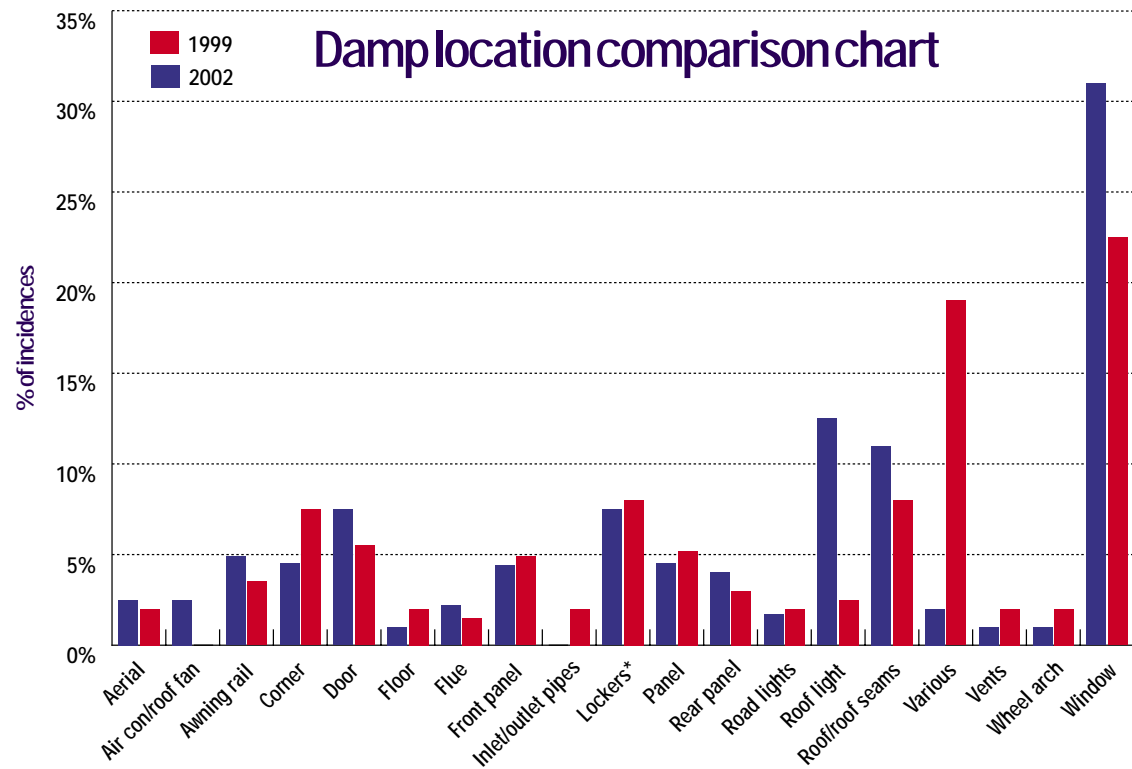


LIFTING THE LID ON DAMP



Things are getting better, but The Caravan Club's 2002 Quality & Reliability Survey shows mixed results

NOWHERE'S a can of worms, Pandora's box and a fine kettle of fish all rolled into one. And, for good measure, let's throw in the one about lies and statistics. Why? Because sometimes you can look at the bare facts and figures and know they're not telling you the whole story, and we fear this may be the case with water ingress in our 2002 survey.

Some of you may recall water ingress was identified as a major problem in the 1999 survey. It started at the point of delivery, with 2% of caravans showing signs of dampness, and continued with an average of 11% leaking during their first three years of use. Bailey was the best volume producer with just 5% of its tourers

having a problem, through to the likes of Avondale, Coachman and Swift with 16%, 15% and 14% respectively showing signs of water ingress. At the more serious end of the scale was Buccaneer with 26% of its production leaking. Key areas of water ingress were windows, awning rail, corners, front panel and roof.

Now let's move on to the 2002 survey. On delivery, 4% showed signs of leaks – double that of 1999, and not an auspicious start. Then look at the chart above which compares the sites of water ingress for 2002 over 1999.

A few things jump out at you. Firstly, rooflights appear to have become a major problem area during the intervening years. Secondly,

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windows are on the up and thirdly, the 'various' category has all but disappeared.

What can we make of this? Starting with rooflights, why on earth should they suddenly feature to this degree? Part of the answer may be in the recent trend to fit the large rooflights, or sunroofs as they are often called, in one or more places. But is it the type of sunroof or the fitting of it that causes the problem?

Hyer and Vanmaster are outstanding examples in that they had no reported leaks anywhere, including sunroofs, so they are a good place to start investigating. German caravans have been using Heki sunroofs for some time and they certainly don't have a reputation for leaking; in fact Hyer caravans come with a six-year warranty against water ingress, subject to the usual annual inspections. However, they and other German makes do have rather taut, flat roofs, which may be significant.

One importer of German caravans believes it is the roof

construction in general on British-built caravans that is the problem, rather than sunroofs in particular, and as leaks through roofs and roof seams have also increased with some manufacturers, he could be right.

