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## *EastEnders* and the Manufacture of Celebrity

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### **Abstract**

When *EastEnders* launched in February 1985 it represented a new approach by the BBC to programme making in many ways. One of these was publicity. Traditionally, the BBC put little effort into programme promotion but for *EastEnders* a much more professional approach was adopted and more resources employed. In part the publicity was based on the real life histories of the actors involved, many of whom had been cast because they had similar backgrounds to the characters they played. However, the full-blooded entry of the BBC, the UK's largest cultural producer into the business of publicity was to have unforeseen consequences, as the tabloid press, following a logic of its own created the kind of feeding frenzy around the actors' private lives with which we are so familiar today. The launch of *EastEnders*, it is argued, represents therefore a significant moment in recent British cultural history as the private lives of relatively minor characters, as much as their on screen personas became public property.

### **Introduction**

Social phenomena such as celebrity culture are not uniform across the globe though they may be present very widely. They are inflected differently, and 'have numerous points of origin, numerous points of change' (Turner 2004, 12) in the various places where they occur depending on the nature of the society out of which they both come and inform. In the UK, we 'celebrate' if that is the word, certain individuals or classes of people in our own distinct way. This article is about celebrity and the early days of a very British creation, the popular BBC soap opera *EastEnders*, which was first shown in February 1985.

That the title 'celebrity' is no longer confined to the major stars of the cinema screen and is bestowed upon a widening circle of people of mixed achievements and abilities hardly needs saying. Celebrity's ranks are now swelled by the inclusion

of the minor stars of the small screen: chat show hosts, newscasters, game show guests, weather people and increasingly in an age of reality television, the general public. It has been estimated recently that in Britain almost 'a quarter of a million 'ordinary people' appear on television every year, with over 20,000 of them having a speaking role' (Ibid, 53). Growing numbers of us, it would appear are indeed living in hope of our very own fifteen minutes and we are prepared to see the most intimate details of our daily lives and personal histories splashed across the newspapers in order to achieve it.

This is where we are. The question remains how did we get here? How have celebrity and the marketing of private lives come to achieve their present ubiquity? This article takes an historical rather than a theoretical approach to the subject. It is based on wider research contributing to volume six of the official history of the BBC and uses internal BBC documentation, interviews with those involved as well as secondary sources. What is of note about the coming of *EastEnders* it is argued, is that it saw the BBC, the UK's biggest cultural producer, taking a fundamentally different approach to how it publicised its programmes. From adopting a largely passive position, from allowing the programmes to speak for themselves, the BBC began to promote itself more actively, more professionally. In part, in the case of *EastEnders* this was done by making the actors as individuals a selling point. This was then taken up by the tabloid press in ways which were impossible for the BBC to control and events then followed an inexorable logic of their own. This represents a significant moment in recent British cultural history, and shows how the BBC became involved, hesitantly but inevitably in the manufacture of celebrity.

### **Celebrity and Religion**

Celebrity culture is often linked, both in journalism and in the academy with the supposed gap left by the decline of religion in modern societies. In the context of the present article this link can be explored to provide a clearer understanding of the nature of the celebrity brought forward by the promotion of *Eastenders*, and I would like to do so before moving on to the historical departure of this particular show. For, as much of the media portrayal of contemporary celebrity, in particular reality TV participants and other minor but familiar characters, is unevenly balanced between some degree of elevation of the individual to a life 'beyond' ordinary people and a considerable emphasis on mundane activities and grubby personal details (see Palmer in this issue for an elaboration of tabloid treatment of reality TV characters), we can in the making of the *Eastenders* soap stars see the beginnings of an attitude to celebrity which drew on stronger notions of familiarity and ordinariness than previous 'star' adulation (see Dyer 1998, first published 1979, for an analysis of the Hollywood star system). If seen in relation to ideas of

celebrity and religion, it is possible to elucidate some distinctive cultural functions of this kind of celebrity construction.

