

HIGHWAYS PROBLEM REPORTING

HARDINGTON MANDEVILLE

For Hardington Mandeville

Parish Council

March 2025

Highways Problem Reporting - Hardington Mandeville

Having been asked to be the highways representative on behalf of the Hardington Mandeville Parish Council, it very soon became apparent that issues with the lanes in our village related to more than just pothole reporting. Clearly the undertaking could be limited to that but even in doing so there was considerable doubt over what constituted a pothole, whether responsibility lay with Somerset Council's Highways Department or with another, such as a landowner, Wessex Water or BT/Openreach, and more importantly whether there would be any money in the pot to address them and if so when.

In this paper I will explore the issues that Hardington folk are experiencing on a day-to-day basis on the roads that are related to its location and its activity profile but will also consider how we have got to where we are.

Then it will be time to categorise the issues, relate them to their incidence within the parish and request clarification on ownership, responsibilities, priorities and planning. Finally, a list of considerations for resolving the issues will be suggested.

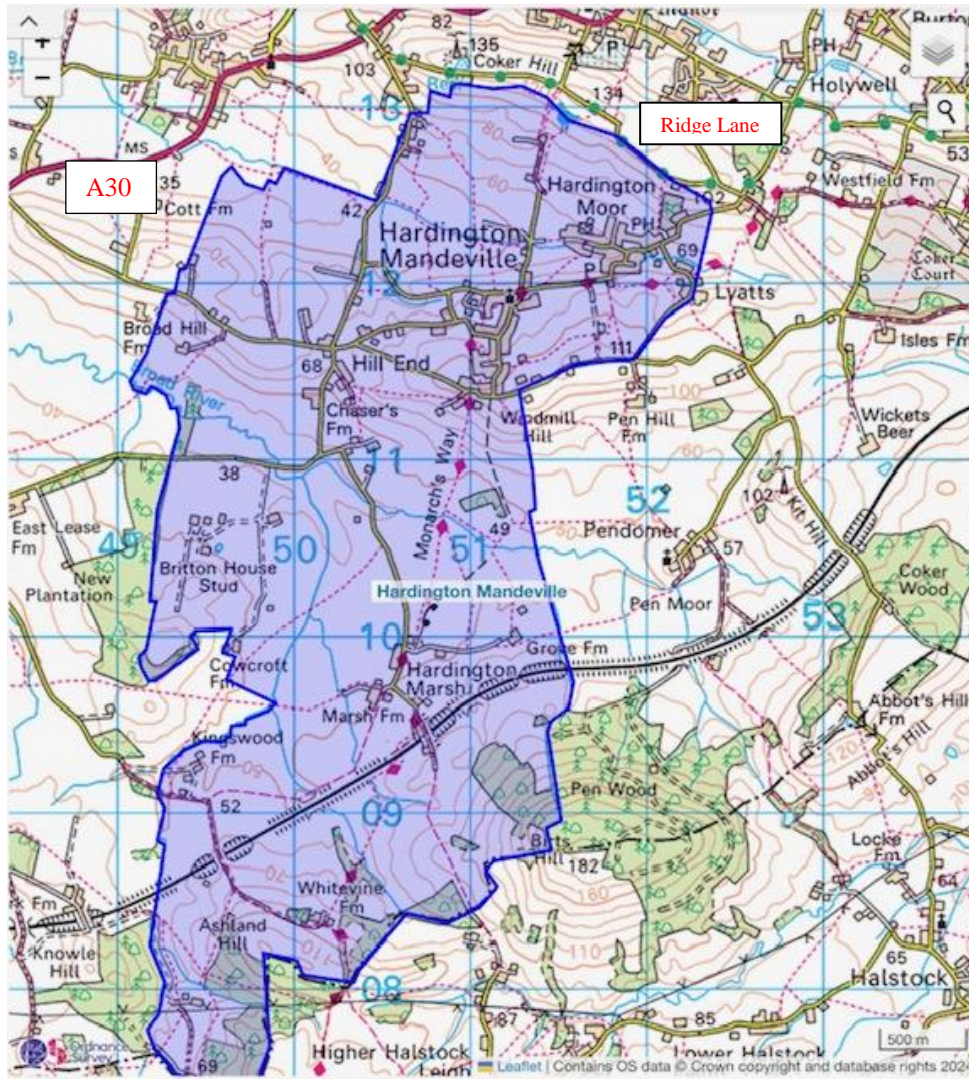
Location

The village comprises of three separate parts, Moor, Marsh and Mandeville, with the latter on the ridge between Moor to the north and Marsh to the south. It is basically not on a road to anywhere other than itself - a loop road runs from the A30 east of West Coker, through Moor and Mandeville, to the A30 to the west of East Chinnock and yes, I have got my easts and wests correct!

Hardington Marsh is reached via a road connecting the parish to Haselbury Plucknett from which a spur (no through road) runs to the houses and businesses there.

Since the 1980s the village has grown very little so population growth is not seen as a factor in the poor state of Hardington's roads.

The three areas and the parish itself are indicated below.



From this it can be seen that access to and from Hardington is via other parishes:

- East Chinnock
- West Coker
- East Coker
- Closworth
- Haselbury
- North Perrot

along lanes that will not be frequently used by inhabitants of those parishes; their journeys primarily involve using the A30 or gaining direct access to it or to the A37.

This means that travellers to and from Hardington rely on routes that are perhaps of less interest and consequence to those parishes. I am thinking of the road from Hill End out to the A30 and similarly via Primrose Hill and out through Holywell, again to the A30. It could be said that East Coker is similarly on a loop but the profile of village activity – see below, less focused on agriculture - makes it different from Hardington.

It should also be noted that one lane in particular, ie Ridge Lane is a significant route to fields farmed from the village but lies entirely or almost entirely in West Coker parish.

