

# Missing in action

With construction staff so thin on the ground after the exodus of European labour post-Brexit, homeowners are finding it nigh on impossible to employ decent builders

Hugh Graham

Jennifer Earle is tired of the mess in her hallway. Every time it rains she and her husband have to put towels down in their east London home to soak up water from a leak in their exterior wall. They have been doing this for eight months. In normal times it would be an easy fix, but these are not normal times: for the life of them the couple cannot find a builder.

“The guy who normally does stuff for us has retired, and the ones we have been calling all say they are too busy,” Earle says. “I think there are fewer builders because eastern Europeans have gone after Brexit. And builders are so busy, none of them want to take on a small job as it would get in the way of bigger £100,000 projects.”

She is reluctant to use builder job websites because she has had bad experiences with them. The stress is taking its toll. “Chasing builders takes hours — it is hard to fit it into your life,” says Earle, who runs chocolate tasting tours. “I find it hard not to think about this, it is driving me crazy. It seems all we can do is keep calling, keep changing the towels and wait until things are less busy.”



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She could be waiting a while. Britain is in the throes of a national building shortage. A new survey by the Federation of Master Builders (FMB) reveals that 42 per cent of small to medium-size housebuilders were struggling to find bricklayers, 37 per cent need carpenters, 32 per cent can't find plasterers and 26 per cent of all builders try in vain to hire general labourers. Combined with the shortage of building materials and the lockdown-era boom in renovations, it is the perfect storm for homeowners in need of handymen and women.

“There is a shortage across the country, but it is more

acute in London and the southeast [of England], which had become heavily reliant on EU labour, which made up 9 per cent of the construction workforce, but many have returned home and we are beginning to see the impact,” says Brian Berry, the chief executive of the FMB. “We need to recruit 43,000 extra workers a year for the next four years to meet demand, according to the Construction Skills Network.”

Jeremy Bott, the managing director of Blakes London, a kitchen and joinery studio, says: “Bulgarians and Polish people especially are choosing to leave and move to Holland





## How to avoid rogue traders

- Don't pay upfront. The FMB suggests a 10 per cent deposit is reasonable; anything over 25 per cent is unreasonable. Hold back 5 per cent for snagging, linked to work being signed off by building control.
- Pay by bank transfer so you have evidence if things go wrong. It is much easier to get your money back if you pay by credit card. If you pay cash it is almost impossible to get it back.
- If you can, wait until prices have stabilised and the shortage of builders has eased before doing a project. Right now builders can name their terms.

- Have a written contract, such as a standard form building contract. Understand what are you signing: is it a fixed-price contract or an estimate?
- In building disputes use an escrow account, which is run by a third-party service such as Shieldpay. Only when work is done will funds be released.
- Beware of builders that quickly agree to your price and date. Right now they may be too good to be true.
- Do background checks on the builder at Companies House. Do the company directors have ten dissolved

companies? Red flag.

- Check the builder has the right insurance. Are they members of a trade association?
  - Ask for a few references of recent jobs. Double-check them on planning portals. Do the dates and description match? Chat to the architect and building control company tied to that project. Go and see the project — don't take the builder's word for it. Homeowners are often happy to show it off.
- Tips from Mat Maddocks, founder, [developsafe.com](http://developsafe.com)*

and Germany. A local building company had 400 people on their books a year ago: over the course of this year they've lost 160 people to European migration. This shortage in labour is compounded by Covid. People are working from home and wanting to improve their homes. We've employed nine new members of a team that was only 18 people and we're still run off our feet. The workforce that is available is more transient and will move projects for better salaries."

Suzanne Noble knows this all too well. In May 2020 her managing agent sent a firm to decorate the exterior wall of her lower-ground floor flat in

South Hampstead in north London. The firm botched the job and accidentally removed all the render, so was sacked. It took until October to find a new builder to reapply the render and repair the damage. The render was reapplied by January, but Noble is still waiting for the rest of the job to be finished: a new front gate, a front garden entry phone to be installed, her bathroom repainted from water damage.

"I haven't seen the builder since March because now he has four other jobs, big refurbishments, and clearly I am no longer a priority for him," says Noble, who works from home retraining

unemployed over-50s and says that it is a real hassle not having an entry phone. "I am watching all the other projects he is doing on his Instagram feed — 'look at this project I've got on!' — and getting really angry. I wrote to him yesterday and said, 'Are you going to come and finish?' He just blanked me. He no longer takes my calls."

Harry, a teacher in a Devon town, is similarly frustrated trying to find a builder because wealthy second-homers have lured labourers with bigger projects in resort towns such as Salcombe. "I recently moved into a house that needs doing up — I am looking for a leaking roof to be





fixed, and I can't redecorate my living room until it is," he says. "I need a carpenter to reconfigure the kitchen. It would only be a few days' work, but I have been told I have to wait until Christmas. I have tried four different people and it is the same story. They can't fit me in. Second-home owners from London have loads of money to spend. Builders will go with the long projects rather than the two-day jobs."

The builder shortage means higher wages for them and higher bills for the consumer. The FMB has agreed a 1.5 per cent pay rise with the Unite union this year, but most firms are having to pay more. Spencer Ellis, a director of Kent Building & Construction Ltd, has increased wages by £30 a day to ensure builders don't jump ship, although he is trying to minimise costs to the consumer. Nonetheless, he advises homeowners to raise their usual contingency fund for projects from 15 per cent to at least 35 per cent, to cover higher materials and labour costs.

Other consequences of the shortage are long waits — for a £500,000 project Ellis's firm has a lead time of 12 months, and six months for a smaller project — and a surge in rogue traders and cowboy builders.

The problem will only get worse. The dearth of EU builders coincides with a decline of young Britons entering the industry. The number of construction



apprenticeships have dropped from 16,000 to 13,000 in a year, according to Berry. Ellis said that ten years ago he received 30 to 40 calls a year from youngsters wanting experience at his firm. Last year he received none. "Young people care more about their mobile phones," Ellis says. "They see influencers in Dubai and think they want to do that. They are not interested in getting their hands dirty."

The most critical problem is a lack of lorry drivers to transport materials, according to John Newcomb, the chief executive of the Builders Merchants Federation (BMF): the UK has lost 15,000 European drivers this year because of Brexit and 30,000 UK driver tests because of Covid-19. "The building industry is losing drivers to Lidl and Aldi — the supermarkets pay them

£10,000 more [a year]. Not many young people are doing HGV driving tests because the training costs £3,000 to £6,000, and it is not seen as a sexy job. But it is essential for supply chains."

There is a glimmer of hope that demand will ease in the autumn. "Self-employed builders are still able to claim grants from the government due to the pandemic," Berry says. "Some are thinking they would like to just enjoy the summer and will pick up work again in the autumn."

And as society (hopefully) opens up, the obsession with home improvements will wane. "The shortage will ease as restrictions ease and people start spending money on restaurants, cinema and travel," Newcomb says. "I feel disposable income will move away from home improvements." ■

