Pilots fall asleep in cockpit in midflight

The pilots, who have not been named, were said to have been left alone in their cockpits when their co-pilots left the flight desk.

Authorities reportedly refused to identify the men, who were working with British, because it would breach data protection laws.

The safety scares emerged as the British Airlines Pilots Association warned the problem was commonplace.

In one incident, a captain left to use the lavatory but when he return could not raise his first officer through the radio, according to the Sun.

The captain then used a code to get back in the cockpit where he found the pilot "slumped over the controls", according to official records of the incident.

The Civil Aviation Authority records, obtained by the newspaper under Freedom of Information laws, showed that another pilot found himself in a similar situation.

He was unable to gain entry to the cockpit and, after using an entry code to access the cockpit, found his first officer asleep and had to shake him awake.

Meanwhile a third pilot also fell asleep while his plane was on the ground. No further details on where or when the incidents occurred were made public.

According to a survey of BAPA members, nearly half of those polled admitted sleeping in the cockpit while and a third woke to find the other pilot asleep.

Rob Hunter, the union's head of safety, told the Transport Select Committee earlier this year that pilots feared being disciplined if they complained of being tired.

He said: "We commonly receive letters that deal with cases where pilots feel that the process that they then get embroiled in is more fatiguing that the duty itself.

"It becomes a better option to put up with a bit of fatigue rather than report it."

A CAA spokesman declined to name the airlines, claiming it would breach confidentiality.