



Working on a sound base and using a builder's trestle with planks, an access platform was created

A stitch in time...

...saves nine, as the old proverb tells us. **JOHN WICKERSHAM** stems a small leak on his caravan by re-bedding some trim strips

fact file

Contacts

- Carafax sells cartridge sealant in small quantities to owners
Tel: 01482 825941
 - W4 ribbon sealant is sold at caravan accessory shops
 - Other ribbon sealants with greater 'grab' characteristics can sometimes be purchased from your friendly caravan workshop
 - Information on suppliers of Sikaflex products, Tel: 01707 394444
- Note:** You must use external grade products designed for the job. Many of the sealants sold in DIY stores for internal use are not suitable for external repairs on caravans

It was a tiny discolouring patch. High up at the back of the van, where the wall ply meets with the ceiling board, a small patch of damp had appeared. I had to resolve the problem at once.

It's a fact of life that rain will soon find its way into your caravan when the sealant starts to deteriorate. It doesn't matter whether this is the bedding mastic under a roof light, an aluminium trim strip or the awning channelling. As soon as sealing mastic dries out, cracks, and starts to fall away, rain will soon find a way under a fitting.

Once it creeps behind the component, it then looks for another weak link in the waterproofing chain. Typically it's the screws holding the item in place and they will then start to rust. Isn't it a shame that manufacturers don't spend a bit extra fitting stainless

steel fixings? When conventional screws start rusting, your caravan has almost lost the water fight.

The threaded portion of your fixing screws will usually corrode soon after and that means you've now got a series of tiny drain holes where water can creep into the structural timbers. It happens time and time again, and my 10-year-old caravan had now joined the league of the losers.

To avoid this common problem, The Caravan Club recommends that all external trim strips are removed and re-bedded on fresh mastic at periodic intervals. The idea behind the recommendation is that prevention is better than cure.

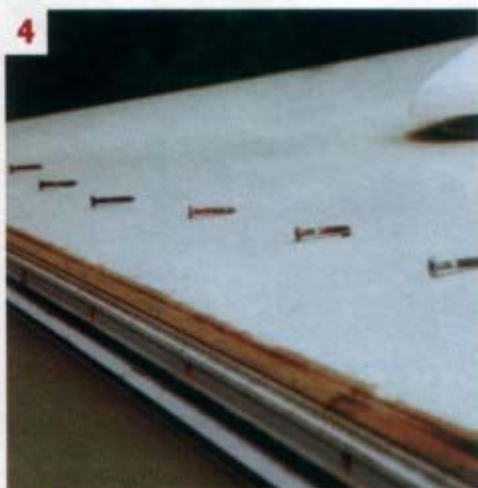
I've even read somewhere that the job should be done every five or six years. Well, I suppose that might make sense... In reality, however, I suspect



2 ■ On inspection, the awning rail was backed by a rubber base which lacked a suitable sealant



3 ■ Stage one was to peel away its plastic insert which is a cosmetic way to hide the screws



4 ■ Most, but not all, of the screws were removed. The heads broke off on a few and these were later extracted with pliers



5 ■ A few rusting screws had lost their threads as well – a sure sign that water is starting to creep in where it's not wanted



6 ■ A lower section was removed first and it was noted that some remnants were still in fairly good condition



7 ■ This is a long caravan so the main section of the awning rail is joined midway along the roof

most owners don't want the expense of getting this done by a dealer. After all, it takes a considerable amount of time to remove all external trim pieces and then to reinstall them.

So, like most people, I've always kept a close eye on my caravans and have carried out regular damp checks to confirm that the defences are still intact. But eventually the day came when the barrier was breached as I knew it would be eventually.

At this point, I ought to explain that the roof of my caravan is a 'boat-style' design which means it has got a raised ridge running from front to back. This also means that some of the rainwater landing on the roof will discharge outwards. In consequence, the awning channelling will receive a greater flow of water than you'd expect on a flat type of roof.

Nothing wrong with that, of course. It just means the awning channel needs a 'better than usual' bedding material of non-setting mastic sealant.

And the awning channel on one side was obviously starting to fail. So on a dry day I got down to work and the photographs tell the story.



8 ■ Several sections underneath the rail looked pretty susceptible to weather penetration



9 ■ An old blunt chisel was the only tool which would scrape away deposits of mastic



10 ■ Turps substitute seemed to help in the cleaning-up process, but it took quite a time to completely tidy up the surface



11 ■ An old fish knife is my favourite tool for getting into tight spaces such as removing sealant from the rear side of the channelling



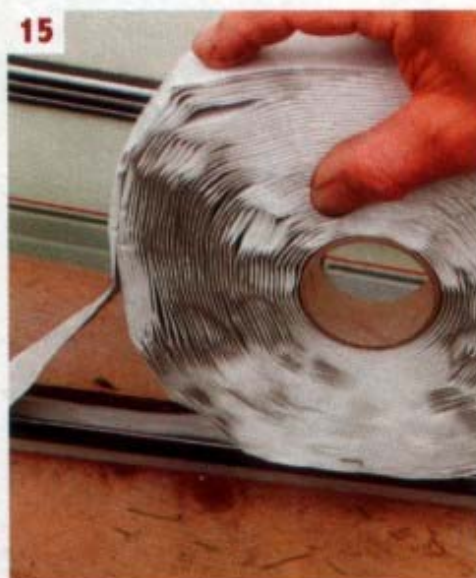
12 ■ The channel was temporarily re-fixed so that fresh holes could be drilled to receive replacement screws



13 ■ Sealant was pumped into all the holes, both the original ones and the new holes for replacement fixings



14 ■ A narrow band of ribbon sealant was pressed deeply into the moulding channels on the reverse face of the awning rail



15 ■ A further band of 25mm (1in) sealant was then applied over the entire rear face of the rail to ensure maximum coverage



16 ■ Once the new holes had been finally prepared with a countersink, the new screws were driven home



17 ■ Each section was pressed firmly into the bedding sealant, taking care to ensure there was continuity in the channelling groove



18 ■ The plastic trim was re-inserted next. Then a thin bead of Sikaflex 221 was injected along the roof edge of the awning rail itself

conclusion

Needless to say, this isn't the only way to re-bed and re-attach external fixtures and fittings. For instance, my personal preference is to use a bedding sealant in ribbon form because it gives an assurance that a consistent application of sealant has been carefully and accurately positioned.

Cartridge-applied products have their place, but a DIY repairer is less likely to have a professional worker's skill to deliver a consistent application from the nozzle of a gun.

Then there's the Sikaflex method of fixing. I don't mind admitting that I've found Sikaflex products extremely good in the last few years. What's more, a product like Sikaflex 221 isn't just a sealant. It is also an adhesive and its ability to bond items together is little short of remarkable.

If it's good enough to stick a car's windscreen to a metal surround, I don't need any more convincing about its structural credentials.

So when it comes to fitting a trim strip, you don't need screws at all. Well, actually that's not quite true because you normally need two or three fixings along the full length of an aluminium trim to hold it in place while the product's finally curing. I usually leave a trim for at least 12 hours to ensure a good bond has been achieved, at which point the temporary holding screws can either be left or replaced with a squirt of sealant in the holes.

And finally... while the focus of this article has been the awning rail, other trims which are particularly susceptible to water damage include the strips running across the top of the windows at the front and rear of a caravan. That's another place where a lot of leaks can develop too. And if you don't attend to this promptly, the outcome can be really dreadful.

If you're watching and prepared, you can stop a leak becoming a real problem.