

My 'Escape to the Country' dream

Escape to the Country presenter Jules Hudson tells **Pat Parker** how his home town of Colchester inspired much of his future career

Jules Hudson is best known as the cheery, rosy-cheeked presenter of BBC1's *Escape to the Country*, although he's also a familiar face from *Countryfile* and numerous history shows for a variety of channels. Now 45, he's spent most of his life in rural Wales, having fallen in love with the Cambrian mountains as an archaeology student at Lampeter University. It is, he tells me, his "spiritual home". He holds an honorary fellowship from the University of Wales and is the new president of the Council for the Protection of Rural Wales. So it may come as a surprise to learn that he is in fact an Essex boy, born and bred in Colchester.

"It was a lovely place to grow up in," Jules says, taking a break from restoring the 16th Century home on the Welsh borders he shares with partner Tania, baby son Jack and black labradors Iolo and Teddy. "In those days, Colchester had a lovely provincial feel to it, with a carnival every year and the military tattoo. But it was the history of the town which really inspired me."

So much so that for his seventh birthday he asked to join a guided tour of the Roman vaults beneath Colchester Castle – all that remains of the original Temple of Claudius, razed to the ground by Boudica.

The experience fired his imagination. "I remember looking up at these great concrete vaults and being amazed there was still sand on the ceiling, put there by the Romans," he recalls. "And, suddenly, some fell at my feet, and I picked it up and took it home. It was like touching history, touching time – and it inspired a love of history which has stayed with me ever since."

Jules grew up in a bed and breakfast in Lexden, which mum Pam ran for 40 years. His dad, Cliff, was a mechanical engineer and technical director at the old Heybridge firm Bentalls, spending much of his time abroad, building grain storage systems for the UN in Africa and the Middle East. It was life in a B&B, says Jules, which gave him the relaxed, chatty style which is his hallmark as a presenter. "I think growing up in a home where there were lots of different faces from around the world gave me the confidence to engage with people, to talk and listen to them," he says.

We'd regularly sail up and down the Blackwater. I still get dreamy-eyed about the Essex marshes and the coast

"Empathising with our buyers on *Escape* is a key part of the job, and it has to be genuine and honest. I'm lucky to have had a life which allows me to use the character I've been given."

He was educated privately, attending Colchester High School and then boarding from the age of 11 at Ipswich School. Its history, of course, appealed to him. "It was founded by Thomas Wolsey in the 1500s, and it was a terrific school," he enthuses. "Mum and dad scrimped and saved to send me, and it was there I first studied Roman and Greek history. And, over time, I developed a fascination for archaeology, and the business of knowing how we know what we know about the past."

In the summer holidays he worked for Colchester Archaeological Trust, having been inspired as a 10-year-old by the Culver Square excavations of Roman barracks in the town centre. He joined the trust full-time after leaving school. "I had no ambitions to go to university. I'd had enough of education. I just wanted to get on with something."

He took part in numerous digs, including excavations at Gosbecks, the site of the pre-Roman settlement of Camulodunum. "It was an interesting time for archaeology, because a lot of excavations

were being undertaken by voluntary groups, and the trust was one of the first to be set up. There were huge discoveries going on, and it was wonderful working in an historic town like Colchester, finding out what lay beneath the streets we walked every day." It was his Lexden neighbours who convinced Jules to go to university. Studying archaeology at Lampeter marked the start of a lifelong love affair with the Welsh countryside. He lived in the picturesque village of Llanddewi Brefi (coincidentally the fictional home of *Little Britain*'s "only gay in the village"). Little did he know it would become his home for more



■ Jules Hudson in his element at Royal Naval Air Service Yeovilton for the TV series *Defenders of the Sky*, with one of the last airworthy Swordfishes

than 20 years. Jules' love of archaeology vied with his passion for military history, also inspired by his home town. "I loved Colchester's military traditions such as the tattoo, and by the time I graduated I was quite an expert in military history. And as I got older, I became fascinated with effective management and team work, and it occurred to me there was no better place to learn it than in the Army."

And so he enrolled at Sandhurst. "I did enjoy it, but I realised towards the end of my training that Army life just wasn't right for me. I made the difficult decision not to stay on. But although I never made a career out of it, there are things I learnt at Sandhurst that I use every day – how to delegate, manage difficult situations, plan and get tasks done. It was there I first heard General Patton's great phrase 'Lead, follow, or get out of the way'. That's been a mantra to me throughout my life."

He returned to archaeology, taking a Masters at Durham and later working as a geophysicist for the university. Then one day he wandered into Durham city centre and saw something that changed his life for good. A city street had been transformed back to the 1800s, serving as a location for a film version of Hardy's *Jude The*

Obscure. Jules was transfixed. "I thought, 'Wow! Look at that!' It really brought the past alive in an interesting way. And suddenly I realised that television could be a fascinating outlet for my love of history and my creativity. It made me realise that at heart I'm a creative person, whether it's making things, designing, fixing, restoring, or writing and crafting films."

