

# FIONA



Here is the news. Fiona Armstrong is 42, charming, easy going, resolute, personable, independent, ambitious, secure, the consummate TV professional. And, oh yes ... when the time is right she's prepared to consider cosmetic surgery. *Alan Air* interviews the former ITN, GMTV and current Border Television news presenter. Photography by Johnny Becker

Fiona Armstrong flashes her green eyes, grins widely and looks bemused when I ask her how she copes with amorous men hitting on her. "It doesn't really happen that much..." she replies, her voice trailing off as though struggling to recall the last naff chat-up line. It must do. You're very attractive, I insist. Fiona shuffles uneasily in her chair and looks away.

"Thank you. That's very flattering but I don't...er...really...well, I don't think men hit on me at all. I think they see me more as a sister figure," she laughs. F is surely for fibber.

I'm still struggling with the sister bit when she offers me heavily buttered slices of calorie-packed stollen bread (which she doesn't touch I notice) and pours out freshly brewed coffee. We are sitting in the kitchen of her comfortable home at Canonbie - a short drive from the Border TV studios in Carlisle - and Fiona is casually elegant in a cream Cashmere polo neck, a black Cashmere sweater on top, black leggings and black boots that complement her slim ('ish' she says) figure.

After taking a telephone call from a male friend

As I expect, Fiona, an experienced interviewer herself, shows no signs of awkwardness at being questioned in depth about pretty personal matters, neatly side steps any compromising posers about politics and blood sports and keeps her cool throughout. A tough cookie then? No, not at all. She is charming, easy going and highly personable. But as the minutes tick by I gradually sense a formidable protective wall surrounding the woman who admits to being hurt by a handful of female writers - the *Daily Mail's* Lynda Lee-Potter led the tirade - who attacked her 'sturdy hockey player legs' at the height of her TV fame in the late 80s and early 90s.

"I was amazed because these so-called sisters were going on about my fat thighs, having a go, sticking the knife in. I thought to myself 'Come on girls!' " she cries, still incredulous at the treatment meted out to her.

Clearly, her job move to ITN from Border TV in 1987 (hers was the last video application out of 40 to be considered by Alistair Burnett) was a steep learning curve when it came to the national tabloids.

my own anymore and I had to be careful what I did."

Fiona admits to being relieved to be out of the firing line - of both newspaper columnists with poison in their pens and deranged stalkers. For some unfathomable reason, a religious fanatic who had former Tory Deputy Leader Michael Heseltine on a death list, once showed an unhealthy interest in Fiona and fellow ITN colleague Julia Somerville. "There was a to-do about that," she says calmly. More frightening was the attentions of an obsessed teenager with too much time on his hands and probably too much testosterone in his blood.

"This boy of about 17 or 18 had been following me about and on one occasion I was walking home to my London flat," she recalls. "I was just putting my key in the lock when he patted me on the shoulder and said 'I know where you live now.' I nearly died of fright. He stood watching the flat for the rest of the day and eventually I had to ring the police."

Fiona was very shaken by the Jill Dando murder. "It was beyond belief, horrifying. It made everyone in this industry sit up and think 'That could have been me.'"

'The first day I came up here to work at Border TV I went to live in a flat at Wetheral near Carlisle, on the banks of the River Eden. I remember looking out on a glorious evening and thinking it was all fantastic, the hills, the Cumbrian people. I'm rather pleased that the routes in and out of here are rather difficult because other people will leave us alone. I really am living in God's country'

and laughing about his latest chat up line to her single girlfriends - something along the lines of how he loves babies and can't wait to have children - Fiona resumes our chat. This morning she has the house all to herself. Husband Rod is away at work, daughter Natasha is at school and her next appointment is over two hours away. Only the family pet, a friendly black Labrador, disturbs the peace by casually wandering into the house and lumbering up to me for an inquisitive look before settling down.

