

August 2006

This month: Getting the services on site, the gas ducting challenge, and hopefully selling our own house...
Tuesday 1st

I start to realise the time is fast approaching when I have to dig the service trench, as the utility company are booked to connect our electric supply on the 14th, and Severn Trent are booked to inspect the trench on the 10th. The digger is hired for the 9th & 10th, which should give me ample time to dig the trench, plus some trial foundation holes for the structural engineer to peer into.

This means I need to have all the ducting ready (gas, electric, BT) plus water pipe, and get a temporary electric supply board rigged up ASAP.

A while back I bought an external electric meter box, and inside this I intend to run the incoming supply through an isolating switch, then split it via a Henley block into two RCD consumer units. One consumer unit will just feed the caravan, for this purpose a "shower" consumer unit is ideal as it is small, has an RCD isolator, and one 50A MCB. The other consumer unit will feed some outside sockets for builders use, and some site lighting. A "garage" consumer unit is ideal for this, as it is also small, has a 30ma RCD switch, a 16A MCB for socket outlets and a 6A MCB for lighting. Although probably unnecessary because they're inside a weatherproof meter box, I bought IP55 rated consumer units, for added safety if for some reason the box gets left open. The idea of having two separate consumer units is to reduce the likelihood of the caravan supply tripping out due to faults on the builders supply. Earthing will be taken care of by two earth rods - one at the temporary meter box, and one for the caravan (which is at the other end of a long stretch of armoured cable).

Quite a shopping list of things to buy, so I spend some time checking prices at various suppliers. First I used Screwfix as a benchmark cost. Then I checked prices for equivalent items at TLC-direct, and was suprised to find them noticeably more expensive on every item on my list. Next I scoured through the Toolstation website - the best prices so far, cheaper than Screwfix on all the items I needed. For the consumer units, I was able to get much better prices from suppliers on Ebay, complete with VAT receipts.

I begin to realise just how time consuming research suppliers and prices is, and this is just for our electric supply - we've not even started building yet ! Wednesday 2nd

With the Toolstation and Ebay orders placed, I turn my attention to sourcing the remaining ducting.

I email our local BT chap who's dealing with our supply, and he promises to get some delivered to site.

So that's the electric and BT ducting sorted, and I have the water pipe (which doesn't get ducted), so now it's just gas ducting. Should be easy don't you think ?

Some discussions on the Yahoo Selfbuild group prompt me to ring the gas company and clarify their requirements, to find that it's no ordinary yellow ducting I need, but it has to be 63mm outer diameter perforated yellow ducting. I ask where I can get it, they tell me to try Plumbcenter, Jewsons or Polypipe Civils. Plumbcenter and Jewsons say they don't stock it. Polypipe have loads of the stuff, but as I don't have an account, they tell me to try some local builders merchants who might be distributors. Most say they can't get hold of it. One place says they can, but only in 150m rolls (I only need about 30m). One place - think it was Buildbase Derby, I've lost track of how many places I phoned - says they do 50m rolls but it's unperforated, and suggest I perforate it myself with a drill. At this point I'm thinking the self-perforation option isn't as silly as first thought, and might be the only way ahead. However, further discussion on the Yahoo Selfbuild group yields a couple of suppliers that other people have used (apparently it's not just me having trouble finding this stuff), and also the same stuff is sold as "land drain". One of these suppliers, Simmons in Stafford, do the perforated stuff in 150m rolls, and will cut a length off. Ideal, but they're a bit out of the way. Finally success - Keyline in Nottingham stock 50m rolls of exactly the right stuff, and they tell me it'll fit in the back of the Passat. They'd heard how difficult it was to get hold of, and started stocking it. So a trip to Nottingham on Saturday morning is in order.

I then begin to ring the various utility companies again, to find the required depths for all the services which are running under our driveway. The results are as follows:

- Water must be a minimum depth of 750mm, no separation required from other services.
- Electric must be at 750mm depth under the drive, and 450mm under garden. A 200mm separation is required from other services.
- Gas only has to be at 100mm depth which sounds daft for something so potentially dangerous, but a 250mm separation is required from other services.
- BT - haven't bothered ringing them. Everything else is going at 750mm depth so this can too, just keeping the BT duct at the opposite side of the trench to the electricity sounds like a good idea.

A friend I know via a car owners club has some underground electric warning tape left over which I'm buying off him. I

was going to get some yellow gas warning tape, but it costs about £30 for a 365metre roll. Sod that - instead I'm buying two rolls of yellow self adhesive tape which have "GAS" written all over for about £3 each from Toolstation, and I'll just unroll these in parallel in the trench instead. Should do the same job. I should really put water and BT warning tapes down too, but I figure that as they're all running in the same trench, if anyone digs down and finds the electric & gas warnings (which are more dangerous) it should stop them digging through the rest of them.

Thursday 3rd

The solicitor tells me that our house buyers won't be ready to complete next Friday as planned, but as soon as possible afterwards. This is infuriating, as I've got the time booked off work, and alternative dates will be awkward due to other holidays in our team at work.