To writer Justin Cartwright, (2001), celebrities possess, like the old gods they have replaced the one thing mere mortals do not: immortality. Though the belief systems of our grandparents no longer serve, we still hanker after the non-rational, the immortal and the adulation of celebrities meets this spiritual need. Chris Rojek (2001, 90-91) writes of celebrity as part of 'a cult of distraction' filling the vacuum left by the death of God and masking the consequent meaninglessness of modern life in capitalist societies.

Attractive as these notions appear at first sight, one might have reservations for a number of reasons. First of all, the notion that stars somehow possess an aura of immortality or transcendence from the everyday. Stars can indeed seem larger than life – on the stage that is, but just because people say 'Eric Clapton is God' does not mean they actually believe it. Some few individuals may touch so many people so deeply that they may seem to have stepped out of the mainstream and hang, pristine and splendid in the firmament like the stars that light the night sky but increasingly our celebrities blend one into another, and come and go so quickly that we scarcely note their passing. Their actions – the parties, the drug-taking, the infidelities and breast enhancements – do not map them out as special, or even particularly individual. As for immortality, they are created and destroyed overnight. We no longer feed our children to *Moloch*, it is we who devour the Gods. As P. David Marshall has noted, 'what is enduring is the process' (2004).

To premise celebrity culture upon a weakening of religious belief is similarly open to question. To say, for example, 'God is dead' does not imply of necessity that life has no meaning, rather that for those individuals concerned, it has one in which God plays no part. In any case, what has declined for certain in most western societies is not necessarily a belief in God but in organised religion. It is true that the picture is not entirely clear, some recent work (Voas & Crockett 2005) has argued that both adherence to a particular faith and faith itself are in decline, with the latter more steeply than the former, but as it is often pointed out, in the last census conducted in the UK, in what is generally accepted as being among the most secular of societies, 77 per cent of the population of England and Wales claimed a religious affiliation (Census 2001). Falling church attendances do not tell the whole story. Logically at least, it would follow that we might expect the most secular society to have the greatest fascination with celebrity and though it is certainly the case that celebrity culture is more of a feature of British society currently than before, that this affects Britain more than other comparable countries is by no means certain. Conversely, the society with which we would most associate celebrity culture, the USA is the least affected of all by this supposed celestial demise. God is alive and well and living in the mid west.

Furthermore, the gap which, according to this theory celebrity aims to span, is a chasm so great, an idea so powerful – which led to the willingness to suffer martyrdom on the part of thousands, and then to the Crusades, the Thirty Years War, the Spanish Inquisition and so on – that it would surely be beyond even the combined talents of John Wayne, James Cagney, Madonna, Geri Halliwell and Jade Goody to bridge? I am not merely being facetious here, what I am trying to say is that there are significant differences between celebrity and religion.

This not to say that we can find no similarities in the role played by the media and by religion. Jean Seaton (2005) has argued persuasively that the media, specifically the news media, have inherited from the clergy the function of explaining the meaning of life, death and suffering to us. But, if we accept the idea as a conceit, then what kind of modern gods are contestants of reality shows and the stars of soaps – the Makosi's, (*Big Brother*) Debbie Dingle's (*Emmerdale Farm*) and Dirty Den's (*EastEnders*) of today? They are clearly not replacements for Jehovah, nor even for Zeus and co. They are more like the *penates*, the lesser gods of the hearth and home of the Greeks and Romans. We even keep them in the same place as of old, in a box in a corner of the living room, or perhaps if we are lucky, in a gleaming plasma screen stretched across the chimneybreast. They are surely present. And as we have noted they are legion – from the films, to the soaps, to the game shows, the make-overs, the get-me-out-of here's, the let-me-in-here's, to the beam-me-up-Scotty's.

