



# The true cost of the build

**Working out how much building your home is going to cost can be tricky. But don't worry – there are software packages to help. Graham Norwood finds out if they really are as useful as they claim, if they are easy to use and how much they cost**

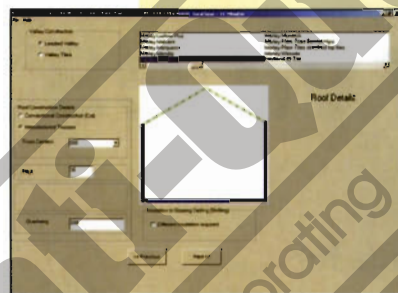
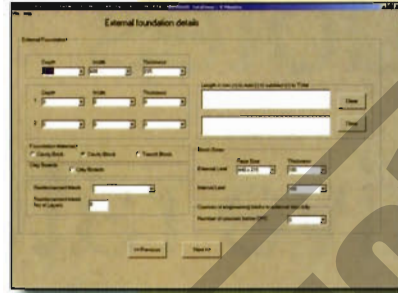
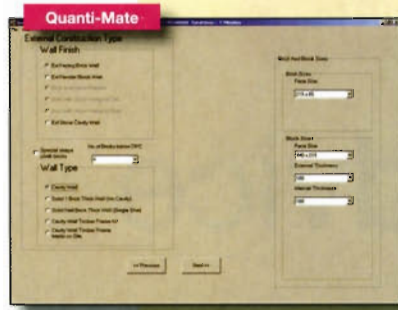
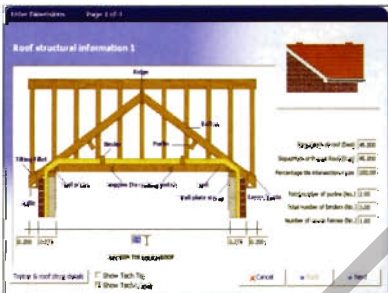
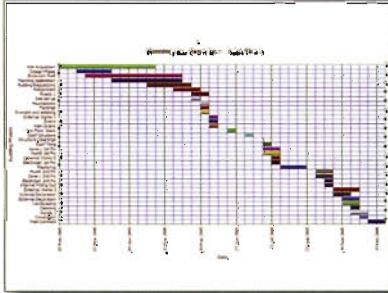
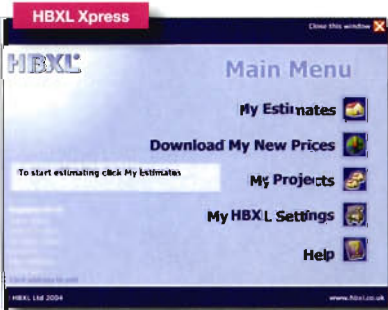
**T**here are several ways to work out how much you need to spend on your build. You could use an Excel spreadsheet and make frequent calls to a builders' merchant to work out the pricing. Alternatively, you could buy professional builders' price guides costing up to £70 that do the job themselves. These

approaches are very time-consuming, so to help make the pricing process easier, a number of companies have introduced computer software packages. Many cater specifically for building professionals, however, so you'll want to choose from those aimed at self-builders.

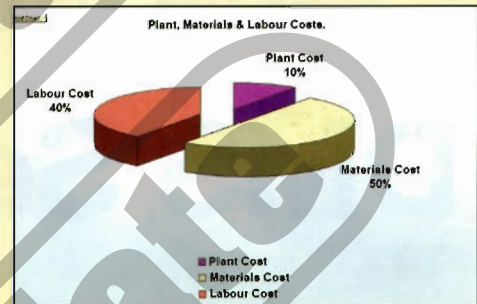
Before you rush out and buy one, it's worth checking the products on the market. Below, we test three of the best-known in the self-build market. Do browse the internet too, and ask for a demonstration in a builders' merchant to see what suits you best. If you intend to buy your supplies from a specific builders' merchant, it's worth asking which one they recommend. Jewson, for example, offers a trade discount to self-build users of HBXL's product. You may also be able to negotiate a discount on the software sold by a merchant if you commit to buying from him once your project is under way.

Two of the ones we tested – Easy Price Pro and Quanti-Mate – send out demo CDs, although these do not offer much more information than is available on their already-comprehensive websites. The third – HBXL's Estimator Xpress – will send written material to you and, again, has a thorough website.

