

MARTIN
HARBOTTLE'S
APPRECIATION
OF TIME

Dominic Utton



ONE WORLD

A Oneworld Book

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*'The human race has only one really effective
weapon and that is laughter'*

—Mark Twain

'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me'

—Shakespeare, *Richard II*

*This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to
people or institutions, living or dead, is entirely
coincidental and, to be frank, most likely the
product of your own fevered imagination. You
can probably blame the media for that.*



Prologue

April 7

From: DantheMan020@gmail.com

To: customer.service@premier-westward.com

Re: Premier Westward service, Oxford–London line.

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to complain about the continued and many delays on this line. I have been getting Premier Westward trains to and from my work for five days a week between Oxford and London for the past 14 months. And, to be honest with you, I'm fed up.

I rarely go more than two or three days without a delay to one of my trains. Could you provide me with an explanation please?

Yours

Daniel

April 21

From: DantheMan020@gmail.com

To: customer.service@premier-westward.com

Re: Premier Westward service, Oxford–London line.

Dear Sir/Madam

Further to my email of April 7 (attached), I am writing once again to enquire about the many and continued delays to my service. I have heard nothing back from you about this. Could someone please do me the courtesy of giving me an explanation?

Yours

Daniel

May 31

From: DantheMan020@gmail.com

To: customer.service@premier-westward.com

Re: Premier Westward service, Oxford–London line.

Dear Sir/Madam

Please see the attached emails dated April 7 and April 21.

Hey! Oi! Cooeeee! Do you exist? Are you just a figment of my imagination? Am I shouting into the abyss here? This is the third email I've written to you and I still haven't heard so much as a peep, a whisper, an echo of a reply in return.

It's bad enough your trains are a disgrace – I was 32 minutes delayed this morning, 32 minutes late into work (and trust me, my boss is not the kind of man who lets these kinds of things slide) – but the

fact that you, the so-called customer service department, can't even be bothered writing back to me is nothing short of shocking.

So you know what? I'm no longer going to waste my time with you. I've had it with the monkeys. I'm going straight to the organ grinder. I'm talking to the MD. Sure, I realise his email isn't anywhere on the website (funny that), but I wouldn't let that concern you. I can find his email easily enough. I'm smart like that...

So farewell, customer service monkeys. Have nice lives. I won't be writing to you again. I'll be writing to your boss.

Dan



Martin Harbottle's Appreciation of Time

Letter 1

From: DantheMan020@gmail.com

To: Martin.Harbottle@premier-westward.com

Re: 07.31 Premier Westward Railways train from Oxford to London Paddington, June 1. Amount of my day wasted: 12 minutes.

Dear Mr Martin Harbottle

Good morning.

I do hope you're well. My name is Daniel and I am a customer of Premier Westward trains. Every morning, five days a week, I catch a

Premier Westward train from Oxford to London and every evening I catch one home again. It's what I do. It's what I have to do, in order to get to work and back.

As Managing Director of the Premier Westward train company, I am sure you will be fascinated, concerned and most of all keen to hear about my experiences on your trains.

Oh, and before you just pass me on to your customer 'service' department, you'll notice I've attached a bunch of emails I've sent them over the last six weeks or so. Guess how many replies I've had, Martin? Go on, guess.

None. That's right. I don't feel very serviced. I don't feel very serviced at all. And so now I'm writing to you.

Because you must care, right? You must want to do all you can to provide a good service for your paying customers?

I'm writing directly to you – as Managing Director of PW – because, not to put too fine a point on it, the service you run is a shambles. And I thought you should know. Being the man in charge of the whole shoddy operation. The buck stops with you, right? Well, here it is. Here's the buck. Stop my buck!

I thought you'd like to know how awful it really is, having to catch two of your trains every day. You welcome feedback, don't you? You want to improve the customer experience, correct? Good.

But you know what? I've had a better idea than simply complaining. I've decided not to get mad – but to get even. My frustration at the appalling service you provide, at never going more than about three journeys without experiencing a delay, has prompted me into what I'm going to call a 'project'.

A project! That makes it sound exciting, doesn't it? Do you want to hear more about my project? You do! Oh goody! Here it is then. Here's my project.

From now on, every time I'm delayed on one of your trains I'm going to send you an email letting you know about it. Good, eh?

