appear to be an almost perfect match - dimension wise - with the Cream Robatto prop, which originally lead to some confusion about which prop appeared in this photoshoot.

SERIES 4 PHOTOSHOOT

However, despite this extremely accurate prototype - excluding the color - when the MFX replica went into production, some of the dimensions were altered, and for that, we can only speculate as to why. Whatever the case for the latter, this photo session finally corroborates Neill Gorton's recollections that an MFX replica was used in a photoshoot with David Tennant, during his era.

MFX PROTOTYPE

When the MFX sonic was first released in 2009, it unfortunately lead to heated debates among fans about the screen accuracy of the replica, largely due to the color of the handle. And while we know that the MFX prototype used in the February 2008 photoshoot was a near perfect match for the Cream Robatto prop - dimensions wise, the mystery of how MFX ended up with Heritage Gold paint on their replicas still remains a mystery. Of course, we know that the handle of the original props had yellowed over Series 4, so perhaps the simplest explanation is that they tried their best to match the color that they saw in person.

It should be stated that the paint was not the only inaccuracy, however, as the handle body was made of brass, whereas the real handles were aluminum. Of course, along with the paint color change, came the incorrect vein-like crackle finish. There were also various differences in the overall body dimensions when compared to the original props, and the battery compartment was made from brass, when again it should have been aluminum. The replica even has an activation button design unique to itself, which was down to a miscommunication.

While there are aspects of the replica that deviate from the original, such as the emitter window height, the replica was actually pretty faithful - dimensionally - to the Cream Robatto prop; from the ridge profile, to the head alignment with a strut aligned just to the right of the key.

Despite the screen accuracy debate, many fans were thrilled to finally have a replica of the Tenth Doctor's Sonic Screwdriver in their collections. Something that wouldn't happen again until The Wand Company released their own replica; the Sonic Screwdriver Universal Remote Control in 2013. Unfortunately, even though that replica was made from a 3D scan of an original prop, it still came with its own set of inaccuracies.

The Wand Company remote wasn't the only notable moment for an official replica in 2013; For the 50th Anniversary Special of Doctor Who, the production team was in need of Sonic Screwdriver props for David Tennant's return to the show, and rather than risk damaging David's original Grey Robatto, the team made other plans. Which brings things back to Neill Gorton, who had lent the production four of his own personal MFX replicas for David to use in "The Day of the Doctor". After filming, all four of Neill's replicas were returned to him, however, sometime after the airing of the 50th Anniversary Special, at least three of the four have been sold into private collections.

The inclusion of the MFX sonics in "The Day of the Doctor" has retroactively made their replicas a perfect screen match to a screen used Sonic Screwdriver, which was pretty great to see for those of us who own one, and who stuck by Neill through the debates. It also gave us a piece of the 50th Anniversary of Doctor Who in our very own hands.