This means that Hardington residents in everyday life are also affected by the condition of the lanes outside of the Parish so effectively rely on others to report issues.

Activity Profile

When one stops to reflect upon it, we are fortunate in Hardington Mandeville to have a number of independent working family farms. This means that we are surrounded by a lush rolling landscape still criss-crossed by hedges with not a solar panel or wind turbine in sight. Given the gradual incursion of larger organisations and wealthy individuals buying up land in the neighbourhood and the potential financial rewards that can be on offer from green energy installers, we can only hope that our oasis can be retained.

However, whether or not the current position persists, farming activity is unique within the locality and it brings its own consequences. But it is not alone in this.

How Did We Get To Where We Are?

It is said that size isn't everything but in the case of our lanes it certainly matters.

Consider:

- Vehicle widths
- Lorry dimensions
- Vehicle weights
- Farm vehicles

I have put the vehicles which are normally pointed to as the culprits when it comes to road and verge damage last but let's stop just for a moment and look at ourselves because our habits have changed as have the cars we drive.

In 1984 the width of the highest selling car in the UK was the Ford Escort.

Width: 1.64 metres. Weight: 900 kg.

In 2004 it was the Ford Focus.

Width: 1.84 metres. Weight: 1264 kg.

In 2024 it was the Ford Puma.

Width: 1.93 metres. Weight: 1316 kg.

So, in 2024 for two of the most popular vehicles to pass each other an additional 58 cms (c. 2 feet) of carriageway width is needed compared with 40 years ago. This is relevant in a village such as Hardington where much of its lane mileage is more suited to a single track. And an additional 416 kg (roughly the weight of five adults) would be deployed for the 2024 vehicle.

Other models have evolved similarly, for instance the 2024 VW Polo (1.96m) is now larger and wider than what was at that time the larger 1984 Golf (1.66m).

One other relevant statistic. The trend to electrically powered vehicles has increased over recent years until around 20% of new car sales in 2024 were of this type. It is generally accepted that they weigh more than the equivalent diesel or petrol model, perhaps as much as 30%. As battery technology improves the weight difference should reduce but against that government inspired targets are looking for increased numbers on our roads.

Of course, lorry dimensions have also increased. The small coal lorry which might still have been seen in 1984 is now relegated to the past, with even small oil delivery wagons being relatively large and wide on the village roads. There is also the observable fact that companies find it more economic to use larger lorries rather than smaller ones for smaller/more remote deliveries which are not ideally suited to Hardington's location.

