

The Connected Histories of the BBC

Provenance:	<p>The file reproduced here was provided by the BBC to be made publicly accessible through the Connected Histories of the BBC catalogue hosted by the University of Sussex. It was selected in 2021 from one of five collections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BBC Oral History • BBC History of North Regional Broadcasting • BBC Horizon at 50 • BBC World Service Moving Houses Project • Alexandra Palace Television Society Oral History
Clearance:	Interviews have been reviewed and edited to comply with GDPR and other requirements.
Copyright:	<p>© BBC</p> <p>© Alexandra Palace Television Society</p>
Conditions of use:	<p>This interview is available for private research. If you wish to use any of the interview in a published work or for a commercial purpose, permission must be requested from the BBC at</p> <p>historyteam@bbc.co.uk</p> <p>apts@apts.org.uk (for Alexandra Palace material)</p>
Partner:	The Connected Histories of the BBC research project was led by the University of Sussex, 2017-2022, funded by the AHRC.
More information:	The project's public resource including more information on terms and conditions of use are available at: https://chbbc.sussex.ac.uk/

Norman Painting 15/11/02 Full version
Interviewed by Donald Steele

D Norman you of course are the only person who's been in *The Archers* continuously since day one?

N Yes, no it makes me feel like Methuselah sometimes but it was true, I was there before there was an *Archers* I was on a programme contract which meant a kind of dogsbody and I did a lot of work for Godfrey, both writing and interviewing it tended to be agricultural things because that was his main line and he launched a number of really quite successful agricultural programmes. There at one of the meetings somebody said "Yes they are great programmes but the farmers don't listen to them I don't know why?" and then one man got up and said "what we need is a farming *Dick Barton*" that was a programme which went out on the Light Programme as it was then, each day, a sort of James Bond thing and everybody laughed and years later when I came to write the first history of the programme I dedicated it to "the one who didn't laugh" and it was ten years before Godfrey realised I meant him, because the idea of a farming *Dick Barton*, it didn't make any sort of sense you know, a 007 farmer it was nonsense.

But he went away and thought about it and he wrote on a bit of paper, Dan, Doris, Jack, Phil, Chris, Walter Gabriel, I don't know about Simon, then he said "no" and he tore it up and threw it in his wastepaper basket and his secretary rescued it and it's now somewhere – a kind of museum thing because he had a flash, the original idea, and then, being Godfrey, he'd got to sell it and he had a lot of contacts in the agricultural world in London in the Ministry and the National Farmers Union. And of course they all knew Godfrey very well because he used to come along with a banner you know about the most wonderful programme you ever had and they'd sort of think well this is Godfrey. I mean if it's a good idea it might not take off because he does tend to be rather a lot of mouth. He was his own worst enemy actually and frankly at times an impossible person but as I knew from working with him he knew his radio for one thing, he was a very good radio performer both as a commentator and as an actor and he knew his audience and he also was a bit of bulldozer and he wouldn't take no for an answer. He persuaded the programme heads at Birmingham that it was a good idea and the money a little bit of money was finally discovered for us to do one week's trial run in May 1950 and I was in that and the only other survivor from that time is June Spencer and she played Peggy Archer and then when we'd been running for a couple of years or so, she left the programme and the part was taken over by a nice actress called Thelma Rogers. But I'd been there come hell or high water throughout the whole time without a break.

D You haven't felt then, I mean sometimes they sometimes call *The Archers* an institution, you haven't felt like an institution...

N I gave a talk at the Royal Festival Hall one day for the National Trust and I was introduced by the man from the National Trust by saying "Here's the National Trust, a great institution, and now I am going to introduce you to another great institution" and that was the first time I had been called an institution in my life but it has become that. But to go back to Godfrey he directed the programme for three months, Tony Shryane was there to learn how to do it, no Tony Shryane was the senior programme operator, but nonetheless he had to learn how to do it Godfrey's way. And then I remember the wife of the Controller said at one of our parties afterwards "I always felt for the first three months you were all rather tense but now you seem much more natural and relaxed" well the tension was Godfrey's tension, probably necessary but he was an absolute firebrand, I mean you could hear him coming and when he came into the room there was no doubt that he was here.

D But although he got the money for a trial run he must have really believed that this was something that could run, he had a story here that would really catch on?

