

No more sticky- backed plastic...

For a generation Janet Ellis was one of the faces of children's television. Jane Yettram meets her at home in Ravenscourt Park – and finds that there is life after *Blue Peter*

There are muddy wellies on the doorstep of Janet Ellis's four-storey Victorian house near Ravenscourt Park. Inside, Nancy, an equally muddy dog, hurtles happily around. Photographs of Janet's children – singer Sophie Ellis Bextor, 25, Jackson, 17, a drummer, and 14-year-old Martha – cover the walls. *The Archers* is on the radio. There are cards and cookbooks, coats slung on the banister. It's the archetypal family house, making you want to kick off your shoes and curl up with some toast and honey. 'I was determined for my children that I would put down roots,' says Janet, now 49. With a father in the army, her own childhood was peripatetic.

When Janet and husband John Leach moved here 15 years ago from St Margarets they knew nothing about the area – except that it was near the schools they hoped Sophie might attend. But since then, smiles Janet, 'the benefits have revealed themselves. They are so vast I can't imagine why people choose anywhere else.' Sophie secured a place at Godolphin, where Martha now goes. Jack went to the Arts Ed in Chiswick followed by a year at Drumtech, the Acton percussion school. 'Because this house is within walking distance to the schools, it's been the meeting place for their friends,' says Janet. Living just steps from Ravenscourt Park has been important. 'We have *lived* in that park. I have memories of the children swinging, skateboarding, getting too large for climbing frames... it feels as if it's ours.'

Best known for her time on *Blue Peter*, Janet's first role was in a *Jackanory Playhouse* – as a princess who got changed into a pot plant. *Blue Peter* then thrust her into the prime children's slot, where her intrepid assignments included 35 parachute jumps, breaking the women's European free-fall record – and breaking her pelvis too. 'Was it scary? Yes, really,' Janet tells me. 'I still hate the smell of aircraft fuel!' In 1987, pregnant with Jack, Janet left *Blue Peter* but, despite the persistent myth, wasn't sacked. 'I had four years of *Blue Peter*, which saw out one generation as the target age is 8-12.' With Sophie plus a new baby, Janet explains, continuing would have been tough. 'It was lovely to leave while I was enjoying it.'

Janet can now be seen discussing the day's news stories on *The Wright Stuff* on Five. She admits, 'We're meant to read the top news stories, but I get distracted by articles about soaps!' Last autumn she fronted *House Busters*, a series in which astrologers and feng shui experts banished bad vibes from viewers' homes, and her next project is a 15-week marathon of almost daily live programmes following the progress of teams competing to create the best garden. 'We're filming at Blenheim,' says Janet. 'The gardens will stay in situ so people can see them building up.' It's an intensive schedule so Janet needs to be fit. But the woman who hurled herself out of planes says she's not remotely sporty: 'I loathed PE at

school.' Even so she swims three times a week at Holmes Place. Is she kitted out in designer swimwear? Far from it. 'All my swimsuits come from Primark. The most I've paid is £6. It's a fantastic shop!'

One thing Janet appreciates about living where she does is that Hammersmith, with its practical stores, and Chiswick, with its specialist shops, are equidistant. 'I'd fight tooth and nail to save Turnham Green Terrace,' she says. 'I hope they don't price everybody out of those little shops – I know they keep putting up the rents.' For Janet, who calls cooking her therapy, the food shops are heaven. 'I love Mortimer & Bennett. And at FishWorks they're so helpful. Mackens is great – for 14 years we've queued for our Christmas turkey!' When not cooking, Janet's favourite restaurant is the Hammersmith Café on Studland Street. 'It's a greasy spoon by day and a BYO Thai at night.'

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There's little Janet dislikes about living here – just the Piccadilly Line trains not stopping at District Line stations and cars in her road on the school run. When the children leave home, she wouldn't mind moving to Marylebone. But she may never have the chance. Sophie, Jack and Martha insist she stays, saying: 'We want to bring our children here!' The grandchildren's visits have already begun. Sonny, Sophie's baby, was born last year. 'Being a grandmother is excellent,' she says. 'Sophie and I are close. She lives just off Ladbroke Grove, so we see a lot of her.' Janet is also about to take on another family role – as mother-in-law, when Sophie marries partner Richard in June.

So was family-focused Janet fantastic with sticky-backed plastic when her children were small? An emphatic no. But having a *Blue Peter* mum had other benefits – with Sophie selling *Blue Peter* badges. 'She didn't have a stall,' laughs Janet, 'but she'd be wearing one and someone would offer to buy it.' Such is the currency of the *Blue Peter* badge. I treasured mine until a cycle in the washing machine erased the blue ship forever. So, Sophie, if you still have a supply, here's one former viewer who'd love to have one... ❀

The Great Garden Challenge *will be showing on Channel 4 from March*. The Wright Stuff *is on Five at 9am*.