And yes, the days of the small Fergie are also long gone. Not every farmer is like Mr Clarkson, running a massive "Lambo" but the New Hollands, John Deeres etc are large in width, height, length and weight.

Without delving into the various makes of tractor, the maximum width of a standard agricultural tractor is 2.55 metres and 3 metres when it has fully mounted equipment or interchanged towed equipment.

A tractor which weighs more than 7.25 tonnes when unladen is classed as a large tractor (Jeremy's Lambo was 9.5 tonnes) and it has a maximum width of 2.75 metres. Maximum weight for tractor and trailer combined is 31 tonnes.

So the average tractor is at least 33 cms (13 inches) wider than a Range Rover (1.78m in 1984, 2.22m in 2024) but perhaps more pertinently some of our lanes are very narrow. For instance some stretches of Ridge Lane are barely 2.75 metres and the same for North Lane, Rag Lane – in fact every lane in the village has restricted widths and pinch points.

The obvious effect is that vehicles which wish to pass each other have to find a convenient driveway (not too many of those), a gateway (infrequent) a formal passing place (ie a lay-by, not a routine feature in Hardington) or use a grass verge. Clearly the wider and heavier the vehicle the greater the affect if this latter and more readily available choice is taken. The consequence is that over time the verge becomes a "natural" passing place which by definition will be underpinned by little if any foundations. The increasingly wet weather also accelerates a reasonably firm verge to being soft and muddy and it rapidly becomes a rough uneven hazard. There are many examples in the village.

And grassy banks can become scoured by large wheels as can be seen again on Ridge Lane where even both verges will be intruded upon by a single wide vehicle.

But then there is frequency of traffic which may potentially have a more significant affect on road surfaces than widths and weights.

Consider:

- On-line shopping deliveries
- Social habits
- Farming practices

Grocery deliveries and the proverbial white van man and his associate the sub-contracted private vehicle need no elaboration - very frequently seen.

And socially, of course, more cars per household, more after school activities and even school runs, more evenings out and possibly larger cars in the predominance in the village over the popular selling models: all contribute to more stress on road surfaces and to more occurrences of meeting an on-coming vehicle just where you didn't want to. We've all been there. Being able to reverse becomes an essential skill as does patience and preparedness to wait in a passing place rather than squeeze by.

I am not a farmer and cannot claim to know much about the full-on life, often 24/7, that farmers have but I submit the following observations.

- Larger dairy herds than 40, even 20 years ago
- Milk tankers are consequently wider and heavier
- Cows kept on the farm more often than in the fields
- More likely to be bringing fodder directly to the cows or into storage
- More acreage devoted to cultivation of fodder
- More regulations on disposal of slurry
- More regulations on disposal of surface/grey water collection
- More slurry to dispose of
- Restricted time periods for hedge cutting

Many if not all of the above will have resulted from regulation and the need to react to market forces. These result in more farm movements and for reasons of economies of scale, larger wider tractors to tow larger wider trailers for fodder and slurry, often impacted by suitability of weather and ground conditions. And yet the effect of that activity is to provide the wonderful countryside which we all enjoy and which may well be a major reason for us living in Hardington.

So in terms of road usage, wear and tear we must all bear some responsibility.

In my view that completes a quick synopsis of the usage characteristics leading to the condition of the roads here. But of course the elephant in the room is:

Finance

This topic cannot be ignored. The current state of the roads did not happen overnight. For several years lack of maintenance, laid at the door of lack of finance, has had the inevitable consequence we experience today. The deterioration of the roads seems to bear some correlation with the process and timing of the merging of SSDC into Somerset Council having been more marked over the last three years or so but with tight controls over how much money can be raised and increasing demand elsewhere, it is understandable that something has to give. It can be predicted that unless some major defects in the roads of Hardington are properly addressed, roads will become impassable to all except tractors and higher suspension vehicles.

All we can do is document what we see and put forward our case for significant improvement before much of the situation becomes irretrievable.

Let's have a look at how our problems can be classified as an aid to understanding what if anything can be achieved.

