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OPTICAL FIBRES

This invention relates to coated optical fibres and methods for their production. In particular the invention relates to coated optical fibres which are especially
5 suitable for use in blown fibre systems.

5 Optical fibres are now widely used in place of electrical conductors in the communications field. Typically, glass optical fibres have an external diameter in the range 100 - 150 μm , usually 125 μm . Polymer fibres are normally somewhat larger in diameter. Unlike conventional
10 electrical conductors, optical fibres are generally fragile and easily damaged to the detriment of their performance and lifetime. Consequently, it is important to protect the fibres from damage.

 The first step in the protection of optical fibres
15 occurs, at least in the case of glass fibres, immediately after the fibres are drawn and involves the application of one or two layers of synthetic resin coating. This protection, whether one or two layers, is somewhat loosely referred to as the "primary coating", and fibres so coated
20 are sometimes known as "primary coated fibres". Alternatively, and more accurately, the coatings are sometimes referred to as the primary and secondary coatings, and this convention is adopted in this specification. The first coating, which is typically a low-modulus silicone or
25 acrylate polymer is applied to the fibre surface at a point no more than about a metre from the point where the fibre is drawn down. Commonly, the primary coating is UV curable. The primary coating is also known as the buffer layer, since it serves to buffer the fibre from lateral pressure. The
30 reason for applying the primary coating practically as soon as the fibre is formed is that the strength of glass and other small fibres depends critically on the extent to which their surface is free from cracks and microcracks. In order to avoid the formation of microcracks it is important to
35 protect the fibre surface from dust and other causes of

abrasion, and to this end the zone between the point of fibre drawing and the point of application of the primary coating is kept short and dust-free. The mechanical properties of primary coating materials are critical to the performance of optical fibres. In particular, the coating should not induce microbends in the fibre and the mechanical properties should be compatible with those of the fibre.

A particularly important consideration is the material's coefficient of thermal expansion (TCE). The difference in TCEs between the material of the fibre (normally a silica-based glass, which means a low TCE) and that of the primary coating (normally with a TCE an order of magnitude or more greater) means that at low temperatures fibres may be subject to considerable compressive stress, significantly increasing optical loss. This effect is generally made worse by increasing the primary coating thickness, and of course with reduced temperatures.

The secondary coating is typically a hard and robust material, such as nylon, to protect the primary coating, and hence the fibre, from damage. [Increasingly, acrylates, e.g. urethane acrylate, are being used in place of nylon.] Again, the physical properties of the material are very important in terms of their effect on the optical performance of the fibre, particularly its temperature sensitivity. Particularly now that optical fibres are being more widely deployed, it is important that optical fibres can be packaged to withstand extremes of temperature. In practice, it is insensitivity to low temperatures, e.g. sub-zero centigrade, which is the most difficult to achieve. For network use in continental climates, it is desirable that optical fibres should show no significant excess loss at temperatures as low as -20, -40 or even -60°C. Some relevant aspects of the temperature sensitivity of optical fibres are dealt with in the following papers:

T. A. Lenahan, A. T. & T Tech. J., V.64, No. 7, 1985, pp 1565 - 1584,

T. Yabuta, N. Yoshizawa and K. Ishihara, Applied Optics, V. 22, No. 15, 1983, pp 2356 - 2362; and
Y. Katasuyama, Y. Mitsunaga, Y. Ishida and K. Ishihara, Applied Optics, V. 19, No. 24, 1980, pp 4200 - 4205.

5 Conventionally, the primary or secondary coated fibres, which typically have a diameter of about 250 μm , are made up into cables which provide the required level of mechanical protection for the optical fibres. It is important to protect the optical fibres from strain,
10 consequently it is usual to decouple the optical fibres from the bulk of the cable structure. Typically, this decoupling is effected by locating the optical fibre(s) in a tube or slot in which the fibre is free to move. In addition to decoupling the fibres, it is necessary to ensure that the
15 rest of the cable structure can withstand the loads which will be applied during installation or use of the cable, without imposing excess strain on its optical fibres. Since the level of strain which optical fibres can endure without damage is very low, typically less than 0.2 percent, cable
20 structures need to be very strong. Typically, optical fibre cables are installed in much the same way as copper wire cables, that is they are pulled into place through ducts and conduits using a rope attached to a cable end. Cables experience very high tensile loadings during such
25 installation, and consequently optical fibre cables need very considerable reinforcement to prevent their optical fibres being damaged. These requirements increase the size, weight and cost of optical fibre cables.

 An alternative approach to optical fibre installation
30 is described in our European patent EP-B-0108590. In this method the fibres are installed along a previously installed duct using fluid drag of a gaseous medium which passes through the duct in the desired direction of advance. This method, which is known as Blown Fibre or Fibre Blowing uses
35 distributed viscous drag forces to install a fibre unit which is supported on a cushion of air.

