

CUSTARD, CULVERTS  
AND CAKE

Academics on Life in  
*The Archers*

# CUSTARD, CULVERTS AND CAKE

Academics on Life in  
*The Archers*

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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*Chapter Two:* “‘Big Telephoto Lens, Small Ticklist’: Birdwatching, Class and Gender in Ambridge’, Joanna Dobson, commenting on the gender dynamics of birdwatching, with a reply from Jennifer Aldridge who somehow manages to get in a mention of Phoebe being at Oxford.

*Chapter Three:* ‘The Ambridge Paradox: Cake Consumption and Metabolic Health in a Defined Rural Population’, Christine Michael. This chapter was awarded the prize — of a tin of shop-bought custard — for the most Ambridge paper of *Academic Archers 2017*. The often culinary-slighted Christine Barford has been given the right to reply concerning the campaign of intimate terrorism deployed by her closest friends regarding her bake-off credentials.

## SECTION TWO: EDUCATING AMBRIDGE

*Chapter Four:* ‘Ambridge as Metaphor: Sharing the Mission and Values of a 21st-Century Library’, Madeleine Lefebvre, talking of the place and absence of a mobile library in Ambridge.

*Chapter Five:* ‘We Don’t Need No Education? The Absence of Primary Education in *The Archers*’, Dr Grant Bage and Jane Turner. Nic Grundy, mum-of-four and one of the silent characters at the time of writing, finds her voice in response, giving her view before rushing to meet the school bus.

*Chapter Six:* ‘Educating Freddie Pargetter: or, Will He Pass His Maths GCSE?’, Ruth Heilbronn and Rosalind Janssen, bringing a UCL Institute of Education analysis to ask whether Freddie Pargetter is an underachiever and if so is this attributable to his bereavement aged twelve. State-education advocate, Jill Archer, responds.

*Chapter Seven:* ‘Phoebe Goes to Oxford’, Felicity Macdonald-Smith, turning our focus from early years to elite higher education, and Jennifer Aldridge, whose pride in and hope for self-reflected glory from Phoebe led to fairly Olympic-standard boasting.

## SECTION THREE: THE GEOGRAPHY OF AMBRIDGE

*Chapters Eight and Nine:* These two chapters concern complementary analyses of the Ambridge Flood.

First, ‘Get Me Out of Here! Assessing Ambridge’s Flood Resilience’, Angela Connelly sets up a review from the very disgruntled Stefan, who may or may not have more to say in the future.

Second, ‘After the Flood: How Can Ambridge Residents Develop Resilience to Future Flooding?’, Fiona Gleed, turning our attention from developing resilience to future flooding, offers an action plan for another casualty of the flood, Charlie Thomas.

*Chapter Ten:* ‘Locating Ambridge: Public Broadcasting, Region and Identity, an Everyday Story of Worcestershire Folk?’, Tom Nicholls considers the midlands location of Ambridge, to which loyal Ambridge resident Clarrie Grundy will add her thoughts.

#### SECTION FOUR: POWER RELATIONSHIPS

*Chapters Eleven and Twelve:* Both have a visual element as authors seek to present information about the relationships that underpin the village.

First, Louise Gillies and Helen M. Burrows, ‘A Case Study in the Use of Genograms to Assess Family Dysfunction and Social Class: To the Manor Born versus Shameless’. Their analysis somewhat vindicates the much maligned Horrobins and we hear from the most incorrigible of them, Clive Horrobin in response.

Second, ‘Kinship Networks in Ambridge’, Nicola Headlam warms to this theme and presents *The Headlam Hypothesis*, *The Archers* are dead, long live the network. Hazel Woolley responds.

*Chapter Thirteen:* Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler, ‘God in Ambridge: *The Archers* as Rural Theology’ and a response from Alan Franks.

*Chapter Fourteen:* Jessica Meyer tries to locate the Ambridge war memorial and approaches *The Archers* as *lieu de*

*memoire* of the Great War in Britain. Jim Lloyd, whose interests are more classical than modern, replies.

#### SECTION FIVE: AMBRIDGE ONLINE

*Chapter Fifteen:* ‘An Everyday Story of Country Folk’ Online? The Marginalisation of the Internet and Social Media in *The Archers*’, Professor Lizzie Coles-Kemp and Professor Debi Ashenden argue that for the younger characters particularly this has been a gap.

