



Clockwise from opposite page: Sean O'Connor, editor of *The Archers*, has maintained its cliffhanger tradition; Louiza Patikas portrays Helen Titchener whose plight has raised national concern; Barry Farrimond plays Ed Grundy, alongside Emerald O'Hanrahan as his wife, Emma; Charlotte Martin (wearing glasses) plays ever-aspirational Susan Carter

# 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

**D**irty 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 scripts, the dog is a sound effect and there are microphones picking up all the dialogue.

I'm at a recording of *The Archers* in a studio at BBC Birmingham – in Susan Carter's kitchen, with daughter Emma Grundy, her husband Ed and friend Helen Titchener. Described as the 'everyday story of country folk' *The Archers* is the world's longest-running soap. Launched on New Year's Day 1951, its mission was to educate farmers about productivity in the era of rationing.

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 tum-tee-tum tee-tum-tee-tum theme tune was struck up.

For 15 minutes, six times a week, 5m 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 panto, 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 bringing 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* are 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's talking about Peggy Woolley, played by June Spencer since 1951. 'You couldn't do it in a TV show because she'd have to get up at 5am to be sitting in the make-up chair.'

Another matriarch is WI associate member Patricia Greene, aged 85. She has 'an amazing, treacly, classic radio voice,' Sean says, 'which speaks of the Aga, baking and family.' One of the first things he did was to move her character, Jill, 'to the heart of the show', to live back with her family at Brookfield Farm.

In the studio, I spot a cupboard full of different phones. Listeners would know instantly if Ruth Archer slammed down the wrong one, Sean tells me. There's even a real Aga in the kitchen. It's reserved for posh characters such as Jennifer Aldridge – there's a cheap electric cooker too for the common-as-farmyard-muck Grundys.

Sean is leaving Ambridge soon. After two and a half years at the helm, he's off to take up the role of Executive Producer on *EastEnders*, where he worked before *The Archers*. The former may be famous for punch-ups, but perhaps it's not such a leap from Radio 4. Sean insists *The Archers* has never been cosy. 'The show was set up to be exciting, to have cliffhangers, to be a soap opera. And it has always had shocks.'

He points to the 1967 story about pregnancy outside marriage. 'There were protesters 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 just 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 outwardly-

charming but actually frightening and 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 Trueman has raised £60,000, and counting, for Refuge because he wanted to do something more than shout at the radio – his JustGiving 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 depths of the script, Sean adds. 'We are

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

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 I've 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? **W7**