



## Meet *The Archers* farmer who started life in Henley

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HE is known to millions of *The Archers* fans as pig farmer Neil Carter but Brian Hewlett has swapped galoshes for ghosts for his latest role in the mystery thriller *I'll Be Back Before Midnight*.

He's currently starring as landlord George in the play which has broken box office records around the world and is currently mid-way through its seven-week run at the Mill at Sonning.

It's a far cry from the workaday goings-on at Ambridge. But for Brian, it's a much-treasured opportunity to show off his acting skills just a few miles from where he was brought up — in Queen Street, Henley.

Brian's acting talent was nurtured during his time at Henley Grammar School, now The Henley College.

He says: "I was always interested in pretending to be somebody else and it was while I was at school that I decided that that was where my main interest lay, in being an actor."

Mrs Elizabeth Attrill, who taught English and English Literature as well as producing the school plays, was a particular inspiration.

"We were always inspired by her care and attention to detail," he says. "I think she realised that was where my future lay."

She encouraged her young protégé to enroll on RADA courses but his parents were unable to afford them and instead he practised treading the boards as part of Henley Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society where he played Harry Ritchie in *The Brigadoon* and was one of the students in *The Student Prince*. The first formal drama teaching he received

was when he enrolled in a three-year course at Rose Bruford College in south London in 1956 — and he has never looked back.

His professional debut was a walk-on part in the last three weeks of the musical *Lock Up Your Daughters* at London's Mermaid Theatre and he stayed on at the theatre for the next two shows, *Treasure Island* and *Great Expectations*.

In the years that have followed, his stage career highlights have included playing Terye in *Fiddler On The Roof* and Amos Hart in the first London run of *Chicago* at the Cambridge Theatre. And he has also performed on screen — most famously as part of the ensemble cast of up-and-coming young actors in BBC series *The Younger Generation* alongside John Thaw, as well as parts in *Grange Hill*, *Doctors* and *Kingdom*.

Yet it's impossible to interview Brian without touching on his four-decade stint (and counting) on the airwaves in *The Archers*.

His achievement seems all the more remarkable when you consider that he was initially contracted to appear in just four episodes of the Radio Four soap opera.

"I just thought it was simply another radio job — I'd start one day, finish two weeks later, thank you very much and goodbye. But it has gone on and on and on," he laughs. "I was looking down the cast list the other day and I am now one of the few people in it for this long."



On stage: Brian Hewlett, one of the longest-serving cast members of *The Archers*, plays George at the Mill at Sonning

I am now one of the senior members of the cast, I suppose, although I don't feel like that inside."

His character was just a teenage apprentice at Brookfield Farm when he first appeared in the show. He was told he could use any Midlands accent, so he opted for the north Oxfordshire burr he'd heard often in his youth.

In the intervening 40 years he has had such diverse storylines as nearly dying from leptospirosis to struggling to bring up two young children while his wife was in jail.

Brian admits his closest link to farming in real life is

that he lives in an old farmhouse in Norfolk — and says he doesn't entirely understand Neil's enduring appeal.

"I think he's a good character, he's caring towards other people and he has not always had it easy in his life so the public can probably sympathise with him," he says.

"But they are probably infuriated with him on certain occasions because of his reticence as he's always been the kind of character to think long and deep."

For now, though, Brian is firmly back on stage — and says there's nowhere else he would rather be.

*I'll Be Back Before Midnight* tells the story of Greg and his wife, Jan, who rent an old farmhouse so that she can recover from a recent nervous breakdown, unaware that the property was the site of a terrible murder. The situation worsens as George reveals all, and Jan is tormented by ghostly visions.

"It is a real pleasure to come and perform so close to Henley," says Brian.

"It's an amazing play with its fair share of laughter and scary moments which is always fun to put before an audience because you get an instant reaction. If you are making them laugh you get

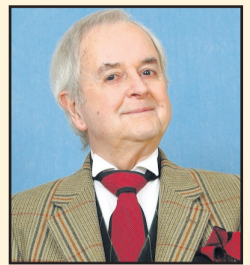
laughter back and if you are being more serious then that is reflected in the audience. And then there is always the applause at the end.

"Nothing beats entertaining a real live audience, which I am pleased to be doing right now.

"I thoroughly enjoy it — and I hope other people do, too.

"I've still got that bug and I hope it will never leave me because I just love doing it."

● *I'll Be Back Before Midnight* continues at the Mill at Sonning until November 23. Box office 0118 969 8000 or visit [www.millatsonning.com](http://www.millatsonning.com)



### Why I wear a poppy

Rodney Bewes

I WEAR a poppy because of my uncle Jim.

When *The Likely Lads* was at the height of its fame Ian La Frenais, one of the writers, and I drove north in Ian's Rolls Royce to see his mother. We made a detour to where my relatives lived and we walked in the house and there were my grandparents, aunts and uncles, everybody.

I said to my auntie Elsie: "How is my uncle Jim?" and she said: "Well he hasn't got the breath and he can't march. He's finished."

I thought she meant he was dying because of his asthma but she meant he was finished with the brass band in which he played the euphonium. My mother said: "Well Elsie, I don't think Dunkirk did him any good, standing in all that water waiting for a boat."



### Why I wear a poppy

Ed Simons

Chairman, Kenton Theatre trustees

THERE are a few moments in your life where a particular action evokes a feeling of pride. The wearing of the red poppy is one of those actions.

