

## Second-class postal service



Has Chris' parcel been tampered with?

### Protect your post

#### SAFE DELIVERY

When using special delivery, request a free silver tamper-evident bag. If you receive an item by special delivery that isn't in one of these bags, check the contents in front of the delivery officer.

#### COMPENSATION

Keep proof of how much you've paid for the contents of a special delivery package in case of loss.



#### CONSEQUENCES

Insuring items sent by special delivery for consequential loss costs from £1.25. If you have to buy new tickets because those sent by special delivery arrive late, you'll be reimbursed for both pairs of tickets if you have proof of the two transactions.

If you forget to send cards this Christmas, you've good reason to claim they were lost in the post.

An astonishing one in four people told us they've suffered both lost and damaged post in the past 12 months. A further 34 per cent saw their post either go missing or get damaged.

The findings, from our survey of 1,000 adults in September, suggest people's experience of the service could be worse than Royal Mail figures indicate. It says 99.9 per cent of mail arrives safely.

But the news won't surprise readers like Chris

**'It looks like someone has had a go at that. Royal Mail must be blind'**

Peter Carr, Postwatch

Hicks from Ceredigion, who lost confidence in Royal Mail after three parcels, containing a computer and valuable books, went missing in two months.

To test the reliability of Chris' service, we sent him a box of individually wrapped books by Royal Mail special delivery. The box arrived, but it seemed to us and to Chris that someone had opened it, ripped open the wrapping around the books and repacked it.

We put this to Royal Mail and it visited Chris to inspect the parcel. It said that because the damage was on the bottom of the box, it probably went unnoticed by the delivery person. It then suggested that the damage was our fault, as the box was 'insufficiently packaged for its weight and content'.

We contacted the postal watchdog, Postwatch. On seeing the pictures of our box, chief Peter Carr said: 'It looks like someone's had a go at that. Royal Mail must be blind.'

We've shown the box (above) and the contents (right) so you can make up your own mind.

Last year 202 postal staff were convicted of theft – 78 cases are outstanding. But Royal Mail told us that the numbers are low in the context of 200,000 staff.

It won't say how many items of post are stolen, claiming the information is commercially sensitive. Postwatch, which does have access to the figures, says the numbers are the tip of the iceberg because Royal Mail doesn't recognise postal tampering. This involves thieves opening parcels carefully and stealing the contents but leaving the packaging apparently intact.

Postwatch has seen a 50 per cent rise in these cases over the last two years. Royal Mail will consider compensation claims but it says that when the addressee signs for goods they are saying items were delivered intact.

## roundup

### SILENT CALLS

Firms that make nuisance silent calls could face fines of up to £50,000, says watchdog Ofcom. The calls result from automated calling systems that dial more numbers than operators can handle. If there's no operator, you hear silence on answering. Dial 1471 and report the number to Ofcom. If the number is withheld, report the time and date to your phone company.

### SONY PSP

Sony will replace faulty PlayStation Portable (PSP) games consoles direct if retailers refuse. Owners have told us of problems exchanging consoles with dead pixels, which appear as flaws on the LCD screen. Contact Sony on the number in the box.

### CALL SCAM

Conman Joseph Boll, 26, has been sentenced to 200 hours of community service for tricking people into calling a £1.50-a-minute competition line. It's thought to be the first conviction for a premium-rate scam. Callers spent up to £9 hoping to win a sports car.

### CARE CHOICE

Health chiefs insist people needing an operation will be able to choose their hospital from January, despite the delay to the electronic booking system.



## Sorry, sir. You're dead

Joseph Laidler has more reason than most to dread a letter from his building society – it keeps trying to tell him that he's dead.

It first happened in his local Bristol and West branch, where he was told by counter staff that his account had been closed because he'd died. He then received two letters addressed to the late Joseph Laidler. He and his wife Eileen complained.

But the Dorset couple said they weren't taken seriously by the building society, despite being loyal customers for more than 30 years.

On our advice, the Laidlers contacted the Financial Ombudsman and Bristol and West later paid them £200 in compensation.

'It's assured us it won't happen again,' said Eileen.

Bristol and West blamed a computer error for the problem.

## The never-ending chain letter

It's the bogus chain letter that never ends and it's still fooling people ten years after we featured it.

Victims are urged to send a business card or compliments slip to 'John Cragg, a seven-year-old with cancer', and forward the appeal to ten others.

