



The black conspiracy

By Ian M. Johnston

For years I have known that the Pothole Repairer's Guild has a conspiracy aimed squarely at me! New recruits to the fraternity are obliged to solemnly declare their loyalty to the pursuit of my entrapment.

BLACK AND WHITE

Accordingly, wherever I drive (even in remote places) I am constantly confronted by the sudden appearance of an ill-disposed person, waving a stop-go sign which says GO. But as I am about to accelerate past, he will throw me an evil grin and whirl the thing around to read STOP.

So I have to slam on the brakes, which causes all my papers to slide forward off the seat into a confused pile on the floor. My accoster has a large boom/box looking walkie-talkie grafted to his ear, into which he appears to hold an in-depth conversation with person or persons unknown.

No matter where I encounter my antagonists, they seem to be clones of each other and are typically attired in a fluoro orange jacket with a well nourished belly hanging out over a pair of miniscule shorts.

One hundred metres down the road, there will be the inevitable gaggle of similarly garbed individuals, standing idly but expectantly around a half tipped truck, containing sticky tarry asphalt. Noting the fact that my progress has being brought to a halt by their compatriot, they will commence leisurely shovelling their tacky brew into an intricate pattern of assorted potholes. This guarantees that, even with precision navigation, there will be no escape for me from driving through all the yuk.

When they are satisfied they have delayed me for the length of time necessary for me to be late on arriving at wherever I may be going, the gang will then resume the well practiced attitude of leaning upon their shovels. The stop-go sign is reluctantly rotated to GO, by my singularly un-humorous stop-go man, who farewells me with an aggressive frown.

The shovel-leaners line the road, like an apology for a guard of honour, as I crawl past. By now they will have adopted pious expressions of a job well done. In the meantime the lower half of my white (always white) vehicle becomes hideously splattered with their handiwork, whilst my tyres serve the purpose of compacting

their "repairs". Half of my weekend will be spent on my knees endeavouring to remove the wretched black stuff.

