

UNDERGROUND ITEMS FROM THE TELEVISION AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

by Paul Creswell

CONFESSIONS FROM THE UNDERGROUND

Thursday 2 February 2012, Channel 4, 22.00 to 23.05.

This programme was a 'one-off' and looked at the operation of the Underground from the point of view of some of the staff, both operating and engineering, involved. The identity of those involved was not revealed, in case this should effect their employment in any way. They were all played by actors, who seemed to your reviewer to be quite convincing in their roles. The programme was narrated by Richard Wilson (well known as the lead part in "One Foot in the Grave").

Your reviewer admits to some puzzlement at the way in which he would approach his review of this particular programme. Ten staff (i.e. actors voicing them) took part and, as invariably happens, we were switched from one to another at a very fast pace! There were some 120 'quotes' (not counting the narrator in between), with one member of station staff clocking up 26 of these! I decided that the easiest (but maybe not the best!) way to tackle the review was thus to try to deal with 'subjects' rather than 'people'.

In reading this review, I feel that is only fair to point out that, when given anonymity, people are free to say almost anything and so it is probable that one or two chose to over-exaggerate some points, or just take the opportunity to 'grind their axe'. Ultimately, even the **accuracy** of some of the points quoted below may possibly be open to question?

Just for the record, the staff were named (in visual credits) as:

Pete (station staff)	Patricia (station staff)	David (station staff)
John (driver)	Rosemary (station supervisor)	Ray (signal engineer)
Dan (Controller)	Chinna (emergency response unit)	Steve (driver)
Dennis (track maintenance)		

This is the order in which they **first** appeared.

SAFETY ON PLATFORMS AND STATIONS, INCLUDING STAFFING LEVELS

Pete's ultimate fear is having too many people on the platform and then having to face a judge and explain why he let so many down there. Someone swears at him every day with regard to the train running or his own appearance. At times there are some 5,000 people trying to get through the gateline, with only two staff to oversee them. If it flows it's fine, but if it does not it is frightening. You are always under pressure to keep the station open.

The worst people are men in their thirties in suits – worse than football hooligans! Strangely, as 'hoodies' do not want to be seen, they leave you alone. Although he served in the military, he feels more threatened on the platform. At least in the services you have a rifle or similar to defend yourself with!

He has been followed to the station 'safe room' and finds people will face right up to him if he tells them their ticket is not valid – so close that he feels their breath on his skin. He has tried telling them 'there is no need for that' and is then likely to get slapped in the face or punched in the chest. He was assaulted twice in a few months.

There are so few of 'u' and so many passengers and he does consider that his own safety has decreased considerably, of recent times.

Patricia felt overwhelmed at times and tends to concentrate on the tickets and not look at the faces. She feels people are being lied to (about the service situation) and then they take it out on the person they can see – herself. It is possible to go from a platform with about 400 people on it to a figure of over one thousand in about three minutes, especially if there is a delay. She mentioned one time when two 'guys', who had been drinking, had no money on their Oyster cards – apparently this was her fault. Abuse and threats are common. She called the police to one such incident, where the man had threatened to 'come round there and get you' and it took five of them to restrain just one individual – very traumatic. When she started on the Underground, there were generally two or three staff, so she did not feel overwhelmed, but now she is often on her own.

David tends to pretend people are not there – all those eyes looking at you. He feels that, when people enter a station, they seem to lose their sense of social habits and inhibitions. He guesses that even Mother Theresa would ‘lose her rag’ on a gateline! It is very difficult to be nice to the sixth person when you have had five consecutive insults. There is almost a ‘state of war’ between staff and the public.

At times it has been very close to something going seriously wrong. It has not happened, so he admits he could be exaggerating, but passengers do sometimes come and tell him ‘it is dangerous down there’. The system is seriously understaffed and he feels vulnerable. Safety is always a concern and he feels that, at any moment, it could all go ‘spinning off into chaos’. He does not actually believe that passenger safety is undermined, but at times it is bursting at the seams.

