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'A peculiarly English epic': the weird genius of The Archers

Strangely eventless, yet swelling with high drama, The Archers is the longest-running series in the world. But does this rural soap

reflect the reality of country life, or is it a fantasy liberal never-never land for urban audiences?

by Charlotte Higgins

Illustration: Brett Ryder/The Guardian

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The longest-running drama in the world is a soap opera about life in an English farming village. Every week, 5 million people listen to The Archers on BBC Radio 4. It is also the broadcaster's most downloaded radio show. It first aired 70 years ago - that is to say, during the era of the horse-drawn plough and tea on the ration. One of the current cast, June Spencer, who plays the formidable matriarch Peggy Woolley, appeared in the first episode on New Year's Day, 1951. She is 101 years old.

Because it is middle England's omnipresent soundtrack, it can be easier to see The Archers as some kind of naturally occurring phenomenon than, say, an experimental, durational artwork that blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality; or a "peculiarly English epic" as its former editor, or showrunner, Sean O'Connor describes it. To the uninitiated, on the other hand, it can appear somewhere on a scale between charmingly quaint, deeply bewildering and insufferably smug. An Irish friend told me she regarded the entire Archers mis-en-scène - "the village green, Bonfire Night, the slightly mysteriously located Big House, the cider club and the posh livery stables, even the Bull's beer garden" as "utterly exotic". A puzzled Texan, invited to listen by the hosts of the BBC's Americast podcast, described it as "like Downton, except without the interesting period detail or drama".

The Archers was pitched in 1950 by Godfrey Baseley, a Birmingham-based producer of farming programmes, as a means of encouraging improved postwar food production. And, though the Ministry of Agriculture ceased sending memos to the BBC about warble fly and swine flu in the 70s, the shadow of this didactic past remains a key part of the show's unlikely fictive mixture, its longevity, and its success. Abstruse details of pig husbandry and milking-parlour technology are woven into a narrative in which the idealised rituals of rural life (jam-making, the flower and produce show, endless cups of tea), form the weirdly eventless, diurnal backdrop to waves of high drama that may or may not be typical of life in the English countryside.

Aside from floods, fraud, suicide, manslaughter, diamond smugglers, spies, a near-fatal stabbing, a plane crash, a collapsing church tower, rape, arson and a formidable tally of horrific motor-vehicle accidents, these have included a hostage-taking situation in the village shop (scripted in the 90s by the great screenwriter [Sally Wainwright](#), before the multiple Baftas), and, recently, the accidental exploding of the kitchen wing of Grey Gables, a country house hotel, by a hapless labourer in the clutches of a villainous modern slaver.

It is a mark of The Archers' status as a British institution that Billy Connolly once jokingly suggested that the show's theme tune - the aggressively catchy [Barwick Green](#), a "maypole dance" from Arthur Wood's suite My Native Heath - ought to become the national anthem. While it has not yet ousted God Save the Queen, snatches of it were heard during the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, and royalty has condescended to appear on the show, as itself, twice: the Duchess of Cornwall [in 2011](#) and Princess Margaret, who was [a surprise guest at a charity fashion show](#) in 1984. (Asked by the director to sound a little more as if she were enjoying herself, the latter replied: "Well, I wouldn't be, would I?")

Some unlikely figures have pitched for cameos in the show. O'Connor told me that in his time he'd received calls from representatives of Bill Gates ("I couldn't think of how the Women's Institute would imagine they'd get him"), and from the office of the Evening Standard's proprietor Evgeny Lebedev ("I told them I'd come back to them if the Borsetshire Echo was taken over by a larger syndicate"). O'Connor invited the Pet Shop Boys to play themselves [headlining "Loxfest"](#) in 2015. Neil Tennant told me that despite not being a regular listener, he nevertheless considered himself part of a kind of "ambient listenership" of a show that "has been there all my life". Appearing on it was, he said, "definitely a highlight of our career".

Ambridge, the village at the heart of the show, is said to be about 20 miles from Birmingham, where the show has always been made - though characters are largely confined, as if by a mysterious force field, to the county of Borsetshire, with its market town of Borchester, cathedral city of Felpersham and scattering of quaintly named villages. The nomenclature of the dwellings in Ambridge is both slightly generic (there must be hundreds of Grange Farms and Home Farms in England) and nostalgically pastoral: Hollowtree, Honeysuckle Cottage, Willow Farm. You won't find these places on a map, and yet it seems crucial to the drama that it is neither of the south or north of England, but of the Midlands. There is just the faintest trace of Middlemarch, Middle-earth and the [Forest of Arden](#) in the DNA of The Archers.



