

Sex and the slurry

Y

ou may not recognise her face, but Caroline Lennon is a bona fide cult heroine. Mind you, many of her most ardent followers could push pass her in the street without identifying the devil woman at their elbow. As she explains: "I met this woman at a friend's house recently. A lovely lady: very witty, very self-confident. Then at the end, just as I had to leave, they said who I was. And this woman

just exploded in a mass of jelly. 'Thank God I didn't know,' she said. 'I wouldn't have been able to say a word all afternoon.' I've had several instances like that: grown men — lawyers — who will grip my arm intensely when they realise who I am."

A religion to its adherents, a wearying recitation of livestock ailments to its detractors, BBC Radio 4's *The Archers* is as immutable a part of English life as village cricketers pouring warm lager over church wardens during Evensong. Or whatever that John Major quote was.

Yet life in Ambridge — the fictional location for the 51-year-old soap opera — is no longer all foot rot and skittles. For in 1999, the Wicklow-born Lennon arrived to play Siobhan Hathaway — doctor's wife and serial scandal magnet.

"Almost immediately things go wrong for her and her husband," Lennon explains. "She has a miscarriage from which their marriage never recovers. Then he has a very unwise something-or-other with the lady vicar. Then something awful happens with a green scarf. So I take this very badly and start a thing with Brian Aldridge who is sort of the JR of Ambridge. Then I let this slip..."

My goodness, all this has been going on in between *Brain of Britain* and the *Afternoon Play*, unbeknownst to those of us for whom the dum-dee-dum of *The Archers*' theme tune has always been followed by the click of the off knob.

"... so my husband can't believe I'm shagging this awful guy. He's back with the vicar and then I discover that I'm up-the-duff by Brian..."

And there's more where that came from. What has become of this once sober institution, originally devised to educate farmers about their profession? "Oh I think if you look at the archive, they've been at it like knives for 50 years," Lennon explains. "We'd like to take the credit for being the first people to have sex on the show, but sadly that's not the case."

Caroline began acting while at Trinity College Dublin, going on to train at the Bristol Old Vic before embarking on a successful stage career. But nothing quite prepared her for the quiet madness of *The Archers*.

"I knew a bit about it," she says. "But that's a little like knowing a bit about tight-rope walking: it's very different when you do it. At the celebration for the 50th anniversary, there were people there who had been listening since 1951. It's part of their

lives, but not in a weird way. We don't get the nutters TV soaps get."

That 50th anniversary celebration included a party hosted by *Archers* enthusiast Prince Charles: "We were invited to St James's Palace for wall-to-wall champagne. I met lots of interesting people who liked the show — Martin Clunes and Stephen Fry, both obsessives. People you'd never expect: Phill Jupitus for example. We were then taken off to Highgrove to see all the Prince's organic farming, which was interesting for me, coming from a small town in Wicklow."

As well as getting used to the public attention, Lennon has had to accustom herself to the peculiarities of radio drama. Given Siobhan's irrepressible libido, this inevitably involves plenty of duvet sequences.

"Your voice sounds completely different lying down," she says. "So you lie down across something and you have this duvet with which to make duvet noises — something I do a bit too enthusiastically. However my most surreal experience was not a sex scene, but when I was supposed to be riding a horse. And they actually had this saddle set on blocks which I had to climb up on. I practically had to be carried out of the studio afterwards. Again your voice sounds quite different when in that position, and you can't fake it."

In the past, appearing in long-running radio shows such as *The Archers* has limited actors' career opportunities in other media. As she puts it: "If you did radio, TV would be snitty about you and vice versa." But the current cast includes performers from the two finest British sitcoms of the age: Tamsin Greig from *Black Books* and Lucy Davis from *The Office*. Meanwhile Caroline is preparing for a UK production of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and hopes to work back home in Ireland soon. But does she not fear that she may still be playing Siobhan in 50 years?

"Frankly, I would never say never," she says. "But then I would never have seen myself in it in the first place. I would never have seen myself being knocked-up by Brian Aldridge. But because you only record for one week every month, you are not inhibited from doing other things."

Nonetheless I wonder how she can live with Siobhan. Though possessed of a formidable personality — her enthusiastic answers are delivered with piercing diction — I don't quite see Lennon as a self-obsessed sexual predator.

"Siobhan is very self-centred," she laughs. "But the audience do seem to find that enormously sympathetic. Much more sympathetic than I do. You neurotic slut! That's what I think."

Neurotic sluts, promiscuous lady vicars, mysterious green scarves: maybe it is time to investigate what goes on before *The Afternoon Play*.

***The Archers* is on BBC Radio 4 at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Monday-Friday, and on Sunday at 10 a.m. (omnibus) and 7 p.m.**