

Since 1964, any comedian short of a quick laugh could always rely on mothers-in-law, seaside landladies - and 'Crossroads'. 'Did you hear about the actor who was sacked from "Crossroads"? He kept remembering his lines! 'My wife's never been happy wherever we've lived. We've moved more than the sets on "Crossroads"! 'My mother-in-law's really fat. Her thighs are as thick as Benny in "Crossroads"! And so on. Radio Rentals even came up with a television commercial for a video machine that promised: 'It can take sixteen episodes of "Crossroads" (if you can.) .

Like no other, this soap has been a target. It never failed to provide its many critics with ammunition. Some of the acting would have disgraced the humblest of village halls; many of the plots were so farcical they could have been written in a bad dream, and much of the dialogue was pathetic - like the hackneyed arresting line once used by a policeman to Benny: 'Come along now, lad. Let's be 'aving you.' Even the cast used to complain about some of the things they had to say. Max Wall, who'd been around a bit before he appeared in it, described the experience as 'Dreadful, just dreadful'.

Characters disappeared for ever without explanation. Others would go missing for months on end and would always be in the next room, on the other end of the phone; or, better still, just their back leg would be seen going out of the door. Non-speaking extras, terrified

of making a sound (the producers would then have had to pay them more), would spend an entire scene shaking their head frantically like nodding dogs in the backs of Cortinas.

In defence of 'Crossroads', particularly in the early years, the budget was low and the workload punishing. The show was virtually done live. Actor Anthony Morton, who played chef Carlos Raphael for the first three years of 'Crossroads', recalls: 'It was all done on videotape, but only very rarely was there a retake. They wanted it all done in one fell swoop. If you had to do a scene over again, you felt as if the Sword of Damocles was hanging over your head.' Even in the eighties, four programmes were recorded each week. Actress Clare Falconbridge suggested that 'Crossroads' should have been shown with subtitles explaining that to produce two hours of television drama in a week from scratch was a near-miracle.

THE HISTORY

The first episode of 'Crossroads' was transmitted on 2 November 1964, but the idea had been floating around since 1958. That was when Associated Television's Reg Watson had casually told the station's boss, Sir Lew Grade, how impressed he had been by the live daily serials he had seen in America. Sir Lew said nothing - for six years. Then he asked Watson, an Australian, to produce a daily serial for

ATV to be called 'The Midland Road', written by Hazel Adair and Peter Ling and centred on a widow named Meg Richardson and her two children who had turned their family home into a motel. Everyone at ATV liked the story but hated the title. So a Midlands newspaper ran a competition to think up a new name. 'Crossroads' was born. Watson, the producer of 'Lunch Box', didn't have to look far for an actress to play Meg. Noele Gordon, the hostess of 'Lunch Box', was the obvious choice.

'Crossroads' was scheduled to run for thirty episodes - six weeks - but it managed twenty-four years, to become a legend in its own tea-time. In some areas it was screened at 4.35 p.m., bringing complaints from worried parents about this adult serial being shown during what was traditionally children's hour. There was also unrest within ATV. Bill Ward, production chief at ATV, didn't like the fact that critics were already comparing it unfavourably with the company's other soap 'Emergency - Ward Ten'. He wanted to take 'Crossroads' off. Sir Lew wouldn't let him.

An important year for 'Crossroads' was 1967. For production reasons, the number of episodes was reduced to four a week. The big story-line that year was the explosion of an old wartime bomb which destroyed much of the motel. The 'bomb' was detonated by the producers, who were moving to new studios and wanted to feature new sets.

A year later, the London region decided not to transmit 'Crossroads'. Irate viewers sent a deluge of mail. Prime Minister's wife Mary Wilson was one of them. London succumbed, and 'Crossroads' was back on screen there - but six months behind the rest of the country. So characters who were alive and well in Watford were six feet under in Wolverhampton! London finally caught up in time for Meg's wedding in 1975 by means of a special hour-long episode. The wedding episode topped the television ratings. 'Crossroads' was at its peak. It was to downhill from then on.

