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# ED THOMPSON SAYS FAREWELL TO THE TRADE

## by Sandie Goodwin and Bob Fisher



By the time you are reading this, Ed Thompson, Director of Taxi & Private Hire at the Public Carriage Office, will have left his office at Penton Street. After almost eight years, Ed is moving on to pastures new within TfL and his successor John Mason has taken office. We took the opportunity to catch up with Ed shortly before his departure...Some reports in the trade press have said that Ed is a "nice guy" but did not do as much as he could have in the role. Ed would disagree with the second half of this comment as he feels that the PCO, working closely with the trade, has moved things forward over the last few years. He said: "The job is a heady mix of running a large organisation from day to day; making sure the important work of licensing and compliance are maintained, and if possible improved; thinking about how to develop the licensing policies; sometimes initiating changes in the law and sometimes responding to them; and dealing with high profile events of which we seem to have had more than our fair share at the PCO."

'When I first arrived at Penton Street I came from mainstream transport policy and planning – buses, trains, fares and ticketing. This has been useful in my role as it has made me see just how important and essential taxis are as part of the integrated transport system serving London. It has been a privilege to work with cab drivers. The perception is that London's taxi trade is the best in the world and I now know this, from first hand observation, to be the case. The drivers are a dedicated, hard working group of people and radio companies, proprietors and owners also do a very good job – while the trade press must be unique in any industry! And a special word of praise for the fabulous work done by the taxi charities'.

### PRIVATE HIRE LICENSING

One of the major changes to licensing in London has been that of private hire licensing. Ed considers this to have been a major achievement by the team at the PCO. He commented: "The taxi trade as it is today proves the historical value of licensing. Taxi licensing has been honed over the years, but private hire licensing is still in its infancy and there will no doubt be further changes. The alternative to licensing the PH trade was to do nothing but really this was not a viable option. Licensing means we are able to set standards, but the two trades will continue to be different. TfL does not plan to merge the two, nor does it plan to make PH drivers study the Knowledge of London (KoL). Sat navs have their place but, in my opinion, they are definitely no replacement for the KoL."

Ed believes that PH licensing has helped in the fight against illegal touting. He admits that as an organisation, the PCO may not have communicated as well as it could on the issues surrounding the 'battle of Whitcomb Street' earlier this year. The strength of trade feeling was seen by the demo in Trafalgar Square in February. Ed says that lessons have been learned and there were some positive results from the issue. "That particular operator, who was taking bookings in Leicester Square with cars waiting in Whitcomb Street, was not doing anything illegal, but the issue did make the PCO look much more closely at other operations that were breaking the law and the blatant abuses of the system such as allowing 'clipboard johnnies' to work on the pavements. We did some serious listening and looking, and we appreciated the cab trade input and cooperation on this. I learned a lot by driving round with cab drivers late at night. I believe that these booking staff are now back inside venues where they should be instead of illegally touting outside. We continue to work on the issues surrounding illegal touting."

### PEDICABS

The topic of pedicabs has been an ongoing issue with the cab trade for years now. Ed has obviously been involved with some of these issues and says that now the matter is out of the PCO's hands. "Pedicabs have been a bit of a thorn in the side of the PCO. But we didn't license them so we had no powers over them. It is an issue which is fairly typical of those the PCO team has to deal with, but this time it has been taken out of our hands. Legally pedicabs are in a no-mans land and so we are unable to take any action."

### TAXI RANKS

Ed knows that the marshalled ranks have been a success story and continue to be a tool in helping prevent illegal journeys. He commented: "I would like to see more of these marshalled ranks, but, as ever, funding is an issue." In some areas, ranks which were not served by all London drivers have been opened up to suburban drivers, such as Clapham Common. Some of the ranks are now being better served and this helps in the fight against touting. The PCO are the office who make Cab Rank orders and so have input into where they are placed. "An example of an improvement is the rank at Eurostar," said Ed. "Initially this was not very well sited but now it has been moved, it works better."

### THE FUTURE

Ed thinks that the future for London's cab trade will see some more changes. He thinks that the trade needs to embrace modernisation. Green issues are always in the news and EU directives dictate emissions of new vehicles. But as cab drivers spend their working day breathing in the emissions, perhaps it makes sense for the trade to look more sympathetically at low emission systems and vehicles. This is a controversial area bearing in mind the Euro III requirements for cabs which left drivers having to pay for upgrades to their cabs, although the PCO did put 20p on the meter for three years to cover costs. Putting the vehicle testing out to SGS is a success, according to Ed. At the time the trade were unsure whether this was a good move, although time seems to have shown it was the right move - but he would like to see first time pass rates improve. It is definitely an odd sight though looking out of the office window at the PCO and seeing rows of commercial vehicles where once the cabs lined up for inspection! Ed commented that he thinks the trade should also embrace the idea of accepting card payments in today's market place where many people want to pay by card and not in cash: "Where you have stiff competition in some places by the newly licensed private hire trade, I'd suggest that you have to modernise wherever you can".

So, for Ed it's farewell to the Knowledge, taxi tariff setting (night fares, extras, the Heathrow extra), Taxi card, reviewing the conditions of fitness, TX4 fires, private hire licensing, mid-year inspections, marshalled taxi ranks, anti-touting measures, his colleagues at the PICO ("a terrific team, who do all the hard work"), driving down to Margate with a London cab charity, meeting retired taxi drivers with decades of experience and service; and many other features of being the Taxi and Private Hire Director. "It's been a continuous challenge, but with never a dull moment. London should be proud of its cab trade and the men and women who provide it."

