The Cabmen’s Cafes

In theory, each of the approximately twenty-five thousand licensed drivers of black taxicabs in London knows every street in the center of town. This familiarity is entirely possible, since getting a license—or, as it is commonly known, Passing the Knowledge—involves detailed recall of twenty-five thousand streets within a six-mile radius of Charing Cross Railway Station. The locations of clubs, hospitals, hotels, railway stations, parks, theaters, courts, restaurants, colleges, government buildings, and places of worship are similarly required. What most of these cabdrivers also know is the location of London’s thirteen taxi shelters, their hours of operation, and their menus.

The first shelter was built in London in 1875, paid for by Captain George Armstrong, a newspaper publisher and editor, after his servant was unable to find him a cab during a storm. All the drivers had abandoned their posts to seek refuge, companionship, and drink in a local pub. Armstrong apparently felt that if the cabdrivers were provided with alcohol-free, heated shelters, they would not resort to “the demon drink” and would be much easier to find. Anxious to have sober cabdrivers on call, Armstrong rounded up some of his wealthy friends and acquaintances, started a building fund, and erected the first shelter at a cab stand—across the street from his house.

Until the shelters were established, cabbies had no easy way of obtaining hot food or shelter, since it was against the law to leave a cab unattended at a cab rank. They could pay someone to look after their cab, or they could run the risks of breaking the law or having their cab stolen, but any of these options could lead to financial disaster. In the winter months a combination of freezing temperatures, hunger, and thirst made their situation particularly difficult. So the cabbies also benefited from shelters.

When the first shelters were built, London was plagued by massive traffic jams, epidemics, pollution, and filth. Social tensions ran high, and the divide between rich and poor was enormous. Nevertheless, there were a number of well-known philanthropists, foremost among them the seventy-three-year-old 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, a well-known champion of the working classes and urban poor. Taking up Armstrong’s cause, he became the first president of the Cabmen’s Shelter Fund, a charity established to provide, at the busiest cab stands, places where the drivers of hansom cabs and, later, hackney carriages could obtain “good and wholesome refreshments at moderate prices.” The fund also helped to maintain the shelters.

Soon, wealthy residents banded together to build shelters for their local cabbies. Contributions were made by such luminaries as His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Westminster, and His Highness the Sultan of Zanzibar. The Rothschilds donated braces of partridge; the Countess of Cowper gave fur capes, the latter gift being “a most valuable and acceptable present during the late bitter weather.”

This was Victorian London, where proper etiquette and temperance were considered virtues. To maintain a degree of decorum the charity forbade “gambling, cardplaying, drinking, and swearing” in any of its shelters. Instead, cabbies were encouraged to read the books and newspapers donated by publishers and other benefactors. Lady Charlotte Schreiber was said to have provided her local shelter with both the Times and the Daily Chronicle so that the cabbies would be able to read about “both sides of politics.” She also knitted her local cabbies long, red woolen scarves, made sure they had umbrellas, and gave them money for excursions.

Between 1875 and 1914 the Cabmen’s Shelter Fund built a total of sixty-one shelters in London, at a cost of about two hundred pounds apiece. Because the shelters were erected at cab stands on public highways, either in the curb lane or in the middle of the road, the police ordered that they could take up no more space than a horse and cart. Despite their small size, the shelters managed to accommodate a working kitchen and bench seating for ten to thirteen men along both sides of a long, narrow table.

The fund equipped the shelters with furnishings, window blinds, an American-style cooking stove, an ice chest,
bottles and Tupperware-type containers meant that food from home could be kept fresh and warm in the cab for hours, thereby eliminating the need to buy a meal on the road. Obviously, if the cabmen no longer needed the shelters, then the shelters would suffer financially.

Today only thirteen shelters remain. These dark green timber-framed huts are found mostly in the more salubrious parts of west London, a well-taxied area. All the shelters are Grade II listed (i.e., historic) buildings and continue to function as diners, each with its regular clientele of cabbies. They are very similar to private clubs—only cabbies are allowed inside. Originally, retired cabbies were recruited to operate the shelters.

Over the years, many of the shelters disappeared. Some were bombed during World War II, while others fell victim to street-widening projects after the war. It was the rise of modern technology, however, that put most of the shelters out of business—they just weren’t profitable anymore. First, the invention of the automobile and then the widespread use of radio dispatching gave drivers much greater mobility, allowing them to stop almost anywhere for a bite to eat. It is even possible that the availability of excellent thermos

Above: The cabmen’s shelter in Russell Square.

a strong, iron-lined coke or coal bin, hooks, a lead-lined or galvanized iron sink with a plate rack above, crockery, and lockers for provisions. According to the Museum of London, the shelters did not provide mugs. The cabbies had to supply their own, which were kept for them at the shelter and looked after by the “shelter boys.”

