

# ENGLAND v FRANCE IN THE TRAINING GAME

French construction training as described by Elsbeth Ganguin in *Building* last year appeared to put English training in the shade. Here she evens the score by giving a detailed assessment of the course offered at Cecol, the Norfolk training college run by the Construction Industry Training Board. Reg Freeson, the Housing Minister, is to visit the college on 12 July.

They call it a civil engineering college when really it is a training centre for construction industry operatives—and it is a very good one. This sums up the difference between the Ecole d'Apprentissage des Travaux Publics at Egletons, in France, and the Civil Engineering College, run by the Construction Industry Training Board at Bircham Newton in Norfolk.

The French believe in training-cum-education, and they are willing to pay for it. Magnificently equipped training establishments combine extensive schooling with the provision of technical expertise. There is considerable parental involvement and acceptance of financial responsibility for their young. The young themselves appear keen to attain craftsman status through taking examinations for the certificat d'aptitude professionnelle and the construction industry in France obviously appreciates the quality of trained recruits: the boys leave Egletons, for example, as "experienced workers", qualifying straight away for "the third wage level of the six in French industry and fairly rapid promotion."

I described the French approach in some detail last year (*Building* 14 September 1973), and have now taken a similar look at the Bircham Newton college. This is the one and only one, I believe, in Britain, whereas Egletons, supported by the French civil engineering industry, is only one among several more. The building industry is equally well endowed. It speaks for itself that at Bircham Newton there are as many builders' boys as there are trainees sponsored by civil engineering firms—the builders have no college of their own. Egletons alone has some 450 boys (first and second year) at any one time. Cecol at Bircham Newton has 130 boys now, rising to 200 by the end of August.

In fact, one is not comparing like with like. The question is whether, (as it is sometimes suggested in Britain) the French are over-doing things and so the British construction industry need not, and should not, aspire to similar heights, or whether it would be to the benefit of British industry and boys alike to pay much more attention to training.

In the meantime, Egletons and Cecol are drawing closer together: sponsored by Cubitts, who offers this opportunity annually from now on, one Cecol boy, Neil Howells, will get a second year's training at Egletons following his one-year stint at Bircham Newton. It will be interesting to see what he will make of the different atmosphere with its strict discipline and high educational content (the curriculum is equally divided between

theoretical and practical instruction, including project work). I understand that as many as 36 Cecol boys applied to compete for this prize.

There is also talk of two Egletons boys coming to train at Bircham Newton. If this comes about, it will be even more interesting to learn their views than it will be to hear of the British boy's experience—they may well think that they would have learnt more at home.

People who have seen both places said: "Egletons is much more like a technical institute", and "they don't work so much under site conditions, and do not do so much scaffolding and concreting." The Bircham Newton philosophy is "let them become used to realistic conditions from the start". One Cecol boy, who aspires to become a foreman eventually, decided after his visit to Egletons that because "they are so many there, it is not as sociable as this place".

At Egletons the course lasts for two years; at Bircham Newton it is a one-year course: when Cecol was started in 1969 the intention was also to have two-years' instruction. But after the first intake this was cut by half for reasons of economy. In their year the boys get three weeks' basic training in the use of hand tools, power tools, site plant, and so forth, followed by concreting (10 weeks); formwork erection (six weeks); kerb laying (two weeks); sheet piling and oxy-acetylene cutting (one week); pipelaying and other drainage work (four weeks); scaffolding (one week); steel fixing and bar bending for reinforced concrete (three weeks); timbering for trenches and shafts (four weeks) and one week each in levelling and setting out, road surfacing, and site work with a firm. Eight weeks are set aside for "physical and leadership" training, including an Outward Bound course. In addition, one day a week is spent at the local technical college. (The "tech" is soon to have an "annexe" at Bircham Newton itself.)

Bircham Newton is a former RAF station. Apart from Cecol, the CITB has also operated a training centre for adults there since 1966, where 75 different courses are provided in supervision, earthmoving plant, scaffolding, cranes, industrial painting, work study, roadwork equipment, bar bending and steel fixing, and more. There are a number of large hangars which offer some weather protection. The Cecol boys use some of the

2 A cheerful-looking group doing timbering. Most of the training is outdoor, and site conditions can be unpleasant if realistic.



facilities on the "adult" side, (including leisure amenities), but mainly they are being "hardened" on site.