N I don't think he, even Godfrey, thought more than about ten years if it all happened but he was turned down flat you see, Birmingham gave him his chance, he then got five huge discs each one playing for 15 minutes and he managed to persuade Ministry of Agriculture officials and the Secretary of the NFU, the PRO of the NFU to hear these programmes and the BBC said through Sir William Haley, I think it was the Director General, "Oh no, we want no more family programmes unless there's a war," which in December 1950 there very nearly was. We had the Berlin airlift and it all got very cold war and dangerous and finally Light Programme decided this was something they'd like to give a go to and because *Dick Barton* was not exactly outstaying its welcome but becoming increasingly difficult because each day Dick Barton was in a difficult position but within a couple of minutes of the next episode he was out of that and into another one, you know single bound our hero was free but by the end of the week, the Friday episode it was such a tremendous cliffhanger to hold them over to Monday and eventually as you can see that's a bit self defeating because how can you go on year in and year out finding credible or even incredible situations which he can get out of. So the two scriptwriters Edward J Mason and Geoffrey Webb were beginning to get a little worried. They didn't like the idea of anyone else taking it over and so when this came up although of the two neither was a farmer, Geoff Webb was a countryman but Ted was a complete urbanite you know, so Godfrey went around for a while and that's when he asked me if I would write it and I said "yes" and he asked me if I would direct it and I said "yes" because I had directed some radio "would I research it" that was the first question "you've got an academic background would you do some research?" And he didn't ask me to play one of the parts it just came through the post as a contract. But he... at the time he was looking for a writer, he said "You see my problem is this, I've either got to find a farmer and teach him how to write for the radio, or find a radio writer and teach them some agriculture." And that is in fact what he did. And he then started something which still happens to this day where the writing team and the editor go with the agriculture story editor onto location onto a farm, its what we call the mud on the boots syndrome you know because we try to get it as real as possible without appearing to be spokespeople for anybody, the union or for the ministry or any other pressure group you know, we have to have a balance and tell the whole story.

D But what was your... over the years you'd developed quite a close professional relationship with Godfrey Baseley that he's either maligned in some things that you read of his being a tyrant and difficult as you've said a dictator or as a wonderful visionary and how did you see him?

N Oh the two can certainly be the same. After three months I resigned three times in one week because we'd been told one story and when it came it was quite different. We sat having coffee one day and Harry Oakes who played Dan Archer said "Well shall we do another three months of it because after all twelve pounds a week is not to be sneered at," and there was a silence and we then discovered that he and June Spencer and Robert Mawdesley who played Walter Gabriel were all getting twelve, I was getting ten, Gwen was getting eight.

D That was Gwen Berryman who played Doris?

N Who played Doris Archer. And I said "Well this wasn't what we were told, we were all going to be paid the same money to get a nice family feeling." We used to do all sorts of silly things like having lunch together in the canteen around a big table to get that family feeling, that didn't work because there were the wets and the dries you know, some liked to go for a drink before and some of us liked to go and tuck into the food. So that I had this row with Godfrey because I

resigned quite formally and perfectly three times in writing in one week and somebody came over and said "He's in the Club, he's getting tanked up saying he'll sign, he'll sign when I've done with him". So I happened to bump into the Assistant Head of Programmes and told him this and he said "Oh dear dear dear, people just don't know how to deal with primadonnas do they, anyway best of luck" and we went into the music studio, the only place where we could talk and Godfrey banged the Bechstein and I banged the Bossendorfer, I don't know what came into me because I'm a mild thing usually but it was not just, he knew it wasn't just, I mean he hadn't got the money, his budget was impossible, I don't know how he did it to be honest but anyway at the end a great deal of thumping and shouting, a lot of heavy shouting he had a big fine voice as well for some reason I wasn't intimidated probably because I knew I was right. Also I thought well if that's the way it is I would rather carry on with what I always thought was going to be my career as a writer and so I said "Well if we have the same money there's no problem," and as I went down the stairs he called after me "You silly young fool, you've got a job here for ten years if you want it." And that's when I thought that man lives in a fantasy world but I was wrong and he was right and this is the trouble with Godfrey he is impossible. I mean we once had a script meeting I remember and I forget what the story was luckily but we'd got a cracking new storyline and we were all really thrilled with it, I was in the writing team by now and we went, there was a lunch provided I don't know where we were, some sort of agricultural place were being hosts and then we did a thing in the afternoon and several of these distinguished agriculturalists came up to me and said "its all very exciting isn't it?" I said "what's exciting?" "well this new storyline of yours" I said "well how do you know about it?" and they said "oh Godfrey's been telling everybody" and I thought what is the point because he was carried away by his own enthusiasm by his passion for the thing. He did see life in black and white I think, but after our row you see, there was a silence for a while and I was in a studio in another programme and he came in and said "I want a word with you" and we came outside and he said "would you write a programme for me about the Harper Adams Agricultural College?" I said "yes, lovely, fine" and it was obvious that the breach was healed, because people said he tended to be resentful and bear grudges well there was no grudge there and I'd really shouted at him as much as he had shouted at me and possibly it didn't happen very often but I on this occasion knew I was right and I would have shouted until I was hoarse.

D But he must have been having fights behind the scenes of programmes just to keep it on the air?

