

Lesley Dolphin  
enjoying the  
sunshine in  
Felixstowe



Following the announcement of her retirement earlier this year, Danielle Lett chats to the former BBC Radio Norfolk and Suffolk host, who reflects on her decade-spanning career – and explains what’s next on the horizon

# LESLEY DOLPHIN:

*“The afternoon show felt like home”*

If you’ve ever tuned into the radio in East Anglia, you’ll no doubt have heard Lesley Dolphin’s voice. A mainstay on the local airwaves, Lesley has had a fantastic career spanning four decades.

Getting her start on BBC Radio Norfolk in the 80s, she rose through the ranks before eventually making the big move to Suffolk – where she has lived ever since.

And for the past 14 years, Lesley has been at the helm of BBC Radio Suffolk’s afternoon show, making her one of the region’s most recognisable voices.

Earlier this year however, she announced her retirement, hanging up her headphones and microphone after her final show, which aired from Wherstead Park on Thursday, July 28.

## **But who is the woman behind the microphone?**

Originally from Birmingham, Lesley and her family moved to rural Norfolk when she was just 18 months old...and never left.

Lesley attended Bunwell Primary School and then Wymondham College before heading off to the University of Bradford where she studied science and society.

“The professors reckoned that in the world of computers, it would be handy to have communicators who knew a little bit about a lot of things, which is perfect for being a journalist. And when I went to university, I didn’t have any particular plans, but I loved English and reading. I thought about maybe being a writer or a journalist working for the Eastern Daily Press.”

One fateful day however, BBC Radio Leeds producer Anne Hunter came in and gave a lecture to all the students.

And it was this chat that ended up setting Lesley on the path she was to follow for the next 40 years.

“Anne was doing programmes in Bradford for BBC Radio Leeds and gave us a lecture on working in radio, and I thought how interesting that sounded. So another student and I blagged a visit to the studios for a look around. Back in Norfolk at that time, there was no commercial or local radio, so I’d not heard of local radio except the pirate stations.

“When I was younger, my dad had a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and my friends and I used to make radio plays. I was quite into using tape recorder, but I had no real aspirations to take it any further.”

But that visit BBC Radio Leeds ignited something within Lesley, and made her realise her calling was in fact radio.

The rest, as they say, is history. “I got my foot in the door and did as much as I could. My course was actually a sandwich course, so I did a year of placement there, where I learned the technical background stuff. I was also a

reporter, so I ended up gaining loads of radio knowledge.”

This experience would prove to be invaluable, as upon completing her studies, Lesley was able to secure herself a graduate job on the newly-opened BBC Radio Norfolk, which hit the airwaves in 1980.

“I moved back home after graduating and I knew BBC Radio Norfolk was going to open within the year, so I was able to write all the right letters. In the meantime, I took on a part-time role at BBC East as a floor manager, so when the radio station opened, I was in exactly the right place for one of their jobs.”

There were around 2,000 applicants for just 20 jobs – and Lesley was one of the lucky few.

“When BBC Radio Norfolk opened, I was working on the technical side of things. Back in those days, presenters couldn’t twiddle the knobs for their own shows – it was too complicated – so I did that. I was also a junior reporter, so I went out in the radio car and covered a variety of stories.”

Amassing a wealth of experience both in and out of the studio, it was only a couple of years before Lesley was asked to present her own show.

“It’s one thing to drive a programme, but it’s another thing to have to do the talking on air. I didn’t ever really have particular ambitions to do programmes – I loved news reporting, and it hadn’t crossed my mind. But they must’ve spotted something in me that I hadn’t.”

Lesley first took to the air in 1982 and presented an arts programme called Platform.

“I remember we used vinyl in those days, and by the time I got one record lined up, the one that was playing was nearly finished, so you didn’t have much time to think about what you were going to say!”

Lesley enjoyed regularly presenting in Norfolk for a few years before she decided to start a family in the mid-80s.

“I stopped working for BBC Radio Norfolk when I had my first son. My husband was working in Suffolk at the time, so when I left the radio station we left Norfolk and moved here.”

Lesley and her family first moved to the village of Milden before settling in Long Melford.

But with Suffolk’s very own radio station due to open in 1990, the allure of local radio was too much for her to ignore.

“My sons were school aged by then, so it felt like a great time to get back into radio. I started off doing freelance work for BBC Radio Suffolk, which eventually evolved into a Saturday show.”

As her sons got older, Lesley managed to bag herself the coveted 3pm-5pm afternoon radio slot, allowing her to build a new fanbase in this county she has called home ever since.

