

CHAPTER FIVE

WE DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION? THE ABSENCE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN *THE ARCHERS*

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ABSTRACT

The primary school in any rural village is a significant and vivid institution. Its classrooms, playground, buses, staffroom, governing body, PTA committee, religious celebrations, educational visits and community events are a focus not just for village pride but for parental and social aspirations and tensions. Village schools are special local spaces, in which the bite is keenly felt of national education policies. They are sources and sites of friendships, rivalries and divisions amongst both children and adults; places where celebrations and disappointments occur on a daily basis; an important local

employer and reliant on a range of committed volunteers. Village schools are genuinely lively and dramatic places.

But not in The Archers. The mostly invisible children of Ambridge simply board a bus to Loxley Barrett aged five, then mysteriously alight aged 11 at Borchester Green or the fee-paying Cathedral School. During those primary years Ambridge's children, parents and listeners seem blissfully unaffected by tests, snow, bullying, crazes, curriculum change, poor teachers, brilliant teaching assistants, academisation, Ofsted inspections, fussy governors, budget crises or any other rural educational reality.

In this chapter we consider why primary education, a topic that dominates the lives and conversations of real village families from all backgrounds, seems to be of such insignificance to the inhabitants of Ambridge?

Keywords: Children; education; primary; school; village

INTRODUCTION

In 1891 the British parliament legislated to ensure that every child in England would receive free and compulsory education between the ages of five and ten. It was a political, legislative acknowledgement that the world had changed. A modern nation needed its masses to be educated, and that process started with primary schooling. Sixty years and two world wars later *The Archers* was conceived. As a radio soap opera it was hoped that it might play a different, but similarly modernising, mass educational role. For security and geopolitical reasons and as the Cold War threatened to heat up, Britain needed to maximise its self-sufficiency in food. Radio stories of everyday rural folk might just play their part in

achieving that strategic aim, both by inspiring country-dwellers to produce more food and by informing the urban majority about how that was done.

Since 1891 primary schools have been ubiquitous in British rural and urban life, and since 1951 *The Archers* has become a staple of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Nearly seven decades later, how has the relationship between those primary-educated masses, the village of Ambridge and its characters developed? Such a question is of broader cultural significance than as a mere corner in listeners' imaginations, or as a footnote in the fantasy that is our favourite radio village. For as this 2014 Church of England report expounded:

It is a commonly-held view that having a school within a village strengthens and enhances the community ... The school is one of the state's last remaining structural points of contact with rural communities. (Church of England National Education Office, 2014, p. 6)

Does that hold true in Ambridge?

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

Since 1891 primary education has been a standard ingredient of English childhoods: by 2017 there were over 4.5 million children in English state-funded primary schools (DfE, 2016b), numbers that currently increase each year.

Children arrive in English primary schools following what is termed the Foundation Stage. Between the ages of three and five education is provided in many different forms, but thereafter the educational experience of children and their families becomes increasingly standardised. State school pupils attend school for six to seven hours a day, 38–40 weeks

a year. In primary education the major goals are achieving basic literacy and numeracy for all pupils, as well as establishing foundations in science and other subjects. Children's entitlement to learning was statutorily outlined in the primary National Curriculum, introduced in 1988 to ensure pupils in state schools received a broad and balanced education. The current primary curriculum for English primary schools consequently includes Information Technology, Religious Education Design and Technology, History, Geography, Art, Music and Physical Education, as well as the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. Children are assessed in the core subjects at the ages of seven and eleven.

As well as fulfilling a vital and standardising educative role on an individual and national level, primary schools in England also play a major and communal part in spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Within their primary schools children are encouraged to learn how to make friends, how to collaborate, to tolerate, to compete and to share. They develop independence and agency. Primary schools develop social capital, by strengthening and enhancing communities. They provide a local focal point where children grow up, families meet and joint activities take place. Primary school parents raise funds, listen to children read, help with cookery, art and PE, compete and encourage at sports days, govern, attend school plays and assemblies and chat amongst themselves at the school gate. Many are employed as teachers, teaching assistants, mid-day meal supervisors, cooks, cleaners and administrators. Most primary school buildings are used for a wide range of other purposes beyond the school day: pupil discos, adult quiz nights, community meetings, faith and flower arranging classes, as polling stations and for sports, recreation and community fund-raising events.

