



ASI's RHINOPHALT being applied to a road surface

The Doctor will see you now

Dr Howard Robinson (pictured) led the Road Surface Treatments Association (RSTA) for close to a decade before a recent move to become managing director of ASI. In all, he has around 30 years of experience in the industry and over this time has used his chemistry expertise, his wide knowledge and contacts, and his down to earth, no-nonsense style, to push forward progress everywhere from the laboratories of top companies to the corridors of power. Dominic Browne reports

Howard Robinson – stalwart of the highways world – is an interesting exception to the George Bernard Shaw line: ‘The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.’

No one could say Mr Robinson has not adapted to the sector. In fact, he is something of the embodiment of the industry. He tells *Highways*: ‘I don’t really talk about it much (but) I have a chemistry degree and a doctorate in chemistry and I am a visiting professor at Liverpool John Moores University.’

‘I am also a fellow of the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation. [However] in the roads industry, I find there is never too much interest. What people appreciate is common sense being spoken and practical guidance.’

A modest man with nothing to be modest about, Dr Robinson and the sector are a perfect partnership – ‘common sense and practical guidance’ might well be his mantra.

One the other hand, he is not exactly scared to say what he thinks and keep pushing for change. At the RSTA, he lobbied tirelessly and intelligently at what must have seemed at times the Sisyphean task of securing more funding for roads.

He has also held senior roles in product development including overseeing Tarmac’s R&D programme, where he helped bring in new technologies in areas such as aggregates concrete, low carbon concretes, super strong concretes, cold asphalts, stone mastic asphalts and thin surface systems, to name just a few.

In this respect he has certainly persisted and succeeded in making the world adapt to his knowledge and ability. If this is unreasonable it is unreasonable for the benefit of the sector.

Looking back over his record you can see just how much benefit his work has brought.

During his time in charge of the RSTA, membership grew from 60 to 90 – a huge expansion in a relatively narrow market.

‘Organisations noticed what the RSTA was doing. We raised the profile. One of the main reasons the membership grew and

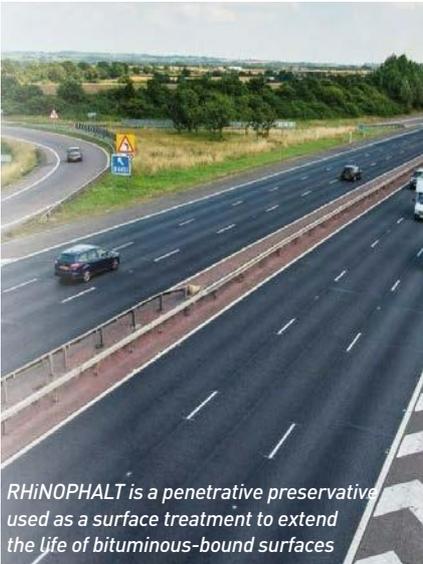
we became more recognised is because I realised when I first joined that there was a broad range of treatments and very few of them had standard specifications and if treatments do not have these, it is difficult for authorities to specify their use. So one of the key things I wanted to do was to backfill where those gaps had occurred,’ he says.

The RSTA worked with Highways England and local authorities to put in place guidance and codes of practices and helped draft new standards and specifications for all surface treatments. This is no small matter when done right.

‘We worked with ADEPT, the local authority body, to produce a library of codes of practices that cover every single surface treatment and the drafting process and the peer review process is actually quite rigorous. Our members agonise over the content of these documents. Some of these documents took four years to produce. Then ADEPT spent anything between six months to a year doing a peer review.’

All of this is freely available under the publications section of the RSTA website.

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RHiNOPHALT is a penetrative preservative used as a surface treatment to extend the life of bituminous-bound surfaces

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The RSTA also works through the UK Pavement Liaison Group, which has Highways England as its chair and meets two or three times a year.

'That's the forum where all industry stakeholder groups and industry bodies meet to discuss issues affecting the ongoing development of two key documents – the *Design Manual for Roads and Bridges* (DMRB) and the *Specification for Highway Works*,' Mr Robinson says.

The RSTA is a key body partnering with Highways England as it takes on the mammoth task of completely updating the DMRB by 2020.

'The other area we work on is the British Standards and European Standards. I was the chairman of the BSI committee for the standards affecting different treatments. We also provide a mirror for inputting into the European standards.'

On top of this growth of technical literature is an impressive growth in technical knowledge.

In 2009, when he joined the RSTA it trained about 100 engineers a year. In 2018 it trained around 800.

'Over the years there has been a steady increase in numbers on our training courses and we have extended their range, so now we have a course for virtually every treatment.'

Mr Robinson describes his recent appearance before the Transport Select Committee as part of its inquiry into highways funding and governance (December 2018 – *Highways*) as one of his proudest moments, a fitting tribute and testimony to the progress he has made with the RSTA.

On the new code of practice, he tells *Highways*: 'Authorities see the need to have a paper trail in place and show they are embracing the new code, but actually on

the ground little seems to be changing.'

Surprisingly, he also argues that asset management has yet to produce the cultural shift in the sector many would argue we have seen in recent years and that too many just want to carry on doing what they have done before.

The Local Highways Maintenance Incentive/Efficiency Element self-assessment process has been generally well-received, but now many fear that authorities might be gaming the system somewhat. Mr Robinson drily observes: 'The interesting thing will be what happens when the Department for Transport finally does the audit. It could find a lot of people who said they were in Band 3 who are not there and there could be a domino effect.'

Solutions to the problem of governance and funding – barring a massive cash injection – are difficult. Mr Robinson admits

to the 1% figure. All the local authorities combined spend about £3bn every year on the local road network but, of that, only about half actually goes on the pavement. The rest goes on things like street lights and other connected assets. The replacement cost is around £300bn so we are spending 1% of its value a year maintaining our biggest public asset.'

In part, it is this commitment to delivering real economy in highways that brought him to join ASI – well-known for its RHiNOPHALT product.

'The way I would describe the use of RHiNOPHALT is to preserve your budget. We talk about preserving roads, but the reason you use it is to preserve your budget.'

'Look at the returns you are going to get over a 10-15-year period.'

Mr Robinson points out that to get the best value out of a preservative it should

be used on roads in suitable condition, which is typically one to two years before reactive maintenance. The A50 has been treated, helping this heavily-trafficked SMA road last 20 years.

'More authorities are working with us and

I hope to help others understand our key place in the overall portfolio of treatments alongside other traditional techniques.'

The ASI business is looking to expand into new areas across the UK with a key focus on winning work in Scotland.

Mr Robinson is excited by the prospect of boosting business and helping authorities. He also seems excited at the prospect of getting out to all corners of the highways world and, after such a long time spent teaching the sector and teaching others about the sector, perhaps even learning something new himself. So, for all those authorities looking to maximise budgets...the doctor will see you now. ☺

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he is hesitant to issue any grand answer to all our problems, though he does raise the idea of regional commissions – possibly even along the utilities line.

'It makes sense to have some sort of overarching roads commission, perhaps on regional basis, to take control of highway maintenance.'

'The current system is not working. Where is the evidence to show that fewer authorities or a regionally-based roads commission would improve things? The response is that you would have organisations with the right skills and resources and money to do the job better.'

He also bemoans the false economy of not funding the network: 'I always refer



RHiNOPHALT application