

inside story

On the night shift

While you sleep, the tube is alive with gangs of support staff carrying out day-to-day maintenance. Andrew Losowsky spent a night under ground to see how they make the network safe to use

PHOTOGRAPHY NICK WILSON

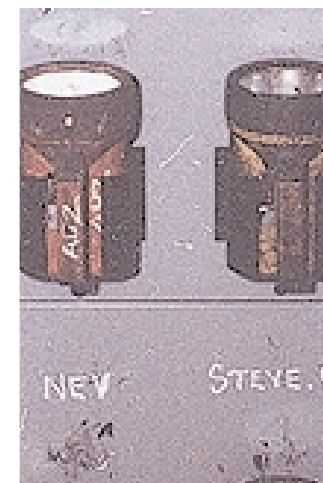
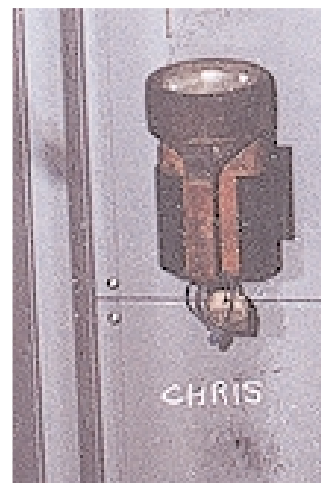
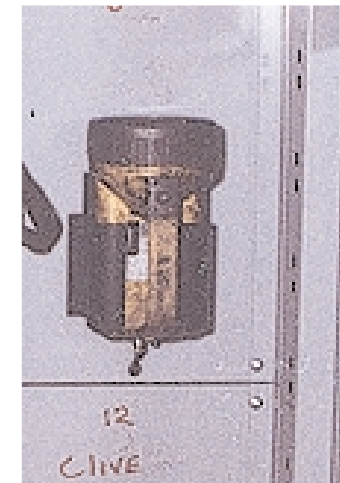
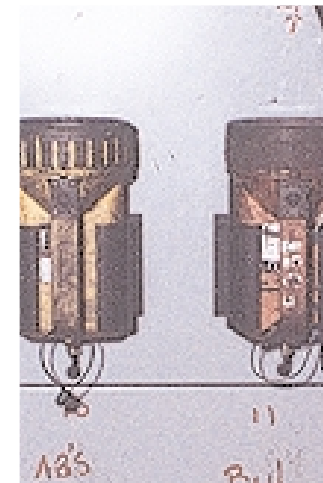
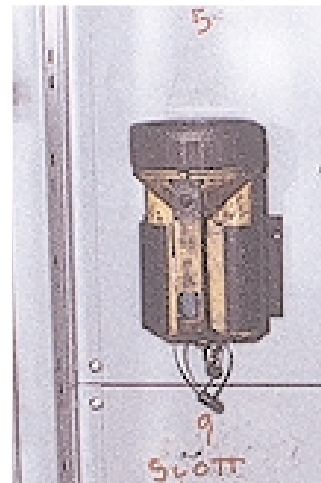
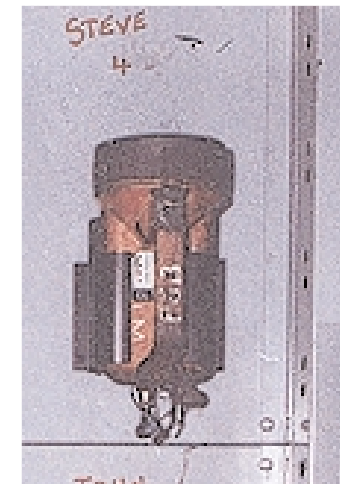
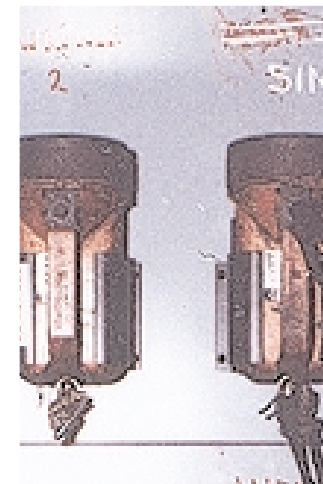
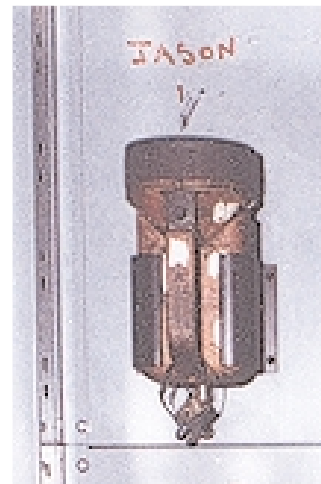


As the last train reaches the sidings and you're safely tucked up in bed, hundreds of people are waiting at tube stations throughout London, ready to start work. At around 1.15am, the drivers finally clock off for the night – and an army of cleaners, engineers, station staff, maintenance operatives plus countless others begin their working day on the Underground.