They're told his ambition is to be in the *Guinness Book of Records* for collecting the most cards. But both the youngster and his address are fictitious, although the hoax has its origins in truth.

In the late 1980s seven-year-old Craig Shergold had a brain tumour and wanted to collect the greatest number of get-well cards. He was successfully treated and entered the 1991 *Guinness Book of Records* after collecting 16 million cards.

But variants of the letter still do the rounds. When reader David Pepper received one, he knew it was a hoax as he'd seen a *Which?* article ('Never-ending chain reaction', May 1995, p7).

'I have seen that chain letter, or one similar, for the past 12 to 15 years. I used to forward them until about five or six years ago when someone

wrote back with a copy of the *Which?* article saying it was a hoax,' he said.

Royal Mail said that all chain letters should be thrown in the bin, adding: 'Sometimes chain letters can be threatening and upsetting. We advise people to ignore them.'



Craig Shergold entered the *Guinness Book of Records*

## It's a new swear word H\*\*phreys

Pensioner Herbert Humphreys was refused an email address because his name was 'offensive'.

Herbert, aged 89, outraged the sensitive filters of his internet provider Tiscali when he asked for an email address using his surname. Tiscali said the name contained 'a word which is considered offensive', and later upped this to a 'profanity'.

Perplexed, Herbert asked Tiscali to explain, but staff

seemed reluctant even to utter the offending word.

Herbert said: 'It took a huge effort to persuade them to disclose this gem. They said my name contains profanity, as it includes the word hump.'

We quizzed Tiscali about a list of other benign surnames, such as Butterworth, which might offend its profanity filter, but it declined to answer.

We asked whether, since Humphreys was unlikely to offend,

it could override its filter. It said it could handle a large number of email subscriptions due to automated

procedures and bypassing these was inefficient – so it wouldn't do it. And that was the b\*ttom line.



Herbert Humphreys' name is 'offensive'



# Seat clocks OWN cars

Car giant Seat has admitted clocking its cars before they're delivered to dealerships.

The practice is normally associated with rogue second-hand dealers who turn back the mileage on cars so they appear less used. But Seat admits its cars have a facility, which it says is used in factory testing only, that resets the clock.

But it's not just a factory secret. We discovered it after the trick was used by a Seat dealer in front of a customer.

Andy Tagger arrived at Thornes dealership in Wakefield to collect an ex-demo £8,640 Seat Ibiza. It had 287 miles on the clock when he drove it days earlier. But he claimed the odometer had been changed to show just 50 miles.

When Andy queried the mileage, staff reset the clock to zero – a criminal offence.

Andy said: 'We were happy to be buying a demo car with 287 miles on the clock but now I don't know if it was a demo car. I don't know if 287 miles was accurate.'

Trading standards officer Peter Stratton said that, under trading laws, the practice is 'a straightforward offence' wherever it's done.

But while Seat admits the clock on Andy's car was reset, it disputes that it ever had 287 miles on it, even though that's what is on the invoice.

It said: 'It is not theoretically possible that Mr Tagger's vehicle could have been reset after 287 miles,' as an odometer can be reset only three times, by 100 miles in total. It has now told dealers never to use this facility.

Seat also disputes any wrongdoing by clocking in the factory as it's done only in testing.

It offered free servicing for three years 'in recognition of the anxiety experienced by Mr Tagger'.

Andy watched, shocked, as the car dealer clocked his Seat Ibiza

Andy queried the mileage.

Staff reset the clock to zero

## ACTION POINT

You have the right to reject a car that's not what you signed for. But car dealers may try to change your mind by threatening court action. If so, seek legal advice before taking the car away.



It takes quite a stupid company to call my direct line at *Which?* and trot out the old 'You've been selected for an amazing holiday offer' spiel. Stand up, Sun-Kissed Travel.

Apparently, I could pay £199 per person

## [fighting your corner]

*Which?*'s Liz Edwards takes on big companies for you

for a 16-day trip to the US, including a Caribbean cruise. Oh, except for the extra £110 per person port fees (these 'go to the Queen', so that's OK), a £31 booking fee and a potential £40 'high-season' fee, all mentioned later.

Since readers have complained about problems cancelling similar deals despite

being told they could do so, I had to test this one.

Sun-Kissed assured me three times that I could cancel within 30 days and get a full refund. As it turned out, I did, but no thanks to Sun-Kissed, which didn't pay up.