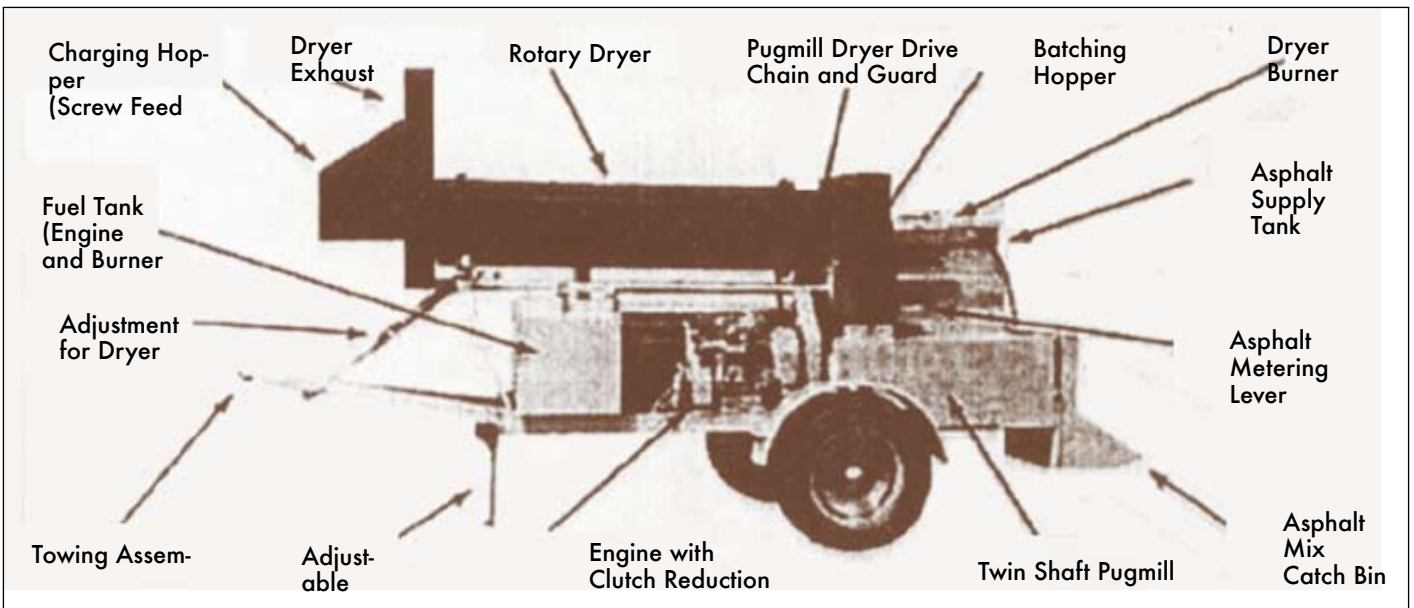
THE WYLIE

Light years ago, back in 1964 when I was sales manager for Lough Equipment Pty Ltd of Artarmon, I thought I had found the answer to this constant roadside harassment. It was a machine called the Wylie Portable Asphalt Plant. Imported from the US, it was built as a trailed unit designed to be pulled behind a truck. It sort of resembled a cross between a caravan and a mobile fish and chip fryer.

The idea was that burners, with an insatiable appetite for gas, melted the bitumen and preheated the aggregate. By manipulating two awkward levers, a measured amount of hot aggregate was deposited, along with a measured amount of near boiling bitumen, into a pugmill.

That is providing one could read the gauges through the clouds of smoke and steam and remembered to don the **asbestos** gloves. Then another lever operated the pugmill which acted as a sort of giant mixmaster.

The amalgamated brew was then ejected into a hopper from which it could be



The Wylie Portable Asphalt Plant, as imported by Lough Equipment Pty Ltd, of Artarmon, NSW in the early 1960s. Unlike the cold-mix (or at the best tepid-mix) asphalt commonly used by road authorities to repair potholes, the Wylie introduced near boiling bitumen to searing hot aggregate. This bonded the two products together, resulting in a perfect asphalt concoction, which would endure for years when used to fill potholes.

shovelled into offending potholes. Tamped down with a Whacker, the hot asphalt would remain (according to the manual) for years — unlike the cold, or at the best, tepid mix used by my gangs of conspirators. Importantly, it would not splatter all over my white car!

A SACK OF SNAKES

Such a grand machine of course had to be unveiled at an appropriate occasion. Therefore, with much prior publicity, the Wylie Portable Asphalt Plant was proudly and conspicuously put on display at the Local Government Engineers Association Field Day, that year being held at Lane Cove National Park. Engineers from all over were anxious to see the machine in action. Indeed the Tumut Shire Council and the Lithgow City Council were prepared to write tenders around the Wylie, subject to seeing it in action at the Lough Equipment stand.

Service Manager Gib Gospel, Salesman Bill Flett and yours truly had all read the manual and were in no doubt of our ability to operate the machine with a considerable degree of efficiency. Therefore we felt prepared and confident when around 30 local government engineers surrounded the (by now) roaring smoking plant at



The Wylie was usually towed behind a tip truck, which carried the supply of aggregate (blue metal).

the appointed hour of 10 am upon the first day.

Gib was in charge of the gas heaters and temperature control, Bill was responsible for the aggregate and I somewhat egotistically assumed command of the levers.

I delivered my spiel to the assembled engineers, explaining the virtues of the Wylie, how it operated and results they would observe. Then, like a well drilled artillery gunnery crew, the three of us went into action.

“Bitumen temperature?” I inquired loudly.

“Correct and ready!” A snappy response from Gib.

“Aggregate?”

“In place and ready” Bill’s well rehearsed response.

“Bitumen and aggregate now being transferred to pugmill” I announced in what I hoped were clipped military intonations.

With that I grasped a lever in each asbestos gloved hand and, carefully following the memorised manual of instructions, raised one and lowered the other. There was a rumbling and shaking as the hot aggregate was dumped into the pugmill, but — **no bitumen!** I once again manipulated the bitumen ladle handle — but again **no bitumen!**

70 ▷

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There was a shuffling of feet accompanied by a few sniggers and a general feeling of mild amusement radiating from the engineers. I mumbled a statement about “teething troubles” and requested their patience.

