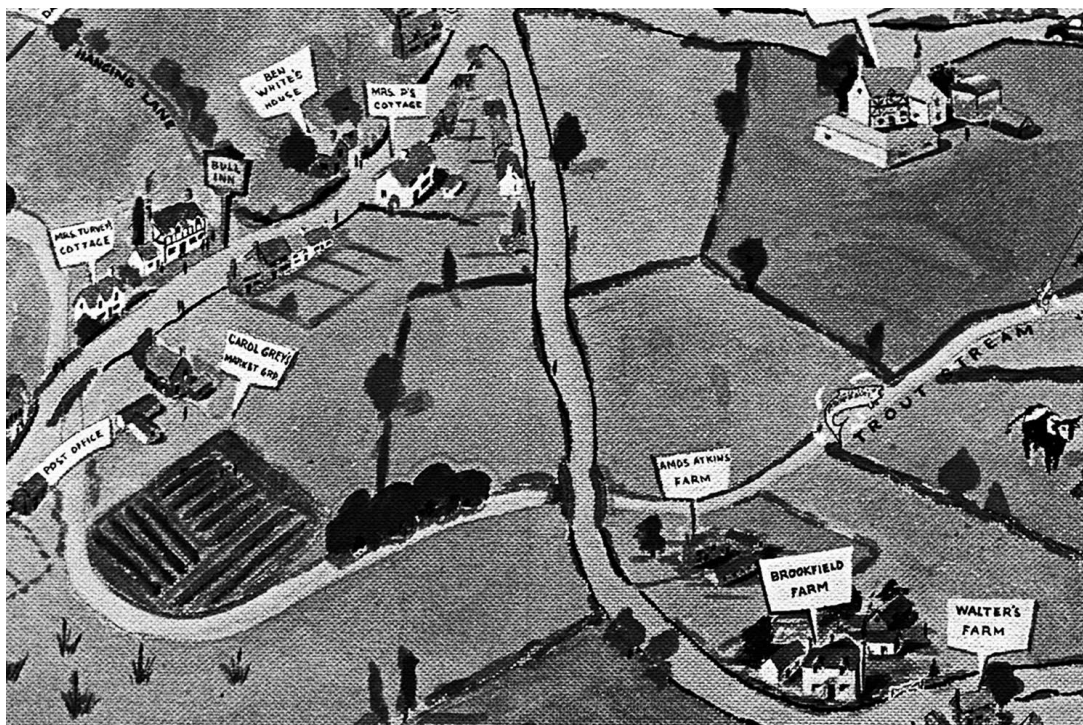


### 3. Model Pub

*Director of The MERL, Kate Arnold-Forster, shares her personal memories of The Archers, which launched in 1951. She also writes about some of the ways this iconic radio serial played a part in the life of The MERL. The model represents the pub in the fictional village in the series. It belonged to a wonderful supporter of the Museum and was displayed as part of The MERL's 60th Anniversary exhibition.*

#### Danbury Mint, Model pub from The Archers radio serial, 1996

I suspect I am alone in my conviction that my almost-lifelong interest in *The Archers* has been an important qualification for my role at the Museum of English Rural Life. Other distinguished colleagues and predecessors are the offspring of farmers, have spent time living and working on the land, or can claim first-hand experience of ploughing, animal husbandry, or driving tractors and Land Rovers. Clearly all far more relevant credentials than my formative childhood holidays spent on the west coast of Scotland, where my grandparents farmed some of most marginal, unprofitable, and unpromising land in any part of the United Kingdom, still using technology that even then was hopelessly outdated and ill-suited to the hilly, boggy, and bracken-filled fields.



Detail from a 1950s map of Ambridge and District, showing the location of The Bull inn, top left, and The Archers family home at Brookfield Farm, bottom right, as used in *Farmers Weekly* magazine (MERL P FW PH1/T57/12/2/3).

