

Uplifting experience



The rise of ATFs (Authorised Test Facilities) is witnessing greatly increased spending on top-of-the-range garage equipment. Steve Banner looks at what's available – and what makes sense where

While they would certainly not describe it as a bonanza, the steady roll-out of ATFs (Authorised Testing Facilities) nationwide as VOSA's (the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency) own test stations shut down has been welcomed by garage equipment suppliers. More than 350 ATFs were up and running at time of writing and there are more in the pipeline. They are based at the premises of dealers and operators, and all need kitting out.

"The VOSA-approved equipment you require includes a roller brake tester, a headlight aim tester, a diesel smoke meter, play detectors, a pit and a pit jack," explains Roger Cox, managing director of Pershore, Worcestershire-based Bradbury

equipment distributor Commercial Garage Equipment. "We charge roughly £85,000 for the entire package, although it can cost up to £140,000, depending on what you specify and who you get it from," he states.

Some operators spend even more by combining the establishment of an ATF with rejuvenating their sites. Cox and his colleagues recently supplied equipment for an ATF set up by logistics group Owens at its Llangennech, Carmathenshire, depot, just off Junction 48 on the M4. The firm invested over £300,000 on the facility, including upgrading buildings, ground works and resurfacing.

Pass or fail

Roller brake testers alone do not come cheap, especially if you want equipment that faithfully replicates the brake test that VOSA carries out when a truck, bus or coach is tested. Opting for a machine with such a high level of specification and stomaching the cost ("we can supply one for £27,950, plus ground works," Cox remarks) makes sense, however. It gives the workshop a much more accurate idea of whether the vehicle concerned is likely to pass or fail, prior to submission for testing. If it does not pass muster, then the necessary remedial work can be carried out before it is sent for test, so maximising the chance of a first-time pass score.

Once a roller brake tester is installed, it should require very little maintenance, though. "We offer the Bradbury 1090," states Cox. "It needs lubricating every so often and recalibrating perhaps once every six months. The software has to be upgraded periodically and the rollers may need re-gritting once every three to six years."

At the other end of the scale, in terms of purchase price, but also maintenance and periodic repair costs,

Diagnostics equipment

Just as workshop machinery is continually being upgraded, diagnostic tools are constantly being updated, too. The latest incarnation of Texa's IDC4 Truck software, for example – Version 29 – allows technicians to carry out a complete scan of the electronic systems on most makes of truck. Most importantly, it lets technicians diagnose all their control units, without having to examine each system individually.

As a consequence, diagnoses are easier and quicker to carry out, says the company. "It gives you a faster reading of the error memory – from three to 20 times faster – and allows you to delete errors, without having to physically reconnect the control unit at issue," says a spokesperson.





are cable-operated column lifts. As well as presenting a trip hazard, the cables they rely on are vulnerable to damage. Driving an eight-wheeler over them will do little for their health and, typically, they cost around £500 apiece to replace. "Then there is the downtime to consider, because the lift will be out of action until a replacement cable is provided," says column lift specialist Somerstotalkare's sales and marketing director James Radford.

Hence the growth in popularity of cable-free column lifts over the past few years. Powered by rechargeable batteries, these lifts are generally synchronised by means of a dedicated radio signal. "When we first introduced cable-free models, back in 2006, we thought they would account for around 10% of our column lift sales volumes," recalls Stertil Koni national account manager Simon Laffoley. "Today, they are responsible for approximately 80%."

That's despite the higher price of cable-free lifts. Why? "A set of four cable-free column lifts, with a capacity of 7.5 tonnes per column, will set you back around £16,000, as opposed to roughly £12,000 for a similar set that uses cables, but remember that column lifts can last for up to 20 years," explains Somerstotalkare's Radford. If you have to replace a cable twice a year, the price difference soon vanishes.

But there's more to garage equipment than brake testers and column lifts, and manufacturers are continuing to launch products. Majorlift, for example – which specialises in pit jacks and low-height bus jacks – recently introduced a hub and calliper removal tool that, it says, can be used by a single individual.

"More often than not, these vehicle parts are difficult to access and the technician has to adopt an awkward pose to reach them, leading to a high risk of back strain," says a spokesperson. "The tool also reduces the risk of damage to hub seals and components," he adds – and he points to a new air-

assisted transmission jack with comparable benefits.

Similarly, Boston Garage Equipment recently unveiled the PD304, a pit play detector suitable for Class IV and Class VII MoT testing. Offering combined lateral and rotational wheel shift from a single hydraulic power unit, it features membrane control keypads and portable torch controls. A wireless rechargeable torch is also available.

Four-poster power

Returning to roller brake testers, earlier this year Tecalemit unveiled its DE 9700, again aimed at ATFs, and complete with 15kW motors and a 'soft start'. That reduces the electrodynamic stress imposed. Meanwhile, the company has also introduced an extra-long 6.5m 5.0-tonne capacity four-poster ATL (automated test lane) lift under the Quadra SF 9265 banner. This equipment has been designed for Class VII MOT testers and Tecalemit says it comes with flush-fitting radius turning plates and hydraulically-operated wheel play detectors.

The continued use of four posters shows that column lifts are not having it all their own way. "We're also seeing more interest in in-ground lifts," comments Blitz Rotary sales manager Ian Gibbs. "We can offer one with two 15-tonne capacity rams that will easily lift rigids and tractor units, and gives you the advantage of wheel-free access." That is something column lifts cannot readily deliver, unless axle stands are used. Nor, of course, can four-poster lifts or pits – unless jacking beams are employed.

Like column lifts – which can be pushed into a corner when not in use – in-ground lifts are space-efficient. Once the rams have been retracted, a truck can be parked in the space. But at £25,000–30,000, such lifts do not come cheap, particularly given the ground works required. Indeed, most workshops only go for them when sites are being redeveloped – although Blitz Rotary can offer kits that allow them to be slotted into under-utilised pits.

Talking of which, pits still present a potential safety hazard and everyone knows that they should be covered when not in use. For those that haven't satisfactorily done so yet, Butts Equipment offers the Reus safety cover. Deployed manually, it creates a solid surface that can even be walked on. **TE**

Left: Stertil Koni wireless column lifts: powered by rechargeable batteries, the lifts are synchronised via radio signal

Left: Butts' Reus pit safety cover creates a solid surface that can be walked on



State of the nation

Perhaps indicative of a transport industry improving its health, Blitz Rotary sales manager Ian Gibbs says the firm is enjoying steady improvement in sales. "We've seen a 5–6% increase in business so far this year, compared with the same period in 2012," he reports.

"Demand seems to be picking up a bit," agrees Stertil Koni account manager Simon Laffoley. "A lot of workshops have been holding back on buying new equipment and having what they've already got repaired in order to keep it going. But you can only do that for so long."