The Knowledge’ Sparks London Taxi War

By Fred Barbash
Washington Post Service

LONDON — You can spot them on the streets early in the morning or late at night, on streets thick with traffic or deserted. Attached to their windshield are detailed maps of London, thousands of blocks, millions of addresses. But they are looking for no place in particular; just everyplace in general.

They are studying to pass one of the hardest tests in the world: the exam that will qualify them to be a licensed London taxi driver. It may take them two years or maybe three to master this sprawling city, with its thousands of roads, avenues, crescents, gardens, mews and squares.

There are three Gloucester avenues, for example: about 10 Gloucester Roads; a Gloucester Circle, a Gloucester Close, Gloucester Gardens. There are three. Not to mention Gloucester Gate, Gloucester Grove and Gloucester Walk.

But if they learn all this, and pass the test, they have won what the drivers call “The Knowledge.”

They also have a livelihood — a good one and sometimes a very good one, as the driver of one of London’s 22,000 fabled “black taxis.”

At the moment, they are engaged in a struggle, they say, to preserve their livelihoods: “The Battle of the Victoria Coach Station,” as their posters and stickers say.

The enemies are another group of cabbies, the minicab drivers of London. They definitely do not have The Knowledge. Indeed, anyone with a driving license, a wrecker of a car, and the money to install a radio can be a minicab driver. No test, no special license, no Knowledge.

But they charge less, sometimes a lot less, and are popular with people who do not have expense accounts. One cannot hail them from the street — that is not allowed. And they’re not allowed at airports. You get them through touts. Or you telephone them through minicab syndicates, whose cards litter the streets and find their way into millions of mailboxes.

The battle began last year when the Victoria Coach Station near Buckingham Palace contracted with one of these syndicates to install a minicab desk right in the bus station, giving these drivers a legitimacy, and an opportunity, they have never before enjoyed.

So far, it has all been nonviolent. The weapons are the traditional taxis themselves. Four times in the past few months, most recently on Friday, the licensed taxi drivers have descended by the thousands on the station, shutting down their engines, blocking the streets, stopping traffic in the heart of London for miles around. Leaving weary bus passengers wandering about in search of transportation, wondering what it was all about.

What it was all about, said Dave Jones, 37, who has The Knowledge and has been using it for 11 years, “is our livelihoods.”

“It’s not just Victoria Station,” he said. “If the minicabs win this one, Kings Cross Station will be next; then Euston, then Waterloo and then ... God forbid, maybe Heathrow Airport itself. ‘We train for two years minimum, on our own time. We buy those minicabs. They just set up and take our work from us.”

“We’re not being greedy,” said Alec Sterling. “We’re just trying to protect ourselves and the public. These guys have made no investment. They aren’t licensed. They have no insurance. A guy can come right out of prison and drive a minicab.”

And, chimed in another driver, “they usually don’t know where they’re going.”

Chas Varney, a minicab driver who was manning the Victoria Station minicab desk Friday, was surprisingly sympathetic.

“It’s true,” he said, “they’ve got The Knowledge. I can sympathize with them about us not being licensed.” Then again, he said, it is only the market at work. “We’re cheaper. It’s that simple.”

That is also true. A ride from Central London to Heathrow in a licensed taxi can cost $45; in a minicab, it’s $25. “But it might cost you $80,” said Mr. Sterling. “They’re not metered like we are. They’ll charge you whatever they can get away with.”

Colin Fenge, editor of the Mini-Cab Courier, said that what’s happening is thoroughly positive and thoroughly modern. The minicabs are creating a “genuine market” in London, he said.

“What that means is that the prices they charge are the prices many want to pay,” he said. “They represent the real market, which he estimates to be 40 percent cheaper than the licensed taxis.”

Jewish Cemetery Vandalized

REUTERS

BONN — A Jewish cemetery near Bonn was desecrated by unknown assailants who knocked over 10 tombstones, the police said Wednesday.