Godfrey Baseley, the creator of The Archers, in 1960. Photograph: BBC

Its viewpoint is firmly of the social middle, too. Baseley invented a structure in which the Archer family would be flanked, in class terms, by the “squire” on the one hand, and a less progressive, more foolish farmer on the other - Walter Gabriel, who

provided much early comedy of the rude mechanicals variety. Though the social stereotypes have loosened up, *The Archers* retains this basic shape, with the landed gentry, the Pargetters, on one extreme, and the Grundys and Horrobins forming the community's lumpenproletariat. This marks it off from the biggest British TV soaps, *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street*, which focus, in their urban locales, on working-class characters. It says a great deal about the British weakness for a buffoonish posh boy that the audience has still not quite forgiven its former editor of 22 years' standing, Vanessa Whitburn, for having Nigel Pargetter plunge to his death from the roof of his stately home a decade ago, as a 60th-anniversary plot shocker. (She received death threats. "Even now, if I give a talk at a Women's Institute, people ask why I killed him off," she told me.) On the other hand, former Labour home secretary David Blunkett has recalled that *The Archers* sharpened his class consciousness as a child. The former Labour leader Neil Kinnock once called for it to be renamed *The Grundys and Their Oppressors*.

The genius of *The Archers* lies in the fact that farming is inherently dramatic, according to O'Connor. The vagaries of the weather, government policy, Brexit, disease, crop failure - any number of catastrophes may sweep away your livelihood, which is also your home, and your inheritance, and what you hope to pass on to your children - a cue for King Lear-like plots about intergenerational and sibling strife. But its appeal, O'Connor said, lies also in the symbolic power of the English rural landscape.

The Archers taps into a myth that the nation's spirit is most authentically to be found in the countryside, that its irreducible social unit is the village - as if the Industrial Revolution and 19th-century urbanisation were only aberrations. The English dream of a "fair field full of folk" still lingers, however implausible such a notion is to describe Britain in 2021, which is not only 83% urban, but riven by cultural, economic and generational divides so deep that the rural idyll of Ambridge cannot truly contain and represent them.

Baseley was alert to the British nostalgia for the land. His pitch, written in August 1950, was focused on a listenership not just of farmers, but of "the general listener, ie, the townsman". Urban audiences liked - and still like - to feel that they were in touch with the land, with the farming year, with birdsong and lambing and harvest. "There's a reason *Country Life* magazine is so popular, and *Country Living*, and TV programmes like *The Great British Bake Off* and *Springwatch*," O'Connor said. *The Archers*, wrote its editor of the 70s and 80s, William Smethurst, "is more than a mere drama. It has become a fantasy of England that contains a little bit of the national soul."

'R' eal life overheard" was the impression Godfrey Baseley wanted The Archers to create. He succeeded. "For years the listeners believed it absolutely - whatever we did was real to them," original cast member June Spencer told me. "When listeners wrote to us, we didn't disillusion them. If we replied, we replied in character." She remembers receiving a letter in 1966 solemnly informing her of the scandalous, out-of-wedlock pregnancy of her on-air daughter, Jennifer, and asking why she didn't seem to know about it: "Don't you listen to the show?" The producers played hard on the listeners' credulity, or willingness to suspend disbelief, mingling the real and the make-believe: when Christine Archer, owner of the stables, entered her Red Link for the Badminton horse trials in 1957, a real-life horse of the same name competed.

Nor was it just the listeners who were sucked in. Norman Painting, who played Phil Archer until his death in 2009, recalled that as the 50s wore on, the actors - who were expected to appear in character at myriad public events - began to identify more strongly with their roles. The idea of being written out, he wrote in his memoir, *Forever Ambridge*, felt "akin to murder".

The blurring of fact and fiction had troubling consequences. Amid overwork and sudden celebrity, the actor playing Doris Archer, Gwen Berryman, "started to slip over the edge" in the late 50s, according to Smethurst's history of the show. She had her personal writing paper printed with the fictional address of "Brookfield Farm, Ambridge" (in reality, she lived in industrial Wolverhampton). She even stopped calling fellow actors by their real names. "Gwen Berryman believed implicitly that she *was* Doris Archer," Spencer told me.

