

Photo Finish:

TV OBs through the lens of **Steve Challes**

If you've ever worked on a TV outside broadcast, then chances are you'll have been photographed at work by intrigued members of the public as they pass by. But there's one individual – and his camera – whose presence at many an OB is almost guaranteed. Since the 1970s, Steve Challes has dedicated an extraordinary amount of his spare time to travelling extensively across the UK, in his quest to capture images of OB operations, cameras and crew. In recent years, Steve has taken to posting his photos on Twitter and Instagram, thereby building up a loyal following of TV crew, eager to discover whether they've been snapped in action. Jib operator and GTC member **Dan George** caught up with Steve (while on an OB, obviously!) to discover more about the passion and enduring fascination with our industry that led to this pictorial odyssey spanning five decades.



BBC Wales' OB Unit (CMCR13) crew begin rigging at Taunton Cricket Ground, 1979

A passion is born

I first met Steve about five years ago, while I was operating a Jimmy Jib on one of my regular gigs, *ITV Racing* for NEP at Chester Racecourse. We were just repositioning the jib with our relocation vehicle at one of the race starts when I spotted Steve out of the corner of my eye. I'd been following his Twitter feed for a few months and always love to see photos of myself and fellow camera teams in action. I invited him over to take a closer look at what we were doing – Steve was, and always has been, very considerate with regard to staying out of people's way and not interrupting anyone. Since then, Steve and his wife Sarah have become good friends, and it's always lovely to see them pop up on a job. For me, and the other camera ops I talk to, it's nice to have a record of what we do at work, and also to have something to show our non-TV friends and family back home, so we can say, "Look, see, we do actually work for a living; it's not all just standing around a tea urn, talking...!"

Growing up in Somerset, in the era of just three television channels, Steve had a passion for watching the output from OBs. Whether in sports, entertainment, events or drama, he has always felt that OBs are the true essence of television, providing the viewer with the ability to see events as they unfold, particularly when covered live. *"I was always impressed with the skills of the engineers, the camera, sound, lighting, vision and rigging teams – as well as the OB vehicles themselves. The sense of teamwork and determination of the OB family to produce the best coverage, in all weather conditions, really shone through the screen."*



Steve Challes at York Races, capturing Dan George in action

Although TV broadcasts of cricket matches from his local county ground in Taunton were rare in the 1970s, Steve would nevertheless eagerly await any dates when an OB was scheduled. *"I would go along and take some photos on my little Instamatic camera – from quite a distance though! I was always wary of disturbing crews at work – and still very much am now."* Matches from Taunton were usually covered by the BBC's Bristol Type 1 CMCR (Colour Mobile Control Room), with its Pye/Philips PC60 cameras. *"It was great to occasionally venture further afield to the Badminton Horse Trials (helpfully, my dad was responsible for the policing there for several years) and to see the London fleet with their EMI 2001 cameras!"*



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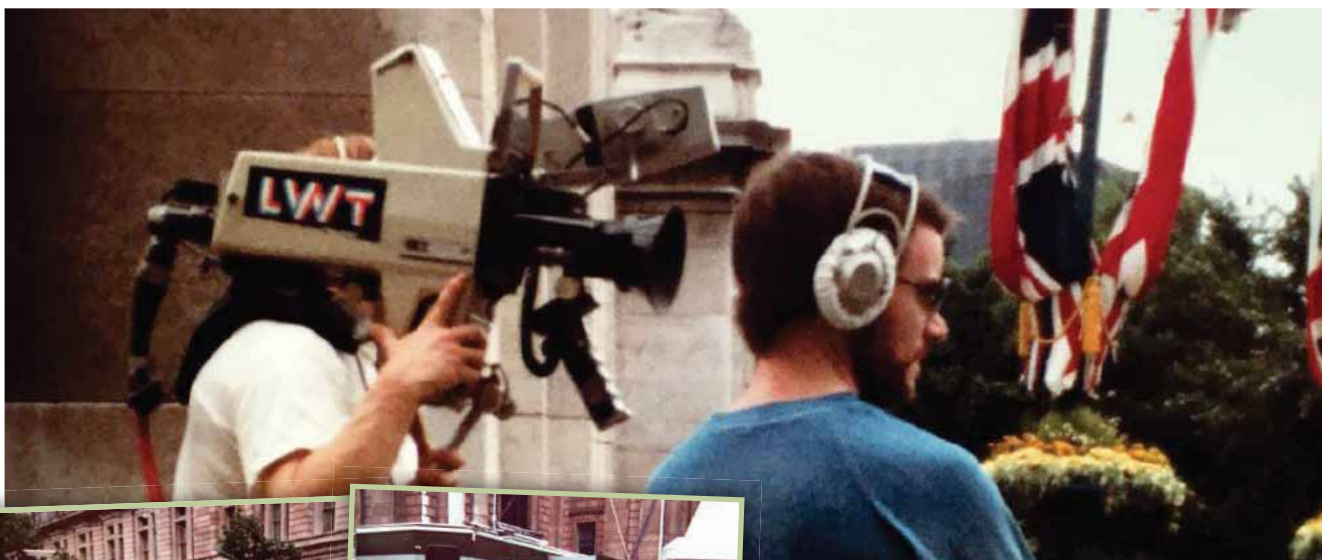
BBC cameraman John Pilblad at Wentworth World Match Play Golf in 1982