But don't be over-ambitious or allow technology to dictate your software choice. It's easy to buy a product that is over-fit for the purpose for a self-builder. For example, TSI Luckins makes an excellent Software Toolcase package but this is best suited to professional electrical contractors rather than dedicated amateurs, and it will not help in >



DESCRIPTION	UNIT	QTY	TYPE	PLANT
Brickwork in Hand	sq m	2	Draw	175.00
Concrete in situ	cu m	1	Draw	100.00
Plasterwork	sq m	1	Draw	100.00
Roofing	sq m	1	Draw	100.00
Paintwork	sq m	1	Draw	100.00
Site Prep	sq m	1	Draw	100.00
<b>TOTALS</b>				<b>£220.00</b>



Item	Plant	Material	Labour	Total
Site Prep	£100.00	£100.00	£100.00	£300.00
Foundation	£100.00	£100.00	£100.00	£300.00
Roofing	£100.00	£100.00	£100.00	£300.00
Paintwork	£100.00	£100.00	£100.00	£300.00
Site Prep	£100.00	£100.00	£100.00	£300.00
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>£500.00</b>	<b>£500.00</b>	<b>£500.00</b>	<b>£1,500.00</b>

non-electrical aspects of your project. Likewise, Worldwide Software's various Esti-Mate estimating modules are for large-scale contractors and will be more costly than a single, smaller, fit-for-purpose package.

Some software packages are tailored for different national markets. Chief Architect (www.chiefarchitect.co.uk) has a building module primarily for residential property designs. It includes a costing element, but has a tone and checklists geared more to US and Australian users than British.

Get a good one and your package will estimate labour, materials, time and costs for full or part houses, extensions, garages or outbuildings of any size. Generally, the software delivers estimates to all common PC word-processing and spreadsheet packages, or can directly print off-screen. All you have to do is feed in dimensions, phasing, chosen materials and variables, such as customised labour costs, and state whether you are doing any of the labour yourself or using sub-contractors.

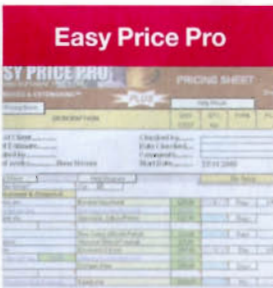
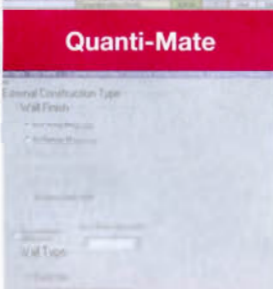
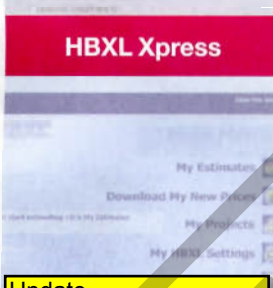

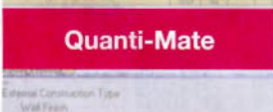
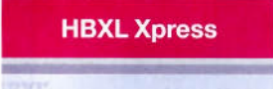
**Above left:** HBXL Xpress gives 100-plus calculations for different projects; fantastic on-screen quality; free email and phone backup; user training sessions. **Centre:** Quanti-Mate takes to price house in 30mins; works on all PCs; free telephone helpline and upgrades. **Right:** Easy Price Pro offers good value for a competent self-builder; easy to load; excellent email support

Ideally, you enter the costs of the items you need. If you are unsure of the quantity, the packages help calculate this by entering the cost of an item and the space or volume to be covered. If, for example, you enter the cost of labour for glazing one window then the number of windows you need, it does the calculation. The software packages make calculations based on broad assumptions – for example, that the ground is level so only straightforward foundation work is required – and no allowances are made for weather or delivery delays unless you build in a contingency.

It's probably best to allow two hours to load the data. This includes loading from disc (or discs in the case of Easy Price Pro) onto a PC, although with practice, you might be able to do it in an hour.

So once we have the data, what do we find with our three guinea-pig packages?