This somewhat disturbing aspect of The Archers may have faded, but to many longtime listeners, among whom I include myself, The Archers certainly feels real. (This, it is true, requires the swallowing of myriad dramatic conventions, including, but not limited to, the near-universal silence of children until they reach their late teens; the lack of discussion of politics, the telly or social media; and the curious immunity of Borsetshire from the early months of Covid-19.) When, for example, the social-climbing village gossip Susan Carter was imprisoned for harbouring an escaped criminal in 1994, the then home secretary Michael Howard was petitioned by a campaign called Free the Archers One, which argued that her sentence might set a real precedent. Howard declared that he considered the incarceration overly harsh. It is a mark of The Archers' cultural status that it seemed perfectly natural for a holder of one of Britain's great offices of state to opine on the fate of a made-up person in a soap.



Princess Margaret (right) making a guest appearance as herself during a recording The Archers in 1984. She is pictured with Sara Coward, who played Caroline Sterling/Bone, and Arnold Peters, who played Jack Woolley for 31 years. Photograph: BBC

A great deal of The Archers' illusion of reality derives from its audio form, the way it "drills into people's brains", as O'Connor put it. "It gets under the skin: it embeds itself into people's lives," said Charlotte Martin, who plays Susan Carter. "Radio does this better than any other medium. Listeners create their own Ambridge." (In real life, Martin has a second career as a psychologist; one of her research areas is auditory hallucinations.) This effect is magnified by the inexorable drip-drip of material: the show airs six 13-minute episodes a week (four under current pandemic conditions), each of which is repeated. There is also an omnibus on Sundays. If you are a [Radio 4](#) listener, you have to be pretty quick to the off button to keep yourself entirely out of range of its charms, and pretty old for it not to have been around all of your life.

I can chart my own life through The Archers: its theme-tune was the first music I recognised, according to family legend; listening with my mother after lunch was the drowsy daily ritual of the school holidays. Voices like that of Patricia Greene, who has played Jill Archer since 1957, or Trevor Harrison, Eddie Grundy since 1979, are as familiar to me as those of my own family. When I listened to archive recordings to research this piece and heard the comforting voice of Norman Painting, I wept, because it was as if I was hearing the voice of a lost relative, and because I was stepping back into memories of my younger self.

Attachment to The Archers is expressed in any number of violently opinionated internet forums: there's a paradox, or maybe a kind of yearning, in the fact that scattered, online communities cluster so strongly around a fictional community sustained, at least before the pandemic, by unlikely amounts of real, physical contact. (In Ambridge, people pop by for a cuppa with a frequency that would doubtless be oppressive in real life. Texting isn't great on the radio.) The most venerable of these groups is UMRA, dating back to the infancy of the web, but there are many more, catering for every mood, taste or fan subgroup: Ambridge Addicts, Archers Appreciation, even the Archers Singles Social. Roifield Brown, host of the Archers fan podcast DumTeeDum (named for the theme tune's insistent rhythm), told me that "the way to understand this world is in terms of extreme leftwing or rightwing politics. These groups are the result of endless schisms and splits."

Academic Archers, a Facebook group that came together through #Archers tweetalongs, hosts an annual conference. Four volumes of half-serious scholarly essays have resulted, with titles such as [The Ambridge Paradox](#): Cake Consumption and Metabolic Health in a Defined Rural Population, and Foucault, Freda Fry and the Power of Silent Characters on the Radio. (Fry, after decades of muteness, was swept to her death by the Dorsetshire floods of 2015, a flourish O'Connor told me he pinched from the death of Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss*.) Conference speakers are well-advised to hold back on showing photographs of cast members, organisers Cara Courage and Nicola Headlam told me, lest members of another longstanding fan group, Archers Anarchists, start booing (I admit that I, too, have resisted seeing pictures of the cast all my life). "The Archers is a real-life fly-on-the-wall documentary about one of the strangest villages in England," insists the Anarchists' website.

Declaring The Archers a documentary is an arch joke. But in an important sense the show is "real" - in that it is the authentic material of its audience's lives, of memory and emotion. When, between 2013 and 2016, the show famously ran a storyline about coercive control, there were listeners who understood the iniquity of their own domestic situations [for the first time](#). A harrowing storyline about Alice Carter - pregnant, alcoholic, in denial - is, at the moment, taking some listeners into difficult, but deeply recognisable places. And Ambridge is inescapably part of the actors' reality, not least in the ordinary ways that workplaces insinuate themselves into private lives: the actors who play trainee vicar Shula Hebden Lloyd and arch-capitalist Brian Aldridge are a married couple, for example.

