NAILS, SCREWS AND HIDDEN WATER PIPES OR ELECTRICITY CABLES

It always pays to seek out any hidden pipes or cables before one attempts to drill a hole in wall, floor or ceiling or to hammer in a large nail. I have to confess that in this matter I have almost always been lucky, but others have been less so.

Our first house had a tiny kitchen and was minimally fitted with cupboards and work surfaces. There was no provision for connection of a washing machine, and in any event we could not afford one at the time. However we did own a few inexpensive kitchen gadgets, some of which had been kindly given to us on our marriage a year or two previously and some which we had acquired. These included a wall mounted can opener. On moving in I selected the best location for the can opener – immediately above the sink. It needed two holes to be drilled into the wall for mounting and with an electric drill and inner walls that were made of foamed concrete I soon had the gadget fixed in place.

Six years passed. We relocaed north of London on a company move and learned that our buyers had soon decided to replace the can opener with a heavier duty version – which required deeper holes…. You can almost hear what is coming next of course. The buyer's electric drill found the cold water supply pipe that lurked immediately behind the fitting; due to the unfortunate place I had originally chosen for installing it in the first place. The result was an emergency call to the plumber, and no doubt an expensive bill.

I know someone else who was really annoyed by squeaky floorboards on his first floor landing. This was in the days when *real* tongue and grooved floorboards were used – not chipboard. T&G floorboards are conventionally held in place with two parallel rows of nails. But on lifting the carpet and underlay he was surprised to see that one floorboard had only a single row of nails. This should have already sounded a warning: He ignored the pencilled squiggle running along the area where the nails were missing. He decided that this was the cause of the problem and resolved to fix it forthwith. Nails were duly hammered in, the carpet was replaced and the floor squeaked no longer. Some days later his wife remarked that there were some equally spaced stains appearing on the lounge ceiling immediately below, and that they were getting larger. My friend was puzzled until the truth struck him. The carpenter had correctly left the board un-nailed immediately above one of the heating pipes, where it ran through notches in the floor joist. So he had inadvertently punched about eight holes in the pipe with his nails. Now it was at this point that a cool head was needed. Sadly, in a mild state

of panic, and keen to solve the problem immediately my friend tore upstairs and lifted the carpet to confirm his worst fears. Surely enough the floorboard was wet. So without further ado he carefully prised up the doubly nailed board. This exposed eight neat holes some three millimetres in diameter in the water pipe, and he was treated to a spectacular aqueous display. This too resulted in an expensive call to the emergency plumber.

In most houses, electricity cables run vertically up or down walls, and are hidden behind the plaster, conventionally protected in some form of conduit. You can therefore make a reasonable bet that a hole drilled well one side or the other of the vertical lines projected above or below both sides of a socket or switch plate should be well clear of cables. However if there has been some shoddy workmanship you cannot be sure. The unexpected always lies in wait. Nowadays you can find hidden cables or pipes with a cable and stud finder, so there is really no excuse for drilling into a cable. But prior to the eighties you had to use commonsense. We had been given a barometer and I wanted to mount it in the hall. No problem. A single hole, well plugged, one screw of the right size. Job done. Not quite, I am afraid. I commenced drilling using a large masonry drill at which point I found the house 30 amp ring main in a fairly spectacular manner. The first two inches of the masonry drill literally disappeared in a flash of light and clouds of pungent smoke, which filled our hall, followed by the traditional dead silence of a failed power supply. Worse still, when the pungent smoke had cleared I could see that the ring main, which was a double cable at that point, had been destroyed over a length of a hand span. The solution was to replace the cable – but how? The two cables going “up” went into the bathroom, more or less under the toilet and to replace them meant destroying a substantial part of the bathroom. Eventually I decided that I had to cut a large recess in the wall, sufficient to house a 30 amp junction box protected within a polythene bag. At this stage we had no electricity of course, so it was a brute force task. I then removed the damaged cables leading down from the blast zone to the double socket located below (but some inches to the right!) and replaced all with fresh cabling. Finally the wall was replastered (that accounts for the polythene bag) and the junction box remained hidden deep within the wall and probably remains to this day.

There are a number of morals to be drawn here. But perhaps the most important is that to act in haste allows one to repent in sorrow. Also to make sure that your brain is engaged before starting work.

As an amusing rider, I recently needed that hidden pipe finder again – this time in our back garden of all places. We have one of those rotary clothes lines, and during the winter it is removed for storage. But now I can’t find the socket in the lawn!! It has been covered by

grass. Neither can I find the pipe finder, which I suddenly realised might solve the problem. Anyone got a metal detector?

John Wells