Type Of Work

As mentioned at the start of this paper, potholes are not the only, not even the main problem. Here is my suggested categorisation of the wide range of issues with road surfaces encountered to date.

Minor Works

- Potholes in carriageway
- Blocked and overflowing drains
- Mud on roads

The Council has a mechanism whereby problems on the roads can be reported under 20 different headings so there are many issues which the Council has to deal with. So far in Hardington calls have been logged against the three listed above but that has been unsatisfactory because:

- Jobs have been reported as complete when nothing has been done eg Rectory Lane Ref. 831249
- Problems are dismissed when there clearly is one eg tracking Lyatts Ref. 828262
- Jobs are classed as "future" with no idea of a target – many eg Pig Hill Ref. 829895
- Potholes refused as not being on the carriageway, despite their danger eg Pig Hill Ref. 829893

Given many other carriageway defects, the picture in Hardington is dispiriting.

Major Works

The fact remains that the main problem in Hardington is not potholes. It is major reconstruction work that is required because of:

- Stretches of deteriorating surface eg
 - Lynch Lane
 - Barry Lane
 - Broad Hill
 - Marsh Road
- Tracking (one or both wheel tracks sunken with possible or actual grounding) eg
 - Lyatts x 3
 - North Lane
 - Rag Lane
 - Primrose Hill
- High side drains above the water flow line – several eg
 - Wimborough Lane
- Sunken drains eg
 - Pig Hill
- Flooded roads
 - Penn Lane
 - Rectory Lane
- Lack of drainage (absence of drains or infrequent clearing thereof)
 - Collarway Lane
 - Rectory Lane
 - Pig Hill

This shouldn't be down to local reporting but should rely on an effective strategy for survey, repair and improvement from Somerset Council.

Third Party Involvement

- Potholes on edge of carriageway - Highways or landowner?

Where a problem exists eg a pothole and a landowner might be involved there needs to be some sympathetic understanding of the reason for the problem occurring and very often its importance as a useful feature for the motorist. For instance I am thinking of parking for the shop and unofficial passing places where otherwise no option might exist. Under certain circumstances it would appear that a landowner even has to pay for a licence to place an obstruction on their land to prevent intrusion by motor vehicles.

- Gullies at side of carriageway - Highways or landowner?

When a verge is eroded, particularly on a slope, water gradually creates a gully which over time can be deep and wide enough to cause a problem should a car, motorbike or bicycle wheel drop into it, especially where the edge of the carriageway remains sharply delineated.

- Exposed inspection covers etc – Highways or BT, Wessex Water etc?

There is an increasing number of locations where the tarmac around a cover is either breaking up or subsiding or both. The iron frames can pose a problem for car tyres and a trip hazard for pedestrians in a village without street lighting.

- Roadside ditches - Highways (draining surface water) or landowner?

When kept in good condition these contribute significantly to surface drainage which minimises the risk of surface break up during icy weather or road defects concealed by puddling/flooding.

In some places a ditch that once drained a road has been lost to an unofficial passing place or to verge compression.

- Unofficial passing places - Highways or should landowner fence off?

These might be significant or merely a narrow erosion of a once neat verge. The extremely wet weather has meant that the grass verges are much less resilient than they once were and either some quite deep tracks have been created or merely a muddy roadside margin.

- Culverts

There are culverts under High Street, Wimborough Lane, Rectory Lane, Moor Lane and maybe more as well as bridges (North Lane, Pig Hill, Partway Lane for example). Traffic runs over them but natural water as well as highway surface drainage runs under them.

- Public Surface Water Sewer

I am aware of one Public Surface Water Sewer – there may be more – which collects water from Broadstone Lane and eventually deposits it into Chinnock Brook, running under a highway and merging with a natural water source. Wessex Water or Highways?

Responsibilities and accountabilities need to be identified.

Quality Control

- How to ensure that the correct issue will be addressed - how to identify exactly the defect to be remedied - GPS, What3Words, lat/long?
- How is it ensured that work has been done satisfactorily? There are instances of tarmac being terminated as an edge rather than bonded in with the existing surface and of repairs breaking up or subsiding after a very short time
- How are recurring reports identified since it is not possible to reopen a call?