Harrison, who has played lovable chancer Eddie Grundy for 41 years, since he was 22, developed a strong bond with his on-air father, the late Edward Kelsey. "I knew how Ted was going to deliver a line," he told me, "and he knew how I was going to

deliver a line. It was like a real family." He told me that when he acts in the studio, he sees the faces of his fellow performers - but behind them, in his imagination, the farm, or the field, or the pub where the scene is set. He listens to the show, too, at home in his own Worcestershire village. "I had the radio on on Sunday, and I closed my eyes and transported myself to Grange Farm and the Bull," he told me.

And yet, of course, The Archers is not real. It is the result of a brilliantly fabricated illusion. Not for nothing was Godfrey Baseley known as "God" by the cast; the producers and writers are the deities that preside over the Ambridge universe. Sustaining the illusion of The Archers is the result of a relentless production line. Making the show, Norman Painting recalled, is "like feeding some insatiable monster, some Moloch".

The Archers is created in interlocking five-week cycles, or blocks. "Day dot," as producer Jessica Bunch calls it, involves an all-day script meeting, usually held in the studio in Birmingham, to prepare the five weeks' worth of episodes that will be broadcast 10 weeks later. Writers, producers and the agricultural story adviser, Sarah Swadling, come to the meeting armed with a "story pack" issued a few days earlier by producer David Payne. This details the direction of the show, family by family, farm by farm, over the whole cycle. The work of the meeting is to decide how to transform this prose outline into drama.

Five out of the 12 writers on the team are assigned to write a week of scripts each. After producing a scene-by-scene synopsis, each writer has two weeks to produce a first draft of their (normally) six episodes. This is quite the deadline: Sally Wainwright, who was driving the number 73 bus in London when she joined The Archers in 1989, told me the only way she could do it was by "getting up at 5am and really putting the hours in - something I've done ever since". She recalled: "You had five scenes per episode, no more than seven characters, and you were supposed to avoid two-handers if you could. You also had to use each character at least twice. But it was a fantastic discipline; it enforced a structure that really worked." (Wainwright is perhaps the most illustrious alumna of the show, with the possible exception of actor Tamsin Greig, who still appears as the Hungary-based farmer Debbie Aldridge from time to time, and Felicity Jones, who graduated from playing Emma Carter to being nominated for an Oscar for her role as Jane Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*.)

After the second and final drafts of the scripts are signed off, they are recorded over 10 days. Radio acting demands a specific set of techniques, all aimed at "creating a picture in somebody's mind of something physically happening", as Barry

Farrimond, who plays Edward Grundy, put it. This requires the use of “effort noises”, to convey actions such as bending over, or sitting down - crudely, “sighing and grunting”, according to Ben Norris, who plays the 18-year-old Ben Archer. Since actors are holding scripts, the subtle art of the silent page turn must also be mastered. “Tim [Bentinck, who plays David Archer] favours a delicate turn with tension all the way along the spine and a silent drop,” Norris said. “Arthur [Hughes, who plays Ruairi Donovan] likes to tear out the pages of his script as if he’s disgusted with the writing and screw them up, creating something like a poppadom - rigid, so it doesn’t flap noisily.”

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The Archers studio, part of the BBC’s Birmingham base, is a curious combination of hi-tech and scruffy, filled with a miscellany of surfaces and objects that magically combine to create the sonic impression of meadows, pig sheds and farmhouse kitchens. A “live” area is covered with parquet flooring conveying the acoustic of large interior spaces: St Stephen’s church, or the banqueting room at Lower Loxley, the Jacobean-fronted pile of the Pargetters. A carpeted “soft” area is used for bedrooms, sitting rooms, the seating area of the Bull; here are some nondescript plastic chairs and an old leather-effect sofa. Leading off from it is a “kitchen” with a lino floor, a row of kitchen units and two sinks: a smart Belfast sink for the grander families and an ordinary metal one for less elevated households. A “dead” area, lined with foam acoustic panels to cut out all trace of echo, is used for exterior locations; beyond that is “the snail”, a short corridor from which characters can seem to enter scenes from a distance, or sit in “the naughty corner” to record the distant half of a telephone call.

