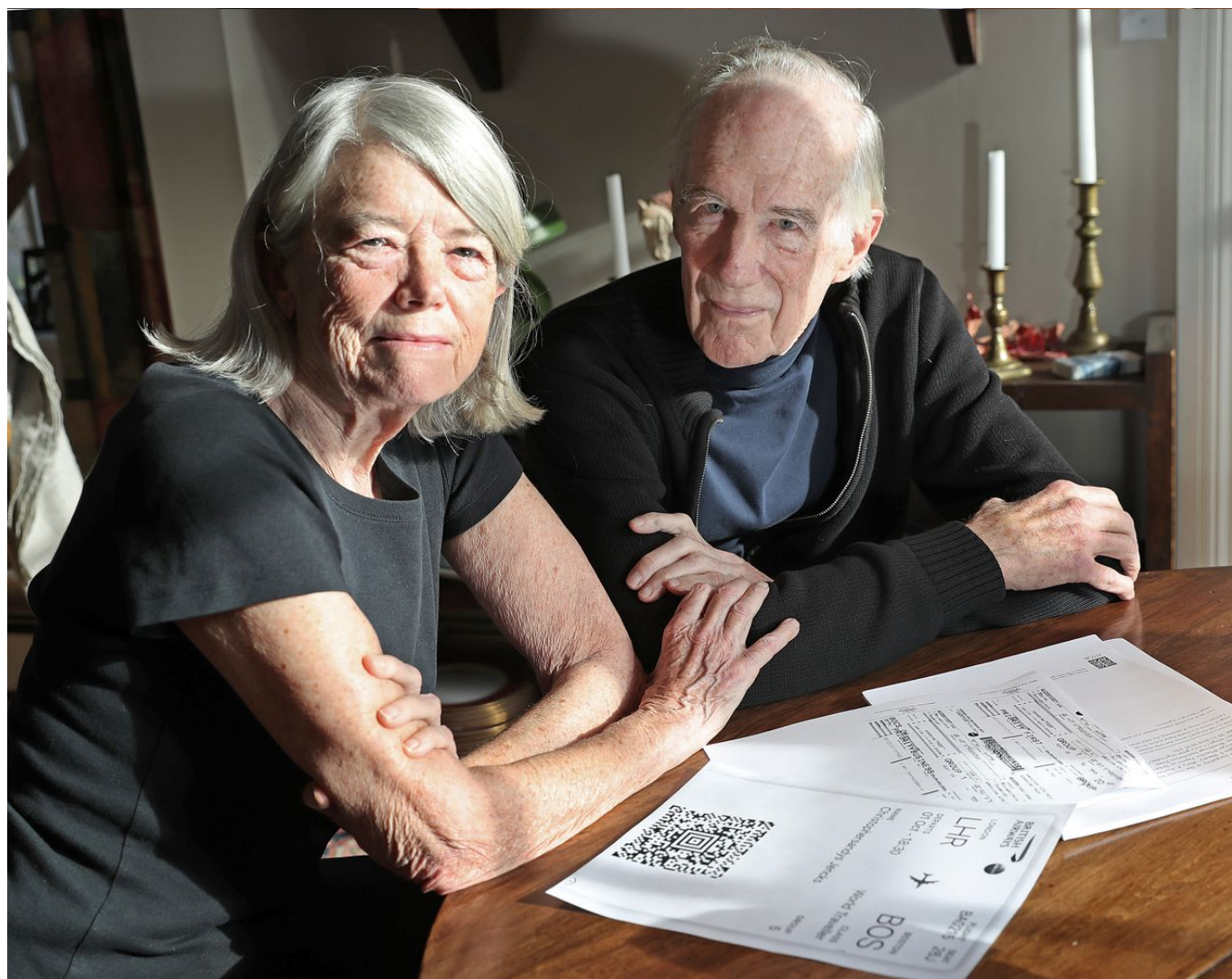


THE FINE PRINT | SEAN P. MURPHY

# British Airways messed up this couple's seating on a flight. Then it wouldn't give them a refund

By [Sean P. Murphy](#) Globe Staff, December 4, 2018, 7:25 p.m.



