

KEY CRITERIA

Try getting out of this one

Marcella Bidinost asks a few locksmiths to spill the beans on the strange things they've seen.

Thirteen years ago, Graham Behrendorff swapped his uni lecturer's tie for a pile of pick sets to forge a career as a locksmith.

"I just wanted to do something fulfilling using my hands," the 70-year-old says. Little did he realise an array of stranger jobs would come his way: "Each time the phone rings, it can deliver us a challenge I haven't faced before."

Nor are the challenges isolated to the unopenable; often, it's customers' emotions that need managing.

Twenty-four-hour locksmiths, in particular, are on call for breathless emergencies (think a child accidentally locked in a car on a hot summer's day) and often deal with customers who are frustrated by the inconvenience and expense of having to call out a locksmith.

The trick, Behrendorff says, is in the navigating – blending gut instincts and psychology with a steel-trap mind.

"In stickier situations, I can call a fellow locksmith but, a lot of the time, you just have to nut things out," he says.

That includes coping with embarrassing situations, such as when people lock themselves in the bathroom without clothes or risk a nude dash for the morning paper to find the front door swings shut behind them.

And almost every locksmith has a tale involving handcuffs. Behrendorff's most memorable one involves a set of antiques: "I got a call from the local hospital accident and emergency at 2.30am one Sunday. They had a patient there with handcuffs on and no key – a Saturday night 'exercise' that had gone wrong. When you 'press'

handcuffs, they get tighter and these handcuffs were cutting off his circulation."

To unleash handcuffs, people usually front up to the police station, where a set of general handcuff keys are kept for red-faced situations.

Then there was the teacher at the local secondary school who had just finished reading the riot act to three girls in an interview room: "Only problem was that the teacher couldn't open the door to let them out," Behrendorff says.

"They had to wait around for one hour together in a small room before we could get there and open the door. The door had a glass panel so people on the outside could see in and witness the predicament. By the end of it, they were all in good spirits and could see the funny side."

Suburban locksmith Neale Delves has come across one dead body in his years unlocking houses for

police, ambulance services and real estate agents. He sees it as one of the more unpleasant – and often unexpected – sides of the job.

"I'd taken a call from a real estate agent who wanted me to access what they assumed was an empty property," he says. "They thought the tenant had left without paying the rent." Turns out the tenant had left the building, in the lifetime sense.

Delves' most memorable tale belongs to a former locksmith colleague, who the police called to open a house for them.

"The home belonged to an elderly man who hadn't been seen for weeks and who kept his place locked up like Fort Knox. My workmate managed to open a window for the police to get in and, just as he was walking back to his van, looked back to see the policeman standing on a bed the old guy had been lying dead in for weeks.

"The policeman jumped back outside and started vomiting while his partner, who had been looking inside the old man's letterbox, realised

she'd just let loose a huntsman spider. So there were these two cops, one screaming around the front yard and the other vomiting everywhere."

Locksmithing has experienced major changes since the introduction of digital and electronic locking devices; complex security systems, including safes and vault doors; and transponder keys for high-security cars.

Some of Behrendorff's recent jobs include installing automated access control for a laundromat to

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save its owner visiting the premises to open and close each day and installing a biometric system at a gym, where members swipe fingerprints for after-hours access.

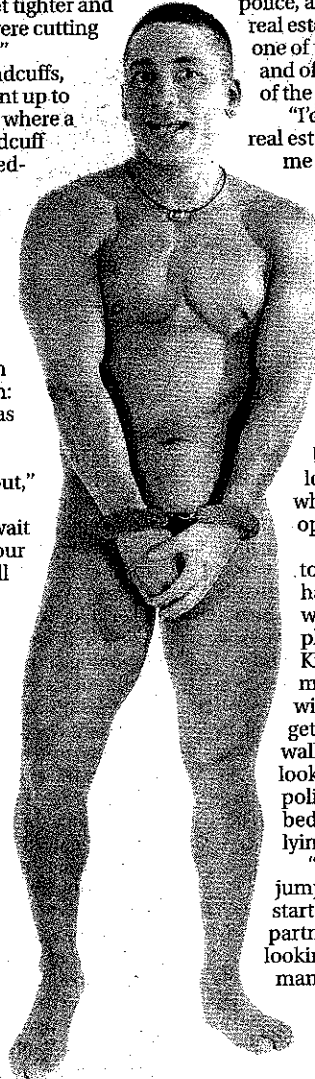
"For all its activity, locksmithing is a trade that keeps a surprisingly low profile," the chief executive of the Master Locksmiths Association, Allan Jones, says.

"It's almost like a religion, a brotherhood with plenty of experts who are very respectful and conscious of the ethics involved."

Of course, picking the right locksmith is key. One of the trade's cautions is to beware the locksmith who shows up with only a pair of pliers and a large bill to follow.

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Oops ... this is not an uncommon sight for some locksmiths. Photo: iStock