But wait! It gets better! Not only will I send you an email every time I'm late, I'm going to make the length of that email reflect the length of delay on the service you have provided for me. Because, after all, Mr Martin Harbottle, Managing Director, it is your job to be interested, concerned and eager to help with this kind of thing. Because you're anxious to provide the best service you can to your customers, right? Right.

Good. So, to continue...

The idea is that by sending you an email every time I'm on one of your delayed trains, I shall waste some of your time, just as you have wasted mine. If you've only wasted a few minutes of my morning (or evening) I shall accordingly send you a short, pithy, minute-or-two-wasting email. And if, on the other hand, you've wasted more of my time, so the email shall be longer, and no doubt far more tedious for you to read.

This morning, for example, you wasted 12 minutes of my time, when the 07.31 train from Oxford to Paddington slowed to a crawl between Maidenhead and Slough. I was late for work. I'll have to leave work late now. Thanks for that. Thanks for wasting my time, messing up my work schedules and wrecking my evening. My boss was annoyed with me when I arrived in London; my wife will be annoyed with me when I arrive home again in Oxford. And none of it's my fault. It's your fault.

The thing is: time is precious, isn't it? I'm sure you're not enjoying having your time wasted like this. I'm sure as a go-getting managing director about town (even if the town is Reading, or Slough, or wherever your head office is) you have fantastically busy working days. I'm sure you have a happy, healthy, fulfilling home life too. I'm sure that you wouldn't want unnecessary wastes of time to impact upon either your work or home life, would you?

Of course not. It's rubbish when that happens. It sucks.

In fact, I shall even be presumptuous enough to assume that the prospect of receiving many, many more emails like this from me – some of which, let's not kid ourselves here, will be longer and far more tedious to match the longer, more tedious delays that your train company will doubtless waste my time with – fills you with a kind of dread and ennui. Of course it does! And that's how I feel every morning at Oxford and every evening at Paddington. It's like anticipation in reverse. (What do you call anticipation in reverse? What's the word for when you're expecting something that you know will be rubbish? Something for us all to think about, perhaps. Something for us to return to, again and again. Anticipation in reverse. The feeling that what's coming is bound to be disappointing.) I think it could be a theme for these letters! I think it could end up being a – what's the word? A motif. A conceit.

And in the meantime, that's my project. Of course, it may be that by some happy miracle your train service suddenly starts doing what I'm paying you to make it do, and run according to the timetables. In which case, this will be both hello and farewell...

But I think we both know that's not going to happen, don't we? So, not farewell but *au revoir*. (That's French, by the way. It means 'until we see each other again'. I think. Truth be told, I'm hopeless at languages. I'm a total dumbkopf at languages. I'm *très stupide* at all that languages stuff. Except the English language, of course. I'm all right at that, Martin. In fact, I'm pretty good at it. It's what I do, you see. It's what I am.)

I've got a train to catch home tonight, after all. What do you think the chances of it running on time actually are? I mean, as Managing Director of Premier Westward you should be able to put a percentage on one of your trains running on time, shouldn't you?

Shall we say: 100 percent chance? No, of course not. Ninety percent? Eighty? Fifty? Twenty? Let's see, shall we?

Au revoir!

Dan

From: Martin.Harbottle@premier-westward.com
To: DantheMan020@gmail.com
Re: 07.31 Premier Westward Railways train from Oxford to London Paddington, June 1.

Dear Dan

Thanks for your email.

I am sorry you have had negative experiences with Premier Westward. I am well aware of the issues customers face each day and use the trains myself every day. When things go wrong I try and assist as much as possible so I feel I am as aware of the issues we face as I can be.

This morning, delays were frustrating for us. All delays are frustrating for us.

I share your view that reliability just isn't good enough right now and this is primarily an issue with Network Rail reliability. We are applying pressure for improvement.

Also, do you mind if I ask a question of my own? I'm curious as to how you obtained my email address?

Martin

Letter 2

From: DantheMan020@gmail.com
To: Martin.Harbottle@premier-westward.com
Re: 07.31 Premier Westward Railways train from Oxford to London Paddington, June 3. Amount of my day wasted: five minutes.

Hey, Martin! (You don't mind me calling you Martin, do you? It is how you signed off your letter, after all.)

