

EXCLUSIVE!

# A life in the Country

**Countryfile** presenter Ellie Harrison tells ANTHONY HAYWARD about her mad TV adventures, groovy farmers, motherhood and returning to rural life herself.

Ellie Harrison has a confession – farmers, take note. “My biggest mistake is being prejudiced about the people I meet before I actually start chatting to them, because they’ll always surprise you,” says the *Countryfile* TV star.

“When you rock up to a farm, there’s an old boy there, grey hair, and you work the conversation. The guy I particularly remember used to be the only vet on the Falkland Islands when they were invaded. He was then the vet for the Sultan of Brunei, before deciding to come back here and start a goat farm.

“So my own mistake is making assumptions about people and they end up being groovier than you think they will be.

“I also need to remember that the generation who watch *Countryfile* tend to be slightly older – my mum’s generation, for example. But she went through the Swinging Sixties. They *should* all be groovy and they *should* all be quite cool and easy to talk to.

“So I need to battle my own prejudices sometimes when I think, ‘Oh, I’ve got a “grey” farmer.’ Actually, quite often, they’re very groovy.”

Ellie, 35, talks freely and openly, seemingly unconcerned about carving a public image. It is this natural quality that has made her so popular with *Countryfile* viewers since joining the programme as a main presenter in 2010, a year after the BBC moved it to a peak-time, Sunday-evening slot.

It also, perhaps, betrays an innocence that she has on at least one occasion lived to regret. An item about the uses of seaweed in Ireland finished with Ellie stepping into a bath of the slimy green stuff at a health spa. Wearing only a bikini, she declared that she was taking the plunge “in the name of holistic therapy”.

“I wish I hadn’t done that!” she says now. “Sharon Fisher, who is one of the best directors I’ve ever worked with and a friend, said, ‘Oh, it’ll be fine. Just put your swimming costume on and get in, and it’ll be really quick.’

“For some reason, I believed her! As I got sweatier and redder-faced and puffer-faced, I thought, ‘Oh, it’s only me and the cameraman.’ I wasn’t thinking – it was just a *Countryfile* story, it was no big deal. Unfortunately, it’s now on YouTube, which is rather embarrassing.”

Over the years, though, it has not been potential embarrassments that have posed a threat to Ellie’s wellbeing as much as apparently dangerous exploits.

Given her television break alongside Michaela Strachan in the children’s series *Michaela’s Wild Challenge*, she photographed the undersides of desert elephants, entered an enclosure of wild wolves that playfully nipped her and put her hand into the mouth of a crocodile in an encounter that, fortunately, did not end in tears.

“We weren’t meddling with animals for no good reason,” she explains. “It was a crocodile that had a data-logger in its stomach to measure the temperature at which the eggs gestate, so it was a normal process



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they go through in order to retrieve that data-logger.

"You have to put your arm all the way in, with teeth on your armpit. You can feel the digestive juices are very strong, very acidic, and your hand tingling, which is quite weird.

"But I didn't think there was any danger because I was with a professor who

did it for his studies and the crocodile did have its mouth taped open – keeping it open wasn't actually that difficult."

With a slight hint of doubt, Ellie adds: "So I was reassured enough... yeah. Also, it was the first TV job I ever did and there is a funny thing – when it's being filmed, you forget any potential danger.

"For that same production company, I did a story with a great white shark out in South Africa and they had little budget and little time for health and safety. In one part of the story, I was lying on the outboard in the boat, with my hand in the water, up against a Dip Cam [underwater camera], trying to take a photo of a great white shark.

"Bait was being thrown in and the visibility was very poor. The guy who was doing that



Photograph: Channel 5

Channel 5 gave Ellie her first TV job, alongside Michaela Strachan and Jamie Crawford in *Michaela's Wild Challenge*.

couldn't see when the shark was coming, but he was then giving me a warning. 'Get out, get out, the shark's coming!' and I was being held on to by an eight-stone girl, who was the researcher. She would really have saved the day!

"None of us, except the cameraman sitting in the back of the boat, working it, remote-control, saw that this great white shark came up to my hand and swam away. So you kind of forget the danger when you're being filmed."

All this must have seemed a long way from rural Gloucestershire, where Ellie grew up. During her early years, the Harrison family even tried self-sufficiency in the style of the 1970s sitcom *The Good Life*, which was running at the time of Ellie's birth.

"We lived in a really beautiful setting," she recalls. "It was the last turn-off at the end of the village, down a country track, and ours was the house at the very end, surrounded by wooded valley.

