

Meet the geeky Wexford farm boy who became the Sherlock Holmes of the computer age (and made billions!)

WALTER O'Brien wasn't very popular at school. To teachers, he was the frustrating student who asked ten questions when other children would ask one.

'He was different,' said former teacher John Quane. 'We did struggle to understand him, maybe not that successfully, but we struggled.'

To his classmates, he was the socially awkward geek who spent lunchtime in the company of adults. Not surprisingly, his school days weren't filled with much in the way of happy memories.

'I was pretty unhappy and confused in general,' he says. 'I didn't necessarily fit in and I didn't know why. I was often lonely.'

Three decades later, as a major US TV show prepares to tell the world about the Irish farm boy who went on to become a computer genius, everyone wants to be friends with Walter O'Brien.

'The phone hasn't stopped ringing,' he told the Mail this week. 'I've been contacted by people from all over, and a number of kids from Ireland, who are in the same position I was, have reached out to me.'

Walter O'Brien is a genius. He has an IQ of 197 - the fourth-highest ever

by Catherine Fegan

was slow. I only had few close friends, I wasn't into hurling or sports, which limited popularity.'

In a bid to keep her son occupied and out of trouble, Ann O'Brien would feed Walter's brain with mazes, books, colour by numbers and Rubik's cube-type puzzles. A loner by nature, Walter gravitated to analytical pursuits.

When he was 12, his parents bought him his first computer, an Amstrad 484 CPC, for £300.

In the seclusion of his remote family home, he began to devour books, immersing himself in the world of computing. As each new book opened up an interesting area, he read a book on each new topic. Completely self-taught and self-funded, he painstakingly learned all there was to know about the fledgling computer industry in Ireland.

'I got more active as I discovered computers,' he says.

'The Amstrad had a green screen and a tape drive. I started exploring the world from Ireland and gathering info wherever I could. I was programming, writing my own games, helping my friends.'

When Walter was 13, the family moved to a farm in Tingarrin, outside Callan, where he attended St Kieran's College, Kilkenny, but his problems at school continued.

'I was probably over-analytical,' he says. 'I probably asked more questions than most kids did. I often

'Having a high IQ isn't all it's cracked up to be'

recorded and higher than that of Albert Einstein. He hacked into the NASA computer at the age of 13 and was welcomed to the US on the same type of 'extraordinary ability' visa that was granted to Einstein.

Today the 39-year-old, who has lived in LA for over 15 years, heads Scorpion Computer Services, which specialises in international security. (Scorpion was O'Brien's hacking name as a teenager). He employs more than 2,000 geniuses all around the world, solving difficult problems for the likes of the US military and high-net-worth individuals. In his spare time, he collects artefacts (like the golden gun from the James Bond movie) as well as luxury cars (Lamborghini and Ferraris).

Now his story is being told by CBS in a new series also called Scorpion, airing next month. 'CBS bought the rights to my life story,' he said. 'The result is Scorpion.'

So here he is: Sherlock Holmes meets Tony Stark, a billionaire crime-fighting supergenius. And yet for most of his life, growing up on the Wexford farm where his parents still live, Walter O'Brien was an unhappy, geeky loner.

'I came from meagre beginnings. Farming in the rain in Ireland in the 80s was a tough but healthy life,' he says. The son of Ann and Maurice O'Brien, Walter O'Brien was born in February 1975 in Ennisecorney, Co. Wexford. He was one of five children. The family started out in Cortnacuddy, near Cushinstown, where Walter began his education at Saint Patrick's National School.

From an early age, he realised he was 'different' from other children.

'Having a high IQ isn't all it's cracked up to be,' he says. 'It's a lonely place in terms of trying to understand the world and find others that you can empathise with you and you with them. I didn't fit in at school and I didn't fit in at home and I didn't know why.'

'The teachers complained that for every one question a kid would ask I had ten questions so they thought I

He owns fast cars... and the 007 Golden Gun

didn't get the answers to those questions. One trait of prodigies is that they turn their brain either on or off depending on whether they like the teacher of the subject, so there would often be 'As' and 'Fs', depending on whether they took an interest or value in what they were studying. I think that was true of me. There were teachers and subjects I liked where I did very well and ones where I just turned off and kind of gave up. When you are a kid in school and you don't fit in and you make teachers nervous and you can't tell if people are lying to you, it causes all kinds of issues.'

