

Manchester Arena bombing: Security worker told police about 'crank' praying before blast, inquiry hears

From [Manchester Evening News](#)

A member of an “anti-bootlegging” operation at Manchester Arena on the night of the terrorist attack saw the bomber Salman Abedi praying in an area not patrolled by security staff, he has told the inquiry.

William Drysdale’s colleague said she reported that there was a “crankypants” praying in the area to British Transport Police, but admitted that her memory of the night was “jumbled up”. Julie Merchant had initially claimed she had crossed paths with the bomber, but he was already in his position when she arrived in the City Room foyer. However, CCTV showed her approaching two British Transport Police officers and pointing in the direction where Salman Abedi, was hiding during a brief, five-second interaction. The officer is said not to remember the interaction and will give evidence next week.

Abedi spent almost an hour waiting with his rucksack on the mezzanine floor of the City Room, opposite the entrance to the arena, before he launched his attack at 10.31pm on 22 May 2017.



William Drysdale, who worked for Copyright and Trademark Protection, was responsible for getting rid of unofficial merchandise sellers from the area around the arena. At 9.40pm on the night of the attack, he was standing on the mezzanine floor to observe any bootleggers coming into the City Room foyer outside the main entrance.

“He has got his back to me. He had olive-coloured skin, definitely not white or black. He was kneeling down. He was moving, going forwards to the floor and then raising himself back up again, still being on his knees”, he added. “I did notice he had a big pack on his back, a large rucksack.”

His first impression was “what’s he doing, basically?” he continued. “As I turned to look at him, I saw him go down and then come back up and then go down and come back, so to me I thought, ‘oh he’s just praying.’”

Asked by QC for the inquiry, Nick de la Poer, if he thought it was unusual, he said: “Yes and no. “Yes because I’d never seen it before, and no because as far as I knew, being a Muslim, if you hadn’t prayed, you found a quiet spot and prayed there – based on my knowledge of Islam, whether it’s right or wrong.”

He knew the people attending the concert were children aged six and upwards but said: "We're above a train station so there's a lot of people coming through there with rucksacks, bags, suitcases.

"Some of the lads said, 'What's he doing? Oh he's just praying,' and we left it at that."

In his original statement, given a week after the attack, he said he had thought the man was a bootlegger until he saw him praying, and that he could not see if he was kneeling or sitting. . . "I saw him and thought to myself, he's just praying he's not a bootlegger," he told police.

Patrick Gibbs QC, for British Transport Police, asked him: "Did any alarm bell go off in your head?"

"No," he replied.

Julie Merchant said that she had made "eye contact" with the bomber as he came through the foyer doors and told police: "I specifically remember seeing his face and he was smiling back at me."

She said she told her colleagues that there was a "crankypants round the corner praying".

"It's not very polite to say it, but that's what I said."

But she said she was not suspicious, adding: "I thought he'd been on a big journey and might have missed his prayer time."

She discussed mentioning it to a blonde British Transport Police officer, saying: "I thought it would be worth mentioning, is that crank still there? She just so happened to be there, I might not have sought her out, I thought I'd go over and have a chat."

She said she had told the officer: "I think I would have said, 'is crankypants still there, is that nutter still there

praying?' I know I would have been a little bit rude." The police officers "just walked off", she said.

"They were going to walk out the doors. I think she turned around. I can't remember if she replied. I got the impression she thought, 'I can't really pull him.' They didn't seem that interested. "None of us were suspicious of him and I think we were aware of being overtly un-PC. It was something and nothing – it wasn't significant. . . Even though I wasn't suspicious – the worst-case scenario being a bomber – what I was suspicious about is that he had secreted himself away and maybe she needed to know he was there when we cleared the place later. I wasn't thinking, 'Oh my god he's a terrorist', but I did think he was in an area he shouldn't have been in. . . It is a security risk to a certain extent. Nobody's allowed up there, that is why I was alerting the Transport police. They check all these things."

After the attack, she said she thought: "God I hope it's not him because then you get the issue, I could have stopped it." After the atrocity, she said she was "in a bit of a state" and her memory got "jumbled up" about where she had seen the bomber. "My head was still a mess, I was still in a state," she said.