We'd just been about to book our holiday for 21-25th August, but I guess we'll have to hold off now until we know what's going on with the house :(Friday 4th

Friday again already. Rushed home from my 12:30 finish, because BT were coming round to install the phone line to the caravan. Except they didn't turn up.

While waiting around I started wiring up the temporary meter box, using the stuff I bought from Toolstation (which arrived a day late...).

Have also put the seats back in the caravan on top of the new carpet, it's looking quite inviting now !

Called the architect, who has made no progress since last week. He promises to get the building regs application submitted by end of next week (again!).Saturday 5th

A morning run to Keyline in Nottingham, to pick up the gas ducting. If you're interested, it's actually sold as a 50m coil of "perforated yellow land drain, 63mm o/d". And it fits nicely in the back of an estate car.

BT left a voicemail to apologise for "not completing" the work yesterday - an interesting way of putting it - and they had rescheduled to today; if this was not OK, ring this number. As today wasn't convenient, I called the number, only to hear a message inviting me to ring during office hours Monday-Friday.

Later in the day, while we were about 45 mins from home, the BT engineer left a message saying he was on his way and would arrive in 20 mins. I tried to call his number but it was his landline, and obviously he wasn't there any more !

So, we set off back to the plot. When we got there, he was busy connecting the line in the street box. The previous owner of the caravan had a phone socket in place, so it was just a 5 minute job to run the cable through the floor and into the socket.Sunday 6th

Today saw the removal of the twin beds from the second bedroom in the caravan. Out with the old manky carpet, and in with some gripper rods, underlay and cheap new carpet. We're leaving the beds out, to use this room as a mini office and storage room. Our small chest freezer is going to go in here when we leave our current home - until Emma realised the doorway is far too small for it to get through. Luckily the window looks big enough, so the freezer will shortly be entering via the window.

Moved a few more items into the caravan from our house; it's starting to feel a bit like a home now ! Monday 7th

The digger arrives on Wednesday, and before any trench can be dug along the drive, there's a LOT of driveway blocks to be lifted. So tonight I made a start, going up as far as where the neighbour's drive joins. Relaying these is going to be a fun job....

{mosimage cw=200 popup=1}Tuesday 8th

Another quick visit by BT this evening to fit a different phone socket in the caravan. Apparently, with the existing socket, the phone would never have actually rung...

Also started gathering lots of timber and boarding with which to bridge the trenching tomorrow, because tomorrow I get to play at diggers :)Wednesday 9th

The fun really started today. The digger arrived mid morning, and after a quick lesson on the controls by the delivery driver, I was off.

First task was to dig two trial holes for the structural engineer to peer down, to check what the ground conditions were like. At first, my digger skills were something akin to a monkey doing semaphore on speed, but I soon got the hang of it. I got two holes dug about 6ft down. I started to get a bit worried as below 4ft or so, the soil to me looked like it had a bit of clay... Doug the structural engineer arrived after lunch, and put my mind at rest when, after prodding the bottom of the holes with a long metal bar, he thought it looked like pretty good ground. A couple of soil samples in a carrier bag and he

was off. Luckily I didn't uncover any of the animal remain I'm told lie in the plot....

The next step was to dig a trench from the caravan, to where the temporary electric & water supplies are going to be. I never expected the ground to be so rocky, it was full of stones and the digger struggled a bit in places. By mid afternoon, our pleasant, tranquil plot now resembled a scene from World War 2. But this was just the start...

Onto the main job. Digging the trench from the roadside, down the drive. I'd already lifted the driveway blocks, but having seen the mess made digging towards the caravan, I realised I hadn't left a wide enough space, so I had to lift loads more up - otherwise a lot of blocks would fall in, get scooped out and lost in the piles of rubble.

I started at the bottom of the drive around 3pm. I thought the trench to the caravan was rocky, but nothing compared to this - massive boulders all the way, some up to nearly 3ft wide. It was very slow going, and when I called it a day at 9pm, had only got halfway up the drive - a long way behind schedule. With Severn Trent due to come and inspect the trench sometime tomorrow, I didn't think they'd have anything to look at.

Photos here [Thursday 10th](#)

An early start, back on the digger by 8am, in a bid to get back on track. Fortunately, as I got further up the drive, the rocks weren't so big and I had destroyed the entire drive by late morning. However, because the exposed soil was full of sharp stones, I would need to bed the water pipe in a few inches of gravel to protect it. A quick trip down to the local builders merchants, and a ton bag was delivered.

With perfect timing, the BT truck turned up and delivered their ducting, bends and drawrope (free with the new line order, including several hundred metres of drawrope). The driver said there were some spare 6m lengths if I wanted them, so I took them thinking they'd come in handy.

The BT and electric ducting went in the trench reasonably easy, I ran the drawrope through a section at a time before joining them together. Wrestling the coil of 32mm water pipe was a different matter, once the packing bands were cut it became alive, it sprang around and did it's best to A) stay bent and B) not go in the trench. Finally was the gas duct, this was also coiled but was more flexible and didn't put up quite such a fight.

