

A MORNING IN THE LIFE OF A "LIVING ON THE PREMISES" SMALL U.K. ROOFING CONTRACTOR/TRADESMAN

This article is not intended to be a factual minute by minute resume of events. It is, however, based on events that have happened to me.
JOHN BALL • Illustrations by Len Ball

I know there must be many proprietors or even employees of small roofing and indeed many other building related businesses who I hope will understand and can identify with some of the types of problems that we can all encounter in our day to day businesses. The article is intended to be light hearted and amusing even if based on true situations. I hope the reader enjoys reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. J.J. Ball

7AM. on a winters morning.

Thank God it's time to get up. Didn't sleep a wink all night. Rain pelting off the tin roof of the lath store. Those hip ridges we bedded with sand and cement yesterday afternoon, just got the job finished, ladders down and tidied up before the rain came on. 50° pitch roof, natural slates, what a mess that lot will be in.

Were the planks tied on the scaffold on Jon's Job? What about the job Len and his squad felted and fly lathed, at least 18 miles away, but I could swear I heard the felt flapping till it tears.

Don't want to disturb Angeline, the missus. I recall, as I got into bed, she told me she had a headache. Might be able to get my corn flakes before the phone starts ringing.

The phone goes. It's an old lady from the other side of town, she says she is a friend of a friend and she knows we will help her, she heard a bump in the night, there's water coming in through the ceiling rose and dripping off the light bulb and the electricity has gone off. Could I please come round first thing or even send someone? She's afraid of the house catching fire via the electrical system. I jest to her that the rain would probably put it out but she doesn't think it's at all funny and begins to cry. She easily persuades me into promising that I will call round as soon as possible (when it stops raining).

One of the boys rings up to tell me the battery is flat in his car and it won't start and he wants to know what I can do about it. On hearing my suggestion re his battery and his car he retorts that if that's the way I want it he will just go back to bed.

I'm part way through the cornflakes what the postman arrives. He won't get out of the van because the dogs are out so he blasts the van horn and I have to run out into the rain with a donkey jacket over my pajamas (haven't had time to get my clothes on yet) and my feet half into a pair of heavy safety work boots. Postman Pat smiles and bids me good morning as he pushes a bundle of mail through his very slightly open van window while the dogs playfully chew the lower leg of my pajamas.

I run back in, sorting the mail as I go. I push aside all the envelopes with windows, throw an assortment of mail from computer firms, mail order businesses, newspaper bingo cards and the like into the bin and I am so eager to open the only interesting one, that as I tear a strip along the edge of it I neatly tear a half inch strip off the bottom of the only cheque in the post, removing both the banks official number and obliterating the signature, and the cornflakes have gone soggy.

At least the grey dawn is breaking. It is at this stage I notice a strange car in the yard and the employee who couldn't get his car started is showing two respectable looking gentlemen the three pallets of second-hand slates that some months ago, I bought off a gypsy, who having completed the cash deal with me, shot off in an awful hurry. I really was rather apprehensive at the way he left looking over his shoulder. I was torn between pushing them into a dis-used quarry hole (fear of the law) or selling them off to another contractor at a vast profit. Looks like it's too late for either now! The law has tracked down the slates?

Another two cars arrive with a few more of the boys. They are rather late because it's raining as they drive slowly past the unlit window of the yard office towards the house. I move smartly towards the bedroom to get dressed, since I believe it lowers the morale of the men if they find me in my pajamas after 9 am, neither am I in form for the certain sarcastic jibes!

As I go, I leave Angeline to give the men their detailed written instructions, carefully written out by me over a few hours the previous night. However, the main contents of these are now irrelevant since, due to the weather, the work cannot be done. Schedules will have to be re-arranged, since some work, which was not so urgent, has now to be given top priority due to the effects of the bad weather. Priorities will change throughout the day according to which irate customer is on the phone at any given time.

I have just kicked off my pajama bottoms when I have to reach for the phone again. It's the man with the hip ridged roof we finished yesterday. There's a sickness in the bottom of my stomach, but all he's telling me is how pleased he is to have the job finished and how well it all looks, and by the way, we left a ladder and plastic container of funny looking green liquid behind. The label got washed off in the rain. I give a great sigh of relief, some of the boys must have thought to put accelerator into the mortar. Those ridges are probably alright. The boys are not so bad after all, and the gloom lifts slightly.

