

BBC Worldwide

People Like Us

Series 1

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Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

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B B C Worldwide

People Like Us

Series 1

Watch the work of a serious documentary film-maker who really knows how to bring out the worst in his subjects

Winner of the 1999/2000 Silver Rose of Montreux for Comedy

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

BBC Worldwide

People Like Us

Series 1

Introduction

Chris Langham stars as fly-on-the-wall documentary-maker Roy Mallard in the television debut of a popular BBC Radio 4 series. *People Like Us* has already won some impressive radio awards:the Sony Gold,The Writer's Guild and the British Comedy Award.Having received the Royal Television Society Award in its first season,the television series looks set for similar success.

In an attempt to get under the skin of what it's really like to be one of Britain's unsung professionals, Roy Mallard travels across the nation to interview a variety of subjects:ordinary folk,"people like us". Although viewers never see him,they are very much aware of him. He is always in the thick of the action, up to his eyes in problems and forever trying to keep chaos at bay.

Roy is earnest and well-meaning. He is also hopelessly inept, staggeringly gauche and linguistically challenged. Utterly insensitive to nuance or atmosphere, he is constantly wrong-footed by his interviewees who take his questions too literally. Slowly but relentlessly, he gets caught up in some distracting human mini-drama that skews the entire programme, whether because of a dysfunctional slide projector, an unintelligible Japanese translator or an estate agent with an unconsummated passion for a colleague. And everyone keeps getting his name wrong.

Those unfamiliar with the show might at first mistake it for a genuine documentary. It is this authenticity, combined with Mallard's idiotic narration and interview technique, that makes the show so funny. Details creep in that have nothing to do with serious reporting.

"Roy Mallard wasn't a spoof of anyone in particular," says writer John Morton."He's the incarnation of a BBC-ness that still exists in Radio 4 and on BBC2. I'm sure he sees himself as educating,informing and entertaining, and being a hero when things are falling about around him."

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Series 1

Production Credits

Written and directed by **John Morton** (*Kiss Me Kate*)

Produced and co-directed by **Paul Schlesinger** (*Beast, Ted and Ralph, Europigeon*)

Executive Producer **Jon Plowman** (*Absolutely Fabulous, French & Saunders, Smith & Jones*)

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

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People Like Us

Series 1

Characterisation

Evening Standard: Feature

Chris Langham (Roy Mallard)

The forgotten man of *Not The Nine O'Clock News* is back on top again with a spoof fly-on-the-wall documentary series. Chris Langham has got through the insecure and neurotic bits to conjure up the brilliant *People Like Us*.

In the first episode of *People Like Us*, documentary maker Roy Mallard arrives at the factory of a company called Zenotec to interview its managing director. "How does a typical day go?" asks Mallard. "Well," says the boss, "There's no such thing as a typical day." "Well, how does an untypical one go then?" responds Mallard.

At first you might be thinking this is the worst interview you have ever seen but, after a while, it emerges that what you are watching is a subtle subversion of a whole genre of programme-making. At the centre of it, though never in shot, is Roy Mallard, forever hoping to appear as a transparent observer, rather like *Man Alive's* Fyfe Robertson in the days before personality-led programming...

The slow-burning, low-key humour of *People Like Us* made it Best Radio Comedy at the British Comedy Awards in 1996 and 1997. The formula was perfect for radio. But how will it transfer to TV?

If it works, it will mark yet another unexpected twist in the life of Chris Langham, who plays Roy Mallard. Langham, 50, is divorced from his first wife, *Rock Follies* actor Sue Jones-Davies (who also played the "Welsh tart" in *Monty Python's Life of Brian*) and has three children from two marriages. He has had a varied (though rather unnoticed) career as a performer and writer. From 1977 to 1980, he wrote for *The Muppet Show*, winning a Writers' Guild of America Award and Emmy which he later derided as "completely worthless".

If he sounded the worse for drink throughout most of the press interviews he gave in the Seventies and Eighties, that's probably because he was. His old friend, the former *Spitting Image* producer John Lloyd, talks admiringly of him displaying "a guerrilla quirkiness". Langham's collaboration with John Lloyd goes back to *Not The Nine O'Clock News*, in which he appeared alongside Mel Smith, Rowan Atkinson and Pamela Stephenson. But Langham was dropped in 1979 after the first series, replaced by Griff Rhys Jones, and became the forgotten man of the series.