So, for me, *The Archers* was my first education in the patterns of the modern farming year and the rhythms of the English countryside, despite these belonging to an entirely fictional rendition of

rural life. The story of Ambridge and its inhabitants, as I grew up, was broadcast over suppers and homework at the kitchen table with its dialogue and theme tune – *Barwick Green* – providing a background soundtrack to family discourse and life. For many years I failed to pay much attention (indeed probably found it distracting and unwelcome) other than to recognise its most distinctive voices, including Joe Grundy and Walter Gabriel. I am not quite sure at what point this changed and I began to follow the interconnected narratives of human and agricultural interest. Since then, I have kept company with *The Archers* over the years, mainly in my kitchen (a pleasure sadly not shared by the rest of my household) allowing me to belong to this strange parallel universe of frequently troubled rural Dorsetshire.

The Museum and *The Archers* have a long connection, both established in 1951. They were inspired by founders eager to make sure that a post-war population remained in touch with English rural life; a Museum to capture a record of a rapidly disappearing rural heritage and a new kind of radio drama that would help educate post-war farmers and ensure that modern urban audiences had an understanding of contemporary farming. Both projects were pioneering – *The Archers* through its innovative form of public broadcasting, underpinned by informative agricultural storylines and the Museum of English Rural Life, through its mission to rescue of thousands of rural objects as traditional agriculture practice and rural skills vanished from the English countryside. Given their shared interest in the impact of post-war farming, it is probably not surprising that the Museum's founding Keeper, John Higgs, and the first producer of *The Archers*, Godfrey Baseley, were acquaintances. We can imagine, possibly even friends. A posed scene on the lawn outside the Museum's first home at Old Whiteknights House, with Baseley interviewing Higgs about the Museum project provides a wonderful glimpse into this common cause.



Godfrey Baseley, creator of *The Archers*, interviewing John Higgs, first Keeper of The MERL, in front of The MERL's first home at Whiteknights House, Reading, and for a live TV broadcast in 1954 (MERL 35/2743)

The object chosen here to link the Museum's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary to *The Archers* is a small plaster model of the Bull Inn, a pub that sits at the heart of the Ambridge community, and the setting of many memorable plotlines and encounters. Made by Danbury Mint, a firm that makes 'fine collectibles', the surprisingly detailed architectural features hint at the world conceived by Baseley, who apparently based the Ambridge Bull on a pub he knew, the Old Bull at Inkberrow, in Worcestershire. Of course, the Bull in Ambridge has been particularly hard hit in recent months. As my colleague, Ollie Douglas, has noted

*'Pubs – sites of community and social identity and life – have been closed and have suffered as a consequence of the pandemic and their importance as part of our cultural lives and sense of English/British identity has been emphasised and amplified'.*

As we ponder the last seven decades of *The Archers* at this extraordinary moment it is hard to avoid wondering whether the Bull may never quite recover or that its struggle for post-Covid survival will become another important storyline. Listeners have heard unprecedented episodes recorded in lockdown. Characters usually defined by dialogue and their social interaction have resorted to introspection and strange 'under the stairs' soliloquy. Not always the easiest or most comforting listening for us who needed to believe in Ambridge as the place where television doesn't exist and where only a very curious edited version of the outside world is ever mentioned.

Yet, while this initial connection between the Museum and *The Archers* was significant, it has not always figured so prominently in the Museum's programmes and activities. Holdings associated with *The Archers* were for many years relatively limited – papers from a former agricultural story-editor that found their way into the archives, along with some photographs and books, but also, fortunately, an extraordinary film, *Supper with the Archers*, promoting dairying and dairy products for the *National Dairy Council*. Directed by Godfrey Baseley in 1963, it is a rare (possibly unique) visual rather than aural insight into Ambridge life. Its slightly disconcerting, if entertaining, revelation of a much younger 60s Peggy (then Archer) in her pinny offering tips on how to cook milk shakes and flan and cheery male chat over a pint of milk (rather than Shires) at the bar of the Bull, as well as footage of the important moment when the first milk tankers arrived in the village suggest, to me at least, why the longevity and success of *The Archers* has much to do with being a radio rather than TV drama where the longform plot that spans whole lifetimes and the constant and repeating cycle of the seasons and village events, never tire and seem to work best.