N He wouldn't take no for an answer. And the result is that in spite of all the odds and they were considerable he worked his way past the Director General for heavens sake, pleaded his case, played his discs and its now a matter of record, we went on the air on the Light Programme in January 1951 at midday and within three months we moved up to the *Dick Barton* slot and *Dick Barton* went and I still meet ageing gentlemen who say "well I've never liked *The Archers* because you took my *Dick Barton* away from me" but that was a long time ago.

D There are certainly those who feel that Godfrey's not really had the recognition even from the BBC that he should have had for creating this most wonderful series.

N Well yes I think that the most ignoble act that BBC people that I encountered ever did was to sack Godfrey without any warning and to announce that he was going to be replaced by a leading dramatist. Well the leading dramatist turned out to be a failing scriptwriter from ITV.

D Who was that?

N His name was Malcolm Lynch. He'd won an Emmy or something but he knew nothing, and I say it deliberately, nothing about writing for radio whereas Godfrey lived and breathed radio. He had this extraordinary imagination because the Midland region then hadn't got a coastline when they became very regional conscious they gave the Midlands region East Anglia and I was doing odd bits of programmes, contract programmes and somebody said "they're going to do a roundup now of this hour's programme" each of the regions did one where they went to the different summer shows and things that were happening on the pier and all that and the chap said "listen to this, I think you'll learn something from it" and I heard a man say "now over to Godfrey Basley at the swimming stadium" and Godfrey said "well you join us at a very interesting time, the score is 1-1 and we desperately hope that somebody will do another goal so that we can have a decider" and he built it up and built it up and built it up and somebody did just before we went off the air, they scored this goal and "good we now have a result and this is Godfrey Baseley returning you to so and so" and this man said "go and have a look" and I so I opened the door into the swimming pool which was empty he'd done it all in his own imagination and it was totally convincing but you see the fantasy world was never far away and I don't think he deserved the treatment he got to open his post one day and find his contract was not being renewed. Monstrous, I mean the man who created the whole thing and the man who had made it possible for the man who wrote that letter to have the job at all and I mean what should have happened was that if their story when they were challenged eventually was "well he's 67 you know, he is knocking on" well if he'd had problems or what they regarded as problems they could have discussed them with him but of course, a lot of people were afraid of him, he was his own worst enemy but he was accused of being too forward looking, now for a 67 year old that's not a bad criticism but he would find out what the developments were and come in and say "of course bottled milk is on its way out, you won't be drinking milk anymore, I mean all these chaps carrying gallons of water about, we shall all be on powdered milk in ten years time" you know, which we weren't, but on the other hand "we're going to make chicken as cheap as beef and lamb" and we thought well this is nonsense but now with the broiler house and chickens and so on, there's more of that particular meat eaten than any other and you see he was determined that it was going to happen and of course he was right. That was his thing but the fact that he was looking forward, they could have said to him "look put it back a little bit" but that was never said you see, he was just allowed, but the old principle of give them enough rope and they will hang themselves but on the other hand you could say "well you've done a very good service for us and don't put us in a position where we have to get rid of you".

D Because in the end the BBC really kind of put him out to the wilderness I think he had an annual meeting a cup of tea with the editor of *The Archers* as a courtesy in latter years but really the only recognition he got from the BBC was a memorial service of sorts.

N Well that's true I know because I gave the address of trying to take this particular line, his family were there and you see what should have happened quite clearly was that if they decided, seriously decided that his time had come they could have given him a very nice party, he could have appeared in the honours list and he would have gone out to grass a happy man because he still had 20 years to go or more and I know he told me once his parents were both in their nineties when they died, because unfortunately you see then he did make a lot of enemies, he smashed himself up very badly in a car crash and somebody told me so I rang up one or two people who I won't mention the names because it is invidious but people whom he made, well no I will tell you one because it's perfectly true and he was a nice man, a man who became a national figure as Percy Thrower the gardening man and I rang and said "Percy, you know Godfrey's smashed himself up and he's in a hospital out in the sticks and so we were just wondering whether somebody might go and see him" and he said "oh well, perhaps you don't know but Godfrey and I had a terrible row and we haven't spoken for some years" and so I went to see him in hospital

and took him some books and things, but I'm not giving myself a medal but not many people did you know because as I say he was a difficult person to like, but I was aware at first hand of his enormous talent. He actually played a part in the programme because again he was a very fine poetry reader which astonishes some people, when the third programme started he did several long readings for people like John Masefield? Half hour long readings, that's a side of him that never gets mentioned. I suppose its no secret that he is going to be in the new dictionary of national biography so he's getting a little bit of acknowledgement at last.

D I wonder if we could talk briefly about another individual either to lay a myth to rest or stand it up which is John Gallagher. John Gallagher undoubtedly would like people to think that he saved *The Archers* from being axed.

N Yes, he belonged to the school which said this programme has been going for 20 years so there must be something wrong with it and I am the man to put it right.

D He was never the editor of course, he was...

