

Minor Roads in Crisis?

The maintenance of minor roads: a problem overtaking us quickly?

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Recreational, sporting, and every-day motor use of minor public roads, both unsealed and those with a 'blacktop', is facing a 'perfect storm' of three antagonistic events, all of which individually are seriously hazardous to the future of our sport, and have to be tackled together. These three are:

- The traditional criticisms of recreational motoring — bad driver conduct, and/or surface damage.
- Successive bad winters, and periods of extreme wet weather outside of winter.
- A serious cut to local government funding, which is not likely to be reversed, and is changing council's perception of their traditional 'service provider' role.

Anyone who has been out on the minor rural roads of northern England in the last couple of years will have experienced a marked deterioration in the condition of long stretches, with some parts being particularly bad. There is transverse 'heave' – ripples across the width of the road, potholing, and bad break-up of the edges of the metalling. A senior county council roads engineer gave LARA his view of the reason for this: these are generally roads that were ordinary, preexisting (as distinct from properly engineered) stone roads which got a 'blacktop', probably in the 1918-39 inter-war years. For as long as the blacktop was kept intact, and water kept out, these roads survived well. Once proactive maintenance was decreased, or stopped altogether, then the water got into the metal of the road and — particularly in the recent bad winters — froze, expanded, and corrupted the sub-base. The road edges also suffer from water and freezing, but are particularly vulnerable to crumbling by heavy vehicles — the increase in heavy farm traffic, and the large number of 4x4s in everyday local countryside use, are far more significant than the passage of a few visitors.

'No problem,' you might say, 'I like challenging roads,' but the real challenge is going to be keeping our access to these highways as the weather, funding and maintenance problem becomes endemic.

In July 2014 LARA sent an officer to attend the seminar, *Local Roads Maintenance: Understanding New Funding Arrangements*, which looked primarily at how local authorities would fund and prioritise road (as distinct from rights of way) maintenance in the future. This below is a selection of the comments made by speakers, and raises issues important to the future of sealed and unsealed unclassified roads and byways open to all traffic:

The Roads Minister, Robert Goodwill MP: ‘People do not want potholes in their roads. They do not care whether a road is a ministry road, or a local (council) road ... their expectations are largely the same. Councils have to source maintenance money from a wide variety of pots, and in the future most of this will be tied to enterprise and efficiency ... We have a legacy of deteriorating roads ... Needs to be a ‘customer-led’ approach to road maintenance.’

Steve Kent, until recently a ‘strategic advisor’ to Cheshire West and Chester Council, and immediate past-president of ADEPT (the County Surveyors’ Society, as was), and now embedded with the Department for Transport in their Highways Maintenance Efficiency Programme (HMEP): ‘What bits of the road network will remain open under more-challenging circumstances?... Councils are having to scrap the ‘nice bits’ of their work, such as ‘snow wardens’, because ‘they just cannot afford to do it anymore ... There is an ‘assumption of availability’ for roads, but the ‘last 5% or so of the work has disproportionate costs ... Don’t need a network available all the time ... [why are we having to] ‘repair roads in Derbyshire that were only ever used to take sheep to market, and are so bad that you can only get up them wearing boots. Why are we maintaining these? ... Need legislative change ... Can’t afford to do it, don’t need to do it, shouldn’t do it ... Shift some of these task to the voluntary sector — *‘drive down public expectations.’*”

So, what is going to happen with these deteriorating rural roads? Will they just be patched and left open for the public, or will there be individual, or even blanket, closures of public access, which can easily be done on purported ‘safety grounds’? Past experience suggests that the landowning and cycling interest groups will seek to capitalise on the situation to keep ordinary motorists out of ‘their’ countryside, and whole networks of ordinary roads could become ‘access only’. It’ll never happen, you say? Look at these photographs below.



This first one is a mock-up of a TRO sign on Wrynose Pass in the Lake District, made in 2005 (probably in the run-up to NERCA 2006)

This photograph on the right is real. It is a sign that has quite recently appeared at the foot of Hard Knott Pass. In the winter of 2012-13 Cumbria County Council made lengthy closure orders for Hard Knott (and another high, steep road) for 'ice and snow'. Simply, the council did not want to clear the road and deal with the water running down from bad drainage, and freezing. The road surface is still (November 2014) in a very poor state, and extremely vulnerable to the next hard winter.

If your driving only takes in 'A' and 'B' roads, then none of this really matters to you, but if you delight in using our 'back roads', whether blacktopped or not, then this issue is absolutely fundamental.

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