

PROLOGUE

I**N PENNING THIS** little memoir, I have tried to give a flavour of what life was like working for Fleet Street tabloids during the 1980s, '90s and up to the closure of the *News of the World* in 2011.

Since then, there has been a whole sea change in the way the tabloids report their news and the types of stories they cover. The Leveson Inquiry, numerous police investigations and a torrent of criticism (to put it mildly) from outraged celebrities and politicians have seen to that, for better or for worse.

But for a quarter of a century, I helped the red-top newspapers dole out their daily fare of scandals and exposés with cavalier abandon. And the British public bought into it in their millions.

It is a world that has vanished for good. And it is an insight into this very bizarre career which I thought you might be interested in seeing, through the eyes of a man who spent his life there. I hope you find it an entertaining read.

If none of you read it, it will at least provide future generations of my family with a lasting monument to the absurd and bonkers world of their bizarre ancestor!

TABLOID SECRETS

Those of you looking for an insight into the phone-hacking saga will be disappointed. I think most of you will now be fed up to the back teeth with the wall-to-wall coverage of it over the past several years. And I don't want this book to be boring, self-serving guff. And I have no wish to heap piles of blame on anyone, many of whom are suffering greatly as I write. Finally, to focus on phone-hacking would distort the narrative, as it came onto my radar less than a handful of times in twenty-five years. That it came onto my radar at all is, of course, extremely regrettable and I apologise to anyone affected by it.

You will also hear very little of my wife and children, as I don't want them to become part of this story, although they are a large part of my 'normal' life.

While I covered hundreds of stories for the *News of the World*, the *Today* newspaper and the *Daily Mirror*, I have picked out a dozen or so which I hope give a flavour of how we worked in those ruthless, cut-throat times.

For a young man, they were an adventure. One minute, you could find yourself in the middle of an Alfred Hitchcock thriller. Next, a Marx Brothers comedy. Another, a Jacobean tragedy. It was never dull and I hope this book is a fair reflection of the industry I now look back on with fondness and astonishment.

CHAPTER 3

TO FLEET STREET

FLEET STREET JOURNALISTS are hewn from the same stone but come in different shapes.

Fundamentally, we have the same set of skills and qualities and faults. We are all ultra-curious, anti-authoritarian, analytical, methodical, outgoing, confident, plausible, chameleon-like people. Able to talk to a titled aristocrat or a school dinner lady on a reasonably confident footing.

A *Daily Mail* reporter could fit as easily into *The Sun*, and they frequently do. So the newspaper we end up working for is a fairly random event. Journalists tend not to choose the paper they work for, the paper seems often to choose them. And so it was with me.

My scoop for the *News of the World* had me pigeonholed straight away as an undercover reporter who could work alone and pass himself off plausibly as someone else. And that is the way it remained for the rest of my career. The fact that my previous news editor Graham Newson had said I was the best feature writer he had come across counted for nothing now.

TABLOID SECRETS

If you're lucky to find yourself selected from many other freelance rivals jockeying for a position on a paper and bunged into a pigeon hole – into it you go.

My first day on the *News of the World* as a freelance was in June 1988. In Harrow, I'd been the proverbial big fish in the small pond. But walking up to the *News of the World* building in Wapping was daunting. My reputation as a big hitter on my local paper also counted for nothing. Everyone on Fleet Street had been big hitters on their local paper. And most of the big hitters didn't make the grade on Fleet Street and returned to the provinces. Of the tens of thousands of journalists in the UK, only a few hundred eventually make it as Fleet Street reporters.

Despite this, I had every confidence I would succeed. This may sound terribly arrogant but I assure you it isn't. It was a simple assessment of my own abilities here and lack of them there. I have already outlined what an appalling academic I was and how my early ambitions floated aimlessly. I also had a very real understanding of my own failures. But now I thoroughly believed I had yet to come across a journalist who could best me. And that belief continued with me for another twenty-three years on Fleet Street.

Despite this, I was very uptight and anxious as I took the lift to the top floor. I realised the *News of the World* was going to be vastly different to the *Harrow Observer*. But how different? Would all the reporters be demons? Would the newsroom be like Dante's Inferno, with flames shooting from the keyboards?

My experience was totally the opposite. I walked through

TO FLEET STREET

the door and introduced myself to the legendary news editor Bob Warren, who showed me to a desk. News editors, even on local papers, are ferocious types. But Bob, a former Royal Navy officer, was blessed with gentlemanly courtesy. The late Derek Jameson memorably described him as having the air of a public schoolmaster but with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the foibles of every scoutmaster in England.