N No, he thought he was the one who could pull the strings he rather got the wrong chap, but he had an unrealistic view of it. He actually said until the man actually became the editor "well you can knock out five scripts in a weekend and keep your ordinary job going" I mean five scripts in a weekend is a joke, I mean you want a week at least to do that, I know I have done under duress on one occasion I did more than one a day but I mean that was purely because people had died around me. And he without any real justification except an enormous ambition thought that he was the one to put things right, so he sacked Godfrey which was silly, he appointed not Jamie Priestley? or Terence Rattigan? or somebody which was what his letter to Godfrey suggested but Malcolm who was a nice enough chap but didn't understand radio and left within a very short time and when he left the BBC he said "I am now friends with everybody including Godfrey and Norman" well the latter bit is not true. I can never forgive him for what he did to the programme, he tried to undermine my confidence personally and very nearly did, my scripts were found to be not acceptable were sent to the Controller of the service who had said that they were despicable and they needed to be rewritten except that when I met him and apologised he said "I don't know what you are talking about" he'd never seen them. Now that to my mind is mischievous manipulation but you can imagine what it does to one. I mean Ted Mason and I had won the only award so far that's been given for writing the scripts, I knew that when people were dying I wrote for three months once and Tony Shryane kept calling me in and saying "look at the figures, look at the figures" and instead of going down they were holding their own and in some cases going up and he said "so you've nothing to worry about" and yet I was of no value whatsoever in the eyes of Mr Gallagher. He took against two people, one was a female member of the staff and it took him some years to get rid of her which he finally did by all sorts of legal requirements and so on. I was asked as a scriptwriter to give my opinion of this girl and I said that she was highly efficient, the programme came first, it mattered to her that we got things right and if she had a fault it was that she did tend to make a big fuss to get things right, and four and a half years later or so on I had another letter from the then editor Charles Lefoe who said "I want you to write to me in a short letter giving me your assessment of the work of..." So once again I had a feeling of déjà vu I am writing again to say that I think this person is... and surely people with such dedication and talent should be cherished and not tormented and got rid of, but he finally did get rid of her.

D But do you think that *The Archers* was really under threat of being axed when Jock took it over.

N No I think that, I don't think so. Later and this is the gospel according to William Smethurst, there had been a meeting in London at which it was decided to get rid of one of the soap operas, I imagine that would be a cost cutting exercise and there was a programme which was London based, a show called *Waggoner's Walk*, and according to Smethurst, for one month that was the decision that *The Archers* should go and *Waggoner's Walk* should stay. But then for whatever reason wise powers prevailed and that's why we're still here. But I don't think we were, clearly we weren't in danger but when Jock took over I will tell you why. He appointed a man who had no knowledge of agriculture, no knowledge of radio, no knowledge of country life and in the first three or four weeks we had railway disasters, the whole set of disasters you could think of, people near death and whatnot and it became a totally different programme and it survived it and I've said somewhere else for a programme to have such major surgery done on it and to survive must have been a pretty strong patient in the first place and I really do not think that it was remotely in danger of being taken off. There was always to be frank, there was always a very slight feeling from London, a sort of metropolitan thing that this was a regional programme because it was done in Birmingham and it took a long time for that to disappear completely and I met the assistant head of Light Programme in a lift in BH once and he said "oh what brings you to Babylon?" and I said "well the programme of course" and he said "what programme?" and I said "there's only one, *The Archers*" and he laughed but that wasn't what they wanted to hear you know, I think they were, for a long time, felt they were grudgingly allowing us to go on, we had after a very few years a memo from the Head of Drama Val Gielgud saying he thought we all sounded rather tired. Now I personally don't think that was the case but nonetheless it was then decided we should be given extra time to rehearse with the result that we sounded even more tired because the whole thing depends on professional performers getting a good script and getting it to life very quickly and the moment you start you know doing the [CHECK INDISTINCT] on it you are doing something you never intended it to be. It's not Chekhov, it's an everyday story of life in the country.

D Can we talk about a rather wonderful woman in the history of *The Archers* in many ways was Gwen Berryman.

N Well Gwen and I were extremely close to the extent that we were one day in the studio, Tony Shryane stopped the rehearsal and said "Norman I'm sorry I've got the Daily Mail on the phone here, they want to publish a story that you and Gwen are going to get married" and I said "well you can use the formula can't you, we are very good friends" which was true. *The Archers* has survived for many reason but one is because it's an ensemble show there are no stars and without for a minute setting out to do it, Gwen became the star.

D She played Doris Archer?

N She played Doris Archer, the original idea, the farmer Dan, his wife Doris, their three children and the farm worker and the bad farmer, and she was there and many of the scenes were round the breakfast table at Brookfield Farm and they were by the light of that time natural and convincing but Gwen, one has to remember, her father was an orphanage boy who ended up a very rich man, but when he started he used to sleep under the counter of the shoemaker's shop where he was an apprentice and then he owned the shoemakers shop and little Gwen was born and she never forgot and often mentioned the fact that she used to dance on the counter to amuse the customers and so far as I was concerned Gwen spent the rest of her life dancing on the counter to amuse the customers.