"He was brilliant but erratic," says Lloyd. Langham's lifestyle was pretty much all over the place at the time, which may not have helped engender a spirit of unity with the rest of the cast, but that final blow soon after his removal from the show he said, "I was shattered; to this day no one has told me why" – sent him even closer towards the edge. He finally checked into rehab[ilitation] and cleaned himself up, which resulted in subsequent successes like two series of *Kiss Me Kate* with Caroline Quentin for BBC TV, as well as stage parts in *Crazy For You* and *Les Misérables*.

Entertainment

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Series 1

Characterisation

Evening Standard: Feature

Chris Langham continued

These days, he looks neat, in a dark blue shirt, pressed trousers, hair lightly greying. He says Roy Mallard is a comic exaggeration of John Morton, the show's writer, a man who, in a very English way, mixes curiosity with shyness. "One of the most enjoyable things about *People Like Us*," he says, "is the fraudulent aspect of it, which is that if we've done our job properly, someone could stumble across it, and five minutes later think, 'God, this is awful', and five minutes after that choose, independently of the show, to find it funny. But the show never seems to be aware of the fact that it's amusing because it has a serious intent."

I would say they've achieved that, and I hope Langham has managed to give the slip to the spectres of his past, when the only person he could share the stage with was himself. No wonder, though, that when I ask him if he's happy, there's a long pause. "By nature I'm not," he begins. "I mean I am, but you start out as a happy-go-lucky kid, and then you go through a period of adult life when you become quite anxious, insecure and neurotic, and you deny that until it gets so bad that you make it your business to reclaim your right to be comfortable. Then the point arrives when you think, 'I'd better learn to want what I have instead of having what I want', and 'if only the world treated me properly'. And so, yes, I am becoming a happier person."

People Like Us should make a lot of people happier, too, whether or not they get the joke.

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

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People Like Us

Series 1

Production Biography

Sunday Times: Feature

John Morton (Writer)

When a radio programme has won as many awards as *People Like Us*, its transfer to television is almost inevitable. Television is a voracious medium, always happy to gobble up a ready-made hit. So how could it resist a programme that on Radio 4 had won two British Comedy awards, the Writer's Guild award and a Sony Gold? Television has been cannibalising radio ever since Tony Hancock was honing his timing, but not all formats survive the transplant... So, not surprisingly, the news that *People Like Us* was preparing to take the plunge as been greeted with some alarm. Even the programme-makers were nervous.

People Like Us is a parody of documentary-making. Roy Mallard, supposedly a BBC interviewer, is sent round the country to talk to ordinary folk. Mallard has an almost Reithian calling, but precious little skill. He is over-earnest, apt to talk nonsense and is so obviously unattractive there is a running gag that nobody can believe he is married. "Roy Mallard wasn't a spoof of anyone in particular," says writer John Morton. "He's the incarnation of a BBC-ness that still exists in Radio 4 and on BBC2. I'm sure he sees himself as educating, informing and entertaining, and being a hero when things are falling about around him."

Played by Chris Langham, Mallard remains just the right side of endearing, but it's an unsettling satire all the same. To keep the flavour of the radio show on television, Morton decided it needed to leave the audience some work to do. He therefore came up with the idea of always keeping Mallard out of shot. "He rang up one day, and said: 'how about if we never see your character?'" says Langham. "My ego said: 'No. Absolute veto. More close-ups are what are required.' But we shot it both ways and in the one where you see me, it looks like any other comedy show. In the one where you don't see me, there's this odd dynamic that is somehow very engaging."

Since they worked together on *People Like Us*, Morton and Langham have become friends. They've collaborated on the Caroline Quentin sitcom *Kiss Me Kate* (BBC), in which Langham also stars, and are about to start work on the third series. Now Morton is looking like one of comedy's brightest new stars, but when he began, it was against all the odds. An unknown writer, with no connections in the industry, Morton sent in *People Like Us* as an unsolicited idea. This is a process almost no script survives. It is almost unheard of for an unknown writer to get a whole series made. At Radio 4, they can't remember it ever having happened before.

But Morton plays for high stakes. In 1990, when he was 34, he sold his house and gave in his notice as an English teacher at a sixth-form college in Winchester. "I still shudder when I think about it," he says. "I wasn't unhappy teaching. Some would say my job was so cushy, it wasn't working at all. But I got to the point where I realised nobody was going to tell me to stop and if I didn't do something, I'd be teaching for the rest of my life."