As the scenes are recorded, a further, ghostly figure is present, performing a curious shadow-play alongside the actors. Vanessa Nuttall creates foley effects - added sounds that, alongside recorded material dropped in from a vast digital library, create the illusion of Ambridge. Known in BBC-speak as a spot-effects artist (since the effects are made “on the spot”, rather than in post-production), her private term for herself is a “spot ninja”, since she creeps around scenes like a “stealth warrior”. If the characters Harrison and Fallon are in bed together, for example, Nuttall will be in there with them, rustling their duvet. If Shula is out riding, Nuttall will be at her side, jangling a bridle. If a meal is in progress at Bridge Farm, she will be creeping around the table, appearing at an actor’s side from time to time to scrape a fork gently against a plate.

According to Barry Farrimond, “There’s a really nice synergy that should happen between the actor and the spot-effects person: their movements and your effort-sounds have to synchronise perfectly. There’s no point me making an effort-sound and three seconds later that being expressed through an object. As an actor you are reading the script, watching the spot-effects person out of the corner of your eye, being aware of where the mic is and where your fellow actors are, and how all of that maps together.”

Sometimes sound effects are created by the object itself - only a real Aga door closing can adequately communicate its particular solid clink, Nuttall told me. At other times, a sound must be impersonated, either for practical reasons or because it will not successfully “read” when created by the real thing. Piles of old half-inch magnetic tape become undergrowth or straw. An ancient ironing board, opened and closed, stands in for the farm gates. Hands are squelched through a bowl of yoghurt when a lamb is born. When Helen Archer stabbed her husband, it was a knife through a watermelon, and when brothers Ed and William Grundy have one of their punch-ups, a spot-effects artist will be smashing the living daylights out of a cabbage. The day the script required a canine character to eat crisps, Nuttall gamely chomped, doglike, through a packet. She even dials a mobile phone when someone makes a call, convinced that however subtle the sound, every detail counts in creating the world of The Archers in the minds of its 5 million listeners. Nevertheless, Farrimond told me: “For all that how constructed it is, when you are in the zone and you are there with those other characters, The Archers is real.”

Time itself is a character in The Archers. The story unspools at the pace of real life; its actors age with it, as do its listeners. Its unity of time offers the illusion that we are eavesdropping on lived lives (an aspect of the show that also offers dramatic opportunities, since we so often know more about events than the characters). It also creates the impression that life in Ambridge might even chug along in the absence of its makers. “Just because it doesn’t go out on a Saturday, it doesn’t mean things aren’t happening in Ambridge on a Saturday,” Jessica Bunch told me. “If we stopped the show for a year, I have a pretty good idea of what everyone would be doing all that time. We’d pick them all up again ... It exists without all of us, in a funny way.”

The day-by-day pace, and continuity of characters, lends the show a kind of resilience. If life takes you away from The Archers for a year or five, it will feel familiar when you return. “I don’t listen to The Archers religiously,” said Wainwright, “but if I drop in I always feel like I know where I am, and who everybody is, and if I don’t, it’s not long before they are talking to someone I know.”

TV soaps, with their responsibilities to ratings, are more reliant on the kind of sensational stories that “ravage through characters”, as Wainwright put it, departing after they have served a particular narrative.

The Archers, by contrast, with its dynastic focus on a handful of families, can afford to go slow. Once, in Vanessa Whitburn’s time, Tony Archer lost his glasses for an entire year, which became a ridiculous, enjoyable leitmotif. Listeners often claim that this banal, nothing-much-happening quality of The Archers is what they particularly treasure: the passing of the year, the seasonal rituals repeated. But the real-time quality can also bring significant gains for more dramatic storylines - such as the agonising, three-year unfurling of the Helen Archer and Rob Titchener coercive control plot, until Helen finally cracked and stabbed her abusive husband.

