

19 July 1938

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Departmental Committee on Cabs

and

Private Hire Vehicles

Evidence given on behalf of the
Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis.

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LONDON MOTOR-CAB DRIVERS EXAMINATION (TOPOGRAPHICAL TEST).

(DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEE.)

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REPORT
of the
COMMITTEE

appointed by the Secretary of State to enquire into the
topographical examination proscribed for applicants for
licences to drive motor-cabs in London,

with

APPENDIX.

Home Office,
Whitchall.

(1915.)

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To the Right Honourable

Sir John Simon, K.C., M.P.

Sir,

On May 13th of this year we were appointed by Mr. McKenna to enquire into the Topographical Examination prescribed for applicants for licences to drive Motor Cabs in London, and to report whether any alterations in the examination were desirable.

In the course of our enquiry we have examined the following witnesses:-

Lord Chichester, Captain D.A. Lynch, Mr. C. Ashwood,
and Mr. A. Blaydon,

of the British Motor Cab Company;

Mr. A.W. Fellows,

of Messrs. W. & G. Du Cros;

Mr. E.A. Greathed,

of the National Motor Cab Company;

Mr. Albert Smith,

President of the National Union of Licensed
Vehicle Workers,

Superintendent A. Bassom and Inspector G. Briant,

of Scotland Yard (Public Carriage Department).

In addition we paid a visit to Scotland Yard with a view to making ourselves acquainted with the conditions under which candidates for licences are examined - and listened to examinations in progress both in the presence of and also concealed from the candidate.

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The granting of licences to drivers of cabs plying for hire is governed by the London Hackney Carriages Act, 1843, the Metropolitan Carriage Act, 1869, and an Order of the Secretary of State (February 1908), under the last mentioned Act.

Under Section 8 of the Act of 1869, the licence must be given by the Secretary of State, but Section 11 enables the Secretary of State to depute the power to the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, "or any such other person as the Secretary of State appoints for the purpose". Power to grant licences is conferred on the Commissioner by paragraph 15 of the Order of February, 1908.

No details as to the tests which candidates for licences are to be required to pass are laid down in the Acts or order, though Section 8 of the London Hackney Carriages Act of 1843 prescribes the production of "such a certificate as shall satisfy the Commissioner of his good behaviour and fitness for the situation".

The present tests comprise -

- (a) an investigation as to character;
- (b) the examination as to knowledge of London (or of particular suburban localities); and
- (c) an examination in driving.

The question of the Topographical Examination, which was instituted we understand in 1866, has received incidental attention from previous Committees.

1. The Departmental Committee of 1895 on the Metropolitan Cab Service, while they recommended increased strictness generally in the granting of licences to drivers,

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thought that the standard of examination as to an applicant's knowledge of London was sufficiently high.

2. A Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1906 on the Cabs and Omnibuses (Metropolis) Bill had evidence given before them in regard to the Topographical Examination, the proprietors contending that it was too strict, the representatives of the drivers that it was, if anything, not strict enough; The Committee did not, however, deal with the matter in their Report.

3. The Departmental Committee in 1911 on Taxi-Cab fares had similar evidence given before them, and gave the following opinion in their Report:

"As regards the Topographical Test, the Committee do not consider it is undue or excessive. It is the same in the centre of London that has been in use for Horse Cab Drivers for many years, with an increase as to knowledge of main roads in outlying suburbs due to the increased distance covered by taxi cabs. The Committee believe that a thorough topographical knowledge of London is essential to the proper driving of taxi cabs, and in the interests of the public they cannot recommend its relaxation. The drivers also approve of the maintenance of the present test."

The Committee recommended that the standard of qualification for drivers' licences should be strictly maintained.

The Examination is an oral one and the questions are based in every case on one of 25 lists of specimen questions which are printed in book form, and supplied beforehand to each applicant for a licence. These printed lists of questions date from 1906. Prior to that date a

/candidate

candidate had no knowledge of the lines on which he was to be examined. A specimen list of questions from the book is given in an appendix at the end of the report.

The system of marking for each question is as follows:-

2 - for an absolutely correct answer;

1 - for a fairly correct answer; and

0 - for an answer showing complete want of knowledge.

In order to pass finally the candidate must obtain at least 1 for each question on the list on the basis of which he is examined. If he does not succeed in getting 66% total marks at the examination he is considered as "ploughed" and must present himself again (if he wishes to persist) on a subsequent date to be examined on a different list. If, however, he succeeds in obtaining 66% total marks, he is considered as having passed on those questions on which he has obtained marks (popularly, he is said to have passed his "first knowledge") and has only to present himself for re-examination ("second knowledge") on those particular questions in which he has failed, and he is given what is known as a "permit" to learn driving. (This "permit", we are informed, is an arrangement for the benefit of the Companies employing the men. When a man is within sight of passing the Topographical Examination it will be worth the Company's while to begin to train him seriously for the driving test).

