

Production Note: *The Tip Off* was produced as an audio series. If possible, we encourage you to listen to this episode wherever you get your podcasts. The following transcript is for reference only and may contain typos. Please confirm accuracy before quoting.

Maeve: Zak's heart was pounding as the cold morning air fogged up the car windows. He was trying to remember his backstory as they neared the location. But they swung around the corner, and no one was there. Zak was stunned. Had it all fallen apart already? But we don't start here. I'm Maeve McClenaghan. If you're joining us for the first time, welcome. This is the start of a brand new series. And as always, we begin with the tip off.

Zak: So I'm Zak Garner-Purkis. I'm the chief reporter at myLondon. At the time of reporting the story, I was the Head of Content at *Construction News*.

Maeve: *Construction News* is a monthly business-to-business news outlet, also known as B2B. Zak's role involved writing new stories, doing interviews, covering reports and writing up press releases. It was a job that involved a deep knowledge of the industry but wasn't necessarily an obvious place to do investigations.

Zak: Working at titles like *Construction News* – because you're more of a part of an industry in a way that maybe you wouldn't be if you're doing local journalism or national journalism – there's sometimes a wariness of like, I don't know whether to say not 'upset' people, but focus on kind of like deals and stuff that is not really going deep.

Maeve: But somewhere within the usual news stories, Zak started to notice things. Things he wanted to dig into. One area was modern slavery. Around 40 million people worldwide are in modern slavery. It can include things like human trafficking, forced labour, child exploitation, forced marriage and domestic servitude. It goes on all around us, including in the UK.

Zak: When they look at modern slavery, the majority of cases in the UK or the largest number are, within labour of some kind, within the construction sector, or gardening and that type of thing. But you never really see stories about it, or you didn't used to see stories about it. It tended to focus on nail bars or car washes. And so, at

Construction News, I thought, well, there's a real opportunity that we can do this, because we understand the sector and can kind of get in there in a way.

Maeve: Zak started reading around as much as he could. And one day he set up an interview that would set things really rolling. Zak had gone to interview the Met Police's then Head of Modern Slavery, Phil Brewer. It was supposed to be a simple interview story. But right at the end, Brewer dropped a bomb.

Zak: He mentioned to me, we know that there's stuff going on, but we don't have the resources to go in there and investigate and deal with it. So it's worth you having a look at it. He gave me specific locations. I just started going down to them.

Maeve: So he started waking up early, dressing as if he was heading off for a day of manual labour, and would then set out of his front door.

Zak: I don't drive, so it was always horrendously, like a four o'clock, as early a Tube as you can get.

Maeve: Zak would arrive in the early mornings and find groups of men waiting outside builders' yards or shops. They would often be speaking Romanian, and many seemed to know each other. He knew he couldn't just go up and start asking questions. But he wanted to understand better what he was seeing. So he watched.

Zak: So they're relatively easy places to blend, because I'm the kind of bloke if I wear the right clothes, I could just blend with them and be another person that's just looking for work, although I probably did stand out in a lot of ways. The one in Old Kent Road had a McDonald's. It was well-positioned that if you sat in the window, you could kind of observe it. And that was a really good spot for me because I could just watch it without it being as obvious whereas other places I did have to kind of like walk about.

Maeve: So for days, and then weeks, he would watch the groups. It soon became clear that when a van pulled up, it was a builder looking for cheap labour. Most of the men were there to work, but some didn't get into the vans themselves. Instead, these were the ones negotiating, organising. These were the gangmasters. Zak took it all in, always careful to never stick around too long or make his presence too obvious. But he wanted to know more. And he realised the only way to do that was going to be talking to them and themselves. So he managed to find a Romanian translator. And together

they set out. They would go to these builder's yards and quietly approach the men they found there.

Zak: It was always a real battle to get anyone to talk in those situations. Like, I had a brilliant translator, Razvan, and he had been a journalist in the past. So, it's always really helpful when you've got someone that kind of gets it, but people just, they didn't want to speak and because there had been stories done in the past by tabloid papers, they'd been secretly filmed. And it had been like "look at these people undercutting British workers" kind of thing. They were highly suspicious of journalists. And there was also a sense about "you're just going to take my story, and you're all gonna make money out of it." And while that wasn't directly true [...] it's hard not to have sympathy with these people, because they're there because they're in quite a desperate situation.

