

# Up, up and away



## High-level cleaning is put to the test

**T**he FM profession is constantly looking for the Holy Grail – the next new revenue stream which can be attached to current service agreements and also used to win FM contracts. High-level cleaning and particularly gutter cleaning has overall been left alone owing to the cost, health and safety regulations, time taken and inconvenience. Now gutter cleaning has become a cost effective reality just in time for this winter's invasion of leaves.

To date, regulations relating to working off ladders and working at heights have prevented almost all gutters from effective cleaning without the use of expensive scaffolding or cherry pickers. This has resulted in the task being put off for a year or two (and saving money) but in most situations the problem has come home to roost – broken roof tiles, leaves, airborne debris and large clumps of weeds have blocked gutters and downpipes leaving the water to run down the outside of the downpipe (and onto the building exterior) or to just pour over the gutter and down the wall causing dampness and insurance claims.

Now there is a new generation of pole cleaning equipment. We're all familiar with pole window cleaning, but now there are a

growing number of firms making specific vacuum-operated systems to clean the most badly blocked gutters and can safely remove a building brick from high-level and lift it safely to the ground.

There is a range of basic systems and sophisticated ones with the latest lightweight carbon fibre technology poles and high-level TV cameras so you can view the monitor at ground level and help guide the swan neck on the pole end to the blockages. You can even make a DVD recording of the job being done so there is no room for cowboy

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cleaners that claim to have done the job. Clients can see before, during and after cleaning results on their chosen screen.

So PFM went out into the marketplace to check out anonymously the latest developments that will carry out gutter

cleaning. It found four manufacturers in the UK and ordered them through a third party, seven days ahead of our proposed product comparison testing. We ordered the basic kit from each company. One company's products were not available in time so could not be tested. Brand A arrived complete, Brand B came complete with camera and monitor as standard and Brand C arrived complete.

We were impressed with Brands B and C as they supplied easy-to-manage tough protective carry cases. Brand A arrived but it was not the model that had been requested.

### **Independent tester**

What was needed was an independent high-level gutter and window cleaning specialist who could constructively assess the three products based on ease of assembly, weight (important if you want to make gutter cleaning a one-man task); to compare what is included or not included in the basic model and of course value for money. Ian Robson, director of Progress Cleaning Services in Southampton, was selected because of his company's credentials as one of the largest and most qualified window cleaning specialists in the UK with nearly 50 years' experience including many using pole systems.

The product testing took place on the premises of LCC Support Services – its three storey buildings provided a convenient testing ground. Lorraine Larman, LCC's head of health and safety made the arrangements and adjudicated to see fair play. Robson found all three products did what they promised to do but naturally some did it better and some of the basic kits came with

more gizmos and extras to make the task easier and more effective.

Robson says he couldn't really judge whether the gutters were completely clean as brand B had a camera included as

standard. Having put all three brands through their paces, he made some general judge's comments and some on each brand.

### **Brand A**

This was the slowest and most difficult to set

up, taking 11 minutes compared with four or five for the other brands. It was also the heaviest – with a 60ft pole it needs three men to lift it from the ground after assembly which is high cost in use of labour. This can only be operated one floor with one man and two storeys with two.

Robson said: "It has very poor instructions and i'm not happy with the wheels which are easily destroyed. The motor is a waste of time (from previous experience). The clips become unglued easily and the poles jam with dust. Construction was not easy and the poles were dented on arrival – probably something relating to the dreadful delivery cardboard packaging which was split open – and there is no carry bag."

### Brand B

This was supplied in two carry cases – one for the poles etc and one for the TV monitor and camera, which are included as part of the basic kit – something one other supplied as an extra. At four minutes this was the fastest to assemble. It comes with a good quality Nilfisk Alto vac and a very durable filter. Robson said: "It has a nice strong frame on wheels and is the only manufacturer offering free staff training anywhere – awesome! Bloody good camera system which means we can give clients DVD or stills of their gutter cleaning.

"Two outstanding features include the very clever swan neck and its fittings, but they would be improved with a retaining tie so my guys don't lose the clips.



The swans' necks – one with camera the other with jubilee type clip

"This is quality and will last, it is light – very, very light with nice carbon fibre poles which are by far the easiest to assemble and unlike others don't jam together with moisture or dust. If I could buy anything, I would buy this one."

### Brand C

Supplied in a strong carry case it is easy

to transport. It took only five minutes to assemble which was almost the fastest. Its ability to fit into an estate car is as good as any we tested and its instructions were the best. It has a good quality hose and Nilfisk Alto vacuum. General quality of poles and bag are terrible. One pole had a broken top and they jam together making them very difficult to separate.

Robson said: "I definitely did not like the rubber swan neck at the top which bends and blocks. It is held on with a jubilee type of clip which will not last long with my men. Rubbish quality poles, the most likely of the three to block, the worst head I have seen. I don't like it at all and the great vacuum does not save it."

Robson's choice was Brand B, which – for the record – is SpaceVac, a Northampton-based manufacturer of single person operated, lightweight pole gutter cleaning systems.

• This testing was carried out independently and unpaid by Ian Robson, a UK expert on window cleaning; on neutral ground. David Strydom, editor of PFM, was present.