Over the last 150 years primary education has, gradually but steadily, come to play a major role in social, cultural, and

economic urban and rural life in England. The amount of money spent on primary education in England has increased massively and is now over 25 billion pounds per year (Chantrill, 2017). During the last decade, as the number of primary school-aged children has risen but school budgets have come under growing pressure and scrutiny, outcomes from and inputs into English primary schools have also become matters of heightened political profile and contention. As expenditure has tightened in the face of national financial austerity, buildings have still had to be maintained or renewed, teachers' salaries paid, teaching resources bought and children kept safe. Increasing and pressurising public demands have still had to be met from politicians, industry, inspectors, communities and parents, all anxious to see children learn and achieve more. Sometimes those demands have been measured and mediated through supposed national calibrations of academic achievement in subjects, via the construction of school league tables; and at other times through the setting for individual children of more ambitious developmental, behavioural, physical, linguistic and social targets for improvement.

Whatever the final expression of the country's educational anxieties, national and local political intervention in primary education became commonplace after the 1988 introduction of the national curriculum. Political parties have on occasions used state primary schools as an ideological playground: and successive national governments have accordingly changed curriculum content, increased accountability demands and imposed different inspection frameworks. Education has become a key area of political contention, with parties' proposals and promises about organisation, class size, selection, sex education, special educational needs, testing and school meals, to name but a few, offered to the electorate in return for votes. Such issues are discussed in local and national

newspapers, hustings on actual and metaphorical door steps, at elections and regularly in between.

Yet for the most part, they are rarely discussed in Ambridge. Indeed for some aspects of the above, never in Ambridge. As we will explore in the rest of this chapter, the fictional community of Ambridge is currently and educationally, a rather strange place.

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN AMBRIDGE

It hasn't always been like that. For a brief spell during the late 1960s and early 1970s Ambridge witnessed an extended episode of radical social engagement with education. In 1969 Jill Archer, who, to this day, has consistently been the only voice in Ambridge for universal educational entitlement, decided to stand for the Rural District Council and campaign against the threatened closure of Ambridge village school. Much to her surprise she was elected, but threats to the school persisted. In early summer of 1971 there was a new proposal to close the school, sparking several protest meetings, before another reprieve. In June 1973 Jill and the rest of the village heard that Ambridge's primary school was finally to close; and from then on Ambridge became part of Loxley Barrett School's catchment area.

How Ambridge children were subsequently transported to the neighbouring village does not appear to be documented, though the 'school bus drop off and pickup' is now part of the Ambridge village timetable. Interestingly, the use of the Ambridge School building post 1973 is unclear at best. According to the 1975 map of Ambridge (Gallagher, 1975) the school was between the village shop and St Stephen's church. A more recent map (Moore & Bedow, 2000) shows 'the surgery' in this location. Yet as has been noted elsewhere (Perkins, 2017), property size and location in Ambridge is

not always fixed. In the intervening years after its closure, this covetable piece of Ambridge real estate mysteriously disappeared, despite being potentially ripe for domestic conversion. Around the same time both Woodbine and Honeysuckle Cottage also apparently changed their locations.

Back in the real world, subsequent decades saw a patchwork of local government proposals for what amounted to further significant closures of small English rural schools. Often these generated vociferous responses in local communities and sometimes even in national media. A 2008 article in the Daily *Telegraph* entitled 'Without a school, a village won't live long' saw Rowan Pelling claim that:

Anyone who has attended a village primary school can tell you that the institution is integral to the healthy pulse of rural life. A village without a pub or post office is limping along, but one without a playground ringing with children's laughter is in its death throes. (Pelling, 2008)

Meanwhile, since 1973 the village of Ambridge has continued to thrive, despite the absence of Pelling's playground sound track; although in 2001 there was another brief foray into arguments about educational provision. At around that time the BBC's scriptwriters responded (as claimed by its members at least) to the provocations of an *Archers* online forum:

