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Photography Michael Whitestone

Cosmetic Surgery

We talk to the people who can sort out all those ugly scratches, dents and chips without respraying whole panels.

There's nothing more frustrating than coming back to your BMW after parking it somewhere, only to find someone has rather inconsiderately used it as a parking aid.

Scratches, dents and scuffs on the bumpers, doors and wings are unsightly annoyances; something we've all had to put up with at one stage or another. Either that or some idiot has decided he's jealous of your motor and has run his Daewoo key up the side of it.

Luckily, there's a viable alternative to going to your local bodyshop and paying through the nose to have the whole panel resprayed. Chips Away is a national franchise chain which started in the UK in 1994, after coming across the Atlantic from America. The company specialises in repairing only the area around the scratch, blending it in with the paint of the car. Chips Away can tackle scratches, small dents, keyed panels, stone chips on the bonnet and also

refurbish alloy wheels — and the added bonus is that the company comes to you, either at home or at your office, to do all the work. They'll even collect the car if it's absolutely necessary.

We met Jon Starr and Steve Field at TBMW's offices to show us what they can do. Jon and Steve have been working for 14 months as the operators of the Reading franchise, using their Mercedes van full of equipment to travel around the area repairing cars. The pair are currently thinking about establishing a drive-in centre in Reading, which would allow up to four cars at a time to drive into a tyre-fitting style bay for the work to be carried out there. For the moment, though, the business is doing very well and Jon and Steve are booked up for the forthcoming weeks.

They came along to work on editor Wager's wheels, a 323i Touring in Fern

Green metallic. Marks on the front and rear bumpers were due to be touched up, while a gouge in the offside side skirt was also up for renovation.

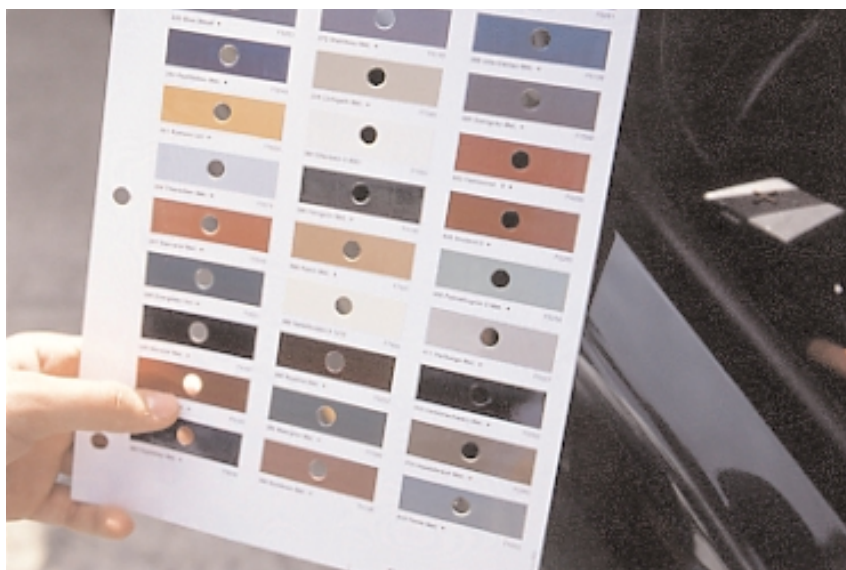
Just to show what they can do, and with the editor's grudging consent, Jon ran his key along the panel just above the gouge to show a typical 'keying' incident — to be repaired by Chips Away during the day.

Chips Away can repair a quite badly scuffed car in a few hours, and the work is guaranteed for two years. They tend to do about two or three cars each day, working five days a week from 9 am to 5 pm. Other franchises work over weekends, but there's enough demand in Reading for the pair just to work Mondays to Fridays. They will work on Saturdays and Sundays too, but only by prior arrangement.

While having a scratch filled and painted might not sound as good as a respray to

some people, the quality of the work is very high and most customers cannot spot where the work has been done. Jon says: "The most important thing to us is that we believe we are maintaining the integrity of the car's paintwork. The idea is that we are not unnecessarily respraying bodywork that isn't damaged. We try to keep as much as possible of the car's paintwork as it left the factory." Jon and Steve do all repairs with the body panels in situ, and will not remove panels to do the work.

