

GENDER, SEX
AND GOSSIP
IN AMBRIDGE:

Women in The Archers



CARA COURAGE
NICOLA HEADLAM

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Edited by
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ABOUT THE EDITORS

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Dr Cara Courage is Head of Tate Exchange, UK, the Tate's platform dedicated to socially engaged art, and an arts, society and place curator, researcher, writer and practitioner. Cara has a 20-year career in the arts, specialising in arts in the public realm and public engagement with the built environment, active across all art forms in this and working as a consultant and project manager for public and private initiatives, as well as having her own placemaking practice. As well as co-editing two volumes of Academic Archers books (2016 & 2017) Cara is author of *Arts in Place: The Arts, the Urban and Social Practice* (2017) and the co-editor of *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (2018).

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Dr Nicola Headlam is the Head of the Northern Powerhouse within the Cities and Local Growth Unit and is on secondment from her research fellowship at The University of Oxford. Prior to that she spent several years as the Urban Transformations and Foresight Future of Cities Knowledge Exchange Research Fellow funded by the ESRC. She is primarily interested in knowledge mobilisation for urban

transformations. She has worked for 20 years on issues relating to the translation of research into policy and is an adaptable urbanist, media commentator and author. Her expertise is in comparative city governance, economic development, regeneration and urban policy and the networks that enable human flourishing, including the role of public agencies in place, specifically sub-national spatial and urban policy, and the role of leadership and partnerships. Nicola is passionate about the role of universities in public policy and practice and is a founding member of the Urbanista UK network for women involved in positive urban change.

She goes to Ambridge every evening to escape all that.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Hannah Marije Altorf is a Reader in philosophy at St. Mary's University, Strawberry Hill, London, where she was programme director for eight years. She has written on the philosophical work of Iris Murdoch and on different forms of philosophical dialogue. Together with Mariëtte Willemsen she translated *The Sovereignty of Good* into Dutch and presented a fictional dialogue between Murdoch, Bayley and two friends at its presentation. She is presently working on a short introduction to Murdoch's philosophical work.

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Elizabeth has returned to the University of Cambridge to complete an Master of Laws in 2018–2019, having previously worked in two City law firms. She was a proud participant in the 2018 Academic Archers conference.

Charlotte Martin (aka Dr Charlotte Connor)

Charlotte is an actor and research psychologist. She trained and worked as a dancer before attending drama school at The Old Rep, Birmingham. In 1982 she was cast as 'Susan Carter' in BBC Radio 4's *The Archers*, a character which she plays to

the present day. She continues to work in theatre, television, radio and as a voice-over artist, but has also gone on to pursue an academic career, studying psychology at the University of Birmingham and achieving a PhD in 2008, exploring the role of power and expressed emotion in depression in people with auditory hallucinations. Her current academic role is focussed specifically on early identification and intervention in youth mental health, working in collaboration with schools and communities. Recent studies have included improving care pathways for young people with psychosis, and screening for early warning signs of eating disorders in young people in schools. She has published 15 academic papers and regularly presents at academic conferences worldwide. Charlotte is also a keen Tweeter (@ambridgeview) and regularly tweets during the *Sunday Archers Omnibus Tweetalong*.

Louise Gillies

Louise Gillies is a clinical academic, working as both a social scientist and a genetic counsellor. Her main research areas are family communication (particularly relating to inherited disease), use of genograms to explore family issues and genealogy and family health history. The goings on in *The Archers* have provided a great source of practise material at both masters counselling level and PhD family studies. *The Archers* has been in her life for about the same length of time as her current relationship (a couple of decades). Eleven years in, she decided she was too old to have a boyfriend and informed Mr G that they were going to get married the following year. He didn't say no, which obviously meant yes (this has been a subject of much debate since the wedding). She hopes that Fallon and Harrison (at the time of writing) have a boringly normal (and happy) marriage.

Carolynne Henshaw

Carolynne Henshaw is most decidedly not an academic, but is a long-time nightly listener of *The Archers*. She has worked for a UK pregnancy services provider and a charity offering support to women faced with abnormal pregnancy screening results. She is pro-choice.

Katharine Hoskyn

Katharine Hoskyn spent her childhood and part of her adult life in Britain and now lives in New Zealand. She is currently teaching on contract with the Auckland University of Technology, after teaching marketing and advertising for 20 years and supervising students on work placement. She has an undergraduate degree in social sciences, a graduate diploma in business and an MPhil on the use of sports events to encourage sport participation. Her doctoral research investigates the membership of community sports clubs. Her current research blends social science and marketing, with a focus on community issues. She has been listening to *The Archers* on and off since 1968.

