



A complex operation to protect Thomas Cook stores across the UK and Northern Ireland

THE TASK

- Key Management for 557 stores within 48 hours of receiving instruction
- Accredited escorted access for specialist data security removal firm
- Removal and security of foreign currency and other valuable assets
- Return of all stores' keys to third party with 48 hours notice

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Cook ceased trading with immediate effect on September 23, 2019 after the travel firm was unable to pay £200million to its creditors. The travel firm's demise sparked the largest peacetime repatriation since World War Two after 150,000 passengers were stranded abroad. In the UK and Northern Ireland, 9,000 people lost their jobs, and 557 shops were closed overnight.

“The size and complexity of this operation was immense. I doubt any other company in the UK could have accomplished the task in the same time and with such efficiency.”

David Wormald,
Key Account Director, Retail

OVERVIEW

SECTOR	Insolvency
CUSTOMER	Thomas Cook via Insolvency Practitioner
CHALLENGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High profile project requiring swift and co-ordinated response across hundreds of stores
SOLUTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key management and escorted access services





THE CHALLENGE

The operation posed many challenges:

- The travel firm's collapse was widely reported in local and national trade press, making the stores a target for thefts and vandalism
- Confidential data was stored on laptops, tablets, data tapes and in archive boxes at all sites
- An accredited specialist was required to remove the confidential data, but needed to be provided with accompanied access to each site
- The number and spread of locations were very wide - 557 shops, from Ballymena in Northern Ireland to Brighton on the South Coast of England, Inverness in Scotland to Plymouth in the South West
- With the rapid notice of closure, other valuable assets were left on the sites including PDQ payment terminals, postage stamps, staff's personal belongings and charity collection boxes
- Thousands of pounds of foreign currencies were also stored in the Bureau de Change safes which had to be collected and removed
- Part way through the operation the administrators agreed a take-over of the stores from Hays Travel, requiring an additional party involvement and fast key recovery management

THE SOLUTION

The administrators instructed VPS Security Services for key management and escorted access services. VPS has SIA approval and SSAIB accreditation for these services.

VPS obtained all keys for the stores within 48 hours - a feat in itself that the administrators found remarkable - and then worked with specialist data contractor Shred Station for the access and removal of data from each site. Additional complications arose as some head landlords had already changed the locks on the retail units, so had to be sought out to obtain access.

During the operations, some of the stores had already experienced attempted security breaches which VPS staff were qualified to address, implementing new locks or other security measures as required.

The fact that so many people had lost their jobs meant that the collection of personal belongings, then contacting them to arrange collection, had to be handled with sensitivity.

The intervention of another party, Hays Travel, added to the complexity of the operation as there was additional opportunities for keys to go missing or mislaid.

The sheer size of the operation was handled by VPS utilising management teams and inspectors across the country to ensure the extremely tight deadlines were met.

The administrators were so impressed by VPS ability to handle the operation so efficiently and by the can-do attitude demonstrated by everyone involved.

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