The shelters originally offered coffee, tea, cocoa, bread, and margarine, and, for a penny, the attendant would cook food the cabbies brought in. As time passed, the menus became more elaborate, and some of the shelters provided meals, including sausages, faggots, pease pudding, and ham and eggs.

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tips. Today, though, she no longer visits them: “They are too good. I was eating so much I gained too much weight. Now I avoid the shelters and bring my own food from home.”

The Cabmen’s Cafes Today

During my wanderings around town, I often stop and ask the cabbies what they think of the shelters.8 Not surprisingly, the answers are as varied as the individuals. For one woman cabbie, being in the shelters feels like being in a warm country kitchen, where everyone is friendly and helpful. When she was just starting out, she went to the shelters to get business

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personality, clientele, and menu (sold both inside and through a window hatch, as takeaway).

Above: Lidija takes a much-needed break at her shelter.  
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GASTRONOMICA

Photograph by Dawn Starin
people who go there aren’t very sophisticated.” One driver I talked to said that he was asked to leave a shelter because he was not one of the regulars.

His experience seems to have been an exception. One driver I spoke with certainly thinks so. Calling himself a “hut slut,” he said he would “go anywhere with anyone at anytime.” Another thought the huts would be “unfriendly and standoffish, not too happy to have a brown face inside” but was happy to discover that he was wrong. Yet another cabbie found that he “used to spend half an hour getting to the shelter to meet my mates and then one and a half hours sitting around shooting the breeze.” Now that he is a father he can’t afford that much time, though he still gets sandwiches to go from the window. “I can’t give up the great British bacon sarnie.”

The bacon sarnie keeps a fifteen-year veteran going back to his local shelter. A properly made cup of tea is also important. This cabbie could never live in the United States. He visited once, traveling from Miami to New York “looking for a decent cuppa, and all I could find was coffee…” The shelters know how to make a proper British cuppa.”

Pat Carter has been running the Warwick Avenue shelter (the fortieth one to be built) for the past nineteen years. She feeds about thirty cabbies a day, five days a week, from eight in the morning until three in the afternoon. Pat tells me that her food “is basically just plain English food. No curries. No exotic spices.” She provides bottled condiments on the table if the cabbies want to add something. On Wednesdays she makes roast lamb, roast chicken, and roast pork, and on Fridays, fresh fish and chips with homemade batter. “They all fight over the pork crackling. God help me if I don’t give them enough crackling,” she says. “I suppose my best dish is stuffed lambs’ hearts, a real old-fashioned English dish.” Her most popular offering is breakfast in a baguette: two pieces of bacon, two sausages, and an egg “squashed in a French stick.”

Pat enjoys her job. She and her husband, Tony, a cabbie, socialize with many of the patrons. They buy lottery tickets together, go to the dog races together, visit Tenerife as a group. These cabbies are Pat’s surrogate family. “This place is noisy like a monkey house,” she says. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Maybe this shelter has always been fun because it was built in 1889, the same year Charlie Chaplin was born. It has a good history. We have a laugh. No two days are the same. I cook and I clean and I laugh and I listen and I know all what they get up to and what their wives don’t know.”

Although only cabbies are allowed to enter the dark green shelter, takeaway food is served to all comers through a window hatch. As much as some drivers like the atmosphere of the shelters, others, like those noted above, do not, so they order their food to go. It is this passing trade, which accounts for about 75 percent of her business, that allows Pat to make a decent living. The local postman, for example, claims that Pat’s sandwich of cheddar cheese, butter, salt, and tomato on a large white roll is the best in the country. Sometimes, he says, “getting a sandwich from the shelter window is exactly what I need at the end of my route. I pay my £1.20 and I’m happy.” A local contractor relied on Pat’s fare for years, saying it was just like his mother used to make. “I’ve stopped now,” he confesses, “because I was getting too fat, but I sure miss her roasts.”

Not far from Pat’s shelter on Warwick Avenue and very near the spot where the first shelter was established, Lidija Armanda runs her shelter six days a week from nine in the morning to four in the afternoon, with a decidedly different menu and personality. Lidija, who left Croatia in 1979, has brought healthier, more exotic tastes and non-British cuisine into her kitchen. She refuses to serve the “piles of grease and fat” that she feels typify British cooking. Her goal is to serve decent, well-balanced food, with a Mediterranean flavor. “Slowly,” she says, the cabbies “have come to appreciate it. Some of them had never had olive oil or balsamic vinegar or garlic or basil or coriander until they ate here. Now they can’t get enough of it. I even have a special jar full of typical Croatian spices that I sometimes add to my cooking.” Overhearing us talk condiments and spices, one cabbie asks me to write something down. “Lidija has extended our lives by a few years by making us healthy food. She has personally saved me from a McDonald’s hell.” Another says, “I bring in my homemade pickles and the surplus organic vegetables from my allotment for Lidija because she appreciates them, and we get wonderful plates of grilled vegetables and salads in exchange.”

