

The Telegraph

The rise and fall of the do-it-yourself bug

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Store closures at the DIY giant Homebase reflect a decline in craft skills that we once took for granted.



Throughout the Seventies and Eighties, everyone was DIY-ing. It became a badge of honour to decorate the new baby's bedroom or tile the bathroom Photo: Alamy

I am not entirely surprised that the DIY giant Homebase has announced that a quarter of its stores will be closed down by early 2019. There was a time when I was sustaining their profits single-handedly, with regular weekend visits for paint brushes, rollers, lining paper, wallpaper, nails, screws, Rawlplugs and all the other paraphernalia of the wannabe Barry Bucknell. Now I pay someone else to do it, saving time, money and marital harmony. A hired decorator gets the material more cheaply and uses it more efficiently. The job is also far less likely to be botched.

For younger readers who might not have understood the reference to Barry Bucknell, he was responsible for convincing millions of homeowners who should not have been let anywhere near a hammer that they were capable of being a "handyman".

Bucknell had a television series in the Fifties and Sixties that is credited with having spawned an entire industry. It was called Do It Yourself and the renovation of his house in London was used to show how it could be done. At its peak, it attracted seven million viewers and the BBC employed 10 staff just to deal with the 40,000 letters he received every week.

"Even with all the rehearsing, there were still disasters," he conceded. "I over-soaked the paper for a ceiling and it fell down on me. I had to say, 'This is not the way to do it,' but the viewers loved all that."

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Indeed, they loved it so much that they flocked to shops that sold them the wherewithal to emulate Bucknell. In the Sixties these were high street ironmongers and hardware stores; but the DIY bug spread so rapidly that opportunities for expansion arose. By the end of the decade the first DIY superstore was opened in a disused cinema in Southampton by Richard Block and David Quayle, soon to be trading as B&Q. Within 10 years they had 26 stores across the UK. Two decades later and B&Q ran more than 350 outlets, with competitors such as Homebase, Wickes and dozens of others moving into this highly lucrative market.

Throughout the Seventies and Eighties, everyone was DIY-ing. It became a badge of honour to decorate the new baby's bedroom or tile the bathroom. I have that badge, even if the Winnie-the-Pooh wallpaper has long peeled away.

For my father's wartime generation this was all second nature. Many men learnt at least the basics of DIY from their own fathers or while in the Armed Forces or on National Service. And nor were these abilities confined to men. Many women had worked in factories or on the land during the war, and were more than capable of giving decorating or straightforward repair jobs a go.

The baby-boomer generation was also equipped with rudimentary skills through woodwork and metalwork classes, even if parents were not always thrilled with the objects their offspring brought home to take pride of place in the sitting room.

Nowadays, Design and Technology is taught as a core curriculum subject until the age of 14, though some schools have dropped traditional craft lessons because teachers lack sufficient health and safety training to operate drills, lathes and saws. An Ofsted investigation found that the subject was taught well in just a third of primary schools and two thirds of secondaries. Inspectors said: "There is a need to recognise that craft skills are fundamentally important to some kinds of adult design and technology, as the growing number of modern apprenticeships indicates."