... it is good to see the script writers follow our advice (of some months ago) and bring the local school into the picture a bit more. We had been saying we didn't hear enough about school and its social influence in the village. (Clarke, 2001)

The resultant storyline postulated the potential merger of five village schools, including Loxley Barrett, with Hollerton

Primary School. Lynda Snell, Siobhan Hathaway and Pat Archer were highly audible in Ambridge's campaign to lobby the Local Educational Authority, the District Council and the County Council. That campaign was supported by Archers' David and Ruth, Shula Hebden-Lloyd and Kathy Perks, along with Brian Aldridge's tractor driver and 'those people from Glebelands'. Despite a major confusion in the campaigners' understanding of how state education is managed (a District Council hasn't any authority when it comes to education and the County Council is the Local Education Authority), the Ambridge campaign was successful. Educational arguments prevailed over social concerns and financial pressures. Luckily Loxley Barrett had the better Ofsted inspection report and so was saved. Interestingly though, less than 12 months later the school's Ofsted rating was cited by Brian and Jennifer Aldridge as one of the reasons for moving eight-year-old Ruari away from his village friends at Loxley Barrett, to a distant boarding school. There, at least (Radio 4 listeners could now sleep easy) the young Ruari would be made to complete all his homework.

The closure of Ambridge's village school over 40 years ago and the subsequent threat to Loxley Barrett in 2001 were authentic script lines. They reflected similar changes and the sporadic but continuing loss of primary schools, in the real English villages that Ambridge in the noughties was designed to mirror (Todman, Harris, Carter, & McCamphill, 2009). Since those two forays, there has been little primary education action in Ambridge. Yet the pressures on rural primary schools have continued to grow (CoE, 2014 op. cit.; Hill, Kettlewell, & Salt, 2014). These and a host of other 'real world facts' make the primary educational aspects of current Ambridge life now appear dangerously inauthentic.

Each year, for example, the English government's Department for Education publishes detailed figures about the

school workforce employed in English state-funded compulsory education. The June 2016 report described three main groups of school employees:

- The equivalent of 457,000 full-time teachers, just over half of whom were in primary or (far fewer) nursery schools.
- As well as teachers, the report describes how schools also employed the equivalent of 263,000 full-time teaching assistants, 174,500 of whom worked in primary or nursery schools.
- There was in 2015–2016 the equivalent of 238,000 other full-time members of staff working in English schools as caretakers, cleaners, administrators, receptionists, managers, receptionists and in other miscellaneous roles. Of these 105,000 were in primary or nursery schools (DfE, 2016c, p. 5).

In terms of gender balance, at the time of writing, four out of every five English state school employees are female; a figure which tends to be even higher in the primary sector where for example 85% of teachers (approximately 195,000 full time equivalents) are women (*ibid.*). Given these proportions there at least 419,000 full-time equivalent female employees working in English nursery or primary schools; although the number of individual women in that workforce is actually far higher, for we know from other government statistics (Office for National Statistics, 2016) that at least 40% of the UK's 14.5 million working women, do so on a part-time basis (for men the equivalent proportion is around 13% working part-time). We do not know, because the statistics are not compiled in that way, exactly how many individual women earn their living in English state-funded primary or nursery schools. Yet, if there are at least 419,000 female full-time equivalents, and an average of 40% of women work on a part-time basis,

then by any means of calculation there are well over half a million individual women working in that sector.

Which makes it slightly odd, to say the least, that in Ambridge there are none: full-time, part-time or any-time the primary school employee figure is still a fat, or should that be a thin, zero. Not only does Ambridge's female workforce boast a statistically unlikely absence of anybody paid to do something in a primary or nursery school; nobody in Ambridge even volunteers for the same. Although accurate and up-to-date figures are hard to arrive at, in 2014 there were approximately 300,000 volunteers needed for English primary and secondary school governorships alone (Richardson, 2014). That figure excludes all the other volunteers who helped with school reading, sports, music, paint pot-washing, gardening, visits, fund raising or other general duties.

