



# Robert's Warning... Beware of Bogus Landlords!

Tenants are routinely subjected to referencing prior to a tenancy being granted AND being charged for it by Letting Agents, even though it is for the landlord's 'piece of mind'.

However, we never reference the landlord...but in the advent of the web and the opportunistic 'bogus landlord', maybe we need to start doing so, to safeguard us, the private tenant, from bogus landlords....

**In Summer 2010**, we were contacted by 'Robert', a searching tenant who had added his online 'accommodation wanted' requirements onto Houseflys. He had found a property via a landlord advertising on Gumtree an advertising website and wanted to be deleted from Houseflys.

Five days later, Robert called us again with the distressing news that the property had fallen through and that its bogus landlord had defrauded him of a £150 'holding deposit' and again on moving in day, all of his 1<sup>st</sup> month's rent + deposit...amounting to £900.

Robert had felt confident that this was a genuine landlord at the viewing, although Robert had been uncomfortable handing over £150 'holding deposit' in the first place.

*"That night, after the viewing, I thought to myself: I shouldn't have handed over so much money in one go. But the next day the landlord called and agreed for me to move in straight away and booked a time. So I thought it was going to be alright after all."*

On moving in day, Robert took along a tenancy agreement that he'd downloaded from the internet. The landlord signed it, took the 1<sup>st</sup> month's rent + deposit and gave Robert the keys.

*"That was the Friday, I went and bought a new fridge/freezer and moved it in straight away. The next day, Saturday, I hired a van and continued to move furniture in, with the plan to move in fully by Sunday, when I installed the bed."*

Sunday came, and the keys Robert had been given wouldn't work...the lock had been changed and he had no way of entering the 1<sup>st</sup> floor flat.

*"I couldn't even look in the windows to check if my property was still inside, as the flat had its own downstairs entrance. All my belongings were inside, except a box and my bed which I had with me. I couldn't believe it."*

Not knowing what to do, Robert called the police and was promptly told that it was 'a civil matter' and wouldn't get involved.

*"I was homeless, on a weekend with no money..."*

*Fortunately a friend offered me accommodation for the night...and on Monday morning, I contacted Houseflys, to warn them and others of bogus landlords and to put my details back up on the accommodation wanted pages as I needed something quick."*

*Robert R, private tenant*

*"When I picked up the email on the Monday, I was horrified to hear Robert's 1<sup>st</sup> hand experience of this bogus landlord,"* said Jana, Co-founder of Houseflys.

*"Robert felt totally paralysed by the experience especially when the police refused to help. Having worked within the private housing sector for over 12 years and as a professional tenant for over 30 years, this is the worst case I have ever come across, mainly because the bogus landlord wasn't satisfied with just taking the £150, he went back for a 2<sup>nd</sup> bite of the cherry and obtained £900, changed the locks whilst retaining Robert's furniture, making him intentionally homeless."*

As Robert had discovered that the landlord's address was false, Jana advised Robert that he could find out who owned the property by downloading a copy of the property's land registry report instantly, for just £4 direct, which details the owners name AND address along with when it was purchased. Visit: [www.landregistry.org.uk](http://www.landregistry.org.uk).

Jana also encouraged Robert to visit Shelter's Housing Aid Centre based at the Food Centre, Silbury Boulevard, Milton Keynes to report the incident and to get specialist advice and guidance.

The land registry document showed that the owner was living in Milton Keynes but not as stated by the bogus landlord, who claimed the property was owned by 'his mother who lived on the coast'.

The real owner of the property was equally oblivious to the deception and discovered that his fridge had also been stolen during the deception.



To add insult to injury, Robert continued to receive strange email message feeds via the online free advertising site 'Gumtree' from 'landlords' with offers of a '...property available, it's the most beautiful thing on earth!'

*'I've deleted my details from Gum tree now and have reported the incident to them, who knows if they'll do anything either.'*

Two months on, Robert is still staying with his friend and the impact has been extremely stressful:

*"I had to go back to work soon after this happened. I have not heard anything from the council (I suspected they would not be interested) so the best thing I can do is try to retrieve my property back so I contacted a solicitor on the matter, hopefully I can get things rolling."*

*This episode has really set me back financially and with the cost of the solicitor it will set me back even further so it looks like September before I can afford to rent again...could Houseflys please warn others so that they don't ever experience this situation in future?'*

*At Houseflys we take this warning really seriously, we are tenants ourselves and want to ensure that the website deters bogus landlords from targeting Bucks based tenants.*

*So, with Robert's insight, we have pulled together the following Top 10 Tips on: 'Ways to Spot and Avoid Bogus Landlords' so that searching tenants can deter them easily.*

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Top Ten Tips:

*Ways to spot and avoid:*

*Bogus Landlords*



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A Houseflys Insight into the Private Rented Sector in Milton Keynes + Bucks

# relocation

*Top Ten Tips: Ways to spot and avoid: Bogus Landlords*

- On arranging a viewing**, obtain the full name of the landlord, and advise them that you would like to see evidence of their identity, with **their** current address and of the property's ownership as a safeguard against bogus landlords. If the landlord is genuine, they should be happy to provide this. If they refuse, walk away from the property
- At the viewing**, request to see the at least 2 forms of evidence, either:
  - Driving Licence** with current address
  - Passport** [beware: address might not be current]
  - Recent utility bill** from their current address with their name and address on it [not the rental property]
  - Mortgage details** on the rental property so you can contact to check that no arrears exist.
  - Land Registry property report** – however, obtain your own copy direct for just £4, prior to viewing from: [www.landregistry.gov.uk](http://www.landregistry.gov.uk) then compare! Report includes original mortgage company details.
- If the landlord claims** s/he is a 'Registered Landlord with the National Landlords Association' ask for their membership card and contact the **NLA** to confirm: [www.goodlandlord.org.uk/nlalandlord.aspx?id=t](http://www.goodlandlord.org.uk/nlalandlord.aspx?id=t)
- Don't accept photocopies** of 'evidence' as these could be forgeries.
- Retain landlord's contact telephone** and/or email/mobile number for future reference.
- Take a witness with you** to the viewing + moving in.

- Only give a maximum of £50** as a holding deposit: this will cover a week's worth of re-advertising if you subsequently pull out [which is the reason for the holding deposit]. If the landlord asks for more than this – walk away.
- Insist on a receipt** for any money you hand over and have it signed by your witness.
- Produce your own 'tenancy agreement'** if the landlord states they don't use them OR ideally walk away.

- On the day of moving in** and on handing over deposits, ensure there is a signed tenancy agreement in place. As Robert's bogus landlord demonstrated, he was brazen enough to sign the tenancy to maintain the fraud BUT was worthless. However, it acted as proof that Robert did enter into a tenancy agreement and backed up his claim when speaking to Shelter, the council, police, his solicitor and potentially the county courts - if it eventually leads to this.

*Don't Fall Victim to a bogus landlord and if you do...don't take the matter into your own hands, contact the police immediately:*

- Fraudulently obtaining money by deception is a reportable crime along with 'obtaining stolen goods' if a landlord prevents you from taking your personal belongings back.
- Provide evidence that you handed over money [receipts] and that you entered into a tenancy agreement [contract]
- Assert your right to make a formal crime report, bogus landlords who 'obtain money by deception' is a crime, not a civil matter.