*Chapter Sixteen:* ‘The Importance of Social Media in Modern Borsetshire Life: Domestic and Commercial’, Olivia Vandyk, presenting her social media marketing perspective to the villagers. Josh Archer, who appears to making a path for himself combining eBay with Grindr, replies.

*Chapter Seventeen:* ‘Being @borsetpolice: Autoethnographic Reflections on Archers Fan Fiction on Twitter’, Jerome Turner, proposing an (auto)ethnographic understanding of *Archers* fan fiction on Twitter, a pursuit that results in him being interviewed at Felpersham police station.

#### SECTION SIX: THE HELEN AND ROB STORY

*Chapters Eighteen to Twenty-four:* We turn our attention to the most serious storyline of recent times the controlling relationship between Helen Archer and Rob Titchener which culminated in the violent stabbing of April 2016 and the ensuing courtroom drama where Helen was acquitted.

*Chapter Eighteen:* The conference keynote from Professor Jennifer Brown, ‘Understanding the Antecedents of the

Domestic Violence Perpetrator Using *The Archers* Coercive Controlling Behaviour Storyline as a Case Study’, which sets the criminological and social context for the storyline.

*Chapter Nineteen:* ‘Bag of the Devil: The Disablement of Rob Titchener’, Katherine Runswick-Cole and Rebecca Wood, arguing that by stigmatising Rob the storyline could have been clearer in educating about stoma, but that this opportunity was lost. *Bag of the devil...* both won the award of Best Title at *Academic Archers 2017* — and was awarded the prize of a bottle of cider — and the attention of Rob Titchener, who has written his retort to the chapter.

*Chapter Twenty:* Amber Medland, ‘Culinary Coercion: Nurturing Traditional Gender Roles in Ambridge’, on all things food, identity and domestic labour in the village, and which is reviewed by the domestic goddess herself, Jennifer Aldridge.

*Chapter Twenty-one:* ‘The Case of Helen and Rob: An Evaluation of the New Coercive Control Offence and Its Portrayal in *The Archers*’, Elizabeth R. A. Champion, taking the legal line on coercive control.

*Chapter Twenty-two:* Anna-Marie O’Connor takes a forensic science approach to the crime scene as in *Forensic* ‘Blood Pattern Analysis in Blossom Hill Cottage’. Reviewed by the first officer on the scene, PC Harrison Burns.

*Chapter Twenty-three:* ‘Soundtrack to a Stabbing: What Rob’s Choice of Music over Dinner Tells Us about Why He Ended Up Spilling the Custard’, Emily Baker and Freya Jarman, on what Rob’s choice of music over dinner tells us about why he ended up spilling the custard, reviewed by Alan Franks. Winner of a bottle of bubbly at conference for

audience participation (a group *dum tee dum* for the Dum Tee Dum podcast opener).

*Chapter Twenty-four:* Caroline M. Taylor tells us of ‘Helen's Diet Behind Bars: Nutrition for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women in Prison’.

# INTRODUCTION

## THE ARCHERS ANALYSED: ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON LIFE IN BORSETSHIRE

This book builds upon our slightly grand attempts to develop a ‘new academic community’ (Courage, Headlam, & Matthews, 2016) quite deliberately connecting subject-specific knowledge from a cohort of academics, researchers, and professionals present at the 2nd *The Archers* in Fact and Fiction: Academic Analyses of Life in Rural Borsetshire conference, with the wealth of material available through 18,000 episodes of the world’s longest running soap opera (or docudrama as Archers Anarchists and Dum Tee Dum podcast fans would have it).

We announced our intention for Academic Archers to be ‘a fine-detailed, open, cross disciplinary space’ in our first book (*ibid.*) and have described elsewhere our maturation from ‘idle tweets’ through to now combining social media curation, events management, media and PR (see Academic Archers website and press work) as well as holding down day-jobs. This volume is the latest output of our experimental *modus vivendi*. In everything we do we have invested significant hope in the cognitive surplus afforded by the wisdom of the crowd or the hive mind of the wider *Archers* firmament. By our calculations on the day, the collective listening time of the audience at the second Academic Archers conference

amounted to half a million minutes. There are many hubs of *Archers* lore and obscure trivia lurking in the message boards.

This introductory chapter seeks to flesh out some of the elements of our thinking in developing Academic Archers since our founding in 2015. As previously, each academic chapter contribution is ‘peer reviewed’ in the voice of an *Archers* character/real person of Ambridge (depending on your disposition). Uniquely within this volume the Helen and Rob storyline represents almost a book within the book – the conference and this book coming at a time when we are in the wake of this substantive storyline. We sincerely hope that the varied contributions of these wonderful (all-female researched and written) chapters in this section can go some way to offer catharsis for those still deeply affected by what was a very traumatic, brave and controversial storyline for the programme.