"Working on Lookaround and being recognised in Carlisle is one thing," she explains, "but being recognised anywhere else in the country is daunting. I remember going to a London nightclub and I was just enjoying myself, dancing away as you do with a group of friends. The next morning there was a call to the ITN press office asking whether the man I was dancing with - who I wasn't actually - was my boyfriend and did my husband know about him? I suddenly realised my life wasn't

**YET HER OWN** overnight national fame via ITN was inevitable and deserved. Fiona always looked and sounded the part; the right bone structure complemented the smooth, controlled voice. She was, and remains, a consummate professional in front of TV cameras which love her, but which nevertheless make her appear heavier than she really is. "Television puts a stone on you," she admits, "but the trouble is if you start to diet too drastically you lose it off your face and that looks horrible! Of course at the end of the day life is too short to worry about things like that isn't it? But then I haven't had any stollen cake have I?" she says, laughing at her own inconsistency of argument.

To keep her five foot five inch frame in trim she swims, exercises on a rowing machine and lifts gentle weights. "About three years ago I went crazy and went to the gym every day. I went up about two



jacket sizes and looked like Michelin Woman. I do it much more cautiously now," she says.

Knowing she prides herself on her appearance I wonder about cosmetic surgery and surreptitiously scan the area around her ears for tell tale marks. Fiona quickly assures me her face is still as God intended. Apart from laser treatment on her eyes to correct short sight (she wore contact lenses for years) the surgeon's knife has not touched her. But would she actually have a facelift?

"Absolutely! Not to work in TV - because while I love what I do at Border I can't see myself doing it in ten years time - but for me. I think it's absolutely wonderful what they can do. The minute there starts to be a wrinkle I don't like I shall seriously consider it."

Still on trivia, Fiona admits that people have always criticised her hair. It looks fine to me but that's the problem, she explains. It's fine, not in the

sense of being okay, but fine in texture. "It's flyaway and difficult to manage I suppose," she says flatly, clearly bored by the subject.

I put it to her that everyone in Cumbria (apart from one or two bitter, green-eyed journalists who once tried to stitch her up by selling stories about her pre-marital love life to the *News of the World*) seem to like her and that everyone says she's awfully nice. Does such a bland description bother her as surely it fails to capture the essence of a woman who reached the top in national television?

"They might well call me nice. I probably am nice! But I am ambitious," she admits.

Are you tough then?

"I'm tough but I'm not hard."

Moody? "No, I'm not moody. I'm beginning to sound like Mrs Perfect aren't I?"

She isn't at all but I fear I'm no nearer to catching a glimpse of her inner self. I ask her if she's ever

bitchy in the newsroom?

"Oh yes, I like a good gossip like everyone else."

It's not quite the same thing but my next question, prompted by her description of an almost idyllic childhood, is more satisfying. Are you secure?

"I am very secure in myself. I don't need other people now," she says. Yes, she has friends, male and female, but she is very self-contained. "I'm not looking for anyone to support me or love me. If they do that's great! It's wonderful. But I'm independent."

It confirms my feelings about her protective personal forcefield, not unpleasant or hostile, but resolute. For whatever reason, I suspect you'd have to know Fiona a long time before she truly trusted you or let you in.

She is, of course, married. So she's not totally independent and Fiona admits that husband Rod ►

# FIONA

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► did help her keep a sense of perspective at the height of her fame. She remembers some people - who had been famous but weren't anymore - sobbing into their pillows.

"You have to remember that television is such an up and down businesses," she asserts, "one minute you are flavour of the month and the next you are out. And you could be out forever."

It always helped that husband Rod didn't work in the same line of business, didn't actually like television very much, didn't watch it very much.

"He's got a normal job. He makes electricity, it's a family firm," says Fiona. "We have very few friends in television. That has kept my feet on the ground. I like to think I wouldn't have become a lovey. I don't think I am that sort of person anyway but Rod was always the anchor that said 'Hey! It's only TV!'"

While we're on about the husband I ask Fiona if she's heard the rumour that her marriage is on the rocks - gossip that began when eagle-eyed (possibly hopeful) *Lookaround* viewers noticed that she had stopped wearing her wedding ring. She doesn't wear it because she's allergic to it and her finger swells up, she says. So your marriage is not on the rocks?

"Absolutely not! A couple of people have rung up Border about it. Maybe I should wear one through my nose. My marriage is okay!"