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

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People Like Us

Series 1

Production Biography

Sunday Times: Feature

John Morton continued

"I also knew if I was ever going to have an idea accepted, I'd have to write an enormous amount. I knew I'd never have enough spare time as a teacher." Living in rented accommodation, Morton eked out a living by working in bars, doing garden maintenance and taking short-term teaching contracts.

At first, he didn't even have an idea. "You hear of writers who say they are walking round Sainsbury's and suddenly inspiration strikes. That's never happened to me. I'm very slow. I have to sit down and clear time and space, but there's always something that is rattling around in my head. It's a case of pushing everything else to one side and letting it come to the surface." Ideas took a long time to bubble up, and when he did send off scripts, they all came back. "I remember at one point, the tax man didn't believe I hadn't earned anything from teaching, which they still had as my stated profession, and asked to see my rejection slips. I sent off the lot – about 40. It was hopeless in a way."

But Morton always believed he could write and, eventually, the BBC were convinced. *People Like Us* was the second script that was accepted (the first was a comedy called *Mightier Than the Sword* on Radio 3). Having seen Chris Langham on *Smith & Jones*, Morton always had his voice in mind as he wrote.

"John has this very dry but engaging style," says Langham. "My character would go to interview a farmer, and say: 'Do you remember farming without a tractor?', and he'd say: 'Oh, I've got a good memory, I don't need a tractor.' I think you tune in, thinking this is a documentary, and after five minutes, you think, Jesus, this is awful. Then, five minutes after that, you think, this is really funny." Once you get the joke, it works like a dream.

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

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Series 1

Episode Synopses

1.The Managing Director

Roy Mallard travels to Nottingham to spend a day with Peter Wilson, Managing Director of Zenotech, a company fighting to keep afloat in the stimulating environment of Surface Mount Technology. In other words, it manufactures Thick Film Hybrids for the computer industry.

Zenotec is a typical example of the high tech infrastructure that has sprung up in the last 30 years all over Nottingham. Managing director, Peter Wilson (**Neil McCaul**) gives Roy an insight into his inept management skills when he is forced to fire delivery driver Dean Trussler (**Peter Gunn**) in the face of a new corporate strategy to radically simplify the transport system – by not having one. Roy reports: "Being cruel in order to be kind is never easy. As Peter is not doing this to be kind, his task of being cruel is even more of a challenge." But not everything goes to plan and Roy ends up with less of a fly-on-the-wall presence than he'd like.

The rest of the staff seem just as incapable as Peter. Sales director (**Lisa Bell**), who has a background in oil rigs, is more interested in her car than her work and does a good job of embarrassing herself in front of visiting Japanese businessmen. Peter's personal assistant, secretary and general back woman, Sue Rudkin (**Soo Drouet**) is especially keen on organising the office.

2.The Estate Agent

Roy Mallard spends a day with Levick's Estate Agent, a small family firm in Lewes, Sussex. Founded in-between the wars, Levick's is an established family business, although most people didn't realise that it existed until after World War II. Roy talks to Nick Levick (**Stuart Wright**), who has run the office for the last three years, and says: "Many people think it's a really easy job, money for old rope. In actual fact it's bloody hard work, the trick is to make it look easy – it's a bit like bullfighting."

He also meets sales negotiator Madeline Goddard (**Sarah Alexander**), who has developed a reputation as an agile and subtle negotiator and wins Roy over with a few tricks of the trade. Roy also gets an insight into viewings and valuations. He discovers that it is no surprise that estate agents are so often compared to synchronised swimmers. No matter how much pressure they are under, no matter how complex the manoeuvre, their skill is to make their clients think that nothing could be easier and that the chances of anyone drowning are slight. Roy's glimpse under the water reveals a different story...

This episode also features **Jessica Stephenson** as a prospective buyer.

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

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Series 1

Episode Synopses

3.The Police Officer

Roy follows PC David Knight as he prepares for a 12-hour day on duty. Roy also meets Inspector Mike, who believes technology is no substitute for having a good nose on the job, and Chief Inspector Carpenter, who explains the importance of earning respect in the force, but his dodgy hairdo prevents him from gaining Roy's respect.