Hey Martin! Thanks for your letter. Imagine that! The Managing Director of Premier Westward trains, writing to me! I feel... honoured, Martin. Humbled.

It was good of you to write back to me. I didn't expect it, if I'm being honest, but thank you very much for taking the time to do it. It was big of you. You're a gentleman.

Guess what? Yesterday I wasn't delayed at all! You got me to work, and you got me home from work, and all at the times you promised me you would. Well done! I'm proud of you, Martin. For a crazy moment I even wondered if it had something to do with my letter, my project – whether it really had spurred you into action, forced you to pull your finger out.

Silly of me, I know. I'm embarrassed just thinking about it. Because here we are, just the day after the day after my first letter, and I'm having to email you again. Admittedly, this morning's train was only delayed by five minutes, but still. Rules are rules. We have to play by the rules.

I'm a firm believer in playing by the rules, Martin. And for that reason, just as I promised, this letter will be correspondingly about half the length of the last one. Just as my delay was half the length.

One thing, however. You asked how I got your email address. I used my skills. Or as the kids say, my skillz! The skillz I've picked up from ten years of working in the seamier side of the media! I'm a journalist, you see. (Oh, I can sense your ears prick up already.) I work for the *Globe*. Yes... *THAT Globe*. (Was that a sharp intake of breath, Martin? We're not all bad, you know!) Finding people's email addresses – it's part of what I do. It's surprisingly easy. I could probably get your mobile number too, if I could be bothered.

But don't worry. I can't be bothered. Emails it shall be.

Oh, also: something else in your kind reply intrigued me. You try to help out when there are delays? Really? How do you do that? I have

a vision of you, Martin, striding manfully through the carriages, ripping off your shirt as you go...

Au revoir!

Dan

Letter 3

From: DantheMan020@gmail.com

To: Martin.Harbottle@premier-westward.com

Re: 19.50 Premier Westward Railways trains between London Paddington and Oxford, June 3. Amount of my day wasted: 21 minutes.

Oh, Martin. You've only gone and done the double. Delayed me on the way to work this morning, and then delayed me again on the way home this evening. I do hope you're feeling proud of yourself. I can picture you now, high-fiving and thigh-slapping and whooping your way around the office. Double score! Two-nil to Premier Westward.

Twenty-one minutes tonight. What did happen? And, Martin – were you forced to assist? Did you rush to the scene of the delay, pants outside your trousers, cape billowing in the wind behind you? 'It's OK, citizens! I'm the Managing Director!'

We know you're the MD, Martin. And seeing as we have so much time together today, perhaps I'd better tell you a little bit more about myself.

My name is Dan (you know that bit already). I'm 32 years old and I live in Oxford with my wife, Beth, and our two-month-old daughter Sylvie. (Neither of us are French or anything – we named her after a St Etienne song. That alone should tell you more about me than anything else I write here: I'm the kind of person who names his children after St Etienne songs.)

I don't have any family other than them. My parents died a year or so ago, one after the other. Nothing dramatic, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that doesn't happen every day all across the world. Mum from her dodgy ticker, Dad from a broken heart not two months later. She didn't have a chance to know what hit her, really, and as far as he was concerned, dying was just the next thing to do. There was no raging against the dying of the light – without her, he couldn't really see the point any more. He gave up: and why the hell shouldn't he?

It's no biggie, and, actually, I don't really want to talk about it.

Anyway: no parents, no brothers, no sisters. Just me and Beth and little baby Sylvie.

We moved to Oxford before I got the job at the *Globe*. I was freelancing then, you see, working from home. I was writing for everyone, for anyone who wanted a titbit or two. If they were willing to pay, I was willing to give them whatever they asked for. I grubbed around the grubby end of Grub Street. I wrote for newspapers high and low. I could tell you a tale or two. Perhaps I will, one day. But the point is, I wasn't in an office. I could live anywhere.

And once Beth finished her nursing course there was no reason to stay in London. People get sick everywhere, right? So five years ago, when Beth graduated and was offered a job at the John Radcliffe hospital, it made total sense to get out of our cramped little flat in London. We kissed goodbye to the flotsam and jetsam of Finsbury Park, caught a train to Oxford and did the whole grown-up mortgage-marriage thing.

