An extraordinary story of country folk

The world’s longest-running soap, The Archers, still holds the nation in its nostalgic grip, with the Ambridge storylines still making the news 65 years on.

Interview by KAYE MCINTOSH. Photography ANDREW BILLINGTON

Dirty dishes are piled up in the sink. Mum’s back from work and furious that the kitchen is a complete mess. Someone’s telling the dog off for jumping up. A scene that is played out in kitchens across the land every day. But the people snapping at each other are holding on to a thread in a world being pulled apart. They’re the Archers, whose set is probably the most famous English village of all and, of course, Ambridge has its own WI. Last Christmas, instead of the traditional pantos, they put on a production of Calendar Girls – perhaps the first time anyone’s tried to depict nudity on the radio. The WI is a way of being together.

The Archers is the world’s longest-running soap. Launched on New Year’s Day 1951, it was commissioned to educate farmers about productivity in the era of rationing. It truly is a national institution. There have been cameo appearances by Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, Princess Margaret and the Pet Shop Boys, who headlined The Archers’ answer to Glastonbury. Even the Olympic opening ceremony paid tribute, with the sound of a radio being tuned in before the instantly-recognisable tumb-tee-tum-tum-tee-tum-tee-tum theme tune was struck up.

For 15 minutes, six times a week, five million listeners are gripped, and another million also catch up online, making it the most popular radio programme in the UK. The setting is probably the most famous English village of all and, of course, Ambridge has its own WI. Last Christmas, instead of the traditional pantos, they put on a production of Calendar Girls – perhaps the first time anyone’s tried to depict nudity on the radio.

The WI is a way of being together. Different generations and introducing controversial topics, editor Sean O’Connor tells me. One meeting sparked a debate about pole-dancing ‘whether it is acceptable, whether it is empowering or not’. People in the pub were talking about feminism. ‘That wouldn’t happen in any other show in the UK.’

Soap opera has always been driven by the female characters, he says, but what stands out about The Archers is the big roles for older women. ‘There is no other show where a 95-year-old actress would be able to be at the centre of stories, not just someone’s gran.’

He points to the 1967 story about a marriage outside marriage, ‘there were protests on Westminster Bridge who had painted sheets stating “Doris Archer is a prude”. There were questions in parliament about her granddaughter Jennifer’s baby. Before the Abortion Act was passed, [patriarch] Dan Archer was talking about abortion. He couldn’t use the term because it was illegal but it was discussed.’

Sean’s reign has been as controversial. Brookfield was threatened by a road-building scheme that would have driven the main branch of the Archers out of Ambridge. Tom jilted Kirsty at the altar and ran away to Canada, reappearing played by a new actor. And a domestic abuse storyline has been running for two years with Helen Titchener gradually ground down by her overbearing controlling husband Rob.

Committed fans can cause trouble for editors. Sean says he no longer reads discussion online because of insulting comments (the kind that can’t be printed here). But the passion stirred by the series can be a force for good. Listener Paul Trusman has raised £60,000, and counting, for Refuge because he wanted to do something more than shout at the radio – his justifying page is a chance to do something constructive for all the real-life Helens.

Sean says there was ‘a brilliant moment’ early on in the storyline, when Helen came downstairs and asked, ‘Is that better?’. The audience wasn’t privy to the conversation before that point but picked up the implication that it was about her outfit. ‘After the first broadcast there was a flutter about it but after the Sunday omnibus people were saying “he’s really controlling, there’s something going on”’.

It shows how the audience engages with the depth of the script. Sean adds, ‘We are doing it deliberately, to make a second listen or a podcast more rewarding. There are extra things to be had, clues about the future. For the attentive listener, there is added value.’

The farming setting of the show offers the men more scope, as well as the women. ‘One of the issues about Corrie and EastEnders is that ordinarily in the pub what men talk about is football and sex. At 7.30pm you can’t mention sex and you can’t mention football because filming takes place six weeks ahead. ‘With The Archers we can discuss machinery and farming boys’ toys in the way that farmers themselves talk about stuff. The listeners span all age groups but are younger than the usual Radio 4 audience. Sean says many are ‘new traditionalists’. People who watch The Great British Bake Off, or join a newly opened WI.

‘In the age of the internet, people crave the kind of community that the WI and the programme represent,’ he argues.

My own craving for details of plot twists is not satisfied. Sean wouldn’t dream of giving anything away. He fillets cast lists to keep returning characters secret, is ‘very cautious’ about what’s revealed in the Radio Times listings and has abandoned email.

‘We used to email all the scripts to the writers and we stopped doing that. We’ve gone back to sending out hard copies because I want to know where the scripts are. I don’t wish to spoil anyone’s enjoyment.’

Sean’s tenure has been controversial but his love for the show is clear. Who knows what surprises the new editor – the BBC hasn’t yet announced a name – will throw at fans?

What stands out about The Archers are the big roles for older women: