

= The Secret Service =

The Secret Service is a British children's espionage television series, filmed by Century 21 for ITC Entertainment and broadcast on Associated Television, Granada Television and Southern Television in 1969. Created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, and produced by David Lane and Reg Hill, it was the eighth and last Century 21 production to feature, in a manner similar to Thunderbirds and other earlier series, marionette puppet characters as part of a filming technique known as "Supermarionation". Under the direction of Gerry Anderson, who wanted to increase the realism of the Supermarionation format, The Secret Service incorporates footage of live actors for long distance shots. Following The Secret Service, Anderson would not work with puppets again until the 1980s, when he produced Terrahawks in "Supermacromation".

The series follows the adventures of Father Stanley Unwin, a character both voiced by and resembling the real life comedian of the same name. Outwardly the parish priest of a rural English village, Unwin is in fact a secret agent for BISHOP, a covert branch of British Intelligence that counters criminal and terrorist threats from abroad. Aided by junior operative Matthew Harding, the Father answers to his London based superior, "The Bishop". Whenever they must gather intelligence in a hostile situation, Unwin and Matthew deploy the "Minimiser", a gadget capable of shrinking people and objects to a fraction of their normal size to carry out secret reconnaissance. A form of gobbledegook of Unwin's devising is used to confuse and distract enemies when required.

Filming commenced at Century 21 Studios in Slough and on location in August 1968. Production was cancelled in December when Lew Grade, the Andersons' financial backer, responded poorly to a test screening of the pilot episode, fearing that successful distribution in the United States would be impossible with the inclusion of the nonsensical "Unwinese" dialogue. Filming concluded in January 1969 with the completion of the thirteenth episode. Critical reception to The Secret Service remains mixed: when compared to the Andersons' previous series, verdicts range from "the forgotten gem" to "the one flop". Commentators have questioned the wisdom of hiring Unwin as a voice actor, suggesting that the potential for comedy provided by his Unwinese is too weak to sustain interest; however, the writing of the supporting characters has been praised.

= = Plot = =

The Secret Service follows the adventures of Father Stanley Unwin, the parish priest of a rural English village. Affecting the appearance of an eccentric middle aged vicar, Unwin moonlights as a secret agent for BISHOP (an acronym of "British Intelligence Service Headquarters, Operation Priest"), a top secret division of British Intelligence based in Whitehall. Answering to his superior, "The Bishop", Unwin is stationed at his vicarage with Matthew Harding, another agent who, when not assisting the Father on missions, adopts the manner of a simple gardener. Supporting characters include Blake, a junior BISHOP operative, and Mrs Appleby, the Father's ageing housekeeper, who is unaware of Unwin and Harding's involvement with British Intelligence.

Prior to the events of the series, the pioneering scientist Professor Humbert invented the Minimiser, a device capable of shrinking people or objects to one third of their original size. After Humbert's death, it was passed down to Father Unwin, who conceals his deceased parishioner's parting gift inside a copy of Milner's Gallery of Nature. The regular focus of the Minimiser is Harding, whom Unwin reduces to a height of two feet (0.6 m) to enable him to infiltrate situations to which no ordinary sized person could make a discreet entry. In this manner, the Harding puppet interacts with life sized sets and live actors whose faces are excluded from shots. The Minimiser is also used to shrink enemy agents, literally bringing them down to Harding's size.

While miniaturised, Harding is transported in Unwin's specially adapted briefcase, which is fitted with equipment such as a periscope, stores other gadgets as and when required, and can open from the inside. Unwin's hearing aid is in fact a transceiver that enables him to communicate covertly with Harding, who wears a corresponding unit. The Father's preferred means of transport

is Gabriel , a repainted and revamped 1917 @-@ issue Ford Model T that can travel at speeds in excess of 50 miles per hour (80 km / h) . When enemies , police or other authorities challenge Unwin , the Father spouts a form of nonsensical gobbledegook as a smokescreen to confuse the opposition and cover for Matthew .

The Secret Service represents a departure from most earlier Supermarionation television series on account of its contemporary , late @-@ 1960s setting . The events of the episodes " Errand of Mercy " and " The Deadly Whisper " are set on 3 February and 24 May 1969 , respectively . The earlier series Supercar is set between 1960 and 1962 . However , Simon Archer and Marcus Hearn , writers of The Complete Gerry Anderson : the Authorised Episode Guide , argue that the setting is ambiguous : although they suggest it to be " sometime in the near future " , they also observe that " Morris Minors negotiate leafy country roads while space @-@ age helijets patrol the skies " and conclude that the series is so fantastic that it " isn 't set in the real world at all . "

= = = Episodes = = =

= = Production = =

With the completion of Joe 90 , which commenced transmission on ATV in September 1968 , Gerry Anderson decided to produce another espionage television series . This would incorporate the plot device of a rural English village as the base of operations for the star secret agent , the local parish priest . Anderson selected Stanley Unwin to voice the lead character , which would be named after him , after encountering the comedian at Pinewood Studios as he completed dubbing work for the 1968 film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang .

In the 1940s and 50s , Unwin had developed " Unwinese " , a nonsense language that distorted words and phrases into a form of gibberish that sounded unintelligible but which in fact retained some fragments of meaning . Recalling Unwin 's radio and television performances , Anderson thought that the self @-@ made language would suit the character of an eccentric undercover operative , and could produce humour if demonstrated to have a confusing effect on enemies . He elaborated , " As far as I was concerned , Stanley came first and then the idea had to accommodate him . It wasn 't that the story called for someone who could speak gobbledegook , it was a question of how we could fit him into the storyline . "

Due to the strange nature of the language , the Century 21 writers would brief Unwin on episode plots and then leave space in their scripts for the actor to draft all the Unwinese dialogue himself . Shane Rimmer , who scripted the episode " Hole in One " , remarked that " A lot of [the Unwinese] you had to leave to [Unwin] . You gave him a line of patter that 's going to work with what he does . Because he was such a bizarre character , you felt you could really go all the way with him : you could practically do anything . "

The premise of The Secret Service drew part of its inspiration from the Joe 90 episode " The Unorthodox Shepherd " , which features the character of an aged , deaf vicar who covers up a money counterfeiting operation on his church grounds . Archer and Hearn comment on the wider influence of Joe 90 on its successor series , stating that The Secret Service " continues the espionage theme of Joe 90 in a range of adventures that depict a Britain under siege from despicable foreign agents intent on stealing its secrets . "

= = = Puppets = = =

Following Joe 90 , Anderson had originally intended to discontinue the use of Supermarionation puppets altogether . However , due to the higher prospective production costs of filming a new series completely in live action , he decided to compromise between the advantages of both options and mix the two formats . On the nature of the puppets , which had incorporated natural human anatomical proportions since Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons , Anderson stated that a progression in sculpting techniques had resulted in " imitations of human beings " that rendered his

series " like live @-@ action shows but with unconvincing actors " .

Recording live actors for long shots solved a problem that all previous Supermarionation productions had entailed : that of inducing realistic movement from puppet characters . Century 21 had experimented with filming special effects in live settings for its 1968 film , Thunderbird 6 . " The Unorthodox Shepherd " had incorporated similar filming techniques : a church at Harefield in Buckinghamshire had doubled as the principal setting , the villain represented on location footage by a full @-@ size mannequin based on a Supermarionation puppet . La Rivière notes the contrast between the mixing of formats for The Secret Service and the procedure adopted for earlier Supermarionation series , which had only used live @-@ action shots for situations such as the operation of machines (for which a brief shot of a living hand would often be inserted) .

New puppets created for The Secret Service were limited to the characters of Father Unwin (which sculptor Mary Turner based on the likeness of Stanley Unwin) , his ageing housekeeper Mrs Appleby (which Christine Glanville based on the appearance of her mother) and The Bishop . Other characters were portrayed by " revamp puppets " that appeared in the earlier Anderson series Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons and Joe 90 . For example , the Harding puppet made its first appearance in the Captain Scarlet episode " Treble Cross " , while the Captain Scarlet marionette itself starred as Blake . La Rivière refers to the Unwin puppet in particular as " one of the most impressive artistic feats " produced at the Century 21 puppet workshop , describing the accuracy of the likeness as " uncanny " .