Maeve: Zak would try and explain. And occasionally men would tell him useful insights. But often, he had to work hard to get anything out of them.

Zak: When I first went out, they said to me, they were like, "We're hungry. Like, why should we speak to you when I'm hungry?" And I know you're not supposed to do this, so me and the translator went to Tesco, or whatever, and just bought a load of sandwiches and crisps and stuff, and just gave them to them, and that experience of interacting with those people was one of the major drives that I had for doing the subsequent stories, nobody was speaking for them. In lots of ways, it was like, they weren't able to stand up for themselves. And people were just exploiting for it as well.

Maeve: Zak kept on travelling out to these building suppliers, trying his best to get the men to talk. One day, he and his translator arrived, but he realised something was off. They'd gone to a site in Seven Sisters, in North London.

Zak: And it was just that atmosphere was just bad. There was people having a really kind of aggressive argument. And then it just shifted, where me and the interpreter seemed to be the focus of what was going on and like, a guy body checked me as he went past. And we were getting a little bit surrounded.

There were some people who were Romani so they were switching from Romanian, which my translator understood, to Romani language, which he *didn't* understand. And

so we didn't know what they were saying, but they were talking about us, so we were like, we have to get out of here now.

Maeve: He and the translator got out of there quick, but he didn't let it stop him. He kept going back. Slowly, Zak began to understand more about where these men came from. Many had travelled from Romania, having been promised that they would make good money in the UK. The traffickers exploited family connections or friendships to win the men's trust. Many came from the same towns or villages. When they arrived in the UK, they were put to work for as little as a couple of pounds an hour working long shifts on dangerous building sites. Their gangmasters had control over them. They knew there was nowhere they could go to for help. And the more Zak heard, the more he understood the scale of the issue.

Zak: What a lot of the industry would do is they'd just kind of dismiss it as like, oh, you know, these are just people that are going and kind of fixing people's kitchens and stuff. Just happening on a small scale, with unscrupulous landlords, ripping people off. And so a lot of the way that I started to think about the story was like, *Well, how do I show it's happening in major projects? But also the kind of criminal elements which are at play there, as well.*

Maeve: And slowly it dawned on him that there was only one way to get it. He was going to have to go undercover.

Zak had been reporting on exploitation and modern day slavery in the construction industry for months. But there was still more he wanted to know.

Zak: I knew that there were those elements there, where it's organised and controlled elements of these sites. But in what way could I flush them out?

Maeve: And then one day, he was contacted by a producer, a woman called Shy, who worked for *BBC Three*, and was making a series called *Blindboy Undestroys the World* - an unusual show in which Irish satirist, musician and presenter, Blindboy Boatclub, would delve into deep and polemic issues: a mix of gonzo journalism and satirical commentary. And they wanted to do an episode about modern day slavery in the UK.

Zak: We started discussing different ways in which you would be able to find out where people were going to. So some of the original ideas that we played with were like,

Could we have people on mopeds that would follow vans to see what sites they ended up at? And then it occurred to me it was like, well, actually, it's the transaction, that would be the way to do it. Because there would be significant deals that would be done. And obviously, it would be a hierarchy of people running the workers. So the idea of posing as a potential customer kind of evolved from wanting to demonstrate how far it went to make people sit up and take notice, kind of this is where it starts, and it's going on, on your doorstep.

Maeve: The producer liked the idea. And they started to develop how they would do it.

Zak: So I kind of devised this idea and laid it out. And then Shy and the BBC team, they helped to refine it and got a lawyer to say "Okay, what are the parameters of modern slavery?" So we had like a framework [...] we'd go through the hours that they work, and it was to be under minimum wage, that it would be unsafe. Essentially going through the different things to tick all the boxes to demonstrate that this was actually modern slavery.

Maeve: Now Zak knew these building yards. He had seen enough times how the deals went down. So he thought he would be the perfect person to go undercover for the sting. But the production team weren't so sure.