When I went there the sun shone and it was very pleasant to wander about and watch. But I was told that "mostly we have a howling gale round here", and you get vivid descriptions of mud and rain and other unpleasant if realistic site conditions. I saw boys who had started on their course three days earlier, in red helmets, green jerseys, denims, protective boots (all provided by the college) learning to erect rope barriers on the grass around some wooden huts or lecture rooms. Other newcomers were handling a steelwire rope.



1 Putting in concrete formwork. The college gives its students six weeks training in formwork erection and ten weeks in concreting.

Further along the site, less green, and much rougher, some boys were laying kerbs while others mixed concrete. There was some trenching going on too, but the trainees only work with a mechanical digger—they do not themselves learn to operate it: the only plant they use is a dumper, and there was evidence of former roadmaking, while on the horizon in the distance one could see earthmoving plant in action, handled by adjut trainees. At Egletons, of course, the boys are learning to operate plant, too, and get the workshop training to go with it.

Actually, Cecol plans to start separate plant operator courses in September. The first 48 boys have already been accepted. There are to be two streams—cranes and earthmoving—and the course will last for two years, though 36 weeks of this time are to be spent with the sponsoring firm, on the job, and no less than seven weeks are allocated for holidays, plus four weeks' physical leadership training. There will, however, also be 14 weeks' plant maintenance and repair and related technical studies, and 38 weeks' plant operator training. Cecol is hoping to be able to get the airfield adjoining the station to provide space for more earthmoving and project activities, though the projects are unlikely to measure up to Egletons' efforts: trainees there have already built the local airstrip, a public swimming pool and other

amenities (including two rugby pitches) for the community.

At Egletons as at Cecol the boys are tested before being accepted. But while at Egletons the boys are placed in employment after their two years are up, at Cecol sponsoring firms must be found from the start, which means that promising boys might not be able to get in simply because they live in the "wrong area" from the point of view of would-be sponsors. In other words, the need to match boys with sponsors brings its difficulties. On the other hand, sponsorships also create loyalty. Very few boys are said to drop out. The sponsoring companies pay a fee of £1200, and, if they are "in scope" to the CITB, receive 75 per cent back in grant. Included in the fee is £5 a week pocket money for the trainees. At the end of the course the boys can get the Cecol certificate and the City and Guilds of London Institute Further Education Certificate at Operative level. Once they return to their sponsors (normally a two-year service agreement will apply) they can expect to receive 4p per hour above the basic rate.

The syllabus at Cecol has been devised by the industry, so one must assume that this is what industry wants, no more or less. I still cannot help thinking that more formalised indoor training for, say, nine months, followed by proper projects outside for another few months might be better than all that site training, where the weather tends to intervene more often than is realised. Greater involvement by the parents, as is regarded natural at Egletons, might also be an advantage.

While they say at Cecol that discipline is no problem—they are working on the "loose rein" principle, trusting that as the boys work in gangs, group discipline will emerge—I saw for example a lot of litter lying about. Well, "we teach them their trade, professional behaviour and personal behaviour", Monsieur J Derche, principal of Egletons, told me, while Cecol aims at "developing their character and leadership potential through educational and physical pursuits—as individuals and as members of groups" and at "giving them a sound working knowledge of a wide variety of civil engineering skills so that after spending an appropriate time in the industry, they are well prepared for future promotion to foreman." Which after all sounds similar enough.

## Cecol entry standards

**Age:** under 18½ upon joining.

**Medical:** the student must be in good health and able to take the training offered. A medical examination will be part of the selection process.

**Education:** while the student must have a satisfactory school record, certificates of education are not essential.

**Interests:** the student must have shown an interest in active outdoor sports and recreational activities.

**Disposition:** the student must be willing to lead an outdoor life and to train and work away from home.

The Civil Engineering College  
Bircham Newton Training Centre  
King's Lynn  
Norfolk.