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# The Celeb Diaries

The Sensational Inside Story of the Celebrity Decade

Mark Frith

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Extract

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# Introduction

Celebrities. I've been writing about them for eight years solid and I still don't understand them. I often would have meetings with the *Heat* team that would end with me shaking my head and saying the words, 'They're all MAD! The lot of them!' There is no group of people on God's earth more infuriating, ego-driven, contradictory, pampered, spoilt and downright ridiculous than celebrities. And for eight years I was caught up in their madness.

When I was a kid, magazines – and the people in them – were the centre of my life. I'd buy four or five a week, subsidised (although only just) by the worst-paid paper round in Sheffield (£2.50 a week for five morning shifts. I'm not joking!) There's just something about magazines. They were everything to me. My favourite was *Smash Hits* and I cherished every single page: pored over each one, consumed every word, examined every picture before turning the page and getting upset cos that meant I was two pages nearer the end. I loved that they were produced by people who were passionate about their subject. I loved how the journalists who wrote for them crafted each sentence with skill and humour. On my paper round I'd dawdle as I read all the magazines (and the *Sun*'s gossip column) in such detail that the good people of Woodseats in Sheffield would either get the wrong paper or the right one far too late. I became obsessed. I read everything: free newspapers, leaflets on buses, my grandma's copy of *Woman's Own* magazine, *everything.*

I never, as a painfully shy lad growing up in Yorkshire, *ever* thought I would actually get to work at a magazine. Why ever would I? And anyway, I was too shy to speak to anyone so there were practical problems there. The careers teacher at my rough comprehensive school told me only out-going people became journalists.

But still, I told everyone who asked that I was going to work for a magazine one day. They didn't believe it and I didn't believe it but I didn't have any better answers. For five years, from the age of 13 to 18, I kept telling people I was going to work at a magazine but did absolutely nothing about it. Then, in autumn 1988 during my first week at the Polytechnic Of East London, I plucked up the courage to go along to the offices of the Student Union magazine, asked them if they wanted a pop music column and they said they did. My confidence gradually increased: I ended up editing it and then one day, in the launderette, I saw an advert for a job at *Smash Hits* …

I loved working at a pop magazine. Music was my thing and it was easy for me to write about it. *Smash Hits* led to *Sky* magazine and I was suddenly reliving my student magazine days doing a magazine for hedonistic (or pretend hedonistic) college kids. Then, in autumn 1997, I was approached about a new magazine, *Heat*, that was being lined up for launch. *Heat* magazine was intended to be a serious, wordy look at the world of entertainment.

We launched with a huge fanfare on 1 February 1999. We knew by week three that *Heat* had flopped. Big time. Why? Good question. It wasn't a bad magazine but it was probably the wrong magazine. That year, 1999, was all about Posh and Becks' wedding and Posh and Becks' wedding was all about gossip, glamour and fashion. Those were the three reasons this event was interesting, but also there were other famous people out there who were becoming interesting for similar reasons. In spring 2000, the publishers Emap relaunched *Heat* as a magazine about these celebrities, with me in charge. This book begins as I'm handed the reins and hurtles through a time when celebrity got bigger, more democratic and a lot more controversial. It's one hell of a roller coaster ride.

Originally I never wanted to do magazines about 'celebrities', as music magazines were my thing, but somehow I ended up doing this. And, as people took me into their confidence, allowed me in the dressing rooms or photo studios or parties, I saw the madness of it all at close hand. And it fascinated me – I'm intrigued by how people relate to each other, how they fall for each other and fall out. The world of celebrity is the new human zoo and I loved watching it all.

I'm very proud of the fact that I managed to not get sucked in by

it, to take it seriously or believe *I* was famous simply because I wrote about famous people. None of these famous people you read about here became my friends. I do happen to have two friends that are quite famous but I only know them because my girlfriend went to school with them. I promised them I wouldn't mention either in the book (they're both really boring anyway).