Madeleine Lefebvre

Madeleine Lefebvre is Chief Librarian of Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. Born in the UK, she holds an MA from Edinburgh University as well as MA and MLS degrees from the University of Alberta. She is a Fellow of the UK Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals and an Associate of the Australian Library and Information Association. Her book, *The Romance of Libraries*, was published by Scarecrow Press in 2005. In 2015 Madeleine was appointed a trustee of the Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library and is passionate about the role public libraries play in the community.

Sarah Kate Merry

Dr Sarah Kate Merry is a knitter, a Radio 4 addict, and a Research Associate in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University. Her PhD is in information studies and her personal research interests include how the Internet has changed friendship and the value of non-participatory membership of online communities. However, her actual work involves research into improving support for students with disabilities in Latin America and North Africa, open education in the Middle East and the benefits of board games for people who are socially isolated. Sarah was indoctrinated into *The Archers* at an early age and despite several attempts has never quite managed to leave.

Claire Mortimer

Claire Mortimer is a film historian, writer and teacher. She completed her PhD in 2017 at the University of East Anglia, her research being concerned with ageing women and British film comedy. She has published and presented at conferences on a range of ageing women, including Margaret Rutherford and Peggy Mount.

William Pitt

William ‘Bill’ Pitt is a social researcher based in a world leading research agency in London. He works across a range of policy areas and has an interest in gender and sexuality. He’s a mixed methods practitioner who is passionate about data agnostic research and using evidence to advocate for social change. An avid fan of *The Archers*, Bill has listened daily for (almost) a third of his life. He holds a BA in anthropology and psychology from the University of Sydney, Australia, and an advanced

certificate in market and social research practice from the Market Research Society in London.

Jane Turner

Associate Professor Jane Turner works in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire. She is a primary teacher educator, author and consultant, and director of the national Primary Science Quality Mark. As a newly qualified teacher in 1986, she was introduced by a colleague to the delights of the Sunday morning omnibus.

Clare Warren

Clare Warren has worked as a primary school teacher, teacher educator and education consultant. She is studying for a PhD in primary science education at the University of Hertfordshire. Clare became familiar with *The Archers* as a child when every Sunday morning the kitchen was filled with the smell of baking and the sounds of Ambridge.

Rebecca Wood

Rebecca is an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow at King's College, London, and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham. She is a former languages teacher who subsequently specialised in autism education. Rebecca completed her PhD at the Autism Centre for Education and Research at the University of Birmingham where she was supported by a full-time scholarship. She was also project manager of the Transform Autism Education project, a tri-national scheme funded by the European Commission. Rebecca has a particular interest in language and communication and has applied some of the ideas from this area of study to *The Archers*, of which she is a devoted listener.

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PREFACE

Nicola Headlam and Cara Courage

WHAT ARE THE WOMEN OF AMBRIDGE TELLING US?

Whilst *The Archers* is the butt of many a joke, whilst there is much comedy and in-jokes laced through the scripts and whilst we at Academic Archers pay close attention to the humour in and to be had from the lives of those in Ambridge, the women of Ambridge are our site of serious study. This book collects papers across a wide spectrum of social, political, economic and cultural issues through which we use *The Archers* lens to interrogate the lives of the women in the programme and how far their voices support or challenge tropes of feminist or post-feminist lives. Of course, *The Archers* is scripted and carefully plotted in order to reflect societal norms, and our authors herein take varied routes in questioning how far women are in charge of their own destinies in Ambridge and in comparison to what we see in the lives of women outside of Borsetshire. What then are the women of Ambridge telling us? What can they tell us of the prevailing structures of a society which has been structurally patriarchal? Of internalised

gendered socialisation and the roles thereof, and intersectional identity formation?¹

Informed by feminist, critical race theories and critical disability studies, we view *The Archers* as of huge and essentially contested sociocultural significance. In exploring the many threads of gender and feminist or anti-feminist themes in *The Archers*, in this book we call attention to how far individual identity and gendered roles and norms are presented in Ambridge. As is appropriate we focus in our second section on *Women's Talk*; it has been observed that the informal networks of women's talk and gossip networks have been sites of power and resistance when men are in charge of more formal arenas. In the third section, *Gendered Expectations: Within the Home*, we focus on the gendered implications of the home, where there are reproductive choices and decisions around love and marriage as well as the emotional labour of family life. The fourth, *Gendered Expectations: Beyond the Home*, focusses on gendered implications beyond the home as women participate in the workforce.