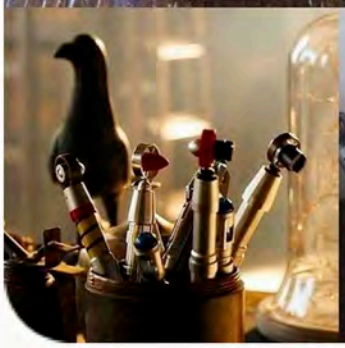
THE DAY OF THE DOCTOR

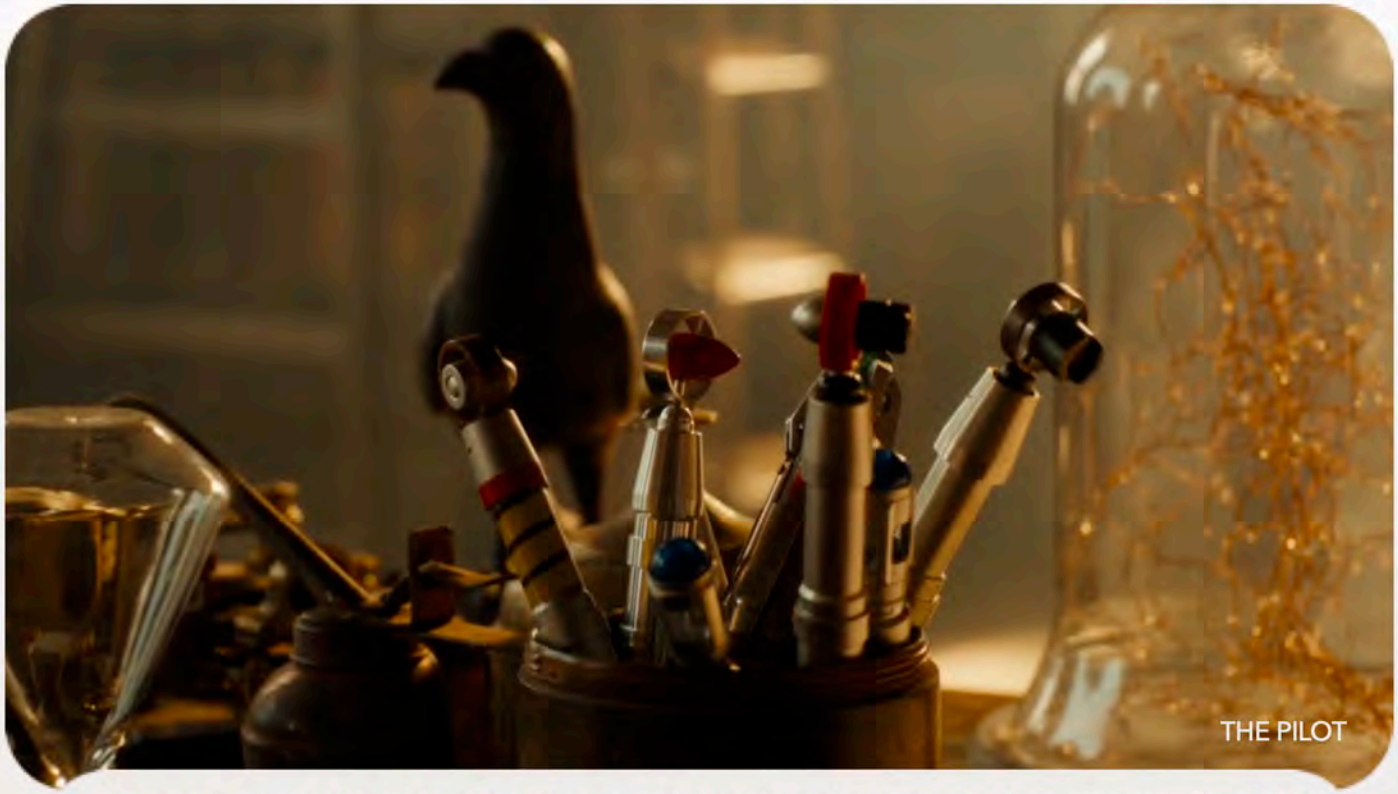
SERIES 7 PHOTOSHOOT

There was one more curtain call in the show for an MFX replica, just four years after the 50th Anniversary Special. For the Series 10 opener, "The Pilot", a fan owned MFX replica was used as part of the set dressing for the Doctor's office. The replica was arranged, with other versions of the Sonic Screwdriver, sitting atop the Doctor's desk within a mid 19th century lignum vitae string pot.

Rhys Purton had sent his MFX replica to Nick Robatto for repairs to have the nonfunctioning blue LED replaced, and the replica was still in Nick's care during the filming of Series 10. Nick had already used the replica in various photos of his own while it was in his possession, so when he got a call from the BBC saying that they were in need of a Tenth Doctor version of the Sonic Screwdriver to accompany the other past versions in the episode, "The Pilot", Nick took it upon himself to add Rhys Purton's MFX into the string pot. This not only fulfilled a need for the production team, but it also made Rhys' MFX replica a screen used Sonic Screwdriver prop.

RHYS PURTON'S INSTAGRAM





THE PILOT

And there you have it, that's the history of the Doctor's RTD Era Sonic Screwdriver props, so far as we currently know it.

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