

# My weekend at the University of Ambridge

**Kat Brown joins sociologists and criminologists at an academic conference about 'The Archers'**

I am not, by nature, one of life's joiner-inners. I prefer to enjoy hobbies in small groups or, as in the case of Radio 4's long-running drama *The Archers*, which I've been listening to for the best part of 20 years, alone while brushing my teeth.

Yet here I am in a lecture hall at Sheffield University, sporting a badge with a picture of a lemon drizzle cake, enjoying talks, fruit gums and a rather delicious lunch with 300 other *Archers* fans. The event that has drawn me out of my shell is Academic Archers, an annual weekend-long conference where sociologists, criminologists, urban planners and a whole host of other experts delve into the goings-on in Ambridge and apply it to their individual disciplines.

Talks on the agenda this weekend include: *We Should Have Called Him Damien*, a discussion on eight-year-old Henry Archer and why his troubled childhood could turn him into a psychopath; *Get me to the church in time... I do. I don't. I won't. An analysis of weddings and marriages in Ambridge*; and *Not with a bang, but with a whimper?*, a discussion of Britain's attitude to dying, in the context of the death of poor Nic Grundy from sepsis last year.

"You might not think planning law is interesting, but when you've got something to apply it to, it makes sense," says Coventry University's Sarah Kate Merry. "You can explain anything if you have a common frame of reference."

That opportunity to explore issues thrown up by *The Archers'* storylines – not just parenting, marriage and death, but topics like community cohesion, rural policing, inequality and homosexuality – was the reason why the conference was set up three years ago. *Archers* fans are an obsessive bunch and when the BBC closed *The Archers* messageboard on its website after 10 years, listeners were crying out for an alternative place to meet up.

They talk on social media, of course. There are daily "tweetalongs" to episodes on Twitter, a fan podcast called DumTeeDum, and large and engaged Facebook groups. But it



*On the agenda is a discussion of Henry Archer and why his troubled childhood could turn him into a psychopath*

was clear to the co-founders, Cara Courage, an arts consultant, and Nicola Headlam, a research fellow at Oxford University, that there was also an appetite for an event where fans could meet in person.

It's the jolliest group of people I've been with in some time. The closest there has been to disagreement is



an outbreak of pantomime hissing whenever the word "actor" is mentioned (participants are meant to go along with the pretence that Ambridge is real), a mild chuntering when the Yorkshire Tea ran out – in Sheffield! – during the tea break, and a threat of an uprising when, due to students apparently having drunk the bar dry before the end of term, there was no gin for the evening's drinks.

Courage and Headlam's latest book, *Gender, Sex and Gossip in Ambridge*, made headlines earlier this month. A study in the book analysed the dialogue in 128 *Archers* episodes broadcast between February and June last year and concluded that the show was more sexist than the 1963 James Bond film *From Russia with Love*. The issue is, inevitably, a topic of conversation over the weekend. But there are some participants who find the discussion annoying.

As Birmingham City University's Jerome Turner points out in his

paper, *From Kitchens to Smartphones: Updating our Understanding of The Archers Listening Practices in the Digital Age*, many of the show's five million listeners like the soap for the very fact that it takes them away from the pressures and vicissitudes of modern life. The show is intensely comfortable and that's why they like it.

If there is one thing that unites the guests and speakers, apart from *The Archers*, it is knitting. Abi Pattenden, president of the National Association of Funeral Directors, and the author of the talk on British attitudes to death, has just finished knitting a pair of orange Converse trainers for a baby's christening. "Her mother wants them to match the ones she wore at her wedding," she beams. "I'm going to knit her a pink cardigan now."

Another attendee, Janet Beck, 63, who has been a listener for 54 years, is making blankets for premature babies for the charity Project Linus UK. "I love the conference for the

**Talking points:** the dramas of Ambridge's regulars, above, were the subject of lectures, left, and much discussion over knitting, right, at the weekend conference

For more information, go to [academicarchers.net](http://academicarchers.net). *Gender, Sex and Gossip in Ambridge* by Cara Courage and Nicola Headlam (Emerald Publishing, £14.99) is out now

silliness," she says. "I nearly lost it when [one lecturer] talked about Jake Grundy going to live with his birth father, because it was all said with such seriousness."

Over by the lectern, Nicola Maxfield, the author of the paper on Henry Archer (which has caused quite a stir), has unveiled a quilt that, even as a non-seamstress, I can see is superb. Sid and Jolene's steamy shower scene is rendered perfectly; there's a map of Lakey Hill picked out in immaculate needlepoint, and Susan Carter's infamous tabard appears in a section denoting the village shop. She is also quilting for Project Linus UK. "The thing is, once you start making quilts you make them for people, and then everyone you know has one."

This is as much a community meeting as it is an academic conference. For many people in the room, listening to the Sunday omnibus together gives them their first "tweetalong" experience: tweets from #teearchers hashtag are shown on screens to gales of laughter. The room is recorded singing *The Archers'*



theme, *Barwick Green*, to be aired on the DumTeeDum podcast – and prizes are awarded to the speakers, ranging from a lemon drizzle cake to a pair of tweezers for "keeping it highbrow", awarded to a talk comparing Shula Hebden-Lloyd's divorce from Alistair Lloyd and Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy ("I can't explain it, Alistair, it's just how I feel!"). Murdoch, an avid *Archers* listener, would have been delighted.

As the conference closes, the audience are already talking about "next year". The talks on health – *The Archers'* elderly folk are implausibly healthy – have inspired GP Claire DeMortimer to start planning her first paper, on the numbers of GPs fleeing their specialism due to overwork, and how this compares to Ambridge's silent doctor. "When we learn about medicine it can be really dry," she says. "But these are characters we know." I leave, inevitably, with a familiar tune on my lips.

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