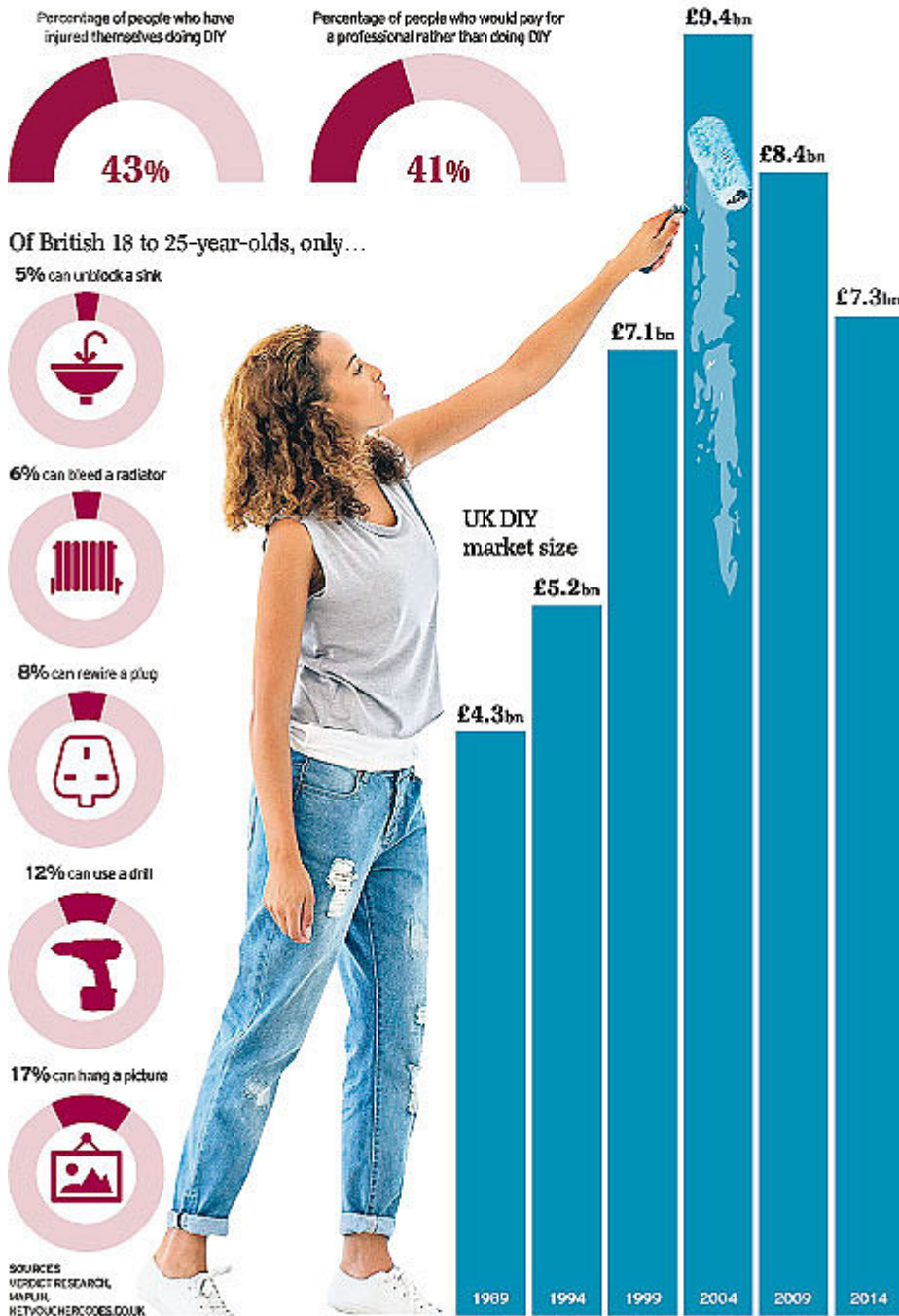
But these skills are not only needed by industry; they also underpin the confidence required to have a go at DIY, an ethic of self-reliance that has been diminishing over the past two decades. This is not confined to home decoration and repair. Once we were able to open the bonnet of our cars and change the spark plugs or the distributor cap. Now the sealed computerised engine is impossible to tinker with unless you have a degree in advanced mechanics.

Fixing any piece of electronic equipment at home nowadays is not only pointless, since white goods are so cheap, but probably illegal under some EU directive. Rewiring is also a no-no for the amateur DIY fiend. Since 2005, all electrical work must meet Building Regulations specifications, which means any big job should be undertaken by a qualified electrician – which, admittedly, does seem sensible. You can forget, too, about digging out that old soldering iron from the shed to make an electronic repair, since miniaturisation has made internal parts too small to see, let alone work on. As for the TV, whereas once a new tube could be inserted if it broke down, now you might as well throw the set away and get a new one, because you won't be able to fix it yourself.

In any case, nothing lasts. The average lifespan for a refrigerator is now 13 years, a washing machine 10, and a dishwasher just nine. Why bother repairing them – even if you did have the know-how? Perversely, although DIY is supposed to save money, we are probably better off getting someone in who knows what they are doing. Recent research by the Lloyds Banking Group found that homeowners are spending a fortune on dodgy DIY projects. Some 3.3 million people spend an average of £3,200 correcting mistakes, many of them self-inflicted. Avoiding DIY also relieves pressure on the NHS: more than 200,000 people are injured each year trying their hand at jobs around the house, with A&E units especially full at holiday periods.

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HOW BRITAIN LOST ITS TASTE FOR HOME IMPROVEMENT



Even if we don't do it ourselves as much as we used to, we still want to keep our houses in order. So we rely on professional decorators and builders who do need to buy equipment – but they tend to do so through trade outlets. This shift may account for the decline in the size of the DIY market over the past 10 years. It may also account for the thousands of skilled eastern Europeans who are flocking to this country for work – we pay them to do the tasks we now eschew.

Research shows that in the Seventies, more than two thirds of British men learnt DIY from their fathers – but if the current decline continues, home maintenance could be extinct within 40 years.

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Young people today have simply lost the skills we once took for granted. According to another survey, only eight per cent say they can rewire a plug and just 17 per cent know how to hang a picture.

Mind you, this is hardly a new phenomenon. In Jerome K Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, Uncle Podger's bungled attempt to hang a picture is surely the funniest account of a DIY botch-job ever written.

"'Oh, you leave that to me,' he would say. 'Don't you, any of you, worry yourselves about that, I'll do all that.' And then he would lift up the picture, and drop it, and it would come out of the frame, and he would try to save the glass, and cut himself; and then he would spring round the room, looking for his handkerchief."

Hours later, after losing the nail and the hammer, damaging the plaster, shocking the children with his profanities and injuring his thumb, Uncle Podger would step back and survey the mess he had made with evident pride.

"Why," he would say, "some people would have had a man in to do a little thing like that!"

Link: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/retailandconsumer/11182595/The-rise-and-fall-of-the-do-it-yourself-bug.html>