

CAR CLINIC

Your motoring problems solved

Q I have received a £120 parking ticket from Transport for London (TfL) but, having checked my diary and call records, I know I was not in London at the time of the alleged infringement but in my office in Havant. I called the police

to inform them that my numberplate had been cloned and they provided a crime reference number, which I sent to TfL. Nonetheless, TfL refused my appeal and is still refusing to cancel the penalty charge notice (PCN). I am told I have the right to appeal to the Parking and Traffic Appeals Service (Patas) within 28 days and I can do this by post or in person. What should I do?

NG, Havant, Hampshire

A There are an estimated 10,000 cloned cars on the road. In the past, criminals would clone your car by stealing its numberplates and then putting them on a car of the same make, model and age. They could then use their clone to avoid fines or to commit other criminal offences, safe in the knowledge that the registration plate would not lead the authorities

back to them. Nowadays criminals have taken to buying replica plates on the internet. They are meant for display purposes only and are not legal for use on the road, but they can often be bought without any documentation, and criminals are not going to bother with the finer details of the law. This is probably what happened to you, which explains why you had no idea it had happened until you received the PCN.

You've done all the right things so far and you have a good chance of success if you appeal to Patas, which rules on such disputes in the London area. It may cost you something in time and effort, but you will not be charged for the right to appeal, and the fine will be frozen at its current level until your appeal has been heard.

What you need to do now is write out a "sworn and signed" statement outlining your case to the independent Patas adjudicator (details of where to send it should have been included with the "notice of appeal" form, which came with your initial "notice of rejection" from TfL). A sworn and signed statement means that you are submitting it under the penalty of perjury if you are found to have misled the court. You should end your statement with a declaration along the lines of: "I understand that the contents of this statement are true to the best of my knowledge and belief", followed by your signature and the date.

Along with your statement, include all the material you feel is relevant and supportive of your appeal, in a clear and concise manner. Include the fact that you were working on that date — as

confirmed by your work diary, of which you can provide a photocopy. In addition, consider getting a signed statement from a work colleague who can remember you working in Havant at the time of the alleged contravention. Also include the crime reference number given to you by the police, plus any associated documentation, as this will show that you have taken the matter seriously and are not merely seeking to avoid paying the charge. Aside from that, do you have any other material that could help, such as an email from an office computer sent by you at the time of the alleged offence? Anything like that could sway matters in your favour.

Finally, if possible, go to the tribunal in person. This will reinforce how eager you are to show that you do not deserve this charge. If you are successful in your appeal (and I do hope that you are), you should consider asking for costs to reflect the time and effort that the appeal process has required. You can find more information about appealing at parkingandtrafficappeals.gov.uk, Patas's website. It's worth noting that in the year 2007-8, 73% of (completed) appeals to PATAS were successful. **NF**

Q My girlfriend is looking for advice and assistance in buying a new car and I don't really want to admit I'm a motoring ignoramus. Can you help me look more clued up? She wants a small model with three or five doors and something a bit fun or distinctive. She works in fashion and is more bothered about how it looks than how it drives,

although she'd also rather it didn't guzzle fuel. The budget is £15,000. Any ideas?

TF, London

A Why not opt for substance as well as style? The Alfa Romeo Mito, Audi A1 and Fiat 500C have plenty of substance beneath their fashion-conscious bodies. The Mito's flamboyant styling is matched by a cabin that feels sporty and purposeful. The £15,465 MultiAir TB Lusso model has a turbocharged 1.4-litre engine and zips from standstill to 62mph in 8.4 seconds, yet still does 50.4mpg in the combined cycle.

For the very latest in catwalk style, your girlfriend should test-drive the Audi A1, the company's smallest car. The 1.4 TFSI Sport (£15,670) is only marginally slower than the Alfa Mito. It does 0-62mph in 8.9 seconds and has a top speed of 126mph — a touch lower than the Mito's 129mph — plus it claims 54.3mpg in the combined cycle. The real kudos comes in having that badge on the grille and the feel-good factor when friends comment on the A1's impressively well-made cabin.