Zak: They were like, "No, you don't have any experience of doing it." And it's a potentially, you know, a risky, dangerous situation.

Maeve: Zak put his foot down.

Zak: You know, it's often if you're in the junior specialist publication that you don't have as big a name, you plug in sources and stuff, and then you don't perhaps get the credit at the end of it. So I was like, "No, I want to do this, myself."

Maeve: But there was a lot to do first. He had to concoct a plausible cover story. They decided he would pose as a builder who needed some cheap labour to finish the job.

Zak: It was like, we had a project that was running late, and we needed to get people in. And I mean, writing about construction, you deal with those stories all the time. So I guess I kind of fused together little things that I knew and was familiar with.

Maeve: The story would mean he could talk to the gangmasters and really push them on the limits of what the men would do. Asking whether they would work long hours without breaks. Do dangerous work without safety equipment. And work for way below the minimum wage. But there was still one thing he needed: a fake name. Finally, he decided on Ray Chamberlain.

Zak: The name actually always makes me laugh, because the reason that I had my cover name as Ray was because my uncle's called Ray, and he's an electrician. And then I think just used to live off Chamberlain Road. So they were just two things that I could remember.

Maeve: The team decided to pick locations that Zak knew well from all his scoping. Being on familiar territory would hopefully play in their favour. They rehearsed the story over and over again. They even had a safeword they would use if things got a bit hairy.

Zak: It's a bit like rock climbing where they say, "Look, the best thing you can do is climb down off the wall" if you get into a situation you don't want to be [in]. You've always got that option. You can just kind of drop and fall safely. It started to develop, and the safeword was there if you just had to get out of there.

Maeve: Zak thought back to this time in Seven Sisters when the men had got aggressive and had heard of worse things happening. Men bundled into the back of vans against their will. Violent gangmasters who took no prisoners. But there wasn't time to dwell. He tried to hold his nerve. Zak would be working with Matei, a Romanian-speaking journalist who would pose as his translator. So it was, Zak turned up at Matei's house at 3 in the morning, buzzing with adrenaline. The BBC team took them through the plans one last time, and they got mic'd up.

Zak: I had a polo shirt. And then he had, like, a kind of plaid shirt with the buttonhole cameras. But you've got strapped up like a kind of mummy, wrapped around you with this kind of monitor. And yeah, making sure that you've studied in the right place, checking that the camera's working and that you've not got something falling in front of it. And yeah, I guess that's when you're kind of like, "Okay, we're really doing this now. We're not messing about."

Maeve: Equipment in place, it was time to go. Zak and Matei bundled into a van they had hired for the occasion and set off into the dark North London streets.

Zak: It was absolutely freezing. It was just so cold. I remember I was wearing thick socks, two coats and a hat and gloves and everything. And I was still freezing.

Maeve: Matei was driving, but just like Zak, he was nervous.

Zak: He kept stalling the van. You're already pretty nervous and anxious. It didn't feel like the safest journey.

Maeve: Stopping and starting, they drove to the builders' merchant yards they had scoped out previously. As Matei heaved the van around the corner, Zak's heart was pounding in his chest. This was it. Everything they had been working towards. But the site before him was the last thing he had expected.

Zak: There weren't actually people there. Like we've gone to all this trouble. Like we're all here with straps. And we've got the hidden cameras on. We're in the van, driving in this freezing cold, very early morning. And we're not even going to be able to do the story.

Maeve: Trying not to feel too dejected, they moved to Plan B. Another location. Another yard they'd scoped out. But, yet more problems.

Zak: The second place we went to, we spoke to a guy and it was just clear that he was not the type of person who we were looking for. You know, the line was, "Can you get us some workers?" and he was like, "Oh, yeah, I can," kind of "I'll call my mates" type thing. But he just obviously was not running any kind of scheme. So we've gone to three different locations. I'm thinking this is just not going to work, feeling, you know, really anxious about it. And I – okay, well, there is one more that's relatively close that we can try. So we drive through there. And as soon as we pulled up, I knew it. I was like, *This one is different*, because the guys were just, they had a different demeanour about them, like they meant business. They were like a gang of blokes rather than being kind of like a smattering of individuals.

