

“We’re such country bumpkins”

The popular TV presenter may have left behind the big city but her life remains as hectic as ever

IT WOULD be easy to attribute Kate Humble’s television success to her wide, Julia Roberts smile and the glorious mane of unruly blonde curls that she constantly tosses back as we talk in her publisher’s London office. But it would also be unfair because Kate is a woman to be reckoned with.

“I’ve read that I was offered a screen test on my second day in television, but that’s nonsense” she says indignantly. “If you want to work in TV you start at the bottom. You type stuff, make tea and sweep things or you’re a runner, so that’s what I did for a company that made corporate videos. I went on to become a production assistant, researcher, director and an assistant producer and it was only after all that experience that I landed a job at the BBC, researching for *Animal Hospital* and then the *Holiday* programme, who gave me the chance to present. So I’d actually been working in television for eight or nine years before a presenting job came my way!”

That first on-screen appearance was an unglamorous report from a barge holiday on a French canal, in thick fog and driving rain. But it did the trick because Kate’s presenting career took off. Her TV credits include *Springwatch*, *Autumnwatch*, *Volcano Live*, *Orbit: Earth’s Extraordinary Journey* and *Lambing Live*. She is also a qualified commercial diver and only the second woman to be appointed President of the RSPB.

Though still much in demand as a TV presenter, Kate has now embarked on a new venture called Humble by Nature, running courses in food, rural skills and animal husbandry on a 100-acre livestock



farm in the Wye Valley near Monmouth which she and her husband Ludo acquired two years ago.

In her new book, also called *Humble by Nature*, Kate tells the story of their move to a Welsh smallholding in 2007 and their recent battle to buy the farm (which the council wanted to break up and sell off),

“I have sheep because I want to eat them, and I raise chickens because I want their eggs”

restore the crumbling farm buildings and launch the courses that were Kate’s dream. Although most local people were supportive, there were clashes with bureaucracy and a few hostile individuals who regarded the venture as a ‘vanity

project’. Tutored by local experts, the Humble by Nature courses are aimed at people of all ages. The first one, in hedge-laying, took place in March 2012, and since then Kate and Ludo have added foraging, keeping sheep, pigs, poultry and bees and ‘foodie’ workshops on salting and curing, charcuterie, baking and sausage making.

“What’s really special is that they’re held in the context of a proper working farm,” says Kate. “Our friends Tim and Sarah live in the farmhouse as tenant farmers and we run our courses in the beautiful new barn.”

Kate and Ludo still live on their nearby smallholding, where they rear their own pigs, sheep and goats and have two adored mongrels, Badger and Bella. Now 44, Kate decided long ago that she did not want children. ‘I have six godchildren

Kate Humble

Interview by Nicki Household
Pictures by Philip Reeson



who I adore, probably because I don't see them all the time! I definitely prefer animals to children, but I'm not an animal lover in the 'bunny hugger' sense. For example, I don't regard sheep as pets. They're actually rubbish pets because they don't really like you very much and they're not cuddly, despite all that wool. I have sheep because I want to eat them, and I raise chickens because I want their eggs.

"Quite often people don't understand that you can be an animal lover and yet not a vegetarian. But any farmer will tell you that the joy of keeping livestock is all about rearing healthy, happy animals. I'm fascinated by animal behaviour and I spend ridiculous amounts of time just standing in the field watching them."

Kate's love affair with animals started young. "I had the sort of childhood I think every child should have. Our house in Berkshire backed onto fields and was next door to a farm so I was free to roam in a way that few children are today. My mum says I was three the first time I went travelling. I set off with my little wheelbarrow and was found a mile away. As far as I was concerned, I was going on a 'journey'."

"The next door farm was a pig farm – which is probably why I love pigs so much – then it was taken over by people who bred horses. So I started hanging round the yard, which of course wouldn't be allowed these days.

"From the age of five, I'd gallop through breakfast, run off to the farm and my mum wouldn't see me again until the end of the day. Sometimes I even used to



Kate Humble



go and muck out in my school uniform, which made her furious!"

