

DISTANT THUNDER

An everyday story of geological folk

Geologist and science writer Nina Morgan tunes in to the UK's longest running radio soap

Originally produced with collaborative input from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *The Archers*, the popular UK radio soap first broadcast in 1950 and now attracting an estimated audience of over 5 million listeners, was conceived as a means of disseminating information to farmers and smallholders to help increase productivity in the postwar era of rationing and shortages.

But whether the producers knew it or not, the programme also provides a perfect medium for disseminating geological concepts. Back in 1993, Hugh Torrens [b. 1940] and Bernard Besly [b. 1955], both then based in the Geology Department at Keele University, worked through piles of 'palaeoscriptological' evidence, augmented by information provided by the then agricultural story editor Anthony Parkin [1926 – 2007], to

produce a geological map of the area around Ambridge, the Archer's imaginary home village in the fictional county of Borsetshire.

Palaeoscriptology

A combination of contextual clues, regional geological information and chance remarks slipped into the script led Besly and Torrens to the conclusion that the local solid geology must consist of Jurassic and Triassic rocks. Additional clues in the dialogue made it possible to identify the underlying geology in greater detail. For example, mentions of the heavy blue clay – cold to warm up and too wet to work – that so frustrated fictional farmer, Phil Archer, from 1950 until his (real and fictional) death in 2009, suggest the presence of the Lower Lias. With the help of a highly detailed topographic map, and aided and abetted by chance remarks made by Ambridge's feckless farmers, the Grundys, the pair were able to draw on their mapping skills to come up with a

plausible geological map of the area around Ambridge.

Elaborating on the evidence

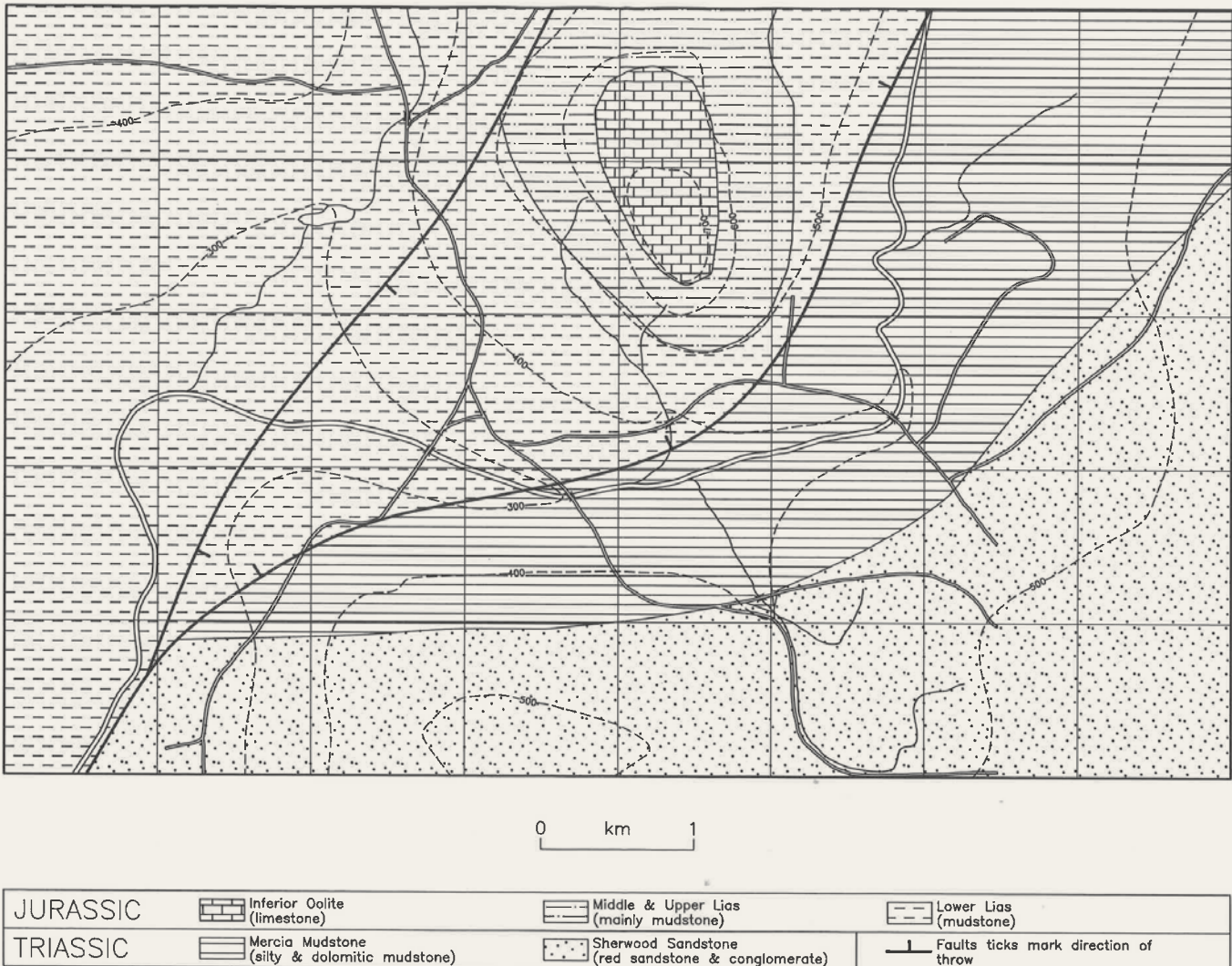
Torrens's and Besly's map and interpretation was first reported – or perhaps, more accurately, misreported -- in the October – November 1993 issue of *The Yew Tree*, the Community Magazine of Keele Parish. It also drew a big crowd at the 1993 British Association Annual Meeting held in Keele, where Torrens and Besly presented the results of their research in a poster. Illustrated by photographs taken around Blockley in Gloucestershire, the poster revealed further geological details, including the suggestion that the geology around the local Ambridge landmark, Lakey Hill, probably begins with Lias clays, and passes up into cappings of Oxfordshire-Warwickshire oolites, with an important Marlstone Rock ledge in between. This scenario would allow for the Coal Measures and the New Red Sandstone to appear by faulting in one quarter of the mapped area.

Their map led the geologist Eric Robinson





GEOLOGY OF AMBRIDGE



Map created by Hugh Torrens and Bernard Besly for their poster at the 1993 BAAS meeting in Keele

[b. 1929] to speculate that the local building stone in Ambridge might consist of either Triassic Arden Sandstone (either the green, brown, buff or mauve varieties) or a buff coloured sandstone from the Upper Carboniferous Keele Formation, dug from quarries in the surrounding woodland where, until recently, gamekeeper Will Grundy reared his pheasants. There might even, Robinson hypothesised, be scope for an oil discovery in the area, similar to the Eaking oil field in Nottinghamshire, which produced the bulk of the UK's indigenous crude from a Carboniferous reservoir during the Second World War.

Tune in

All this speculation might seem slightly silly, but it does have a serious side. Incorporating geology into popular programmes like *The Archers* is a really effective form of science outreach. And geologically speaking, picking up on the clues provided – either intentionally or not – is a great way to sharpen up your geological mind. No fooling!

End notes: I am grateful to Hugh Torrens for providing copies of the article, Larkin' about on Lahey Hill, from the October – November 1993 issue of *The Yew Tree*

along with a copy of the map of Ambridge presented at the 1993 BA meeting; and to Bernard Besly for helpful discussions. Other sources include *News from Keele* by Eric Robinson, *Geology Today*, 9/6 1993, pp 207-208; Wikipedia entries about *The Archers* and information about the programme on the BBC Radio 4 website.

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