

Home truths on DIY then and now

DIY can be an expression of individualism and creativity according, to a new exhibition in Barnsley. Maybe so, but John Woodcock begs to differ

Mr Eccles was our woodwork teacher. I can visualise him, Brylcreemed and wearing a grey smock with a squad of pencils standing to attention in the breast pocket, as he slipped a piece of pine into the vice and in one flowing move planed a beautiful golden curl.

"Right you lot," he'd say, "do the same." Several did, lads who then left our secondary modern to become apprentice joiners and are now probably millionaires thanks to York's building boom and restoration workshops.

Not me. Even when I managed to get the vice bit right, my plane had a mind of its own and gouged lumps out of the wood. The end result wasn't a pretty sight. My efforts at creating dovetail, mitre, and mortice and tenon joints were so pathetic that Mr Eccles wouldn't let me take home my skew-legged versions of a coffee table and stool.

He seemed to think that revealing them in public would make the school a laughing stock and ruin his reputation. He did relent when I produced a bookend, and my mother thought I was the next Thomas Chippendale.

As for metalwork, I never did finish that poker because of a failure to master the heat of the forge and the timing required to shape the blazing rod of mild steel. I could see Mr Anderson's point. Not much use trying to prod a fire with a shrivelled piece of metal reduced to three inches. I had marginally more success making a fish slice, until the rivet securing the wooden handle fell out and mother reverted to her trusted utensils.

I blame father for my lack of practical skills. You should have heard the language when he tried to build a gantry crane from my Meccano No. 5 set. "Where's that b..... screwdriver?", and worse. I so wanted to resemble the photograph on the box – young boy sprawled on the carpet (we didn't have a carpet), head in cupped hands and watching admiringly as his smiling father put the finishing touches to some fantastic structure.

In our bookcase – paid-for, naturally – was a copy of *The Practical Man's Book of Things to Make and Do*, but only there for show. At No 17 there was no call for advice on wood turning, veneering, and "practical notes on building a house".

On our black and white TV, when it wasn't on the blink and Dad wasn't cursing the vertical hold knob,



Above and right: TV's do-it-yourself guru Barry Bucknell demonstrates the art of bracket fixing to the nation in his series *The ABC of Do It Yourself*. Bucknell was described as "a DIY hero to post-war women".

On our black and white TV, when it wasn't on the blink and Dad wasn't cursing the vertical hold knob, we used to be intrigued by someone called Barry Bucknell. He made do-it-yourself look effortless. You want a conservatory? Anybody can make one. Watch this.





The Mirror dinghy, co-designed by Barry Bucknell, a plywood boat, to be assembled at home, which made taking up sailing affordable as a hobby. Picture courtesy Daily Mirror.



we used to be intrigued by someone called Barry Bucknell. He made do-it-yourself look effortless. You want a conservatory? Anybody can make one. Watch this. We did, and mother sighed while Dad fidgeted and hid behind the newspaper.

I don't know how we managed it when money was so tight in those post-war years, but because Dad was so inept at manual tasks he'd call in tradesmen to mend fuses, put up a shelf, and decorate the best room.

Little did we realise how unpatriotic he was being, as well as betraying his masculinity by not making our semi safe and comfortable through his own hands.

At least that would be the judgment of a fascinating exhibition in Barnsley which traces the history of DIY, from 18th-century embroidery kits to today's self-publishing via the internet.

What is now a vast industry worth billions has been contradictory. According to the exhibition's curator, Paul Atkinson, there is a political element. DIY has liberated the individual but has also been exploited by the powers-that-be as a means of controlling society.

Hobbies were useful in reinforcing a moral code and outside the workplace idle hands had to be employed, ideally on the domestic front. The shortage of manpower after the First World War, and the need for craftsmen to concentrate on rebuilding the country after the Second, meant that being good at do-it-yourself was regarded not just as a virtue, but a patriotic duty. Self-help campaigns approved by the government developed wartime austerity slogans like "Mrs Sew and Sew", "Dig for Victory" and "Make Do and Mend".