The dodge worked like this. I cancelled well within the 30 days, but Sun-Kissed said I must return some brochures it had sent. I jumped this hurdle, with time to spare. Next I called to chase my cash, and got the hard sell from José. I jumped this hurdle, too. José now blamed an anonymous 'processing' company, which hadn't released my money – so

I'd better ask my credit card company. Happily, my card's insurance covered it.

Sun-Kissed, of Florida, has an 'unsatisfactory' record with the US Better Business Bureau 'due to unanswered complaints'. My advice: steer clear, and check similar US offers at [www.bbb.org](http://www.bbb.org).



# eBay crooks jailed

Online shoppers have been urged to wise up to scams after criminals were jailed for stealing more than £450,000 from Ebay customers over the last year.

The auction site was targeted by two gangs which advertised goods that didn't exist.

They persuaded their victims to transfer money direct to them instead of using Ebay's payment system PayPal, which holds funds until a sale is complete.

Nicolae Cretanu, his wife Adrianna, and George Titar from east London were sent to prison for more than eight years in total in October for tricking 3,000 victims world wide into sending more than £250,000 using the money transfer service Western Union. The gang collected the cash within minutes of it being sent.



Jailed (left to right): Nicolae Cretanu, Adrianna Cretanu and George Titar

In the same week David Levi from Lytham, Lancashire, was jailed for four years for tricking Ebay traders into revealing their Ebay passwords in a scam known as 'phishing'.

Levi led a gang of six who sent fake emails claiming to be from the auction website. The fraudsters were then able to assume the identity of trustworthy vendors and convinced buyers to send money by

money transfer for fictional goods.

This gang was convicted of swindling 160 victims out of £200,000 but police sources say these figures are likely to be

the tip of the iceberg because internet fraud is under-reported and not all cases were investigated.

Ebay defended itself saying: 'We believe Ebay is one of the worst

places to commit fraud, due to the open nature of the listings and the traceability of the transactions which take place.'

The company says that it has learned lessons from the cases and will ban payment via Western Union by the end of the year.

It is also in talks with the Metropolitan Police's economic and specialist crime squad, which wants the site to keep a better watch over its listings and to give more prominent warnings about fraud.

## ACTION POINTS

Websites which match buyers with sellers are an opportunity for fraudsters, says the national crime squad campaign ([www.getsafeonline.org](http://www.getsafeonline.org)).

Follow our tips for shopping safely.

● If you've never bought anything from a seller advertising on a

website, take the time to read the site's security guides.

● Find out what the online store will and won't do if a sale goes wrong.

● Use an intermediary payment system such as PayPal, which gives buyers protection of up to £500.

Never use a money transfer service such as Western Union.

## Put off by rip-off rail prices

Almost half of the rail passengers we surveyed say they've been priced out of train travel by high fares.

Our survey results came as the government's transport committee heard evidence of the UK's rip-off ticket prices.

In October we asked 755 train travellers whether ticket prices had stopped them making a train journey in the past two years – a period in which revenues from fares

rose by 8 per cent. Around 47 per cent said they had, with those aged 25 to 34 deterred the most.

The consumer body Rail Passengers Council (RPC) said the findings

are in line with a survey it did earlier this year.

Research by the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers' union (RMT) found that standard train tickets in the UK can be three

times those on routes of the same length in mainland Europe.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow said: 'Fares should be set at levels that encourage people out of their cars. The fragmentation of the industry means that operators offer a bewildering array of fare structures, and they appear designed more to confuse than enlighten.'

Both the RMT and RPC told the committee

that the fare structure is difficult to understand and said that fare cuts are needed to entice more people on to the trains.

But transport expert Barry Doe warned: 'If those 47 per cent took the train, the trains wouldn't be able to cope.'

## ACTION POINT

Train firms must release cheap tickets nine weeks before the date of travel. If they don't, contact the RPC on 08453 022 022.



Almost half were put off train travel by high fares



# Used needle sparks anti-tampering measures at Boots

High-street chemist Boots is to introduce new measures to prevent tampering after a bloody needle was found in a blood-sugar testing kit sold by the store.

Liz Francis and her partner Matthew

An investigation by the store in Horsham, West Sussex, where the family bought the Freestyle Mini blood glucose monitor, failed to discover the source of the contamination.