Kate says her parents, Nick and Diana, instilled in her the idea that the most important things in life cost nothing. "My father worked for IBM computers and my mum looked after me and my younger brother Charlie. We didn't have any 'stuff' because my parents put

everything they had into giving us a good education." In that regard, Kate admits she was a disappointment to her parents because she refused to go to university.

"I did my three A-levels but I thought school was a bit of a waste of time. All you did was take exams, which seemed to me a bit pointless. I remember once rushing into an English lesson clutching a wonderful poem I'd found by E.E. Cummings. All the English teacher said was 'We're not doing E.E. Cummings, we're doing Crabbe!', so I decided 'thank you very much, I've had enough of education'."

Her mother persuaded her to do a typing course in Oxford so she would always be employable. "I think she secretly hoped I'd fall in love with the 'dreaming spires' and decide to do a degree after all. That didn't happen, but when the course finished I moved into a student house – into the store cupboard, really – and had an absolute ball. I worked at the Radcliffe Infirmary during the day and as a barmaid at night because I was saving up to go travelling."

Her original plan was to meet up with her best friend in Australia. "But I kept

getting letters from her listing all the people we knew she'd bumped into. I didn't want to go to the other side of the world to bump into people I knew." So, aged 19, with £800 in her pocket, she set off alone for Africa. "I spent a year there and it did teach me an awful lot."

On her return, Kate signed up with a temp agency that specialised in media work, and moved into a squat in Camden with some friends. "It was all incredibly exciting," she explains. "For a month or so I hung out with this wonderful, artistic bunch of people and, yes, I lived on a diet of crisps, smoked the odd bit of dope and never went to sleep. It does slightly annoy me when people express shock and horror. It was just part of growing up and finding out what you like and what you don't. These days I'd far rather have a cup of tea than a gin and tonic and if I'm not in bed by ten o'clock, I need a week off!"

Around this time her husband-to-be, Ludo Graham entered, or rather re-entered, the picture. "I first met him at a family party when I was 16, but he was 24 and paid no attention to me. Then, when I came to London my mother said.

'Why don't you look up that nice Ludo Graham – maybe he could help you find work in television.' Our families were friends and I think she'd have married me off to him when I was three if she could have!"

Ludo, then a fledgling freelance TV director, was not in a position to employ her, but he did pay her some attention – and the couple married in 1992, when Kate was 23. Ludo went to become a successful documentary maker whose credits include the BAFTA winning *The Choir*.

"Ludo is too good for me" says Kate with conviction. "He's my anchor, really. I'd probably be completely mad if not for him. My life can get overwhelming, there's just so much to think about. But Ludo is incredibly rooted and practical."

After 15 years in Chiswick, living what Kate describes as "a good life but not the right life", the couple found their dream smallholding in Wales and left London for good. At the time, Ludo was working for the BBC in Cardiff, although he has now given that up to run Humble by Nature.

"We're such country bumpkins," says Kate with unmistakable pride. "The other day we had to be in London and in

the evening we treated ourselves to a play at the National Theatre. But that's not our life anymore. As we walked along the South Bank we had to laugh because we'd got dog hair all over our clothes!"

Despite her energy and enthusiasm, Kate does find it hard to fit everything in.

"Take last weekend," she says. "On Friday morning we had meetings at the farm and in the afternoon I went to Bath to present the Agricultural Buildings Awards. The next day we had a foraging course so I had to cook for 16 people. When I got home at midnight, I quickly packed a case so I could leave at 5.30am to go to Scotland, where I was filming *The Great Big Energy-Saving Challenge* for BBC1. Then I flew down to London so I could start doing publicity for my book on the Monday morning."

All you can say is that she looks very good on it.

■ *Humble By Nature*, by Kate Humble, is published by Headline at £16.99
 ■ For details of Humble By Nature events go to: (www.humblebynature.com).

