

DOWNSIZING

REAL-LIFE COUPLE
Judy Bennett and Charles Collingwood at home, main



CLARA MULDEN FOR THE TELEGRAPH/BBC

'I know how the Aldridges must feel about downsizing'

Jane Slade meets two stars of 'The Archers' whose real-life property moves have echoed storylines on the soap

Fans of the BBC's long-running radio soap *The Archers* will be aware of Jennifer Aldridge's turmoil. Her husband, the roguish landowner Brian, has been forced to retire from running the farm, and has put the family home up for sale.

The couple, who are now in their 70s, have been Ambridge's wealthiest residents, living at Home Farm. Chatelaine Jennifer has created a luxurious and stylish home in the 18th-century manor house, where they have lived since the Seventies.

It has been the setting for many of Ambridge's noteworthy scenes, including when illicit sexual activity caused a bouncy castle to burst in the grounds, and when Toby Fair-

brother poured sheep dye into the swimming pool.

The powerful thread in the story now is that Jennifer is not only facing the loss of her home, but also her status as a homemaker. She's always baking and preparing meals, and loves nothing more than having her family around her large dining table enjoying one of her Sunday roasts. Her state-of-the-art kitchen, with induction hob and granite worktops, was the subject of several episodes of the programme from its inception through to installation, and came complete with under-floor heating, boiling water tap, a Belfast sink and wine fridge.

Actor Charles Collingwood, 75, has played Brian for 43 years. His real-life wife, Judy Bennett, has played another character, Shula Hebden Lloyd, for even longer (she is another soon-to-be

downsizer, as she and her vet husband, Alistair, are divorcing). Bennett and Collingwood have already downsized. "My *Archers* character, Brian, is not really bothered about having to sell the marital home," says Collingwood. "As a farmer, he is more interested in the land. Retaining it is more important to him than the house - whereas the reverse is important to his wife, Jennifer."

The real-life couple sold their big five-bedroom family home in north London 14 years ago, and moved to a four-bedroom cottage in a village near Portsmouth, in Hampshire. "I was happy to move from London," says Bennett. "I just wanted to live somewhere that had a big sky."

The only major change during that time is that Collingwood now wears a hearing aid. "I don't feel 75," he declares. He drives the 144-mile round trip to Birmingham for the eight-day *Archers* recording schedule each month. They record four 15-minute episodes a day, and each one takes two and a half hours. Six episodes are broadcast every week, with an omnibus edition on Sundays. "I'm not sure my mother or father would have driven that far at my age," he says.

The couple have been married for 42 years. Bennett started her professional career in children's puppet shows, and recorded 150 episodes of *The Adventures of Rupert Bear* before moving to *The Archers* in her late 20s. "I narrated and did all the voices in 1969 for ATV," she recalls. They would seem to have the perfect life: there are separate televisions with Sky boxes, so they can watch different things at the same time (Bennett loves soaps and Collingwood loves cricket), and they each have their own bathroom.

"We don't yet need separate glasses for our teeth," Collingwood quips, but they are planning ahead, checking, for example, that their long, straight staircase would be suitable for a stairlift should they need one. "I've also planned a layout so we could live downstairs," says Bennett. "The study would be a wet room, the dining room a bedroom and the carer could live upstairs."

The downstairs rooms are arranged in an interconnecting circle - by design. "So if we get Alzheimer's, we can walk around, bump into each other and reintroduce ourselves," Collingwood laughs.

There are no symptoms so far. In fact, neither has any intention of retiring, and each of their characters has good storylines at the moment. There are several members of the cast of *The Archers* who are much older too.

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Patricia Green, who plays Jill Archer, is 87, and June Spencer, alias Peggy Woolley, is 90.

The Archers is one of few programmes that really tackles older people's issues. Another storyline touches on the subject of care in old age and the importance of living somewhere that is adapted to your needs. "Auntie Chris" had planned to retire with her husband, George, to a new home, but his sudden death put an end to her dream. In recent episodes, she has faced the prospect of moving to a care home, but couldn't afford it so has gone to live with her widowed sister-in-law, Peggy, who has agreed to have alternations made to her home to make it suitable for her.

In real life, Collingwood and Bennett decluttered and downsized well before they needed to, moving to a dream cottage in an enclave of three houses. They have views of rolling fields down to the sea, and a garden with apple trees, shrubs and a summerhouse. They walk a mile to get the papers in the morning, and swim in the sea at nearby Southsea every day during the summer. It's a pretty idyllic life. Collingwood's only concern is that their postcode isn't accurate. "Our home is misnamed on GPS," he explains. "So if I had to call an ambulance I worry that it might not get here."

Their latest discovery is Brittany Ferries. "It takes 15 minutes in the car to get to Portsmouth to go to St Malo," says Collingwood. "We sail overnight, have a wonderful dinner and wake up in France, where we spend the week and come home again... Heaven."

ALTER EGOS
Jennifer and Brian Aldridge of *The Archers*, below, played by Angela Piper and Charles Collingwood



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