



THE LABOURER'S SALE

Donall Mac Amlaigh is no ordinary labourer – his novel about the travails of an Irish labourer in the UK has just been published. Now living in Northampton, he joined the industry in the mid-1950s; here, he looks at how life on site has changed.

When I landed a job with Kyle Stewart on a Tesco superstore halfway towards completion last summer, I counted myself lucky. At 57, I had been out of work for over 12 months.

There seems to be a growing acceptance in most industries now that a man too old at 45, and so those in their late fifties can hardly expect to be viewed with much enthusiasm by prospective employers.

Although the construction industry is getting ever more competitive, it is still not quite so ruthless as other occupations. Certainly Kyle Stewart's hourly rate of £3.50 left me better off than I could realistically expect with so many men chasing so few jobs these days – something that contractors are all too well aware of. Tradesmen and general operatives alike are finding it increasingly harder to get employed "on the books" now, with subcontractors and labour suppliers competing like piranha fish for whatever bit of work is going.

For those employed "off the books" – the majority these days – £30.00 per eight or nine-hour day, with the requisite 30% deduction for income tax in the case of those not in possession of an exemption certificate, is the prevailing rate for labourers in Northamptonshire. But it is not uncommon to hear of men employed on a casual basis being paid as little as £18.00 a day.

Two years ago, I worked for Fairclough on a bank renovation job. We were occasionally helped out by casual labour sent in by an employment agency, who were paid as little as two-thirds our rate.

Fly-by-night subbies and their suppliers have become the bane of the building trade, at least from the employees' standpoint, and the unions seem powerless in face of the threat. In contrast with former times, most contractors now view union membership with a kind of benign indifference. They'll even deduct your union dues from your wages and pass them along to save you the bother of attending branch meetings.

When I began work in the industry in the 1950s, when you came on site in search of a job you rarely needed to look farther than the nearest ganger or foreman, who either put you to work on the spot or sent you away with the makings of an inferiority complex stirring beneath your skin.

Nowadays you are more likely to be received with every courtesy in the site office, and

your details noted down with flattering interest, before they tell you that you'll be notified when and if there's a vacancy. While this may be kinder than outright rejection, many believe that the purpose is to gauge the availability of labour, just as non-existent jobs are sometimes advertised to test the response.

With few exceptions, I see now, the big firms farm their work out now, finding it more economical and less trouble to do so than to maintain a full workforce.

Very often when there are vacancies, the applicant will be referred to "the subbie down the field" – a subbie with an Irish surname nine times out of ten. Because for all that they have somehow acquired an image of amiable buoyancy in the popular fancy, the Irish are very adept at surviving in the cut-throat business that much of the industry has become.

One deceptively guileless-looking young chap from the far reaches of County Mayo runs a nice little venture supplying men here in the Midlands, quite often paying as little as £18.00 for a busy nine-hour day.

Mechanisation has made life physically easier on building sites. Now the concrete arrives ready-mixed, and with a modicum of gumption may be laid without too much sweat. Bricks are offloaded at the touch of a knob, where a few years back the unloading gang spent one of their teeth or took a grateful breather behind the stack. The introduction of the mobile CB in the mid-1950s did away with most of the hard digging on sites – and with the mystique of the black gang too.

But life is also a lot less carefree than it was when I began in the early 1950s. The complexity of bonus and priced work and the necessity of worrying about targets has done a lot to vanquish the "crack" that was such an enjoyable feature of the building worker's life.

I was particularly struck by the changed attitudes on building sites when I rejoined the industry after a couple of years absence. It seemed to me that every one was preoccupied with targets and prices, and there was a new rapacity too, a tendency to skimp and do shoddy work that would have shocked a lot of the older men.

It is a common knowledge that a lot of soft money has been earned in the course of various building booms over the past 30 years or more. But there was always a great disparity in pay, too, with the smaller,

family-type concerns either unwilling or unable to match the bigger, one might almost say more glamorous, firms that many felt proud to work for.

The big national firms such as MacAlpine and Wimpey generated a kind of folk mythology, whether of paternalistic benevolence or callous disregard for the welfare of employees. In Mayo, it used to be said, little children were taught to say their bedtime prayers as follows: "God bless Mammy, and God bless Daddy, and God bless Sir Robert MacAlpine."

The name Wimpey was believed to be an acronym for "We import more Puddies every year". In later times I heard West Indian workers complain that one of the figures, at least, in the Taylor/Woodrow motif should have been black.

Wimpey was generally thought to be "tight with the shillings", though many West of Ireland men regarded the firm with the kind of devotion that Japanese car workers reserve for the companies that employ them.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, had the reputation of being a good payer. I had to work flat out on one of their unloading gangs, but the bonus compensated for the effort and rarely gave rise to the kind of hassle that poor or outdated prices caused on so many jobs.

"I worked for Laing, but not for long," was a wry catch-phrase heard time and again over the years.

Many things have changed in the industry over the years, but the very British trait of wastefulness has not, and the introduction of the big disposal bins on site seems to me a temptation to dump rather than to conserve. While a chap like myself – who still remains a labourer after a lifetime of work – should beware of telling his superiors how to sack eggs, I do think that worthwhile savings could easily be made.

But the biggest change of all perhaps is the speed with which jobs are completed today: the Tesco superstore I worked on was started last February and is open for business now with attractive landscaping, car parks and other accessories. Fast work indeed and, as one old groundworker observed the day we were paid off: "There was a time when a new pair of boots wouldn't see the job out, but they hardly have time to get dirty now before you're off here again!"

Donall Mac Amlaigh's book *Strutter O'Shane* is published by Brandon Press, Drogheda, Co Kerry, and costs £9.95.