
Central heating, mice and simple extensions

We were very lucky when we moved into our first house in 1967. It had (horrible) Venetian blinds for the downstairs windows, and was fitted with (horribly expensive) fan blown wall mounted electrical convector heaters. However it did have a solid fuel fireplace with a small back boiler to heat up the (unlagged) hot water cylinder. There was a gas point intended for a gas poker by the fireplace but we were bitterly cold because the fire would not “draw” properly. It took a Chinese colleague, who also introduced me to red-hot chillies, to teach me how to use the poker properly to get a good blaze going. Not sure if it was the fire or the chillies....

I had been an engineer working at the Philips Research Labs, and through quite indomitable over-confidence I saw no reason why I shouldn't throw out all the expensive electrical kit and the solid fuel open fire and design and install a proper gas fired central heating system. Easy! I studied a couple of texts on central heating systems, worked out the “U” values of the walls and floors; noted the pitfalls to be avoided – or so I thought - and proudly computed the size of radiators and boiler needed. But where to site the boiler in such a small house? Eureka! I could remove the existing fireplace and fit a Baxi combined back boiler and radiant fire. I even strode into the local plumbers' merchants with a great shopping list and asked for an account. The manager was so tickled that he agreed and even gave me trade prices.

All would have been well, except that a neighbour across the road – another engineer – and this time a building engineer - had an identical but mirror image house. He had worked out a cunning plan. He had a design for a small extension – a box to be bolted on to the front of the house. This would comprise a toilet and entrance hall. Best of all, if we both built our boxes at the same time we could just exchange complete front door frames, since they needed to be reversed.

Imagine the situation. We are dealing with building subcontractors. It is now November – a traditionally wet and cold month. Ill advisedly we have started the two building projects as soon as planning permission was granted and at this stage the two front door frames have just been removed. The carpenter will be back in a day or two - probably. To be fair there is a sheet of polythene covering the gaping hole beyond which lies blackness, wind, burglars and

lots of rain. But although the two boxes have had their roofs planked, there is no felt on the roof, so the rain just comes through. In short – it is hellish and everywhere is wet.

So guess what – concurrently I was busy working on my new central heating system. This meant that the rest of the house was in chaos as well. Floorboards had been lifted in strategic places in every bedroom and the tiny landing. But the pièce de resistance was the fireplace work (remember that sixties wallpaper?). Well the fireplace surround had to be removed, together with the tiled hearth. Then the fireclay fireback (the kinky sort of throat thing) had to be smashed and removed. Finally a layer of concrete had to be laid in situ. And all the rubble had to be piled up on the lounge carpet. Judith cried and I must admit that it was a pretty close thing for me too! But I had at least put a large sheet of polythene over the carpet first.

To our horror, a mouse had also found its way into the house during building operations – in fact we had several furry visitors. Whilst the floorboards were up one of them thought it was a merry game to dive down and run scratchily across the ceiling where we couldn't follow. However he was eventually caught, found hiding inside one of the extension tubes of a Hoover floor cleaner, and disposed of humanely.

Ultimately the little box extension was finished; the central heating was installed and worked admirably. Nowadays a drive down the same street some forty years on reveals that a number of other houses have built on almost identical boxes, so the design wasn't so bad after all.

Lessons to learn:

- ❖ Plan ahead
- ❖ Don't take on too much
- ❖ Make sure you know your own limitations
- ❖ Remember the weather
- ❖ Keep control of your subcontractors
- ❖ Remember that when a jobbing bricklayer tells you he is OK to do plastering as well – don't believe him!

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