

KEN CLOCKS UP 34 YEARS IN HIS LONDON CAB

Salesman Ken Bird, known as Mr Taxi, has been selling LTI Vehicles' London taxis for nearly 19 years, and before that he was driving one for 16. He still drives a London cab as he clocks up at least 60,000 miles a year travelling to see clients in his demonstrator - and it serves as his office as well. "People ask me what I do for a living and they look at me a bit strangely when I say I sell London taxis because not that many people do this for a living," said Ken, aged 59. "I enjoy the job I am doing, I relate to the customers I am dealing with and I suppose the most important thing is that I am selling the best product. There is only one true taxi. The success of the TX4 and the recent deal to manufacture cabs for the Eastern market

in China proves this. Other vehicles try and emulate it but no one can get the mix just right. The vehicle really is an icon."

"Being a driver was the grounding for me and made my job easier when I came into sales as I was dealing with the same area," added Ken, who lives in Weymouth with wife Lesley, and children Elkie, aged 19, and Matthew, aged 17. "But 34 years is a long time to be driving a cab. I would most likely get withdrawal symptoms if I stopped now!"



GOSKILLS CALLS FOR SKILLS TARGETS IN LOCAL TRANSPORT BILL

GoSkills is the Sector Skills Council (SSC) for Passenger Transport. It has called on the Government to include provision for setting skills development targets for drivers and other customer-facing staff in the Local Transport Bill, as between passenger transport executives and bus operators. The recommendation came in written and oral evidence presented recently to the House of Commons Transport Select Committee. London's taxi trade already has to demonstrate a high level of skill in passing the Knowledge, but across the country Licensing Authorities vary in their requirements for hackney and private hire licensing. GoSkills are suggesting making enhanced arrangements for skills in taxi and private hire, including the attainment of a uniform minimum level of skills, a requirement for obtaining taxi and private hire licences, and continuing training for further professional development. Peter Huntington, GoSkills' Chief Executive, said: "Obviously skills are important to the passenger experience and the Bill itself seeks to address quality through improved partnerships between operators and PTAs, here is an area where partnership would be especially beneficial."

Mr Huntington also said that the taxi and private hire industries had no consistent national approach to skills and that the draft Bill offered an opportunity to have a public discussion on the issue. Responding to a question from Chairman Gwyneth Dunwoody on how training might be funded, he said: "We are negotiating with the Learning and Skills Council in England to make funding available for self-employed drivers through the Train to Gain scheme. ESOL and basic skills training, I think, under the Government's new arrangements, will continue to be free of charge to the user where they are supported on an individual basis."

Mr Huntington went on to say that two things needed to be done; firstly, that the bar to entry to the industry should be raised by having skills requirements built into the licensing process; and secondly, to have ongoing training and challenge people to attain that level. This would, he said, start to improve quality and improve the image of the industry, thus leading it to play its full part in the local transport mix.

NEW GUIDE TO GREAT DAYS OUT IN LONDON

A new, high-quality Access Guide to English Heritage Properties has been launched which could help taxi drivers answer questions from passengers with special needs trying to plan visits to tourist attractions. Rebecca Kane, Visitor Operations Director for English Heritage, said: "We are really pleased to be able to welcome all visitors to our sites. It can be daunting to go anywhere new when you don't know what the facilities will be like. This new access guide gives you all the information you'll need to plan your day, plus a taste of the historic highlights our sites offer. We welcome feedback and suggestions on what more we can do to make our properties as accessible as possible. We'd like everyone to be able to enjoy their heritage, and perhaps spend an afternoon absorbing life in a Viking village, enjoying the tranquil serenity of an Augustine priory or having a peek around Queen Victoria's bedroom."

Recent access improvements to English Heritage sites include:

- * The grand Palladian villa, Kenwood House in Hampstead, London, famous for appearing in the films Notting Hill and Mansfield Park, has a new, free car-to-door chauffeur service for visitors with limited mobility. It also has good gravel paths to most of its extensive grounds.
- * The Classical style Wellington Arch, at Hyde Park, London, has a lift to all floors and viewing galleries, allowing disabled visitors to view the surrounding area and to see the displays on the arch's unique history.
- * The stunning Eltham Palace, Greenwich, London, is a showpiece of glamorous 1930s design and visitors can revel in the eclectic mix of

French-influence Art Deco, ultra-smart ocean-liner style and cutting-edge Swedish design. Disabled visitors can gain level access to the ground floor with a lift to the first floor. The Garden areas are accessible over grass and an audio tour is available for all.



* The elegant Rangers House, Greenwich, London, was once the home of Princess Sophia Matilda, niece of George III, and it now houses the impressive Wernher Collection, which is made up of Medieval and Renaissance works of art.

Wheelchairs can access the ground floor, and there is a chair lift to the upper floor. Disabled visitors may be set down in the yard next to the house.

English Heritage also runs top-quality entertainment at its sites, with craft fairs, garden shows, open air theatre, talks and tours, family-fun days and hands-on children's activities.

The Access Guide is available on the English Heritage web site www.english-heritage.org.uk/accessguide or from English Heritage customer services on 0870 333 1181.