The *penates* were not figures to fear, they did not strike one dead with thunderbolts, but were domestic, familiar, part of the fabric of everyday life. In the same way that the stars of the small screen are both like and unlike us, famous but remaining quintessentially ordinary, they were gods it is true, but gods to whom we talked as we talk to each other. They were propitiated not with elaborate ceremony and sacrifice at a temple but with small daily offerings in the family home. In a similar way the soap stars and other television celebrities have become entwined, 'integrated into the cultural processes of our daily lives' (Turner 2004, 17). We do not pray to them of course but we visit them, or they us, in the case of *EastEnders* twice and now four times a week (with an omnibus on Sunday). Beyond this they are the matter of discussion, of example, of part of the way we experience the world, and their celebrity is constructed unlike that of the classic star of film through individuality but through 'conceptions of familiarity' (Marshall, cited in Ibid, 20). As I will show in the following discussion of the media tumult that followed the BBC's promotion of *EastEnders*, to keep such a comparison in mind can shed light on the cultural functions of the characters of this soap and their subsequent treatment in the media. What it will also do is to highlight an intermediate stage on the way to the pervasive celebrity culture of today.

### **The BBC and Publicity in the 1980s**

Let us turn then to the BBC in the early nineteen eighties. It was one of the corporation's perennial uncomfortable periods. At the end of a time of almost runaway inflation, and in a political climate of unprecedented hostility to public service in all its guises, elitist broadcasting in particular, it had suffered a series of disappointing licence fee settlements, and was being adversely compared to the ITV companies, who were using their superior resources to outperform it in terms of ratings. For the BBC audience ratings were not directly linked to income as they were for the commercial companies, but they were connected to the legitimacy of the licence fee. The BBC was funded by what was effectively a poll tax and if it did not produce popular programmes then this called that legitimacy into question. A decision was taken to produce a new soap opera, or in the internal terminology of the BBC a 'twice-weekly serial drama' as part of a strategy to regain the popular audience. Now, *EastEnders* is at the heart of BBC publicity, it is very much what the BBC wants to be seen to be. This was the intention from the start. *EastEnders* came out of a reinterpretation of what public service meant which put popular programming as a core value. It is now very much the self-proclaimed public face of the BBC. In the early 1980s though, a public face was something not everyone thought the corporation should have.

For a broadcaster, the BBC was a curiously publicity-shy organisation. The reasons for this are in part constitutional, but also political, financial and bound up with the professional culture of the Corporation. By its charter and licence, the BBC was and is yet forbidden from having a corporate opinion and from using its own airtime to broadcast on its own account. BBC Governors and senior executives were very wary of appearing on the airwaves themselves for fear of antagonising the government. Licence fee negotiations were conducted in secret and the BBC did not traditionally tell the public how much it was asking the government for, nor why. At the same time the corporation's strategies and plans – the move into daytime broadcasting in this period, or the expansion of the local radio network was subjected to minute examination in parliament and in the press. The BBC had to take great care to be able to justify any expenditure which was not directly on making programmes. Publicity was ancillary to programme-making and it was therefore not something the Corporation should spend a lot of effort or resources on. The professional ethic of the BBC also meant that publicity, beyond the publishing of programme listings, was like the business of producing soap operas, not something the BBC was sure it should be doing at all.

Peter Rosier, Head of the Information Division at the time of *EastEnders*' launch, said that when he joined the Corporation some years previously from ITV, he had found the BBC's attitude to publicity 'rather naïve'. He was fully aware of the potential for a corporate publicist of a long-running programme such as *Coronation Street*, which during his time in commercial television was used to good effect to

offset anything the BBC might be doing. 'You'd always want to kill a story. You could do this with the *Street*'. After he joined the corporation, his new colleagues 'talked and looked longingly at the *Street*, but they weren't really sure something like *Coronation Street* was really them'. The BBC's own soaps were on the radio, 'Mrs. Dale's Diary and the *Arbors* – for nice people, for middle class people' (Interview 13/3/2002).