In 1979 the Independent Broadcasting Authority criticised the standard of 'Crossroads' and decreed that the number of episodes per week should be cut from four to three - a devastating blow, and one which seemed to panic ATV and its 1982 successor, Central.



The unthinkable happened in 1981: Meg was written out. Jack Barton the producer of the time, had the motel burned down and Meg sailed off in QE2. The nation fumed and grieved. Charles Denton, Central's Director of Programmes, said the soap could not develop with Meg in place. He wanted to end 'Crossroads' completely but feared it would plunge newly formed Central into an awkward wrangle with the other independent companies. (See below, 'The Executioners' .)

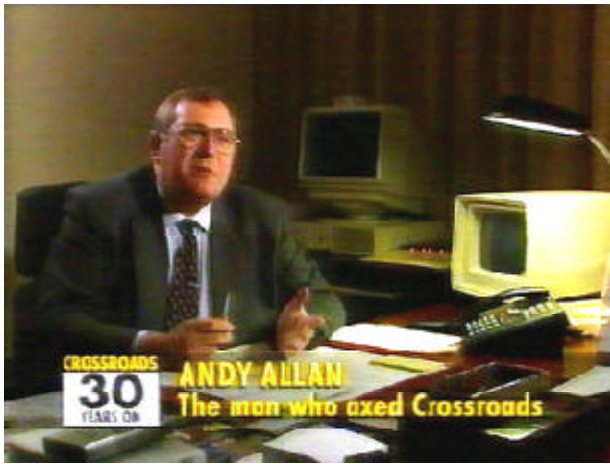
A new-look motel, based on the Golden Valley Hotel near Cheltenham, failed to halt the slide in the viewing figures. Brash young producer Phillip Bowman was hired to cut out the dead wood and bring in new faces. He took charge in 1984, rebuilt the sets, switched the outside filming to Penns Hall Hotel in Sutton Coldfield and sacked the Hunters. The rot continued.

Eighteen months later, Bowman was replaced by former 'Archers' producer William Smethurst. He set out to put his stamp on the show to move it up-market and, he said, make it 'unrecognisable in six months'. Out went Diane Hunter, Kath Brownlow, Nicola Freeman Stan Hooper and others. Down went the ratings. A show that once boasted 16 million viewers was now down to 8 million. Before Smethurst's plan was complete in the summer of 1987, Central announced that the Crossroads Motel was to close for good nine months later - a move which, ironically, heralded an increase in the viewing figures. There was to be no reprieve. The 'joke' was over.

It would be wrong to say 'Crossroads' failed - it ran for twenty-four years. In that time it tackled many difficult subjects: alcoholism (regularly), test-tube pregnancies, bigamy, rape, abortion, mental handicap (remember Nina Weill, the Downs Syndrome child who ably played a part?), physical handicap (Sandy Richardson was soap's first paraplegic), adopted children and racism (Joe MacDonald was one of the first black characters to become a soap regular). So why did it finish? There is no doubt that the axing of Meg was the beginning of the end. Her exit alienated its loyal fans, who then had so much more to endure.

The 'Crossroads' epitaph has yet to be written. No doubt the sociologists and the media studies veterans





will churn out millions of worthy words in their wonderful jargon. I can wait.

There are only a few certainties. It was taken off because Andy Allen Central's Director of Programmes, felt like it. It wasn't attracting the sort of viewers the men who stick advertisements in its mid-show commercial break wanted to watch it. The faithful fans were mostly the unemployed, the retired or the lower-paid workers, who begin early in the mornings and are home and viewing by 6.35 p.m. The ABC1nders were still on their commuter trains or in their cars. You couldn't flog BMWs to 'Crossroads' fans.