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"It felt right as I'd already done the afternoon show in Norfolk, so the afternoon show in Suffolk was lovely - it felt like home. Ever since I walked into BBC Radio Leeds as a student, I knew local radio was all that I ever wanted to do."

**But what is it she loves so much about local radio?**

"I enjoy getting to know people, and having them tell me about themselves. I love getting people to talk without feeling like they're on the radio, and getting the best of them. People are endlessly fascinating - and it doesn't matter how I'm talking to, or why I'm talking to them, I'm there to get the essence out them. I'm not looking for scoops, I want to find out what makes people tick."

Over the years, Lesley has done pretty much every slot there is on radio - including those early and mid-morning breakfast shows - but afternoon is where her heart lies.

"It's the best time for me, it suits me best and it's all of the things I love doing. It's not necessarily news, but the things we love about our counties, such as history and nature. And the people of Suffolk are fascinating, they've always got amazing stories to tell."

Other guests Lesley has interviewed during her time in Norfolk and Suffolk include Billy Connolly, Diana Dors, Morecambe and Wise, Gordon Brown, Daniel O'Donnell, and Peter Purves.

"One person in particular I admire and have interviewed loads is Pip Hare. She's such an inspiration, and is leading the way for all sorts of other young women."

Speaking of inspirations, Lesley herself has been at the forefront of philanthropic efforts, and has used her platform to help fundraise for a number of charities.

"One thing you learn while working in radio is finding out how important charity is to the local community."

Recalling some of the charitable events she's gotten involved with, she says: "The first thing I ever did was in Norfolk, and came about when I was doing an interview with someone in a pub who was doing a sponsored parachute jump. They asked me on air if I'd join them, and I heard myself saying 'yes'. I had no ambition of doing a parachute jump!"

Before she knew it, Lesley was being kitted out in all the gear, with her trusty cassette recorder in tow.

"I was meant to record it, but as I leapt out the plane, the jack plug came out of the cassette recorder, so no one heard me as I fell.

"Then for BBC Radio Suffolk, Terry Baxter was producing my show and arranged for me to abseil from the roof of Lowestoft College for Children in Need - live on air. As I stood at the top, I leant back, the rope stretched and I went back over the edge. In a panic, I said 'oh sh\*t' - and I was quite impressed that was all I said. I could've said a lot worse, but I carried on."

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ABOVE:  
Lesley interviewing  
Diana Dors at BBC  
Radio Norfolk

TOP LEFT:  
Rick Wakeman on  
Lesley's studio sofa

BOTTOM LEFT:  
Lesley at the Chelsea  
Flower Show with  
Ben Fogle

RIGHT:  
Lesley in the studio  
with Basil Brush

Pictures: LESLEY  
DOLPHIN



"And when I got back to the studio, all of my colleagues had put yellow sticky notes on my desk, pretending that I'd been inundated with complaints after swearing on air!"

Off the air, Lesley has helped raise millions of pounds for the East Anglian Children's Hospices' Treehouse Appeal following a trek up Mount Kilimanjaro in 2011. She has also run a CPR campaign and walked the length of the Suffolk coast in order to raise money for a Suffolk Family Carers bus.

"Every village and town has people doing wonderful work, and we'd be nowhere without these amazing charities," she says.

Following a fantastic career that has touched tens of thousands of listeners across two counties, Lesley has decided to retire. But why?

"Because I'm old," she chuckles.

"Most people are surprised that I'm old enough to take my state pension. But also partly because my mum had dementia, and my dad is 94 and he became her carer, so I wanted to spend more time with them."

**Family comes first, of course. As does self-care.**

"The other reason for retiring is that I want a rest, and I want to do

things while I'm still able to. Every day I talk about how lovely this county is, and I've just never had the chance to explore it for myself. I've been working non-stop, and looking after my parents.

"But now is the time for me. Maybe I'll join a choir, read a book, or go on some walks with the dog. My mum sadly passed away before I retired, so I can now spend time with my dad."

Even though Lesley has signed off the air, she has one final message for her loyal listeners.

"I've been absolutely bowled over by the response from the audience about my retirement. I did my final programme at Wherstead Park, and so many people came along. And I've only just gotten around to opening all of my cards and presents. I've had so many lovely emails and messages from people who said they moved to the county and that my show has helped them settle in.

"It's been so lovely to know I've been appreciated and have made a difference. It's been incredibly moving, and I would love to say thank you to everybody who has been a part of my journey"

To keep up with Lesley, follow her on Twitter @lesleydolphin