To be fair, in the unique position in British society occupied by the BBC, publicity, no less than programme making could be a minefield and the BBC was as usual, prey to attacks from all sides – from middle England if it tried to be popular, and from 'Granadaland' if it did not. At the time *EastEnders* launched in early 1985, the BBC was still smarting over the *Thorn Birds* affair of the previous year. The BBC had promoted this American series rather heavily, in a deliberate attempt at giving it 'a sense of occasion' as the ITV companies customarily did and paid a heavy price in terms of bad press for doing so. The received wisdom in the BBC prior to this had been that good programmes were their own best advertisement and that a lot of ITV material had to be sold heavily because it was not very good. It was however recognised that the self-evident quality of BBC programmes was no longer necessarily apparent to the general public and more effort was needed, hence the unusual amount of trailing this programme received. A scheduling accident – in those days broadcasters kept details of their schedules secret – led to it clashing with *Brideshead Revisited*, ITV's home grown drama triumph of the year and the Corporation was lashed for driving standards down in a headlong rush for ratings success. BBC1 Controller Alan Hart, interviewed some twenty years after the event, while defending a more professional approach to promotion still winced slightly at mention of the affair, admitting that perhaps they should have inaugurated this new approach with a domestic product (Interview 15/3/2002).

### ***EastEnders***

However, reservations were set aside and with *EastEnders*, the BBC was to have its own engine for publicity. It was recognised by Hart a year before launch that the programme would require sustained and professional promotion if it were to succeed (BBCWAC Television Weekly Programme Review 24/4/1985 minute 98). It was decided to appoint a dedicated publicity officer, Cheryl Ann Wilson, to the programme. For the BBC this was breaking new ground and an indication of the importance to the Corporation of the programme itself and a recognition that publicity in the prevailing conditions would have to be handled in a more systematic and professional way than heretofore. Previously, a publicity officer had been responsible for a whole genre or an area and Wilson had worked with *EastEnders*' producer Julia Smith before when her duties covered drama more generally. *EastEnders* was also made on a permanent set at Elstree studios, and Wilson was

the first publicity officer to be based outside Television Centre, which allowed her a degree of autonomy not normally given (Peter Rosier Interview 13/3/2002).

The *Sunday Times* wrote of plans for the series in April 1984 almost a year before the launch – ‘BBC Soap Goes East’ ran the headline (*Sunday Times* 22/4/1984). London was chosen it said to distinguish it from *Coronation Street* in the north and *Crossroads* in the Midlands. In July, as preparations for the programme were underway on the Elstree set, Smith was anxious to avoid any publicity until the time was right and visits to the site were restricted, because she ‘did not want eventual Press announcements to be pre-empted’ (BBC WAC SE2/2/1 *Eastenders* Lot-Memo K Clement to his asst. 9/7/1984).

The *EastEnders* lot at Elstree was like a separate realm ruled over by the formidable Smith. For Cheryl Wilson, the set up had unexpected advantages, she was able to make contacts and use synergies which in the normal course of her work would be unavailable.

I was next door to the set designers and across the way from the script editors which was something that was totally unknown and my background had been being with the publicists... I mention this because it was incredibly useful having all these people around me that were writing and administering the scripts, people who were designing the set next door in fact one could pop in and socialize with and down the corridor were the production team. (Interview 18/3/2002)

As the months went by and the set took shape and the production team moved in for rehearsals, Elstree became increasingly interesting to the press. It had been well known to journalists from its days as the ATV studios, as Wilson recalled, ‘It had a huge affection in the press because they used to go out there and spend days getting drunk there in the bar and not having to go to their offices’. After initially keeping the press out, it was now time to invite them in and in October 1984, after she had ‘systematically contacted every newspaper, every magazine in this country’, fifty eight photographers came to the official press launch at Elstree. The normal drama launch garnered about twelve journalists. The sheer size of the enterprise made the programme attractive to all kinds of publications, and the painstakingly constructed permanent set itself became a magnet, ‘because whether it was a lifestyle magazine or a motorcycle magazine there was something in it for them’. For example, in keeping with the high production values which the BBC insisted be maintained, the paints used on the set reflected the one hundred plus different types of brick in common use in London buildings, so paint manufacturers wanted to do articles on paints. The *Express Dairy* milk float complete with extra, which can be seen at times as part of the Albert Square backdrop is still, Wilson thinks in demand by advertisers. In December press photographers were invited to a

photocall to introduce Roly the poodle with actress Laetitia Dean who played Den and Angie's daughter, Sharon Watts. The BBC began trailing the programme fully seven weeks before the first episode, gradually building up in frequency until they were sometimes twice-daily.