Oops. But it's nice to see the cool, professional mask slip, if only for a millisecond. Fiona insists that marriage has never, ever constrained her in any way or prevented her from realising ambitions. With a different husband it might have done, she admits.

"Rod has always been happy for me to go off and do my own thing which is great. He's not sat there waiting for his dinner to be cooked every night."

So it's an ideal marriage then?

"I won't say it's ideal because when you say that you break up the following week. We have our ups and downs like everyone else."

What do you row about?

"Oh gosh! I couldn't possibly tell you that."

Oh, go on.

"No. We just row about normal things - and not that often. But at the end of the day there's no one else I'd rather sit in with on a Saturday night eating spaghetti bolognese and discussing the world. It's as simple as that."

At the age of 42, and despite Cherie Blair's much-vaunted pregnancy at 45, Fiona has more or less given up on the idea of more children. "Shame. I'd have loved more but it's just never happened," she sighs. Her relationship with her only daughter Natasha, now seven, is rewarding and they have started having little girlie chats together, she says.

"I'm not an earth mother but I'm a very good mother. I read stories and play games but at the end of the day I need to go off and do my own bits of work as well."

Her motherhood rules are old-fashioned and sensible. Children need love, set bedtimes, boundaries, she argues.

"I'm delighted I've got a daughter. If I had another child I'd want a daughter. It's the old saying, 'A



son's a son until he finds a wife but a daughter's a daughter all her life'. I do believe that."

Fiona's own childhood was happy, safe and privileged in the sense that her Maryport-born father and Lancashire mother stayed together and provided a loving environment in which to grow up.

"That's not so common these days but my parents seemed to get on, they certainly didn't row in front of us," she remembers.

Although born in Preston, much of her early childhood was spent in colonial West Africa because of her father's work.

"It was the most idyllic childhood, it really was. I was in Nigeria, the tropics and I wandered around barefoot which worried my mother because of all the scorpions. I remember catching big butterflies in nets, schooling in the shade of the veranda, going to the swimming pool, eating mangoes. It was glorious."

She admits the family's lifestyle advantage was guaranteed by a white skin then but still feels enormous sadness at what has happened to the country in recent times.

"I went back there about six years ago to cover the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales and I was horrified at what I saw, beggars everywhere,

Fiona exacted a revenge of sorts on the 'F' factor fiasco when she called her first book 'F is for Fly Fishing' - neatly capitalising on a phrase that is always likely to stick to her. Indeed, when guesting on the BBC's 'Have I Got News For You?' team captain Paul Merton nearly had a hernia trying to get Fiona to use the ultimate F word. She politely saw him off.

raw sewage running down the streets, corruption. But there was still kindness and laughter from the Nigerian people."

When the Biafran War broke out in 1966 her family returned to Preston. She spent a year at a local primary school, failed the 11 plus and went to a fairly basic Catholic comprehensive school whereas her brothers attended a Catholic college run by Jesuit priests. ►

# FIONA



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► “I did well at the comprehensive but I think that was because my parents were both academic and were there to help out. At home it wasn’t television, it was homework,” she says.

After graduating from London University she worked at radio stations in Reading and Manchester before moving to Border TV - the station that she says she adores. There’s also the wonderful quality of life to be had in Cumbria and the borders.

“To go to London is fine but you’ve got to earn so much to have an equal standard of living,” she says, “and you’ll probably have to live in a tiny flat when up here for the same price you can have a lovely cottage. Then there’s the dirty streets and worries about whether you can get your children into a decent school. London has less and less of an appeal now. I prefer Glasgow and Edinburgh - they are much more manageable.”

So is Fiona destined to become Border TV’s matriarchal equivalent of Eric Wallace in the 21st century - lined (unless she opts for the surgeon’s knife) and loveable?

“Maybe,” she laughs.

Would it be a problem for her?

“It might be a problem for the viewers. It would certainly be a first because where do you know in TV that they have a 55-year-old woman presenting a regional programme? Perhaps I could start a trend!”