An embarrassment of riches

Steve recalls that 14 July 1973 was a pivotal date in the evolution of his passion because it provided him with not one but four OBs on TV to watch on the same day! BBC One's *Grandstand* programme was featuring the Open Golf from Troon, the British Grand Prix from Silverstone, horse racing from Newbury, and International Athletics from Crystal Palace, so Steve was glued to his television set all afternoon. When a crash at the Grand Prix led to a race restart, the BBC had to hastily reshuffle the schedules and transfer the Formula 1 across to BBC Two, due to an unexpected clash with the planned coverage of the golf, which was also reaching its own thrilling climax on BBC One. Consequently, thoroughly gripped by the nail-biting developments in each event, Steve had to constantly hop back and forth between the channels to keep up.



A BBC Bristol Pye/Philips PC60 camera and operator covering cricket at Taunton in 1974



An LWT IVC7000P handheld camera in position at Canada Gate during the Royal Wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981



Compare and contrast: Charles and Diana's wedding attracted all the key players in OBs. Above left: Anglia's OB1 unit; Above right: BBC CMCCR and Type 5 CMCR; Below: Thames TV's OB unit at St Paul's Cathedral

Steve's teenage years were marked by watching the annual cycle of OBs: major sporting occasions like the Boat Race, Grand National, Wimbledon, British Grand Prix and Open Golf, through to state events such as Remembrance weekend in November, all of

which still remain highlights for him to this day. He would always look out for the closing credits, so he could diligently note them all down in his weekly copy of the *Radio Times*. Steve points out that he has faithfully bought the *Radio Times* every week since 1974 (and the *TV Times* since 1979). "I still have them all now – nearly 50 years' worth, neatly boxed up in the garage, much to my family's amusement (although I claim it to be great contemporary history)!" He always enjoyed seeing the same familiar names pop up on the credits and would look out for camera operators such as John Pilblad operating the early generation of handheld colour cameras for the BBC (particularly at golf tournaments) or legends such as Bruce Miller.



The career that never was

On leaving school in 1978, Steve applied to join the BBC as a Technical Operator. Unfortunately, the interview didn't go very well and he was turned down for the role. Steve still has awful memories of how badly the interview went and so, to his eternal regret, he never pursued his dream of working in the television industry. Instead, he forged himself a successful career in accountancy, working initially for Taunton Cider, then moving on to be a Finance Director at Dyson, before finally becoming the Business Development Director at New Look.

Aside from his fulfilling career, Steve married Sarah in 1988, and they had their son, Ed, in 1989. "My family has always been – and still is – incredibly tolerant of being dragged around the country, seeking out OBs pretty much every weekend! Ed has made it into television; he's currently a news producer on ITV's *Good Morning Britain*, and it's always good to hear about his experiences."