It was another important milestone in the Museum's history that rekindled the Museum's connection with the world's longest-running broadcast drama. In 2010, approached by Mark Mason, a retired civil servant, whose enthusiasm for *The Archers* was matched by his expertise and deep knowledge, we agreed to his proposals for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011 of both the Museum and the programme – what turned into a year-long celebration of an *Archers*' themed exhibition and events. It is a tribute to Mark's charm and powers of persuasion that we marked the Museum's first 60 years by exploring its parallels with a fictional radio drama, something that represented a new and somewhat scary curatorial departure at the time. The model of The Bull was just one object among a remarkable selection of material, much in the same category of 'collectable', lent to us by Mark and later bequeathed to the Museum following Mark's untimely death.



Left to right: Vanessa Whitburn (then Editor of *The Archers*), the late Mark Mason, Tim Bentinck (actor who plays David Archer), and Kate Arnold-Forster, cutting a cake to celebrate the Museum's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011.

Mark's part in our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year extended far beyond the exhibition – he encouraged us to build links with the BBC and cast members who he somehow helped persuade should join us at our own 'Village Fete' in The MERL garden, with a star turn from Eddie Grundy and many other events. Like **51 Voices** will be, this became a year-long celebration, including academic seminars and panel discussions with members of the cast, The MERL Lecture by Felicity Finch on *From Ambridge to Afghanistan*, and heroic Q&A appearances by then producer, Vanessa Whitburn, and Tim Bentinck, (aka David Archer), at events including our own *Archers* 'roadshow' at the 2011 Royal Berkshire.

Without *The Archers* exhibition and its impact on the Museum, it is unlikely that we would have included *The Archers* in the new permanent displays (where *Barwick Green* plays out from a vintage wireless in the *Collecting the Countryside* gallery). As the Museum reflects on its first 70 years, it feels as though we have come a long way during the pandemic and since 2011. Mark and those who became our partners in our *Archers* project taught me much about working collaboratively and co-developing projects with different communities and stakeholders. That this also provided an opportunity for new thinking about reaching out to new audiences, reviewing aspects of our collecting and, above all, how we interpret and engage with rural culture was in my view a very good thing for which we owe those who love *The Archers* and Mark many thanks.

## Further Reading:

**On The Archers 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary** – BBC Radio 4 Celebrating 70 Years of The Archers,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p090xg82>

**On The Archers collections at The MERL** – Including archive papers, publications, and objects,

[https://rdg.ent.sirsiidynix.net.uk/client/en\\_GB/merl/search/results?qu=%22the+archers%22&te=&lm=MERL2](https://rdg.ent.sirsiidynix.net.uk/client/en_GB/merl/search/results?qu=%22the+archers%22&te=&lm=MERL2)

**For details of The MERL 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary programme** – Including the exhibition, the ‘village fete’, and the MERL Annual Lecture, [https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/whatson/exhibitions/merl-](https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/whatson/exhibitions/merl-everydaystoriesofcountryfolk.aspx)

[everydaystoriesofcountryfolk.aspx](https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/whatson/merl-villagefete2011.aspx); <https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/whatson/merl-villagefete2011.aspx>;

<https://www.reading.ac.uk/merl/whatson/annuallecture/merl-annuallecture2011.aspx>

**For a description of Supper with The Archers** –

[https://rdg.ent.sirsiidynix.net.uk/client/en\\_GB/merl/search/detailnonmodal/ent:\\$002f\\$002fUOR\\_ADLIB\\_ARC\\$002f\\$002fUOR\\_ADLIB\\_ARC:110225967/one?qu=supper+with+the+archers&lm=MERL2](https://rdg.ent.sirsiidynix.net.uk/client/en_GB/merl/search/detailnonmodal/ent:$002f$002fUOR_ADLIB_ARC$002f$002fUOR_ADLIB_ARC:110225967/one?qu=supper+with+the+archers&lm=MERL2)

**On the Old Bull** – <https://oldbullinkberrow.co.uk/>

**Details of The MERL objects that once belonged to Mark Mason** –

[https://rdg.ent.sirsiidynix.net.uk/client/en\\_GB/merl/search/results?qu=mark+mason&qf=UR\\_FORMAT%09Format%09OBJECT%09Object&lm=MERL2&isd=true](https://rdg.ent.sirsiidynix.net.uk/client/en_GB/merl/search/results?qu=mark+mason&qf=UR_FORMAT%09Format%09OBJECT%09Object&lm=MERL2&isd=true)

**On the model pub itself** – Collections Database entry for [MERL 2019/85](#)