



TOP UK TILERS – COLIN BARBER

Beginning his career in the 1980s, Colin Barber has become known as a “tiler to the stars,” following a string of high-profile jobs for celebrities and wealthy homeowners. Working across three continents throughout his career, Barber also recently achieved TTA’s Master Tile Fixer status, citing a focus on patience and quality as his strongest attributes.

For this year’s Top UK Tilers feature, Barber gave his thoughts on a number of key topics in the industry today.

What qualities define an expert tiler?

I’ve worked alongside a lot of tilers. They’re all very different people even beyond their basic techniques and methods of working, and they all seem to work in very different ways. The most important attribute I’ve noticed across them however is absolutely patience. I’ve worked with all sorts of



Colin Barber, photographed by Fiona Fletcher

great craftsmen and tradespeople in other disciplines and they always take an interest in the tiling, but they will often say: “I’ve done a bit of tiling for myself but I hate it – haven’t got the patience for it.” So, I think the absolute attribute is patience.

The other thing most of the best tilers I’ve met have is an interest in design or art in some way. They may not bring that to bear in the work, or they may not do the sort of work where it has much bearing, but I think it helps them to want to produce something of quality. Tiling is quite a technical trade, and we see far too much poor tiling done to make it very clear that it is so technical, with a lot of skill necessary to do it well.

How has 2024 been for your company? Are you optimistic about 2025?

It’s difficult speaking as a sole trader, because it’s a little easier for me, only having to support one person in keeping the work rather than a team. I know one or two other teams have had to slim down and that’s been hard, but it’s been good for me, because I can steer myself towards the sort of work I want to do. Having said that, I’ve never been snobbish. I’ve done every sort of work and I’ll do the simple jobs as well if it suits all the parties involved.

So yes, this year has been quite good. It got busier after about the midway point, and it stayed pretty busy since. I was getting lots of inquiries from June onwards, and I’ve been booked right through since then.

As for next year, I’m actually sitting in New Zealand right now, so I’ve taken myself out of the equation, but I’m aiming to be back in Britain by the Spring of 2025. Obviously, I’m watching what’s going on and it seems like all sectors of business and life are rather worried by the budget’s effects. I don’t think we’ll really start to see what happens until the new year, but it seems to have gotten all sorts of people jittery. Politics aside, you want a good business environment. All I’d say on that side for me personally is that London has always been such a strong market that I’ve never really known it to be slow to the extent that there’s no work for people who do good work.



What are the biggest challenges facing the tiling industry?

Keeping the profile of quality work. In the past 20 years, I personally – let alone other good tilers – have been called out to look at work which is just so bad, work that's just let the customers down 100%. And they simply had to pay to start again. That applies to the preparation work, the waterproofing, the actual tiling.

It's important to get that message of quality across, but at the same time you don't want to put people off by saying: "Tiling is so difficult, you've got to use people with 20 years of experience". You don't want that, but that understanding of quality is important, because at the end of the day, if you don't get the tiles done right, there's no painting over it.

Often, customers have said to me: "Oh, the way you're doing it seems to be totally different to what they did before." That tends to help them understand why it's going to take two weeks rather than three days. So in relation to The Tile Association and the Master Tile Fixer programme, it really shows that people are investing in their trade and their brand.

What tools and products do you rely on?

Since the 2000s, there are so many more dedicated tools for tiling, it's quite unbelievable. I think we had about four dedicated tools when I started and one of



them was the actual cutter! So there's so much more now that tilers can buy and use, tool-wise, which is great. Adhesives are a minefield, because it is so difficult to judge aside from the prices. What I do is stick with three, maybe four key brands that are worldwide recognised research and development brands – you rarely go wrong doing that.

I primarily stick with ARDEX, BAL, Mapei and Kerakoll, though I have used other ones, and I'm certainly not dismissing all of them. It is a complicated thing to pick through and some might want to stick to the products they know, but at the same time, I've never just said: "We used this 30 years ago and we'll keep using it because of just because of that reason." Ardex adhesives are my choice whenever possible for high quality jobs with environment demands and when

absolute peace of mind in fixing is required.

For tools, I think Sigma and Montolit do some very interesting products – they put a lot of thought into their cutters, and I think cutters are the most important tools in tiling. They have to do so much more now since the introduction of porcelain tiles, since they're so much harder to cut. Montolit have made very good advancements to tile slicers in their products – small details that make a difference.

What advice would you give new tilers?

Recently, I was doing a job for Camden Council, refurbishing a spa back in August and September. The team that was running the project has a small apprenticeship scheme, and they asked if I would mind one of the apprentices sitting in while I was working – of course I was all for that.

It was a young woman actually, 17, and she was an absolute find. I spoke both to her tutor, her NVQ liaison and her line manager at Camden and told them she's someone who's really good at applying herself. Later on, when I saw her line manager again, he told me she'd asked for some tiling tools specifically – that was rather pleasing to hear!

So, for youngsters coming into tiling (or the trades full stop) I would be enthused to tell them that you can do an awful lot and gain a lot of personal satisfaction from doing the work. ■

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Montolit Tile Cutter – Top Tilers' Tools: Barber favours Montolit tile cutters for the "small details that make a difference"