John feels that the platform/train interface is the main area for potential accidents. He worries about two things. The first is ‘one under’ (i.e. a suicide, see later in this review) and the second is not being the driver who drags a kid to their death (see also under ‘Dan’ later). He reminded us of guards (“remember them?” he quipped) who would check everything was safe. They have been replaced by mirrors and monitors.

He also mentioned ‘self despatch’ (where the driver has neither a human colleague nor equipment to assist with the train’s safe departure). He tells us that ‘anything could happen’ between when you looked down the train and actually started it moving.

In training, safety is drummed into you. The rule book was ‘written in blood’. He thinks that senior management are trying to ‘tweak and erode’ some of the ‘standards we’ve all worked to’.

Station closures are an inconvenience for passengers and management – it affects the ‘points’ on their ‘target’ (i.e. the management).

Rosemary reminded us that safety regulations are sometimes broken with regard to station staffing. At her own station, the minimum number of staff (for it to remain open) is two. The station must be closed if there are not two available. This ruling came about following the King’s Cross fire (of 1987) where 31 passengers were killed.

She had been asked to keep her station open when she was the only staff member present. She had asked for some clarity as to whether this was a request or an instruction and the Service Manager involved promptly ‘backed off’. You can always please management, but, if anything goes wrong, it is your job at risk. She recalled a colleague who kept a station open for half an hour with only themselves present. She stated that this was recorded in the station log book.

Dan mentioned that we read all the time about passengers stuck ‘here and there’. The Mayor (of London) is always being pushed to ‘speed things up’. He feels this is happening too much and that the system is going from a ‘safety’ to a ‘speed things up’ point of view too rapidly.

He recalls a boy getting his jacket straps (or other part of clothing) caught in the doors and being dragged to his death.

As regards the ‘self despatch’, the driver has to get out of his seat and get on to the platform. If all is clear he goes back to his cab, shuts the doors, one final check and off. If there is a bend, he will have to walk a little way down the platform. It makes his (i.e. Dan’s) life easier, but is not as safe. If the ‘safety wedge’ is continually ‘shaved away’ something will eventually give.

Steve told us that everything (now) revolves about the ‘service’. The world might be falling apart outside, but as long as the service runs, managers are happy. He also feels that decades of experience in running a safe railway are being cut away. The meaning of running a safe railway has been undermined.

SAFETY ON AND OF TRACK AND ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

John advised us that on every single day you experience a rough ride – trains are jumping around all over the place. You get on a train and hope you get off. Fingers crossed and hope for the best!

Ray mentioned that some relay rooms are very small and hold more equipment than they were originally designed to accommodate. You have to go in sideways. Some (electrical) conductors are not covered and the gloves provided tend to slip. 100 volts gives a bit of a ‘tingle’ and he has had shocks in his neck when stepping back in some rooms. He has also experienced mice running up his arm!

If you have to attend equipment in the tunnel (i.e. during traffic hours), you have to drop down from the train and the rails are sometimes greasy. Also, you have to work with the power on, though you are trained for this eventuality.

Health and Safety regulations require you to have good access, space to work and adequate lighting. London Underground are pushing the regulations to the limit.

Trainstops (which halt trains if they pass a red signal) are maintained every twelve weeks, but there are plans to increase this to 24/26 weeks, which he felt was dangerous.

Chinna commented that, if you were drinking a cup of tea on a train and it went up your nose, this was probably due to a 'dipped' joint in the rails, where there was a gap beneath the point where the two rails were bolted together.

There were more major track overhauls, which was great, but minor jobs do not happen any more. Everything that moves needs to be maintained.

Steve mentioned that older drivers, when noticing an 'oddity' in the track, will go more slowly over it next time around to try to understand what is really happening.

He was seen studying a report of eight defective sleepers (about 15 to 20 feet of track). He would have expected this to be repaired quickly, but it went from June to February at least. In 2010, the track 'spread' under the weight of an engineers' train in the Earl's Court area and the train derailed.

He felt that there was a 'reactive' rather than 'proactive' approach to track maintenance.