I worked from home, on email and the internet and, well, PlayStation – if I'm honest, quite a bit of PlayStation – and Beth cycled to and from work every day. There was no commuting. My working day began about 20 minutes after I got out of bed and our family time together began the minute Beth opened the door in the evening. It was a good system. It worked.

And then... and then I only got offered a job, didn't I? I only got offered the chance of a regular income, of holiday entitlement, of sick pay. I only got offered a pension, a company healthcare scheme. (Memo to self: must look into that company healthcare scheme sometime.) After years of chancing it where I could, of hustling for features here, interviews there, celebrity nuggets and tittle-tattle everywhere, I was only offered a steady, secure, grown-up salary.

It's not a big deal, this job of mine. It's not a massive deal – not yet. It's a junior position on the showbiz desk, rewriting copy mostly, not a lot of bylined stuff. But it's a start: it's still a staff job in the newsroom of the biggest newspaper in the world. It's got potential. It could take me places.

So anyway: a year or so ago I was offered the chance to be a grown-up. Of course I took it. Even if it did mean commuting back to London every day. Even if working for a Sunday paper means my working week is now Tuesday to Saturday.

Can you remember the moment you decided to become a grown-up, Martin? Or were you one of those people who was always a bit grown-up? Were you one of those weird kids who had a life-plan way back when you were doing your GCSE options? Were you focused from an early age? Was it always going to be trains for you? Did you study hard, apply yourself diligently, work sensibly towards a long and steady career in train management?

I'm guessing that in your case, becoming a grown-up was simply the next logical stage in your development. I'm guessing it was inevitable. Like puberty. Like acne. I'm guessing you saw becoming a grown-up as nothing more dramatic than the thing that comes after leaving university.

And then what? Find a girl, settle down, if you want to you can marry? Look at me, I am old but I'm happy? Cat Stevens knew it. Despite it all, he knew what being a grown-up meant.

(Obviously Cat Stevens' life should not be taken as a literal model for

how to be a grown-up. Let's not do anything rash now. Abandoning your career at the height of your success and vowing never to pick up the instrument of your success again is obviously – or rather, *obvs*, as they say in our magazine supplement – not that sensible, or responsible, or adult-like. It's not something many school career advisers would recommend. But you know what I mean. The lyrics to 'Father to Son': they're about becoming a grown-up, right? They're about the melancholy inevitability of having to become a grown-up. It's a song about accepting defeat. It's a song about surrender.)

Where was I? Oh yes. Growing up. I can imagine you were always quite a sensible boy, Martin. A sensible boy, and then a good bloke, and now a steady chap. And then what? A nice old gent... and then fondly remembered. That's life. That's the epitaph.

But that, I suppose, is how you get to be Managing Director of a company like Premier Westward. And not someone who writes about reality TV wannabes and scandalised soap starlets and disgraced pop flops and lecherous actors and priapic footballers and self-loathing WAGs for a living.

Oh dear. It doesn't sound much like I enjoy my job there, does it? It doesn't sound like I get off on what I do. Please don't think that! You couldn't be more wrong! It's just the delay that's put me in a bad mood, it's just your rotten trains that are souring my normally sunny disposition. The truth is, I love my job. You wanna hear a secret? I'd probably do it for free. I may not be getting the bylines or the glory every week, but still. I'd probably do it for free.

Don't get me wrong, I need the money. God knows I need the money – if it wasn't for the money I certainly wouldn't sit on these trains every morning and evening, an hour each way (when they run on time). If it wasn't for the money and the fact I need to be a grown-up now, after too many years of spectacularly failing to be a grown-up. If it wasn't for all that... I'd do it for free.

I'm a good bloke, obviously, a loving husband and father, but I'm also a tabloid journalist. And that makes me a professional bastard. I basically think I'm better than everyone else and at the same time worry that nobody else really realises it. It makes me think I'm always right (even when I sort of know, inside, I may be wrong). Because the *Sunday Globe* – it is always right, isn't it? It tells the world what's right – and more often, what's wrong.

We work in absolutes. Black and white and read all over. No grey areas for us! When I write my little bits and bobs, my news in briefs, when I lay it all out for our millions of readers, I can't afford to see both sides. It's not what they want – and it's not what my boss wants. They call it 'taking a line' in the tabloid game, Martin. We've got to take a line on every story. We've got to believe we're right, or we're scuppered.