= = = Voice cast = = =

With the exception of Unwin , all voice actors cast for The Secret Service had contributed to earlier Supermarionation series . The Secret Service featured the voices of :

Stanley Unwin as Father Stanley Unwin (aged 57) , a parish priest based in rural England who carries out top @-@ secret missions for BISHOP (British Intelligence Service Headquarters , Operation Priest) . Due to the realism of the costume that he wore for live @-@ action location filming , members of the public would often confuse Unwin for a real vicar during production on The Secret Service . While driving home from one shooting session in costume , he once found himself " held up because the driver in front had stalled his caravan . Seeing my clerical garb he said : ' So sorry , Father . I 'm in trouble . ' " .

Gary Files as Matthew Harding (aged 28) , a BISHOP agent paired with Unwin , who serves as his accomplice on assignment and as gardener of the vicarage in public life . Files retained fond memories of his time on The Secret Service , stating that he enjoyed voicing the character of Harding more than the character of Captain Magenta on Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons . He made significant contributions to Harding 's characterisation , conceiving the rural accent of Unwin 's assistant himself : " It just seemed so right for the character . Then once I had the voice , the rest of Matthew followed . " .

Sylvia Anderson as Mrs Appleby (aged 55) , the housekeeper of Unwin 's vicarage , who remains ignorant of Unwin and Harding 's secret double life .

Jeremy Wilkin as The Bishop (aged 52) , a high @-@ ranking figure in British Intelligence , director of BISHOP and superior to Unwin , based in Whitehall .

Keith Alexander as Agent Blake , a cautious junior agent of BISHOP , who has speaking roles in three episodes (" A Question of Miracles " , " Last Train to Bufflers Halt " and " The Cure ") .

Supporting character voices were provided by all the regular cast (with the exception of Unwin) in addition to David Healy and (for the final two episodes , " May @-@ Day , May @-@ Day ! " and " More Haste Less Speed ") David Graham .

= = = Filming = = =

Filming commenced on 20 August 1968 after a summer of pre @-@ production . Director Ken Turner , who headed the location unit , recalled that The Secret Service became a complex series to shoot because it incorporated three design elements (studio puppet filming , studio special effects

filming and live @-@ action location filming) . In a reversal to the practice used on earlier Supermarionation productions , location filming needed to be completed first before work could start at the Century 21 Studios . Turner elaborated , " We felt that somebody had to take the location stuff by the balls , get it shot and then hand it over to the director to fit his puppet stuff in . I suppose that seemed a bit back to front but with that programme it was what worked out best . "

On the complications that emerged from filming , producer David Lane remembered his experience on the series as " an absolute nightmare " due to the various scales used : " You can imagine the problems . You 're shrinking [the Matthew Harding puppet] to puppet size on a puppet set and then you 're having to build it in live @-@ action size for the puppet because he 's supposed to be a small man in a full @-@ sized environment . And then you 're using the ' shrunken ' puppet in a full set . "

Locations used in filming included a manor house at Burnham in Buckinghamshire , which doubled as Unwin 's residence . Centre Point , a tower building located on Oxford Street in London , appeared as British Intelligence Headquarters , while Horse Guards Parade in Whitehall represented the base of BISHOP . The hospital at which Unwin visits Brother Gregory in the episode " School for Spies " was in fact Wexham Park Hospital in Slough . The exterior of Century 21 Studios themselves , located on the Slough Trading Estate , appeared as the Healey Automation plant in the pilot episode , " A Case for the Bishop " .

Due to the 1960s setting of The Secret Service , Derek Meddings and the technicians of the special effects department received few commissions for scale models of vehicles that appeared futuristic . This left Unwin 's vintage Ford Model T , Gabriel , as their main project , in addition to rendering vehicles and settings common to the decade in miniature and producing the optical enlargement and miniaturisation effects for the character of Harding . Wag Evans manufactured a full @-@ size and two miniature versions (the last of differing scales) of Gabriel , fitting the larger car with belt @-@ driven electric motors , a folding roof , upholstered interior , and a remote control mechanism .