It took him a while, he thinks, to escape the influence of school on choosing a career. "At school, you're groomed to go to university. Nobody talked about a career in archaeology, let alone TV. But I've always been slightly maverick. I guess I knew from a young age that I'd have what we now call a portfolio career. I've always ploughed my own furrow."

Creativity, he says, is in his genes. "Both my parents are creative. My mother is a phenomenal quilter – she's a member of the local quilting set in Wivenhoe. And my dad is a great amateur portrait artist."

So Jules quit his job in Durham, moved to London and attempted to break into television. "I worked for absolutely nothing, making tea and sweeping floors. I started from the bottom up as a runner, then junior researcher, researcher and eventually producer. And somehow, 20 years later, I'm still working in

TV today!" His archaeological background helped him land his first TV jobs, including work for the Discovery Channel and several stints on C4's *Time Team*, including acting as assistant producer for a week of live excavations called *The Big Dig*. He also worked on *Horizon*, plus three military history series with the late Richard Holmes, who inspired him to present. He finally moved in front of the cameras on *The Making of England* for Meridian, followed by *Revival* – an ITV show about history re-enactment. This was his idea, and was nominated for a TV award.

Jules' enthusiasm made him a natural presenter. "It was terrifying at first, but I realised it was a fascinating way of combining my production experience with the new challenge of being able to tell the story myself."

While presenting *The People's Museum* for the BBC, word got around that he was restoring a derelict Welsh cottage in his spare time. The then head of BBC Daytime decided this would make him an ideal presenter for the property show *Escape To The Country*. Jules joined in 2007 and continues to be one of the main presenters. "It just became a joy – the right hand in the right glove – and it set my career in

started here



■ Jules and pilot Cliff Spink safely back on the ground after achieving a boyhood dream of flying in a Spitfire.

a completely different direction. It's been a constant fascination ever since." An episode takes a week to film, and each property visit takes around three hours, rather than the few minutes we see on screen. Jules reckons maybe 10% of prospective buyers seriously consider making an offer on a property they're shown, which he considers a pretty good success rate.

"It's a nice, aspirational show. It's called *Escape to the Country*, but it's an escape from the world for 45 minutes."

It was Essex that inspired Jules' love of the countryside. "I had a horse out at Layer de la Haye from the age of 11, and I regularly explored the woods around there. I loved Dedham Vale and Flatford. And our family had a boat at Mersea, and we'd regularly sail up and down the Blackwater. I still get dreamy-eyed about the Essex marshes and the coast."

His early life was pretty nomadic, with extensive trips abroad, but in his mid-20s he looked to put down roots. "I'd have been quite happy to have lived in Suffolk, but it was quite expensive for a first-time buyer. Wales was then much more affordable, and I really fancied a project – doing something up." He was delighted when a derelict

cottage came on the market in the village where he'd lived as a student. "There was an outside tap, outside loo, three light switches, no bathroom and no kitchen. It was a real labour of love to transform it, and it taught me a huge amount about conservation and renovation."

Later, he felt rather bereft. "There was a black hole in my life. I thought, 'What am I going to do now?' And then I looked out of the window at about an acre of garden and field, which was a complete blank canvas. So that kicked off a fascination for gardening – it was another area I could create in."

He recently sold his Welsh retreat and has taken on an even bigger restoration project in Herefordshire, where he, Tania – the finance director of a historic buildings charity – and Jack now live.

Restoration has had to take a bit of a back seat since Jack was born in January. Jules was busy flying in a Tiger Moth over Essex when he heard of Jack's imminent arrival. He was filming at the First World War airfield in Stow Maries, near Burnham-on-Crouch, for the History Channel's *Defenders of the Sky*. "It was way below freezing and I was flying upside down, being put through my paces as a World War One fighter pilot. I got the call that Jack was on his way, six weeks early, so I landed and hot-footed it back home. I should have asked the pilot for a lift!"

Filming in East Anglia is always a nostalgic pleasure. "I like Suffolk, especially. I love Woodbridge, and the swathe of coast from Aldeburgh up to Norfolk. But then Lovejoy country, around Long Melford, Clare and Saffron Walden is also wonderful. Having the chance to film in and know champion places I knew as a child is a real treat."



■ Jules Hudson and the production team on *Defenders of the Sky*.

■ Jules Hudson, presenter of the BBC show *Escape to the Country*. 'It's a nice, aspirational show. It's called *Escape to the Country*, but it's an escape from the world for 45 minutes.'

Photo: ADAM FRADGLEY