

Throwing in the trowel

Charles Bodsworth packed up his job at the BBC to try his hand at plastering

MY CRASH COURSE in plastering turned out to be a lesson in learning to wait. You see, plaster just will not be rushed. In fact, if watching paint dry is just too racy for you, then plastering could be right up your street. But neither can you wander off while the stuff dries out: plastering has five stages and woe betide you if you aren't on hand with a smoothing trowel when the time comes.

The week-long plastering course, following on from a week learning basic plumbing, was part of the first stage of my transformation from office drone to self-employed independence. Tired of the routine and the indignity of life as an underling, I decided I needed a career where I could be my own boss, where I would work hands-on and, I hoped, actually make some decent money for a change. Doing up old properties, with an eye eventually to becoming a property investor, seemed to offer exactly the balance of independence and practical and design skills for which I was searching.

In short, I had quit my job as an online journalist for the BBC to do something more interesting. On reflection, glaring at an imperceptibly firming wall with trowel and hawk in hand, plastering seemed perhaps not the best option.

But it was early days in my career change, so I persisted. And it did get easier: like learning to touch-type or ride a bike, you just have to do it again and again and again. In fact, the only thing on my course that filled me with less enthusiasm than waiting for the plaster to dry was getting the stuff to stick to the walls. Or maybe it was getting it to stay on my hawk, which wasn't much fun either. That said, mixing it up in a bucket with a huge electric whisk was certainly entertaining.

The set-up at the Builder Training Centre in Croydon meant that I was exposed to just about every standard plastering job there is. Each student shares a bay with just one other person and each bay has a brick wall, stud partitioning, a chimney breast, a window and a ceiling. From this skeleton we each slowly rendered, boarded and plastered something that looked like a finished room. In fact, a few days in, when the penny had dropped that you can't rush plaster, I liked to think my bay had begun to look pretty good. Which is why I was a little hurt to find a hole punched unceremoniously in my newly plastered wall on the fourth morning. But I duly learnt another valuable lesson, this time in filling and patching an awkward hole. By being allowed to try every task several times with a teacher on hand, I learnt far more in a week than I could ever have done experimenting at home or just watching an expert at work.

The high cost of skilled labour and the difficulty in finding a reliable tradesman to work on our homes or investment properties has led to a small boom in schools such as the Builder Training Centre that offer short courses in practical skills. At the same time, the profile of the students has shifted. These days, alongside the young men expecting to go into the building trade or handymen expanding their skills, there's a host of career changers. My classmates included a management consultant turned plumber, a woman tired of shelling out for home improvements, and a man gathering the skills to build an extension on his house single-handedly.

As for myself, a glorious career as a precision plasterer almost certainly does not beckon, but I am now equipped to sort out small jobs. In fact, back home in my Edwardian house in Harlesden, northwest London, I've found myself critically eyeing my recently decorated walls: papering work that had previously been a source of great pride would have looked far better with a simple plaster skim. And though I'll still get a professional in for big jobs, I can prepare surfaces properly and I have a good idea of what the work involves and what it ought to cost.

And although a few days' practice might not have brought us up to professional standard, I was surprised by just where the course did lead some classmates. One of them, Ben, who after redundancy from BT had decided he no longer wanted to click on a mouse for a living, was offered a job before the week was out. On his way to the school, clad in plaster-caked jeans, he was spotted by a property developer, who handed over his business card and offered him a plastering job once he had completed the course.

As for what I learnt, well, I now know you don't just slap plaster up and expect it to look perfect. I may not have attained the Zen-like qualities of patience and inner calm that professional plasterers, I now realise, must surely

possess. But I can see myself wielding a trowel for the odd wall here and there. And the dream of a life outside the office grind does seem that little bit closer.