Maeve: It was on. Zak and Matei had worked out a plan. Zak, who's posing as a head builder, would stay in the van. When he'd been watching the yards, he had noticed that if English builders stepped down from their vehicles, they were often swamped by men offering their services. But he wanted to find out who the negotiators were. The

gangmasters. They were the ones they wanted to draw out. So it was Matei who headed out, leaving Zak to wait.

Zak: And that, I guess that was when the nerves started to rattle a bit, because I'm watching Matei talking to the guys and kind of gesturing over.

Maeve: Zak slid out of the van and made his way over to where Matei and the gang master were standing. But the look on his translator's face was panic. What was wrong? Had the men guessed what they were up to? No. It was something a little more basic than that. Matei had forgotten Zak's undercover name.

Zak: He came over and kind of, like, gestured and then was silent. And it was a bit of an awkward thing. We were looking at each other. And he told me afterwards it was because he had forgot[ten] my cover name.

Maeve: Luckily, Zak remembered. He was Ray Chamberlain. Still, he was fighting to keep his cool.

Zak: You're just thinking, they can see the camera, even though they're obviously not. I think it's something in human nature where it's like you're hyper aware of it, so you make that assumption that everyone else is hyper aware of it. Then when we started speaking, you just switch into sort of a mode of like, *I need to see whether I can get what I need to get*. You know, good guys, they've got to work long hours, just ridiculous things like they've got to go up on the roof and use a blowtorch. I've not got any equipment. They can't have any equipment. They're not gonna need any of that. And, you know, going through all of these things, and just adding them on bit by bit and haggling with them.

Maeve: Here's a clip from the undercover reporting - the team later distorted the voice of the suspected gangmaster, but you'll hear Zak haggling with him...

[Audio from undercover-filming, which later aired on BBC Three]

Zak: So we need some guys, and we're manning up on two jobs. And I need someone that can sort people out. You've got to be working like seven days, long hours.

Matei: (Speaking Romanian)

Zak: Yeah, I need reliable people. No funny business. On the price, what is the lowest we can do?

Gangmaster: Seventy seven.

Zak: Alright, but seven days?

Gangmaster: Yeah.

Zak: And long days?

Gangmaster: Yeah. Fifteen hours on the site.

Zak: We need hard workers. All right.

[Undercover audio clip ends]

Zak: And then when I listen back to the thing, it's like, I've almost adopted some weird voice for it. But I guess it was just trying to kind of hold my nerve and be convincing and assertive. The whole morning seemed like, you build it up a lot, you've got that anxiety, those nerves. You don't know how it's going to go. It seems like nothing's going to happen, which then at the very last place that we went to, it all just came together.

Maeve: Hardly able to believe it, Zak and Matei headed back to his house. In the days after they tried texting the gangmaster. They wanted to get more information. One thing in particular had stood out. When boasting of his men's experience, the gangmaster had alleged that they had worked on a big rail project in a Southwest town. This was fascinating to Zak.

Zak: This is a project that's publicly funded that they've gone and worked on.

Maeve: But eventually the texts dried up. And Zak never did get exactly who had hired the men for the rail project. Still, the sting had been a huge success. Zak was excited, ready to see the story go out. But he was getting ahead of himself. This was for a TV

documentary. And they can be slow. Months passed. And there was no sign of a green light to go ahead.

Zak: Like we had a few follow-up calls. They showed the footage to the lawyers and all of that kind of stuff. Then it was over very quickly.

Maeve: To try and stave off the frustration, Zak kept digging. A source tipped him off about a criminal trial that was going on in Suffolk Crown Court. A prosecution under the Modern Day Slavery Act, which was digging into construction work. So it was that Zak found himself at the courthouse, day after day.

Zak: I could see the pattern repeated of where they go to a rural area of Romania. You know, often they have links to lots of the victims. And you know, it's kind of "Oh, go and work with my cousin's mate or whatever." And then they turn up and they take the passport off them and all the kind of classic exploitative practises that take place. But sitting through days and days of evidence, although like classically, when you do that, it's not exactly like a riveting or exciting experience, but it helped me to really understand it, because it had happened with so many other people.