In Ambridge volunteering is generally embraced. Kirsty Miller does it for the wildlife trust, David for the National Farmers Union, Shula for the church and Lynda, rather promiscuously, does it for practically everything else. Hayley Tucker, previously a nanny, did lead sporadic school visits to Lower Loxley Hall before she moved to Birmingham. But as of May 2017 who in Ambridge works in or volunteers for education? Once again, it is the blind-eyed zero. Indeed amongst Ambridge inhabitants the only paid or voluntary educators and helpers are has-beens. Jim Lloyd used to be a professor of classical history, and Kathy used to be a teacher of secondary domestic science. Both have now thought better of it, opting for alternative sources of income and job satisfaction. Following retirement Jim is a volunteer in the village shop, a highly competitive ornithologist and a general genius at crosswords. Kathy now earns her metaphorical corn as an employee at the Grey Gables health club; a venue mercifully clear of adolescents who on the whole, Kathy discovered, were not that bothered about cooking.

EDUCATIONAL INAUTHENTICITY IN AMBRIDGE

Primary education in *The Archers* has two purposes and both are dramatic, rather than educationally authentic. Indeed authenticity is often a casualty of these dramatic ends. Loxley Barrett school's failure to follow statutory safeguarding procedures (DfE, 2016a) during 2016, for example, allowed estranged and strange-looking step-father Rob Titchener to talk regularly to Henry through the playground fence. This breach of legal care requirements caused consternation to primary education-savvy correspondents to Mumsnet and the national press. How the school was getting away with neglecting the safety and wellbeing of a vulnerable and traumatised child? Throughout Helen Archer and Rob's nationally gripping coercive control storyline the role of Henry's local schooling was never to offer the support or guidance to the family, that an actual English primary school would almost certainly have done. Rather (and perhaps inauthentically) the school provided a mere backdrop against which Rob could further undermine Helen (Henry's missing reading books, not being allowed to collect him from school), or as a pretext to explore Henry's understandable behavioural problems, also simplistically blamed on Helen. So much for the (conspicuously absent) nurturing skills of Loxley Barrett as a small village school: despite such skills regularly being hailed in real small village school prospectuses, which typically portray themselves as organisations in which each child and family is individually known and cared for.

The Helen and Rob storyline also demonstrated the other dramatic use of primary education in *The Archers*: to reinforce character traits, especially those influenced by class. Rob and Ursula Titchener's scheming to send Henry to board at Rob's old prep school not only showed their joint desire to damage the relationship between Henry and Helen but also

served as grandparental reinforcement of the snobbery and distaste that Rob himself showed towards Emma Grundy's 'working class brats'. This use of primary education choice as a class identifier and divide had been used previously, for example when Brian and Jennifer assumed that Ruari would go to private school. The only question they seriously considered was whether he should be a day boy or a boarder. Nor did either parent see any need to talk about Ruari's future educational needs with his current teacher at Loxley Barrett. Instead, educational expertise was sought from someone considered to be of an equivalent social standing as the Aldridges, namely Elizabeth Pargetter of Lower Loxley Hall. Rather ironically of course, as a teenager Elizabeth had been expelled from her own independent secondary school.

The Archers is a radio drama that, despite having officially lost its original agricultural educational purpose in 1972, still prides itself on its research and accurate reflections of real rural life (BBC, 2017). So why does it present such an inadequate and inauthentic picture of children's education, in contemporary rural communities? One potential answer lies in pragmatics. Child actors are time consuming to work with and difficult to script. It is sometimes opined that the animals in *The Archers* sound more genuine than its children. For example, few real five year olds invariably answer 'all right then mummy' when told to put away their toys. Perhaps such compliant infant diction is part legacy from the show's original and rather pofaced 1950s public educational mission? If so, and being well into a new millennium, it could now be varied. Contemporary scriptwriters can safely assume that Radio 4 listeners have first-hand experience of children in primary education: as pupils, as relatives of a primary pupil, through employment or volunteering. Because they cannot make that assumption of their listeners' expertise in silage or sausage-making, ironically they

sometimes seem to take more care about trying to explain those processes 'as they really are'.

