



# The London Cab

by Geoff Wheatley

When you think of British cars such names as Jaguar or Rolls Royce come to mind. The image of an English sports car usually starts with such names as MG or Triumph. Morgan or Healey. Sad to say these are names from the past, the once flourishing British Motor Industry is now just a memory, however there is one vehicle that continues to flourish and prosper. When you visit London as a tourist or for business you certainly see and often use this facility.

In total there are over 24,000 located in the British capital in use every day, three hundred and sixty five days a year. I am referring to the popular London Taxi service better known as a "Hackney Cab", a name dating back at least three hundred years. Each vehicle is unique to its requirements. The floor cannot be more than fifteen inches off the ground and must now be wheelchair accessible.

The license to drive a London cab is granted by the Public Carriage Office known as the "PCO", they are responsible for the 22,000 licensed drivers who have to complete a total of three years training before being granted the authority to drive a hackney cab. The first year is spent learning every location of 26,000 streets within the London area and that's only related to a six mile radius from Charring Cross station considered the center of central London excluding the city and the greater suburbs. Now add the location of hospitals, hotels, theaters, Churches and of course central London hotels all 1,800 of them!

This knowledge is obtained by getting each would be driver to spend a year on a motor scooter rain or shine memorizing these required locations. One in five applicants manage to complete this first one year training period. The next two years are spent as an assistant to an experienced driver which in real terms means that you watch and learn. If you are successful after this you get the desired prize the converted green badge that every London cabbie wears with pride on the left side of his or her jacket. Yes women are now able to apply and pass the training.

The cabs are specially made but change their design every few years. They are not a cheap item to purchase the average price is around \$45,000 and they are subject to an annual inspection by the Driving Authorities. At the same time there are plain clothes inspectors who will hail a cab and observe to way that the vehicle is driven, parked etc., also how the driver relates to the passengers. That green badge that took so long to achieve can be suspended for a given period should it be decided that the driver is not up to the required standards. If any cabbie is found to be overcharging passengers he or she can lose their license for as long as a year which means that their cab can remain idle in company with the driver's income.

During WWII London cabs were used to direct fire services and to take injured people to the hospitals when the ambulance services were over loaded, they also assisted in transports requirements regardless of the circumstances such as an air raid etc. Over a three dozen London cabbies were decorated for their service during this period and a few were killed on duty.

The highest collection of London cabs at any time is Heathrow airport during the allowed flying hours. Over three thousand cabs service passengers during this period daily, three hundred and sixty five days a year.

I like to sit in the back of a London cab with space to stretch out and large windows to see the passing world. However there is one aspect of such travel that I do find disturbing. Watching those numbers flick by on the pay meter, I often wish they were on the reverse side so that I was not subjected to this irritation but the law is firm on this matter. The passenger must always be able to see the meter from start to finish of the journey.



Photo: 1958 Austin FX3 London Cab