There is, at present, no limit to the number of times a candidate may present himself for examination - but in certain cases intervals of definite lengths are imposed.

We understand that we were appointed to enquire into the question of the Topographical Examinations in consequence of urgent and repeated complaints from the British Motor

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Company as to the severity and general unfairness of the examination and the alleged shortage of drivers resulting therefrom. The British Motor Cab Company were the first witnesses whom we summoned and they put their views very fully before us.

They are, it appears, the largest of the motor cab companies, and are the only company who now have schools of instruction for teaching knowledge of London.

They complain that the examinations have greatly increased in severity[!] of recent years, and that in particular the percentage of passes has been considerably reduced since the beginning of the war, though the standard of the candidates sent up by the Company is unchanged. *

1,234 of their licensed drivers have, they say, gone on military service, and in the nine months following the outbreak of war they only succeeded in passing 165 new men (as against 289 in the nine months up to August 1914).

They allege that they have in consequence several hundred more cabs lying idle than in normal times, and that this is involving the Company in serious difficulties.

Moreover, the public too, they say, are being hit, as there is now a definite shortage of cabs on the streets.

They state that they are compelled to keep in their employment men of unsatisfactory character who ought not in the interests of the public to be allowed to drive and who, in normal times, would certainly be discharged.

They complain that the Examination is essentially an unpractical one, and therefore not a fair test of the candidate's knowledge.

Under the present oral system, they urge, many candidates are too nervous to do themselves justice. Candidates feel moreover there is no appeal from an oral examination, as there is no written evidence of the answers given by them to each question.

A written examination should, the Company thought, be at least optional.

Specific allegations of unfairness in the methods of conducting the examination were made, viz:

1. That trick questions were asked, e.g., "Drive from the Naval and Military Club to 114, Piccadilly" (which are one and the same thing).
2. That examiners confuse candidates by interrupting in the middle of an answer with side questions, and by deviating from the questions on the list.
3. That on coming up for "second knowledge" candidates are made to answer questions outside those which they are supposed to have looked up in the interval and on which the understanding is that they are to be re-examined. In some cases they are made to go through the whole examination again after one failure on "second knowledge".

In addition they complain (a) of the long time that candidates are kept waiting about before the examination; they are not allowed to turn up later than 10 o'clock in the morning, and their turn may not come until the late afternoon, and (b) of the confusing effect of overhearing the examination of another candidate in the next chamber, the two examination chambers being separated only by a light partition.

Lord Chichester, one of the representatives of the British Motor Cab Company, in reply to a specific question, said emphatically that they did not suggest that any special "set" was being made against them by the Scotland Yard officials.

A number of the above statements were supported, though less confidently, by representatives of Messrs.

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W. & G. Du Cros and of the National Motor Cab Company who gave evidence before us. In neither case did they appear to have the same knowledge or experience of the examination as the British Motor Cab Company.

They both stated that the examination had become more difficult of recent years, and they agreed also in asking for some temporary relaxation, e.g. a system of temporary licences, for the period of the war*. Mr. Fellows (of Messrs. Du Cros) was in favour of an optionally oral or written examination. On the other hand Mr. Greathed (of the National Motor Cab Company) was against a written examination, which he considered would be beyond the powers of the average applicant.

The Gamage-Bell Company, who gave as their reason for not wishing to give evidence personally that they had no knowledge at all of the manner in which the Topographical Examination is conducted, said in their letter:- "We are very pleased indeed to learn that a thorough enquiry is to be made into the way in which the public can be protected by insuring greater safety by drivers having a more thorough knowledge of the streets of London than some of them at present exhibit. We are frequently receiving telephone complaints on this matter, but our reply is that we have to rely upon the fact that drivers have all been passed by the Authorities of Scotland Yard before they have been given licences".

The majority of the statements of the British Motor Cab Company were vigorously controverted by witnesses from Scotland Yard (Superintendent Bassom and Inspector Briant),
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* The British Motor Cab Company were also strongly in favour of this suggestion.

and by Mr. Albert Smith, President of the Licensed Vehicle Workers' Union.

Mr. Smith said that the unanimous opinion of his Union was very much against any relaxation in the standard of the Examination; if anything it was not stiff enough. He would like to see the Examination conducted in the form of a practical test. He was not in favour of a written examination.

