

# ANIMALS VEGETABLES AND MENIALS

## *The Archers' Story of the Everyday*

Suddenly *The Archers* have become fashionable. The world's longest running serial is displaying all the signs of healthy media 'hype'. The latest in a number of books about them has reached the best-seller lists, and *The Archers* play has merited serious critical reviews. Why the sudden interest in a programme that was nearly axed five years ago?

One reason is undoubtedly the way in which the producer of recent years, the publicity conscious William Smethurst, has 'frothed up' the programme into the soap style of a *Dallas* or *Dynasty*. Secondly, there seems to be an amalgam of 'young fogeyish' nostalgia and radical chic about admitting that one actually listens to the

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programme. Characters in *The Archers* seem somehow to be deeply ingrained in our collective folk memory, they inhabit that twilight world where you are never really sure whether they do exist or not. After all, the older generation of Ambridge have been inside our radios for longer than those who now make up the bulk of *The Archers'* new audience have been alive.

In 1980, following classic soap opera theory that one should take the knife to a leading character in order to boost falling ratings, Doris Archer was allowed to 'die peacefully at home'. An inspired set of



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press leakages just prior to the broadcasting of the 'death scene' helped to bring a turnaround in the fortunes of Ambridge. This was the first of many publicity coups that Smethurst managed to pull off, these were literally crowned by the arrival in Ambridge in 1985 of Princess Margaret appearing as herself.

Unlike tv soaps, great attention was paid to the style and quality of scripts, 'serious' writers such as Susan Hill were added to the script-writing team. It was Susan Hill who quite deliberately set out to make the character of Pat Archer a conscious feminist and a member of CND. Helen Leadbeater, the longest-serving member of the current writing team, finds Pat 'more North London than Ambridge' and hence a lot easier for an urban-based scriptwriter to write for.

Although Smethurst has tried to put the 'straw in the hair' image of the programme firmly into the background, it would be a mistake to believe that *The Archers* simply used to be a dramatised piece of propaganda from the Ministry of Agriculture. A glance through the pages of the history of Ambridge reveals murder, plane crashes, mail van robberies, illegitimate children, sudden death and broken hearts. All of which were put over in a style owing more to *Mrs Dale's Diary* than to *Eastenders*.

Until the late 70s Ambridge was a strange place where nothing had a price or individual an age, physical characteristic, or financial status. Everyone seemed to pay for their pints in The Bull with exactly the right money. As Helen Leadbeater explains this was mainly due to the fact that the scriptwriters in those days were almost exclusively men who had little idea how much things cost in the shops.

All this has changed in recent years. Smethurst has gathered around him a small team of talented young women writers, who are able to introduce some typical prices so that some small elements of financial reality now seep into Ambridge life. But major issues of both farming and national politics are still markedly absent. This arises from a number of factors not least of which are that the writers know little of farming politics. Similarly the three month lag between writing and broadcasting would defeat even the most diehard historical materialist to see into the political future. However some major trends in agriculture are now being woven into the storyline: at least one farmer in Ambridge will be financially forced out of farming in 1986.

Listeners to *The Archers* are a very conservative lot, they hate change, so when nice, married millionaire Brian Aldridge had an affair with 'respectable' Caroline Bone, years of carefully constructed personalities were thrown out of the window to howls of protest in the letter columns of the *Radio Times*. For some time scriptwriters at their monthly storylining meeting had wanted to introduce an affair in *The Archers* and, as Helen Leadbeater admits, perhaps their enthusiasm to speed up the process did do damage to previous storylines and character traits. However the introduction of this feature of contemporary 'soaps', the affair that only those involved and 2m listeners knew about, did help to keep newly-won listeners hooked to the storyline. It also ended years of seeming celibacy in Ambridge where immaculate conceptions on Lakey Hill were the order of the day for almost 35 years.

Many characters that were at the centre of attention in Ambridge during the 60s and 70s seem to have 'just popped out for a while' and never been heard of since. This is largely because the new younger generation of writers have found it difficult to write for the older inhabitants of *The Archers*, many of whom are now in their late 80s. So in recent years attention has shifted away from both the older generation of Archers and the physical confines of Brookfield Farm and on to the younger Archers and to characters whose stereotypical form allows more scope for social comedy. The best examples of these are: the Grundy family, Ambridge's own 'upper class twit' Nigel Pargetter and the latest creation of the new-look Archers - Sophie Barlow. These characters neatly show not only the shifts in Archers' style but in the way it deals with images of class.

Eddie, Joe and Clarrie Grundy were for many years just vague names mentioned in passing. For 17 years Clarrie was Jethro Larkin's invisible daughter and the Grundys were a village byword for bad farmers whose relationship to the law was somewhat dubious. They were something that Smethurst believes every soap needs - a set of 'baddies'. It is to the Grundys that some of the best elements of the new Archers' style of social comedy have been given.

The characterisation of Eddie by Trevor Harrison has been skilfully helped to 'cross-over' into the world outside of the radio set. Eddie Grundy records have been released, he has been interviewed in character on serious BBC news programmes and

has his own fan club. Thanks to the brilliant acting of first Heather Bell and now Fiona Mathieson, Clarrie Grundy has become perhaps the only one of these newer characters to achieve any real depth of character. Joe Grundy, on the other hand, is being increasingly used by the scriptwriters as a way of introducing 'issues' into the storyline. In recent months, Joe has been had up in court for trying to fiddle EEC grants and has become a 'born again' Christian. His sudden changes of mind have proved a triumph of editorial convenience over reality.

Perhaps it is the characterisations of Nigel and Sophie that are closer to both the hearts and tastes of the newly-found listeners to *The Archers*. They are written and played strictly for laughs, matching American soaps for thinness of character and depth of stereotyping. Nigel was invisible for his first three years in Ambridge until, at one script conference, it was suggested that he would be an interesting character to bring to life. Rumour has it that just as he is making his mark on the Ambridge scene, he will soon be off to pastures new to be replaced by fellow 'hooray henry', Tim Becham. At a similar meeting at the BBC's Pebble Mill studios Sophie Barlow was born. Her character is of someone so brainless that they could never look after themselves in the real world. Her arrival as the girlfriend of David Archer was in part because the writers found it generally easier to write about relationships than about issues.

The presence of Nigel and Sophie does not jar with the longstanding Archers' tradition of class imagery. Over the years, the writers have been on home territory with the middle and upper classes and have had to clutch at popular stereotypes when dealing with the working class.

As Ambridge enters the late 80s what have we to look forward to? Will Mark Hebden become an SDP councillor and break the hegemony of the Conservatives as the automatic choice of the new Archer generation? Will the character of Hazel Wolley, who has been so closely modelled on Joan Collins in *Dynasty* that one can almost hear the shoulder pads, be brought out again to expose an unknown element of the past of an important member of the Ambridge community? Or will Shane the silent, shadowy and possibly gay barman in Nelson Gabriel's winebar suddenly come to the fore to provide the swelling numbers of Archers fans with a real taste of soap?