Evans remembered that the location filming involving Gabriel , conducted in and around Burnham Beeches in Buckinghamshire in the autumn of 1968 , proved to be arduous due to the low levels of light . On occasion , just two minutes of new footage would be recorded at each session . On the subject of the remote @-@ control steering , he stated , " I remember standing out of shot and having to ' drive ' [Gabriel] down the road while it was out of view . Often I didn 't know where it was , or where and when it had stopped . " A location unit member would be on hand to stop the car with a large cushion if it went out of control .

Shooting locations included Horse Guards Parade and Centre Point in London (left and centre) and at Burnham Beeches in Buckinghamshire (right) .

= = = Music = = =

Composer Barry Gray 's opening theme music , his first Supermarionation contribution since Stingray to include vocal cues , is a chant incorporating church organ and percussion accompaniment . Imitating the nuances of Bach , Gray developed his initial concept into a three @-@ part fugue . He initially approached the Swingle Singers to provide the chant , but the fee demanded would have placed considerable strain on the music budget . Seeking out an alternative , Gray hired the Mike Sammes Singers , who had provided vocals for the Supercar theme and produced an impression of the Swingle Singers ' tones under his direction . Archer and Hearn cite the opening and closing theme music , recorded in a four @-@ hour studio session on 16 October 1968 , as " a glorious piece of choral lunacy " .

Both the opening and ending credits sequences incorporate shots of St Michael and All Angels Church in Hughenden Valley , Buckinghamshire , which doubles as the parish church of Father Unwin . In the opening sequence , a zoom shot establishes a backdrop of fields while the series title slowly fills the screen in a motion that draws inspiration from traditional images of angels descending from Heaven .

Further to the titles , Gray recorded incidental music for individual episodes in three additional four @-@ hour sessions . < ref. name = " TVCentury21Music " / > For the first , held at the Olympic Studios in London on 12 November 1968 , an orchestra of 29 musicians played tracks to feature in

the pilot episode , " A Case for the Bishop " . Recording for " A Question of Miracles " ran on 11 December , at Gray 's private studios and with eight musicians . The only other episodes to have original scores are " The Feathered Spies " and " Last Train To Bufflers Halt , " with the remaining episodes tracked with the four original scores and previously recorded music for other Anderson series , particularly Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons and Joe 90 (" A Question of Miracles , " although having an original score , also used cues recorded for " A Case for the Bishop " and " The Feathered Spies ") . The final session wrapped up the soundtrack on 10 January 1969 .

Due to the series ' cancellation , the soundtrack has received no commercial releases , although since 2007 it has been available on CD exclusively for members of Fanderson , the official Gerry Anderson appreciation society .

= = = Cancellation = = =

Lew Grade , the ITC Entertainment financier , ordered Anderson to cancel production on The Secret Service during a test screening of the pilot episode , " A Case for the Bishop " , in December 1968 . Objecting to the concept on the grounds that audiences in the United States would be confused by the Unwinese , Grade capped the production at the thirteen episodes that either had been completed or were in production at the time of the screening . Anderson countered that a nonsense language such as Unwinese is inherently incomprehensible , and questioned Grade 's reasoning for the cancellation , responding that " I chose Stanley Unwin because you are not supposed to understand Stanley Unwin , even if you 're British . I thought if the Americans don 't understand him either , what 's the difference ? "

However , Anderson conceded that Grade " was not a man you could argue with . If he said " No " , you had to accept that he wouldn 't change his mind . " Of Grade 's decision , La Rivière conjectures , " No one knows what was running through [his] mind ... but given the ease with which the ' Unwinese ' element could have been removed the series , it seems probable that he simply didn 't like a lot of what he was seeing . " In a move that would lead to the discontinuation of the Supermarionation format , Anderson and Grade coordinated to transfer most of the production staff from the Century 21 base at the Slough Trading Estate in Berkshire to Pinewood Studios in Buckinghamshire for the commencement of filming on UFO , the Andersons ' first full live @-@ action series .

Having wanted to abandon puppet work and move into live @-@ action , Anderson greeted the cancellation of The Secret Service with optimism , remarking of live actors , " I started to think : ' It 's amazing ! They speak ! Their mouths are in synch with their words ! And they can walk ! And they can pick up things ! ' " After the Century 21 Studios closed down on 24 January 1969 on completion of the final episode of The Secret Service , " More Haste Less Speed " , the special effects department expanded its workshops into the disused rooms in anticipation of new projects for UFO .