So why do the book? I, more than perhaps anyone else, have had a front-row seat for the celebrity decade. I wanted to document that. I can't deny I was inspired by Piers Morgan's brilliant book *The Insider* because I was. I read it on holiday in the summer of 2005 and thought to myself that one day I'd document my time at a magazine in the way he documented his time at a newspaper, never thinking I'd actually get a chance to do it. But, as you'll see from reading the book, my attitude to life is pretty different to his and the magazine world is a completely different environment from the newspaper world: far less brutal, far more relaxed (a little too relaxed at times). Like him I made mistakes – including one doozy in late 2007 – but when you have to make hundreds of different decisions a week you don't get everything right.

So, this *is* the story of The Celebrity Decade, as it will come to be known, told by a lad from Yorkshire watching it all from close quarters. But it's also the story of a magazine: the people who graced its pages and the characters who created it. Cos magazines are great.

Three days before I wrote this introduction I was in a newsagent's near my home with my two-year-old son. He likes our newsagent's for two very good reasons. Firstly it has three steps leading up to it and he loves climbing steps. Secondly the newsagent's has magazines in it. So, on Sunday he climbed the steps and ran – ran! – over to where the kids' magazines were, handily laid out at kid height. There he surveyed the scene, spied the *Teletubbies* magazine and pulled it out of the selection. 'Okay, you can have it. But I need to take it over to the man because I have to pay for it.' I try and take it out of his hand but he gives it a short tug towards him. 'Danny …' He starts sobbing. 'I need to …' He isn't letting go. 'All right!'

I wander over to the counter, without the magazine, and explain to them what's happening.

'Hi, sorry, my son has a magazine that I'd like to pay for. It's £1.99, can I just give you the money for it now, because he won't let me bring it to the counter and …' As I say the word 'he' I look down to see my son. He is lying on the floor, painstakingly examining every bit of the opening page of the magazine before turning the page and doing the same again on the next one.

Like I say, there's just something about magazines …

# Prologue

**Wednesday 12 July 2006**

I've done some pretty stupid things in my time editing this magazine, but this has to be the most stupid.

In fact, I can't believe we're going to go through with this.

It's 4 p.m., Wednesday afternoon. In three days' time the biggest celebrity wedding since Posh and Becks takes place. Cheryl Tweedy, Girls Aloud's feisty, mouthy ex-reality TV star and singer, is marrying one of the richest young men in Britain: England and Chelsea footballer Ashley Cole. It's a huge wedding and like all huge weddings it has been bought up, exclusively, by … *OK* magazine.

The all-important preparations are being made over the next few days. Us cheeky kids from *Heat* are not allowed in, naturally.

So I've told the team that we're going to gatecrash.

Publicly *Heat* magazine, because we're cooler than all the other celeb mags, hates the whole magazine wedding thing. I, Lucie, Hannah, Julian and the gang give endless interviews to celebrity 'talking heads' TV shows about how cheesy we think these weddings are, how sad we think it is that someone's big day is sullied by security guards who frisk you wherever you go and confiscate your cameras, about how really it's just about money and nothing to do with love and commitment and tradition.

In private, of course, we're all obsessed by the spectacle and I'm sure some of the *Heat* staff would love to work as part of a celebrity wedding reporting team.

So, what we attempt to do on our pages is to get the story behind the event. Find out what really happens behind the scenes.

I'll admit it, we do face a few problems when we attempt to cover a wedding we have no access to.

We have no pictures of the dress.

We have no pictures of the ceremony.

We won't be able to run an interview with the happy couple.

The other disadvantage we have (and this is a biggie) is that we have to print the magazine before the actual wedding happens. But look as though we've printed it after it happened. Yes, I know what you're thinking: 'That's ridiculous.' You're right, of course.

It's especially a problem if, say, you don't even know where the wedding is.

And we don't.