D But she had this kind of, she enjoyed kind of appearing in this grand fur coat...

N Well she was, there was money she was never short of money, she used to get a lot of laughs and the biggest one she got from us was “oh no, I can’t afford it” you know and I can tell you more stories along those lines but I won’t and she, oh yes hats were her thing and she used to appear at, on very grand occasions, she met the Queen Mother once and we said “what did she say to you” and she said “she said something to me and I didn’t hear and I said ‘what?’ and she moved on” so once she was met with a rival I mean she wasn’t a disaster but she was enormous fun, things always had to happen to Gwen she made sure that things happened to her she went on a holiday and there was all of a sudden a disaster she would go on safari in Africa and very nearly got eaten by a tiger or trampled on by an elephant. She always had to have a story to tell.

D But she used to turn up in rather sort of grand cars did she and...?

N No that was a phase when I was living in London and I think she had suddenly realised that you can’t take it with you and it’d be rather fun to appear at London theatres in a Rolls Royce and so she’d say “I’ll pick you up at half past six” and sure enough outside my flat there would be this car. I remember sitting in the back with her after a review with Beryl Reid in it I think it was called *All Square* and as we went back in the car the driver said “I suppose you’ve heard that President Kennedy’s been assassinated?” so that’s where I was on that famous day. That didn’t last very long but she liked to give... is that plane going to be a nuisance to us?

D We’ll let it go past.

N I remember one occasion when she gave a dinner at the Savoy for her goddaughter Elizabeth Harwood, who is a wonderful soprano, and her last night far too young but she did get into the big time and so Gwen gave a dinner for her after the show, I suppose you would call it a supper but it was very very grand and there was an iced cake which said to Zerbinetta [CHECK?] And Zerbinetta was the part that Elizabeth had played and she’d said to me “I’m terrified of these high notes you know” and I said “well just relax you can do them” she said “no” and when it came to the highest note which all the critics knew she panicked and she dropped it a note or two, you know primadonnas don’t do that they go for it so she never played Zerbinetta again and Zerbinetta was a terrible thing having got over that little inquest in the theatre it was at Sadlers Wells and then she turned up as guest of honour at Gwen’s supper party and the big moment was when the head waiter brought in this beautiful cake and it said To Zerbinetta, which was rubbing it in, it all went wrong but she loved to go into big hotels and it wasn’t so much for the food although she was interested in food and later as a diabetic she had to be rather more choosy than she had been and she was also tremendously arthritic but towards the end of her life I remember she realised that the new characters were coming in and getting younger and younger and she used to sit in one chair rather like the one that I am sitting in now and that was the chair of the blessed Gwen you know nobody sat in that and it was in that chair she was sitting one day when William Smethurst arrived with a bounce which he denies emphatically but I was there, bounced up to Gwen and without so much as a bye or leave said “hello Gwen you wouldn’t mind playing your own death scene would you?” and I saw her face just, the light went from her eyes, she couldn’t believe what she was hearing and he said “well you know, all good things come to an end” or something of the sort and off he went. Well I drove Gwen to a hotel after that, she said she couldn’t go in and do the episode, she said to me “I can’t do it I can’t do it” “Yes you can, you are a professional artist on contract you can go and do it” and eventually got her into the studio and she did and I said “I’ll take you back” so I took her back to the hotel and she said “I shan’t come in tomorrow you know, I’ve finished now, I’m not going to come in again” and I said “no you can’t be serious” “oh yes I am very” and I turned round and huge tears were dropping down and in fact she didn’t appear again, but she lived for some years.

D She was a quite remarkable woman.

N Oh undoubtedly and I think she would be with us still but she probably would've been for much longer, I mean this is killing of Sister George you know, there was later I thought a really rather mischievous letter by Smethurst I think to the Times I know I replied to it that said that she became quite dotty in her old age because she thought she was Doris Archer. Now that really is mischievous, I never believed for a moment that I was Philip Archer I always say I put him on when I go into the studio and I hang him up on the hook when I come out. Perhaps Gwen did identify in the early days a little too closely with the character but I mean Gwen was nobody's fool, Gwen had to manage money she had to run a business, she had a very unhappy life in so far as her second boyfriend came into her room and said hello and dropped down dead and so back she went and opened a shop. And so she was a business woman, she was nobody's fool and she could be very funny and very charming but inevitably not everybody liked her, I mean Jessie Matthews said I love the show dear but your leading lady you know but nobody loves us all do they?

D Has *The Archers* always been recorded?

N Always except, we have done what you call a couple of topical inserts live purely because the thing was happening right up to the time.

D These are the bits of the programme you changed, things that were on the news?

