

# What's a stopcock?

An Oxford letting agent is giving clueless students lessons in the most basic household management.

Laura Latham reports

**A**s this year's crop of students prepares to move into rental properties ahead of the new university year, Julia Carraher, who is in charge of student lets at Finders Keepers, an Oxford lettings and management agency, is bracing herself for another round of disasters, ranging from the practical to the personal.

Most of the tenants the agency deals with seem more familiar with a corkscrew than a screwdriver, and some apparently have no qualms about calling Carraher's staff at midnight to ask to borrow money for their taxi home. "We're like substitute parents," she says. "Students call us because they can't turn on the shower or cooker, but also because they've lost their keys or forgotten the pin number for their cash card. One household phoned us because they didn't know how to cook spaghetti."

We're in the swanky kitchen of a six-bed Victorian house that has the kind of cool, neutral decor and upscale fittings you'd see in a five-star hotel. Carraher says this is the standard of accommodation many of today's students expect, and, understandably, landlords are keen to see their properties stay in such condition. Which is why Finders Keepers runs pretenancy classes to teach students all they should know about running a house.

"Students coming straight from home or halls of residence often haven't learnt what to do in an emergency such as a gas or water leak," she says. "They haven't a clue how to reset a fuse box, and if I mention the stopcock, they giggle because they don't know what it is."

To give me an idea of how it works, Carraher takes me though the property as if she were instructing a typical group of students. She shows me the stopcock under the sink and tells me what it does (it cuts off the water supply, if you're too embarrassed to ask), where the fuse box is and how to reset it if it trips. She also explains the controls for the electric shower, the washer-dryer and the central heating, and how to test the fire alarm.

I'm then handed the pack given to all tenants, which contains detailed instructions on how



Students can face a practical exam when they let a house

everything works, and Carraher shows me photos of the damage caused when frozen pipes burst, flood the property and cause the ceiling to fall in. "Students don't realise they need to leave their heating on a minimum setting in winter, even when the house is empty," she says. "But why would they know if they've never been told?"

Jonathan Smith, who is studying medicine at St Peter's College, Oxford University, recently moved into a rental property with friends. He says the pretenancy instruction has already proved useful. "A faulty bulb blew one night and all the lights went out," he says. "But it wasn't a big deal because we'd been told what to do. We found the fuse box using a torch and reset the mains straightaway."

Some problems seem down to a lack of parental guidance and common sense. The agency comes across tenants who don't realise they can damage a washing machine by overloading it or opening the door before the cycle has finished, or that table salt isn't suitable for use in a dishwasher. Some call the office to complain the electric cooker is broken because they've only ever used gas before. What's astonishing is that these people are our future lawyers, economists and surgeons.

Will Phillips, a father of three whose two youngest daughters are studying at Edinburgh and Reading, has first-hand experience of such issues. "Students can be a bit clueless and have to be talked through turning the water main off, resetting a

## Digs not dives

Today's students seem reluctant to put up with the kind of damp, dingy digs their parents lived in while studying. Clean, warm, well-furnished accommodation is expected, with broadband, cable TV and luxury appliances among the must-haves.

Tim Hassell, the owner of the London agency Draker Lettings (020 7042 9100; draker.co.uk), says landlords can make good money by offering students the highest-spec decor and furnishings — especially in central London, where, he claims, a lucky few pay as much as £550 to £2,000 a week to rent a luxury property. "Because landlords now put more effort into designing and furnishing rental properties, the standards have gone up as a whole," he says. "There's also been an increase in the number of international students, especially in London, with parents prepared to pay a premium for central, safe, quality accommodation."

Prices outside the capital tend to be lower, although students in places such as Glasgow and Birmingham can still pay £100 a week for a room in a decent shared house. Indeed, student halls of residence are big business. Companies such as Liberty Living (libertyliving.co.uk) offer furnished rooms in new, secure blocks in popular university towns across Britain. The buildings have on-site laundry facilities and 24-hour security, and some have gyms. Prices range from £85-£255 a week, but that includes all utilities, insurance and, in some cases, internet access.

fuse box and even reading the gas meter," he says, although this is probably true for anyone heading out into the world for the first time. "Most young adults would benefit if parents talked them through the basics before they left home, but, like everything in life, people only learn how to do something when they really have to."

Finders Keepers: 01865 260111; finders.co.uk

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