Repairing damaged trucks, buses and vans is becoming an increasingly expensive business. Steve Banner looks at the issues behind the scenes

Body beautiful

Truck repair costs are being driven up, primarily by increased use of plastics on cab exteriors, either for cosmetic or aerodynamic purposes. So says Glyn Heathcock, managing director of Oswestry, Shropshire-based Renault Trucks repairer and service centre Perrys of Gobowen.

"The reason is that, when a truck is in a collision, the forces mean that any plastics tend to shatter beyond repair," he explains. "As a consequence, they have to be replaced in their entirety and that's what costs the money."

Other replacement parts are proving expensive, too. Indeed, the high price of new cabs and doors is resulting in an increased use of recycled – in other words, second-hand – items to avoid writing off vehicles, continues Heathcock. "As a rule of thumb, they are around 50% cheaper than new equivalent," he says. "As a consequence, we've got 16 recycled cabs sitting here, ready to be used, and between 40 and 50 doors."

Plastics do, of course, enjoy the benefits of lightness and no corrosion. If they can be repaired and don't compromise safety, then operators can save significant sums of money. "We've come across situations, for example, where the only thing broken on a headlight is the plastic lug that attaches it to the vehicle," explains Fran Johnson, bodyshop manager at Britcom International. "Using plastic welding and a staple gun, we've repaired the lug and put the headlight back into place at a cost of no more than £30–40." A new one would cost £150–200.

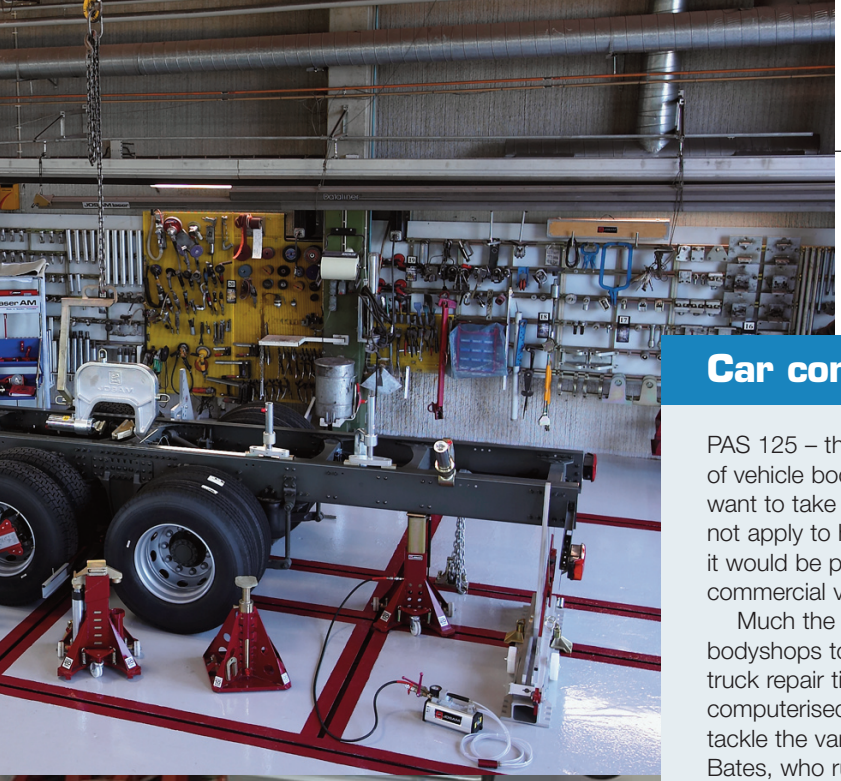
Britcom has also had some success using Power-Tec's Miracle panel repair system to pull dents out of truck cab door skins. It involves welding a series of attachment points to the door skin, using

Healthy competition for truck repairs

The truck repair business is competitive, although that's tempered when it comes to repairing severely accident-damaged heavy trucks, because of the relatively small number of bodyshops capable of handling them. "There are only around 18 with the ability to straighten a truck chassis," explains Geoff Bates, chairman of the Vehicle Builders and Repairers Association.