People didn't *like* it as much, even if they continued to watch as a unit. They had felt comfortable with the show's familiar faces. Too *many* new ones too quickly was a mistake. And of the new ones who was there to *like*? Not Bomber. Not the ghastly Grice family; the long-suffering Mrs Grice was too weedy to care about. Mrs Tardebigge the comic cleaner was a pantomime figure. Charlie Mycroft was a buffoon. No one looked like the nicely mannered daughter the average elder woman viewer yearned to see. And, for all the new plans, it remained - compared with 'EastEnders' and 'Brookside' - unstimulating compared with 'Coronation Street' it didn't make people laugh and, with so many changes, it wasn't - as it had been before - relaxing in its basic soppieness. Cynics would say it wasn't bad enough to be good.

Certainly our comedians will have to find some fresh material. And hat's no bad thing.

THE EXECUTIONERS

No soap has been reinvented as drastically and as painfully as 'Crossroads'. Behind the changes were tough men.

Charles Denton was the toughest. As Director of Programmes at Central, it was he who in 1981 decided to drop Noele Gordon from the cast. He was branded a 'murderer'. He received hate mail by the sackful and dog turds in the post. The senders would have been even more irate had they known that his one real regret was, he told me, that he didn't end the

serial completely. He was never a fan of the soap.

He said: 'I had many conversations with Jack Barton, "Crossroads" producer. Central had not long taken over, but I had been doing the same job for five years at ATV. I knew how important "Crossroads" was. I knew Noele. Jack and I were in total agreement. Noele's large overwhelming presence bang in the middle of the series was such that it was fixed in a rigid formula. We despaired of ever changing things. Meg was a monster. I wanted to end the whole show, frankly. I thought it was past its peak. It's a British sin to let things go on too long. I very much regret I didn't bite the bullet then and kill it. But I didn't, Central was only just getting established. I thought it would cause a fuss they didn't need. But I knew Noele's character had to go. I didn't commit sacrilege lightly. Jack Barton couldn't take such a step. It was for me to do - and it had to be formal. I called Noele and her agent to a meeting and told her that all good things have to come to an end. She'd done magnificent work inside and outside the series for us but- she had to go. One person couldn't go on dominating a series. She didn't cry or make a scene - of course. She wasn't like that. She was simply speechless with disbelief. She accused me of murdering the best-loved woman in Britain.

'Later the general response amazed me. There was general furore. I had threatening letters, phone calls - and I can tell you that to receive dog turd in an envelope gives you a very strange feeling. The idea that people feel that strongly!

'I have no regrets about sacking Noele. I was sad, of course, that her leaving coincided with her illness. But I feel my decision was right. Her departure did do what was necessary, although it couldn't save the show ultimately. Maybe the slide had already begun.'



Jack Barton was proud of his 'Crossroads'. In the days he produced it it was *the* soap - despite all the jokes. Mothers and grandmothers wrote to him begging him to consider the budding actors and actresses in their family for parts. 'Michael Crawford's mother wrote imploring me to give Michael a role. So

did Gemma Craven's mother,' said Jack. 'To so many older women "Crossroads" was the most important, most glamorous show. They weren't impressed by the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National Theatre. To be in "Crossroads" meant you'd *made it*.'

Jack spent seventeen years working on the Birmingham soap, first as a director, then for twelve years as its devoted and fiercely protective producer. He wanted to leave in grand style after the show's twenty-first birthday. In fact he was despatched with no ceremony at all a year earlier, and to his shock and dismay had no say in the choice of his successor. Phillip Bowman, the man picked to follow him, was in Jack's eyes a misguided youth. William Smethurst, who succeeded Bowman, was even worse.

When the news came that 'Crossroads' was to end, he was dry-eyed. 'It wasn't "Crossroads" they took off. "Crossroads" had been killed off years before,' he told me. 'You cannot suddenly say I'm going to play to an entirely different audience, to ignore the existing loyal viewers who happened mostly to be housewives and elderly people. You can't slaughter the cast and take out all those familiar old friends.'

