

Green and pleasant

As BBC1's *Countryfile* celebrates its 25th birthday, Katherine Hassell unearths a bumper crop of facts about the show, its stars and its famous fans

The first episode of *Countryfile* aired on Sunday July 24, 1988, and came from Swaledale in North Yorkshire. It replaced long-running (but rather dry) show *Farming to offer* a more inclusive view of the countryside, including rural affairs, outdoor sports, conservation and food. Among the rural issues covered were folk music, salmon-fishing and tensions between anglers and canoeists. It also introduced the UK's first seven-day weather forecast.

Countryfile was soon a hit, becoming Britain's most popular Sunday-morning show, with 2.5 million viewers. But the 2009 move to an evening slot proved an inspired decision, with the programme now attracting up to eight million viewers.

Matt Baker, Ellie Harrison and Julia Bradbury are among the current presenting line-up, while past reporters have included such illustrious names as Clare Balding, Ruth Langford and Ben Fogle. Veteran broadcaster

John Craven has been part of the team for 24 years. Before *Countryfile*, Craven worked on *Multi-Coloured Swap Shop* and *Saturday Superstore*, but he made his name presenting one of the world's first TV news bulletins for children, *John Craven's Newsround*. He fronted more than 3,000 editions over 17 years and was awarded an OBE for services to children's and rural broadcasting.

There's a well-trodden path from children's TV to *Countryfile*. Helen Skelton and Matt Baker are *Blue Peter* alumni, while former presenter Michaela Strachan found fame on *Wide Awake Club*, and Miriam O'Reilly started out as a runner on *Tiswas*. Having a farming background on your CV is also handy. Miriam O'Reilly and Helen Skelton are

both farmers' daughters, while Matt Baker's family has an organic farm in Durham and Adam Henson grew up on Bemborough Farm in the Cotswolds, which he now runs. Nowadays Bemborough is home to Cotswold Farm Park, which showcases some of the rarest agricultural breeds. The public can visit and even camp there. See www.cotswoldfarmpark.co.uk.

If Adam's father Joe looks familiar, that's because he was the resident farmer on the long-running children's series *Animal Magic*. He also presented a 1980s forerunner to *Countryfile* called *In the Country* with Angela Rippon.

Over the years, presenters have found themselves competing in everything from World Toe Wrestling to the World Hen Racing Championship in the name of entertainment

– but some are more talented than others. When Michaela Strachan reported on 2002's World Gurning Championship in Cumbria, she won the women's competition.

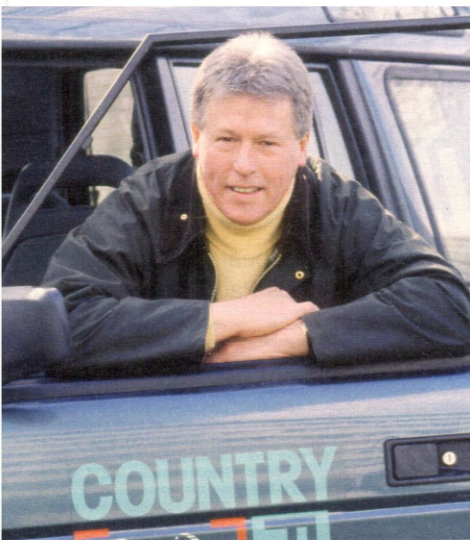
Adam Henson only heard of *Countryfile*'s *X Factor*-style search for new presenters in 2001 when one of his employees asked to borrow a camcorder for his audition tape. Adam's partner Charlie persuaded him to enter.

The tape wasn't easy to film – thanks to the fact that he shared the screen with a playful goat kid and a bull – but it helped Adam beat 3,500 rivals to become the viewers' favourite.

If any proof were needed of the show's devoted fanbase, nearly 50,000 entries flooded in for the 2012 *Countryfile* Photographic Competition. The best 12 were reproduced on the *Countryfile* 2013 calendar to raise money for BBC Children in Need. It made more than £1 million.

