

A month undercover in an Amazon warehouse

James Bloodworth reports on life in the online retailer's "fulfilment centre" in Staffordshire

It was quarter past six in the evening and the siren had just sounded for lunch: a loud noise pumped through loudspeakers into every corner of the cold and drab warehouse. While I stood in the queue, hands in pockets, waiting to get out, a well-built security guard made a signal for me to put my arms in the air. "Move forward, mate, I haven't got all afternoon," he said in a broad West Midlands accent. There was a commotion at the front of the line: a quarrel had erupted between a security guard and a young Romanian man over the presence of a mobile phone. Security guard: "For the umpteenth time, I'll tell you again. No... mobile... phones... in... here! Do you understand me? Now, I'll have to tell your manager."



A picker on patrol at Amazon's Swansea fulfilment centre

The place had the atmosphere of what I imagined a prison would feel like. Most of the rules were concerned with petty theft. It could take 15 minutes to pass through huge metal scanners. You were never paid for the time you spent waiting to have your pockets checked. Hooded tops were banned in the warehouse and so were sunglasses. "We might need to see your eyes in case you've had too much to drink the night before," a large, red-faced woman had warned us ominously on the first day. "Your eyes give you away."

This was life at Amazon, one of the world's largest retailers. I was an order picker in one of its distribution centres – the size of ten football pitches – in the small Staffordshire town of Rugeley. The warehouse employed around 1,200 people. The majority of my co-workers were from eastern Europe and most were from Romania. The Romanians were dumbfounded as to why any English person would want to degrade themselves doing such lowly work. "Excuse me if this sounds offensive, but are you English? Born here?" Yes, I am English. "Then why are you picking?" asked a chubby red-haired girl on my second day.

Lunch – we still called it lunch despite it being dished out at six o'clock in the evening – marked the halfway point in a ten-and-a-half-hour shift. Eastern European languages filled the air of the shiny-floored dining hall, which was brightly lit like an operating theatre and always smelt of disinfectant. One of the perks of the job was the relatively cheap food and the free teas and coffees available from the vending machines. Mince and potatoes or chips plus a can of drink and a Mars bar for £4.10. The challenge was finding sufficient time to eat and drink. We were allocated half an hour for lunch but, by the time you made it to the canteen

and elbowed your way through a throng of workers, you had 15 minutes before you started the long walk back to the warehouse. Two or three English managers would invariably be waiting for you back at the work station, pointing at imaginary watches and bellowing at anyone who returned 30 seconds late: "Extended lunch break today, is it? We don't pay you to sit around jabbering."

One week in, a girl grabbed me by the arm, shook me violently and told me she wanted to pack her bags and return home to

Romania as soon as possible. "I hate it; I hate it here," she hissed through chipped teeth. "I hate the people, I hate the dirt and I hate the work... I don't like this country... Too many Indian people. Indian people everywhere!"

Amazon's vast warehouse sat on waste ground between the canal and the power station. The massive, shoebox-like structure contained four floors, and the workforce was similarly split up into four main groups. There were those who checked and unpacked the incoming orders; those who stowed the items on shelves; another group – which I was part of – that picked the orders; and the workers who

packed the products ready for delivery. It was the picker's job to march up the aisles selecting items from the 2 metre-high shelves before putting them in big yellow plastic boxes, or "totes", as they were called. These totes were wheeled around on blue metal trolleys before being sent down seemingly never-ending conveyor belts that followed the length of the building. On an average day you would expect to send around 40 totes down the conveyors, each one filled with books, DVDs and assorted miscellanea.

Each of us carried a handheld device that tracked our every move. For every dozen or so workers, somewhere in the warehouse a line manager would be huddled over a desk tapping orders into a computer screen. These instructions would filter through to our devices: "Please report to the pick desk immediately," or, "Your rates are down this hour. Please speed up." We were ranked from highest to lowest in terms of the speed at which we collected our items from the shelves and filled our totes. For example, I was informed during my first week that I was in the bottom 10% in terms of my picking rate.

Feel-good slogans were plastered across the interior walls of Amazon's warehouse, next to photographs of workers whose radiant countenances proclaimed that everyone at work was

"Each of us carried a handheld device that tracked our every move"

having a wonderful time. Almost everything that had a name was given a euphemism. Even calling the place a warehouse was a minor transgression. You were informed on the first day that the building would henceforth be known as a “fulfilment centre” – or FC for short. You were not fired or sacked; instead you were “released”. The potentially antagonistic categories of Boss and Worker had also been abolished. You were all “Associates” – both high and lowly alike.

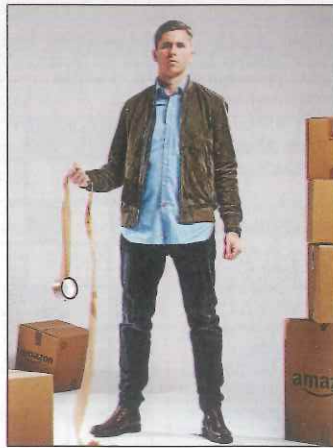
I landed the job at Amazon through an agency, Transline. Every contract that we pickers were on was zero hours and temporary. After nine months, Amazon would either take you on permanently or cast you aside. In practice, you were lucky to make it to nine months. We were informed on our first day that if we were “outstanding”, Amazon might conceivably retain us. However, we were also told that we should be “under no illusions that this is a temporary job”.