Being brought up in the early Fifties the memory of war was still fresh, and the nation literally came to a halt on Poppy day. In recent years the symbol of the poppy has been brought back to life in remembering our young soldiers who have so tragically lost their lives in current warfare.

Pinning the poppy to my lapel is a very small token of thanks to those very brave men and women.



In fine voice: former Henley College student Oliver Dench

### Oliver makes a dashing Mr Darcy

REHEARSALS for a musical version of *Pride and Prejudice* at the Kenton Theatre are well underway and director Julie Huntington says she is delighted with her Mr Darcy.

After a long search for an accomplished actor who was dashing — and could sing — Mrs Huntington was relieved to find Oliver Dench, a former Henley College student who is now busy making his name as an actor.

Oliver most recently played Paris in an avant-garde professional production of *Romeo and Juliet* at St Mary the Virgin Church in Reading.

Mrs Huntington said: "Oliver has got a lovely voice and an amazing command of the text. He gets the emotion on board so well. He's a true born actor."

She added that Samantha Field, who plays Elizabeth Bennett, is "a *Pride and Prejudice* freak, it's her favourite book and she knows the character inside out."

The show, produced by the Henley Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society, runs at the Kenton Theatre from Wednesday to Saturday, November 13 to 16.

For tickets call (01491) 575698 or visit [www.kentontheatre.co.uk](http://www.kentontheatre.co.uk)

### Playing the blues in Mississippi Delta clubs requires a fair bit of backbone

BACKBONE are still virtually unknown in the UK, but in America the five-piece electric blues band has been on national radio and played at some of the most famous blues clubs in the world, writes Lesley Potter.

Lead singer Tony Seaman, from Remenham Hill, is just back from a 10-day tour of the States with the band, where they were greeted with open arms.

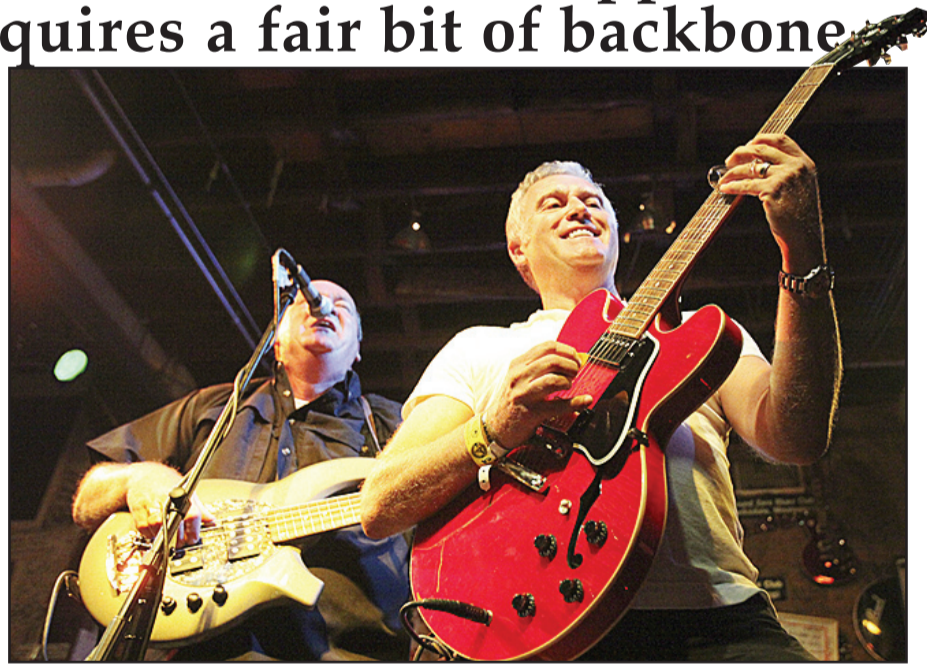
They played at Morgan Freeman's Ground Zero Blues Club in Clarksdale and in the infamous Balcony Music Club in New Orleans — and have already been invited back to play at a festival in Memphis next May.

He said: "When you go to New Orleans, for example in the French quarter, wherever you walk there's music. Or you go to a restaurant and there will be a jazz band playing."

"A bit further on and there's a blues band playing music on every corner. In clubs they rotate the bands so you might hear three different bands in one night."

"There's a demand for live music, and it was the same when we went to Arkansas in the Mississippi delta. The blues culture there is endemic. You don't get that here."

The five musicians had been playing together as a



On stage: Tony Seaman on electric guitar with Duncan Highet at Ground Zero Blues Club

typical pub band for years, knocking out dance favourites for parties. Then five years ago they found themselves listening to veteran blues guitarist BB King playing live and had a "Eureka!" moment.

Tony said: "BB King is still going, even though he can't walk any more, he has to sit down to play. But he inspired us to start playing blues."

"Three of the guys then got up and played at an open

mic and people just sat there open-mouthed and said, 'you guys are good!' That's how it all started."

Backbone have built up a repertoire of old blues numbers — though not your typical old chestnuts along the lines of "Got up this morning and my dog was dead".

Instead, their sound is an electric, Chicago blues-based sound, following in the footsteps of musicians like Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Bass player Dun-

can Highet has also written a number of songs, and they have recently recorded an EP, *Made In Britain*.

Tony, 54, a former session musician who has recorded with Billy J Kramer and Mud among others, said the American tour has inspired them to up their game: "It was great fun. The American public is very critical, but nice, and they loved us."

For more information about the band visit [www.backbonebluesband.co.uk](http://www.backbonebluesband.co.uk)