Since the duct is installed first, conveniently using traditional cable installation techniques, without any optical fibres and since there is no significant stress imposed on the fibre unit during blowing, it is possible to use very lightweight fibre structures. Indeed, in terms of space-saving and routing flexibility it is desirable if the fibre unit is both small and flexible. Typically, a fibre unit consists of a plurality of conventionally coated optical fibres held together in a lightweight polymer sheath which has a foamed coating. Such multiple-fibre units may also include a ripcord to facilitate the splitting out of the fibres from the unit for termination of the fibres. Examples of multiple-fibre units are described in our European patent EP-B-0157610 and in EP-A-0296836. Fibre units can also usefully consist of just a single fibre provided with a suitably bulky and lightweight sheath, as discussed in EP-B-0157610 and EP-A-0296836. An example of a single-fibre unit is described in EP-A-0338854 and EP-A-0338855.

It has been found to be desirable, e.g. for good blowing performance, for the coatings in a fibre unit to surround the fibres tightly. As a result of this, the mechanical properties of the fibre unit coatings are as significant to the temperature sensitivity of the optical fibres as the mechanical properties of the primary and secondary coatings. It is no surprise, therefore, to learn that in EP-A-0296836 the fibre unit coatings comprise: an inner sheath of a material which is soft and has a low modulus of elasticity, e.g. an acrylate or thermoplastic rubber; an optional intermediate sheath which is hard (greater than 75D Shore hardness) and has a high modulus of elasticity (greater than 900 N/nm^2), to confer mechanical protection on the soft sheath, and an outer sheath of foamed material. This arrangement is akin to the primary and secondary coatings whose application to individual fibres was described above, with the addition of a foamed layer to reduce the fibre unit density and hence improve blowability. However, while there is some similarity between the

requirements made of primary and secondary coatings and those made of what might be regarded as the tertiary and quaternary coatings, particularly when one is only coating a single fibre, there are extra constraints which only apply when one is providing a coating system which has to hold several fibres together. Thus, in a multiple-fibre unit one would expect to use materials having larger elastic moduli and in considerably greater thicknesses. Moreover, when a multiple-fibre unit is bent, the individual fibres will generally each experience different bending forces and will tend to move relative to each other. In addition, the larger diameter of multiple-fibre units means that for a given bend radius the outer surface of the outer coating is exposed to greater tensile and compressive stress than in a single-fibre unit. It is clear therefore that one cannot necessarily expect a coating system which works on a single-fibre unit to work for a multiple-fibre unit. A further consideration is that while one might expect stronger coatings to solve the problem of transition from single - to multiple-fibre units, it has to be borne in mind that the optical properties of the optical fibres in a fibre unit are very dependent on the physical properties of the coatings used in it. In particular, and as mentioned previously, the physical properties of optical fibre coatings markedly affect the temperature sensitivity of optical fibres coated therewith. Moreover, the stiffness of a fibre unit markedly affects its blowing performance. If a fibre unit is too stiff, it will not blow - at least in a real-life environment.

Thus, it is by no means clear that a coating system which works for a single-fibre unit will also work for a multiple fibre unit.

In EP-A-0345968 there is described a range of single-fibre units having an external coating which comprises a radiation-cured polymer containing particulate matter. The particulate matter is variously, PTFE particles, hollow glass microspheres, or hollow polymeric microspheres. The particulate matter, which preferably has an average particle

size of less than 60 microns, is mixed in with the un-cured liquid polymer. The fibre to be coated, which may already have a tertiary buffer layer, is drawn through a bath containing the polymer/particulate mixture to give an outer coating having a thickness in the range 10 to 70 microns. The coating is then cured using UV radiation.

We have found that the coating systems as described in EP-A-0345968 are not suitable for use in sheathing multiple-fibre units. In particular, we have found that such coatings on multiple-fibre units tend to fail when the unit is bent.

We have found that, particularly with multiple-fibre units such as 4-fibre and 8-fibre units, the coating system described in EP-A-0345968 for single-fibre units wherein particulate matter is mixed in with the outer coating polymer, produces fibre units which are very prone to "fibre breakout". As a fibre unit is progressively bent, and thus experiences a progressively smaller bend radius, a certain bend radius is reached at which irreversible damage to the sheathing occurs allowing the secondary coated fibres to be exposed. This phenomenon is known as fibre-breakout. If the bend radius at which fibre-breakout occurs (the minimum bend radius) is so large that a fibre unit is likely to experience its minimum bend radius during normal handling of the fibre unit, the unit is in practice not useable.