N These were things we made our name on very very early on, Godfrey was very keen on the programme being topical in spite of his long view and on one occasion very early on in the run of the programme we did a topical discussion in the pub of the day's Budget, which was much more news then than it is now, people wanted to know was there much on cigarettes and was beer going up and so on. And so we all four of us were called to the studio to re-record, we've got that scene and into it we are going to insert one minute 20 seconds embodying the latest things which were coming in the budget and they are coming in now on the ticker tape, we're going back to that sort of technology and the scriptwriters would say get the stuff off the ticker tape write in the one minute twenty seconds and give it to us we would rehearse it and time it, we would be in our normal studio on the floor below there was the big fifteen minute disc and at quarter to seven as it was then down would go the needle and play to an agreed point whereupon the engineer would lift the needle and stop that, press the light and a cue would come on in the studio and we would do our one minute and twenty seconds or whatever it was and at the end of it we hoped that the engineer had managed to move the needle on that much and plonk it down again, it was all hairy stuff and that had to be live because there wasn't time to record it and in those days you couldn't very easily edit from disc to disc because the levels went all over the place so that was that. There was one and so far as I can remember the only whole episode which was live and was taken by us as an indication that we had arrived just before Christmas, a couple of days before Christmas in our first year in 1951, we were rung up several of us and asked were we available on Boxing Day to do a half an hour *Archers* live and this was very much a last minute session, it wasn't in Radio Times because there was no time for it to be and so we did a half hour Christmas at Brookfield thing. One of the things that we also made our name on was Dan and Doris singing duets with Phil at the piano. Our studio at Broad Street was sort of oblong and the piano was at one end and the acting studio was at the other, the acting area and as I was playing the piano there would be things like "what about Down the Vale Phil?" "oh yes that would be lovely hang on a minute," said Phil and then I'd beetle down to the far end of the studio and hope that the music was on the thing and then off I'd go and accompany them from some distance away with very little rehearsal

live, but we came out on time and it must have been so good because they've never asked us to do it again!

D Going back to this whole thing about *The Archers* keeping pace with the times, is an interesting topic because it has had a remarkable ability to seem just exactly topical even when its been recorded in advance, there's just been this remarkable ability to seem right up to date even though some people talk about it as an institution and so on it has got this wonderful ability.

N Well from the beginning of course there was a certain amount of feed in from the government, from the minister of agriculture and if those issues were thought important enough then we would put those in. We were very useful for example if every farmer in the country was going to receive a certain communication on the 10 April well it needed dealing with straight away and farmers have a habit of putting it up behind the clock so sure enough Brookfield farm one day, "oh there's a letter for you Dan it looks official I've put it up on the mantelpiece" "oh I'll look at it tomorrow" "it does say urgent Dan" and then we'd got the point over but we'd been topical in another way which had been rather amusing because in recent years we've had the shock horror story, you know these people under a shower or this girl has had a baby and so on, or is having a baby, what Jennifer Archer 20 odd years ago, 30 odd years ago was a teacher trainee and suddenly announced that she was with child, I mean that's a long time ago, we had a certain amount of comment but we didn't have the sort of shock horror which we get now, which seems to me to be really rather retrograde, the very first scene that I played as Phil Archer which was Phil was a little bit of a ram you know and he had terrible trouble with his hormones I mean I've said on more than one occasion he is the patron saint of testosterone and it was a terrific part to play because he got all his red blood in his veins, he was double dating all over the village and sometimes forgetting but at the same time he was a good natured chap he'd got a heart as big as a bucket. He'd help anybody and that was a lovely mixture to play and the very first scene I played was after a New Year's Eve party because we went out on the 1 January and it was that evening and he was sitting in the car with his girlfriend Grace and it was quite clearly they were in for a very heavy snogging session, the bra was undone it was perfectly clear and we did that I may say with our acting, it can be done and then we had a whole series of really very torrid sex scenes and then there was a headline in one of the smaller papers *The Archers* a divorce exclamation mark as if a divorce had never happened in the world and this current story at the moment about a divorced woman having a baby by one of the main characters in the programme, when I was asked to write because another scriptwriter had died, Tony Shryane and Valerie dropped off a folder in my house for me to study before I went to the scriptwriters meeting and I couldn't believe the depth of the research that they went in. They decided for best reasons known to themselves they wanted to reflect the number of women having babies and this covered the group which did seem to be most likely to have pregnancies was teacher training girls so they had promptly made Jennifer now a main character in an entirely different way into a teacher trainer and there she was pregnant and indeed had the baby but there was no sort of shock horror. I often wonder what sort of lives the people are who write these sort of headlines I mean do they go home and have a bowl of thin gruel and go to bed at half past nine? Surely not.

D But in doing these stories *The Archers* was really simply reflecting life as it was I mean it wasn't in any sense trying to predict morality it was simply saying look this is what goes on and this is what would go on today in a country village.

