



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Jules' love affair with Wales and the Border counties stems all the way back to his late teens when he was a carefree student at university in Lampeter

Picture the scene. It's late 1988 and a young 18 year old lad is nursing a monumental hangover, having had a night out with a load of veterinary students in Bristol. On a grey and wet Sunday, he sets off further westward across the old Severn bridge and into Wales for the first time. His destination? Lampeter, and St. David's University College, University of Wales.

I'll never forget that first trip over the Border. Armed with a map and an invitation to visit my chosen University a year or so before taking up my place, I was revelling in the adventure of some carefree days. My oldest schoolmate was already hard at work at one of the best vet schools in the country. As I'd discovered, they played as hard as they studied, and clearly enjoyed every minute of it. I, on the other hand, had it all to come. I was planning to study Archaeology and History, but not before a gap year had assuaged my growing appetite for travel. Although I'd soon be heading to Greece, I decided to visit the place where I was going to spend the following three years of my life. For the second time in 24 hours, I found myself in the bar of a Students' Union, some 250 miles from home.

When at last I returned to Lampeter to begin my degree almost a year later, I arrived full of expectation. Its surroundings already felt vaguely familiar, but this time I was part of a new group of arrivals. No longer just a keen visitor, we were all now claiming it as our own, each of us full of hope and ambition. Being just one college of the University of Wales, Lampeter was then the smallest University College in Europe, but for all that, its intake of beer per head was the highest. This was the kind of headline record that the student body did much to maintain, and throughout my three years we were never short of a party or an excuse to start one.

Among our number were some wonderful people, many genuinely eccentric, and the usual crop of others who tried to be. We had an entire platoon of 'Time Travellers', each one trying to outdo the other with claims either to have been born on another planet or gifted with the ways and means to visit one. Amongst them was one who explained his late arrival to a history lecture with the frustrated assertion that he'd just been back to 1789 France, yet somehow had missed the revolution.

Our Students' Union president was equally colourful. Noel was either uniquely himself, Charles I complete with beard, boots, breastplate and

feathered hat, or a WWII naval officer who collected around him a wardroom of like-minded souls, two of whom could also add dressing like Oscar Wilde to their collective repertoire. Noel even turned up to Union meetings in Cardiff looking like he'd just left the battlefield at Naseby, ready to sign official reports with a flourish of his own quill and ink.

It was here too that I discovered one of the great loves of my life; Llanddewi Brefi. For the last two years of my degree this tiny Welsh-speaking old

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drovers' village became my home. Little did I know that I'd eventually buy a house there. Unbelievably, village life back then proved to be yet more beguiling than that on campus. Ex-monks, artists, the old boys from the mountains, and a host of refugees from the heady drug-fuelled days of the 60's and 70's all combined to produce a society completely cut-off from the rest of the world. In doing so, it'd created one of its own that captured the head and heart of a young man eager to find a corner of the planet that felt like home. It was a place that shaped my life for two decades, and I owe it more than I can say.

Much has happened since then. Yet the other day something occurred that gave me the perfect excuse to revisit these memories and to reflect upon the journey so far. To my great delight, my old university asked me to accept an honorary fellowship. With striking amounts of déjà vu, my parents, Tania and I gathered at Lampeter 21 years almost to the day that I went up to receive my first degree. To return to a place that had such a positive, formative effect on my life, and then to be honoured by it, filled me with the sort of pride I'd witnessed as I watched a generation of young talent collect their medals at the Olympics the year before. I was as thrilled as could be.

When I crossed that bridge for the first time over 20 years ago, I knew it wouldn't be the last. In truth, of course, it was just the beginning.

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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