A growth area in insulation products

by Stephen Plevey, Brydale Products

DRAUGHT proofing products have in recent months become one of the fastest-growing lines in the home insulation market, with many retailers doubling and quadrupling their turnover in this trade over the past 12 months, and some reporting even higher increases in sales of upwards of 600 per cent.

There are sound social and economic reasons for this trend, and equally sound reasons for assuming that it will accelerate in the coming winter months when, logically, sales begin to climb, peaking in the second and third week of January – when the weather is usually cold and when most people have received their first winter quarter, post-Christmas heating bills.

The size of those heating bills tends to concentrate the mind of the average householders marvellously on the urgent need to effect fuel economies. The "Save It!" campaign has, for the average man – faced with astronomically high electricity bills and what amounts to a Government tax on gas central heating bills – ceased to be a campaign and has assumed the mantle of a crusade.

The "Save It!" campaign has been very successful in persuading the majority of householders that loft insulation and hot water jackets are essential in the pursuit of this cut-the-fuel-cost crusade.

There must be very few intelligent householders who today do not place a simple jacket around their hot water cylinders, and comparatively few who are not aware that an uninsulated loft is a major source of heat loss.

This being so, the installation of cylinder jackets is likely to be increasingly confined to replacements, where the existing jacket has become worn or damaged in some way, or where the family has moved house to find an uninsulated tank. To put it succinctly: cylinder jackets are not a growth insulation area.

Loft insulation materials are in a somewhat similar category – except that here one is dealing with a once-only purchase. Loft insulation is not easily damaged and is not subject to wear and tear. Once sold, it is there for the duration and there are very few repeat installations.

How, then, can the average householder further reduce his fuel bills?

One answer is to fit basic draught exclusion products which more than any other insulation method earn the greatest returns in terms of fuel saved, in the shortest time.

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Draught exclusion, however, has rarely – if ever – formed part of any fuel conservation campaign with the result that it is only in comparatively recent times that the householder is becoming aware that cutting out the ingress of cold air might possibly be a way of saving money on the fuel needed to heat that incoming cold air. In short: stop that draught!

Even now very few people can realistically quantify the impact that draughts can have on the average household.

This was one of the facts thrown up by a recent research programme undertaken by Brydale Products of Worsley into public attitudes towards draught exclusion.

Because of the almost total dearth of official research data on the subject of draught exclusion, the company undertook its own survey, examining a small, but statistically indicative, sample of standard homes built between 1907 and 1973 but excluded from the sample homes fitted with double glazing or which were built since the first major oil crisis in 1974-76, since when it was assumed that thermal insulation factors wuld be more stringent and thus draughtproofing would not be (or should not be) a significant problem.

Within these parameters the research showed that the average three bedroom semi-detached house fitted with standard wooden or steel windows has at least 64m of potential draught gaps around the windows and external doors. This may be regarded as a low-level figure, for many houses – particularly those built prior to 1950, when individual window frames tended to be numerous, but comparatively small – have a substantially greater aggregate door-window draught gap.

The average gap around windows is 2mm, and around external doors (including the bottom gap, which is often excessively large) is 6mm. Letter boxes and similar apertures – such as unprotected bathroom and kitchen air vents – were included in the aggregate, giving an overall draught gap equivalent to some 1.7 square metres. This is virtually the same as having 20 bricks missing from the walls of the house.

At the lowest possible estimate, this creates a heat loss of some 15%, which on an average heating bill of £380 per year for the standard household amounts to £57.

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The cost of draught proofing the average house is about £30, which means that the capital cost will, in most areas, be repaid within the first three or four months of a winter heating bill.

On this basis, draught insulation would appear to be the most cost-effective of all the home insulation products currently on the DIY market.

One of the most interesting facts to emerge from this survey was that nearly two-thirds (to be precise, 64.7 per cent) of draught exclusion products are effectively purchased by women.

This compares with 93.9 per cent of the company's basic home insulation products – such as pipe lagging materials and tank insulation jackets – which are purchased by men.

Here an interesting sidelight is that comparatively few women deliberately enter a DIY shop for the express purpose of buying draught excluders. They usually buy such products either in supermarkets when out doing their normal shopping; or when accompanying their husbands to buy or select paint or wallpaper or some other home improvement aid.

Most draught excluder sales to women, therefore, are impulse purchases and are not part of a deliberate home insulation, cost-saving policy.

In depth interviews conducted by Brydale showed that men are primarily concerned with installing insulation in order to save money on fuel bills. For the male, it is a simple formula: if the insulating method saves fuel and costs, it is worth buying. If it costs more than it will save, it is not worth buying.

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Women, on the other hand, were shown to take a fundamentally different view. Their primary reason for purchasing draught exclusion devices is to improve family living conditions by cutting out draughts. Of the women interviewed, well over three quarters put "comfort" as the primary reason for installing draught excluders. Less than 10 per cent considered "fuel savings" to be the primary objective, and only 2.8 per cent thought that draught excluder would add to the value of the property.

The research also revealed that women are concerned almost exclusively with internal draught sources. They will readily fit internal door and window draught excluders (preferably of the self-adhesive stick-on type) but are reluctant to touch external doors if the fitting of a draught exclusion device involves the use of any form of woodworking tool.

The old-fashioned (but still very effective) rain and draught excluder fitted on the outside of such doors, therefore, is a job that, for the most part, remains a strictly male preserve.

That draught exclusion is a major growth market in the insulation field is beyond reasonable argument. What is fascinating, however, is that it is a market that may well become dominated by women rather than, as in the DIY home insulation market, by men.

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