We need to find out where it is – and quickly. There's only one man for the job. Unfortunately he is unavailable, so we're sending Daniel Fulvio instead …

How to explain Daniel Fulvio? He's in his early twenties, eccentric, laughs all the time, is nervous around authority but at other times (especially when he's had a drink) is the life and soul of the party. He's hard-working, intense and one hell of a character. And now he's been given the challenge of his career so far: to infiltrate the preparations for Cheryl Tweedy and Ashley Cole's wedding. He mustn't fail.

So, we know that Dan will be out of the office tomorrow roaming the countryside trying to find this wedding. But as we leave the office for the evening we're not quite sure which direction he'll be heading in.

Then, late this evening, my phone buzzed with a text. It's Dan. He's certain he knows where the wedding will be.

'Mark, heard it from several good sources that it's Highclere House in Berkshire. Off there first thing tomorrow morning. Over and out.'

Here we go.

**Thursday 13 July**

I get to the office at 9 as usual. Hannah's already in, working hard at it.

'He's got a hangover.'

'Who's got a hangover?'

'La Fulvio!'

She's laughing now. Good start – but he'll be fine.

He calls us from Paddington station. He's waiting for a train to Newbury (the nearest station to the hotel) and – because time is tight – he's trying to stand-up his hunch on his way over there.

'So I called them and tried to do my best premiership football-player voice to the girl who answered. I said, "I'm coming to Cheryl and Ashley's wedding this Saturday and I've just received the invite. Could you give me directions?" I could hear the guy speak to someone else. "I've got a guy on the phone asking about Cheryl and Ashley's wedding. What should I tell him?" That confirms it! I'm sure we've got the place!'

I'm really not so sure the phone call told us anything but he seems convinced. Anyway, time's running out. We've got to go for this.

An hour or so later we get another call. He's arrived. And there's a huge white marquee in the centre of the hotel's grounds.

BINGO!

Dan spies vans unloading stuff into the marquee – then follows the staff as they carry stuff out of them. Despite wearing a fluorescent green T-shirt with Tinkabelle performing a strip tease on it, Dan manages to fool the team into believing that he's an event-organiser.

Bloody hell. He's in!

The phone calls keep coming, each one more clandestine and in more hushed tones than the last.

'This tent is vast. It's huge – the size of a football pitch – and a dozen men are busy unpacking boxes and sound-testing a DJ box – pumping eardrum-shattering dance music. There is dry ice and a massive lighting rig. Wa-hey!'

Fulvio gets very excited at times. He raises his voice at the end of the call; he can't help himself.

His final sentence is triumphant.

*'They're preparing for the wedding reception of the century in here!'*

I listen in as Hannah tries to get him off the line.

'Be careful,' she shouts down the phone. 'Call me again when you can.'

The next time we hear from him is 20 minutes later. He's since been chucked out of the main marquee by the person testing the sound – noooo!

Hmm, maybe that T-shirt he's wearing was a give-away. Memo to self: put a LOT more thought into the journalist's outfit next time (if there ever is a next time. Not sure my nerves can cope with this).

Anyway, then he went into the kitchens. He got chucked out of there too …

The phone rings again. 'A woman with a clipboard saw me go in. I told her I was Cheryl's PA and that I was there to make sure everything was going according to plan for Saturday. She exchanged glances with this woman next to her and told me I'd need to speak to Cheryl about all of that.'

He's still not got anything that really stands up, of course, but we are beginning to banish any doubts we've had.

Because of the rumours we've heard, because of the marquee (and the sheer size of the thing), because of their attempts to chuck us out we are now convinced this is the place.

As editor, I have to make a decision and dramatically swing into action.

'Russ, we need some aerial shots of Highclere House as soon as possible – first thing tomorrow by the latest. Great epic shots showing the house and the marquee. It's huge, we really need to get the size and the scale of this event on to the page.'

We've asked Dan to look around a bit more – so he does. He checks out the portaloos and finds a tiny ornate chapel the house has onsite. That's where the ceremony will take place, of course! This all adds up perfectly. Making notes all the time he now has everything he needs: pages and pages of information.

This will be great. A proper news story. And it will look brilliant.

I call him again.