## BUILDING ACADEMIC ARCHERS

From an ethos perspective Academic Archers has been influenced by the political decentring of knowledge production — that being to form and take knowledge outside of the academic academy and its predominantly white, male, and elder constituency — specifically from within feminist scholarship, critical disability studies (Runswick-Cole, 2017) as well as cultural studies and sociology (Thomas, 2017). We intuitively feel that a focus on the processes and practices of relational and meaningful social research should continue to be wholeheartedly embraced by the higher education academy. However, there is a risk that rather than a carnival and celebration of different bodies of knowledge, the ‘impact agenda’ that universities have to place front and centre of

research to secure State funding, can mean such social research becomes co-opted and as calculable as other reforms to research practice as incorporated into the neo-liberal university. Academic Archers is a means to, through *The Archers* lens, develop and present a cross section of scholars and listeners and to explore more subtle ways of being together differently. This is a move to make knowledge production and dissemination horizontal rather than vertical and a mode of investigation that is ‘a rite of communion between thinking and acting human beings, the researcher and the researched’ (Fals Borda, 1997, p. 108).

When convening the conference, for this *modus operandi* to have any meaning at all, non-specialists needed to have positions of power and authority within the paper selection processes. Further, we needed to ensure the quality of contributions and from a wide spectrum, within and without the academy. We began the second cycle for the Academic Archers year with a conventional call for papers but backed up by a novel and slightly terrifying blended peer reviewing process whereby eighteen Academic Archers Research Fellows subjected all submitted paper abstracts to their scrutiny. These peer reviewers were found through an open call within our social media community and offered free conference places and training and support in exchange for their efforts. The reviewers cohort had a range of backgrounds and were not selected because of prior familiarity with academic peer reviewing processes. We developed a peer review protocol, based on the work conducted by the British Medical Journal (BMJ) on peer review of articles by patients (BMJ, in Headlam, Academic Archers website) and waited to see what happened. We are very keen to further interrogate the role of ‘non-academics’ within circuits of knowledge production, and will discuss some of the state of the conversation on these matters in this chapter. The outcome of this process

was a day and a half of a programme with the same thematic areas as we present in this volume, and a delegation of 120 at the second conference superbly co-organised with Professor Carenza Lewis at the University of Lincoln, her superlative PA, Julie Barclay, and her brilliant staff team. We had the broadening of the audience in our minds as we set out into brave new worlds of online streaming all content, and of building on the social media links we had made on Facebook and Twitter.

In this process, as in all things we self-consciously blur the boundaries between subject and object, expert and non-expert, and fact and fiction in a way that some people struggle to ‘get’. This is part of the pleasure for us, we firmly believe in the interface between popular culture and serious academic research, in the political and epistemological possibilities opened up by probing the interplay between the real and the imagined communities and further, in closing the feedback loops between ‘who knows?’ ‘who listens?’ and ‘who gets to say?’ The answers ought not to be simple or settled if one takes seriously the privileging of alternate forms of knowledge and experience.

#### ACCIDENTAL ‘ACA-FANS’ AND THE ‘FANDOM’ IN CO-PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Having felt our way towards a form of practice which felt right as regards how we engaged with the wider *Archers* community it made sense to check our own lived experience. We approach *Archers* scholarship in this vein and have continued to explore our activities within a wider frame of a co-produced ethics of Action Research, but also one which is alive to the aesthetics and affect in simultaneously being in and building a community of this nature and our enthusiastic

participation in the online worlds of the fandom we, these mediated selves, suggest as an ethics of encounter.

In case this sounds overly intellectualised or grand for what may also be seen as ‘p\*ssing about on Twitter rather than doing any real work’ it is striking how far technology has accelerated the possibilities for activities of this nature threading around the everyday. As relative social media digital natives, we were comfortable in moving between these performed selves of online and offline worlds, but it is immediately obvious that the colossal wealth of user-generated content, on Twitter, Facebook, in fan podcasts, blogs, and fanfiction was actively creating ‘boundary objects’ for investigation. A boundary object is any object that is part of multiple social worlds and facilitates communication between them; it has a different identity in each social world that it inhabits. As a result a boundary object must be simultaneously concrete and abstract, simultaneously fluid and well defined (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 393).