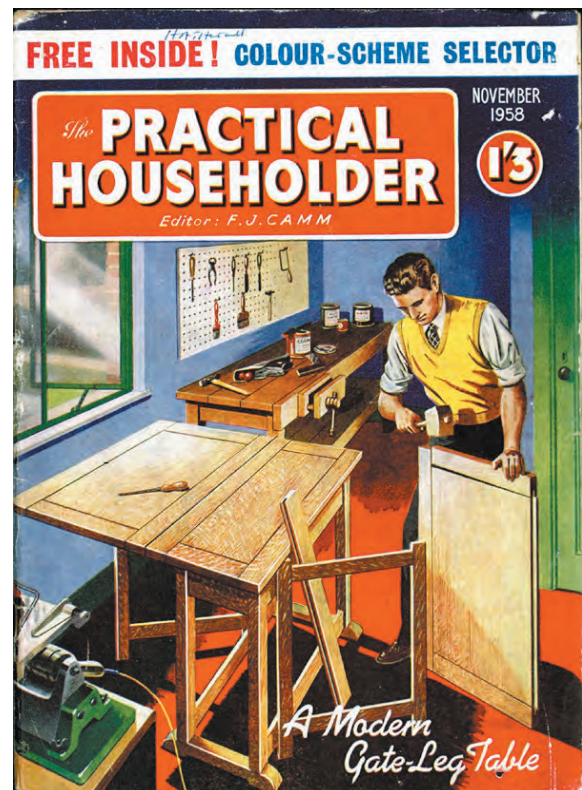
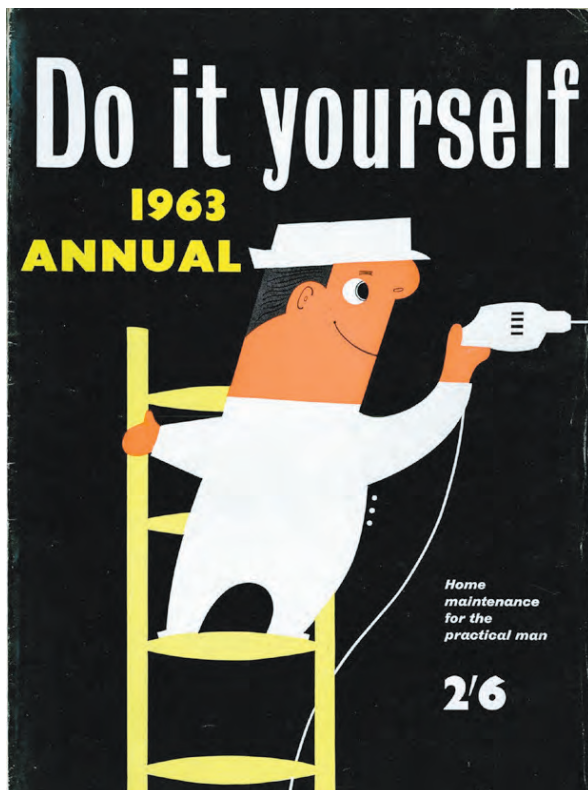
In today's flashy home-improvement TV shows, who among those on *Changing Rooms*, or *DIY SOS*, knows the name WP Matthews? He was as much a pioneer as Black & Decker, the first man to hammer and chisel on behalf of the masses through his books, BBC radio broadcasts during the 1930s, and in a programme on the opening day of commercial television.

But it was Barry Bucknell, along with the advent of colour magazines, who was the turning point. He is credited with saving numerous hardware shops before

the arrival of B&Q and Homebase, and convincing women that they could decorate and tackle household repairs as well as men. When he died three years ago, one obituary described him as the housewife's friend and "DIY hero to post-war women".

Bucknell inspired social revolution in another way. One of the exhibits in Barnsley is a Mirror dinghy, a self-assembly plywood craft he co-designed in 1963 for the *Daily Mirror* which regarded it as a promotion to sell more copies. In fact, it's the dinghy which is still selling well – 70,000 at the last count – and it has helped to transform sailing. At its original price of £63.11 shillings it enabled many more to take up a sport which had been considered the preserve of the well-to-do.

For the curator Paul Atkinson, a designer and a lecturer at Huddersfield University on the history of design, that red-sailed dinghy is a classic example of how do-it-yourself has helped to change society. "We tend to think of DIY as one thing – home improvement – but it is much more complex than that."



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"DIY used to be about saving money when there were economic reasons for household maintenance. Today, it's about choice and spending, a vicious cycle of expenditure that can mean wallpaper at £120 a roll. Programmes like *Changing Rooms* are not about maintenance and necessity but lifestyle, and that can lead to uniformity. People swear blind they are being individualistic when mainly they are copying what they've seen and read."

Atkinson is 43 and his generation was among the last to be taught woodwork and metalwork as specific subjects at school. Today, they usually form only a part