= = Broadcast = =

In the UK , The Secret Service aired only in the ATV , Granada and Southern broadcasting regions on its original run , appearing on Sunday afternoons on ATV at the regular time of 5 @. @ 30 pm . In most other ITV regions , The Flaxton Boys was broadcast in this time slot . Although repeats ran until 1972 on ATV and Southern , and until 1975 on Granada , the series has not been transmitted since and remains unsold to new broadcasters , although ATN Channel 7 purchased and broadcast the series in Australia on Saturday mornings in 1972 .

= = Reception = =

Critical reception of The Secret Service has been mostly negative . Gerry Anderson , however , has said that it is his favourite of all the series that he has produced . Leo Eaton , who directed four episodes , has referred to The Secret Service as " just a bit weird " and questioned the effectiveness

of Unwin 's humour . Production manager Desmond Saunders ' verdict was " strange . I suppose it was the gobbledegook and the mixture of live action with puppets . It never seemed to me to be a very good idea . " Simon Wickes , in discussing the production of the series on the website TVCentury21.com , judges the premise " very strange " and suggests that The Secret Service was made first and foremost to bridge the Andersons ' Supermarionation series and their subsequent efforts in live action . Kif Bowden @-@ Smith of the Transdiffusion website concurs with this latter point , describing the mix of puppetry and live action as " an experimental format for the following live @-@ action series " .

Simon Archer and Marcus Hearn , authors of What Made Thunderbirds Go ! The Authorised Biography of Gerry Anderson (2002) register a divergence from earlier Supermarionation productions stemming from The Secret Service being less " American @-@ orientated " and comprising fewer action sequences . They consider it the " most eccentric " of all the Supermarionation series up to 1969 , and the fusion of puppets and live actors the " natural conclusion " to the filming technique . The writers bestow particular praise on the characterisation of Mrs Appleby , whose ignorance of Unwin and Harding 's involvement with British Intelligence adds to the comedy : for example , when Father Unwin speaks into his communications device that is disguised as a hearing aid , the housekeeper thinks that the apparently senile vicar is muttering to himself . The episodes " A Question of Miracles " , in which the miniaturised Matthew is dwarfed by articles of food and drink from a picnic basket , and " Last Train to Bufflers Halt " , whose plot concerns an unstoppable runaway train , are also well received . Stephen La Rivière , author of Filmed in Supermarionation : A History of the Future , favours " More Haste Less Speed " : describing the series finale as " wonderfully quirky " and " glorious " , he sees the counterfeiting plot as being reminiscent of the " gentler , earlier days of Supercar " , also praising Keith Alexander for his voice acting of the part of the elderly Lady Hazlewell .

However , in his evaluation of The Secret Service as a whole , La Rivière argues that the premise of a secret agent masquerading as a priest while driving an antiquated car could not have appealed much to children , and that older viewers would have been disappointed with the series ' unoriginal " traditional espionage format " . Ian Fryer concurs , writing in FAB magazine that " very little about The Secret Service has obvious appeal to the traditionally young Supermarionation audience . " Discussing the opening theme music , he remarks that " the younger me would have run a mile from any series which sounded like that . " He also notes that the opening credits " broke with the tradition of having a thrilling or suspenseful promise of what was to come , and made the series look suspiciously like it might be about the life and work of an elderly vicar . " For La Rivière , the blending of puppetry and live action " simply doesn 't work . It requires more than the audience can give in terms of acceptance . " In the case of " More Haste Less Speed " , he points out that the character of Lady Hazlewell is portrayed in live @-@ action distance shots by a stunt actor dressed in drag ? an " unintentionally hilarious moment that illustrates beautifully why the live @-@ action inserts didn 't work . " He further argues that the contrasting light levels of shots that alternate between one format and the other shatter the illusion of " artificiality " that previous series had been able to sustain in the absence of live action .