But Roy gets more than he bargained for when he accompanies PC Knight out on the beat in Northampton. A routine day is transformed into a tense roof top drama when an insurance company employee threatens to jump unless his demands for a fuller and more meaningful life are met. Will PC Knight encourage him to come down or will the presence of Roy push them all over the edge?

This episode also stars **Tom Goodman Hill**, **Emma Kennedy**, **David Cann** and **Geoffrey Whitehead**.

4.The Solicitor

Roy Mallard goes on an emotional rollercoaster when he visits Broadbent and Broadbent, a small firm of solicitors specialising in matrimonial cases where it's not only coffee that gets spilt in the office...

Broadbent and Broadbent is located in Alderley Edge, Cheshire, and run by husband-and-wife partnership, Graham and Nicola (**Owen Brenman** and **Rebecca Front**). While Graham explains the intricacies of matrimony and personal injury, Nicola demonstrates how not to run a solicitors office.

Roy follows Nicola as she attempts to sympathise with client Amanda Carter (**Kay Stonham**) on her divorce and attends Matrimony Day at County Court, where he gets an interesting insight into relationships. But Roy finds the biggest emotional upheaval is back in the offices of Broadbent and Broadbent.

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

BBC Worldwide



Series 1

Episode Synopses

5.The Photographer

Roy Mallard is in Winchester to discover the artistic genius behind the work of photographer Will Rushmore (**Bill Nighy** – *The Men's Room*). Unfortunately, Will's talent behind the camera is equal to that of Roy's.

According to Will, he gave up a safe job in town-planning to follow his lifelong ambition to be a top photographer. According to his lodger Emma (**Jessica Oyelowo**), a young art student with whom he appears to have a more than the usual landlord/tenant relationship, Will was not content to settle for the predictable job/family/mortgage that is normal for a man of his age. In fact, 41 is not old at all and his Pierre Cardin underpants are not those of a middle-aged guy. According to his ex-wife Ros, he is a sad loser who was fired from the council.

Roy learns some of the tricks of Will's trade as he follows him around on a day that is anything but routine, whether it's paying over the odds for a camera lens, doing a portrait of a warring family, or visiting a smart London gallery in the vain hope that his work will be exhibited. Even in the dark room, Roy is in awe of the artist at work, or he puts it, "The dark room is the confessional in the church of the photographer's science." This makes as much sense as anything Will has to say about his work.

6.The Headteacher

Roy Mallard goes back to school to find out about life along the corridors and in the classrooms of King Edward VII Comprehensive School in Ashford, Kent.

Part of headteacher Stuart Simmons' duties today include staff meetings and giving the schoolchildren the week's buzzword: intercourse.

Roy also becomes embroiled in the race to recruit a new head of humanities, in which a knowledge of volleyball seems to be a key asset. Needless to say, Roy's advice and support results in his having more than egg on his face.

This episode also features **Philip Fox, Beth Goddard, Ewan Bailey, Joanne Brookes** and **Mark Heap**.

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

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Series 1

Ratings

Episode	UK Txn Date	Channel	Time On	Viewers	Audience Share
1	20.09.99	BBC2	2200	1.5 million	8.2%
2	27.09.99	BBC2	2200	1.6 million	9.0%
3	04.10.99	BBC2	2200	1.7 million	9.9%
4	11.10.99	BBC2	2200	1.3 million	6.9%
5	18.10.99	BBC2	2200	1.3 million	7.6%
6	25.10.99	BBC2	2200	1.2 million	6.4%

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B B C Worldwide



Series 1

Awards

Royal Television Society Awards 1999/2000

Best Situation Comedy/Comedy Drama

Montreux 1999/2000

Silver Rose for Comedy

BAFTA 1999/2000

Nomination: Best Comedy

Entertainment

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BBC Worldwide



Series 1

What the Papers Say

"Anybody who did not enjoy People Like Us should be reported to the authorities and locked away for the protection of themselves and society... it was the funniest thing I have seen on television for years." *The Stage*

"...an absolute gem of a series... Sly, subtle and sharp as a staple." *Express*

"The show is a brilliant amalgamation of spoof styles from *Airplane* to *The Day Today*." *The Financial Times*

"The best comedy series currently on TV." *Daily Mail*

"So awful, it's irresistible... a subtle subversion of the whole genre of programme-making." *London Evening Standard*