About ten minutes later, following my numerous unsuccessful attempts at transferring the bitumen into the pugmill, Gib announced that the problem was solved. It seemed a valve had to be opened to allow the measured bitumen to flow into the pugmill.

What nobody considered was the fact that by this time **umpteen measures of scalding bitumen had been introduced into the system!**

So, with renewed confidence and blissfully ignorant of this fact, I urged the now restless gathering to step closer so that they could experience the descent of the bitumen into the pugmill. With much showmanship and exaggeration I again actuated the lever. For a moment — nothing happened, then there was a great surging and crackling as the smoking bitumen cascaded over the searing aggregate. But it kept coming! Gallons of it!

Before anyone was really aware of what was happening, the pugmill overflowed and the pungent blistering bitumen poured onto the ground. A tide of hissing bitumen spread out in all directions like a sackful of redbelly black snakes.

The sight of the usually dignified engineers fleeing off into the surrounding bush was a vision I shall never forget. The less agile were in the process of having their shoes glued to the ground before they managed a hasty sticky exit. A pair of crepe soled shoes “actually melted”, I was later informed by an irate town clerk.

In actual fact the Wylie Portable Asphalt

Plant turned out to be an excellent machine **in the right hands!** Quite a number were sold. Years later, the engineer at Tumut Shire Council proudly pointed out to me a repaired pothole, at the intersection outside the Council offices, that had been filled 10 years previously using asphalt out of the Shire’s Wylie machine. The repair was as good as new.

STILL TARGETED

Despite the passing of time, I am still high on the target list of the Pothole Repairer’s Guild. But today my fluoro jacketed assailants are more sophisticated in their techniques.

Portable traffic lights have largely replaced the stop/go lollipop signs.

A few months ago, whilst out and about on my tractor research, I was assailed on a lonely straight treeless section of the Newell Highway. I was heading north and could clearly see the road disappearing into the far distance. A solitary traffic light, seemingly abandoned on the side of the road, abruptly changed from green to red as I was nearly level with it. (A confused pile of papers on the floor — once again).

Certainly there was a proliferation of potholes in evidence, but absolutely no activity taking place and neither was there another vehicle in sight, apart from a solitary parked ute. The only sign of life was two fluoro coated individuals who were yarning beside the ute. So I fumed for fully 10 minutes until the green eventually appeared.

I drove for at least two kilometres at a crazy restricted 40 kph until I encountered the other traffic light for southbound traffic and an “End of work” sign. During the entire episode I failed to detect any road work taking place.

So you see, they must obviously be tracking me by satellite or maybe they have planted a bug under my car. Perhaps

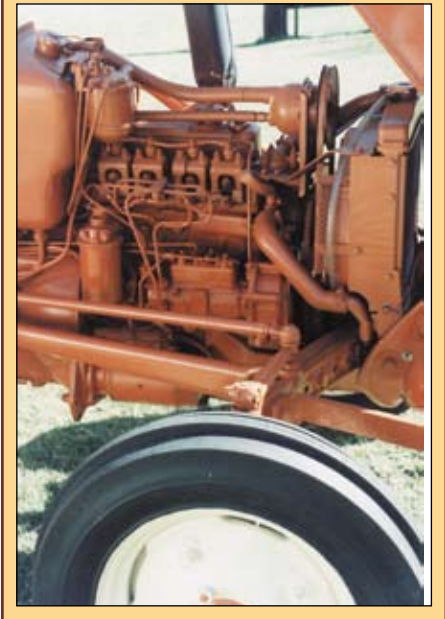
IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

QUESTION: What on earth is the engine and in which tractor is it installed?

CLUE: There were over 2,000,000 of these British engines produced in various configurations.

DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY: This is a real teaser.

ANSWER: See page 80.



one day I will be able to purchase a black stealth vehicle that will be invisible to my conspirators.

And what about the Wylie Portable Asphalt Plants? Maybe I have a nasty mind, but I will bet London to a brick that the Pothole Repairer’s Guild had them blacked. Well they would — wouldn’t they?!

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