

The Electrician

London-based Kelly Vincent took a career change to set up her own business as an electrician

How are your working days spent?

Every day is completely different, but I'll generally begin with planning my route around London. I usually start early, trying to get to clients who work full-time, in order that they don't have to book time off.

Typical jobs might include safety inspections for people buying new homes, installing additional sockets – with all our appliances today we need a lot more than our homes have – and installing RCD (residual current device) protection to consumer units. The latter is a safety device which cuts off the power if there's a fault and since 2008 all new domestic circuits need them; but around 90% of existing homes don't have them. Occasionally I'll undertake the rewiring of a property too.

My day will usually end with a dash to the wholesalers. There's always something you'll run out of that you'll need for the next day. It's actually one of the most stressful aspects, particularly when a job overruns. With electrics, you never know quite what you're going to get, so you may begin a job only to uncover unforeseen problems.

When did you become an electrician?

I'd worked in admin for the NHS for 10 years when I decided I wanted to do something different, something more practical. My dad's a building contractor so I spoke with him about a career change and we began discussing electrics and plumbing. The latter would have involved a lot of heavy lifting, so I opted to retrain as an electrician.

Once I'd qualified I worked for another electrician before finally setting up my own business. In this profession you don't just need an understanding of electrics, the current Building Regulations, etc., but you also need to have an understanding of the work undertaken by other trades too.

Are there any other less enjoyable aspects of your profession?

I do undertake a lot of work in small, dark, confined spaces such as up in lofts. It can be a messy job too.

Bright Spark

Kelly rarely has a quiet day since she set up her own business working as an electrician. She also works for Home Jane (homejane.co.uk) a network of tradeswomen who work throughout London and the Home Counties

Is there any benefit to being female electrician?

It's a bit of a USP, and I've not had a quiet week since I set up. Tradesmen I've worked with have been really supportive, but have said that clients would rarely trust them with house keys; many of my clients would.

What common mistakes do homeowners make over electrics?

There's a lot of mess involved in electrical work, so familiarising yourself with each stage of a project is key. Occasionally you'll have a job where the homeowner has laid a lovely new wood floor, only to have to lift it up. Communicating exactly what you want is also really important.

I quite often get called out to jobs where a homeowner has tried to undertake the work themselves, opening up a socket, for example, only to find what lies behind isn't quite what they expected.

female-electrician-london.co.uk



PHOTOGRAPHY: SIMON MAXWELL

The Solicitor — and Former Builder!

Chris Reeves is a solicitor who specialises in building disputes, and a Chartered builder. He's also an expert speaker at the Homebuilding & Renovating Shows

You're a Partner in a legal firm, but you originally began your working life as a builder!

Yes, once upon a time I worked for the family building business. My dad is a second generation builder, so from an early age I was helping out on site or going to the builders merchants' with him during school holidays and at weekends.

I began studying to be a civil engineer, but uni didn't quite work out for me first time round and I left to work for my dad as a labourer. After a couple of years I decided it would be good to learn a trade, so I went to college part-time to train as a carpenter. A few years later I enrolled in a HNC in Building Studies, and my teacher subse-

quently encouraged me to enter in for Chartered status.

So how did you become a solicitor?

I became more involved in the day-to-day running of the family business, estimating for work and subsequently put together my own team; the first job I won was certainly a steep learning curve!

But I still felt like there was a tool missing from the box (so to speak), which became apparent when I worked for a large developer and signed up to a contract I didn't fully understand — I ended up employing

a solicitor.

He then recognised my interest in law and offered me work experience — the very last thing I wanted to do

was become a solicitor, but I fell in love with it!

I took a big risk and sold my flat to fund my way through a law degree. I qualified fully as a solicitor in 2002.

Juggling employment with education for so many years must have been hard; is that it for studying?

Actually, I've recently qualified as a Civil and Commercial Mediator! I really enjoy sitting people down and talking through the issue to resolve a dispute within a short time frame without having to go to court. I hope to do a lot more of this in the future.

Your background must be invaluable when resolving disputes.

Most certainly; I have a thorough understanding of both the technical and legal issues, which is rare. Often you have to sift through a lot of information to get to the heart of just what's happened.

What do you enjoy most about your profession?

I have to remind myself regularly that it really is a huge privilege to

have people sit down and confide in you about what has gone on. There are not many professions where clients can discuss matters in absolute confidence and know it goes no further. When clients come into the office for the first time I always assure them that once they leave it's no longer their problem, it's mine to resolve; hopefully this helps shoulder the burden.

I do like winning a case, but the satisfaction of saving someone from a bad job or a least rectifying it in some part, is what drives me.

Is there anything a homeowner should do during a project which can help in the event of a dispute?

Email is great; but it's becoming a real problem. Don't send one to the contractor or person you're in dispute with in the heat of the moment; sleep on it. Once an email has been sent it's out there and can actually be brought into the public domain and used in legal proceedings.

A site diary is invaluable too. Even if you just record the weather, who's on site each day, what's been delivered to site, conversations had, etc. Also, take photographs.

If a dispute does arise I'd always recommend getting the project finished as a priority; it's difficult to have a clear head when you're living on a building site.

Are there any downsides to the job?

I suppose I occupy a bit of unique niche as a builder turned solicitor, so it can be difficult to say no to cases, and you really don't want to spread yourself thin. It can be hard to switch off from work too.

Do you miss the building trade?

I do — I actually quite miss the on-site banter. Working in an office is a very different environment and was difficult to get used to at first.

See Chris at the National Homebuilding & Renovating Show in March 2013

“I took a big risk and funded my way through a law degree”



Legal Eagle

Chris Reeves has many a feather to his bow as a solicitor, legal mediator, Chartered builder and former carpenter. He's Partner in the Construction and Civil Engineering department of Dorset-based Humphries Kirk (hklaw.eu)