N Well as I've just said the research suggests that this was a group in which the number of unmarried mothers as we called them then is higher than any other group and so we reflected and that is the world, I mean I've said it already but I will say it again because it is worth emphasising, our job is not to lead and not to be too nostalgic, a little goes a very long way with

nostalgia the remit is that we reflect life in an English country village as it is not as it used to be not as it ought to be, which is what some of the papers suggest we ought to be doing, not as it ought to be, as it is, and not even as it might be or as it ought to be or as it will be it's as it is and that isn't always pleasant you know and we can't always do the roses round the door story. I remember in Godfrey's day we didn't mess about, if we had an agricultural story we went and talked to the Ministry of Agriculture, the scriptwriters went. We had a housing story, so we went and spoke to the minister of housing and when we saw the minister of agriculture his number one was stressing that farming, agriculture in this country was one of our most successful industries and he quoted figures to prove it you see and I remember saying "yes but our job is to reflect a homely story of these people in a farmhouse with nice views and roses round the door" and he said "there are no roses round the door this is a serious industry" I said "well its not an easy story to write" but that's the story we had to write otherwise we should have been not sticking to our brief and that rather taxed one's ingenuity because a milkmaid on a three legged stool singing while she milks her cow is one thing but a milking machine humming away and clusters going on and cows udders being washed and this whole business isn't really quite so attractive but we've had to persuade people that that is what really goes on.

D Has there been a tension do you think between urban listeners and rural listeners in the sense that sometimes its said that urban listeners want to feel that there is a chocolate box countryside you know that they can visit.

N Not only the fewer of the listeners but also the people who write the newspaper articles, it's they who are living in the past, they want that idyll which has long gone and it's our job to tell them the truth and tell them honourably and honestly and clearly. I wrote the first history of *The Archers* and inevitably went round promoting it and so on, it was a bestseller one can't do it in quite the open way they do it now but it was in the bestseller lists almost immediately and I gather from the publishers that most of those copies had been sold in London, not all over the countryside it was London, so there is this would be nostalgia, that's not really the word for it, would be desire for a lovely rural scene as you say like the chocolate box and it's been our job whilst entertaining and amusing and being a generally listenable to programme you've got to make it quite clear that this is what is really is like, the curious thing is people don't want to accept that and they very often don't hear the things we've been telling them for an awful long time.

D What about *The Archers* and morality because there's a tradition set in the television soaps for there to be a strong ultimate morality underlying everything, in other words if you do wrong you have to see the consequences of it, if you take drugs it has to be seen that no good will come of it.

N Crime does not pay. I don't think we've, I hope we haven't ever been judgemental in that sort of way, our job is to reflect and if there are people like that in our village as there are in every village, I mean this village where I live I used to describe it as a little microcosm of life except I said for drugs, I said at a dinner party one day and somebody said "well where have you been this last six months" not 200 yards from where you live there's a woman who's just been fined for possession of cannabis which was absolute news to me, I at that time spent most of my time slaving over a hot typewriter, so I wasn't always entirely aware of what goes on. But that was our job and we've done drugs I mean I've always said once I began to write there is no subject in the world that we can't discuss if it is appropriate to a village.

D But this business of reflecting life as it is, I mean do you feel a responsibility to show that crime doesn't pay for example even though we know that in real life, life isn't fair and crime jolly well sometimes does.

N We don't glorify crime or wrongdoing but we cannot deny that it exists, the other thing is of course, its much more difficult to write discord than harmony. If you can write a happy family, people say oh that's a bit syrupy and sentimental isn't it and you're only trying to tell the truth. If on the other hand they all have a row and it's the easiest thing to write, people having a, you know, which is why I see trails for television soaps and it seems to me they're always in extremis, they are shouting and tortured and animated and I think oh that's rather stretching the general range of human emotions as most of us know but I do hope we have never appeared to condone lawlessness and lawbreaking and anything. To that extent alone I think we are moralist, but it doesn't prevent us from showing somebody who has broken the law and in some cases seeming to get away with it because in real life they do which is one of the galling things about it and we can have the rest of the characters saying this very thing, he's got away with it and why should he, well, and somebody might say oh well his day might come but it doesn't come in *The Archers*.

D How much influence do you think this show has had on real life, I mean the original brief of the programme partly to get the farming *Dick Barton* type thing, could we get information across in an entertaining way, how much influence do you think it had?

N Well I don't think it could ever be very great in a specific terms, I remember saying to somebody when I was writing the bulk of the programme "this year I'm hoping to teach eight million people the phrase conservation area because this was just coming in and sure enough one was able to do that merely by throwing the word about in the programme and making it clear to people that if you've got a conservation area you can do certain things in your village and in others you can't do without permission like cut trees down for example and to that extent I think we've, there's also a story if I've told it before I apologise but I was doing a, opening a garden fete, a village fete in East Anglia once and a farmer came up and was talking and said "our vet doesn't like you because you've been telling us all about the dangers of a disease for pigs called the purples and everybody's now aware of the purples and they're calling the vet and our vet came last night very late and is fed up because he's kept, and as he shoved the syringe into the sow's back he said "and this is *The ... Archers* and he was rather fed up but it was benign wasn't it we were getting over something which people ought to know in everyone's interest including ours if we were only consumers. We'd want to know that we were going to have healthy animals.