It is an object of the present invention to provide an improved coating system for multiple-fibre units. The invention also seeks to provide multiple-fibre units having good long-distance blowing performance and an improved resistance to fibre break-out.

In a first aspect the present invention provides an optical fibre package for blown installation, the package comprising at least one optical fibre and having an outer coating of cured flexible resin, the surface of said resin coating having been modified prior to the cure of said resin, the effects of the surface modification still being detectable.

We have found that by modifying the surface of the resin after its application we can obtain the benefits of increased viscous drag and/or reduced friction without significantly impairing the mechanical properties of the resin. As a consequence it is possible to produce fibre units of good blowability with good mechanical properties - in particular with good fibre break-out performance. These benefits are of particular importance with multiple-fibre units but are also of value in single-fibre units.

Preferably the surface modification comprises the addition of desired particulate matter to the surface of the uncured resin.

The addition of particulate matter enables a wide range of surface effects to be achieved and in particular enables the provision of a surface having a much lower coefficient of friction (with respect to a duct wall) than that offered by the resin alone. The material and shape of the particulate matter can be chosen largely independently and combinations chosen with a view to achieving a good balance of such properties as viscous drag, friction with respect to duct material, break-out resistance, durability, abrasiveness/wear resistance.

Preferably the particulate matter is in the form of balls, for example microspheres. More preferably the balls are hollow.

The round surfaces of balls provide significant surface area to enable good bonding with the uncured resin surface. The round surface also means that the finished unit is not too abrasive, reducing the wear on the working surfaces of the blowing equipment and reducing damage to the walls of ducts during blowing. Additionally, although when very small balls are used some balls may enter and become completely submerged in the outer region of the uncured resin surface, the resin surface itself tends to become covered with balls which are stuck like flies on flypaper - that is with the bulk of each ball projecting above the resin surface. The effect is advantageous in terms of increasing

the viscous drag which is experienced by the unit during blown installation. Additionally, where, as is preferable, the material(s) of the balls has/have been chosen to be such as to have a low friction coefficient with respect to the materials which will be used for the duct surface (which will typically be carbon-loaded high density polyethylene but may for example be a metal such as stainless steel), glass for example, the fact that the surface of the fibre unit is in effect now provided by such a material rather than the resin will mean that the unit has a much lower co-efficient of friction. Each of these effects alone will contribute to increasing the blowability (that is the length of the unit which can be installed in a given duct under given blowing conditions) of the unit, but the combination of the two effects may synergistically increase blowability.

The use of hollow rather than solid balls enables relatively dense materials, such as glass, to be used without significantly increasing the mean density of the fibre unit. Indeed the use of hollow balls may enable the mean density of the fibre unit to be reduced compared to that for the fibre unit without particulate additions, even where the balls consist of a dense material such as glass. Where materials other than glass are chosen for the balls they may also be provided in hollow form, with further potential reductions in density.

As an alternative to the use of balls, the particular matter may be in the form of lumps or flakes.

Preferably a significant plurality of the particulate inclusions are at least 10 microns across.

While the use of particles less than 10 microns across does not affect break-out performance, such small particles tend to offer no improvement in viscous drag effects and there may only be minor reductions in friction. Larger particles are therefore preferred.

Preferred embodiments of the present invention will now be described by way of example only with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

Figure 1 is a schematic cross-sectional view through a two-fibre package according to the invention;

Figure 2 is a schematic cross-sectional view through a four-fibre package according to the invention;

5 Figure 3 is a schematic cross-sectional view through an eight-fibre package according to the invention;

Figure 4 shows schematically the apparatus and test used to ascertain fibre break-out radii;

10 Figures 5 shows a prior art fibre unit which has been subject to breakout;

Figure 6 shows a photomicrograph and analysis of an end section of an 8-fibre unit according to the invention;

Figures 7 and 8 are plots representing fibre package blowability;

15 Figures 9 is a plot showing the effects on fibre attenuation of temperature cycling on a four fibre package at different wavelengths;

Figure 10 is a plot of a friction analysis of several fibre unit types;

20 Figure 11 is a schematic illustrating the method used to assess the frictional behaviour of the units analysed in Figure 10;

Figure 12 is a plot of installation force for several fibre unit types;

25 Figure 13 is a schematic illustrating the major elements in a production line for producing fibre unit;

Figure 14 shows processing details for the production of a typical fibre unit according to the invention;

30 Figure 15 is a sectional diagram showing details of a coating chamber for surface modification according to the invention; and

Figures 16 to 18 are optical micrographs of four-fibre packages according to the invention.