There was no shortage of drivers or cabs - rather a shortage of fares owing to the absence of so many of the cab-riding public and the decrease in the number of late suppers and other evening entertainments owing to various causes arising out of the war.

As regards the large number of cabs which the British Motor Cab Company have standing idle, Mr. Smith said that this and any shortage of drivers from which the Company may be suffering are difficulties with which the Company are always faced in consequence of the low power and generally inferior quality of their cabs, which are very unpopular with drivers, who take the first opportunity of leaving the Company to drive a more satisfactory cab.

Superintendent Bassom, who has been head of the Public Carriage Department at Scotland Yard for the past thirteen years, denied strongly the statement that the Topographical Examination has increased in severity of recent years, except in so far as the introduction of motor cabs has widened the area to be covered. A candidate is required to have a good general knowledge of (a) the interior parts

of London and (b) the principal routes to and from the suburbs. - (b) dates from the introduction of motor cabs.

The number of separate attendances per candidate has it is true increased, Mr. Bassom suggested three or four possible reasons to explain this; the two most likely were (1) that "in the horse-cab days the majority of the men were horse-keepers, washers, carmen or others used to driving and finding their way about town", whereas now the percentage of such men is much lower, and (2) that "owing to motor schools, classes, etc; men are perhaps apt to try to learn the names of streets from a map or directory, and find their memory fails when a question is put differing slightly from the one in the book which they have used as a key."

On the other hand the percentage of successful candidates to the total number of applicants has been going up, and in 1914 was higher than for any previous year; Mr. Bassom also submitted figures to show that this percentage has certainly not decreased since the beginning of the war, and actually reaches a record figure for the first five months of 1915.

With regard to the statements about nervousness of candidates in the presence of the Inspector, Mr. Bassom said that examiners do all they can to put men at their ease and help them out with suggestions; usually they try to start the man with questions on a locality with which he is well acquainted, so as to give him confidence.

Examiners have no idea whether a candidate has or has not been sent up by a Company and they are forbidden to ask.

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The examinations are (without the knowledge of the Examiner) listened to from time to time by various responsible officials to ensure that they are being fairly conducted.

Mr. Bassom had definite answers to the three specific allegations numbered 1, 2 and 3 on page 6.

As regards (1) he said that "it is absolutely forbidden that a tricky question should be put", and as regards the particular example cited, that "a man would be absolutely unfit for his position if he ever put such a question".

As regards (2), steps have to be taken to ensure that a candidate has not merely learned his knowledge off by route, and with this object the examiner may ask questions, as to the position of prominent buildings, etc., on the route that is being described; with a similar object the examiner may vary the starting and finishing points of certain routes on the list. Mr. Bassom pointed out that the lists of questions are stated on the cover of the booklet to be only "similar to those put to applicants."

As regards (3), in a certain minority of cases, Mr. Bassom said, the allegation is correct, viz:- where the Inspector has reason to think that the man has been merely "cramming" his questions and has completely forgotten what he knew at the time of passing his "first knowledge".

Mr. Bassom supported Mr. Smith's statement that there is no real shortage of cabs on the streets. From figures which he submitted to us it appears there were about one seventh fewer cabs running at the end of April than at the corresponding period last year, but this deficiency was, Mr. Bassom thought, fully counter-balanced by the shortage of fares.

As regards the supply of drivers, Mr. Bassom submitted figures to show that the proportion of drivers to licensed

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cabs has risen from 10.9 in 1911 to 12.7 for 1914.

Mr. Bassom supported Mr. Smith's contention that the British Motor Company's cabs are generally of an inferior type and unpopular with drivers.

The Committee have in mind the fact that Mr. Bassom at present controls existing arrangements, and may therefore be said to have an unconscious bias in favour of the present system being continued unchanged.

Inspector Briant, who is one of the Examiners in the Public Carriage Department added nothing material to the evidence given by Superintendent Bassom.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

Having given careful consideration to all the evidence which has been put before us, we are of the opinion that the British Motor Cab Company and those who supported their statements have failed, in the main, to make out their case.

Apart from the necessary widening of the scope of the examination as a consequence of the introduction of motor cabs, we cannot satisfy ourselves that the Topographical Examination has unduly increased in severity of recent years. Applicants nowadays take longer to pass than in former times, but on the other hand it is shown that the proportion of successful candidates to the total number has been steadily rising. We think that the reasons suggested by Mr. Bassom for the increased number of attendances per man are probably correct, viz: (1) change in the type of applicant, and (2) the increased use of "cram" methods and the habit of practice "shots", for which the system of schools

is probably responsible.

