

The cruel, dark nights of winter have only just begun and, as if by magic, your electrics start to sputter and promptly go out. You rage against the dying of the light, but there's nothing to be done. You therefore steel yourself for an astronomical bill (there goes the Paris minibreak) and for the arrival of an overweight electrician with ill-fitting trousers and a penchant for your Fortnum & Mason lapsang souchong. He may fix the problem, but he leaves a tsunami of mess and tea-stained china in his wake.

Kelly Vincent may just be the person to put an end to this tiresome cliché. The former NHS administrator set herself up as an electrician in 2011. Since then, business has boomed. Vincent, 33, who works across London and the southeast, has already taken on one (female) trainee and is hoping to hire another. And she's not alone. Exclusive statistics from MyBuilder.com, a website for finding tradesmen, show that the number of women builders, electricians and plumbers signing up to the service rose by 57% in the year to September.

"I think women tend to be a lot neater and, in general, people have more trust in us," Vincent says. Ratedpeople.com, another tradesman site, says the number of women signing up to be listed doubled between June 2011 and June 2013, while Charlie Mullins, founder of Pimlico Plumbers, London's largest independent plumbing company, has also noticed a jump in female applicants.

Government figures corroborate this trend and show that the number of women taking up skilled trades is increasing — albeit slowly. In 2011/12, a total of 230 women signed up for apprenticeships in the construction skills sector, according to the Skills Funding Agency. This is more than double the level seen in 2002/3, but is still dwarfed by the 13,330 men who chose to learn a trade last year. Meanwhile, a recent survey of 300,000 small businesses by the insurance provider Simply Business found that the number of female-led bricklaying businesses rose by 16% in 2012, while building companies and painting and decorating firms run by women rose by 8% and 5% respectively. By contrast, the number of male tradesmen in the building and construction sector fell by 7% last year.

Much has been made of the recession forcing women — who might have been made redundant, or suffered a pay cut



Can she fix it?

Yes, she can — more and more women are entering the traditionally male-dominated building trades. **Alexandra Goss** reports



Chicks and mortar

— to turn to skilled trades, or learn them in an attempt to save money doing up their own properties. For instance, 32% more women than men have signed up to the You Can Do It DIY classes run by B&Q so far this year.

However, a new picture is emerging of women who are giving up stable professions for the increasingly lucrative business of fixing electrics, painting walls and building houses.

"There may still be a glass ceiling, but in the construction industry women are starting to buck the trend, learning trades and setting themselves up as the bosses of small businesses," says Ryan Notz, chief executive of MyBuilder.com. "The construction and home improvement sector has really picked up in the

■ Searching only for female builders, painters and plumbers isn't easy, but MyBuilder.com and Ratedpeople.com are good places to start. Both allow you to post the jobs you want doing — and you can whittle down your choice from the tradesmen (and women) who respond.

■ If you need an electrician, try the Electrical Contractors' Association. Its website (eca.co.uk) allows you to search for a fully qualified member in your area.

■ You can also seek help from members of the online forum DIYnot.com. Past threads discuss topics such as how to find female decorators and plumbers.

past year as confidence has returned to the housing market, and more women are realising that it can be a very good earner."

Vincent agrees. "There is so much work out there," she says. "I've gone from having just a steady flow of work to being really busy. There's so much money to be made — the opportunities are huge."

Marina Ord is also finding her career change surprisingly rewarding. She gave up working as a carer in 2009, after 14 years in the profession, and set up her own house-painting business; having started on her own, she now needs to employ three members of staff.

"Having a female-only decorating firm is a unique selling point," says Ord, 44, who works in the Manchester area.

"A lot of older people in particular feel safer inviting women into their home. We are booked up until Christmas."

And the trend shows no sign of abating. A recent survey by the National Inspection Council for Electrical Installation Contracting (NICEIC) found that 63% of 16- to 24-year-old women were more interested in learning a skilled trade rather than a profession. It has launched a new Jobs for the Girls academy, aiming to help more women succeed in the electrical industry.

"I have started receiving a lot of emails and calls from women who are in college and want to get some hands-on experience," Vincent says. "There's something satisfying about doing a job many think only a man can do."