I have one leg in my trousers then the phone goes again. The local offices of an international company, with offices in Hong Kong, Sydney, New York, and Greater Wallop (according to their very impressive upmarket and extremely expensive looking business literature) wants me to re-consider our quotation for supplying and fixing roof tiles on a new office block.

Their client has decided to install a 1.75 million pound sterling computer designed and controlled heating, ventilating and insulation system. They have also substantially upgraded their internal decor, carpeting and furnishing, and the project is now costing an enormous lot more than they had budgeted for. As our contract had not yet been signed, if we cannot find a way to cut the roofing costs drastically, then they may have to consider another roofing contractor.

I wish them well and put my other leg into my trousers. I hop about on one leg, pulling on my socks with the phone tucked under my chin as one of the squad leaders



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in the phone tells me they won't be going to work today — it's too wet. I thank him kindly and pull my shirt on, removing the telephone down my left sleeve.

I can hear Angeline talking to someone, the two respectable gentlemen who had been looking at the pallets of slates! (God, I had forgotten about them). My heart is in my feet as I go to the back hall. We exchange feeble hand shakes as Angeline remarks that I am looking rather pale. After some discussion that sounds as if it's coming up 13 feet of 4 inch soil pipe, my numbed brain goes pop and I realize that they want to buy the slates. I shake hands all over again and the morning has taken on a much greater brightness. I am so relieved that I almost give them away and Angeline leads them off to the yard office to type out an official invoice including V.A.T. I feel I have cleared my conscience.

I ring a supplier regarding tiles that did not arrive on a site yesterday. He has been trying to ring me. The tiles are on site at this very moment. The lorry has backed in as far as possible but has got bogged down. Unfortunately, the off-loading grab had developed a serious fault. The next door neighbor who sold off his side garden for the site is hopping mad at the mess the 40' articulated lorry is making of his front lawn.

The builder and his men have gone home. Can I get a squad over right away to "hand ball" the tiles off and bring some planks — there's a foot of mud everywhere.

Meanwhile the boys sit round the red-hot pot-bellied stove in the workshop, making colorful remarks regarding my written instructions and drink their 10 o'clock tea.

The phone goes again. The lady with the leaky light bulb wants to know if I had the phone off the hook because she couldn't get through. She thinks she smells something burning. I am tempted to tell her that smells don't normally travel down phone lines and perhaps the seat of my trousers is on fire, but instead I hand the phone to Angeline who consoles her with talk of the flower arranging class on Friday evenings and the latest scandal at the senior citizens Wednesday Club.

I suddenly realize that I haven't yet answered the call of nature. That'll have to wait for a few minutes.

I run down to the work shop whistling as I go (I'm a coward at heart) where the men sit round the stove on boxes of nails, upturned buckets and an old broken deckchair gloating over page three and passing round glossy magazines depicting various bits of female anatomy draped over motorcycles, etc. while the cup of a flask gradually turns into a twisted heap of molten plastic on the stove top.

The apprentice pretends to be cutting eaves slates on a bench in the corner where it is too gloomy to even see the slates never mind cut them. I explain my concerns regarding the wet stormy weather, the old lady's problem and the broken lorry. I don't think they hear me, must be the rain on the tin roof



THE MEN SIT AROUND THE STOVE

and

the sizzle of the water running down the hot stove pipe. I raised my voice somewhat and add a touch of color to my words. One of the boys turns his head slightly, rolls his eyes and looks up at the underside of the tin roof. They all nod sympathetically, and with a certain amount of mumbling, all volunteer to go and look at the old lady's light fitting. They are a good bunch of lads, but the weather gets to all of us.

I delegate Len and the apprentice to go and see her. He is to take a miscellaneous assortment of slates, tiles, ridges etc, a bit of lead and a tube of mastic if only to do a temporary job. He also takes half a dozen new laid eggs Angeline has promised her.

The outside phone bell is ringing again. I pack the rest of the boys off, with some reluctance on their part, to unload the bogged down lorry and then to visit their respective jobs and check them out. The customers like to know that at least we are thinking about their work.

I run back up to the yard office to answer the phone (must try to remember where I left the cordless phone, probably sitting on a stack of tiles in the rain. The ringer on it hasn't worked since it fell out of my pocket when I was leaning out reversing the pick-up and I backed over it with the front wheels). It is a builder who is having trouble getting money from a customer. One problem he says is that the roof is leaking. There's water coming down the chimney breast and dampening the wall and adjoining ceiling in the drawing room. It is obvious we haven't done the lead flashing properly or the tiles haven't been cut correctly. Counting quickly up to ten to keep my hackles down I tactfully remind him that I had pointed out when we were doing the job that the lead damp proof tray had been built in three courses of brick too low.