"Mr Langham, packaged as the totally inept television reporter Roy Mallard, has raised the old comedic art of the pratfall to new heights." *Daily Mail*

"Funnier than the real thing... Television that sets out to rip the piss out of television is walking on eggshells. Too subtle, and people might not get the joke; too broad and people will accuse the makers of biting the hand that feeds it. The spoof documentary *People Like Us*, written by John Morton, gets the balance just right." *Time Out*

"...brilliantly funny..." *Guardian Guide*

"...subtly clever... funny." *Mail on Sunday*

"The docusoap format... has been spoofed brilliantly in *People Like Us*." *Observer*

Entertainment

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BBC Worldwide



Series 1

What the Papers Say

Observer

People Like Us is on BBC2 and should stay there, which is a compliment. The faux documentary series (which transfers surprisingly successfully from radio) features Chris Langham's lugubrious voice as Roy Mallard (why are bird surnames intrinsically amusing, as per Partridge?), an invisible, camera-wielding interrogator, whose deadpan interview and voiceover technique calls to mind the dullest of dull local reports on *Nationwide*, circa 1976.

John Morton's writing is impeccably observed. Last week, Mallard went to Zenotec, a company which made Thick Film Hybrids and were preparing to meet prospective Japanese clients big in Precisional Thermostrates. A subplot involved the managing director attempting, and failing, to make van driver Dean redundant. Being cruel in order to be kind is never easy, intoned Mallard/Langham/Morton portentously. And since Peter isn't doing this to be kind, his task now of simply being cruel is even more challenging. As perfectly precise as (presumably) a precisional thermostrate, this tiny bit of script would have been inordinately less funny as: Being cruel to be kind is never easy. But Peter isn't being kind, so being cruel is even more challenging.

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes

BBC Worldwide

People Like Us

Series 1

What the Papers Say

Daily Mail

Like a bather putting a tentative foot into the water, *People Like Us*, a show born and nurtured on radio, made its TV debut last night, its self-effacing star, Chris Langham, never once showing his face. A pity that, for anyone who has appreciated Langham's droll and languid appearances on *Kiss Me Kate*, one of the few sitcoms around which doesn't induce a reverse laughter effect – in other words, one sits through them with the straightest of faces.

A lot of people may have suspected that the opening few minutes of *People Like Us* also illustrated the reverse laughter effect. We were confronted with the dullest kind of BBC documentary... Gradually, however, providing you were paying attention, you realised that certain odd words that shouldn't be there were creeping into the script. After showing us the exterior of a boring factory block in Nottingham, the presenter – Langham masquerading as documentary-maker Roy Mallard – drones: 'Zenotec manufactures peripheral things for the computer industry. With a total workforce of just over 86 people and a total turnover to match...' Then managing director Peter Wilson's bossy secretary, Sue Rudkin, is described as his "general batwoman", and Wilson's career path includes the information: "In 1994, without warning, he found himself out of a marriage."

You began to realise that – just as Steve Coogan's Alan Partridge is no ordinary presenter – this was no ordinary documentary, and Zenotec no ordinary firm. Its glamorous sales director is interested only in the perks, particularly her car, and is so incompetent that she's unable to put up the screen for a slide show, get the slides in the right order, or even the right way up. Mallard's contribution to the proceedings is to mutter little but, "Oh, good, right, I see." The thrusting, go-ahead, Blairite vision of a cutting edge of technology firm gradually falls to pieces, particularly when we find that the main problem facing its executives is how to fire the van driver. The agonies they go through by their cowardly refusal to be honest and direct with the man tell us all we really need to know about Zenotec's company philosophy.

My favourable opinion of *People Like Us* was coloured by a personal experience I once had in Japan, when I was shown round a factory by an ambitious manager who had, presumably, assured his bosses that he could competently translate into English. He could hardly speak a word, but as I couldn't let anyone else know that, I was obliged to keep up a pretence that I could understand all his gibberish, and that whatever questions I had were faithfully rendered into Japanese, which was hardly likely. A similar thing happened in the show, with a visiting group of Japanese accompanied by a woman translator who made no sense at all in English. I wish I'd had the benefit, as we did last night, of subtitles showing the garbled version received by the Japanese.

People Like Us is a gamble, but a courageous one that deserves to succeed because it dares to escape the general rut of conventionally structured but regrettably unfunny sitcoms.

Entertainment

6 x 30 minutes