System Usage

The reporting system needs improvement if it is to be used regularly and often.

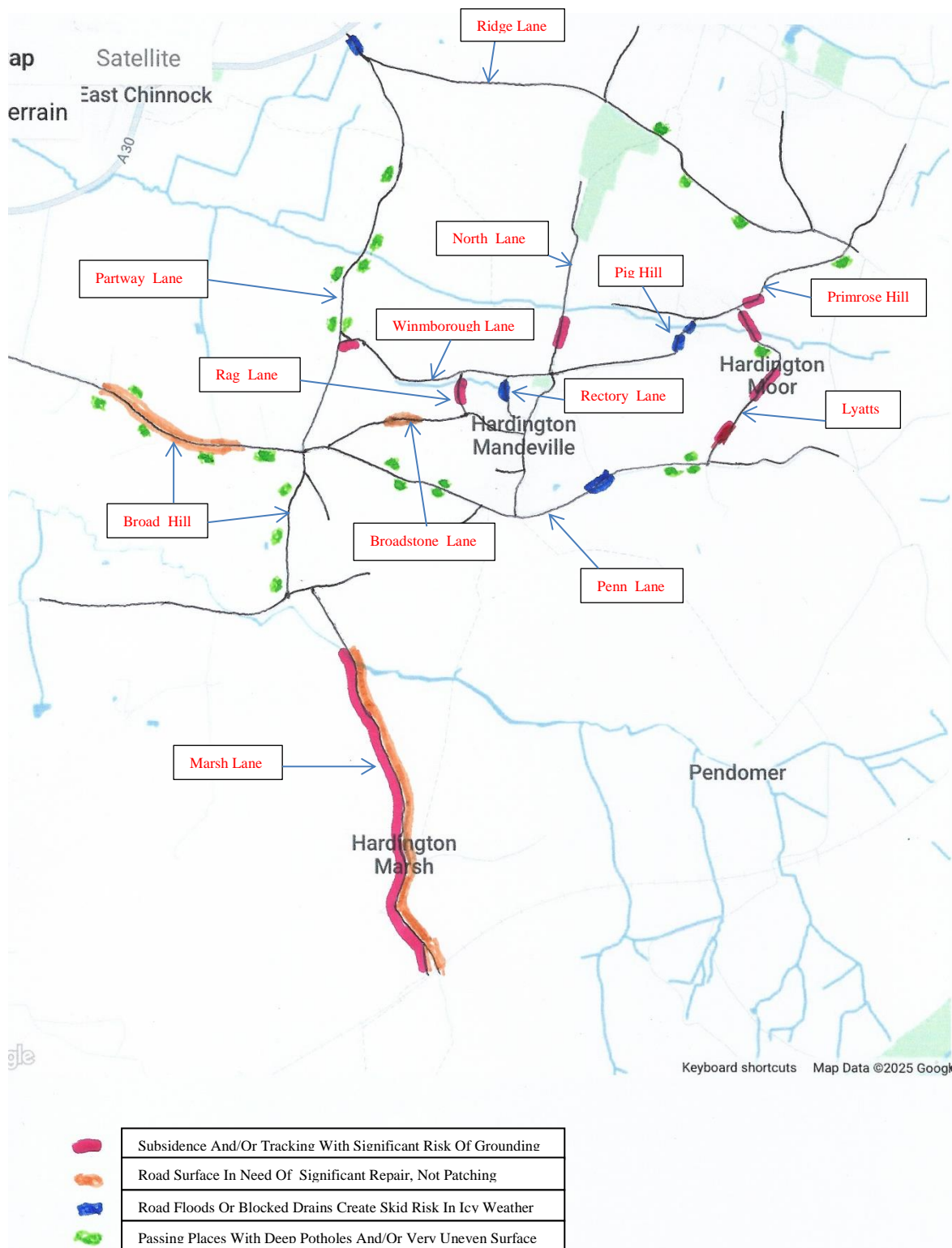
- System updates - activity date not reported and completion notification not always given. Each call has to be interrogated to determine whether any progress has been made.
- It is not possible to reopen a call.
- The system offers the opportunity to add a further call but it does not retain any data ie location, name, telephone number, email address. Not a user-friendly system.
- Notification of road closures is spasmodic. With very limited scope for diversion and a shop and pub in the village this is unacceptable and can be extremely inconvenient and very annoying to residents, particularly if the diversion results in having to travel over a badly deteriorated surface or an area of subsidence.
- Photographs of potholes do not give adequate perspective unless there is a guide alongside/into the hole. Does Somerset Council have a simple one? Can one be obtained? Currently classifying a pothole as golf ball, tennis ball or football size is not meaningful, especially when the hole isn't round! Depth, width and length would be more relevant.
- Work classed as "future" disappears as far as the village is concerned. It might reappear when a stretch of lane is repaired as has happened towards the end of this financial year. It is frustrating not knowing what the future may bring. It would be better if such work was classed as "Pending" such that it can be "Issued" and that status change notified.
- It is not possible to search calls for a village or a location to check whether an issue has already been logged.