The depth and range of publicity was unprecedented. After the launch, the BBC set up as an experiment, an '*EastEnders* Line' with British Telecom so people could phone up to find out what had happened if they missed an episode (BBC WAC T66/53/1 '*EastEnders* Gossip Line' Draft News release 19/2/1985). By February 21<sup>st</sup> 18,000 people had used the service. In May 1985, Smith and Holland arranged the release of a song, *Killing Time*, in celebration of the love affair of Angie Watts with builder Tony Carpenter, by (as the publicity blurb ran) Barry Blood, a direct descendant of Captain Blood, the buccaneer. And so it went on. In September the following year the BBC began to sell a video of the Den and Angie saga. The Corporation had been selling videos for some time but this was the first to be available from supermarkets. Sales of 50,000 were expected, which would outstrip the previous bestseller, the Wedding of Prince Charles which had sold 20,000 (BBCWAC T66/53/2 PA message RNEW714 TPO 3189 22/9/1986). In the same month it was announced that Nick Berry, 'Wicksy' in the programme was to release a recording of a song he had been seen penning in recent episodes at the piano in the Vic, the public house which was the scene of much of the action (BBC WAC T66/53/2 BBC Enterprises press release 23/9/1986). He was voted number one heart throb in a poll conducted by disc jockey Steve Wright for his BBC Radio 1 show (BBC WAC T66/53/2 PA message RNEW199 TPO 3255 29/9/1986). Synergy operated elsewhere, the ever-present Terry Wogan whose television chat show was the other prong of the early evening attack, regularly plugged the programme on his morning radio show. *EastEnders* was being sold abroad in Holland, Australia and the USA, where the new chairman Marmaduke Hussey was said to be promoting the programme. At home, in an example of how another British institution was waking up to the benefits of good PR, the set had been visited by Princess Diana (BBCWAC T66/53/2 TV Press Office log 31/10/1986). In the USA, the programme was promoted by Lionheart Television, 'The BBC in America' as a rival to *Dynasty*, 'With guts instead of glamour and grit instead of glitz....Look out Blake and Krystle, here come the *EastEnders*!' (BBC Registry CO 35 'Give a Royal Welcome to England's Number One Family' promotional brochure Lionheart Television).

Richard Dyer (1998, first published 1979) discusses the manufacture of stardom in terms of the 'dialectic' between production and consumption, between what the producers, in his case the Hollywood studios offer, and what the audience demands. The activities above are all clearly examples of the former. There is another aspect to this. There are also the strategies, needs and ambitions of the



actors themselves and of other sections of the media, in this case principally the press, who are crucial to the achievement of celebrity status and its nature. As Rojek notes, 'Mass media representation is the key principle in the formation of celebrity culture' (2001, 13). These needs, strategies and ambitions may not always be in accord with one another but this 'web of conflicting interests' (Turner 2004, 36) nevertheless produces celebrity. The BBC wanted to engage the interest of the popular press in order to promote an important programme but as we shall see, in so doing it found itself riding a tiger it could not hope to control.

For Cheryl Wilson, the programme's publicist, being integrated into the production team also meant having the actors around for fifty weeks in the year, allowing her to interview all of them individually, providing more grist for her publicist's mill. They were as individuals a publicist's gift. 'We had twenty five people in the cast, a huge amount of diversity', but they were to prove a mixed blessing. The drive for authenticity had led Smith and script editor Tony Holland, who created the characters and storylines to select actors with an East End background. They brought with them verisimilitude and a certain naturalistic charm and some of them played roles with which they were familiar in their daily lives – they looked comfortable selling fruit from market stalls because that is what they had done previously. Wilson had been carefully priming the press in the months around the launch, whetting their appetite with juicy tid-bits of information on this or that character, something about this or that actor. Once the programme launched, such delicate fare was not enough and the press began to demand stronger meat, a development which gives not only an early example of the kind of feeding frenzy we are so familiar with now but showed up contradictions in BBC attitudes to such coverage.