Jane Mansbridge just wanted to sit with her husband Christopher Jencks on the way home from Sweden. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

As she flew home to Boston from Sweden in October, all Jane Mansbridge wanted was to sit next to her husband and “hold hands and lean against each other.”

Mansbridge, 79, a Harvard professor, and her husband, Harvard social scientist Christopher Jencks, 82, were heading home after Mansbridge was feted at a gala dinner as this year's winner of the world's top prize for scholarship in political science.

It had been a whirlwind three days at Uppsala University (which predates Harvard by more than a century and a half). Mansbridge made speeches and presentations and gave interviews and informal talks.

She was worn out. But instead of snuggling with her husband of more than four decades, Mansbridge sat 10 rows behind him, the result, she said, “of another British Airways screw-up.”

A few days earlier, on the way to Sweden, Jencks had been bumped from an overbooked business class — with flat beds for sleeping on an overnight flight. Only because a younger colleague traveling with him gave up her business-class seat did he escape a hellish night sitting up in coach. (Mansbridge had flown to Sweden days earlier because of professional obligations.)

On the way home, Mansbridge had paid \$126 extra to be seated together, this time in economy. But instead they were seated far apart, without an explanation, apology, or refund.

“I was looking forward to those hours together tremendously, just reading, dozing, and talking about the excitement of everything we had just experienced,” said Mansbridge, winner of the Johan Skytte Prize for a lifetime of research and writing on democracy.

Instead, she fumed the whole way home.

And then it got worse.

Back in Cambridge, Mansbridge filed a complaint on the British Airways website, packed with all the disheartening details on both flights. British Airways responded robotically with an official-sounding eight-digit case number and a perfunctory, generic apology. (“We take pride in providing the very highest standards of customer service and are sorry that we fell short on this occasion. We hope we can make it up to you.”)

Weeks passed without British Airways fulfilling its promise to get back to Mansbridge “shortly.”

So Mansbridge mailed the three-page letter she had begun writing, lonely and furious, on the flight home.

Still, no response.

So Mansbridge, urged on by one of a small group of friends who had traveled to Uppsala to toast her achievement, contacted me.

Mansbridge told me she wanted a refund. But she also wanted something else.

“I want an apology,” she said during my visit with the couple. “I want someone to say, ‘We feel really bad about what happened to you and we are sorry.’”

I attached a copy of Mansbridge’s letter to an e-mail to British Airways.

After a second e-mail from me, British Airways responded. Chip Garner assured me they were investigating.

Days passed. In a follow-up e-mail, I wrote that Mansbridge and Jencks “hadn’t received so much as an apology from British Airways.”

Garner responded by asking me to tell Mansbridge and Jencks the airline is “very sorry for their unhappy experience.”

Tell them yourself. That's how apologies work.

One thing I did manage to squeeze out of Garner in our first exchanges was an acknowledgment that when you buy business-class tickets, you are not guaranteed the seat you bought.

“This practice helps to keep air fares as low as possible” by minimizing the number of empty seats, and is common among major airlines, Garner said.

That means British Airways must guess correctly how many people will cancel at the last minute to avoid the kind of situation Jencks faced. And nobody guesses correctly every time.

The airline said Jencks lost his seat because he was “one of the last” passengers to check in for the flight, which he did at the airport. A lesson learned: Always check in as soon as possible online from home or a hotel (usually 24 hours before departure time). The airline also said it handed Jencks a partial refund of \$263 in a “compensation card” when they asked him to give up his business-class seat.

But Jencks, who was stressed out by the whole affair, does not remember having received it.

Four days after I first contacted British Airways, the airline contacted Mansbridge and Jencks with its “most sincere apologies” and a refund of \$459 to cover both flights.

As a goodwill gesture, British Airway gave them 10,000 points, which isn't a lot, considering it takes 50,000 for a trans-Atlantic ticket.

Still, Jencks says he's not going anywhere.

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