



Inside this issue

- Pg 4 **Nynas: thin surfacing review**
- Pg 6 **AI's customer service**
- Pg 8 **Foster Yeoman's European venture**
- Pg 10 **Viaduct problem solved - RMC**
- Pg 12 **Spread Master takes off**
- Pg 14 **Coldfalt success for Hanson**

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Platform



POTHOLE

The roads are in their worst state for 20 years. Rosie Waterhouse investigates who is to blame for making motorists' lives a misery.

Sunday Times
26 March 2000

Britain's roads are in their worst state since records began in 1977 according to the Government's own research, the annual National Road Maintenance Condition Survey. In a somewhat less scientific exercise, in response to a request from the Sunday Times, the Automobile Association gamely had a stab at guesstimating the number of potholes in Britain. Their number cruncher calculated 6.1M - 4M potholes and trenches dug by utility and telecommunications companies a year and another 2.1M potholes (officially defined as isolated defects more than 25mm deep that may be dangerous) disfiguring the roads. In London alone an estimated 400,000 'utility openings' were dug in the streets last year.

Inspections have shown that nine out of 10 such excavations are so badly restored they become potholes in need of further repair, causing hazards to motorists and permanent damage to the road surface. Such shoddy re-surfacing work adds to the growing backlog of repairs to Britain's 363,000km road network now estimated by a survey of local authorities - which maintain 96 per cent of roads - to have reached £4.5 billion.

The figure comes as no surprise to Dugald Gonsal, assistant director of street management for Camden Council in north London; he estimates 20,000 utility holes were excavated in the borough last year. Camden High Street alone was dug up 85 times. There has also been a huge increase in the number of privatised utility companies licensed to dig up the roads - in telecommunications alone the number has risen from one, BT, to 80 - with no coordination between them.

Potholes are symptomatic of Britain's shambolic transport infrastructure which puts the UK bottom of the international league in almost every measurable way. A recent study by the AA concluded that Britain has the highest fuel tax, among the lowest investment, the longest commutes, lowest use of public transport and the worst road congestion in western Europe. The problems are acknowledged by the Government. In 1998 the Chancellor Gordon Brown said: "After years of neglect and under-investment, Britain suffers from an overcrowded, under-financed and under-maintained transport system."

But what has he done about it? In that same year the Government cancelled some 87 new road schemes, leaving a scaled down programme of just 37 projects over seven years. Meanwhile an estimated 500 bypasses are awaited to relieve congestion in traffic-clogged towns. But in this March's Budget transport lost out again as the Chancellor poured in billions to education and the ailing NHS. John Prescott, the deputy prime minister who is ultimately responsible for sorting out the transport crisis managed to squeeze a mere £280M out of the Treasury for schemes to tackle congestion hot spots and modernise public transport.

Prescott's department is currently developing a 10 year plan for roads and transport "to transform our infrastructure over the next 10 years and make Britain's transport system the rival of any in Europe". For this, the AA has warned, investment must increase from £5.5 billion this year to £12 billion by 2007 just to address the backlog of repairs and deliver a core programme of routine maintenance and stalled improvements.

On the pothole question, Mr Prescott must find ways of improving co-ordination between utilities and telecommunications companies, to minimise the number of times a road can be dug up, reduce the length of time taken to restore the road and ensure reinstatement works are carried out to a satisfactory standard. Overall, the AA says, the Government must adopt a culture of 'stitch in time' instead of 'patch and mend.' Sunday Times reporter Rosie Waterhouse wrote the 'Pothole Britain' exposé in her paper, 26 March 2000 issue.