The British tabloid press had begun to change from the late 1960s. In a sparkling account in their *Stick it up Your Punter*, Peter Chippindale and Chris Horrie document how Rupert Murdoch turned the loss-making *Sun* into a profitable concern by largely eschewing news and concentrating on sex, scandal, sport and television. Other papers followed suit. Only three days after *EastEnders* aired for the first time, the *Sun*, joined by most of the tabloid press broke the news that one of the actors, Lesley Grantham had served a prison sentence for a murder he had committed while on National Service in Germany. What happened next is curious. Amidst calls from MPs for him to be sacked, the press continued to dig up further gory details on the affair, interviewing family members of the victim in Germany and former army and cell-mates of Grantham, while the BBC defended him, saying he had paid his debt to society, had turned his life around etc. His character meanwhile, went from strength to strength, eventually becoming a byword for villainy, or what Rojek has termed a *celeactor*, 'a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalised feature of popular culture' (2001, 23). Originally envisaged as secondary characters by the creators of the

programme, 'Dirty Den' as he became known, and his screen wife Angie became pivotal figures in the programme. One of the advantages for broadcasters of the serial format is that characters can be tried out, re-formed, promoted or killed off depending on how they play to the public. There was undoubtedly a frisson between these two actors, based on their skills as performers and the undoubted quality of the scripts, but that Grantham's real past added to this cannot be discounted.

Having drawn blood, the press combed the backgrounds of other cast members and found, as they say in the movies, 'paydirt'. The real life stories of the actors proved every bit as interesting as their on-screen personas. More so. The programme press log shows the BBC fending off enquiries about a succession of actors who were found to have had convictions for theft, grievous bodily harm, drug offences and the like, some of them serious enough to warrant spells in prison. Authenticity came at a price (BBCWAC T66/53/1 TV Press Office 1984-85 *EastEnders*). Inevitably, some of the actors had 'peeled off' for the cameras earlier in their careers. Some, once outed in the press for some indiscretion or other were to give the kind of confessional interview we are so familiar with now: 'How I beat Heroin, by *EastEnders* star Sandy' ran a headline in the *Daily Mirror* (8/5/1985) wherein the actress concerned thanked her family, friends and her own strong will and professed gratitude at being able to contribute to the paper's (no doubt selfless) campaign against drug abuse.

There was a nexus of relationships here – between the cast, the producer, the press and the BBC in the shape of the programme publicist, Cheryl Ann Wilson but also BBC publicity at a corporate level. The BBC wanted publicity for its programme, the actors similarly but principally for themselves and their careers. The press wanted headlines. Within the BBC were the information division and the programme publicist, corporate and programme, global and local if you will. The global needs of the corporation did not always coincide with those of the local publicist, nor did those of the press, nor of the actors.

What was happening to *EastEnders* to use a phrase from Peter Rosier, the aforementioned Head of the Information Division at the BBC was that the programme was leaving 'the ghetto that is television' and becoming a self-generating news story. In this process, described latterly as 'a kind of twisted symbiosis' (Giles, cited in Turner 2004, 36) the interests of all of the parties involved both within and without the BBC sometimes coincided and sometimes did not. Rosier explains the notion of 'the television ghetto' thus: the first publicity a programme gets is in the shape of reviews, of previews, written by the experts in television. Thereafter, especially if the programme succeeds, it moves out of the hands of these people and onto the news pages, and 'It is no longer in the ghetto

that is television'. For most dramas, the 'preview/review ghetto' is necessary, especially for one-off plays and short series, which would otherwise appear out of and disappear back into the ether unnoticed. For a long running series such as *EastEnders* however, 'You just need your brand up on the news pages. Everyone knows what it is, it's a brand'. Additionally, in publicity, Rosier says, they had long looked for a programme where 'any publicity was good publicity,' and *EastEnders* gave them it.