A derailment is a worry for drivers every day. For years he had anticipated an incident between Barons Court and Acton Town, but now expects it to happen in a tunnel section.

Dennis told us that there are regular 'patrols' who fill out reports detailing what needs to be done to keep the track in good condition. When he started with the Underground they had a big gang. If (now) they had more staff, more would get done. He reads from a report of 'eight defective timbers' (reviewer comment: the same one as 'Steve' just above?). Surely one was defective before two were? He also mentions the 'TANC' system – this being an abbreviation for 'Temporary Approval Non-Compliant'. He cites this as 'gobbledygook' for 'O.K. for a bit longer'.

He does agree that things (meaning, assumedly, track maintenance) have improved since the Earl's Court derailment, (see under 'Steve', just above). Shorter walks (i.e. Patrols), more time and more contractors' staff are now available. He is a little more confident than he was, but they still have to write things down and they do not get done.

There is a scheme to change patrols from twice per week to once per week. He does not consider this is safe as anything can happen. A joint or broken plate will not be patrolled for 6/7 days, which allows more time for anything to occur.

SUICIDES AND THE AFTER EFFECTS

Pete said that, as far as recovery from suicides is concerned, the 'show must go on'. Though there is a relevance to that principle, decencies (regarding the body and its disposal) must still be observed.

Patricia said that signs of a potential suicide included taking off wedding rings and erratic behaviour. She remembered a colleague who wrestled a woman to the ground because he realised she was about to jump. She knew a supervisor at Stratford who would not go near the cupboard in which bodies were temporarily stored (see also under 'Chinna' below).

John commented that you approach a platform and there are kids hanging their legs over the edge and youths pretend to push their mates on the track.

Chinna added that the London Ambulance Service no longer take bodies away as once they did. The body remains on site until the arrival of the coroner, which can take up to a couple of hours. To allow the service to resume the body must be placed in a storage cupboard until the Coroner's arrival.

Cleaners have been known to go to such a cupboard seeking their equipment and have, obviously, had a nasty surprise, especially if not forewarned. There is clearly a need to provide as much dignity as possible and also to resume the service as soon as possible. He could not see a practical solution to this problem.

Steve said that when you see a potential suicide you are blowing your whistle, braking hard and thinking 'turn round'. Whilst it is not his fault, someone is now dead and it hits you hard.

INFORMATION AND IT'S (SOMETIMES) NON-AVAILABILITY

Pete maintained that service up-date announcements were sometimes wrong and people downstairs were waiting ten minutes in thirty-five degrees heat when announcements were claiming all was well. He thought station staff should make these announcements. He claimed, however, that mystery shoppers 'score' if they hear this and the station manager is constantly looking at his 'score'. He (personally) 'skirts round' this system by telling passengers 'not at this station'!

Patricia was, she said, unhappy about passengers being told lies about the service. Whenever there is an incident, she cannot obtain information as all the other stations affected are also trying to contact the Line Controller. He is clearly unable to pick up the phone to all of them, as well as also deal directly with the incident itself.

John told us that the famous announcement that 'there is a good service ...' is often crap. *Your reviewer hastens to add that the last word there was John's choice, not his!*

Rosemary also complained that the service may be rubbish, but the boards (up-dated by the Network Operations Centre) do not state this. She has to say there is a good service even when she knows it is incorrect – she cannot tell the customers what the trouble might be. *(Reviewer's comment: The narrator referred to the 'National Operations Centre', but our editor reliably informs me that the N.O.C. certainly has no responsibility for the systems elsewhere in the U.K.)*

CHARING CROSS INCIDENT

At one point, particular attention focussed on an incident at Charing Cross. **Patricia** was shown reading from a report about this incident (or so it appeared) and she took viewers through it in some detail. At 09.25, the Station Supervisor reported masses of dust and could barely see the end of the corridor concerned. At 09.34 the station was evacuated and it was then reported that the station could not re-open as there were still masses of dust in the atmosphere and also caked on the floor. By 10.51, mopping and dusting were completed and at 11.11 the station re-opened and trains recommenced stopping normally.