"My dad, who was a carpenter, had this romanticised notion of living off the land. He built his own incubator

to breed chickens, made yogurt and grew veg. My sister was great with the chickens, the cockerel was really vicious, so that was eaten in a pie one night, and it was pretty idyllic, looking back.

"It didn't bring in huge amounts of money, but my mum had a 'normal' job – she was a midwife. I think she saw the practicalities of needing to earn money."

However, living off the land ended when Ellie was six, her parents divorced and she grew up with her mother. "We had a much more normal life after that," she says. "Bless Dad. It was a nice idea. It just didn't work out for them both."

Not knowing what she wanted to do with her life, Ellie signed up for an environmental science degree course at Manchester

University. "The reason I went to Manchester was because Take That were from there and, on my open day, I saw this really hot guy doing geography and I was up there to do geography," she explains. "I went up for the first year and I didn't see him.

"It was before Manchester had started to be done up again, gentrified in the centre, following the IRA bomb at the Arndale Centre. I arrived soon after the bomb and was living in an apartment on the edge of Moss Side. I was really miserable and homesick, so I went back home after six weeks."

What happened next began to shape Ellie's future. The father of her zoologist boyfriend at the time had acted in the film *White Hunter Black Heart*, starring Clint Eastwood, and made many friends in Zimbabwe, where it was filmed.

"We went to help out on this farm for a few months and got lots and lots of free safaris out of it," says Ellie. "It was great and an amazing time. With hindsight, we did some quite odd things.

"There's an enormous dam, the size of which you can imagine in a



In a short television career, Ellie has had many interesting encounters.



Photograph: Ben Burdill

Meeting seal pups has been one of Ellie's less-dangerous exploits in water.



Ellie joins wildlife expert Iolo Williams to observe choughs in the Lleyn Peninsula of North Wales for *Country Tracks*.



Photograph: Ingress Productions

Far left: A trip to Lincolnshire sees Ellie helping to ring and weigh barn owl chicks.

Left: In a career that has soared, Ellie prepares to paraglide alongside red kites, a once-endangered bird of prey, for *The One Show*.

Left: Ellie joins Prince Charles for a visit to a Co Durham farm in the recent 25th-anniversary special *Countryfile: A Royal Appointment*.

Bond film, to bolster Lake Kariba and we decided to hike down to the bottom of it and camp there.

"It was the worst few nights' sleep I've ever had because I was convinced the dam wall was going to give and then we woke up in the morning and there were all sorts of big cat tracks around the tent and a big poaching operation going on over on the other side – lots of guys with guns."

Determined to give university another go, Ellie suddenly realised that time was running out to apply. After a string of \$60 phone calls back to Britain, she secured a place at King's College, London, studying geography.

On graduation, she still had no career ideas and went through a string of jobs in the capital, from shop assistant to working for an electronics company. Then, she found admin work in the acquisitions department at Channel 5.

A commissioning editor there recognised Ellie as a potential new talent and gave her the job on the award-winning *Michaela's Wild Challenge*, in 2005. She later made an impact on peak-time viewers of

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‘It’s really not easy juggling work and children. You do it with lots of help from family and paid childcare.’



Ellie has achieved national fame, thanks to *Countryfile*.

the BBC magazine programme *The One Show*, with wildlife reports from across the United Kingdom, and presented *Wild About Your Garden*.

She also found time for a stint across the Atlantic, co-hosting the Discovery Channel show *Daily Planet* in Canada and presenting her own series, *The World Without*, for Discovery Science in the United States.

Being chosen in 2009 as a presenter of *Country Tracks* – launched to fill the daytime slot vacated by *Countryfile* – presented Ellie with a natural route to its parent programme.

She has also returned to the countryside herself, moving back to Gloucestershire with her partner, a doctor, and two young children after living in London, New York and Oxford.

Busier than ever, she is sitting down to talk to *Horse & Country* shortly after filming in the freezing Outer Hebrides – complete with luminous pink woolly hat to keep her warm – for the final episode of her own series, *The Great British Winter*.

Her time away from daughters Red, three, and Lux, two this month, has made Ellie determined to tweak her work-family balance. She is still learning the art of juggling the two.

‘It’s really not easy,’ she says. ‘You do it with lots of help from family and paid childcare. I was in the Outer Hebrides for a week and realised that was really too long for the little ones.’

‘If I was doing something really far-flung, I could bring them with me. My mum’s a really great, intrepid traveller – she’s a backpacky traveller, so she would come and bring them. But, for the Outer Hebrides, it’s not worth it.’

So it seems that the sense of adventure we’ve seen from Ellie on screen could be passed on to a new generation.

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