



OUT OF HOURS

While many of us are tucking into our Christmas turkey or toasting the new year, thousands of people in the public sector are working tirelessly. Here, we meet three of them...

INTERVIEWS BY HAZEL PLUSH • PHOTOS BY FRANCESCA JONES

FRAN SOUTHALL
PRISON OFFICER AT HMP STAFFORD



“For everybody who works or lives in a prison, Christmas can be horrendous. HMP Stafford is a Category C facility: a minimum-security closed prison. Many of the residents have been disowned by their families, so Christmas can dredge up painful memories. Self-harming is rife among residents during the festive season and a lot of other incidents do kick off. The prison is very stable at the moment though, which helps.

“I’ve been working here for almost 20 years and I’ve had five Christmases off. Most of my family work shifts too, so we try to find a day when we can all be together: we have a tree, we play cards, and we laugh... The date doesn’t matter: it’s a day just for us. I couldn’t do this job without the support of my family.

“One Christmas I had two lads on the wing that could play musical instruments and the church loaned us some carol sheets. Everybody came out of their cells to sing together – it was a poignant moment. Should criminals be singing carols at Christmas? I don’t know. But I do know that there’s no use shutting the door behind an offender and not supporting them: you’ll just be sending the same person back out into the world. We focus on rehabilitation.

“I’m working this Christmas Day. You get the uniform ready on Christmas Eve, and it’s hanging there instead of a stocking, but that’s what you signed up for. You go in and you leave your personal feelings at the gates: chin up, smile on, let’s just get through this.” »



MARK BUCKLEY
FIREFIGHTER AT ROATH FIRE STATION, WALES

“Our fire station has a kitchen, so we take it in turns to cook meals for the team, but on Christmas Day everyone pitches in. We do the turkey, the potatoes, the crackers... but the only question is, do we get to eat it? You wouldn’t believe the number of times that we get called out just as we’re sitting down. But you won’t find us complaining. There are people up and down the country working over Christmas and we’re very happy to be doing our bit.

“I’ve been a firefighter for six years and I’ve worked every Christmas Day apart from last year. After five years’ service you can book annual leave over Christmas, so that’s what I did last December: we took the kids to Cornwall and made a proper holiday of it. If we had Christmas together every year, we might not appreciate it as much, but we grabbed the opportunity and had a fantastic time. “The season can be very hectic for the Fire Service, though there’s no such

thing as a typical shift: sometimes it’s just a case of popping up the road because someone burnt their turkey to a crisp. But no emergency is ever too small and we’re always ready to help. The station is like a big family: we decorate our Christmas tree, swap presents and take part in charity events during the festive period. Luckily, I’ve never had to rescue Santa – or anyone dressed as Santa – from a chimney... Now *that* would be a Christmas to remember.”

STUART BROOKES
PARAMEDIC AT SOUTH WESTERN AMBULANCE SERVICE
NHS FOUNDATION TRUST, BATH

“When I’m heading in to work over Christmas, I always feel proud – it’s a privilege to do my job on any day of the year. We help people in their lowest moments and at Christmas that can be especially important. That said, I’m over the moon to have most of this Christmas off. I’ll be completing a night shift just as Santa finishes his rounds.

“Of the seven years I’ve worked for the Ambulance Service, I’ve worked six

Christmases, so I’ll be making the most of it. It’ll just be me, my wife and my little girl, enjoying some quality time together. It can be really hard to switch off from shifts. Even on your days off, it never really leaves you – so I always treasure those family moments.

“I primarily work in a rapid response car, or in an ambulance with a crewmate: when somebody calls 999 and asks for the service, we’re the first on the scene.

December is a very busy time. Shift work takes the fun out of most festivities: bank holidays and weekends are just like any other day, but there’s usually a good atmosphere at work over Christmas. We decorate the station and hopefully one of the bosses puts their hand in their pocket for some food. We get through a lot of cakes and biscuits: I know we’re supposed to be promoting health, but it is Christmas after all...” ■