This was not always comfortable for those closer to the programme. For Cheryl Ann Wilson, out with the actors and production staff at Elstree, the cast became like family, a tight knit unit which (in)famously fought like cats and dogs behind the scenes but presented a united face when threatened from outside. She did not subscribe to Rosier's philosophy.

I felt that very strongly that there were some people in publicity who were "all publicity is good publicity". I didn't subscribe to that point of view, never have, because I don't think that all publicity was good publicity, because there were people with feelings there. I was close to people there not to have to bear the brunt of their bruised feelings or if something terrible happened.

Shooting outside of the studio complex was always difficult as it was not possible to guarantee the press would not be tipped off, as they were Wilson suspects by someone within the BBC when they went on a supposedly secret shoot to Venice, only to find the press waiting for them and in possession of their itinerary. When the programme really broke, as personal story after personal story appeared in the papers, the corporate publicists rubbed their hands in glee, 'People like us,' said Rosier, 'from afar, 3 miles up the road, we said it's good for the program,' the only caveat to this being as long as the Governors were not complaining. For Wilson, it came to feel more like a state of siege, with journalists surrounding the studios, renting rooms which overlooked the lots, buying scripts from crew members and their families, and even in the case of the *Daily Mirror*, spying from above from proprietor Robert Maxwell's personal helicopter.

Some of the time Wilson was fending off the unwanted attentions of the press, at others those whom she was defending were not sure that was what they wanted. This went as far as Julia Smith who thought having helicopters hovering overhead was 'quite fun,' some of the time, but would then demand to know what was being done to stop it. The reply was, according to Wilson 'short of shooting a helicopter out of the sky' not much. Journalists were under increasing pressure from their editors to get stories, often at the rate of one per day and resorted to making things up. When she complained the response was often far from satisfactory,

I did have blazing rows with them quite often. I can remember getting on to the *Sun* about things and I was put on the squawk box [intercom] and I could hear the whole night news room jeering at me and screaming at me.

The actors, many of them inexperienced and tasting celebrity for the first time, both courted and shied away from the press. They had all been told that they would become household names and that life would alter as a result, but no one quite believed it until it happened. There were high speed car chases – Lesley Grantham’s real wife, heavily pregnant, was booked into four different hospitals in order to give birth only to find that in one of them a supposed midwife was in fact a reporter from the *News of the World* in disguise. Younger cast members were befriended by Max Clifford, then learning his trade as a publicist, and were at first delighted at getting free entry into glamorous nightclubs but dismayed when the paparazzi appeared and ‘they couldn’t snog in the corner with their latest boyfriend or girlfriend’. Some complained he was ‘taking over their lives’ and wanted her help to extricate them from his clutches. At times ‘It was a bit like being a hospital almoner’. The coverage could be intimidating and some of the actors took to telephoning Wilson in the middle of the night if they happened to be involved in rows in nightclubs so she was forewarned of the inevitable headlines the following morning. What was very clear was that they were all in uncharted territory and ‘everybody was sort of learning on the job whether they happened to be the production designer, the producer or the publicity officer’. This was true of the corporation as a whole.

### Conclusion

In Roman mythology, the penates, and their associated lesser gods kept the household safe, sound and prosperous, guarded the doors, prevented the food from spoiling, were the spirits of the ancestors. At meals they were given their due portion and once a year evil manifestations among them were exorcised. Today, at tea time the minor stars of the small screen can be thought of as performing a similar function. Though we no longer make them offerings (our pizza and chips we keep strictly for ourselves) we sit down loyally week after week and watch with admiration figures who very often look much like ourselves and who lead lives much like our own, (though it has to be said with far fewer long-lost relations)—their mundane triumphs, tragedies, kind deeds and villainies. For *EastEnders* aims, as in the original formulation of the BBC’s founding father John Reith, to keep us informed, educated and entertained, though not of course in equal degree or in that order. As *The Archers* had instructed post-war British farmers in modern agricultural methods, the characters in *EastEnders*, like the penates help to keep us safe, playing out the kind of social dramas and situations in which we might find ourselves involved in real life, so we might better understand them and avoid the pitfalls.

