

ON-LINE FORUM FOR CAB DRIVERS *by Alan Goudge*

I've been a cab driver for the sum total of 3 years. So the butter is still melting and I've still a lot to learn about this trade. But I've learnt a lot more about this game and made a number of very good friends as a result of my creating a website called The London Taxi Drivers Forum (LTDF).

When I was doing the Knowledge I felt isolated at times. I knew there were plenty of others out there doing the same but felt detached from them. I went for my talk at the PCO and that was it, off you go, you're on your own son! I went to knowledge schools from time to time and had varying experiences. The Wizann Knowledge School had a website which I found a valuable tool when studying at home (I worked in IT prior to doing the K so it came natural to me to use technology wherever possible). They had a Messageboard feature which, for those of you who are not familiar with such things, was a place you could post questions and in most cases you'd get a response from fellow students within minutes, sometimes seconds! It was a great resource upon which to draw. But what this site also did was to engender a sense of community among its users, a shared purpose and empathy with each other.

So, when I finally got my Green Badge, here I was again, back in the same situation. My shiny badge placed in my hand then, off you go, you're on your own son! What did I know of the tricks of the trade, the etiquette, the pitfalls, the places to go and the places not to go? I didn't get a manual with this stuff in! Time went by and I learned lessons the hard way; you know the lessons I mean, rolling up to the back of the rank at the Hilton Park Lane blissfully unaware of the boys hooting at me from the feeder in Hamilton Place and don't even get me started on the experience of using the Heathrow feeder for the first time!

I assumed there would be a website like the Wizann one but for Cabbies, where I could ask embarrassing questions from the comfort and anonymity of my armchair. To my surprise there wasn't. I found the odd Nationwide Taxi forum but nothing specific to London Cabbies. I couldn't believe it, knowing how Cabbies like a moan, I was sure there'd be somewhere on the Web they could get it off their chest!

So I created the LTDF. My aim was simply to create a Forum where London cabbies could chew the cud but also where questions could be asked about issues surrounding the Trade, your vehicle, you name it. I didn't publicise it in any way

and it started slowly with a few members trickling in. Then, around Christmas 2008 things really took off. It coincided with the storm surrounding the "Licensed PHV Rank" in Whitcomb Street and the whole issue of "Satellite Minicab Offices/Clipboard Johnnies". Within the space of three months between November 2008 and January 2009 the membership virtually doubled and at the time of writing we are fast approaching our 1000th Member! This in less than 2 years.

There are now topics of discussion surrounding every possible Trade issue, detailed reports regarding Taxi vehicle issues, including personal reviews of the new Mercedes Vito Taxi from owner drivers. Members also post their recommendations regarding Garages offering good service and those not so good as well as Retail outlets worth a visit for Taxi spares/accessories etc. There are also light-hearted sections, with postings of funny stories, tales of celebrity passengers and amusing photographs taken by members whilst on their travels (although not while driving their cabs of course!).

Word is now spreading around the Trade and we have had a number of co-ordinated campaigns instigated by our membership which have had some tangible results. One example is our success in forcing the decision to remove the Taxi Rank on Shepherds Bush Green to be suspended. In addition we have formed an 'Action Group' whereby we co-ordinate with each other out on the road via SMS messaging and target particular Clubs/Venues where touting is rife. Many readers of this article will be aware of the actions carried out by the DAC drivers recently but LTDF members were already doing this!

These are just a few examples of what this Forum can achieve. We are not in any way affiliated to any single Trade Organisation and whilst many members of the Forum express their views and opinions on these bodies and indeed many of the members of these Trade Bodies actively participate in the debate on the LTDF at the end of the day we all share a common cause; that we should all "Prevail and Prosper".

I hope that over the years to come our community will grow and increase its positive standing in the Taxi trade and I encourage readers to pay a visit to www.londontaxiforum.co.uk to see what it's all about for themselves. It's completely free to use so you've nothing to lose!

MID YEAR INSPECTION REFUND SUCCESS

This letter to the PCO and reply appeared in a recent issue of Cab Driver. Taxi Globe is reproducing it with the kind permission of editor Dave Allen. The writer of the letter is John Prout, who felt that the Carriage Office actions on cancelling the mid term and not making a full repayment to drivers were in breach of the "Credit Card Payment" Section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 (As Amended). John contacted his bank, HSBC at Southend and under the complaints procedure his Bank, HSBC, attributed a failure within the consumer Credit act by the PCO, and refunded the additional £18 owed.

HSBC say that Mr Prout is the only driver to have brought the complaint to their notice and are paying him themselves as a gesture of goodwill. However they say that if more complaints were received by customers regarding this issue they may have to put a case to the PCO, as it is clear that the PCO did act outside the rules of the Credit Card Acts, so it is important for those who lost their money to contact their respective Credit Card Companies.

As payments for inspection are made to SGS in Dublin most drivers and fleets seem to pay by credit card and they should be refunded by their respective credit card Issuer, who will seek reimbursal from the PCO, of those who paid by debit card/switch/cheque will unfortunately not be reimbursed by the banks.

The LMCPA complained about the Carriage Office actions to the Ombudsman and as yet have had no success but the Consumer Credit Act 1974 was not part of their complaint.

Dear Sir

I called your office on receipt of a letter I received from my bank (HSBC) in respect of an ongoing challenge I have had with both The Public Carriage Office & the Bank on the matter of the £18 refund I was given as a refunded amount "deemed" by the PCO for the Abolishment of the Mid-term inspection on 5th November 2008.

I would like to inform you of the fact that having sent two recorded Letters To L J Simpkins of the PCO on 3rd & 15th March 2009, requesting his explanation as to how he felt legally endowed to use my money paid before the Abolishment of the mid term inspection retrospectively. He replied by letter of 11th March 2009 with a series of legal powers afforded to him which gave him the right if necessary, but when I asked for points to be clarified which he apparently missed in my second letter (No Reply as yet!) the main point of my first letter being... His Retrospective actions on a "credit Card payment" which under Section 75 Of the Consumer Credit Act 1974 (As Amended) he failed to clarify by non reply.

Under the complaints Procedure, the bank were sent all the correspondence & replies, and after due consideration they attributed a failure (and agreed) within the Consumer Credit Act by the PCO, and refunded the £18. I was called and was told by HSBC that they had borne the £18 cost themselves "as a good will gesture" as it would likely have taken a series of letters to and from the PCO and £18 refunded to me was a far cheaper option. They did say however if more complaints were received from customers regarding this issue (I was the first so far?) they may have to put a case to the PCO, as it is clear that the PCO did act outside the rules of the Credit Card Acts, so it is important for those who lost their money to contact their respective Credit card Companies.

So basically, if any of your members have paid their £178 before 5th November 2008 by credit card, they should be refunded by their respective credit card Issuer, who will seek reimbursal from the PCO, those who paid by debit card/switch/cheque will unfortunately not be reimbursed by the banks.

This whole scenario has been a total fiasco by what is effectively a local government body, and they should be totally ashamed of their actions to date, and an apology should be forthcoming for those actions.

John Prout.

PS. We were all sent some time ago a Complaints procedure booklet from the Public Carriage Office (publication S133) which sets out our Complaints & procedures to follow, and guess what? This Complaint type (such as any Legal Dispute) cannot be sent to the ombudsman (020 7217 4620), "Try the Office of Fair Trading" was their reply! What a waste of time.