As a leftfield alternative, why not suggest the Fiat 500C, the convertible version of the small but perfectly formed Italian city car, the 500? It's smaller than the A1 and Mito, and speed is not really its thing, but it can be personalised with numerous options. Try the new two-cylinder 875cc TwinAir Lounge model, at £15,265; its hatchback sister is our Drive of the Week on pages 2-3. The two-cylinder engine sounds great, and a turbocharger gives it enough pep to get the better of city

THE CAR CLINIC PANEL

Dave Pollard has written several Haynes manuals and has tested just about every car-related accessory.



Nick Freeman, aka "Mr Loophole", runs two firms of solicitors that specialise in road traffic law.



James Mills is a motoring magazine editor with 18 years' experience of evaluating new cars.



Gavin Conway is a former editor of Automobile magazine in America and road-tests cars for InGear.

traffic. Carbon dioxide emissions of just 95g/km make it exempt from road tax and the London congestion charge, and it'll do 68.9mpg. **JM**

Q I have a 1990 Peugeot 405, which has done only 60,000 miles and still feels new to drive. My problem is that it now averages just 20mpg. I had the carburettor cleaned and serviced by a specialist but there's been no improvement. Any suggestions?

DT, Nottingham

A You're right to worry about the fuel consumption, 20mpg being around 10mpg adrift of the sort of figure we'd expect. The answer almost certainly lies in the extremely low mileage. I imagine the car has spent much of its life doing short journeys. It's common to find the engines on such cars clogged up with carbon in the cylinder head (imagine a chimney that hasn't been swept for 20 years), which wrecks the unit's efficiency, increasing fuel consumption.

In the old days you would need to go to a garage to have it decoked, but a product such as PowerBoost (£19.99; ecotek.co.uk) will achieve the same result without the need for complex and expensive engine work. You simply spray it into the air intake, and it works chemically to remove the carbon build-up.

Once you've cleared the build-up, try using a "super" petrol (such as BP Ultimate, Shell V Power or Total Excellium) every now and then. These fuels contain extra detergents, so they can help to keep engines cleaner, although claims about better fuel economy may not be borne out, as InGear discovered in a recent test ("Wonder fuels stretch belief at the pumps", October 3, 2010).

Finally, remember that engines need to be given some work to do; pottering around constantly at low speeds will often lead to the problems you're encountering. You don't need to start breaking the speed limit, but holding the car in a lower gear so that the engine has to rev hard from time to time will also help to shift deposits. **DP**



It's not the most refined drive, but cars don't come any more fashionable than the Fiat 500C. Its new two-cylinder version is exempt from road tax and London congestion charges, too

A For environmental reasons, modern cars are finished with water-based paints, which, unlike oil paints, do not put a large amount of noxious solvents into the atmosphere. Unfortunately, they are not very tough and require a protective lacquer coating. You need to protect this layer to prevent damage to the soft paint beneath. Road detritus, road salt and the elements — from

over the bodywork. Instead, invest in some microfibre cloths. Halfords (halfords.com) does a basic pack of three for £5.49; the higher-quality Autoglym finishing cloth is £7.99 (shop.autoglym.com).

Wash the car by hand regularly with a good shampoo. Try a brand such as Meguiar's, Autoglym or Turtle Wax. Whatever you do, don't resort to

stripped off the wax. Use two buckets — one to wash, one to rinse — to avoid putting dirt and grit back onto the car. With a black car, you'll need to pay particular attention to removing the rinse water. Use a chamois leather cloth (or synthetic alternative) to remove excess water and prevent streaks.

Treat the paint to a good-quality wax

salt that settles on the bodywork during icy weather, as this can be particularly corrosive. **DP**

GOT A PROBLEM?

Email your question to carclinic@sunday-times.co.uk, or write to Car Clinic, InGear, The Sunday Times, 1 Pennington Street, London

THE SUNDAY TIMES
thesundaytimes.co.uk/ingear

13.02.11 11