ATTENTION TO POWER DYNAMICS IN *THE ARCHERS*

Gendered tropes are not hard to find in *The Archers*. In his celebrated BBC Radio 4 *John Finnemore's Souvenir Programme*, the titular comedian creates a pastiche of Ambridgian gender characterisations that is recognisable to even the occasional listener of *The Archers*. The men 'always sound

¹ In broad terms, gender identity is how a person views themselves with respect to masculinity or femininity and how this view of the self leads to the enactment of, or resistance to, socially ascribed gender roles. Gender roles dictate what is considered acceptable for men and women in terms of behaviour, career, parenting, style of dress and so on (Chicago Unbound).

tired' from their hard work of farming business; the 'insufferably wry women' are the incidental makers of coffee, speak to move the plot along and are smugly tolerating of the menfolk ([BBC Radio 4a](#)).

The form of *The Archers* presents a more or less equal number of male and female characters, but there has been unease that the gender stereotyping on display is of an unhelpful kind. In her contribution to the Women of Ambridge Panel at the 2018 Academic Archers conference, Charlotte Martin (actor, Susan Carter) aka Dr Charlotte Connor (Research Psychologist, Warwick University) caused gasps from the auditorium by pointing out that there were no women writers of *The Archers* until 1975 coinciding with a period where the future of *The Archers* was far from certain as it made the transition from post-war farming propaganda towards contemporary drama in a rural setting (see Chapter 2). This is hard to imagine given the subsequent revered status of Vanessa Whitburn as the programme's long-running editor. Often accused of simultaneous 'Brooksidisation' of Ambridge (she had worked on the Channel 4 soap) and of shifting the focus to the lives of the women, hitherto 'farmers' wives', in a career retrospective, Whitburn admitted that she arrived as an ambitious editor, ready to make her mark with a controversial first storyline: Elizabeth Archer's abortion. She was stung by the early pejorative portrayal of her as a domineering, feminist editor with an eye only on the big stories. It is not hard to find outrage and opprobrium from those who feel that gendered agendas abound in *The Archers*, but it can also do no right. On the one hand, it is perceived by some to be written by those of the 'liberal metropolitan elite', admonished for being part of a 'political correctness gone mad'.

On the other hand, however, it simultaneously lacks feminist role models, and often pointedly, career women are conspicuous by their absence. Critics claim that Whitburn

turned a gentle, snoozy countryside tale into a soap (the term loaded with class derision) abundant with crime, sex, drugs, abortion, homosexuality, biracial marriage and families, wayward teenagers, adultery, single motherhood, donated sperm and IVF – in short, everything of everyday life through time that however upsets some listeners’ aspic-set bucolic image of rural life.

However, whilst the listeners might not be settled in a view on how far the women of Ambridge are feminist (or not) or of the veracity gender identities and roles available to them, there is an important point of method to explain. Ambridge is a socially constructed place – made by the scriptwriters and by the actors, and by us as listeners. We view *The Archers* as a ‘polysemic’ text, that being, one in which listeners can construct their own meanings instead of passively adopting the preferred or dominant, themes – and in doing so, assert their own power in the listener subject position. As the real-time backchannel of *The Archers* Tweetalong highlights, there are myriad interpretations of storylines, characterisations and actions, informed by the listeners’ own intersectional² lived experience, leading to divergent interpretations of the same thing. In the context of Ambridge too of course, multiple disadvantage collects around gender, socioeconomic status, housing status, and of either being childless or able to afford childcare. The intersection of these natal, social and politico-economic factors keeps Emma scraping glitter from her gussets (being unable to afford to replace clothes washed with a vial of glitter so having to make do until it would eventually wash out) whilst the middle-class characters thrive from their comparative wealth and consequent purchasing power of

² ‘The theory that the overlap of social identities contributes to the specific type of oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual’ ([Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)).

being able to afford replacement clothes if the same laundry day mishap happened to them.

WHAT ARE OUR AMBRIDGOLISTS TELLING US?

We are honoured to open this book with an *Inside Ambridge* section, with contributions from two *Archers* heavyweights: an ‘in conversation’ with former acting editor, Alison Hindell, and a chapter from the most Academic Archer of us all, Dr Charlotte Connor, aka Charlotte Martin, actor, Susan Carter in BBC Radio 4 *The Archers*. Hindell is able to share her insights into the making of *The Archers* and the impact this has on the women of Ambridge and her thoughts on how some of the key storylines both developed and are developing. Connor spoke at the 2018 Academic Archers conference in reflection on the papers in the *Women in Ambridge* session, informed by her perspective as one of *The Archers* cast, her deep knowledge and love of her character and her academic specialism as a research psychologist. Her chapter goes deeper into these aspects and offers us listeners (and now readers) a consideration of the ambivalence often felt towards Susan, her power and agency in Ambridge located through her role as ‘the gossip’ and into the mental health and support networks in the village.