The standard of knowledge which is required is no doubt high, but so in justice to the public it must be, and, though complaints from the public are not apparently received in any great numbers, it does not seem that even with the existing standard of examination there is any superabundance of topographical knowledge on the part of licensed drivers. It should be observed that the examination does not merely concern the routes by main roads, but the higher marks are awarded for short cuts by thoroughfares which are relatively unfrequented.

The three specific allegations of unfairness made by the British Motor Cab Company were, we consider, sufficiently answered by Mr. Bassom.

The examinations which we witnessed seemed to us to bear out the statements of the Scotland Yard representatives as to the way in which examiners try to lead candidates on and help them out with suggestions. At the same time it is obviously desirable that the risk of unfairness on the part of examiners should be eliminated by every means possible. We think that the existing practice of occasional supervision of an examination, unknown to the examiner, by a responsible official, is a necessary precaution and should certainly be maintained.

As regards the proposal put forward for the institution of temporary licences during the war, on a less rigorous examination; there are serious practical difficulties in the way of such a measure, and the only real justification for it would be the proved existence of a definite shortage of drivers resulting in an inadequate supply of cabs on the

streets. We cannot find that there is any real insufficiency of cabs, in spite of the statements of the British Motor Cab and the National Motor Cab Companies. The British Motor Cab Company, it is true, alleged that their individual takings had increased by about 3/- per head daily; but on the other hand Messrs. Du Cros informed us that their takings per cab were the same as before the war. It is our opinion that the representatives of the licensed Vehicle Workers' Union and Scotland Yard are right in saying that cab-riding has been very largely reduced as a consequence of the war, and that this compensates for any falling off in the total number of cabs actually on the streets.

Two alternatives only to the present system of examination were suggested to us, viz:-

- (1) That there should be a practical test.
- (2) That candidates should at least be allowed the option of a written examination.

(1) The idea of a practical test was logically implied in many of the arguments adduced by the British Motor Cab Company, but they did not press it (on the ground of the difficulties of application). Mr. Smith, however, of the Licensed Vehicle Workers' Union advocated it strongly, from the opposite point of view, i.e., on the ground that it would be a more severe test than an oral examination.

It was pointed out by the Scotland Yard representatives (and recognised by the British Motor Cab Company) that a system of practical tests would involve a wholly disproportionate expenditure of time and labour on the part of the examining staff (which would have to be considerably increased for the purpose). With this view we entirely agree.

From the candidate's point of view it is extremely doubtful whether the change would be for the better, as is evidenced by Mr. Smith's attitude.

(2) The appeal for a written examination has perhaps more to recommend it. It was put forward by the British Motor Cab Company and Messrs. Du Cros, but not supported by the National Motor Cab Company. The latter thought that it would be beyond the powers of the average applicant; and the British Motor Cab Company's representatives were not, it is true, quite certain among themselves, what proportion of their candidates would be in a position to take advantage of a written paper if the alternative were given. The arguments for a written examination were (i) that it would eliminate the paralysing effect of the Inspector, and give the candidate time to think, and (ii) that there would be more control over the examination, and candidates would have a chance of appeal.

We are by no means satisfied that a written examination would be a wholly satisfactory test, but there is, undoubtedly, a class of candidate who, though not necessarily otherwise nervous or unreliable, will always fail to do himself anything like justice in an oral examination; and we are inclined to think that the experiment of a written examination might be tried by the authorities. It would soon be apparent whether there was any real demand for it, or whether the demand was likely to last.

One of our members, Mr. Herbert Nield, is of opinion that the objections raised against the stringency of the Examination as at present conducted would be largely met by dividing the area of Greater London into sections, either (a) by postal districts or (b) upon the basis of London Municipal Boroughs, or in some other manner, and permitting candidates to take these sections separately - for instance (a) as a whole or (b) grouped - at given stages in the examination, but requiring them to pass a final examination

extending over the whole area or combined sectional districts, before a certificate is issued.

In the opinion of Mr. Nield the witnesses from Scotland Yard admitted that such a plan was practicable and one which might be tried.

Mr. Nield considers that it would impart a marked improvement into the system. We think that the suggestion should receive the careful consideration of the Authorities at Scotland Yard.

With regard to the two subsidiary complaints as to (a) insufficient partition between the two examination chambers, and (b) the length of time that candidates are kept waiting before the examination:

(a) We are of opinion that steps should be taken to ensure, either by improving the partition or by making some other arrangement, that candidates shall not be confused by overhearing another examination in progress.