The Current Situation

Below indicates the problems identified across the village. These exclude minor defects, potholes etc, concentrating on issues that need to be addressed by Somerset Council. This is followed by the same map but overlaid with relevant names of lanes, although in truth hardly any are missing!



The current situation with lanes identified.



No comment is necessary; the map speaks for itself. The situation is not good.

However, the issues are detailed below. Listed by lane they are:

Lyatts

- Three stretches of road subsidence/tracking, the central one on the map being particularly bad. Many vehicles have grounded there as can be seen from the surface; in fact, even knowing it was there I grounded whilst temporarily distracted by movement by the lane – during a diversion for roadworks in Lynch Lane! Normally Lyatts is avoided if possible.
- One pitted passing place on a blind bend.

North Lane

- Again, significant road subsidence/tracking with significant risk of grounding. Note that not only does North Lane give access to residences beyond the problem but it also gives access to the community field.

Rag Lane

- Another instance of a significant subsidence and tracking. This lane can be used as a short cut to Wimborough Lane and the church but also gets used when there is a diversion in place on Broadstone Lane.

Wimborough Lane

- At its junction with Partway Lane there remains a significant drop towards the ditch despite repairs having been undertaken.

Marsh Lane

- This has to be the worst lane in the Parish. In my opinion it is badly in need of relaying because of significant stretches of subsidence as well as fractured and defective surfaces.

Primrose Hill

- A stretch of subsidence which was reported in January (Ref. 829902) but was marked for future work. Since then it has deteriorated. This is a rare two-way width of lane in the village so it is not always possible to avoid it.
- The passing place on the blind bend just before the junction with Ridge Lane is very uneven with a rutted surface.

Broad Hill

- The stretch of lane running to the west of the village is also very bad. Whilst there is no obvious subsidence, the road surface is badly deteriorated with numerous areas broken away as well as potholes. This is a frequently used access for the village to and from the A30.
- Also along this westerly stretch are edges where passing places have been created, presumably because of the width and the frequency of movements. Their surfaces are very uneven and in places pitted, making them a risk to vehicles, especially when filled with water after rain.
- The stretch running to the south towards Hardington Marsh also has several risky passing places.

Broadstone Lane

There is a stretch of deteriorated surface here which is gradually becoming worse and will surely generate reports for potholes in the near future.

Partway Lane

- Although generally well surfaced, it is a narrow lane so again suffers from several very risky passing areas.

Ridge Lane

- Also very narrow and as a result also has several places where passing should be possible but you have to be brave because of the surface.
- At its junction with West Coker Hill there is often a report of a blocked or overflowing drain with water running west towards the bridge over the A30. This is potentially hazardous in icy weather for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists.

Pig Hill

- On the hill itself, blocked drains cause water to overflow across and down the road which is obviously a cause for concern in the winter months.
- Where Pig Hill crosses Chinnock Brook water collects after heavy rain; there appears to be inadequate provision to drain it into the Brook.

Penn Lane

- Several stretches of this lane where passing places have become established but which have uneven, pitted or potholed surfaces.
- Where indicated the lane can be flooded because at that point a culvert which should drain water to the north fails to do so because the drain feeding it is often blocked or overgrown with vegetation.