Apart from their differing menus, Lidija’s business is much like Pat’s. They both make one main meal a day, the majority of their profit comes through hatch sales, and their sandwiches are famous. One patron claims that Lidija makes the best bacon sarnies north of the Thames. Because Lidija spends so much time at the shelter and employs her son and daughter to help out, she tries to create a family atmosphere. In fact, her son André is well known for his wall drawings as well as his perfect omelets. One corner holds a free lending library of magazines, newspapers, and paperback books. Guitars, donated by cabbies, hang on the walls and are often taken down for someone to play. There are frequent charity quizzes to raise money for Great Ormond Street Children’s Hospital. Like Pat’s, Lidija’s
shelter is much more than a healthy pit stop for hungry cabbies. It is a place where the cook and her patrons form bonds and have fun.

Across town, not far from the Houses of Parliament, Alf, from Portugal, runs a shelter five days a week from seven in the morning until two in the afternoon. Unlike Lidija, he does not add his own twist to his food, because he believes that the shelters are traditional British establishments and should stay true to their roots. This explains why even though he is Portuguese and a vegetarian, Alf’s most popular meals are bacon sarnies and grilled breakfasts in bread. Like the other shelter keepers, Alf maintains that the majority of his profit comes from the long lines of cabbies, students, and tourists who buy food from the window. “I wouldn’t be able to pay my bills if I had to rely on just the cabbies who come in and sit down for a meal.”

Before the Cabmen’s Shelter Fund was established, cabbies’ social interactions took place in the pub, the forerunner of community centers. There, gossip was exchanged and embellished; politics, philosophy, and economics were discussed and debated. Pubs may have been seen as dens of iniquity, reeking with the demon drink, but they were also places of warmth, relaxation, and camaraderie. And, of course, each pub had its regulars and a specific ambience created by the publican. Today, the shelters have taken the place of the pub for the cabbies, and tenants like Pat, Lidija, and Alf have created individualized, welcoming atmospheres. As one cabbie said, “If you’re having a terrible day, you go in, Lidija gives you a hug, you feel better, and you come out a new person.”

Back in 1875, when Captain George Armstrong built the first shelter to make finding a cab or a sober cabbie easier, he could hardly have envisioned a place where an Englishwoman would supply much-needed local nourishment to a famished postman and a homesick contractor; a Croatian woman would roast vegetables for a group of cabbies collecting money for a children’s charity; or a Portuguese vegetarian would grill bacon and sausages and roast meats. Times and menus may have changed, but thirteen of Armstrong’s green-timbered shelters still stand as reminders of London’s colorful history.

**Notes**
1. The details on the history of the shelters come from the annual reports written by the Cabmen’s Shelter Fund, located in the offices of the Heritage of London Trust, 38 Ebury Street, London. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent citations are from these documents.
4. The documents note that an “American cooking-stove—a No 7 Victoress stove, supplied by Messers Smith and Wellstood of Ludgate Circus, London &c is found to be the most useful size and suitable stove for the purpose.”
5. For an image of a tea mug used at the Warwick Avenue cabmen’s shelter see www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/Collections/OnlineResources/X20L/objects/record.htm?type=object&id=730031.
6. John Yeowell, “Shelters for London’s Cabmen,” *Country Life*, November 1965, 1355. See also John Bainbridge, “A Gentleman’s Shelter,” *Gourmet*, August 1986, pp. 26–30, 95–94, where he writes of the Warwick Avenue shelter: “The helpings are generous, the service is fast, and everything on the plate is consumed, no doubt testifying to customer satisfaction... When asked their opinion of the food, drivers customarily reply ’Not bad,’ a response that, in the light of their natural reluctance to appear impressed by anything, probably translates as ’good’ to ’very good.’”
7. The foods mentioned here are all traditional poor man’s fare. Saveloys are large, bright red pork sausages, sometimes fried in batter. Faggots are baked meatballs made from pork offal. Pease pudding consists of boiled, mashed, and then reboiled split peas.
9. Sarnie is a colloquial term for “sandwich.”

**Surviving Cabmen’s Cafes**
- Pat’s place is located at Warwick Avenue, Maida Vale, at the entrance to the tube station
- Lidija’s place is at Wellington Place, St John’s Wood
- Alf’s place is at St George’s Square, Pimlico
- Chelsea Embankment, near the Albert Bridge
- Embankment Place
- Grosvenor Gardens, west side of the north garden
- Hanover Square, north of the central garden
- Kensington Park Road, outside of numbers 8–10
- Kensington Road, north side
- Pont Street
- Russell Square, west corner
- Temple Place
- Thurloe Place, Kensington, opposite the Victoria & Albert Museum