After joining the gifted children society, Walter put his skills to use by setting up a computer business, Scorpion Computer Services, in 1988. Up until 1993, he says, the company supplied Ireland with more personal computers than DELL and Gateway put together.

'I was 13,' he says. 'I had a small office on the farm with a few computers and wires everywhere, some sim-



Farm life: Walter with a brother growing up in rural Ireland

Growing up in rural Ireland, Walter O'Brien had it tough. As a geek who couldn't relate to people (or play sport), he suffered. Then, aged 13, he hacked NASA's computers. And as if by magic, his life changed...

aspirations where, a still young Walter was struggling to cope with the emotional side of his brain. Through time, he realised he needed to work on his ability to communicate with other people, something that didn't come easy for a child prodigy.

'In the IQ rarity table, mine places me at 1 in 1-and-a-half billion,' he says. 'That means that for me to be truly understood and empathised with, there aren't a lot of people who can put themselves in my shoes.'

'IQ is not also everything. The outlier's book would tell you that anything over 120 IQ is a disadvantage because you are not well-rounded enough to work with others. I learned that in general, the higher your IQ, the lower your EQ, which is the emotional quotient, or your ability to deal with people.'

'We all have an internal voice that we use as a sounding board when we want to explain something sensitive or difficult to someone else. We ask ourselves, "Is this a reasonable thing? Will this hurt their feelings?'"

'That internal voice in me is broken. I would say, "It's okay to look fat in those jeans." Once Walter started working on his EQ, things started to improve.

He came first in Ireland in the

Caught: Walter O'Brien helped identify Boston bombers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev

ple robots, speech synthesizers and many, many books. It was a time when the local banks in Ireland were getting the very first computers in and they were banks and accountancy centres that were mostly subsidiaries of English companies.

'The problem was that if anything went wrong, no one there knew computers. They had to wait for some guy to come, very expensively, from England if something needed fixed.'

'They had to wait a couple of weeks or give the local kid a shot at it. So the local kid had a shot at it and they liked what I did.'

'They started paying me a lot more than my pocket money so every lunch time I would come down from school with a sandwich in one hand and a bunch of hard drives in the other, backing up bank software.'

As demand for his products and services grew, the young schoolboy began to recruit other like-minded friends to help him cope with the workload.

'I needed help,' he says.

'At that point everyone was getting computers, but no one knew how to use them. Everything I sold they (customers) turned right around back on me and said, "Well who is going to train us on how to use this?" I had to start a school for that and that turned into working with gifted children. My friends, who all had IQs above 150, joined me. They all had similar issues and problems to the ones I had so I was at that point starting a mini university.'

Scorpion's early customers included Norwich Union Insurances, Kilkenny Forestry Contractors, The Cork College of Art, SIPTU, Waterford Foods, Nolan Transport of New Ross and the Irish youth services information department.

As successful as his business

Genius: Walter O'Brien has an IQ of 197 - the fourth highest ever recorded



Scorpions: a scene from the CBS drama based on Walter's life

for these companies, even 00 chance of something going down, of being attacked, broken into etcetera.'

From there, as Scorpion Computer Services grew, Walter devised a number of methods to use as a way of finding new employees.

'I eventually ran out of the friends who I knew that were smart,' he says. 'I had to harvest new ones.'

Walter set up an extraordinary programme for tracking down hyper-intelligent people from around the world.

'I pulled the school reports for 10,000 schools and looked for 'As and falls - because the person had either turned their intelligence on or off depending on whether they liked the teacher or subject. Mega Mensa is for IQs over 180, so we reach out to any one who has qualified for that, or had competed in the same Olympics I

Scorpion was instrumental in helping the FBI nail Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev after the April 2013 explosion at the Boston Marathon which claimed three lives.

'The company developed an algorithm which enabled the FBI to analyse CCTV footage and therefore identify the culprits much quicker.'