Another explanation for *The Archers* educational inauthenticity could be that modern primary education is now rather complicated. Even professional educators struggle with the jargon, the proliferation of acronyms and the constant and confusing flow of policy changes. Hard-pressed BBC scriptwriters might be excused for not keeping up. Or might primary education be just too boring for Radio 4 thrill-seekers? To most of its audience *The Archers* represents dramatic escapism from everyday life. Listeners perhaps don't want to be reminded about the routines of excessive homework, the mad scrambles to make fancy dress costumes, or attend yet another dull fund-raising sale of largely unappetising cakes, at their real local primary school next weekend?

Or even more subversively, is actual English rural primary education, which really does throw together children and families of diverse social, cultural, economic and academic backgrounds, just too contentious, co-operative or competitive for *The Archers*? How could the clear and long established demarcations of social class, income and behaviours, on which so much of the structure and appeal of *The Archers* 'timeless' storylines depend, be maintained if all of Ambridge's children were offered equal opportunities? If all their parents and carers queued together at parents' evenings? If education was used less to school children into a preconceived place in a hierarchical world, and more to liberate their minds and realise their potential? The outcomes could prove disastrous for *The Archers*: an historic village would be drowned and its many boundaries dissolved, in a flood of social mobility.

These critiques of inauthenticity are in the end, affectionate. As audience and as fans we connive with the pretence. We collude with Ambridge's continuities, we suspend our disbeliefs and like children ourselves, we treat *The Archers* as

playtime. Yet how much richer might that play be, and how many opportunities could be opened, were the scriptwriters merely to consider one of the many dramatic opportunities offered by rural primary education? Ambridge has its vicar, vet and lawyer, its publicans and proprietors, its farm owners, managers and workers, its consultants and entrepreneurs, its land owners and land agents, its poachers and its gamekeepers, its adolescents and retirees. Surely it could manage to host a male primary teaching assistant, breaking some moulds; a vivacious and untrustworthy head teacher, from a school rivalling Loxley Barrett; a vainglorious school governor from Ambridge, determined to protect the local primary school from acquisition by a chain of academies; or even just a parent, making an idiot of themselves at sports day?

Closing Ambridge's village school in 1973 was a fateful move. Not just for the imaginary village that hosted it, and the imaginary children who attended it, but for the imaginative wellsprings from which everything in Ambridge flows. It may have been an 'authentic' decision at the time, in the sense that many village schools across Britain shut during that decade. Yet it now means that the BBC's scriptwriters have to work even harder at making Ambridge feel and sound like an authentic English village: a community with many children who still have to attend primary school, and in all probability likely to contain at least one inhabitant who works or volunteers in that school. We don't need no education? Hardly. This is Radio 4!

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PEER REVIEW BY NIC GRUNDY, GREENWOOD
COTTAGE, AMBRIDGE, BORSETSHIRE

Do you know, I often ask myself how something so big in our family life, can matter so little to other people in Ambridge? As a mother of four children, school dominates my life. There

is always something: homework, homework, more homework and then tests (the pressure these kids are under honestly, poor Mia had to do that bonkers phonics test reading nonsense words!) Then there's the projects (I think Joe enjoyed the oral history project more than Jake), making costumes for performances, dress up days (thank goodness for Mumsnet is all I can say), sports days, football matches and outings. I'm back and forwards to Loxley Barrett like a yo-yo, especially now Poppy's started nursery. It would be SO much easier if there was still a primary school in Ambridge. It's a big thing for small children to get a bus every day when they first start. And to be honest I'd enjoy waiting at the school gates every day and making friends with the other mothers. You miss stuff otherwise — like gossip about the teachers and other people's children. I heard there was trouble about that business with Rob talking to Henry. Reckon they hushed it all up ...

But the children are happy at school. The teachers work their socks off and were so lovely to Jake and Mia when they joined. I don't know why they get so worried about Ofsted. George loved Loxley Barrett too, until he left for Borchester Green last September. I know other families like the Aldridges and Pargetters don't send their kids there, but Will and I didn't really give it a second thought. The Grundys go to the local comprehensive. And do you know, I wouldn't mind a job at Loxley Barrett myself once Poppy's full time. I reckon being a teaching assistant would really suit me. I could keep an eye on Kiera too. She can be QUITE the little madam, don't you know ...