35 Figure 1 shows a two-fibre package having an outer resin layer with modified surface. The two conventional fibres 1, which have both primary and secondary coatings, are nominally 260 μm in diameter. The fibres are positioned on

either side of the centre line of the package, so that their secondary coatings just touch. The fibres are held in a soft buffer layer 2 which has an overall diameter of about 760 μm . In this example the buffer layer comprises a silicone-acrylate, Cablelite 950 - 701 (available from DSM Desotech, The Netherlands). About this buffer layer there is a further resin layer 3 which is a tough layer which serves to protect the buffer layers and fibres from mechanical and chemical attack. In this example layer 3 comprises Cablelite 950-705, a urethane-acrylate resin, and is about 50 μm thick. It is this layer whose surface is modified. In the present example, the modification consists of the inclusion and addition of glass microspheres 4 to the resin surface. The microspheres which are attached to the resin surface only after the application of the outer resin layer 3 to the cured buffer layer 2, are in this example hollow glass microspheres sold under the tradename "Q-CEL 500" by the PQ corporation (PO Box 840, Valley Forge, PA 19482, USA). The mean size (effectively the O.D.) of the microspheres is 68 μm (with a range of 10 - 180 μm). The microspheres are applied to the resin surface in such a way that they do not penetrate as far as the interface between the resin layer 3 and the buffer layer 2. The resin layer 3 is cured after the microspheres have adhered to it, leaving the microspheres trapped like flies on flypaper. The presence of the hard microspheres greatly reduces the friction which exists between the fibre package and the wall of the duct into which the package is blown. The reduction in friction contributes to the enhanced blowability of this package. A second factor which improves blowability is the enhanced viscous drag which the rough surface provides during blowing.

A similar 4-fibre package is shown in Figure 2. Here the four fibres 1 are disposed symmetrically about and equidistant from the axis of the package. Again the secondary-coated fibres are arranged so that their secondary coatings just touch. Inter alia this helps to reduce the

incidence of microbending due to thermal contraction/expansion.

Three examples of 4-fibre package units, numbered 347, 348 and 349, were made. In all these examples the buffer layer 2 comprised Cablelite 3287-9-39 and the outer layer 3 comprised Cablelite 950-705, both being urethane-acrylate resins available from DSM Desotech, The Netherlands. The '39 resin had a secant modulus at 2.5% strain of about 1.0 MPa, a tensile strength of 1.3 MPa, a Shore D hardness of 49 and a 115% elongation. The 705 resin has a tensile modulus at 2.5% strain of about 700 MPa, and a 43% elongation. The microspheres in these 4-fibre examples were hollow glass microspheres sold under the tradename "Q-CEL 520 FPS" by the PQ corporation. The mean size (effectively the O.D.) of these microspheres was 35 μm (with a range of 25-45 μm). Again the microspheres were applied to the resin surface in such a way that they did not penetrate as far as the interface between the resin layer 3 and the buffer layer 2. The resin layer 3, was cured after the microspheres had adhered to it.

The sizes for the three exemplar 4-fibre Units were as follows:

Unit	347	348	349
Diameter of layer 2 (μm)	789	788	788
Diameter of layer 3 (μm)	930	924	913
Thickness of layer 3 (μm)	70.5	68	62.5
Weight (gm^{-1})	0.69	0.70	0.71

Figure 3 shows a similar 8-fibre unit. Four of the eight fibres are arranged as in the previous 4-fibre units. The other four fibres, the outer four, are again symmetrically disposed about the axis of the package, this time on the centre lines which separate adjacent ones of the inner four. As before, the fibres are disposed so that their secondary coatings just touch. The overall diameter of the buffer layer in this case is about 1mm and that of the outer layer is about 1.2mm.

In Figure 6 can be seen a micrograph of a section through an 8-fibre unit according to the invention. The micrograph, which shows some debris and resin loss resulting from the sectioning procedure, shows the extent of microsphere penetration into the outer resin layer. This is more clearly seen from the analysis which accompanies Figure 6 where the extent of penetration has been somewhat exaggerated as it includes the effect of debris.

We have carried out comparative tests to determine the bend radius at which fibre breakout will occur in a fibre unit sheathed according to the technique of EP-A-0345968 and a fibre unit wherein only the surface of the outer layer has been modified, that is according to the present invention.

The apparatus used is shown in Figure 4. Two grooved plates (5 and 6) are mounted parallel to each other on guide rods (7). A motor (8) is mounted on one guide rod arranged so as to allow the motor to drive one grooved plate (6) towards the other while maintaining the two plates in parallel. In use the fibre unit under test is placed in the groove in each plate and allowed to adopt a free loop shape between the plates. The distance D between the plates is then slowly reduced and the apex of the fibre unit loop is carefully observed for signs of fibre breakout.

The fibre unit radius at which this is first observed is the minimum bend radius.

