

# 'Now I have space to swing my mouse'

Does your house look like an unpopular junk shop? Then you need the Clutter Clinic, says **Jill Insley**

I always thought my home was cosy; untidy but basically clean and welcoming. Now the scales have fallen from my eyes. After two visits from the Clutter Clinic I know that I am, in fact, a slatternly housekeeper with a serious Tupperware habit. More worryingly, my house has mice. What do my cats think I keep them for?

Thankfully, help is on hand in the form of Romaine Lowery, founder of the Clutter Clinic. 'Do you have a cluttered, disorganised home?' asks her website ([www.clutterclinic.co.uk](http://www.clutterclinic.co.uk)). 'Are you overwhelmed by the mess on your desk? Would you like to live in a calm, uncluttered environment? Are you trying to sell your home unsuccessfully? Are you short of space?' I can answer yes to all these questions, bar the selling one.

No doubt like many working mothers, by the time I get home I'm usually too

knackered to do much more than cook tea, read a bedtime story and slump in front of *CSI*. Tidying out cupboards, sorting out clothes, putting things away – you've got to be joking. Over the past year my house has become totally clogged with books, papers, shoes and bags (a girl can never have too many bags and there are two of us in this house).

The website goes on: 'Clutter is a problem for you if it causes tension with family or friends, gets in the way of having people to visit or stay, makes you feel stressed in your own home and is a regular topic of discussion with others.'

Well, all families have rows about untidiness, and doesn't everyone have a mad clearing-up session just before their friends or cleaners come round? No, what made me realise I had a problem was when my neighbour said he had always thought my study was a joke and



Jill Insley takes a break on some of her former clutter. Photograph by Imogen Insley

had said as much to his wife. The horror! My neighbours had been discussing the state of my house.

Enter Romaine, who reassuringly says she has seen far worse. She has a sympathetic personality edged with steeliness, making me realise early on that this business is serious. She starts by taking me through a detailed questionnaire to find

out what I want to get out of the process, and where the main problems are.

Then we go around the house. Every cupboard is opened, not a single drawer escapes. 'What's in there?' she asks, pointing at a small cupboard in the hall. I have absolutely no idea, and, after much tugging, we discover enough alcohol to hold a good party, all covered with cobwebs – at least the spiders have been having a good time. Looking through Romaine's eyes, I realise how much junk we have accumulated, and how horrible it all looks. Halfway around I catch sight of my face in a mirror and see I am bright red with embarrassment.

Two days later, Romaine emails a report of what she thinks should be done in each room – what storage solutions I need to invest in, what shelves need to be put up and, of course, the inevitable chucking out. She lists the websites of retailers ranging from cheap to never-in-a-million-years expensive and sets out exactly what I must buy before she turns up again in two weeks. We've decided to concentrate on my study, so my purchases are magazine files (not plastic or cardboard), a stylish new in-tray (mine was red plastic and about 10 years old) and matching penholder. WH Smith and John Lewis sort me out nicely.

Romaine has inspired me so much that I can't wait until her arrival. I start chucking out rubbish from the study that weekend. Fifteen large bin bags later I think I've done pretty well; you can see some of the floor at least.

Then the day of reckoning arrives. Romaine arrives in her Jeep (capacious boot for taking all the junk away), complete with different sizes of plastic storage boxes (plastic is allowed, but only if it's not visible), padded coat hangers, special hanging compartments to hold jumpers and shoes in your wardrobe (after you've decluttered it, there will be space), and coloured sacks to denote ordinary rubbish, papers with your personal details on that need burning and stuff for the charity shop.

Romaine is pretty sniffy about the

inroads I've made on the study, and I soon realise why as she thrusts folder after folder into my hands to sort, chuck or file. I have to make decisions now, not tomorrow or next week. Everything comes off the shelves and they are cleaned. Documents I need regularly are put in clear plastic labelled sleeves and filed in my new faux-leather magazine files. Somehow they look instantly acceptable.

Bits of computer, software and connecting wires are all stored in a medium-sized plastic box, with the promise that I will buy a faux-leather CD holder, matching the magazine files, for the computer discs. Because the top of the hanging files cabinet has been cleared, it now fits under my desk, so I can actually get to the bookcase. Then she starts on the desk. Papers I have been meaning to deal with for weeks – in some cases months – are whisked into the appropriate place: hanging files, magazine files or bin. By the time Romaine has finished, where once I was in danger of getting RSI because of the limited space to move, I now have enough room to swing my mouse.

The wicker wastepaper basket goes ('Too unhygienic, you can't wash it'), the Lloyd Loom chair is to be painted white, as are the bookshelves, and my box of bills and bank statements is consigned to the bonfire ('You bank online? What do you need your statements for then?')

All this takes about two-and-a-half hours, so we have more time to attack the rest of the house. Next target is the pantry. I'm fairly confident about this as I recollect it having a good clean-out about a year ago. Romaine still manages to find foodstuffs – pulses mostly and quite a few tired-looking spices – dating back to 1997. Her dismay grows when she finds open, out-of-date, nuts: 'You do know these go rancid?'

## 'In my pantry we find foodstuffs – pulses and spices mostly – dating back to 1997'

But the thing that really makes me squirm is when she starts digging into a very elderly vegetable trolley which has been used to store potatoes (I think that's what they were once), serviettes, cling-film, foil, and tea towels. As she starts pulling out the towels a shower of mouse droppings scatters to the floor. My other neighbour has been complaining about mice recently; now I know where they've been spending the night.

We ditch anything that is open, throw away the soiled towels, boil wash anything the mice might have pooped on. Then Romaine discovers my other guilty secret – obsession with Tupperware. 'How much of this have you got?' she demands, pulling out carrier bag after carrier bag of plastic boxes that had been stuffed down the side of the fridge. After she's tugged the sixth bag into the light, I admit that some – a lot – has got to go.

Decluttering my study, the pantry and one bookcase has taken from 10am to 5pm. I feel physically shattered, mentally shell-shocked – no wonder Romaine says she can't declutter every day of the week. But outside there is a very cathartic pile of bin bags, and when my daughter gets home from school she has to climb over a pile of stuff that is going into the back of Romaine's car for disposal.

The Clutter Clinic's fees may seem high – £40 an hour for the initial consultation, then £250 a day for the actual decluttering – but it was worth every penny when I invited my neighbour round to admire the study. 'My God, it echoes in here now,' she said.

Call the Clutter Clinic on 07834 338568 or email [enquiries@clutterclinic.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@clutterclinic.co.uk)



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I'm happy to besober. Happy to be alive. I found myself in some places I can't believe I made it out of alive. Tom Waits tells all to Sean O'Hagan

Observer Magazine page 14



From mice home to nice home: the result was clean, tidy shelves that any houseowner would be proud to show a visiting neighbour, close relative or member of the clergy.