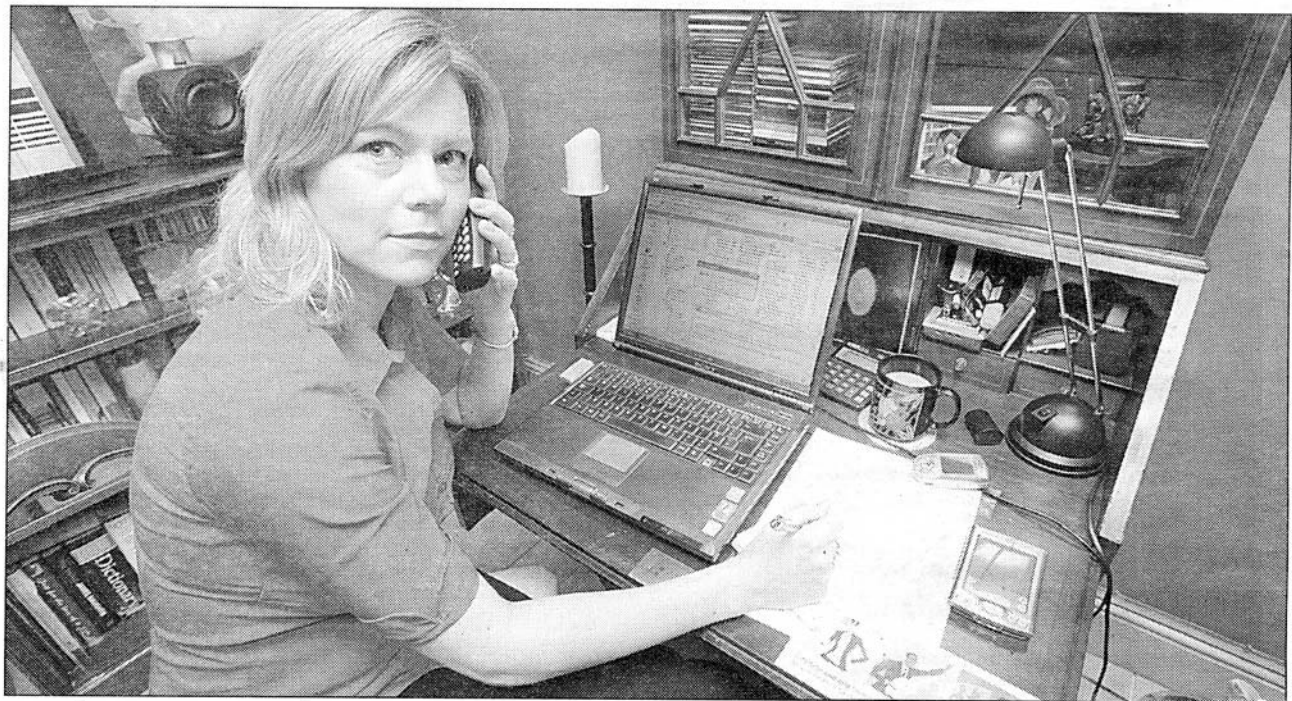


As you frantically prepare for the festive season, you may find yourself begging Santa for a little helper. Well, as **CATHERINE BARNES** discovers, depending on your budget, there are real-life elves available to run your life or simply give you a little respite. So, if you can't get to grips with gift wrap or decorating the tree gives you the needle, call a specialist and leave the donkey-work to them



Christmas angel CLAIRE BRINTON, 34 (above), is managing director of London-based lifestyle management company Buytime (www.buy-time.co.uk). Clients can buy time for themselves costing from £35 for one hour to £250 for 10 hours.

A LOT OF our calls at this time of year are last-minute. Some people panic when they realise that everything is going faster than they'd thought and that time is running out for jobs they thought they'd manage to complete.

We can do virtually everything bar suffer a hangover on behalf of our clients, but I'm sure if we could do that, we'd have plenty of requests!

I thought we'd mainly be catering for busy thirtysomething executives,

but it's not been the case at all. Our clients simply don't have time to shop or prepare for the festive period – even online.

We get a lot of men approaching us to buy their cards. We'll have to follow vague instructions such as "charity ones, maybe with candles on".

Busy as they are, most people will write their own cards, but it's the job of addressing them and posting them that comes to us. Clients can leave their cards and an open address book and we'll do the rest.

We also go shopping, and many men are quite happy for us to shop for personal gifts for wives and girlfriends, because they know we'll take the time to find the perfect gift.

One client gave us a budget of a few hundred pounds to organise a spa day for his wife. There's no way he'd have

had the time to find a place and look for the treatments on offer, or search the Internet for beauty products.

No matter how busy, women, on the other hand, don't seem to find looking for the right gift such a daunting challenge.

We also organise turkeys to be delivered from a specialist farm to clients on Christmas Eve. I didn't get any angry calls on the 25th last year, so no one missed out.

It really says something about the working environment when someone doesn't even have time to buy themselves a turkey, or decorate a tree – which is part of the fun.

It's certainly an interesting time of year, although a bit scary when you get a surge of requests. When that happens, we just have to run around faster than usual.