The broadcast ‘canon’ itself is a boundary object for the wider listening community. The listeners then in their acts of interpretation merge ‘common identities’ across all the many *Archers* online communities (see Thomas, 2009, 2014, 2016; Turner, this volume) for example the policing of behaviour and swift acculturation to different online fan groups. One thing that we were absolutely clear about from the beginning was that we were not lurking anonymously round the edges of the online communities with our notebooks. Waves of fan studies and scholars of popular culture have engaged with subcultures, fan bases and fandoms with more and less respect. We have always seen Academic Archers as an example of aca-fandom. We understand this to mean referring both to the study of popular culture with academics in the position of fans themselves and to the study of the associated fan subcultures. In this, we are hopefully navigating

some of the edges of proper fandom studies featuring academics translating fan culture into academic currency. This way of working, we feel may run the risk of extractive relationships. It is most striking when reading the literature on fans that there is an ‘othering’ or ‘weirding’ by the author of the fans going on — the fans are treated as something separate to the ‘norm’ and in this process, shamed. Certainly long-established fan groups such as Trekkies or Buffy fans are scathing about the roles of anthropologists who focus on fan-fiction, geek cults and conventions. Whilst an academic study of fandom can work to variously celebrate, validate or rehabilitate fan practices:

*‘... a pervasive sense of shame permeates both fan spaces and academic approaches to the subject. There is shame about being a fan at all shame over the extremity of some fans, shame over certain fan practices over having those practices revealed to the rest of the world...there is also shame about studying something as “frivolous” as fandom - or worse yet, taking frivolous pleasure ourselves “sitting too close” instead of remaining suitably detached observers’ (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012, p. 213).*

The key here is that in ‘sitting too close’ to our radios we expose ourselves to ridicule (see [Courage, 2017](#)). In [Courage, Headlam, and Matthews \(2016\)](#), we wrote about our different relationships with the programme. I have been reminded of the steps required for ‘becoming’ from the classic article by Becker (1953). Becker argues that there are distinct phases in the acculturation of any supposedly pleasurable behaviour — with getting high as the example he uses in the article — and it is worth reflecting that until two years ago I had never had a

conversation with anyone outside my immediate family about *The Archers*.

## FAN STUDIES

The first wave of fan studies followed De Certeau's (1984) definition of powerful producers and disempowered consumers, as befitted a mass and broadcast-only mediascape. Second and third wave fan studies continued to focus on class and subversion (subcultures). Theorists are now more interested in the roles of fans in identity work and in the social and cultural performance of identity and in the distribution of power/knowledge prioritizing the emotional aspects of 'fanning'. This later work on the emotional affect is most productive in terms of our engagement with both *The Archers* and *The Archers* fandom.

The point, of course, is to seek to work in a way that disturbs some of the false oppositions and binaries that have governed scholarly life by being different together to some purpose, and it is in this territory that [Cristofari and Guittion \(2016\)](#) have developed their theories of the ways in which both subject positions, of academic and of fan, may be nearer to continuums than divisions.

In seeking differentiated points of entry between distance/proximity, professional/amateur, rational/emotional, orthodox/unorthodox, analytic/appropriative and fundamentally between the individual/community, Academic Archers hopes to unsettle some of the power dynamics that govern the mobilisation of knowledge. It may be that calibrating these continuums differently may serve to radicalise the production of useful and useable knowledge.

Another emotive and emotional feature of the fan clans surrounding *The Archers* is that many fans seem to have quite

deep-seated antipathies towards some (or all) of the characters in the show (Courage, 2017). This is quite brilliantly explained using the example of queering *Star Trek*. Trekkies get so exercised about the lack of gay characters on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise that they vent against the show itself, creating hostility between fans and the show's creators (or 'showrunner fans' as some fan communities have it.) The intensity and depth of engagement from fans are a very temperamental resource indeed. *The Archers* fandom has sat at an angle to the show's creators as long as they have had the means to express this. As we wrote in the first book (Courage, Headlam, & Matthews, 2016), there has been a curious but intense elision between *The Archers* and social media.

In order to examine how the interactions between the show and the fan communities has been changing it is worth exploring the controversy surrounding the unilateral closing of *The Archers* message board site, Mustardland. This story has a number of unique features — explained by Thomas (in Courage, Headlam, & Matthews, 2016) — but the dimension of the power of the BBC in framing and shaping how *The Archers* is received has appeared to change drastically in the very recent past.

