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We can't get the staff

As we rush to do up our homes, tradesmen are suddenly in short supply, says **Alexandra Goss**

It is the middle-class soundtrack du jour — not Laura Marling or Daft Punk, but the hum of power tools, the incessant knocking of hammers and the tuneless whistling of assorted workmen. After five years of hunkering down, making do and shelling out only for the most urgent and necessary of home repairs, we Britons are lavishing cash on our homes again. In many parts of the country, you can't walk down the street without coming across a property undergoing a loft conversion, or having a new bathroom suite or windows fitted.

While this may be good news for the beleaguered construction and home-improvement industries — which haemorrhaged jobs throughout the recession — things are not so peachy for impatient homeowners. They have found themselves locked in a frustrating waiting game if they want to have any sort of work done on their home, let alone get it tarted up in time for Christmas.

Bank of England figures show that housing equity rose by a record £15.4bn between April and June, as more people undertook home improvements. Some of the biggest spikes in demand have been for large-scale projects. Ratedpeople.com, a tradesman review website, has seen a huge increase in building projects this year, particularly for loft conversions — the number of such jobs posted on the site is up by 174% compared with 2012.

Demand for extensions has increased by 149%, conservatories by 144% and basements by 124%. As a result, homeowners need to book up to three months in advance and builders are reporting a run on skips.

"Homeowners are taking on large-scale improvement projects rather than moving house," says Lenny Bunn, director of East Kent Property Services. "It can be difficult for people to hire a skip privately due to the current high demand."

Scaffolding, too, is in short supply, with increased numbers of commercial and residential

projects leading to shortages of certain types of equipment — manufacturers are not able to get it off the production line quickly enough.

"This is happening when construction is running at only about 50% of peak levels," says Robin James, managing director of the National Access and Scaffolding Confederation. "As things pick up and we get back to the peak, there's going to be a shortage of scaffolders, materials and timber board." Even brick supplies are running low, with the builders' merchant Travis Perkins reporting insufficient stocks of breeze blocks to meet burgeoning demand.

"Anecdotally, our members say that this year has been unprecedented," says Ryan Notz, chief executive of MyBuilder.com, a website for finding tradesmen. "There is a sense that confidence in property has returned as house prices have picked up —

people think that if they spend money on their homes, they are more likely to get it back.

"In particular, we are seeing a spike in big projects, typically costing £40,000-£80,000, while the number of people building homes from scratch increased by 74% in August compared with the same month last year. London and the southeast — where prices have risen most — are seeing the highest levels

of activity, but demand is picking up all over the country."

The renewed ability to borrow against our homes is fuelling the building boom — Halifax, Britain's biggest mortgage lender, says 40% of the applications for further mortgage advances it received in the second quarter of this year were to fund home improvements.

"The biggest rise in demand we have seen is in the middle of the market," says Kevin O'Connor, managing director of Cranbrook Basements, which operates in London and charges between £200,000 and £350,000 to dig down and extend a typical family semi. "These are people living in family areas such as Wandsworth, who work in middle management — lower-grade investment bankers and back-office staff — and are, crucially, borrowing to fund the purchase. Funding has only really been available to them in the past 12 months."

As well as shelling out for big building jobs, homeowners are trading up and buying high-quality goods and furnish-

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ings for their homes. Aga sales, for example, have seen double-digit growth since this time last year, and middle England's favourite stove brand is no longer the preserve of the countryside — electric Agas are now its biggest sellers, as

increasing numbers of "urban-ites" buy into the dream.

Bathrooms, too, are getting an upmarket makeover, with the retailer Bathstore reporting increased sales of luxurious fittings such as rolltop baths, double sinks and walk-in showers. Farrow & Ball sells more than 1m sample paint pots a year, and at the New England Shutter Company, inquiries have risen by 45% in the past two months. As a result, householders have to wait up to six weeks to get an appointment for a fitting. "People are once again looking

at their homes as an investment, and increasingly choosing quality rather than the cheapest option," says Nick Garratt, founder and director of the shutter supplier.

The woodburner is becoming a hallmark of the middle-class home — the young married couple's Saturday pilgrimage to traipse round stove shops is replacing the frantic dash round Ikea. To meet the demand, companies are springing up at a rapid rate: membership of Hetas, the stove regulatory body, has increased from 791 registered businesses in 2007 to 3,252 today. And the National Association of Chimney Sweeps reports that its members have been rushed off their feet by the craze for woodburners, with jobs booked up weeks in advance.

"We have definitely seen an overall pick-up in demand," says Chris Croft, who founded Windsor & Eton Stoves two years ago. "I left a £100,000-a-year IT job to sell stoves, so there must be money in it."

Improving your home could also boost its value — and even

encourage competitive bidding. "You can expect a premium offer if your house is well presented," says Kevin Hollinrake, managing director of Hunters estate agency.

Homeowners, form an orderly queue.



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