Soap operas are private life made public. We peer behind the curtains of a street, a square, a hotel, a village and have privileged access to the domestic scenes therein. We learn details about our fictional neighbours which we could not expect to in real life and to which we would have no right if we could. The dramatised private lives portrayed on the screen in *EastEnders*, of necessity emotionally heightened, were mirrored in the press by the lurid stories of the real lives of the actors concerned, accurate or exaggerated, true or false. The programme makers had set out entirely honourably to produce a portrayal of working class urban life, which was at the same time entertaining but true to its subject. Its main commercial rival *Coronation Street*, though it has become more 'realist' since, depended on humour and characterisation for its success. Rarely did the real world intrude. *EastEnders* was to be different and storylines dealt with racism, drink problems, teenage pregnancy, unmarried mothers, old age, overcrowding, teenage runaways etc. All of this generated public discussion, praise from audiences but criticism as well. As Julia Smith repeatedly said, such stories were never tacked on but arose naturally out of the characters, but in keeping with BBC ethics 'Each social issue tackled is researched with the organizations concerned... so they can give positive follow-up to viewers in a similar situation and *Radio Times* often backs this up with their help line information service.' They had been praised by the Council for One Parent Families about their portrayal of teenage pregnancy and they had heard that teachers were using the program to initiate discussion on teenage sex, racism and other issues. What they aimed for was to stimulate discussion 'But not moralizing or giving glib answers to social problems'(BBC RAPIC A4284 *EastEnders* part 1 01/11/84-31/12/87 memo from Cheryl Ann Wilson to Chief Press Officer Keith Samuel 5/11/1985).

However, in the maelstrom of press coverage, the storylines which were developed out of a dedication to realism and the professionalism of public service broadcasting, and the real-life addictions, convictions, romances and separations of the cast, became blurred together. All became the story equally. For the press it was all good copy. Personal history or fiction, character or actor. Condemnations of the language and moral tone of the programme by clean-up TV crusader Mary Whitehouse appeared side-by-side with titillating accounts of the latest sexual indiscretion off the screen. Things have never quite reached the level of surreality achieved in the US by the saga of Murphy Brown's pregnancy, which in part mirrored the Michelle Fowler unmarried teenage pregnancy in *EastEnders*. It became a major, if bizarre political story with Vice-Presidential candidate Dan Quayle condemning the character Murphy, the actress, Candice Bergen and the programme makers for undermining American family life. When the character eventually decided to have the (fictional) baby, Quayle sent the studio a (real) toy elephant to show he had no hard feelings. When one of his aides was asked why

the vice president had sent a real toy to a fictional baby, he replied 'You tell me where fiction begins and reality ends in this business' (Fiske 1994, 26).

*EastEnders* was a huge success. It had been the received wisdom that such long-running serials would need two years to attract and hold an audience. *EastEnders* overtook *Coronation Street* in less than a year. Part of that success can be attributed to the attention the BBC paid to publicising the programme. The aim was to capture the imagination of the press and the public and in this the BBC succeeded. However, once on the news pages the BBC lost all hope of controlling the type of coverage the programme received. A process began in which newspapers tried to out do each other with the latest revelation and the private lives of the actors concerned became common currency.

Subsequently, as those relatively minor actors and their successors ever since became influenced by self-appointed publicists, fixers, agents – all those professions which purport to give their clients an advantage in dealing with 'the media' – their lives became increasingly not only public property, but were also shaped in very real ways by that very media. Now they go places where the media expect them to go, they wear what the media expect them to wear, behave how the media expect them to behave. Watching television in the UK at the turn of the twenty first century it is clear that for many people, the surrender of the right to a life which is in any way private seems a fair exchange for even a fleeting moment of that old impostor, fame. This did not begin with *EastEnders*, nor was it the intention, nor even foreseeable by those who created the programme, but the more full-blooded entry of the BBC into the business of publicity is nevertheless a significant milestone along the way.

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