**MAYBE SHE’LL GET RICH** enough to buy up Border TV. Fiona recently set up her own company called Border Heritage which produces videos about the infamous Border clans - the reiving clans.

“The highland clans have been done to death but not the border clans. Yet they are equally important Scottish families because while the highlanders were fighting among themselves the borderers were fighting the English, holding the line,” she says. Fiona is now pushing her videos in America - potentially a huge market with so many descendants of fine Scottish families.

“It’s not lucrative yet but I’m not doing it purely for love,” she tells me.

She didn’t switch to GMTV from ITN for love either - the career move that is still remembered as a disaster.

“I viewed it as very unfortunate because I was very much looking forward to it,” she recalls. “I was told it would be like an American rolling news programme and we would be behind desks. But as rehearsal time went on it became clear that it was going to be anything but. Basically, it was like trying to stick a round peg in a square hole. It wasn’t the show for me. I’d come from a serious news programme reading doom

and gloom and suddenly I was having to interview clowns.”

The newspaper headlines crucified the show, the critics told glum Fiona to smile, others flagged up her ‘F’ factor and viewers used their imagination about what ‘F’ word to actually use. The end, after a few weeks, came suddenly. So did it damage her professionally?

“Yeah, I’m sure it did,” she concedes. “On the



‘I’m a pretty happy go lucky person. I don’t tend to worry about things - maybe I should but if you worried too much in this job you’d go mad. I think at the end of the day you just have to do whatever you have to do. Seize the moment. I’ve spent my time crying over things that I couldn’t change and I’ve come round to thinking that unless it’s a huge disaster, someone dead or seriously injured, then most of the problems we face in life are pretty minimal. If it all ended tomorrow I couldn’t complain, I’ve had a great life.’

other hand it probably did me a huge favour. At the time my daughter was eight months old and I was taking her up and down to London on the train. By the time she was a toddler I couldn’t have done that, she would have needed a base. It forced me to make a decision to come home and see what I could do here.”

It also made her realise that women could not have the high-flying career and a family with-

out something giving down the line.

“If you’ve got a top job you need to employ a nanny and the children suffer,” she says. “There’s got to be compromise and work has got to be made more flexible for women with children. It needs to be more family orientated and that goes for men too. Children need to see their fathers and be with them.”

Later on, Fiona exacted a revenge of sorts on the ‘F’ factor fiasco when she called her first book ‘F is for Fly Fishing’ - neatly capitalising on a phrase that is always likely to stick to her. Indeed, when guesting on the BBC’s *Have I Got News For You?* team captain Paul Merton nearly had a hernia trying to get Fiona to use the ultimate F word. She politely saw him off.

So what next? While clearly not among today’s A list newsreading celebrities, Fiona is still a familiar enough name to feature on a recent edition of *Songs of Praise* where, for the first time, she revealed a religious side to her nature. Yes, she could be tempted by a big job in London but only if it was for a couple of days week, and even then she’s not so sure. Her second book on fishing is out and doing well and she hopes to persuade Border TV to screen her clan videos next year.

In reality the new Millennium means more of the same for Fiona Armstrong. More *Lookaround*, which she presents three nights a week, more Border clan videos, more fly fishing, more chats with Natasha, more cosy nights in with Rod, more living the comfortable Cumbrian lifestyle that suits her so well.

“The first day I came up here to work at Border TV I went to live in a flat at Wetheral near Carlisle, on the banks of the River Eden. I remember looking out on a glorious evening and thinking it was all fantastic, the hills, the Cumbrian people. I’m rather pleased that the routes in and out of here are rather difficult because other people will leave us alone. I really am living in God’s country.”

And finally - ho, ho - her guiding philosophy?

“I’m a pretty happy-go-lucky person. I don’t tend to worry about things - maybe I should but if you worried

too much in this job you’d go mad. I think at the end of the day you just have to do whatever you have to do. Seize the moment. I’ve spent my time crying over things that I couldn’t change and I’ve come round to thinking that unless it’s a huge disaster, someone dead or seriously injured, then most of the problems we face in life are pretty minimal. If it all ended tomorrow I couldn’t complain, I’ve had a great life.”