'Dan, you can come back to the office. We've got the perfect piece. I can see it now – BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE CELEBRITY WEDDING OF THE DECADE!'

Today was a great day.

**Friday 14 July**

By lunchtime the feature is complete. The aerial shots of the venue look incredible, we've loads of information – everything from what food they'll be eating to the fact that in the men's portaloos the soap is black pepper and ginseng while in the ladies' it's mandarin and grapefruit. It's a proper news job.

However, at just after three, less than two hours before we finish work for the week, Hannah receives a troubling phone call.

A paparazzi photographer friend of hers tells her there's a lot of movement near a venue called Wrotham Park in Hertfordshire.

A convoy of cars with blacked-out windows has just sped into the grounds and other paps are on their way. They think Ashley Cole is in one of the cars. I call Dan over to my desk and let him know.

Dan – his face now as white as a sheet – phones Wrotham Park up. 'They say there's no wedding taking place this weekend.'

'Well, they would, wouldn't they!' I say.

'Yes. I guess.'

At just after five o'clock Deputy News Editor Charlotte gets a call from a showbiz reporter contact at the *Sun* saying that he's received an inventory and schedule detailing all the plans of the big day and that it is happening at … yep, Wrotham Park.

Hannah holds her head in her hands.

'I saw the DJ set up, the food being prepared,' stammers Dan. 'The staff even admitted it.'

'Dan. Did anyone actually say to you that this was the venue of Cheryl's wedding?'

'No. But I mentioned her name to two different people and they didn't bat an eyelid when I did. They didn't flinch. Except …'

'Go on?'

'The woman in the kitchens did give another woman a funny look.'

'So if this wasn't Cheryl and Ashley's wedding, what was it?'

'That's the thing! It was a wedding. It was huge and posh and DJs were setting up.'

I raise my voice.

'Are we *really* to believe that this whole event at Highclere House has been arranged just to put *us* off the scent. It must have cost a fortune! The marquee, all that food. That's the bit I don't get!'

Come on, Mark. What to do? I've summoned Al, our Creative Director, back from the pub. All mentions of Highclere House have now been stripped out and we've kept the copy as vague as possible. I've no idea what else we can do.

It's not a great piece but it's a piece. No one will die if we get it wrong (except perhaps Dan).

But I have to face facts. This is a disaster. A total cock up. *Heat* magazine, the most talked-about magazine of the last ten years, the one that transformed itself from Britain's biggest flop to an award-winning, world-famous, magazine-publishing sensation has just infiltrated THE WRONG BLOODY WEDDING.

Or even, possibly, not a wedding at all.

Dan feels terrible but it's as much my fault.

We all so much wanted to believe that we'd spoilt *OK*'s big exclusive of the year.

'Don't worry,' I say as he heads out of the office. 'You'll look back at this and laugh. One day.'

**Saturday 15 July**

This morning is like waking up with a hangover. I'm trying to piece together the events of yesterday by reading through the newspapers and surfing the web.

Here's what I can make out:

1. Highclere House *was* the original venue for the Cole/Tweedy wedding but they cancelled it months ago.
2. To protect *OK*'s exclusive the organisers decided Highclere may be a good decoy so they asked the venue not to deny the event was happening – which explains why the team were like they were with Dan.
3. What Dan infiltrated was a corporate event, bizarrely, not a wedding. That event is already over – the marquee is being dismantled this morning.
4. The actual Cole/Tweedy wedding ceremony has already taken place – it was yesterday.
5. The reception and party take place today – at Wrotham Park.
6. We've been had – good and proper.

It was never meant to be like this. When I was starting out in magazines it was all very straightforward. Pop group releases record. Record gets to number one. Keen, young reporter goes along and interviews said pop group. Interview gets written up. People read it.

Somehow, I've ended up in a position where I'm asking journalists to break into people's weddings, getting screamed at down the phone by TV presenters, printing half-naked pictures of the Prime Minister and nearly getting run over by film stars. How the hell did I get here?

Welcome to the life a celebrity magazine editor. Trust me, there's never a dull moment.