But hold on, Vanmaster is British. Yes it is, but its tourers are produced at a rate of just one a week and if a customer wants a sunroof as an optional extra (they use RemiTop), a lot of extra timber is added to the roof to support it and a great deal of care is taken over fitting. Actually, Vanmaster doesn't encourage sunroofs – not because of any leak potential but because the company goes to great pains to deaden rain noise in the roof with extra acoustic matting, and the addition of a large sunroof would negate this and make rain sound like 'peas on a drum'.

So to windows. Well, according to the man who spent hours poring over the 5000 or so individual questionnaires and accompanying letters, the window problem is not quite as bad as it seems. Many of the leaks are actually minor. In the context of respondents' descriptions, only 21% of

these leaks were described as serious, compared with 37% in 1999.

In the 1999 survey windows were leaking to such an extent that substantial damage was caused to the caravan body, but this severity was seldom mentioned in the new survey. Quite worrying, though, is the tendency of rainwater to creep through the front windows when the caravan is being towed.

What about the virtual disappearance of the 'various' category? A good sign, we believe, as in the first survey some incidents of water penetration were so bad that no single point of entry could be identified. This has fallen considerably, with only two individual caravans having a major problem with

widespread water ingress.

Another point to bear in mind is that one entity is definitely letting the side down. Something appears to have gone wrong at the Explorer Group over the past few years, with its average rate of water ingress increasing from 12% in 1999 to 16% this time and its customer satisfaction ratings falling for most brands. Explorer also has the two worst brands: Herald (now discontinued) with 29% having a water ingress problem, mostly with corners, door, roof and windows; and Compass at 24% – mostly windows and roof seams. How Buccaneer, another Explorer marque, managed to buck the trend and better its score from 26% to 13% is a bit of a mystery.

By contrast the Swift Group improved on average from 13% to 9%, with Sterling and Abbey brands featuring in the best five.

Bailey is not without problems, despite having the most satisfied owners of the UK volume producers in both the 1999 and 2002 surveys. Its models have seen an increase in water ingress from 5% to a disappointing 11%. No surprise that 14% of this problem can be directed towards sunroofs and 30% to windows. Bailey has been fitting the large-aperture RemiTop rooflights since the year 2000. A director at Bailey was not aware that this was a



Rooflight leaks appear to have increased along with the popularity of caravan sunroofs



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problem area, but did acknowledge that some of the company's caravans' exterior access lockers had let in water – 10% according to our survey. Not a terrible problem if the water can drain out of the locker, but unacceptable if the water can work its way into the caravan interior.

A surprise might be Carlight, third from bottom in the water ingress stakes at 20%. “Surely not!” we hear you cry. Well yes, but this can happen with just a small sample. In fact two models of the 11 in the survey had problems, one with a locker and the other with the rooflight, so it doesn't really compare with the volume producers. Still, if you pay that much money, we guess you don't expect any leaks at all.

Others increasing their

incidence of water ingress since 1999 are ABI up from 7% to 11%, Fleetwood up from 9% to 19% and Lunar, up from 7% to 12%. In these cases the windows were a major downfall, being 44% of the problem for ABI, 60% for Fleetwood and 31% for Lunar.

In summary, while the bald statistics could indicate that water ingress is getting worse overall, part of this is down to the failings of the Explorer Group; take away these figures and results are on a par with the last survey.

It also appears that consumer expectations are rising, which is an important point to consider, and is born out in other surveys undertaken outside the caravan industry. Some of the faults mentioned were definitely niggling, rather than serious. We chose to ignore some of the more trivial matters or those subject to user control. For instance, we were not concerned to hear that rain came through the sunroof when it was open!

Hats off to the Swift Group, who are clearly improving, and to the others in the industry who are on the right track and solving the serious problems of water ingress outlined in the 1999 survey. However, there is a lot of work to do.

Windows are still a major problem area that need sorting. If they were, the figures would improve dramatically. Do you know what? We said that last time! There is also a new problem – sunroofs. If manufacturers must have them, they should be designed into the caravan, not plonked on as an afterthought. We can't all afford coachbuilt caravans, but we all have the right to expect a caravan that won't leak in its early life. So perhaps volume producers should look to the German manufacturers for inspiration, before their customers do. They appear to be at least one step ahead of the game.

The next feature in this series will be looking at the whole buying experience. Was it a pleasure, or a complete pain? Did the supplying dealer and the caravan measure up, or let you down? Find out next month.

SURVEY HEADLINES

- 4% of caravans showed some sign of leakage
- Bodywork seems to have improved
- Windows still a problem area
- Fashion for big rooflights may be causing problems
- Few caravans in the survey suffered major water ingress problems
- Swift Group moves up the ladder, Explorer falls

A REMINDER...

For its 2002 Quality & Reliability Survey The Caravan Club sent questionnaires to 10,000 members with caravans made in model years 1999 to 2001, selected at random. About half returned usable survey forms. A study into members' motor caravan experiences is currently under way.