The results of these comparative tests are shown in Table 1.

	Microspheres mixed in outer layer resin (as in EP 345968)	Microspheres applied to surface of outer layer resin (according to the present invention)
4-fibre unit	10mm $\pm$ 2	2mm $\pm$ 0.5
8-fibre unit	50mm $\pm$ 5	25mm $\pm$ 2

Table 1 minimum bend radii

The microspheres, outer layer resins and unit diameters used in these tests were identical for each of the two techniques for applying microspheres. As can be seen from table 1 the fibre units produced by the method of EP-A-0345 968 have significantly larger minimum bend radii than those produced by modifying only the surface of the outer layer resin. In practice we have found that when handling fibre units with microspheres mixed in to the outer layer resin fibre breakout was a significant problem. Indeed we found such fibre units unusable for all practical purposes. From a comparison of our new product and those made according to EP 345968 we have concluded that this poor breakout performance is probably due to the presence in the EP345968 products of microspheres at the interface between the outer and inner resin layers.

Figure 5 is a photomicrograph showing an example of a fibre unit according to EP345968 which has suffered fibre-breakout; the accompanying analysis shows more clearly the nature of the failure.

In a further comparative test two 4-fibre units, one coated according to the present invention and one coated according to the technique of EP-A-0345968 were wrapped loosely around a mandrel of 40mm diameter and placed in an oven at 60°C. After 100 hours the unit coated according to '968 had suffered fibre breakout, whereas even after 1000 hours the unit coated according to the present invention had not suffered fibre breakout.

A further factor which we have found to be important in preventing fibre breakout is the choice of an outer layer resin with an appropriate percentage elongation figure. Manufacturers such as DSM Desotech measure the percentage elongation of a resin by stretching a cast film of the resin to its elastic limit.

A film of the resin of thickness 70 to 80 microns is first formed by curing with a dual D end mercury lamp which provides 3.5Jcm² of U.V. radiation at the film surface. Then the film is stretched in an environment of 22 to 24°C and 50

to 55% relative humidity and the percentage elongation at failure is recorded.

We have found in practice that for a four fibre unit produced by applying microspheres to the surface of the outer layer an appropriate percentage elongation for the outer layer resin is approximately 35 %. One such suitable resin is cablelite 950-705. We have found that a resin with a percentage elongation of approximately 15% (such as Cablelite 3287-9-31) is not sufficiently flexible to avoid fibre breakout when used for the outer layer of a 4-fibre unit.

For an 8-fibre unit we have found that due to its large diameter a higher percentage elongation is required of the outer layer resin than for a 4-fibre unit.

A method which we have found useful for estimating the percentage elongation required for different unit sizes is to scale the percentage elongation in accordance with the longitudinal extension experienced by the outside of a loop of a unit. For example a four fibre unit of 0.93mm outer diameter formed into a loop of radius 10mm would have a longitudinal extension at the outside of the loop of

$$(0.93/2)/(10 + (0.93/2)) = 0.044$$
$$= 4.4\%$$

While an 8-fibre unit of 1.3mm outer diameter bent into a loop of the same radius would have a longitudinal extension of

$$(1.3/2)/(10 + 1.3/2) = 0.061$$
$$= 6.1\%$$

Since we have found in practise that a material of approximately 35% percentage elongation is satisfactory for such a 4-fibre unit we can estimate that a percentage elongation of

$$\frac{6.1}{4.4} \times 35 = 48.5\%$$

should be satisfactory for an 8-fibre unit.

Initial tests carried out with two high percentage elongation resins from DSM Desotech indicate that, in fact, a percentage elongation of approximately 40 (as measured by the technique described above) may be sufficient to avoid fibre breakout in an 8-fibre unit at a radius of 10mm. The two high elongation resins were RCX-4-207 and RCX-4-208 having percentage elongations of 42 and 40 respectively.

In increasing the percentage elongation of a resin for use in the outer layer of a high fibre count unit a consequent increase in the frictional properties of the resin should be avoided as far as this is possible.

Some plots of blowability tests for fibre packages of the type shown in Figures 2 and 3 are shown in Figures 7 and 8. Note that Figure 7 is for blowing into a trial duct network of 3.5mm bore duct spread over a 4 acre site, the duct length being just over a kilometre. Figure 8 is for a test carried out using a 300 metre duct wound in 4 layers around a 0.5 metre diameter drum.

Figure 9 shows the effects on fibre attenuation of temperature cycling a sample 4-fibre unit.