"Oh yes," he says, not sounding very convinced that it's anything to do with some silly idea of lead trays in the chimneys anyway, and knowing that he hasn't paid me yet he asks me what I can do with it. I respectfully suggest he gets in touch with the bricklayer and/or the brick manufacturers who might recommend some form of liquid treatment. Knowing him to be a bit of a wit I suggest he has some liquid treatment himself in the form of a couple of stiff whiskeys before he goes to look at it. I reckon I have put that one back where it belongs. Whatever else he is, he's straight with the money and I'll get paid all right.

While I'm in the office, I fill in the mens' time and materials against their jobs for the last few days and also phone a merchant who delivered lead the day before yesterday, to advise him that I ordered code 5 lead and he sent me double the quantity of code 3. He explains that they hadn't got code 5 but thought that two layers of code 3 would be even better. He has code 5 now but can't deliver until next week. I need it tomorrow.

A lorry drives into the yard with a pallet of nails. Unfortunately, the size and gauge I wanted urgently they haven't got and the ones they

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I realise they want to buy the slates

term useful purpose after the slate has been correctly installed. Water does not creep through the slate and wet the boards underneath unless the slate has been improperly installed such as with inadequate headlap or is on an inadequate slope, or if the slate has holes or other faults, or if the slate along the eaves has been damaged by gutter installers or roofing contractors.

I'm installing a slate roof. Should I use copper nails or stainless steel screws to fasten the slate? My roofer says I should use screws.

TR: Please don't use screws. The beauty of slate roofs is that they can be taken apart and put back together over time, when needed, for repair and maintenance. Screws will make it impossible to take the roof apart because a slate ripper will not be able to pull them out.

Have questions, comments, rants or raves? Send us mail at Traditional Roofing, 143 Forest Lane, Grove City, PA 16127 USA, or email us at editor@traditionalroofing.com. ☒

sent I did not really want until next month, and only ordered them to help make the delivery costs from the mainland more practical. Now we will have to pay for two deliveries. Talk about being too smart for your own good.

At least the rain is easing. Hopefully, I'll be able to get out to finish that little bit of ornamental roofing at the Rectory in the afternoon.

I sort through a few more papers on the desk and throw two bundles of specifications and bills of quantities into the waste paper bin. They're from large national firms who are taking on work in the area. There's such a mass of paper work and documentation I'm supposed to read and understand that this puts me off for a start.

Neither is there any way that I could morally expect my own employees or my sub-contractors to leave a quality job at the price which these management firms will eventually accept. I briefly consider that I should give them a courtesy telephone call and apologize for being unable to tender, on the other hand they don't go wasting their time on courtesy calls to me.

It's now 12:15 and Angeline calls me from the house to remind me I have a provisional lunch arrangement with a technical rep. and friend from a local manufacturer. I call him up on his car phone and make contact after the third attempt. He is 60 miles away up country so we arrange another date. I had been looking forward to an interesting discussion on the pros and cons of some of his products, over the Chef's Special and a glass or two of the 'creatur' (for medicinal purposes of course) at Murphy's Cellars. However I am somewhat relieved since I have a suspicion that if we had kept this date, then the ornamental roof at the Rectory might tend to become another good intention unfulfilled today.

The phone goes off again. The electrical lady says that nobody has arrived yet. I assure her that Len left at 11 a.m. and should have been there.

After calling at the bathroom, I finish off the rest of my soggy cornflakes with a cup of coffee and four corned beef sandwiches. I am pulling on my boiler suit when the phone rings again and Len says he has got a flat wheel, looks like remains of a slate nail, could someone pick up his spare wheel from the local garage and bring it over.

I pick up my knee pads from the kitchen radiator where they have been quietly drying, give Angeline a peck on the cheek, pat the dogs, and as I walk towards the door, the sun breaks through the scudding clouds.

The phone goes off just as I step into the van, complete with the ladders and tools. I close the van door behind me and drive off to pick up Len's spare wheel and then on to 'Utopia,' the Rectory roof, where perhaps I will have a cold but enjoyable afternoon's therapeutic relaxation plying my trade as a roof slater and tiler. ☒

John Ball won the Gold Medal at the 2000 International Federation of Roofing Trades World Slating and Tiling Championships in Edinburgh, Scotland.


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