Maeve: All these details that came out in the court case built up just how the chain of exploitation worked. But at the courthouse, Zak was struck by just how quiet things were.

Zak: I'd have to ask for the key for the press room or whatever. And there was never anybody about. You occasionally had some agency or someone from *the Daily Mail* that would drop in and there were tons of cases which it would have been great to have people sitting in and getting a better understanding of all of this stuff. Because I know for me it was, you know, enhanced my knowledge tenfold rather than just reading the press release.

Maeve: Throughout his research, Zak realised the complexity of modern day slavery cases within the construction industry. The men he spoke to, even those up in court, did not necessarily see themselves as victims. Many were older men from Eastern Europe, full of pride and carrying the hopes and pressures of families back home, who were waiting on them to send money back.

Zak: There were just so many horrible stories of people like, you know, 50-year-old Romanian blokes who had been picked up outside being queued, driven to Brighton, then told to paint like five flats over 18 hours or something. They've worked themselves into the ground, the person's taken at the end and told, "Oh, yeah, don't worry, I'll go and get your money now," and then just dumped on the street. That was a really common thing.

Maeve: It was too easy to brush the practice off as people offering ad hoc cheap labour for small-scale, individual projects. What Zak had seen was a huge exploitative system at work, with men duped into travel on false promises and then put to work on large-scale, even official projects, with little safety precautions. And for as little as £4.50 an hour. They felt like they couldn't go to the police, because they thought they were working illegally, even though in fact, they weren't. It was a sobering realisation. It has been months now since Zak went undercover. He's been publishing other stories based on his interviews and court reporting. But then, finally, one day BBC Three get in touch and tell him the documentary will be aired.

Maeve: It was not *quite* what Zak had been expecting.

BBC Three clip narrator: All over Britain, gangmasters keep trafficked men in horrible conditions, then bring them to these car parks for auction where asshole construction companies illegally hire whoever will work for the lowest price.

Zak: When it came out, I was kind of like, Wow, you know, it's really short.

Maeve: But it meant he was able to put out his *Construction News* article, charting all that he had found. The story made a splash. And all Zak's concerns about how the readers of this trade magazine would react to such a probing, critical story were proven to be unfounded.

Zak: Not everyone's always going to be on board with it. But I think what *Construction News* did during my time there was like, "We're gonna say stuff that might upset the audience. It might not be what they want to hear, but they need to hear it." And actually, the response was good. They respected us for doing that.

Maeve: And the work garnered award nominations too, including being highly commended at the prestigious British Journalism Awards.

Zak: That was amazing. I remember going down there and being on my own on a table and just yeah, it was all it's all a little bit overwhelming, but really good. To be like, alongside all of the amazing journalists that were there.

If there's young journalists at other specialist titles that think, "Oh I've got a really good knowledge about this topic" or "I've got contacts at the BBC or the FT, they can't develop the contacts like this because they don't write about the things that I write about," to be ambitious and go for it.

Maeve: Thanks to Zak Garner-Purkis for taking us through that great investigation. There's a link to his story in the show notes. Next time on *The Tip Off*...

(Preview) Episode 55 Speaker: *And you immediately start thinking, What was it that I was really seeing back then at Duncroft? Why was this 50-year-old man hanging around with under-16-year-olds, taking them out in his car on his own?*

That's all for this episode of *The Tip Off*. Please do review, subscribe and pass a word on to your friends. And you can visit our new website, thetipoffpodcast.com, to explore show notes and past seasons. This show is a co-production of Studiotobe. Thanks to Joaquin Alvarado and Ken Ikeda for their support. Maeve McClenaghan – that's me – created this podcast. Olivia Aylmer produced the show. Chloe Behrens handles audio production support. Claudia Meza does our audio mixing and sound design. Thanks also to Soobin Kim and Rushana Miller for their transcription support. Dice Muse composed our theme music. As always, stay tuned for more stories behind the headlines.