It is not just this feeling of presentness that gives power to The Archers, but also the ever-deepening territory of its past. The expanding archive of The Archers operates as a kind of “Cumaean Sibyl’s cave”, according to its current editor Jeremy Howe: you can enter it and return with encoded clues to the characters’ possible futures. In practical terms, this archive - which is also the collective memory of its creators and listeners - exists as 20,000 typed index cards, transferred in recent years to a computer database. From here the writers can glean details necessary for continuity: the fact that Brian Aldridge doesn’t like meringue, for instance, or that the Woolleys’ late Staffordshire terrier, Captain, was partial to smoky bacon crisps. But they can also extract “real” memories, such as the books Ruairi Donovan liked as a four-year-old, which, when neatly deployed, can help round out a character’s psyche years later. The past, said Bunch, gives the show “its own momentum ... We are the gardeners of this thing, and we plant stuff in different places and shift things around, but we are never starting from scratch.”



Hollie Chapman and Wilf Scolding, who play Alice and Christopher Carter, in the studio in Birmingham, in August. Photograph: BBC/PA

Nevertheless, it is clear that the editors of the show - its gods - reshape the landscape substantially to reflect their own personalities and preoccupations. William Smethurst's Ambridge of the 70s and 80s was, for example, identifiably a Tory world, one of conservative class distinctions and gentle social comedy. His impulses, said O'Connor, came from "Austen and Stella Gibbons". Vanessa Whitburn, who edited from 1991-2013, came in during the era of the big TV soaps such as EastEnders and Brookside. She wanted, she told me, "to re-galvanise the programme. I felt it should have big stories - it had got quiet about that. I was very clear I wanted to have a story about Elizabeth Archer having an abortion. I like stories that allow you to debate the grey areas of life, the pros and cons of what people do."

In Whitburn's more socially conscious era, for example, Ambridge acquired its first significant non-white character in the form of solicitor Usha Gupta, who was subject to racist attacks. The Grundys were evicted from their farm and rehoused in the ironically named Meadow Rise, a Borehamwood housing estate. This had the effect - at last - of putting working-class characters at the tragic heart of the show. O'Connor was then a young scriptwriter; he borrowed a motif from Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, he told me, when he had Joe Grundy kill his son's ferrets with a hammer, incompatible as the creatures were with cramped council accommodation. (Like the murder of Jude's children, it was "done because we are too menny".)

When O'Connor came to edit the show himself, from 2013-16, there was more creative plundering from the English novel. He put the Archers family and Brookfield at the centre of the action, because: "That's your Wuthering Heights, your Thornfield, your Mansfield Park, and you need to fight over that." Aside from presiding over Helen Archer's coercive control story, O'Connor imperilled Ambridge with floods and a trunk road, and put Brookfield up for sale - almost too much plot for some listeners. By contrast, the current editor, Jeremy Howe, told me he was pulling back from the "very issues-based, or story-based" approaches of his immediate predecessors. "I am character-based," he said. "The goldmine that is The Archers resides in the characters and the actors who play them. It's about people."

The futures of these characters are dictated, in practical terms, by a long-term planning document presided over by Bunch, which sets out, month by month, what will happen to each family, business, farm, and character, sometimes many years in the future. In practice, the document exists in a state of flux, affected by a number of factors. These include, naturally, the changing and capricious whims of the makers - but also unintended consequences created by short-term plot devices, unexpected chemistry between particular actors that might spark off new storylines, and real-world events such as Covid-19.

O'Connor told me that, had he stayed at The Archers, he would have turned Pip Archer, the future inheritor of Brookfield, into a kind of lonely Bathsheba Everdene figure, beset by dramatic and destructive romances, like the heroine of Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. He also had plans for the charming posh boy Freddie Pargetter, son of the unfortunate Nigel (who died falling off his roof). "My story was going to be that Freddie burns down Lower Loxley, which would then be taken over by hoteliers. He would have to become a businessman to buy the family home back. But you would have to spend 15 years with the story to get that moment."

Brexit is exactly the kind of unstable, real-world event that will affect the characters' futures; it needs to be accommodated within the story-world of The Archers, not least because the exit from the EU will have such a significant impact on British farming. But so far it has been recognised through only minor motifs, such as the difficulty of finding seasonal fruit pickers. Sarah Swadling, the agricultural story adviser, commissioned an economist to model the effects of a various kinds of post-EU deal (or no deal) on the Ambridge farms. This, Howe told me, will help inform long-term, post-Brexit stories. But this most noisy, divisive and bitter of British debates has so far been all but inaudible. We don't even know how most of the characters voted - only that Brookfield

patriarch David Archer voted to stay, and gay progressive farmer Adam Macy voted to leave.