To achieve good blowability of a fibre package unit low friction between the unit and the duct into which it is being installed is required. Figure 10 shows a comparison between the coefficient of friction of two units modified with microspheres, a unit modified with mica flakes and an unmodified unit. The coefficient of friction is measured by attaching a weight (shown along the x-axis of Figure 10) to one end of a unit which has been wound around an 85mm diameter glass tube and applying a known force to the other end of the unit. Referring to Figure 11 the coefficient of friction is calculated from $\mu = (\ln T_1 - \ln T_2) / 2\pi N$. The average of μ for five traversing speeds (controlled by T_2) for each weight T_1 is taken. From Figure 10 it can be seen that the coefficient of friction for both the microsphere modified units is lower than for the other two units.

A further factor which affects blowability is any enhanced viscous drag provided by modification of the surface

of a unit. This factor can be assessed by measuring the installation force generated on a unit while it is being installed into a short length of duct (a short length is used so that contributions from frictional forces are negligible).

5 Figure 12 shows this installation force measured for various units. SF12 microspheres have a mean size of 65µm, while CPO3 microspheres have a mean size of 10µm.

As can be seen all the modified units have improved viscous drag over the unmodified unit.

10 The fibre packages shown in Figures 1 to 3 were all made on what is essentially a standard multifibre packaging line of the type used for the manufacture of ribbon cables. Suitable equipment can be obtained from Heathway Limited of Milton Keynes.

15 The equipment modifications which were needed for the manufacture of the packages shown in Figures 1 to 3 are limited to the coating dies plus the addition of surface modification equipment.

20 Briefly described with reference to Figure 13, the processing sequence is as follows. The fibres are used straight from the drums on which they are despatched by manufacturers. The drums are mounted on one or more pay-off stands from which they are fed under tension, via individual or common guide wheels, to the first pressurised coating system (4). The fibres pass down the tower, through the first pressurised coating system (4), through a resin-curing system (5) (typically including a UV lamp system), possibly through a size monitor, through a second pressurised coating system (6), through a surface modification zone (7), through 25 a resin-curing system (8) (again typically including a UV lamp system), possibly through another measuring or inspection unit, and then on, via a capstan, to a drum or pan winding system. Typically the winding system will be not part of the processing tower.

30 Figure 14 shows the parameters used in the above process to produce unit 348 and these parameters are typical of those used to produce all 4 fibre units,

The coating die which is used in each case to produce the inner coated structure, that is the layer 2 in Figures 1 to 3, is of special significance for all multiple fibre counts. This coating die is located in the first pressurised coating system. This inner coating die is specially profiled to hold the fibres in registration prior to the application of the resin 2. This enables an accurately centred structure to be produced, facilitating the achievement of uniform coating thicknesses and hence improved performance and stability. The outer coating die, which is used for the application of the outer resin layer, is a standard fibre coating profile.

The die arrangement for the pressurised coating system is as follows. A die body has a fibre input, a fibre output and a pressurised resin feed. There is a first die on the fibre input and a second, larger die on the fibre output. The size and shape of the output die determine the size and shape of coating achieved. In the present embodiments we are only interested in achieving resin coatings of circular cross-section, so the output die is shaped accordingly. On the second pressurised coating system the incoming fibre assembly already has the first resin coat, the buffer layer 2 of Figures 1 to 3. Thus a circular orifice, appropriately larger than the buffer layer diameter, is suitable for the inlet-end die on the second coating system.

It is the inlet-end die of the first pressurised coating system which is used to ensure the registration of the fibres at the time of coating with the first resin layer. In the case of the 2-fibre unit, the die throat is elliptical with the major axis of the ellipse approximately twice the minor axis, and the minor axis being about 10% larger than the diameter of the optical fibres which are to be packaged. The die inlet is of circular section and, as is conventional, flared. To avoid wear and damage to the fibre and dies, in each die head the two dies should be concentric and accurately aligned with the fibre path and each other.

For the 4-fibre package the die throat of the relevant die is similar to that for the 2-fibre package except that the "ellipse" has major and minor cases of virtually the same length. In practice, the long axis is as in the 2-fibre package case and the "short" axis is double the length of the short axis used in the 2-fibre package case.

For the 8-fibre package the die throat is a more complicated shape, reflecting the desired disposition of fibres in the package. Again, a 10% clearance is provided relative to the nominal outline of the fibres in the package.

In view of the relatively tight tolerance that is required of the die dimensions if the fibre package is to be suitably uniform, it is of course important to ensure that the incoming fibres are supplied to a suitably tight specification.