**Quanti-Quote incorporating Quanti-Mate,**  
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Web Site www.quantiquote.co.uk

	What they do	Computer required*	Ease of use	Support
 <p><b>Easy Price Pro</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Claims to price a house in under an hour (it took us longer)</li> <li>● Creates pro breakdowns of materials orders; payment schedules; suggested retention payment tables; summary sheets; records of costs, time and work-completed schedules</li> <li>● 'Plus' version offers holidays table, plus info on health and safety, walls, roofs, joists and foundations, and converts costs into Euros</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Users must have the full versions (not just Microsoft Works version) of Excel 97, 2000, 2002/XP or 2003</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No printed guide but easy loading, adequate on-screen help files and 'plus' version offers 'help movies' - 8/10</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Excellent support via email (24/7 excluding public holidays) or telephone via BT landlines without extra charge (weekdays 9am-5pm), or via online message boards - 8/10</li> </ul>	
 <p><b>Quanti-Mate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Claims to price a house in 30 mins (again, it took us much longer)</li> <li>● Creates professional breakdowns of materials orders; payment schedules; suggested retention payment tables; summary sheets; records of costs, time and work-completed schedules</li> <li>● Lists items you may have missed, given opportunity to cost almost everything for each room/floor/element of project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● "All modern PCs" with CD drives, Microsoft Works programs or better is the advice from the company</li> </ul> <p><b>Should be:- Any modern computer, reports will export to any spreadsheet for further customizing but not necessary.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No printed guide but on-screen help files and help movies - 8/10</li> </ul> <p><b>Incorrect There is a full text manual supplied on the disc, with 6 help movies and on screen help</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Users can telephone Quanti-Mate direct (no extra charges if within six months of purchase) and get free upgrades - 7/10</li> </ul>	
 <p><b>HBXL Xpress</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● More than 100 calculators for different types of projects</li> <li>● Pro breakdowns of materials orders; payment schedules; suggested retention payment tables; summary sheets; costs, time and work-completed schedules, incl 3-D pie charts</li> <li>● Fantastic quality on-screen diagrams prepared</li> <li>● Calculates profits for self-build developers or small companies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Users must have a minimum of 1GHz processor, 100MB hard-drive space, 64MB RAM, a CD-ROM drive; Microsoft Excel 97/2000/XP/2003; Windows 98/ME/NT/2000/XP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Printed guide plus on-screen video e-tutorials and option of extra help CD - 9/10</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Free technical assistance by telephone and email, plus installation support within 14 days of purchase and free software updates in year one; user training sessions, too - 9/10</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Update Self Builder edition at £49-99 inc Vat Builder Edition at £225-00 + VAT</b></p>				
	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Unique selling points</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	
 <p><b>Easy Price Pro</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 'Lite' version £99+VAT; 'Plus' £399+VAT; www.easypriepro.com</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Health and safety software options plus a Scalex 'PlanWheel' that automatically inputs measurements into a pricing sheet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Best all-round value for money for a competent self-builder</li> </ul>	<p>*All three work on PCs although HBXL hopes to make a Mac version sometime in the future. All the software is formally licensed and should not be passed from person to person. You don't need the internet because the packages are loaded from CDs, but if you're using the HBXL link to the most up-to-date Jewson costs, you'll need internet access; without it, you get the last uploaded Jewson prices.</p>	
 <p><b>Quanti-Mate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Basic DOS version £99+VAT, full version £225+VAT; www.quantiquote.co.uk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Powerpoint demo disc available that does not need installing on your PC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Good personal support from the supplier will help a less technically minded user</li> </ul>		
 <p><b>HBXL Xpress</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Basic versions from £439+VAT with additional costs for extra features; 'Total Toolkit' £599+VAT; www.hbxl.co.uk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Online access to 240,000 materials prices from Jewson, including trade discount</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● For the more experienced user on their second or subsequent project</li> </ul>		

Overall estimating software makes the job easier, although to make best use of it, you need individual prices, an accurate set of measurements plus full lists of materials.

All three packages look professional - some of it is like an Excel spreadsheet and can even be imported into one, but it can also be a very comprehensive list to present to anyone from a supplier to a bank manager from whom you need a loan. And if the project changes, the calculations can be done again.

In short, the packages are useful, easy to use and probably well worth the money if you intend to keep a tight rein on your costs.

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