

# grease

is the word

THE BUILDING SITE CANTEEN HAS traditionally ranked alongside British Rail and school dinners in the table of culinary excellence. But, in many cases, poor standards only persist in urban mythology.

Where once canteens were run by the contractor, with larger firms such as Higgs & Hill and Wimpey running their own catering corps, the service is now contracted out to specialists.

Today, site catering can range from someone coming round with a basket of sandwiches, to converted domestic caravans serving snacks, to impressive, purpose-built temporary buildings with full cooking facilities run by large catering companies. However, as the contractor is usually responsible for providing the facilities, canteens tend only to be viable on longer-term jobs and hence are relatively scarce.

All are subject to the stringent food safety and food hygiene regulations that apply to all movable buildings, and they are in direct competition with local shops and cafes.

## Facilities

Some of the best facilities are at Jubilee Gardens, the largest site on London's Jubilee Line Extension, where workers dine in a light, spacious temporary building with views across the Thames. Tables and floor have a hospital-like cleanliness that befits the surgical gowns worn by catering staff.

Lower down the scale are the two shabby site cabins that serve 400 workers building the £70m new wing at Leeds General Infirmary. These have all the charm of a dirty chip pan. The usual harsh strip lighting fails to compensate for the poky windows hidden behind wire grilles. Walls for which white is an alien concept are lined with rickety MDF shelving supporting the odd sports bag. And by the end of the final lunch shift, wobbly wooden benches and chipped tables are coated in a fine layer of site dust and dry gravy. Some diners complain it is too noisy, too hot, or that people smoke in the non-smoking hut, but they still choose to sit there.

Attitudes to the service vary. "It's not very customer-friendly – they won't even lend you a cup for your tea," complains

one labourer. "I complained about the pie being fatty, and she barked at me," grumbles another.

Others, however, are grateful to have a canteen at all, and consider the facilities on a par with, if not better than, those at other sites.

## The head chef

Olive arrives on site in Leeds at 5.45am and by 6.45 she is serving tea and toast. Full breakfasts are available between 8.50 and 10.50am.

With 400 site workers to be fed by her team of three women, Olive has to work fast. "We've just got to get them in and get them out," she says, looking hassled.

Between shouting orders for hot food across the kitchen from the main hatch and dispensing Mars bars from a hatch at the back, Olive still makes time for a bit of banter with her regular customers. She has also won a name for giving good racing tips at no additional charge.

After 30 years of serving full English breakfasts to hungry site labourers, Olive is still happy with her chosen profession. "I like the easy atmosphere. You are left alone to get on and you don't have some hard-nosed boss breathing down your neck."

Although facilities are provided by the contractor, it is up to Olive to make her own profit. However, she is well aware that she is competing with local cafes and sandwich bars. "I can't have my prices too high or they just won't pay them. They'll go elsewhere."

June, who feeds the hordes at Jubilee Gardens, has been in the business 20 years, and has worked on many of the big London projects, such as Chelsea Harbour. "I like the atmosphere of building sites," she says. "Everyone's so friendly. I think the nicest thing is the way everybody says good morning to you."

## The diners

Although all site managers will claim to eat in the canteen, few of them are to be found there. The closest most get to the joys of site cuisine is asking a friendly caterer or their secretary to have something brought to their office.

At Jubilee Gardens, suits have been

sighted in the canteen, and June regularly lays on buffets when management entertains guests. At Leeds General Infirmary, the clientele is predominantly made up of self-employed tradespeople and the general labourers regularly used by Higgs & Hill. Many travel from as far afield as Liverpool and Manchester, so the first thing they do when they arrive on site is go to the hut for tea and breakfast. Breaks are staggered, with 15 minutes in the morning, half an hour for lunch and an unofficial 15 minutes in the afternoon.

On the Leeds site, vegetarians are as rare as hen's teeth and a healthy diet gives way to a voracious appetite. "I have a big fry-up every morning. But then I work it all off," says one labourer.

"Nobody ever asks for vegetarian and the nearest they get to dieting round here is drinking diet pop," says Olive.



## The proprietor

At Leeds General Infirmary, Higgs & Hill's site manager Mick Walsh is responsible for providing the premises, water and electricity for the site canteen. He ensures that the buildings are well maintained – although they may not look like it, they have apparently been redecorated three times.

When Walsh began his career, Higgs & Hill still ran its own catering division, but this meant that Walsh was finding himself responsible for ordering the milk and

paying the butcher.

"Private caterers take all that responsibility away from me, so I can get on with doing my job."

Where possible, Walsh tries to provide a canteen on site. "It stops the men roaming around the town. It keeps them on the site, so it's important they're happy with the food."

## What you can eat

On the Leeds site, all food is prepared on site by Olive and her team. Cuisine is traditional – pie and chips for main course, sponge and custard for pudding – although more exotic dishes such as lasagne are gaining popularity.

Breakfast is the most popular meal of the day, with the queue stretching out of the canteen door on winter mornings, and the crane driver using machinery to bring

bacon butty rations up to his cab.

Prices are reasonable – a two-course lunch will set you back £2.50. Although the canteen is not subsidised, competition from local cafes and sandwich bars keep the prices down.

The Leeds site is, however, among the most traditional in the country. Up in Newcastle, where Sir Robert McAlpine and Hochtief are constructing a giant wafer fabrication plant for Siemens, the menu stretches to chicken tikka with rice (£1.80) and "pasta twists with bacon in a rich tomato sauce" (£1.65), although there is still room for a battered jumbo sausage. Assorted sponge and crumble again dominate the pudding menu.

Compare this with Jubilee Gardens where June makes it her policy to grill all bacon and burgers and to ensure there is always a vegetarian option. Salad, lasagne and quiche frequently appear on the menu, although a trial with avocado and crispy bacon sandwiches proved a shade too adventurous.

## What you should eat

Work on a construction site can be gruelling, but experts say that just because you are burning lots of energy, doesn't mean you can eat exactly what you like, writes James Macneil.

Nutritionists from the British Nutrition Foundation say that site workers should not just consider the amount of energy a meal provides but also the amount of fat it contains. The percentage of fat in the food should be kept below 35%, although most people tend to exceed this by 2-3%.

To keep within the limit, the BNF advises being choosy. Fat is an effective way of delivering energy-giving carbohydrates, so someone doing a physical job should not cut it out completely. "My advice would be to go for a diet that is not too high in fats," says a spokeswoman. "If you go without fat, it is difficult to take enough energy in. Instead, to keep fat intake below 35%, go without fried bread."

This does not mean cutting out all life's pleasures. If you have a fry-up, have baked beans, which are low in fat, and choose either bacon or sausages. Have your eggs scrambled or poached, not fried. Also, avoid fatty sandwich fillings such as bacon and avocado.