In the embodiments shown in Figures 1 to 3, the surface modification was achieved by adhering glass microspheres to the surface of the resin 3. The microspheres come as a free-flowing powder. Because of their small size and low density, it is readily possible to fluidise or aerate a mass of them. By causing there to be such an aerated mass about the wet resin surface 3 between the second pressurised coating system and the second resin curing location, it is possible to get microspheres to adhere to the wet resin. To assist this process and to give a uniform distribution of microspheres on the surface of the package, it is preferable to electrostatically charge the microspheres after they have been fluidised. This is done by passing the fluidised microspheres through a conventional electrostatic spray gun operating at 10 - 100 kV before they are directed at the fibre package. The charged microspheres are attracted to the fibre package while being mutually repulsive, thus facilitating a controlled, uniform coverage of the fibre package surface.

Figure 15 shows an enlarged view in cross-section of the coating chamber (7) of Figure 13, in which the electrostatic gun 9 can be seen.

In addition to the above-mentioned Q-CEL 500 and Q-CEL 520 FPS microspheres, there are other suitable microspheres. Q-CEL 400 (available from AKZO Chemicals), which has a mean particle size of 75 μm (80% in the range 10 - 120 μm) and a lower density than Q-CEL 500, Q-CEL SF, which has a 100% size range of 10 - 125 μm , with a mean of 65 μm , "Extendspheres XOL 70", with a nominal size of 70 μm , and "Extendspheres SF12" with a mean size of 65 μm are particularly suitable.

Figures 16 and 17 are optical micrographs of four-fibre units. Both units have a buffer layer of Cablelite 950 - 701 and an outer layer of Cablelite 950-705. The microspheres (Extendspheres SF12) were applied electrostatically using a gun voltage of 90KV and can be seen to be uniformly distributed on the outside surface of the outer layer. The units shown in Figure 18 have Q-CEL 500 microspheres.

As an alternative to the use of microspheres we have achieved good results with thin platelets of natural mica, with sizes in the range 40 - 200 μm , which are sold as pigments under the tradename "Iriodin" by Merck. Again, we have found that the use of electrostatic coating is advantageous.

More irregularly shaped non-plate-like particles, i.e. lumps, may of course be used in place of the microspheres or platelets. The lumps may be of glass or of a polymer which will give rise to low friction of the fibre unit against the relevant duct material, for example PTFE particles such as those described in EP-A-0345968 could be used.

It should be noted of course that the microspheres are not, and need not be, perfectly spherical.

A further alternative is to modify the resin surface without the addition of particulate matter. By passing the uncured second resin 3 through a ring of air jets directed at the coating surface we have achieved a significant and useful texturing. Again of course the resin is cured after being textured.

The following tests have been used to demonstrate the mechanical performance of the fibre packages according to the invention. No permanent damage is defined as:

- 5 (a) the reversibility of attenuation with ± 0.05 dB measured at a wavelength of 1300 nm at 20°C.
- (b) a maximum change in diameter ratio of 0.05, after any mechanical test. Where diameter ratio is the ratio of the maximum diameter to the minimum diameter of the fibre unit.

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Strength

The fibre unit shall have sufficient strength to withstand a tensile load equivalent to the weight per unit length of the fibre package multiplied by the maximum blowing length. The load shall not produce a total strain exceeding 0.25% in the fibres, and shall not cause permanent damage to the component parts of the unit. The load shall be sustained for 10 minutes and the strain of the fibres monitored. The target value for the residual strain in the fibres after the load is removed is zero. A maximum of 0.05% would be acceptable for production units.

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Flexibility

The fibre and the component parts of the package shall not suffer permanent damage and shall regain circularity when the package is repeatedly wrapped and unwrapped by hand 4 complete turns for 10 complete cycles, around a mandrel 40 mm in diameter.

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Compressive Stress

The fibres and the component parts of the package shall not suffer permanent damage during the application of a compressive load of 50 Newtons applied between two flat plates of dimensions 50 mm by 50 mm. The plate edges shall have a radius of 3 mm. The load shall be applied for a period of 60 seconds.

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Also a destructive compressive test is applied in which a compressive load of 500 Newtons is applied for a period of 15 minutes. As a result of this test the fibre must not be broken, but the fibre unit need not meet the diameter change test described above.

Blowability

Type 1 Tube

The fibre unit shall be blown into a 300 ± 30 m length of BT-approved 3.5 mm ID tubing wound onto reels of 500 mm barrel diameter and 250 to 300 mm between flanges.

The installation period for this length shall not exceed 30 minutes using standard BT approved blowing apparatus.

Type 2 Tube

The fibre unit shall be blown into a 1000 ± 30 m length of BT approved 3.5 mm ID tubing installed into a BT-approved route.

The installation period for this length shall not exceed 100 minutes using standard BT-approved blowing apparatus.

These blowing tests apply over the temperature range 0 to $+60^{\circ}\text{C}$.