We move on in the second section, *Women’s Talk: Informal Information Networks that Sustain the Village*, the contributors reclaim women’s conversation as a core resource in a system where they may not have access to other forms of capital: agreeing with Connor preceding, Susan is not to be sidelined as a gossip, but rather her active interest in the lives of others gives her the function of the Greek chorus commentary on dramatic action. Starting with Claire Mortimer, *Neighbourhood Watch: Gossip, Power and the*

Working-Class Matriarch in The Archers. Louise Gillies continues with *In Praise of Gossip – Why Tongue-Wagging and the Rumour Mill Are Important in Ambridge*, asserting that gossip is in fact not just imperative for us listeners, as a means of communicating action to us (thank you Susan and Lynda), but how in small communities it can foster a sense of belonging, is a form of learning and maintains social order. Turning to the conversations that Ambridge women have with each other, Sarah Kate Merry, ‘*Almost Without Exception They Are Shown in Their Relation to Men*’: *Ambridge Women and Their Conversations*, takes a statistical approach to what women say and who they say it with to understand what this says of their power positions and dynamics. This section closes with a consideration of the woman we never heard from, but was a locus of village life and *The Archers* storylines, in *Foucault, Freda Fry and the Power of Silent Characters on the Radio*, from Rebecca Wood. Silent characters from literature and television are brought into our frame, and as with the use of music in *The Archers*, the non-verbal communication strategies are also used to transmit messages about the characters’ motivations and points of view.

The third section, *Gendered Expectations: Within the Home*, befits a drama which is centred on family homes and the emotional labour therein and the normative ‘hatch, match, dispatch’ domestic course of the female Ambridgian. At the time of writing, the volte force of Shula and her feelings towards estranged husband Alastair are a major storyline. Hannah Marije Altorf, in ‘*This Isn’t About Curry, Alistair*’: *Shula Hebden Lloyd and Iris Murdoch on Love*, uses Iris Murdoch’s philosophies on love to give an articulation to Shula’s position that the character has so far, failed to do. It has been commented on amongst the listenership that the birth rate in Ambridge is low. Carolynne Henshaw, in *Oh Baby!*

Unplanned Pregnancy and a Woman's Right to Choose, considers the actions of four Ambridge women when faced with an unexpected pregnancy and asks what we can extrapolate, if anything, from a comparison between Ambridge and UK statistical norms. Academic Archers co-founder/organiser, Nicola Headlam, continues her study (started in her chapter in Courage and Headlam, 2017) of who holds the power in Ambridge in *Women's Work?: Civil Society Networks for Social Stability or Social Change in Ambridge*, looking at Ambridgian women's identity and pressure politics, activism, voluntary and community work. Storylines and characters carry implicit and explicit messages around mental health, but how does this serve the women of Ambridge? This is the concern of Elizabeth Campion in *Strong or Silenced? The Under-Representation of Mental Health Problems in Ambridge's Women*, arguing that mental health issues in *The Archers* are unrepresentative, reduced to a plot device.

The fourth and final section, *Gendered Expectations: Beyond the Home*, turns our purview on women's lives in Ambridge to the wider world that lies past the front porch, into the village, and even as far as the Felpersham bypass can take us. Bill Pitt, in *Does The Archers Reflect Contemporary Values on Gender, and Sexuality?*, suggests that in order to reflect the wider society there could be more lesbian and trans characters portrayed in the programme, placing it in gender discourse and the gender politics movement from the 1960s to the present day. The careers, or lack thereof, of Ambridge women, is brought into a STEM spotlight by Jane Turner and Clare Warren in *Ambridge: Keeping the Pipeline of UK Female Scientists Flowing*: will the girls in Ambridge go on to choose science subjects, what determines who will go on to a career in engineering, can the current and future women of Ambridge flip the gender imbalance in non-arts learning and professions? From the science lab to the sports field, Katharine

Hoskyn, in *I Am Woman Hear Me Roar – And Now Watch Me Play Cricket*, considers the empowerment of Ambridge women (and correlating misogyny-busting) through their joining of the cricket team and puts this in a comparative context of cricket and sports in Britain. In *Sow's Ears and Silk Purses: Upcycling and The Archers*, Madeleine Lefebvre turns our attention to the entrepreneurial spirit found in the women of Ambridge and where and how this is located and extends the metaphor to spotlight the pressures felt by some to present a normative feminine form through their life stages and how this is internalised and acted upon.

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