'I can't go in to all the details,' Walter says. 'But we used video forensics to identify all the objects in the 4,000 hours of video footage and detect all the footage where those objects didn't move enough to be relevant, which got rid of all the footage we didn't need to watch.'

'Then we used motion flow analysis on the heads of all the people to show us who moved early, who moved differently, who moved quickly or slowly. That way we could see any suspicious patterns of movements which helped us identify the target.'

In a bid not to ruin the plot of the TV series, he prefers not to talk about certain aspects of his work.

More frustratingly, the most interesting parts of his childhood, including the time he allegedly hacked into NASA at 13, are left tantalisingly unverified.

'I liked any good quality images or video I could get my hands on,' he says. 'For the rest you'll have to watch the show!'

He also refuses to be drawn on the accuracy of the opening scenes of the pilot show - which shows helicopters landing at a farm in Callan and swooping on a schoolboy Walter.

'The show is about 80 per cent accurate in terms of what really happened,' he says.

However, in a previous radio interview, the child prodigy described the moment authorities tracked Scorpion down - and found a schoolboy in Kilkenny. 'I was coming home from school and encountered a house surrounded by black cars,' he said.

'Mom was on the couch, crying. Dad was not too happy. A lot of men in suits were wanting to yell at me for what I had done but were a little surprised when out of my schoolbag I pulled an extradition waiver - which calmed the conversation down.'

'If they signed this then I would show them where the holes are in their network. We ended up doing a deal - which happens in most hacking incidents you never hear about.'

'Outside the tech talk, Walter O'Brien is guarded about his personal life.

The exact scale of his wealth, which he wouldn't comment on, is estimated to be in the billions.

Scorpion helped identify the two Boston Bombers

degree in 1996. During his studies, he had worked as a freelance contractor for a number of companies, including Oracle, a US-based company with offices in Dublin.

Following graduation, he moved to San Francisco in 1997, where he continued to build Scorpion Computer

Services. Then, in 2001, the US Department of Homeland Security certified him as being of National Interest to the United States economy. He was granted an Extraordinary Ability EB 1-1 Visa, the same type of permanent residency visa status also granted to Albert Einstein

and Winston Churchill. 'The US accepted me for what I could do,' he says. 'I was of benefit to society... I started working for IBM, Microsoft, Oracle, doing hard programs, difficult mathematics on large enterprise software systems.'

'I got very good at mitigating risk



Work dramas: Walter O'Brien

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He does, however, own a home in Los Angeles, which he says is 'normal on the outside'.

Walter is currently single and rarely comes home to Ireland, preferring to fly his parents out to LA, where there is more to do and see. His parents often worry about his safety and he has 'several layers of protection... especially when I travel'.

As he approaches 40, his latest venture, ConciergeUP - a global think tank of geniuses that executes any 'funded wish' - sounds very much like the premise to another CBS drama.

Indeed, it has uncanny echoes of Sherlock Holmes offering his services as a 'consulting detective' - except that Walter's teams of geniuses are prepared to go a teensy bit further than the man from 221B Baker Street and his accomplice Dr Watson.

'The requests range from the trivial to the

serious,' Walter says. 'We had a family in Beverly Hills who had a daughter who decided to be a Journalist. At 21 she went to cover the troubles in Libya, ended up being captured as an activist and put in a prison over there. The

A billionaire asked if his son's new fiancée was a gold-digger

family went over with lawyer and discovered there is no ball system for activists in Libya. The waiting time for her day in court was two years.'

'They came to us and said, "We have a funded wish, we wish our daughter was home." She

was home in their house in Beverly Hills in 48 hours. We partnered with the largest private military groups in the US in order to execute our physical security and we executed the digital security. We did a forced extraction.'

After that, the couple hired Walter's gang to GPS all their children's shoes.

Other 'funded wishes' include a client who wanted to know how to choose a winning racehorse and a billionaire who wanted to find out if his son's Ukrainian fiancée was a gold-digger.

'The company is about harvesting intelligence from the planet and applying it to those in need,' he says.

'We are looking for people who are extraordinary at what they do or have dedicated their life to being great at one thing.'

'I would tell anyone in Ireland who is in the position that I was in and is struggling, not to worry about what everyone around you thinks - they are a small sampling.'

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