(b) The only argument put forward by Mr. Bassom against a more systematic arrangement of times was apparently the difficulty of being sure that the men would keep the appointments. This is not very convincing.

The present haphazard system of attendance appears to us to be unsatisfactory and we think that something should be done to avoid keeping men waiting all day before being examined. There ought to be no difficulty about assigning so many men to the morning and so many men to the afternoon; the men to call at Scotland Yard and to be given some such appointments for the afternoon or for the next day, in cases where they have no chance of coming on for several hours.

The above suggestions are all we find ourselves able to
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recommend in response to the appeal of the British Motor Cab Company.

We cordially recognise that the British Motor Cab Company may fairly claim to have rendered valuable assistance in connection with the public cab service of London and specifically in connection with the War. In the Company's training schools a great number of cab drivers have been taught their business, and it is certain that many of these men have proved very useful to the military authorities. We understand, too, that the Company are manufacturing munitions of war at their repair shops. On the other hand there is, as we have said, no evidence before us to show either that the Topographical Examination has been or is now unduly severe, much less that candidates for licences coming from the Company's schools are differentially treated by the examiners at Scotland Yard. There seems to be ground for the conclusion that the Company possess a large number of low powered and inferior cabs and that it is the unwillingness of drivers to work these cabs that is largely responsible for the difficulties under which the Company labours.

There was one piece of evidence given by Superintendent Bassom which has not yet been mentioned, but which we have had to bear in mind throughout our enquiry. It appears that Sir Edward Henry (before the appointment of our Committee) received a request from the Director General of Recruiting that no unusual facilities should be given to new men who come into the public cab service to occupy the places of men who have enlisted in the motor transport service. The Commissioner, we understand, undertook that the examination should not be relaxed; and this undertaking embodies what

may be regarded as an informal contract between enlisted men and the authority responsible for issuing licences in London.

While we have given due weight to this consideration we have no reason to think that our findings would be different if no such understanding existed.

In conclusion we desire to express our high appreciation of the services rendered by our Secretary, Mr. M.H. Whitelegge, who has discharged his duties throughout our enquiry with admirable tact and ability.

We are,

Sir,

Your obedient Servants,

(signed) CECIL HARMSWORTH.

HERBERT NIELD.

WILL CROOKS.

Home Office,
Whitehall,
September, 1915.

M. H. Whitelegge,
Secretary.

APPENDIX.

Extract from the printed lists of Specimen Questions referred
to on page 4 of the Report.

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List No. 14.

Routes.

- No.
1. St. Stephen's Square, to Cavendish Square.
 2. Marylebone County Court, to Chalk Farm Railway Stn.
 3. Fairhazel Gardens, to Endsleigh Gardens.
 4. St. Pancras Church, to Drury Lane Theatre.
 5. Lords' Cricket Ground, to Constitutional Club.
 6. St. James' Theatre, to Finsbury Town Hall.
 7. St. Bartholomew's Hospital, to Great Northern Hospital.
 8. Claremont Square, to Arbour Square.
 9. Metropolitan Hospital, to Limchouse Town Hall.
 10. Westminster Cathedral, to St. Paul's Cathedral.
 11. Carpenters' Hall, to Camberwell Green.
 12. Southwark Park, to Tate Gallery.
 13. Board of Education Offices, to Camberwell Empire.
 14. Camberwell Town Hall, to Chelsea Town Hall.
 15. Gordon Hospital for Fistula, to West London Hospital.
 16. Cadogan Square, to Shepherd's Bush Empire.
 17. Battersea Park, to Hyde Park Gardens.
 18. Earl's Court Square, to Elgin Avenue.

SQUARES - St. Georges. Portman. Sloane. Brunswick.
Lowndes. Golden.

CLUBS - Windham. Bachelors'. United Service. Sports.
Alexandra. Savage.

HOSPITALS - Westminster. St. Thomas'. St. Mar's.
Royal Free. St. Luke's. St. George's.

BUILDINGS - Tower of London. Albert Hall. National Gallery.
Home Office. Wellington Barracks. Record Office.

HOTELS.- Ritz. Victoria. Morley's. Grand. Savoy. Dicudonne.

THEATRES - Gaiety. Wyndham's. Royalty. Comedy. Lyric. Criterion.

Note. - The Applicant may also be required to state the position of any County Court, Police Court, Police Station, and Railway Station, also of the Law Courts, and the Oval and Lords Cricket Grounds.