La Rivière also cites external influences that , in his view , did not work in favour of The Secret Service . He expounds the continuing popularity of earlier Supermarionation productions as far back as The Adventures of Twizzle (1959) and the frequent repeat runs that they had on ATV throughout the 1960s : " ... as with anything that is phenomenally popular , the time must come when the audience is satiated and drifts away to something else . " Fryer suggests that the espionage theme may not have been attractive to potential foreign buyers , noting that the American spy series The Man from U.N.C.L.E. had been cancelled in 1968 and that the last episode of The Avengers had aired in the UK the following year . Fryer considers the " making a spy series just when the fad for the genre was waning " the biggest problem that faced The Secret Service in finding an audience . On the other hand , it is argued that , in light of the release of Century 21 's Doppelgänger (1969) , a live @-@ action film that preceded UFO , the Supermarionation format had become outdated . Archer and Hearn express similar concerns about expectations for a new Supermarionation series in 1969 , writing that Anderson and his colleagues had become " a bit too

successful " in producing a winning format .

Science @-@ fiction author John Peel , in his episode guide to the Supermarionation productions , labels The Secret Service " dismal " , describing the combination of puppetry and live action as " completely pointless " and Unwin 's recruitment not only " bizarre in the extreme " but also ill @-@ considered , in his opinion that Unwinese " was hardly funny to most people (let alone children) . " Addressing Lew Grade 's concerns that American audiences would have been left baffled by Unwin 's mannerisms , he argues that the character was equally incomprehensible to UK viewers . As with La Rivière , Peel considers the central premise uninspired , writing that the Minimiser was the " single gimmick " of the series , which as a whole " marked the death knell of Supermarionation . " It is his opinion that every Supermarionation series after Thunderbirds " had made one mistake after another " , such that " From the heights of Thunderbirds , the Anderson team had slipped to the depths with The Secret Service .

Writers Chris Drake and Graeme Bassett put it that " On paper , at least , the premise seemed irresistible " , yet view the blending of puppetry and live action as " uneasy " . Prior to his death in 2002 , Unwin himself praised the off @-@ beat nature of The Secret Service , defending the inclusion of elements such as Unwinese dialogue as " an attempt to add a new dimension to the puppet field ... It was a bit bizarre , but then aren 't many new ideas a little odd at first ? " On the subject of the cancellation , he commented that the series was possibly " a little bit before its time " . Contrary to Peel and La Rivière , John Walsh of The Guardian challenges the idea that the gobbledegook devalued the series , arguing that " British audiences quite like not understanding things . "

In an episode review published in the Andersonic fanzine , Paul O 'Brien writes that the AquaTank plot of " Recall to Service " is " an obvious allegory about the hazards of complete automation " , suggesting that the depiction of a military super @-@ weapon gone rogue imitates episodes of previous Supermarionation series in its subtext , which warns of the dangers of over @-@ reliance on technology . The vital plot development of the episode occurs , according to O 'Brien , when the character of Matthew returns the AquaTank to manual control : " in other words , the machinery is now subordinate to its creator once again , as it should stay . " O 'Brien is critical of the limitations of the puppet cast , arguing that the recurring absence of female characters makes Unwin and Harding members of an " all @-@ male club " and that the one regular character of the opposite sex , Mrs Appleby , " contributes precisely nil to the plot . "

Exploring cultural influences , historian Nicholas J. Cull describes The Secret Service as an " idiosyncratically British product " and , in reference to BISHOP , writes that the series honours " the 1960s vogue for stories set in secret organisations with extravagant acronyms . " He points out inferences to the Cold War , noting that the spy Sakov in " The Cure " is Russian and concluding that The Secret Service is one of several Century 21 series that " unashamedly capitalised on the Cold War cult of the secret agent whose skills defend the home from enemies unknown . " He labels The Secret Service overall as the Andersons ' " one flop " .

= = Other media = =

In 1969 , author John William Jennison wrote two original novels based on the series ? The Destroyer and The VIP ? under the pseudonym " John Theydon " .

A & E Home Video released the series as a two @-@ disc Region 1 DVD box set on 30 December 2003 with digitally remastered picture and sound quality . Special features include an audio commentary by producer David Lane for the pilot episode , " A Case for the Bishop " .

Network DVD followed with a Region 2 release on 20 June 2005 . Bonus material includes audio commentaries from creator Gerry Anderson and PDF transfers of original script documents . The AllMovie website awards a feature rating of three and a half stars out of five .