Early engagement with social media shows the patrician attitudes of 'Auntie Beeb' in coming to terms with the power of message boards in shaping the ways in which the programme is received. Auntie Beeb, is in this case more or less personified by then-*Archers* editor, Vanessa Whitburn, whose twenty-two-year tenure had begun in pre-social media days. Speaking to *Feedback* on Radio 4 about her retirement in 2013, she described a vexatious relationship with fans, and that she had been subject to 'cyber-bullying' online. It is clear that the relationship between formal channels and the wider fandom were on precarious ground around this time as the BBC closed Mustardland. Reported here in The Telegraph:

*In two weeks' time, the site ([bbc.co.uk/dna/mbarchers](http://bbc.co.uk/dna/mbarchers)), or "Mustard Land" as it is known to fans because of its yellow background, will be no more. The official reason is dwindling numbers: the BBC claims that, out of five million listeners who tune in to The Archers, just 1,000 regularly post on the forum, so it can no longer justify the cost. Listeners, however, claim otherwise. They say the BBC is trying to censor them, in particular their candid comments... "How to get rid of the pesky, wrong sort of listener!" ranted one angry fan on the site, who felt that message board users were seen by the BBC as "too critical, too old and too much trouble". (Sarah Rainey, *The Telegraph*, 13 February 2013)*

It is fair to say that — as Facebook group mediators and as @AcademicArchers on Twitter — the 'candid' and 'proper criticism' can shade over into quite personal invective at times. The robustness of this criticism may have come as a shock to Vanessa Whitburn. There is a very particular role for the BBC in this space. Fandoms in the US are linked with the market imperatives of their creators and can function as a form of marketing and PR, albeit highly reflexively. The justification of 'only' 1000 active posters on Mustardland within the click and attention economy could have been seen as a vital resource for the BBC at this time.

The ensuing five years has seen huge shifts in this relationship, and a flowering of smaller, more fleet of foot forms of commentary, on social media, and through *The Ambridge Observer* and *Dum Tee Dum* podcast for example. The new regime of Editor Huw Kennair-Jones appears to be much more enthusiastic about engaging with the fandom on social media. Kennair-Jones crowd-sourced questions for an outing

on Broadcasting House on Radio 4 and we will enthusiastically watch how this relationship develops.

## ACTS OF CREATION AND INTERPRETATION: ALL WE HAVE IS AN ABILITY TO STRUCTURE INFORMATION

Something that has tickled us from the beginning has been the ingenuity of many of the parody accounts on Twitter, the cartoons and gifs and memes and tropes which circulate in mega-quick time in direct response to the broadcast of *The Archers*. This instant response, coupled with often a snort of laughter or a smile of recognition, is the main way in which the community of *Archers* listeners develops. More recently the show itself has been more active in participating in the fun and a relevant, funny post can get widely retweeted by the official BBC *The Archers* Twitter account before the end of an episode even. Rather than viewing academic practice as some lofty thing, we approach academic endeavour as just an example of us being able to bring the thing that we can do to this party. Not adept as cartoonists, we can offer solely our subject knowledge and the learnt ability to structure knowledge in the way that renders it visible to other scholars and the wider *Archers* culture.

**Table 1** from [Cristofari and Guitton \(2016\)](#) shows how far these various categories are linked through the currencies of ‘involvement’ and ‘structure of knowledge’. This is salient as it places our endeavours as Academic Archers firmly within the acts of creation and interpretation that we admire so much in the wider fandom. This table connects specific skills, fan spaces, practices and modes of participation.

It is our hope that in participating and helping to curate *Archers* content that Academic Archers moves from an extractive or consumptive mode and toward a productive

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**Table 1. Currencies of ‘Involvement’ and ‘Structure of Knowledge’ of Fandom (Cristofari & Guitton, 2016).**

Skill	Fan Space	Fan Practices	Participation
Technical	Public spaces	Info gathering	Consumptive
Analytic	Semi-public (fans only)	Forums, discussion, blogging	Productive
Interpretive	Private, fans only	Creation of fan works	Productive

---

and engaged academic community. We hope that you enjoy the book, and that we can continue the conversation online on Facebook ([Academic Archers](https://www.facebook.com/AcademicArchers/)), on Twitter ([@AcademicArchers](https://twitter.com/AcademicArchers)) and via our website ([www.academicarchers.net](http://academicarchers.net)).

Dr Nicola Headlam  
 Dr Cara Courage  
*Editors*

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