D But has the programme had a role to play in a way championing the rural way of life and farming as a kind of industry that...

N I don't think its true to say that we have a role to play or we're any sort of commitment to do anything other than what I keep coming back to which is to reflect life as it is but to do that it's quite possible without being judgmental or whatever to show people doing it and probably not doing it correctly well to that extent there's a didactic purpose in it but we don't sit down, set out to teach and the original brief was that it was to be an information programme but don't forget what was wrong with the farming programmes was the farmers didn't listen to them, what we want is a farming *Dick Barton* and *Dick Barton* was full of action and excitement and interest so the formula eventually came out we thought something like 10% information and the rest entertainment, but its come down now and the most effective way is about 4% of information and the rest entertainment with certain constraints on it, but its got to be set in the country its got to be about rural things unless there are issues that affect everybody.

D But you could argue that in the programme's portrayal of the some of the biggest crises to hit farmers for example at least twice foot and mouth, [CHECK INDISTINCT] SVD [transcriber's

NB, presumably Swine Vesicular Disease??] that it has done two things, it has made farmers feel yes that's what we're going through and it's a sympathetic element and also for people who are not in the countryside it explains it in a different way from news bulletins this is what life is like, this is the anguish and the personal effects of it and so on.

N Well I would like to think that that's true and I think it is by and large, but especially today there are so many issues when you have a thing like foot and mouth which are overtly political, I mean we have the government saying one thing and the opposition saying what ought to be being done is the other, that makes life very difficult because one mustn't take sides and must try to be above that sort of debate otherwise one can be accused of political bias at the same time we have to stick to our guns and say but this is the way most country people feel but the last one I think, the last outbreak of foot and mouth has been the most difficult for those reasons because of the political things that were imposed upon us the awareness that whatever you said you would be put down as belonging to this party or that party and although we have got people aligned politically in the programme not so much as it used to be but its quite clear you know that we have to go for balance in other words, if one person says well I agree with the government's policy of not vaccinating then we can have a vaccination lobby on the other side saying well of course the answer to all this is vaccination and then somebody in the middle saying well of course if it was absolutely proven then the government would do it and try to keep a balance but at the same time it's rather like children overhearing grown up's conversation they hear all the issues and therefore they are informed so we almost do good by stealth as it were when we are getting it right and I think we do tend to rise to a crisis although it was very difficult but we illustrated, highlighted cases of people who were marooned on their own farm for example and unable to move about in the village which was from the human point of view one of the most difficult aspects of it so we've covered whatever we can that doesn't suggest we're motivated by any political ideas at all.

D Would you say there was, looking back over 50 years there was one storyline or anything you've been involved in that you feel the proudest, do you think that was the best.

N Well I suppose that it is inevitable that I would say the first marriage of Phil and the sad death of his wife which nearly stopped the world on the 22 September 1955 and obviously I am very prejudiced but we were trying to prove ourselves, trying to prove that we were the programme that we purported to be and I think the storyline which they developed then was really very clever and I think most of it probably went down to Godfrey Baseley's influence we got these scenes between Phil and Grace were getting a very good listening figure because this was real love making, this was the way it went on possibly in those days a touch of the Barbara Cartland, up to the bedroom door but no further but they made full use of that time when they weren't and finally Phil proposed to Grace who was a rich man's daughter and eventually she said in a rather spoilt way "well I mean you're never going to keep me in a way I've got used to and I don't see the point of reducing my standard of living and anyway I may have other concerns" well Phil was at his wits end because he truly hadn't got any money, he was the son of a tenant farmer, he was the farm manager of his girlfriend's father so he was being for the time quite well paid but he wasn't going to make a fortune and then he had this idea of breeding a certain kind of pig with minimal disease which was a development in agriculture generally so he decided to do it "will you wait for me, I think I can make some money in a couple of years" so we then had half the nation on tenterhooks to know whether this particular farming process was going to be a success because if it was going to be a success then Phil could marry Grace and if it wasn't then oh dear what can we do and so because that was dramatic and it hooked the audience and the listening figures were tremendous, building up to our famous 20 million which happened around about the time that Grace died because they were agog to know for good farming reasons whether or not this couple could marry. We had a simple case of it in the very first few weeks where the young daughter

Christine wanted to go to London and Dan said “oh we can’t afford the fare” and she said “oh we might if that cow produces a heifer won’t it?”

TAPE ENDS

Under copyright