If there's too much stone chipping and scratching on a panel — typically a front bumper or bonnet — they will happily quote you a price to fix it, but will usually recommend that you have the panel fully resprayed instead. They can repair dented bodywork too but there is a limit; if it needs serious panel-beating to get it back in shape, they'll send you to a bodyshop. "The stuff we do is mainly the smaller cosmetic damage," explains Steve.



Chips Away takes the paint code number from under the bonnet and checks it against a paint chart to see if the car is painted the colour it left the factory – ours matches.



Using the paint code, the company can then mix up whatever colour paint is needed for your car in 15 minutes using the equipment inside their vans. Only a small amount is needed each time.

Any car can be repaired by Chips Away, as all they need to know is what make and colour it is before they come out. Nothing technical required here – just tell them if it's green or yellow or blue, or a BMW, Merc or Audi and so on, and they will do the rest. "Every car has a paint identification number inside its engine bay," says Jon. "We can take that number and mix up the paint in the van in 15 minutes. If that number's not there, we simply take the car's chassis number and ring the manufacturer to get it."

Prices vary slightly from franchise to franchise — dependent on where in the country you are — with 350 operators nationwide. Jon and Steve will quote around £150 for one repair, and £50 for every damaged panel after that, so it makes sense to have a more badly scuffed car restored because it works out cheaper than fixing just one scratch. And you can guarantee that your local BMW dealership will charge you a lot more than that for a panel respray. Chips Away is also RAC affiliated for a bit of extra peace of mind. >



How they do it

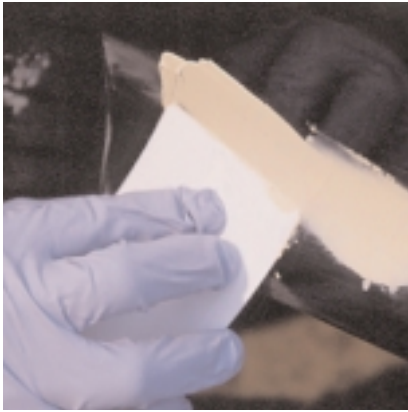
1. You leave your car on the street and, lo and behold, some mindless vandal has keyed it. Ah well, that's an expensive panel respray...



2. ...but not for Chips Away. First stage of the repair is to wipe down the scratched area with a special cleaning fluid which removes grease and dirt from the bodywork.



3. Then, using a fine grade of sandpaper, the area is sanded down to even out any high points or edges created by the scratch in the bodywork.



4. Next stage is to prepare the filler. Chips Away does not use a spray-on liquid but uses its own special paste to be applied to the scratch. A little extra filler is applied to the scratch to ensure that the groove is properly filled, and also that the mark won't reappear two weeks down the line once it has been painted.



5. Once the filler is applied, special infrared heating lamps are directed onto it for 15 minutes to harden the mixture.



6. Once the heat lamps have done their thing and the filler is dry, the repaired area is sanded again to match it with the original contours of the bodywork.



7. Masking tape is applied around the affected area while the damage is being repainted. Chips Away only works on a patch around the scratch, and as such does not paint unaffected panels at all. Painting begins, using a spray gun and compressor.



8. Several applications are put on over a period of about 30 minutes to an hour, in order to build up the colour gradually. The final coat is a special lacquer, applied via a different spray gun. Once this is on, the lamps are returned to bake the repair in place.



9. One quick polish and here it is, a complete repair in the space of a few hours, with a perfect colour match.



Chips Away has around 350 operators in the UK, who can come to your home or office to repair your car.

Contact

Chips Away has franchises all over the country. For information on your local team, visit www.chipsaway.co.uk. If you happen to live in Reading, call Jon and Steve on 01189 477577 or 07860 350150.

So, after all this, how did they do with our car? Well, we were very pleased with the result, especially the repair of the two niggling marks on the front and rear of the car. At the rear, a BMW touch-up stick had previously been used to mask a scratch and the difference between that and the Chips Away work was massive. The colour match on the tricky metallic green was perfect too.

The service is quick and hassle-free, so if you don't fancy the inconvenience of having your car in the bodyshop for a few days, then give Chips Away a try. We'll certainly be using them again. ○