

The Ambridge love triangle



The Mistress
Siobhan Hathaway is expecting her lover's child



The Husband
Brian Aldridge (played by Charles Collingwood) is leading a double life



The Wife
Jennifer (Angela Piper) knows nothing about the love affair

► actress, how can I get on the property ladder?) in north London, and life revolves around a close group of actor friends, whom she admits form a surrogate family.

How long she has been single? 'Oh golly,' she says. 'A while! But I'm – you know – optimistic.' Marriage and children, she says, 'would be lovely if it happened. But if it doesn't happen, I'll be OK. I like to keep an open mind.'

Since she won the part of Siobhan three years ago, she points out, her main relationship has been with Virgin Trains, commuting between London and Birmingham, where *The Archers* is recorded at the Pebble Mill studios.

Joining the show ('I'll be murdered if I call it a soap! I think the term they like to use is "continuing drama"'), Lennon was immediately struck by the welcoming friendliness of the cast compared to those on similarly long-running TV series. 'On my very first day, Patricia Greene, who plays Jill Archer, made me a cup of coffee.' Can't imagine Wendy Richards greeting an *EastEnders* newcomer like that, I say, and Lennon laughs and nods.

'It ain't going to happen! But Pat is great fun and Charles [Collingwood] is hilarious – he's like Terry-Thomas with an edge.'

Recording is intensive, taking place for one week a month when the actors

record up to four episodes a day. The rest of the time they are free to pursue other roles: Lennon spent the summer performing in Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* at the Watermill Theatre in Newbury, and received rave reviews.

'Because *The Archers* actors only see each other once a month – less if we're not sharing a storyline – there's a very festive atmosphere when we do get together,' she says. 'But when I hear stories of get-togethers in the past told by the older cast members, I think that we're a bit tame now. They were wild.'

Lennon has clear views about why radio has not only survived, but prospered, in the television age. 'Radio goes back to the roots of drama, which is about what people do, not what people look like. You can't rely on fabulous special effects and everyone having a marvellous outfit. Instead, you have to have really good stories.'

And few stories could better that of the tangled intrigue of Siobhan and Brian. I ask Lennon how much she resembles her minxy character. 'Well, we both love to chat and Siobhan's an informed person – I wouldn't say I was a font of wisdom, but I'm aware of what's going on in the world.'

'But in other ways, we're very different. Siobhan thrives on conflict, whereas

the idea exhausts me. I'm very much in favour of a quiet life. I like a good argument in terms of ideas, but I hate all that *sturm und drang* business. Life's too short. Siobhan likes living on the edge and I like living on the sofa.'

It seems bizarre that, in this celebrity-transfixed era, Siobhan can be so well known and yet few listeners would recognise the name of the actress who plays her, since *The Archers*' cast list is not read out on the radio.

Does such anonymity bother Lennon? 'No, not really, so long as they keep sending me the cheques,' she replies with total sincerity. 'As far as I'm concerned, there's all the fun of being in a really good show and none of the hassle. I'd hate to go through what the actors from *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* have to.' Yet the die-hard fans still manage to spot her.

'I was at a friend's house having a meal a couple of months ago, and someone started looking at me strangely. Eventually, she said, "You're not Siobhan, are you?" She'd recognised my voice. When I said I was, she said that, if she'd known at the start of the afternoon, she wouldn't have been able to talk to me, which was crazy, as she was a very confident person.'

'Things like that have happened a few

times to me. And then I have lots of men of a certain age sidling up to me and saying, [she puts on a lecherous voice] "Sooo, what do you think young Siobhan sees in Brian?"'

Has she ever been tempted to get involved with a married man? 'I can't imagine it!' she cries, looking genuinely horrified. 'As far as I'm concerned, married men are generally to be avoided, because I couldn't do that to another woman.'

Now Lennon is concentrating on the next phase in Siobhan's stormy life – becoming a mother. The baby is due any day, but Lennon still has no idea of what the precise circumstances surrounding the birth will be. 'We don't see the scripts very far in advance, so I'm still as much in the dark as you are,' she says.

All she can do is start rehearsing the appropriate sound effects. 'I have a friend who's just had a baby, and I'll be asking all about it, so I can get the huffing and puffing right.' Lennon throws back her head and laughs.

'Mind you, when it comes to the actual recording, I know I'll just end up cracking up'.

'*The Archers*' is on Radio 4, Sunday to Friday at 7.02pm, repeated the next day at 2.02pm. The Omnibus edition is on Sundays at 10am.