Around lunchtime I started barrowing gravel into the trench, realising of course I should have done this before I laid the water pipe ! It also became obvious that one ton bag was nowhere near enough, so another trip down to the merchants saw two more ton bags delivered.

The Severn Trent man came when I'd only got a quarter of the way along the trench with gravel, but after a quick nose around he seemed happy with the depth and that I was bedding the pipe properly, so he would report back and get the connection arranged. I'm told this will be around 4 weeks time.

I spent most of the afternoon barrowing gravel into the trench, this is the hardest day's work I've done in a long time. Once the gravel was in, it was time to backfill. Some I could push back in with the digger, but most had to be done by hand - backbreaking work. Emma arrived home in the evening after working away and helped. By the end of the day, I'd got the top half of the trench filled, so our neighbours could access their drive again.

I went home; my back ached, my arms ached, my shoulders ached, my legs ached, my feet ached, my hands were blistered (bit different from working at a keyboard, this) and I was physically exhausted.

Photos here [Friday 11th](#)

The digger was due to be collected today, and I still hadn't filled in the trench to the caravan. So we were up on site around 7.30 in the morning, to make the most of the remaining time.

The extra BT ducting came in very handy - the trench to the caravan was so rocky, we decided to run the spare ducting in the trench and pull the caravan armoured supply cable and water pipe through, eliminating the need for more gravel. The armoured cable was pulled through by rope, the water pipe (25mm to caravan) could be pushed through quite easily.

Full steam ahead with the digger, backfilling the trench to half depth, laying the warning tape, then dozing the rest of the soil back in.

Just enough time to dig the final bit of linking trench, before the digger was collected after lunchtime. As the digger departed, the utility company turned up and dropped off the roadwork barriers and signs ready for Monday.

At this point, the ducting/trench work was done as far as it could be, so I finished wiring up the meter box and fixed it to the wall.

If anyone reading this is contemplating laying their own services, do not make my mistake of underestimating the amount

of work involved. The sheer amount of physical work and time over the last two days has been ridiculous. Sunday 13th

I begin to wonder whether I should have booked the Monday off work, so the utility contractors knew what was to be done; but I haven't, so I hope they work it out. Monday 14th

Received some phonecalls while at work today, from the two guys doing the roadworks, to clarify what was being done and where the cable was being jointed in our trench. They seemed happy enough, but as they didn't have a digger they wouldn't be starting until tomorrow.

Then, more ominously, they called again, this time it seems the neighbours across the road were not very happy at all. Apparently the cable being dug down to is only inches from their wall - their house is 300yrs old, is listed, and has had foundation problems - so understandably they don't want the hole digging where planned. This is not sounding good at all, I realise I'm going to have to be around tomorrow morning to try and sort this out.

In the evening, I pop over to the neighbours, who are still adamant that digging shouldn't take place in front of their house. I promise to talk to the road guys tomorrow so see if they can dig slightly further up the road to avoid the front of their house. Tuesday 15th

They day couldn't start much worse. The contractors arrive and I have a word, explaining the neighbours worries.

Because of the location of existing cable joints and other services, moving the connection up the road seems out of the question. The contractors knock on the neighbours door and the discussions begin...

In a nutshell, after around 2 hours of fairly tense discussions during which I thought we'd never be on speaking terms with the neighbours again, the contractors persuade the utility company to let them dig across to a point 3 metres further down the road than planned, avoiding the neighbours house, and without charging us extra (initially they wanted an extra £5-600 !!). I have to thank the two contractor guys, they kept their cool when they could have easily told our neighbour "you have no choice, we're digging whatever you say" (that's not the actual phrase that was muttered, but you get the idea), and have saved us from paying a fair bit extra. The neighbours are happy again, to the point where they're making everyone cups of tea.

I rush home to get changed, and when I drive back past a few minutes later on the way to work, the road is already being cut open. I stop and drop a few cans of appreciation and hobnobs in their van, to happy smiles and thumbs up. Friday 18th - Monday 28th

A well earned break, we've been on holiday, so no news !Monday 28th

Before we went on holiday, we'd agreed with the solicitors and estate agents that they could exchange contracts while away, for completion on Friday 1st September (end of this week).

No phone calls on holiday, and no letters waiting when we got home today - so no idea what's going on, or whether we need to move out this week !Tuesday 29th

Called the solicitors today, to find out if we'd exchanged contracts on the house or not, to hear a recorded message saying they don't start back until tomorrow due to the bank holiday weekend...Wednesday 30th

Possibly only 2 days to go until we have to be packed and leave the house...so I phone the solicitor again. At least our solicitors were back at work today, it turns out the vendor's solicitor is not back until tomorrow - so we won't know until then whether we will be moving out on Friday. Thursday 31st

Find out mid morning that contracts have been exchanged, are we are to move out tomorrow. Cue furious packing, and our last night in our own house for some time.