It's a big job. For the four short hours when no trains run, there's always a huge list of tasks to be completed – that can only be carried out when

the stations are shut and the rails powered down. On top of that, every tunnel, every escalator, every ticket barrier and every metre of track has to be checked to ensure that everything runs smoothly for the next day's passengers.

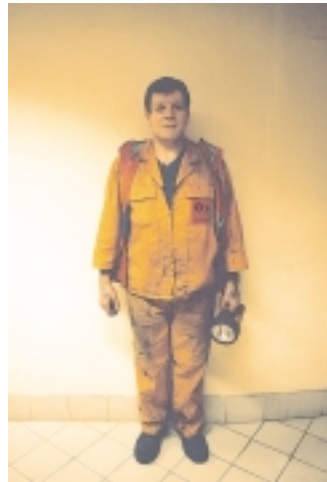
"Tonight we're replacing a sleeper," says Scott Roberts. He's a 'charge hand', which means he's in charge of a 'gang' of 15 working on one section of track. The sleeper in question is in the southbound tunnel, about two-thirds of the way from Bank station to London Bridge. "The



vibrations over the years have started to loosen its fastenings – it's still perfectly safe but we need to replace it sooner rather than later. A lot of the sleepers have been down here since the 1920s so we need to keep an eye on them."

Replacing a sleeper is a five-man job, and can be very time-consuming. If the sleepers are close together, Scott's team could change up to four in one night, but this evening there's only one to do. "After that, we'll do some fettling," he says. "That's where you make sure that the track is in good fettle, or condition. We have to tighten the fastenings and use our gauges to check everything's OK."

Scott is also responsible for making sure that all the work in his section is finished in time for the



Lone ranger

A few dozen patrolmen walk the tunnels alone, checking for potential problems such as loose bolts. Although the integrity of the track is checked by state-of-the-art ultrasound equipment, there's no technological substitute for the trained eye, as Billy McKeown well knows.

Billy (pictured above) has been walking the lines for 13 years, and four nights a week he walks along the Northern Line from Kennington to Old Street – a distance of 4.1 km.

"When you walk a stretch all the time, you know where the positions are that you should pay more attention to. If you find something that needs more work than a small routine job, then you

report it and wait for the gang to get to your position.

"It takes a certain type of person to walk the lines, but I enjoy it very much. It's a one-man job so you can take in more detail and you're not interrupted. When you're on a piece of track for a while, you get to feel that it's yours – even when I'm on holiday I start to wonder who's checking it when I'm away. If I were brought down here blindfolded and asked to identify a stretch of this line, I could near enough give you the exact kilometre mark."

At the end of his walk, Billy calls in to his supervisor with the magic words that allow the Tube to function each day: "The track is safe for trains to run".

power to be turned back on the rails at 5.15am.

Meanwhile, as the 'gang' works together in noisy harmony, back at the stations there may be no trains, but the platforms are far from empty. During the night shift in each of the 275 stations on the network, hundreds of contractors are cleaning, repairing escalator faults, checking roofs – all the day-to-day maintenance that couldn't go on while the station is full of people.

"I've got about 70 contractors in tonight," says Den Mandalia, the station supervisor at London Bridge. "I have to check where they all are and that everything is in order so that the station can open safely and on time. To be honest, I prefer it when the station is bustling with people, but there's a lot of essential work that has to be carried out and there's very little time to do it all."

Safety standards through the night are rigorous – all the contractors are registered, and every person allowed onto the track has a code number and a time that they must call in by. If someone doesn't call in, then the power remains off and the station shut until they can be traced. All the tunnels are lit, and everyone who goes into them must wear high-visibility clothing, carry their own torch and also wear a helmet in any area where there's scaffolding.

"It's quite satisfying working nights," says Clive Blake, a skilled operative in the tunnels. "There's a mix of people and the job's varied. It also means I can get up around lunchtime and spend the day with my hobbies: picking up the kids from school, playing sports. You get used to it pretty easily – and after all there's plenty of jobs down here that need to be done." 🛠️