And do you want to hear a secret? I may only wallow in the shallow end, but I'm absolutely in love with it. With the celebrity world. I'm obsessed by it. I live and breathe it. And I also hate just about everyone involved in it. I think they're vain, shallow, venal, self-obsessed, back-stabbing monsters. (And that's just the cast of *Hollyoaks*.) And I just can't get enough of them all. And that may be all of tabloid journalism in a nutshell for you right there.

And so I write about them. That's why I write about them. And now that I work for the most-read English-language newspaper in the world, and also the most notorious tabloid newspaper in Britain, what I write about them has an impact on their behaviour.

You know what that impact is? You wanna hear another secret? A secret about the world of tabloid journalism and celebrity?

For all the fuss we make about their bad behaviour, and for all the fuss they make about our reporting of their bad behaviour, all any of it does is makes their bad behaviour worse. That's how it works. That's the Faustian pact. That's the hidden symbiosis of tabloid and celebrity. Bad behaviour shifts newspapers, and shifted newspapers make reputations. Nobody remembers the nice, quiet, sensible family

men and women, do they? Nobody remembers the good blokes, the steady chaps.

And, believe me – anyone who wants to be a celebrity wants nothing more than to be remembered. For whatever reason they can get. Being remembered – that’s the point of it all. No matter what their publicists say.

It’s a perverse sort of logic, isn’t it? If I were to write in the *Globe* about the terrible service I get on your trains, for example, well, that would be seen as a bad thing within your company. The sort of thing you’d actively discourage me from doing. Normal people, normal companies, people like you and companies like yours – you don’t want to be remembered. Not by the popular press. Not if that’s what it costs. And quite right too.

Oh dear! Am I ranting, Martin? Do I rave? Am I beginning to sound like a tabloid monster? Like the worst, seediest kind of hack? Am I giving you the willies? Do excuse me. I’m just being honest.

Because that’s another thing about me (we’re going to find out so much about each other, Martin. We’re going to become such confidantes!) – I’m disgracefully honest.

I’ve built a career on it. Or rather, I’m building a career on it. Because, while I’m being honest and before you get too scared, I’m no big shot. I may write for the biggest and baddest paper in town, but I’m no kingmaker or king breaker. I’m not the Fake Sheikh. I’m just a reporter on the showbiz desk. I write what I’m told. And – contrary to popular belief and stereotype – I make sure everything I write is true.

My mate Harry the Dog says it’s going to be the downfall of me, my honesty. ‘Don’t be so bloody honest all the time,’ he says. ‘Don’t start forming your own opinions, just write what you’re told to think.’

His mate Rochelle (she’s the editor of the magazine supplement – it’s called *Amazeballs!*, I’m sure Mrs Harbottle is a fan) is even more perplexed by the idea.

'Honesty? Totes yawnsville,' she told me. 'Like, seriously: whatever.'

What about you, Martin? What do you think? Are you worried I'm going to write about you? About your trains? Is that why you wrote back to me? I can't help wondering...

Tell you what, seeing as we're here, why don't you tell me about yourself? Do you love your job? Or do you grow frustrated? Do you sometimes feel like you're no longer doing the things that fired up your passion for train management in the first place? Is being Managing Director of Premier Westward trains a bit like being headmaster of a very large and very complicated school? Are you one of those headmasters who first got into it because he wanted to teach, to feel the visceral thrill, the exhilarating responsibility of standing in front of a roomful of children and actually educating them... and now spends his days gazing at spreadsheets in an office by himself, balancing budgets and juggling timetables and stressing over staff quotas and never actually going anywhere near a classroom or interacting with any of the children except to send them home in disgrace?

Or do you love the power? Do you get off simply on being the man in charge? Do you prefer being the field marshal, safely miles behind the front, gazing at his models and blithely giving the orders?

Of course not. You're the man of action! You're there on the sharp end, helping out where you can. You told me that already.

Hey, guess what? Look at the time! *Tempus fugit!* Twenty-one of your minutes wasted. My work here is done... but I do look forward to you addressing my concerns. In fact, I can't wait!

Au revoir!

Dan