

Taking the soft options

Are your caravan's soft furnishings looking tired and out of date? Then John Wickersham's guide on upholstery improvements is a must



Complementary curtains and cushions make for a welcoming impact in a caravan or motorhome

Attractive soft furnishings are near the top of any buyer's tick list when comparing different caravans on the market. From a visual viewpoint this is totally understandable, but it is also important to consider the monetary side – did you know that the combined cost of cushions represents one of the most expensive elements in a caravan? So, you certainly wouldn't want them to get damaged.

Mindful of this, upholstery specialists can help caravanners in a variety of ways. For example, dog owners and those of you with children at that sticky-finger age know just how easy it is for seats to suffer dirty marks. One way to avoid this is to fit temporary zip-on covers.

Several years ago, 'stretch nylon', machine-washable covers were commonplace, but they were hardly attractive. However, materials have since improved and there are now some remarkably good-looking fabrics that can also be machine-washed. It is these materials that upholstery

experts use to make zipped, temporary covers. Where dirt is likely to cause problems, 'prevention is better than cure.'

On a different note, owners of older caravans and motorhomes often find that improvements are needed to cushion fillings and covers. Unless you possess the appropriate skills and a good sewing machine, this is another job that needs expert help.

Like most trades, upholsterers employ many technical terms so it's

“To improve the shape of a deteriorating cushion, some upholsterers wrap a soft polyester fibre around the foam”

Below: at this outdoor caravan show, the upholstery specialist had sample seating areas available for testing

Right: exhibitors who attend outdoor shows display a wide variety of fabrics



The addition of soft polyester fibre gives a rounded shape to sharp-edged foam

JARGON BUSTING



■ **'Breathable underlay'** – a product that allows air between a solid bed base and a mattress. Some products are machine washable and anti-fungal. If you ignore the underlay, damp will form on the underside of a mattress.



■ **'Combustion modified foam'** – foam used in caravans, as in the home, must be a combustion-modified product for safety reasons. Somewhat illogically, this is not obligatory in motorhomes (above) which come under legislation applicable to vehicles.



■ **'Bottoming-out'** – cheap foam soon loses its resilience. If you sit down abruptly on a 'failing' seat cushion on a plywood base, you'll feel a sharp bump. The foam is then said to be 'bottoming-out'.



■ **'Piping'** – this refers to the cord that is stitched around cushion edges to aid resistance to wear. Twisted cord is sometimes used to give a more ornate finish.



■ **'Knee roll'** – this relates to the 'rise' along the forward edge of a seat squab which is designed to give support behind the knees. While improving sitting comfort, it's less welcome when those cushions are required to form a bed mattress.



■ **'Foam classification'** – synthetic foam usually comes in soft, medium and firm grades which indicate the support provided. High-density foam, though more costly, is guaranteed to retain its shape and comfort for longer.



■ **'Stockinette'** – it is surprisingly difficult to slide a tight-fitting cover over a section of foam as it 'grips' the foam's surface. Upholstery manufacturers usually resolve this by stitching a layer of stockinette material over the foam first.



■ **'Ruche' (pronounced 'Roosh')** – this is an alternative to piping and is sometimes created using a patterned tape. Another version which has a fluffy finish is referred to as 'cut ruche' and was popular when floral fabrics were fashionable.

helpful for you, as the buyer, to know what they mean. The accompanying 'jargon-busting' panel (left) should, therefore, prove useful.

BUDGET STRATEGIES

In older caravans and motorhomes, it is not unusual for the fillings of cushions to lose their resilience. Were it not for the high cost of good-quality foam, many owners would get all the fillings replaced.

A less-expensive strategy is to buy some thin layers of foam to top-up each cushion. When cushions start to 'bottom-out' (see panel), it's often possible to insert an extra 25mm (1in) of foam to provide a boosting layer.

To improve the shape of a deteriorating cushion, some upholsterers wrap a soft polyester fibre around the foam. Although it softens sharp corners and enhances appearances, it only makes modest improvements to comfort levels.

REPLACING UPHOLSTERY

If you decide or need to replace all the upholstery in your pride and joy, I'd suggest that you pop along to one of the many outdoor caravan and motorhome shows – these seem to attract a good number of soft-furnishing specialists.

Alternatively, during the off season, some upholstery manufacturers, such as the Caravan & Boat Seat Cover Centre (CBSCC) in Bristol, will carry out work for you at their factories. All you need to do is make an appointment (CBSCC has space outside its factory for vehicles to be kept) and choose from the large selection of fabrics in the showroom – there are plenty of examples of finished cushions and mattress bases to help you in your decision.

On a recent visit to CBSCC, I participated in an interesting foam evaluation test. Many types of foam are covered in fabric and marked according to density and type. The samples are then laid on a test bench so that the customer can select a product that suits their weight and offers the resilience they like.

A similar test can be carried out using samples of bed mattresses – handily, CBSCC can make up multi-foam products if a couple has different requirements.

CONCLUSION

Not only should a caravan's soft furnishings look attractive, they also need to provide the level of comfort you desire. If they don't? A number of specialists can help. ■

INFORMATION



Above: completed sample cushions at CBSCC's factory help you in your decision

Right: the blue, yellow and red sample foam cushions are tested on a special plinth

- ➔ The Caravan & Boat Seat Cover Centre, Bristol – call 0117 941 0222 or see cbfcc.co.uk
- ➔ Foam for Comfort, Leeds – foam and composite bonding. Call 0845 345 8101 or see foamforcomfort.co.uk
- ➔ Hawke House, Gosport – Vent Air-Mat anti-condensation washable underlay. Call 02392 588588 or see hawkehouse.co.uk
- ➔ Regal Furnishings, Ilkeston – all types of re-covering operations. Call 0115 932 9988 or see regal-furnishings.co.uk
- ➔ TEK Seating, Melton Mowbray – covers for motorhome cab seats. Call 01664 480689 or see tekseating.co.uk