Why? Because of the massive investment required to repair major accident damage to large goods vehicles. Scania dealer TruckEast's accident repair centres at Wellingborough in Northamptonshire and Stowmarket in Suffolk, for example, each boast 23m Josam chassis straightening jigs, as well as cab jigs, laser wheel alignment equipment, paint booths and low-bake paint ovens.

Not that this means that truck bodyshops can charge whatever they like for their services. "While insurers have had to accept rises in the cost of parts and paint [typically 5–8% every year for the last three years], they've managed to resist any attempt to increase hourly labour rates," explains Bates. "In fact, rates have remained the same for the past three or four years and look unlikely to rise for the next year or two."



Car comparison

PAS 125 – the industry-agreed technical specification for the process of vehicle body repair, to which bodyshops must be accredited, if they want to take on insurance jobs for vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes – does not apply to heavy trucks. And although some industry insiders believe it would be possible to modify PAS 125 to make it suitable for large commercial vehicles, it's unlikely to happen any time soon.

Much the same applies to the Audatex database, used by car bodyshops to estimate repair costs: it simply doesn't contain heavy truck repair times. "In response, what we've done is develop our own computerised estimating system, based on the time it has taken us to tackle the various repairs we've handled over the years," says Geoff Bates, who runs repairer GB Truck Services and is also chairman of the Vehicle Builders and Repairers Association.

"However, the huge variety of trucks and bodies makes standardised repair times difficult to achieve," he adds.

"A key difficulty is that no two truck accidents are the same," comments another repairer, who doesn't want to be named. "If a truck rolls over, it might take 160 hours to put the damage right or it might take 200," he continues. "You can give an opinion: but you cannot be as precise as you can be with a car."

single-sided spot welds, linking the system to them to pull out the dent, then sanding the skin off and filling, prior to painting.

Meanwhile, unless they regularly work on trailers – tipper trailers, in particular – accident repair shops that specialise in trucks seldom come across much in the way of alloys or special steels, observes Heathcock. And DAF product marketing manager Phil Moon agrees. "Some high-strength steel is being used in chassis rails, to increase strength without increasing weight. There's also more use of aluminium elsewhere – in the dashboard behind the instrument panel, for instance. But the need to keep costs down is limiting the extent to which truck manufacturers can turn to such materials," he says.

"What we're trying to do instead is make better use of what we've already got. For example, the new bumper on the Euro 6 XF is still made of steel, but the way it is pressed means it is three times stronger than the bumper previously fitted."

Consistency of materials on the vast majority of trucks explains why repair techniques have not changed enormously in recent years. "Perhaps the most significant development has been the use of jigs that employ heat induction, for example, to straighten chassis that have twisted," observes Heathcock.

"Heat induction is certainly better than resorting to a blow-torch," comments Geoff Bates, who runs repairer GB Truck Services. "Whichever approach you take, though, you still need a jig with big rams and chains to pull a chassis back into place."

Paint, too, has changed little in recent years, so the application methods also haven't changed much in most cases, says Rene Hauser, segment marketing manager for commercial vehicles at paint manufacturer AkzoNobel. "Refinishers still rely heavily on two-pack polyurethane product," he reports. Bodyshops are familiar with it; it's easy to apply; and it dries comparatively quickly.

"We tend to favour two-pack acrylic instead," comments Johnson. "Admittedly, polyurethane is a third of the price, but two-pack acrylic lasts far longer." And he adds that water-based base-coat, plus a clear coat, is best for metallics.

"One useful development is universal primers for plastics," says Bates. "Before they arrived, you had to identify precisely what the plastic was before you could paint it successfully."

And then there are the truck electronics. They are just as vulnerable to damage in a smash as other components, and have to be re-installed and checked to ensure they function properly. So how do repairers cope? "The fact that we've got such close ties to Renault helps us to achieve this and we've invested in Texa diagnostics equipment, too," says Heathcock. "We've also got good reciprocal relationships with other franchised dealers." TE