Boots said: 'Despite

**'One of the needles had dried blood on it.'**

Matthew Coombs

Coombs contacted *Which?* after they made the gruesome discovery. The kit was meant for Liz's ten-year-old daughter Amy. Matthew told us: 'One needle had dried blood on it. These things should be sealed.'

extensive inquiries, there is no obvious explanation. We sincerely apologise that this could have happened.'

Blood glucose monitors, which allow people with diabetes to take their own blood

sample and test sugar levels, aren't required to have an external tamper-proof seal.

But Boots told us that it is now urging the manufacturer, Abbott Laboratories, to put an external tamper-evident seal on its packaging to prevent the possibility of such

incidents. It said it will do the same with its own-brand monitor early next year.

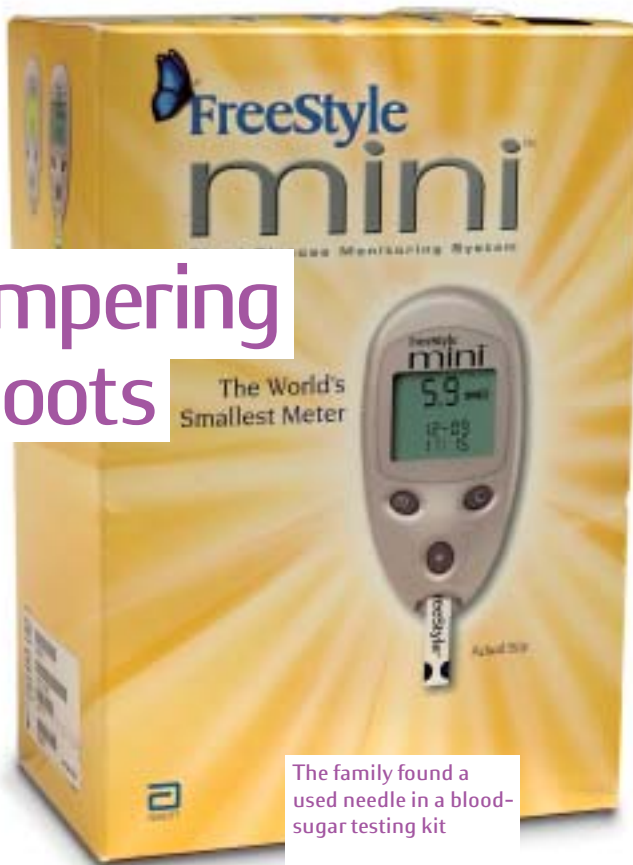
Boots has told all shop staff that they should be on the lookout for other possible cases of tampering: 'We will be writing to staff to ask them to carefully examine any similar

product before sale and to examine the contents of any product without an external seal.'

As for Amy's kit, it's possible that someone had returned it to the store as faulty, but Boots says that returned medical devices are not put back on the shelf. Instead they are returned to suppliers, where they are examined before being destroyed.

## ACTION POINT

If you buy a faulty medical device, take it back to the shop for a refund. You can also report the fault to the government's medicines watchdog through its Yellow Card scheme. It uses the information to spot possible trends. Details can be entered by visiting its website [www.yellowcard.gov.uk](http://www.yellowcard.gov.uk) or by phoning 0808 1003352.



The family found a used needle in a blood-sugar testing kit

## THE PUBLIC'S VIEW

Have the recent high-profile convictions of Ebay fraudsters made you less likely to do your Christmas shopping online this year?



## And finally... Left in the dark

Here's a Christmas decoration teaser, sent in by a *Which?* reader, to distract you from the box of broken baubles and dangly things that the cat shredded last year. B&Q instructs that you immediately replace any failed bulbs in its Clear Snowing Icicle Lights. Equally, it instructs in the last line: 'Do not attempt to replace any...bulbs' since they are 'non replaceable'. We were about to tell B&Q, but it got there first and quietly dropped the first bit.



**Bulb Changing**  
This light set is constructed with non-replaceable bulbs. **DO NOT** attempt to replace any of the bulbs in the light set.

Send your examples of daft or misleading products or promotions to Liz Edwards, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH

## contact inside story

If there's something you'd like us to investigate, leave a message on the Inside Story Hotline on 0800 252088

(calls are free) or email [insidestory@which.co.uk](mailto:insidestory@which.co.uk). We're sorry but we can't reply to emails and letters individually.