



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

History is all around us, not least on television. And that accessibility has shown that it's far from the preserve of academics. It's ours to cherish

A few weeks ago, I found myself in the back of a taxi on the Uxbridge Road in London, looking for a theatre called Bush Hall. Music aficionados might recognise it as one of London's most important music venues – many a household name have started out here – but I wasn't going for the rock'n'roll. I was heading to a unique gathering to celebrate 20 years of television history, and the end of one of the most influential and ambitious historical series ever made.

Since first emerging on our screens in the early 1990s, *Time Team* sought to lift the lid on the secretive and furtive world of archaeology. As a young archaeologist myself back then, it was a revelation; in the words of its creator, Tim Taylor, it filmed archaeologists 'getting it wrong'. The candour, honesty and painstaking process of trial and error that the show reflected was at first eyed nervously by the profession, but as the series grew so did its relationship with historians and archaeologists. Now, 20 years later and with over 200 shows to its credit, *Time Team* has earned its place not just in the history of TV, but also in the history of archaeology. It was a turning point in the way the public saw a subject that all too often had been the preserve of academics and professionals.

In 1996, having swapped my career in archaeology for an equally uncertain foray into the media, a dream came true when I found myself attached to *Time Team* for one episode as its runner, making the tea and trying in general to make myself useful. The show was in its fourth series, but was already a hit for Channel 4. In those days the series comprised just four episodes, but two years later, having served my media apprenticeship elsewhere, I returned as a fully fledged researcher for the first run of 13 shows.

Travelling the country with a team that could number upwards of 50 people, when we arrived it was as if the circus had come to town. Whole communities got willingly involved in the process of revealing whatever we'd been tasked with. The now familiar faces of Tony Robinson, Mick Aston, Phil Harding and others helped to harness an enthusiasm for history that went far beyond anything we might have expected.

Over the years, I've met plenty of people who willingly confess that they don't really like history, usually because of some trauma in their school days. But the truth, as I've discovered in fields, towns and villages all over Britain, is that everyone can be interested in history provided it's relevant to them. In other words, you don't need a degree in 20th century studies, you just have to want to care about how the past has shaped where you live. Local history matters, and when you think about it, it's where all history has

its beginnings. It's about what you and I have done and what our forebears did in the places where they worked, lived and died. The enduring success of *Time Team* is that it plugged into that national fascination with local history, whilst at the same time exploring how those local tales formed part of the national story.

I'm often asked if I can imagine a world without history. I can't and I hope I never have to. It's what gives us all a place in time and in society. As someone who's just moved to a new part of the country, it's also a great way to understand more about the events and forces that have formed the landscape and culture that now surrounds our new home. Tapping into that

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understanding can be a short cut to making a place feel familiar; I discovered recently that the late Prime Minister Anthony Eden once stayed in our guest room! If that is a taster, what else might we discover to add context and colour to our future?

And this is the point of this month's ramble. The past is not the preserve of professors and professionals. It belongs to us all and it can and should involve everyone. Why not check out your local history groups and museums? You might be surprised by what you learn, and in the process play a part in maintaining and developing the history of where you live. Speaking as someone who's been lucky enough to forge a career that has indulged my own passion for the past, I can assure you it's also great fun!

Eventually, my taxi arrived at Bush Hall. From the moment I walked in to the crowd and the noise, it was clear I was in the midst of something extraordinary. Somehow, someone had managed to find and contact virtually everyone who'd worked on the show since it began. Never before had such a gathering happened, and arguably, with the end of the series, it never will again. It was an historic moment, and a just tribute to an institution that has made such an enormous contribution to the past and to television. What's more, in coming together as we all did, it also spoke volumes about how we all felt, like old war veterans laughing over the good old days. It was therefore only right that at its last hurrah, *Time Team* should in itself have also made one final piece of history of its own. It's a party I wouldn't have missed for the world.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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