At 11.48, there was a further alert on the station fire panel. The dust cloud had returned. An engineer reported a massive thud, just before a cloud of dust. Fire doors experienced great force by slamming together or extreme air pressure whilst closed. The Station Supervisor felt nauseous, had irritable eyes and a sore throat. He was stripped down and his clothes bagged up and taken away by ambulance. The Customer Services Assistant was worried about the possibility of asbestos. "This is clearly a phenomenon we have not understood completely".

*(Reviewer's comment: That last sentence is quite worrying! The narrator told us that checks regarding asbestos were negative. However, we were also told that these were conducted some hours after the actual incident, so if they **had been positive** what effect might there have been and on how many passengers in the period since re-opening at 11.11? How could they all have possibly been traced for checks? The incident was quoted as 'last May' and the programme was credited as made in '2012' so I assume this would be May 2011. Thus, this is presumably the incident which appears in 'Underground Diary', at the very top of page 377 in *Underground News* No.595 – July 2011 and relates to Sunday 1 May 2011. This is an interesting example of how complex a story can lie behind a brief report which occupied just one and a half lines in *Underground News*!*

EFFECTS OF SHIFTS ON STAFF

Pete told us that getting up at 03.15 disturbed his sleep pattern and he felt wrecked after seven days.

Patricia commented that there is just time for a coffee before the morning peak hour. She is on her feet for the rest of the day. There is no quiet period until the end of her shift. Just one meal break is permitted. She is very tired when she gets home.

Sometimes people do offer you coffee and she was once handed a rose – by a drunk, but it counted!

David comments that he gets home with his head drumming – it is a very 'wearing' job.

Steve said that he found it difficult to counteract boredom, as you have to stay alert when driving. You cannot listen to music or read a paper or book.

SUMMARIES OF STAFF FEELINGS – BOTH GOOD AND BAD

Pete exclaimed that he was astounded most of the time (that things ran as well as they did)! He felt a sense of pride in a system that moved 3.5 million people a day, but also felt that it was being 'pushed to the limit' It is a marvellous transport system, with old decaying bits and new bits added on.

David claimed that the engineering staff are the 'unsung heroes'. He could not do anything without his colleagues. People on the underground are first rate.

John was clear that the best part of the job was going home. Sometimes you got a 'thank you' from a passenger.

Steve considered that the system was suffering 'death by a thousand cuts'. You do not see the first cut or the last cut, but the system is being bled dry. However, he said he enjoys the job and the responsibility of being in a public service.

At this point the review will be brought to an end. There are other comments that could have been included, but your reviewer felt there is quite enough above to get the full 'flavour' of the programme.

All in all, a very interesting programme all round. Hardly any errors were noticed (except **National** Operations Centre – see under 'Information and its (sometimes) non-availability' above), but then you would expect the staff to get references right, providing that the film company ('Rare Day') then **accurately** reported what the staff told them! Even having worked on the Underground (1958-1987), your reviewer found that things appear to be very different comparing 'then' (25 plus years ago) and 'now', particularly bearing in mind the combined (negative) effects of a depletion of front-line staff and the vast increase in passenger numbers.

Underground News carries opinions from LUL management in every issue (under the headings of 'Press Releases' and 'Publicity Material'), so your reviewer decided to leave his review entirely to the staff – whose 'voice', after all, was the main objective of this programme. Management comments were given (by a female voice at times) and also by notice boards, of the type seen in stations, but carrying various management responses to the items covered by the staff.

Editor's Note:

It is not intended to review every item of Underground interest on the television, as we have to be aware that some programmes might not be suitable for review because of their content. For example, the recent programme "Death Unexplained" of Tuesday 21 February 2012, was considered not to be in the interest of the majority of the members, because the programme covered (only in part) a suicide on the Underground and the following coroner's inquest.

Moreover, it is not our intention to 'take sides' about a programme, but to report the facts as they were portrayed on the television programme – correct or otherwise.