Horse racing, royal weddings and boat races

With a combination of great outdoor locations all around the UK and the wide variety of camera types and positions spread across a large area, as well as the spectacle of the event itself, it's no surprise that horse racing has always been one of Steve's favourite OBs to watch on television. A particular fascination for him in the early days was seeing the output from the BBC's colour 'Roving Eye', through its various incarnations of Citroens, and then a Volvo, as well as the LWT Chevrolet equivalent. Not content with watching the OBs on TV though, Steve started to attend more and more race meetings – primarily to watch the OB crews in action rather than the horses!

It was in the 1980s when he really began to step up the number of photos he took, with the 1981 Royal Wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer in St Paul's Cathedral the first major OB he actually set out to capture. Taking the train up to London on one of the rig days, and carefully walking the route, he took pictures of the crews and units from the BBC, Thames, LWT and Anglia that he spotted along the way. It was also an exciting chance to see the new BBC Type 5 CMCRs in action.



One of the many camera positions for the Platinum Jubilee Trooping the Colour on Horse Guards Parade in June 2022

The Grand National at Aintree, which Steve first visited in 1990, is a particular highlight of his annual calendar. Covered by the BBC, Channel 4 and now ITV, Steve and Sarah often walk the course to see some of the (now 60+) camera positions. *"It has been fascinating to see how the production has developed each year, and the event is now covered so well for ITV by NEP and other specialist camera providers. I thoroughly enjoy getting back there each year and taking photos (and enjoying the racing too!)."*

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Hopefully, my photos have highlighted the skills, technology and scale of the industry and, for me, it has provided various contacts who, in turn, have been very helpful to me in gaining greater access.

A family affair

As a ticket-buying member of the public, the cost of admission fees to events has always limited Steve's ability to visit as many OBs as he would have liked – that and work and family duties too, of course. As their son Ed was growing up, an annual family tradition arose of cycling the Boat Race course from Putney to Mortlake to view the OB setup – a ritual that Steve has upheld every year to date. In 2022, the EMG OB team very kindly allowed Steve inside the trucks so he could better understand the engineering feat of this complex event. *"When I first started going to the Boat Race, a huge scaffold tower was constructed near the start at Putney to relay pictures by microwave links – how things have changed with there now being an RF 'mesh', drones and many waterborne cameras!"*

Over the years, Steve has built up quite an archive of photographs, with the latest tally establishing that there are approximately 8000 images! This collection is an historical record of how the OB industry has developed and advanced technically over recent decades. In particular, over the last 20 years Steve has pictorially documented the change in ownership structures and the rapid growth of facility providers. Aside from visiting OBs and taking photos, he has also amassed a large collection of historical television production books and documents and, with the growth of the internet, he now spends many an hour happily venturing down virtual 'rabbit holes' where he can learn even more about both current and historical OBs.

The Social Media Age

Around 6 years ago, Steve finally embraced the social media era and began to post a few of his images on Twitter and Instagram, where he would upload a selection of his photos of OB trucks and crews in action from events that he'd attended that day. To his surprise, people seemed to enjoy viewing them, especially crew who wanted to see photos of themselves at work! Steve soon gained a fairly sizeable following, which often resulted in his being recognised on location and even getting invited inside a compound or up to a camera position to get a closer look with his camera.



EMG Netherlands unit and crew covering cycling at the European Championships in Munich, August 2022



EMG handheld RF camera on the touchline of a London Irish Rugby match at Brentford, April 2022

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With that online success, Steve then decided to try scanning and posting some of his older photos that he'd taken back in the 1970s onwards. To his delight, there was a real appetite from his followers to see OB equipment and crew from the past: *"When I was originally taking the photos, I never thought they would receive such a wide distribution all these years later!"*

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It's always good to see familiar and new faces, as well as the continually developing technology, and to have the opportunity to be an 'outsider looking in' on the skills of the current generations of OB crews. The annual rhythm of sporting and other events continues and, for me, OBs really capture and celebrate our national life.

One of the OB family

"I have always found OB crews to be unfailingly friendly and helpful whenever I'm taking photos; I have a real conscience and determination to show everyone in the best light and am really mindful they are working, so I do my utmost to avoid getting in the way or disturbing them. It is always fascinating to see the skills and teamwork of crews in action." Steve always seeks to ask permission where possible; sometimes it isn't possible, but, on the whole, he's welcomed by crews up and down the country.