Fibre units 347, 348 and 349, blew into a 300 metre length of 3.5mm bore duct, wound about a drum 0.5 metre diameter, in between 12 minutes and 12 minutes 40 seconds, with an applied pressure of 7 bar. The blowing head was a wheeled head as described in EP-B-108590 and the duct was as described in EP-A-432171. The average installation rate was therefore about 24 metres per minute.

It is believed that the blowability of units according to the present invention is improved, at least when hard microballs are used, because the microballs are not coated in the resin of the fibre unit, unlike those made according to the technique of EP-A-345968.

Of course units made according to the present invention may comprise single-mode fibres or multimode fibres or both together.

CLAIMS

1. A method of making an optical fibre package in a continuous process, the method comprising the steps of:
 - i) positioning a plurality of moving optical fibres in a predetermined spatial relationship;
 - ii) forming a first resin coating about the plurality of moving optical fibres; and
 - iii) curing said first resin coating while maintaining the plurality of moving fibres in said relationship; the method being characterised by the additional steps of:
 - iv) forming a further resin coating about the cured coating formed in step iii);
 - v) modifying the surface of said further resin coating; and then
 - vi) curing the said further resin coating so as to retain effects of step v).
2. A method as claimed in claim 1 wherein the resin of said first resin coating has a lower modulus of elasticity than the resin of said further resin coating.
3. A method as claimed in claim 1 or claim 2 wherein the modifying step (v) produces no significant lasting change in the character of the further resin coating at the interface between the first and further resin coatings.
4. A method of improving the blowability of an optical fibre package, the method including the step of forming a resin coating about the fibre package, modifying the surface of said resin coating to increase the viscous drag coefficient of the package, and curing said resin coating to retain effects of the modifying step.
5. A method as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 4, wherein the resin coating whose surface is modified is a



continuous coating formed about the entire circumference of the fibre package.

- 5 6. A method as claimed in any one of claims 1 to 5 wherein the modification of the resin surface involves the intentional addition of particulate matter to the resin surface.
- 10 7. A method as claimed in claim 6 wherein the particulate matter is applied to the surface through the use of intentionally applied electrostatic attraction,
- 15 8. An optical fibre package for blown installation; comprising at least one optical fibre, the package having an outer coat of cured flexible resin, the surface of said resin coat having been modified prior to the cure of said resin, the modification process having had no significant effect on the character of the underlying resin, effects of the surface modification
20 still being detectable.
- 25 9. An optical fibre package suitable for blowing, the package comprising at least one optical fibre, an inner coating about said fibre, and an outer resin coating about said inner coating, said outer resin coating including a significant plurality of particulate inclusions at least 10 μm across, characterised in that the concentration of said particulate inclusions is significantly greater at the outer surface of said resin
30 coating than at the inner limit of said resin coating.
- 35 10. A package as claimed in claim 9, wherein the innermost third of the depth of said resin coating is substantially free from inclusions of 10 μm or more across.



11. A package as claimed in claim 9 or claim 10, wherein said plurality of particulate inclusions comprise glass microspheres.

5 12. An optical fibre package as claimed in any one of claims 8 to 11 wherein said resin coat or coating over at least the inner half of its thickness retains substantially no effects of the process used to effect the surface modification.

10 13. An optical fibre package as claimed in any one of claims 8 to 12 wherein the effect of the surface modification is confined to the outer 25 percent of the thickness of said resin.

15 14. An optical fibre package as claimed in any one of claims 8 to 13 wherein said resin coat or coating is formed over an inner coat of a resin having a lower modulus of elasticity, the interface between said inner and outer coats being substantially free from any residual effects of said surface modification.

20 15. A package as claimed in any one of claims 8 to 14, wherein the package, at 20°C, has a minimum bend radius, as herein before defined, at which fibre breakout occurs of less than 10mm.

25 16. A package as claimed in claim 15, wherein the package comprises four optical fibres.

30 17. A package as claimed in any one of claims 6 to 16, wherein said outer coat or coating resin has a percentage elongation greater than 30 at 20 degrees celsius.

35 18. A package as claimed in any one of claims 6 to 15, wherein the package comprises eight optical fibres and



said outer coating resin has a percentage elongation greater than 35% at 20°C.

- 5 19. A package as claimed in any one of claims 9 to 11 or of claims 12 to 18 as dependent on any one of claims 9 to 11, wherein the distribution of particulate inclusion size is centred approximately on 35µm diameter,
- 10 20. A package as claimed in any one of claims 9 to 19 wherein said plurality of particulate inclusions comprise mineral flakes.
- 15 21. A package as claimed in claim 16, having only four optical fibres wherein the outer coating resin has a percentage elongation greater than 15 at 20°C.
22. Use of an optical fibre package as claimed in any one of claims 8 to 21 in a blown fibre installation process.
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