Jack was involved, however, in the removal of the most familiar old friend of 'Crossroads'. He agreed with Controller Charles Denton that Noele Gordon should be dropped. 'I agreed with Charles that she had to go because we could not have the show revolving around one person. She was a personal friend. I'd worked with her on two thousand to three thousand editions of "Lunch Box" and in the theatre before that. I felt she was frustrated anyway. Since her mother, who'd been her great support, had died, she'd seemed frustrated. She was hurt, of course she was. But I can categorically say that leaving the programme did not kill her. That's just the dramatic sort of thing actors like to say.'

Jack actually enjoyed Meg's leaving. He tried to ensure that the newspapers were kept in the dark.

Filming in the QE2 at Southampton he even wore a fake moustache to throw reporters off the scent. 'I was spotted by a group of journalists, and they asked me who I was. I said my name was Wolfenden and marched past. It was the stage manager's name; I'd plucked it out of the air.'

Barton positively hated what happened to the soap after he left. 'It was never a chore for me or the people I worked with. We loved it; that's why it hurt when people slagged us off. My aim was to make viewers happy, to help them while entertaining them. After all these years, I still derive satisfaction from the fact that there's a four-bedded unit in a Birmingham hospital for people suffering from kidney disease that "Crossroads" founded. We gave Downs Syndrome children a sense of pride when we showed a child and gave an idea what her life was like. Parents wrote to say they held their heads high after we did that....

My successors had a completely different outlook. They weren't interested in the family aspect, the caring aspect. It's all pretty pictures, smart speeches. Smethurst has changed it beyond all recognition. He destroyed all the illusions of the "Archers" listeners by bringing "Archers" actors and characters on to television. I can hardly believe what was done.

"Crossroads" always had its critics. If it wasn't the media it was the IBA [Independent Broadcasting Authority]. The first time they cut us down from five episodes to four each week because they said they wanted something more cultural in that fifth slot. The cultural addition turned out to be "Opportunity Knocks"!

Since 1984, Jack Barton has been writing and living in the country.



Phillip Bowman sacked Ronald Allen, who played the second most popular character in 'Crossroads', David Hunter. With him went Barbara Hunter (actress Sue Lloyd) and many others. Bowman, an Australian, then thirty-one, took cameras outside, introduced action and glamour. He was hated for it. The viewing figures rose; *The Times* gave him a good review. But after two years Bowman's affair with his young script-editor Kate Henderson (he was still married, although separated) caused uncomfortable publicity. She quit. He was moved to new projects. They are now married. He delivered the Hunters' death-blow in the elegant luxury of Brown's Hotel off Bond Street. What happened was bizarre, a nightmare for the executioner and the condemned.

'I had no inbuilt prejudices about "Crossroads",' said Bowman. 'I'd directed soaps in Australia. I was there because Ted Childs [Central's drama boss] knew me when he was at Euston Films and I was associate producer on "Minder". I just wanted to do a good job. I took a pack of tapes and scripts to France and decided I had to change the principal character, David Hunter. I flipped through *Spotlight* [the actors' directory] to find a leading lady. I had no favourites in mind. I saw so many people, then I found Gabrielle Drake.

'Once I'd got my queen in position, everything else

fell into place. Being an Australian, I knew that once you're on the horse you gotta ride it. You know you'll come out of it covered in shit or glory. I invited Ronald Allen [motel boss David Hunter] and Sue Lloyd [Barbara Hunter, his wife] to tea at Brown's one afternoon. I told them I was going to change the series dramatically and they were not part of my plans. I gave them the prepared speech. Ronald - he's a lovely man. It killed me to do it. He cared incredibly about his work. He sat there that afternoon, white-faced, silent. Suddenly, this loud voice boomed: "My Gaad! It's you, Ronnie." Then: "Is it really true? You're fabulous. My Gaad!" It was a Canadian, a tourist - one of the Rothschilds, it later turned out. He was loaded with parcels and had been fussing about his driver. He was right there with us; he sat down and told us about watching "Crossroads" on cable there. It was just like a set-up. I was cringing, from the worst day of my life. Suddenly he said to Ronnie "Who's the boy?" Ronnie said I was the producer, and he began congratulating me. I felt like an arsehole. Ronnie behaved like a perfect gentleman, politely talking for what seemed hours.