Fans can surely be forgiven if they have enjoyed a space on the radio where talk of Brexit does not have to be endured - I certainly have. Nevertheless, its absence is a clue to an important aspect of the show: that despite its commitment to "real life overheard", and to Baseley's early insistence on keeping the show as topical as possible, fissures such as Brexit, and arguments over identity politics, have driven themselves so deep into Britain's soul that the nation is unrepresentable in the form of "Ambridge".

And so The Archers is a parallel universe - an impossible, liberal never-never land of the shires. The Chinese-born writer and film-maker Xiaolu Guo has observed that the drama, with its apparently apolitical presentation of "an oasis of rural England outside the currents of history" is really offering a supremely political position, a peculiarly British ideology: one that privileges endless indirectness and lethargy, endless deflection of real anger and debate, and endless acceptance of the status quo. Limited outbursts of British revolutionary spirit - such as 70s punk - have been, she wrote, "a jagged reaction to the kettle-boiling and cake-baking families who dwelt eternally in the village of Ambridge".



From left: Ruth Archer (Felicity Finch), Jill Archer (Patricia Green), Helen Archer (Louiza Patikas) and David Archer (Tim Bentinck) recording in 2008. Also pictured, spot effects operative Hywel Payne. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

From its first episode in 1951, *The Archers* “opened a window on to a more desirable world”, wrote Norman Painting, one that offered an antidote to the “apocalyptic, doomsday feeling” that lingered after the war. Ambridge was, and remains, a place to which listeners can retreat: plausible-sounding, but so much safer than real life. There are serious limits on what can be allowed to happen there. Ken Loach’s version of Ambridge – let’s imagine it starring Emma Carter, with an exposé of conditions in the chicken factory and a hard look at the rural housing crisis – wouldn’t quite wash. Nor would Matt Groening’s Ambridge, for a million reasons, including the fact that “you can’t build a nuclear power station on Lakey Hill,” as editor Jeremy Howe put it. (A similar attitude governed *The Archers’* depiction of Covid-19: “If you want bodies piled up in front of St Stephen’s church, *The Archers* is not going to provide it,” he told me back in May.)

The ideology of *The Archers*, in fact, was most clearly set forth as long ago as 1955, after its most sensational episode went out – the death of the glamorous Grace Archer in a fire in the stables at Grey Gables, a broadcasting event that utterly eclipsed the opening night of ITV, Britain’s first commercial television channel. The significant part of the story was not so much the death of the young wife in her husband’s arms, but the dialogue that took place the following day between patriarch Dan Archer (the father-in-law of the dead woman) and his daughter, Christine, who has been played for 67 years by Lesley Saweard.

Addressing his distressed daughter, Dan said: “... Me and Simon, there ... in the milking shed ... we’ve got the same feelings as you and everybody else, but we’ve still had to carry on milking ... And all we can do is the same as folks somehow manage to do in similar circumstances. Just carry on.”

“Just carry on” is the real story of *The Archers*. People may die, disaster may strike, but life will endure. There will always be cows to milk, there will be lambs born in the spring, there will be harvest in the autumn. The months roll, the years turn, and *The Archers* is still there, embodying its own ideology, by itself continuing and enduring. And in this fictional world, everything will be all right, even if it won’t – it really won’t – out here in the real world, in our cold and fractured world. “I don’t know what the final episode of *The Archers* will be,” said Howe, “and I hope I’m never tasked with it. But whatever happens, it will” – and he slapped his kitchen table twice for emphasis – “*end well*. All will be well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.”

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This article was amended on 5 January 2021. An earlier version incorrectly said that Princess Margaret opened a fete in Ambridge in 1984; the event she appeared at was a charity fashion show.

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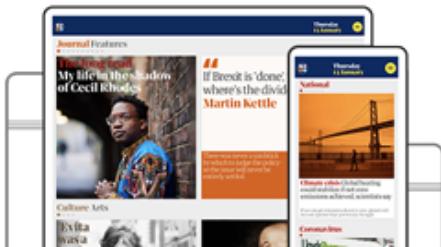
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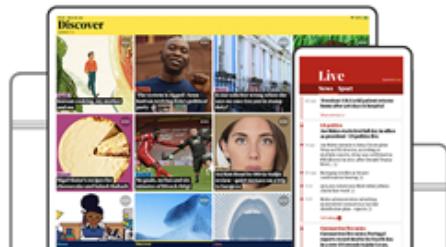
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