The first reporter I met was Clive Goodman, the then royal correspondent, who introduced himself, shook my hand and took me to the canteen for a cup of tea and to explain the serious business of how to fill in an expenses form with maximum profit. Clive was a typical middle-class grammar schoolboy with a blazing line in caustic wit. An eccentric loner with a fondness for handmade suits and shoes, he cut a dash around the office and still holds the *News of the World* record for the most consecutive front-page splashes in a row: six. (I managed five.) I liked Clive a lot and despite his imprisonment after the 2006 royal phone-hacking scandal, still hold him in the highest professional regard. If that makes me unpopular with certain sections of the media and society in general, well, so be it.

The legendary investigator Trevor Kempson (the fake sheikh Mazher Mahmood's predecessor) was in full flourish. I had been reading his astonishing scoops since the early 1970s and he was a genuine, fully-fledged Fleet Street legend.

In 1973, he was responsible for the resignations of two Conservative ministers, Lord Lambton and Lord Jellicoe, after he caught them consorting with prostitutes. I had expected

TABLOID SECRETS

a tough street fighter with a dash of barrow boy in him. But while he was very strong-minded and determined (his motto was ‘softly, softly, catchee monkey’), he was a Haberdashers’ Aske’s old boy and possessed of a kind of seedy glamour.

I struck up conversations with Trevor at every opportunity. How did he break the Lambton story? I was desperate to emulate his methods. Trevor explained he had concealed a small microphone in the nose of a teddy bear he had planted on the prostitute’s bed. He had also paid the prostitute’s husband to photograph the Air Minister *in flagrante* through a two-way mirror.

Trevor was very kind to me and took me under his wing, and for a while I acted as his ‘bag-carrier’, helping him out on stories. Occasionally, we’d have a drink in the old Printer’s Pie in Fleet Street after work, then head off in his red, two-door Jaguar coupé to his flat in the Barbican to make some taped phone calls on investigations. During the course of a working evening like this with Trevor, he would drink whiskey like beer, pouring out half-pint tumblers. Bald and bespectacled, he had an unfortunate resemblance to the Nazi monster Adolf Eichmann when captured and put on trial in 1960. Despite this, his charm and wit made him very popular with women, and several stunning girlfriends in seductive poses adorned his walls.

Trevor died in the early 1990s, a victim not of his hard drinking but of leukaemia. I owe a lot to Trevor and his ability and willingness to share his skills with one so young and green as myself.

TO FLEET STREET

Also on the news desk were two formidable Ukrainians. Alex Marunchak was firm, direct yet taciturn and the most formidable news desk operator I've ever encountered. He had amassed a large volume of essential core contacts who fed the newspaper splash after splash, week after week. During his years as a crime reporter, Alex had made contact with policemen who would be most useful to him. He would sooner have a drink with a DC from London's West End than a chief inspector from Kent, calculating the DC would be better placed to give him a tip-off when a drunken A-lister was arrested on a Friday night after tumbling out of a louche nightspot.

Saturdays were the most stressful day of the week at the *News of the World*, as at all Sunday newspapers. Stories the news editor has been promising the editor all week can suddenly collapse. New angles to stories can be demanded at the very last minute and have to be obtained – especially if the editor has ordered them. In the middle of this, a big story might be breaking – a plane crash, an MP resigning, a celebrity dying, a brutal murder. The news editor needs to pull all the strands of every story together and present it fit for publication in the tensest situations and in a limited amount of time.

On press day, when the stories are going to bed on a big newspaper, it can feel like you are being fired at from all directions, as I was to find out in 2001, when I became news editor myself. Sub-editors would be demanding 'more copy', the editor would be angry as a favourite story collapsed, reporters making excuses for failing to deliver, awkward

TABLOID SECRETS

contacts suddenly pulling out of a deal to provide a story, or demanding unrealistic cash advances, a brilliant new source turning out to be a greedy fantasist.

Piers Morgan once told me that the hardest job in Fleet Street was that of news editor at the *News of the World*. It certainly takes a certain type of character. But one of the most vital qualities is the ability to remain calm under serious amounts of pressure. Marunchak was the master at this. When he was under severe pressure on the desk, the only visible symptom was his tendency to stroke his silver-grey moustache as he calmly, even coldly, dished out very precise, tightly worded orders that left you in no doubt what was needed and expected. I never heard him raise his voice once and yet he had total command over his troops and was feared and revered in equal measure. The same was said of Leonard Cheshire, who, as a squadron leader in the Second World War, led his fellow Halifax bomber pilots through flak and into the teeth of hell. An RAF veteran once told me, 'As he did so, all his fellow pilots could hear in their earpieces was Cheshire murmuring, "Lower, boys, lower please," as if he was dispensing a simple request from his fireside armchair.'