The show hasn't been without its controversies. Miriam O'Reilly – who lost her reporting job after eight years when the show went prime-time – famously won her employment tribunal against the BBC on the grounds of age discrimination. She has since set up the Women's Equality Network and revealed plans to run as a Labour Party candidate.

Countryfile was broadcast live during the 2001



foot-and-mouth epidemic to bring the nation the very latest on the crisis.

The show's theme tune was written by composer David Lowe, who is also responsible for the opening music on *Cash in the Attic*, *Grand Designs* and the BBC News bulletins, among others. Last summer, his remix of *Chariots of Fire* by Vangelis was used for the London 2012 Olympics medal presentations.

The Henson family clearly has showbiz in its genes. Adam's grandfather, Leslie Henson, was a music-hall comedian and actor in the 1920s and 30s, while uncle Nicky is famous as the medallion-wearing ladies' man in an episode of *Fawlty Towers* and later popped up on *EastEnders* as Billy Mitchell's father-in-law Jack.

Countryfile has friends in high places. Its fans include Prince Charles – who guest-edited a celebratory 25th-anniversary edition earlier this year – and the Duchess of Cornwall. Other fans include Top Gear presenter Jeremy Clarkson and JLS singer JB Gill, both of whom have appeared on the show.

Prince Charles gave the Duchess of Cambridge a run for her money as a fashion icon when he appeared on *Countryfile* earlier this year. His passion for make-do-and-mend was revealed when he wore an old coat patched with so many pieces of leather that he could hardly move, prompting style experts to suggest Barbour might produce a version commercially. Next stop the catwalks?

Matt Baker got on so well with the Prince that he arranged to buy some sheep from HRH's farm.

Matt originally dreamed of being a gymnast but the British junior champion's dreams were dashed when he was diagnosed with anaemia at 14.

Matt still has many strings to his bow, however. He is president of the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs, and was a *Strictly Come Dancing* runner-up in 2010.

While training for *Strictly*, Matt waltzed his way around the countryside with countless farmers' wives. His professional dance partner Aliona Vilani would join him on location to practise their dances, but had to step aside for lady fans. "They always want a little dance with me," reveals Matt.

Countryfile has inspired a spin-off monthly magazine and second show, *Countryfile: The Summer Diaries*, hosted by Melissa Porter and Chris Packham.

This Morning's Eamonn Holmes first fell for his future wife, co-host Ruth Langford, when he saw her presenting *Countryfile* – but it



Above, from left: John Craven on the road for *Countryfile* in 1993; the presenter in his *Newsround* days; the late music-hall comedian and actor Leslie Henson. Left: actor Nicky Henson bears (nearly) all in *Fawlty Towers*. Below: Prince Charles wears his famous patched coat, with Julia Bradbury in the 25th-anniversary special *Countryfile: A Royal Appointment*. Below left: Julia lets off steam



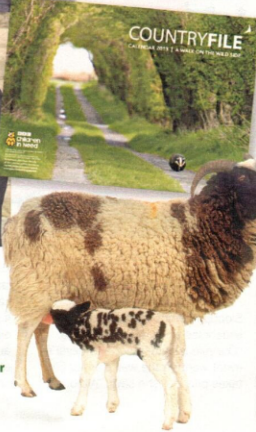
was GMTV fitness guru Mr Motivator who brought them together, inviting them to one of his parties.

For a woman who spends most of her life outside, Julia Bradbury has an unfortunate problem: she feels the cold terribly. "I wear seven layers in winter," she reveals. "By spring, it's down to four. As soon as there's a glimmer of sun, I'm a happy lady."

Countryfile is on BBC1 tonight at 8pm.



Top: presenter Ellie Harrison. Clockwise, from left: Matt Baker; Joe Henson after receiving an MBE in 2011 with his son Adam; the *Countryfile* calendar; a Jacob sheep suckles her lamb; former presenter Miriam O'Reilly with her Jack Russell, Marcia



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