'Ronnie and Sue clearly didn't want to be left alone. When this outrageous man started pressing them to go out with him, have dinner and so on, they more or less went like children. I remember seeing their ashen faces through the back window of a taxi.... It was weird, awful.

'After Ronnie and Sue, sacking the others was easy. I did it without a moment's hesitation. Ronnie was terrific in his last weeks. He worked exactly as always. Sue, too. When they finally left, I gave them some antique vases. It was a very emotional time.'

Bowman also despatched Glenda, Kevin, Paul Ross, Mavis Hooper.



William Smethurst believes 'Crossroads' would be alive and well today had his revolution been allowed to run its course. What killed 'Crossroads' was impatience, he thinks. Had it survived, it would have been called 'King's Oak' and would have been quite different from the old motel saga born twenty-four years ago. So he has regrets. Perhaps he was

arrogant. Perhaps he was naive. But he has no regrets for the bloodshed - the characters he killed, the actors he sacked.

Smethurst put eight years with 'The Archers' behind him when he came in the autumn of 1986 to change corny working-class old 'Crossroads' into a witty middle-class young soap. He declared war with glee, slaughtered holy cows and male stars, too. He changed writers sets, the music, the name. It should have worked, given time. But the corny working-class old viewers stayed and hated it. The trendy Guardian-reading new ones didn't show.

He went ahead with a relaunch of the new look in September 1987 just as his boss, Director of Programmes Andy Allen, announced the time was up. The execution would be total. 'Crossroads' was to die. The time it used in Central's studios - about 20 per cent - could be used better on something new (though no one knew what).

Smethurst, nicknamed 'Barmy Bill', stopped smiling and retired hurt but unrepentant. He said: 'When I was brought in the viewing figures were gently declining, the audience was older than for any of the other soaps and "Crossroads" still had the most awful reputation for shoddy quality. This wasn't really fair, because Phillip Bowman had made amazing changes to the way it looked. The lighting was superb, for example. But it was nowhere near enough. Perhaps I was naive to think that if I improved the scripts, improved the acting I'd get a higher quality product and escape the "Crossroads" image. The older viewers became very fretful, and I can't blame them really.'

'We had a slump in the summer. We'd had the old characters dropping out at the rate of about one a week. I'm convinced it was the only way to do it. We had some terrific new writers and new characters. But then we did a survey of what newspapers "Crossroads" viewers read. It was depressing. More of them read the Daily Star, which was then going through its "Daily Bonk" phase, than the numbers who ever saw any of the quality papers. I realised there was no point in clever funny writing if no one would appreciate it. But we had to try to attract them. We went ahead with our new pub set, our new landlord and our new opening credits and title, "Crossroads King's Oak". We were working in the studios when we heard we'd been chopped.'

'Over the next few months the ratings recovered, the audience profile changed, and I really do believe we had a literate amusing programme. If we'd stayed on, we would have been established somewhere between "Emmerdale Farm" and "Coronation Street". We had 11.5 million viewers, for heaven's sake. All right, we were never going to rival "EastEnders" or "Coronation Street", but I think we would have succeeded on our terms.'

'I have no regrets about leaving "The Archers" and,

no, I have no regrets about firing the actors. I hesitated only once - over sacking Sue Hanson, because she had been there so long. But unless I'd done something dramatic we could never have hoped to lose the old image. As for the others - well, every actor is a freelance artist, paid on a short-term basis. They aren't hired for life. When you end with one you replace him or her with another actor.'

Since October 1987, William Smethurst has been working on new drama projects for Central Television.

