

Where have all the apprentices gone? In this third of a series of articles, Graham Ridout meets Brian Tierney, one of London's small builders, who lashes out at the inadequacies of the schools, attacks low wage levels and deplores the short-term practices of Britain's "black economy".

● The north London firm of R F Peachey & Sons is typical of a host of small British builders which have supplied the industry with craftsmen for many years—in Peachey's case, about 110 years.

Located almost within the shadow of Spurs football club, the plain brickwork offices mark the firm as being solid and dependable.

Brian Tierney, co-partner in the company, is well qualified to speak of what the lack of craftsmen is doing to small builders like his throughout the country.

"As a company, we have a great deal of difficulty finding craftsmen. If we require directly employed or labour-only sub-contractor tradesmen, then I know it's going to be difficult finding them. In this region, the industry is held together by a thin thread of allegiance and only applies to those people who have kept employed over a long period."

He believes this is the case in all regions with skilled people at a premium, or impossible to obtain.

Pragmatic

Tierney is able to offer a wider perspective on the problem. Apart from running a business, he represents the Federation of Master Builders in talks on training with the Construction Industry Training Board. He is chairman of the board of governors at the local Waltham Forest technical college, and was invited to the training and skills shortage forum called by construction minister John Patten in mid-January.

Though he does not doubt Patten's sincerity or underestimate the dilemma caused by the lack of training, Tierney is pragmatic.

"There is no one, simple solution to the problem we face. As an industry we have let matters slide, our training base has been eroded and we have

gone too far down that road." Tierney blames the education system, particularly "politically motivated subversion in schools", as a major reason why people are not coming into the industry.

During the Patten forum, a figure bandied about was that the industry was "4000 apprentices short" and "could cope with an influx of that order right away."

Says Tierney: "I don't know where they got that figure from. Before I consider the shortage in the number of craftsmen, not apprentices, then I would estimate that London alone needs that number of tradesmen just to satisfy the present workload."

He cites an FMB "skills shortage" survey, conducted just before Christmas, to announce a similar pattern—of demand, but not numbers—which exists in all the regions. The issues and causes of the deficiency of trained people are many, says Tierney.

"An increase in workload is definitely not the sole answer to this problem. Doubling the workload won't double the number of trainees.

"An increase would help the medium and smaller firms, which traditionally have been responsible for the majority of training—if, for no other reason, than to discourage larger contractors from siphoning the work which has normally been done by medium-sized builders, and so on down the line.

He also sees no easy answer to the problem of getting sub-contractors more involved with training.

"I'm not against labour-only sub-contractors. My firm couldn't exist without them. But my personal view is that the vast majority of them won't want to know about offering training.

"The pity is that the bona-fide sub-contractors are specialists carrying out traditional crafts. If you could guarantee some of the larger sub-contractors continuity

of work, then they might consider training."

Peachey has, in fact, been able to put an apprentice with a labour-only carpenter sub-contractor to assist his training. This was only possible because the firm was able to give the sub-contractor continuity of work on several sites.

"Generally, the nature of sub-contracting, especially so in some trades, means they are only on site for a short period before moving on to somewhere completely different," adds Tierney.

Moreover, he contends that general builders are losing men to some of the specialist firms: including partitioning, suspended ceiling and dry lining sub-contractors.

"There is an industry very suitable for bonus payments because of the highly repetitious content of the work. That sort of work is very easy for a skilled carpenter; he can earn bonuses which builders are not able to match."

He continues: "Outside industries and those on the fringe of the building industry—like partitioning, as well as labour-only sub-contractors—are the ones which don't train. They rely on builders to do that for them."

The north London builder, however, supports Patten's initiative for the CITB to draw up a plan of action by the end of March. Among the mooted suggestions: the CITB should be the central registration body for training.

Will it help?

"Having a central registration system will help, but it's not going to be the sudden answer to all our problems," Tierney says. But an effective policy embrace sub-contracting?

"In my experience a majority of labour-only sub-contracting firms consist of a leader and up to 10 or 12 men, all hold a 714 (tax-exemption) certificate." He

explains that the leader acts as little more than an agent or contact man, for the rest.

Patten's urging the CITB to prepare an action plan is contrasted with what Tierney sees as a lack of action on the "black economy". It is far worse than any government will admit and the stop-go climate, used in the building industry for many years, has made the situation much worse," he claims.

A big carrot

"Avoiding paying 15% VAT is too big a carrot for some private and domestic employers. It might help if the government needs to make the customer legally responsible for using 'black economy' workers. But again, it won't solve the problem completely."

Tierney does back another of the issues raised during the Patten forum: that of giving more thought to "horizontal" as well as "vertical" training programmes. Horizontal training would involve broadening the range of skills of a trainee, rather than trying to make each individual a master tradesman.

"It does seem like a solution which may satisfy a number of small and medium contractors. There is a case for basically trained people to be given the opportunity to broaden their skills, especially into a construction trade, such as a bricklayer learning plastering. It would not be in many instances where there is the amount of work to economically justify bringing separate tradesmen."

He views adult training as "perhaps the largest, immediate resource" to hand. "There must be many general building operatives who would welcome the chance to become more skilled."

Most of Tierney's dissatisfaction with the parlous state of building is reserved for the educational system.

"We are being let down by schools not including building



Photo: P. G. G.

suitable career for young people. You can pick up any number of leaflets about being a doctor, lawyer or whatever, but very little about becoming a building craftsman.

"The advent of comprehensive schooling has also meant youngsters aren't encouraged to work with their hands."

Another failing of the education system is that "young people are put off from going on a VTS scheme, unless as a last resort". His contention is that all VTS schemes are viewed in a poor light, not only by teachers, but also by parents.

A case of all being tarred by the same brush, except that Tierney says: "the CITB has taken on VTS and used it to tremendous advantage".

Sell to schools

His solution: "We have got to put a lot of effort into selling the industry in clear terms to parents, teachers and schools."

To be effective, he reckons "something must be done to the wages structure. Apprentices' low rates of pay have not attracted enough people into the industry. We need to look towards parity with some of the other industries."

One way out of this, he suggests, is government assistance. "Is it right that the building industry pays to train its apprentices?"

"Other professions have college fees paid by local authorities and parents. There are a lot of anomalies over grants and assistance. It all comes down to which profession you choose to pursue."

Tierney fully supports the choice of the CITB to prepare a rescue plan.

Whatever the recommendations, he believes they will be better than the present morass.

"We can't keep on floundering forever. Something must be done and done fast" ●

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BRIAN TIERNEY

R F Peachey
Brian Tierney speaks up for small British builders