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PENMAN INVESTIGATES

...from the fishy to the fraudulent



NO SKILLS Fake architect David Gogo

BENT BUILDERS GOT OFFICIAL APPROVAL

The Federation of Master Builders has been hammered by victims of a fraudulent building gang. Contemporary Home Improvements Limited raked in more than £800,000 for work it never carried out.

As the prosecution told Snaresbrook Crown Court in East London: "Not one brick was ever laid. These defendants were not cowboy builders, they were fraudsters."

They were caught following a joint trading standards and Metropolitan Police investigation.

The London company was set up by Brian Tutton, 62, who was last week jailed for seven years for fraud.



JAILED Tutton

Accomplice Scott Baker, 50, got four years for fraud.

Fake architect David Gogo, 30, who was described as so bad that he couldn't use a tape measure, got a suspended sentence.



FRAUD Baker

Many of the 61 victims were unable to recover the money from their bank and no compensation order was made because the defendants have no apparent assets.

Key to the scam was a property used as a show house, even though the company had nothing to do with the improvements that had been carried out on it.

One victim was Angie Brigdon, who paid a £8,000 deposit for an extension and says she was reassured by the company's membership of the Federation of Master Builders.

"The FMB never checked who the builder of the show home was," she said.

Another victim, Diana Wright, lost £13,000 and said: "We feel very strongly that the FMB failed in its duty of care to protect the public."

An FMB spokesperson said that the company was a member for five months before being expelled following complaints, and it has since reviewed its membership criteria.

How far can you trust a review on Trustpilot?

Online platform's credibility undermined by a flood of fakes

A WARNING from Trustpilot that it will sue people who repeatedly post fake reviews has been greeted with disbelief, not least because the site seems unable to spot and stop the most obvious scams.

Take bitcoindoubler.eu, which claims to have an algorithm that will "Double Your Bitcoin In Just 24 Hours".

Quite apart from the implausibility of the claim, there's the company name and number that it uses.

It takes a few seconds on the Companies House website to discover that this belongs to a company dissolved in August 2019.

Its Trustpilot page was set up last month and quickly gathered five-star reviews, beginning with Julian dave (sic), who posted: "Legit, legit, legit... first I was in doubt to use it because of some negative reviews here."

Yet there were no other reviews when Julian dave submitted his post on January 18.

Another five-star review is from someone called Jessica Vayn, who says: "100% legit - I recommend this site to everyone."

Jessica Vayn's profile picture has been lifted from a publicity shot of American actress Jessica Camacho.

Another reviewer got confused about which site he's supposed to be praising, and wrote: "Most trusted site ever...btc-doubler.biz is legit."

Btc-doubler.biz has a separate

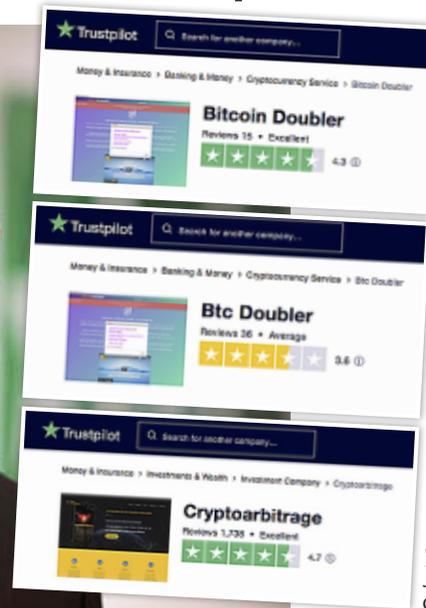


QUIT CALLS Peter Muhlmann, of Trustpilot, which is boosting suspect Bitcoin sites

entry on Trustpilot with its own doubtful reviews, including another person praising the wrong site, writing: "There were a lot of investing platforms out there but nothing comes close to Bitcoin Victory!"

Bitcoin-victory.net, bitcoin-rejoin.net and bitcoin.com all carry the same promise of "insane profits" and the same endorsements - so a Sebastian T Thorpe from London has apparently made precisely £20,941 from all of them.

None of these sites give any corporate information about their owners and cannot be reached



through the contact numbers listed on Trustpilot. Despite all these red flags they're on the platform with dozens of five-star reviews. And these reviews come almost exclusively from people who have never posted a review before.

Then there's cryptoarbitrage.vip - "Deposit your bitcoin with us and double your investment in no time!" - which has 90% five-star reviews.

One reads, in the barely literate way of so many fake reviews: "I'm a true fan of cryptoarbitrage that how they are keeping everything in the flow."

Cryptoarbitrage, which is now offline, used the registration number of a company shut down two years

before it set up its Trustpilot profile.

The platform, home to comments on more than 626,000 domains, said in 2020 it removed more than 2.2 million fake reviews.

Now it says that it will take legal action against repeat offenders, seeking damages and orders blocking them from soliciting fake reviews.

"Consumers rely heavily on reviews to make more informed and confident purchasing decisions each and every day," said Carolyn Jameson, its chief trust officer.

"Protecting and promoting trust is fundamental to Trustpilot's mission."

That did not impress UK property review site, allAgents.co.uk, which this week demanded Trustpilot chief executive Peter Muhlmann resign over "the fake reviews scandal".

Chris Emmins, founder of KwikChex online verification service, called for companies to be vetted before being allowed onto the platform, particularly if they operate in areas notorious for scams such as crypto investments.

"It will cost Trustpilot more but it's the only way to stop the scams," he said. "We can find fake reviews in minutes so there's no way Trustpilot should not be picking them up."

BOGUS COPS JAILED FOR SAVINGS SCAM

Few things are guaranteed to put a spring in my step more than hearing that a bunch of courier fraudsters have been locked up.

This heartless scam involves crooks posing as police officers or bank staff to con their victims into handing over their savings.

In the latest case, a North London gang fleeced victims of more than £700,000.

Posing as officers investigating alleged bank fraud, they told victims to withdraw cash, which would then be collected by police couriers.

Detectives from the North East Regional Special Operations Unit identified 16 victims, one losing more than £450,000.

Sahil Zaman, 22, is now starting a nine-year sentence for conspiracy to commit fraud and money laundering following a trial at Durham Crown Court.

Noor Sharif, 20, was convicted of the same charges and got two years 11 months.

Fawaz Miah, 26, admitted conspiracy to commit fraud and was sentenced to six years.

Two others got suspended sentences. Detective



CRUEL Sahil Zaman, Noor Sharif, Fawaz Miah

Constable Gillian Coulson said: "This is a cruel crime in which criminals target the most vulnerable members of our community and steal their life savings."