All successful leaders dealing with a crisis tend to be unflappable. And so it was with Alex. The shouting, screaming news executives who lose their cool and lose control tend to lose the dressing room and deepen the crisis. And this is what ultimately happened at the *News of the World* before its closure. But in the 1980s and 1990s, the culture at the *News of*

TO FLEET STREET

the World was to treat staff with gentlemanly firmness. Firmness was essential, as a newsroom is jammed to the rafters with egos and very big personalities who, if you allow them to, will ignore you and do things their own way, believing they know best. But the management style was laced with respect, advice, assistance, precise direction borne from finely honed news sense, and instant feedback.

This type of management style was the hallmark of Bob Warren, who acted as news editor and assistant editor from 1964 until his death in 2009. And it was inherited by his successor Alex Marunchak, Alex's replacement Greg Miskiw (pronounced 'miss-cue'), and later, I hope, myself. In my two years as news editor, I never raised my voice once at any reporter. Nor did I bully or threaten anyone. I didn't need to. I had the best reporters in the tabloid world working for me. All I had to do was give them precise direction and off they went.

In 1988, the *News of the World* was selling more than 5 million copies every Sunday and was read by almost 15 million people. Taking children out of the equation, this meant the paper was read by about one in three of the reading population. It was a national institution and a phenomenally successful newspaper.

Week after week, the paper splashed stories that were eagerly awaited by the Saturday night news desks of every daily paper in the world. The anticipation would often boil over into a rumour frenzy, with an MP's non-appearance at a summer fête or a rock star cancelling a concert being interpreted as a signal

TABLOID SECRETS

they were about to be exposed for some scandalous affair or nefarious act in the *News of the World*. The false rumour would sweep Fleet Street, and our night desk phone would ring off the hook: 'We've heard you're exposing Joe Bloggs tomorrow. Can you give us a steer?'

With such a massive circulation came big revenues. It was often quoted that we made £1 million a week profit. Adjusted for inflation averaging 3.4 per cent a year since then, that works out at £2,270,000 a week.

The paper was so wealthy, in his early days Bob Warren didn't even have an editorial budget. He simply asked for the money to buy a story and it was given. Reporters enjoyed a five-star lifestyle. When working out of town, we were accommodated in the town's best hotel and every expense was billed back to the company – even the champagne. Despite this, expenses for £400 a week were still submitted and signed off.

Many reporters drove fast sports cars at the weekend, sent their children to private schools, employed nannies and cleaners and generally lived a racy lifestyle. My first salary as a humble starter at the paper was £40,000 a year. Twenty-odd years later, the starting salary on Fleet Street papers isn't much over £30,000.

Consequently, the competition for a job on the *News of the World* was the toughest on Fleet Street. After a year freelancing for them and working as deputy news editor on the *Western Mail* in Cardiff, I was on the verge of being offered a staff job when disaster struck.

TO FLEET STREET

The editor, Patsy Chapman, had got it into her head that I was a spy for the *Sunday Mirror*.

Sunday newspaper editors are always anxious about protecting their exclusives from rivals, and there had been some leaks. I was apparently spotted looking curiously over the shoulder of one reporter as he rattled out the following day's front-page splash. In the febrile paranoia, I instantly became chief suspect. I was unaware of it at the time, but she had insisted that the news desk got rid of me.

Patsy was becoming increasingly erratic and the news desk thought her aberration would pass. Greg Miskiw, Marunchak's deputy, came over and asked me to go to the Ford motor works in Dagenham, where a bomb had been found and isolated. Off I went. No bomb. I called Miskiw.

'There's no bomb, Greg.'

'Oh well, just go home then,' was the odd reply. It was just the start of my shift.

For six weeks I was given no work. Then, out of the blue, I was asked back into the office. But as soon as I sat down, Greg rushed over with the instruction to cover a demonstration outside the Chinese embassy following the Tiananmen Square massacre. But when I arrived, I saw my fellow reporter John Chapman was there too. I rang Greg.

'Do you realise Chapman is here too and you're double-handed here?'

'Oh, I didn't realise that. Just go home then,' came the baffling reply.

TABLOID SECRETS

It would be five years before the *News of the World* would call me again and I would discover the reason why – that the news desk had hoped Patsy had forgotten all about me. She hadn't and blew a gasket when she saw me walking through the office. Although through it all, she said not one word to me.

A year of hard work had come to nothing and my Fleet Street career had juddered to a halt.