I lived in a rented house where we all worked at Amazon. In week two, I started to get sick. Because being ill was a punishable offence, I was about to earn myself a “point” and lose a day’s pay. According to the pedometer I wore on my wrist, I was walking around ten miles a day. The greatest distance I travelled was 14 miles and the shortest was seven miles. My feet began to resemble two ragged clods of wax gone over with a cheese grater. Traipsing around for ten miles when your feet are soft and you’ve eaten well and slept soundly is one thing. Doing it for four consecutive days (and that’s before any overtime is factored in), with very little let-up and on a diet of ready meals, is another thing altogether. When they start, cordial, bright-eyed young Romanian men and women are so busy running around that they don’t even have time to wipe the sweat from their faces. Just a few days later they’ll be curled over their trolleys, trying to snatch a morsel of sleep out of sight of the supervisors.

The top floor on which I worked was a gloomy place, with the only natural light coming in through small rectangular windows located far above on the high ceiling. During the course of the night – as soon as we clocked off at 11.30pm, another group of workers were bussed in to start their shifts – many of the motion-sensitive lights would malfunction, meaning that a dozen or so workers would be left scuttling around in the dark on the top floor of a warehouse at three o’clock in the morning. Who, when they purchase an iPhone charger or an Adele album with a click on Amazon’s website, imagines anything like this?

You discover almost as soon as you begin the job that the admonishment “never run” was not meant literally. Rather, it was an illusory prohibition of something that was a necessary requirement if you were to avoid the sack. Rules were laid down that it was impossible not to flout. Dashing around was obligatory if you were to meet the exacting targets set for every worker. Similarly, water breaks were permitted, but to go off in search of a water dispenser was to run the risk of “idling”, another transgression you were often warned about. There were around 12 water machines on each floor, yet in a labyrinth of aisles spread over 700,000sq ft, it was nearly always impossible to locate one nearby when you needed it.

Prizes would be offered for the best-performing pickers – although I never did see anyone win anything – and a manager would run through all the mistakes your shift had made on the previous day. These would include things like not stowing boxes properly after picking an item and taking too much idle time. Most of what was disparagingly called “idle time” involved things like going to the



Bloodworth: “sheer misery”

toilet. For those of us who worked on the top floor of this huge building, the closest toilets were down four flights of stairs.

The sheer misery of the work left you craving cigarettes and alcohol and everything else that offered the promise of any kind of emotional kick. When we walked through the door at midnight at the end of a shift, we kicked off our boots and collapsed onto our beds with a bag of McDonald’s and a can of beer. We did not – and nor have I met anyone in a similar job who behaves in this way – come home and stand about in the kitchen for half an hour, boiling broccoli.

Rules, as I have already stated, were not really rules at all at Amazon. A good example of what I mean by this was the time allocated for break.

Over the course of a normal day, workers were entitled to one break of half an hour and two ten-minute breaks. The half-hour break was unpaid, but the shorter breaks were paid. The ten-minute breaks were actually fifteen minutes in total, but an extra five minutes (which you were not paid for) was tacked on to the ten to account for walking from the further reaches of the warehouse to the canteen. In practice, it took around seven minutes to walk from the back of the warehouse (ten football pitches, remember) and through the security scanners to the break area. When the two minutes it took to get back to the pick desk at the end of the break were factored in, the “fifteen-minute break” totalled about six minutes.

I never did receive an employment contract, so I have no idea as to my rights or anything else I might have been entitled to. As for my Romanian co-workers, most of them lacked even a rudimentary understanding of the rights of a typical British worker. However harshly they were treated, in their minds such a regime was normal; it was simply what happened in England.

For me at least, life soon settled into a routine. I spent each morning before my shift eating a hideous ready meal in my room. Sausage and mash from the Co-op. Beef lasagne. Macaroni cheese. I stopped buying milk and bread because they went off

before I had the chance to use them. It is easy to slip into an unhealthy regime like this. You get up each morning at 11, you have breakfast, shower and prepare your feet for the day ahead – several sticking plasters,

two pairs of socks – and then you drag yourself out of the door by 12.30. You return home at midnight and you are usually in bed by 1am. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Managing on the salary paid by Amazon was theoretically feasible in a town like Rugeley. My salary worked out at £245 per week for 35 hours before tax (at £7 per hour). It was tough, but it was possible to keep your head above water; in Rugeley I paid £300 for a functional box room, which included all bills. But it is worth asking what living on a paltry income does to a person’s long-term health. When I started at Amazon, I was a slim 12½ stone. Despite walking around ten miles a day, by the end of the month I had put on a stone. I was smoking again, too.

You can, if you like, punch your credit-card details into Amazon’s website without ever having to see what goes on in this little corner of Staffordshire. You can sit, feet up and kettle on, turn on the computer and order something to arrive the next day with a mere click of the mouse. Our standard of living has come to depend on it.

Extracted from *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain* by James Bloodworth (Atlantic Books, £12.99).