The NEP teams working for ITV Racing, for instance, have become good friends; Technical Projects Manager Jon Harris has always been particularly helpful and giving of his time and offering access, as have the entire camera and technical teams. *"The spirit of the 'OB racing family' particularly shines*

through in its coverage every week of the year and I try to get to as many meetings as I can."

It was on an NEP racing OB that I first met Steve, having spotted photos of myself and my Jimmy Jib on his Twitter feed. Wherever possible, I've tried to invite him for a closer look (and have even let him have a go at operating my jib!), or to introduce him to my fellow camera team, for which he's always been incredibly grateful.

The Aerial Camera Systems (ACS) fleet of tracking vehicles is of particular interest to Steve, as it is, in essence, the latest incarnation of the camera cars he used to see back in the 1980s. Nowadays, it's a Land Rover Discovery with a Shotover F1 6-axis gyro-stabilised gimbal mounted on its roof, and this camera's output is an integral part of the race coverage. *"I would never have thought, back in the 80s, that I would be able to ride in the Tracker for a race and see the skill of the crew up close! The camera operator, Mark Lewis, recently let me have a go at it too, which has only bolstered my admiration for their skills!"*

Not the retiring type

In 2019, at the age of 60, Steve retired, which has allowed him even more time to get out and visit OBs around the country, often taking Sarah along with him – in fact, this has actually led to some fun husband–wife rivalry on social media, with Sarah occasionally competing with Steve to take a better angle of a camera or truck! Steve has even started to venture further afield, last summer visiting Munich in Germany to photograph the OBs covering the 2022 European Athletics Championships.

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Mark Faulkner operating Steadicam around the Oxford rowing crew getting ready for the annual Boat Race at Putney

The death of Queen Elizabeth II

On the days following the Queen's death, Steve set out to photograph (from public spaces as always) some of the OB preparations in London and Windsor, to create a small record of this historic event. I'll leave it to Steve to tell the story in his own words: *"It was so impressive to see the speed of execution of the incredibly detailed plans that had been made in preparation for the occasion. On the Friday morning, the day after the Queen's passing, an NEP team was already rigging at St James's Palace, in advance of the Royal Proclamation on the Saturday morning. Meanwhile, over at St Paul's Cathedral, suited and black-tied camera operators and assistants were assisting with the rigging of the EMG OB*



Camera operator Peter Roach covering a race finish at Newmarket Racecourse

Unit for the Service of Thanksgiving to be held later that day, a mere 24 hours after the official announcement.

"It was fascinating to watch the OB compound at Canada Gate rapidly filling up, with a similar scene developing by Westminster Abbey. Scaffold towers were being assembled and painted around the Queen Victoria Memorial, all along The Mall and outside the Abbey; hoists were arriving at Admiralty Arch; studios for the BBC and other international broadcasters were being constructed on the roof of Methodist Central Hall. Everywhere, there was the familiar sight of crews from Focus Rigging and Film & TV Services (and its generators) – all busying themselves.

"At Windsor on the day before the funeral, we saw the parallel OB efforts to those in London, with trucks from NEP Switzerland and Norway in position on the Long Walk, crewed by (among others) some of the camera team who regularly work on ITV Racing. In the evening, I went back into

Central London – where the monumental effort had been joined by OB units from Cloudbass at Wellington Arch and from OBStv in Hyde Park, along with many jibs in place.

"The day after the funeral, I went back to observe the unsung heroes at work – the riggers as they grafted away on the massive derig – before watching truck after truck as they headed away up Constitution Hill... and, with that, the OB world moved on. As many have said, the 'OB family' can be so proud of what was achieved; it was a phenomenal performance by all."

Fact file

To follow **Steve Challes** and view his archive, visit: Twitter: @stevechalles; Instagram: @challessteve



GTC member **Dan George** is a freelance Jimmy Jib owner operator and RTS award-winning lighting cameraman, working across documentary, drama and promos, as well as on live multicamera studio and OB productions.

To contact Dan, visit: dangeorge.co.uk; mobile: +447966 506 721

Thanks also to GTC member Marc Humphreys for his assistance in this article.

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