Rectory Lane

- Another instance of flooding because of an inadequate culvert taking stream and highways drainage.

Matters For Discussion

There are eight headings which I feel should be considered.

1. Potholes, Drains And Mud

These can usefully be managed on an on-going basis by using the current, hopefully improved, reporting procedure.

2. Road Surface Deterioration

Whilst not necessarily over-problematic, failure to repair will lead to greater expense and inconvenience down the road so correction should be planned in during the financial year and a proposed date cleared with the Parish Council to avoid clashes with any village activity. Any such work needs to be communicated clearly within the village especially as diversions can affect the village shop, pub, travelling to work, school transport and deliveries.

3. Carriageway Tracking And Subsidence

Potentially the most dangerous defect and the one needing immediate action to prevent vehicle damage from grounding and potential accidents. It also has the potential for the most substantive amount of work but cannot be ignored. To do so will result in routes becoming impassable and in extreme cases properties will be unreachable. For example, the road to Hardington Marsh is a disgrace (potholes, deteriorating surface and tracking) and that to North Lane not much better.

4. Passing Places

In some rural areas there are formal passing places. These may not be everyone's idea of an attractive countryside feature but installed sensitively and recognised by motorists as a means of avoiding further deterioration of grassy verges and banks, using established passing points could be a solution, even if an appropriate amount of hardcore and base material rather than tarmac was to be used. Perhaps worth exploring. What alternative is there to accepting the inevitable?

5. Knowing Where We Stand

Who is responsible for what?

6. Self Help - Personal

Could we make more use of existing passing places rather than infringe on verges? Could we be a bit more tolerant of wide vehicles and reverse to an appropriate spot rather than squeeze/force our way past, possibly damaging verges and provoking the scouring of banks by the larger vehicle which may well have restricted movement? Might we possibly avoid the narrowest of lanes, even if it does mean a longer way round?

7. Self Help - Village

Hardington Mandeville has a parish ranger scheme whereby small works such as clearing a drain or footpath or mending a stile or notice board can be undertaken. The cost of this is covered by the precept that the Parish Council decides and is collected via our council tax.

It is possible that other Councils have the same scheme. I well remember a Yeovil Rural District Council employee with his bike and shovel keeping the drains, ditches etc clear in West Coker when I was a lad but unfortunately those days are past.

But are they?

Can the Ranger scheme be extended/redesigned by allowing the Parish Council to raise additional funds, hopefully (!) matched by a reduction in County precept? We have seen Yeovil Town Council take on more responsibilities and perhaps there is a case for a parish or a combination of parishes to take on certain road maintenance activities that are currently not being effected by Somerset Council. Some major works would be beyond us but pothole filling and repairing small areas of surface deterioration could be achievable. Small quantities of materials eg tarmac and base layer are available from builders' merchants and a compactor/whacker might be shared or hired. We might even get a financial contribution from County although mutterings of training, insurance and accountability can perhaps be heard.

Clearly major repairs to subsidence for instance would be beyond the remit but we might hope for a better response on those if minor works could be delegated, saving County time and money.

8. Communication

A lighter moment. A company that fails to advertise is like a man winking at a girl in the dark. He knows he's doing it but no-one else does.

For "advertising" read "communicate". We need to know in advance when repairs are planned to be done and when they are being done. And it could also be useful if we knew when to expect slurry/fodder/hedge cutting movements. If it was possible to be aware of such times and plan accordingly we might get fewer encounters putting pressure on our narrow lanes, to all parties' benefit.

Conclusion

With the exception of personal self-help which could perhaps be encouraged using a suitable entry in the Messenger, the village's newsletter, the above points will need to be progressed with Somerset Council by the Parish Council, I would suggest through our Somerset Councillors, at each Parish Council meeting.

We don't want the comment "we used to drive on the left of the road, now we drive on what's left of it" to become more real than flippant!

I hope that the foregoing is a helpful contribution to finding solutions to badly-needed remedial work within the village.

C R Turner
Highways Representative, Hardington Mandeville Parish Council
31st March 2025
E. & O. E.