

The hi-de-hi image of British holiday camps is dead. A new generation of holiday villages with artificial thrills is wooing back holiday-makers from the Costa del Sol. Martin Spring reports.

GOODBYE TO HI-DE-HI

Next week that venerable and once-popular British institution, the holiday camp, will be laid to rest. In its place will arise a new generation of holiday villages and centres.

At the forefront is a futuristic settlement of 600 chalets in the depths of Sherwood Forest that revolves around a "pleasure dome" of tropical swimming thrills. It opens next Friday.

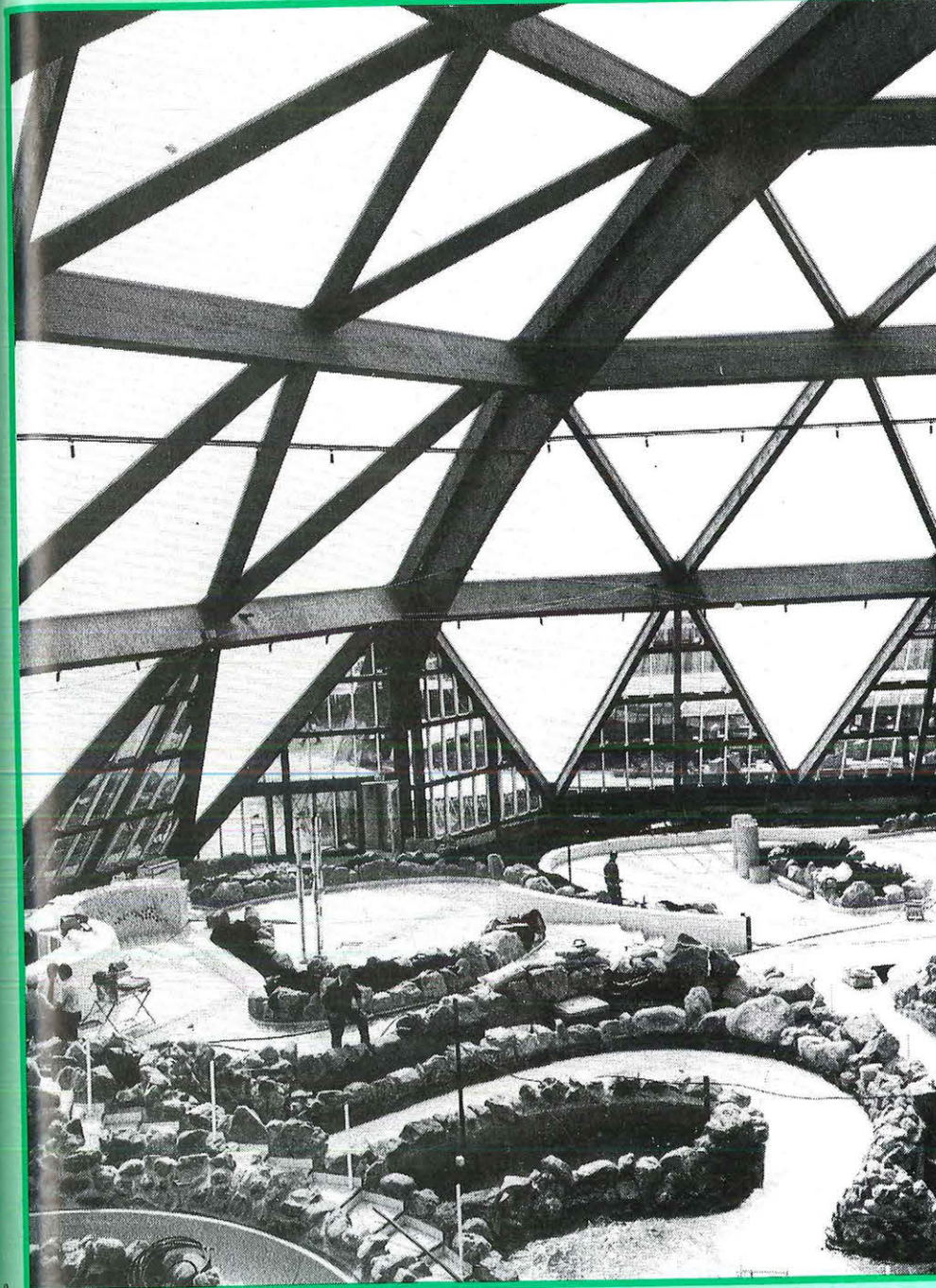
The Sherwood Forest holiday village is a Dutch import. It is based on a formula devised ingeniously and tested fastidiously by Center Parcs in eight forerunners in Holland and Belgium. The company hopes to attract young families that would turn up their noses at the traditional British holiday camp.

Tom Flynn, managing director

of Center Parcs' UK division, has thrown down the gauntlet to British rivals: "We are as different to holiday camps as Concorde is to a bicycle."

The bicycle in question – the original home-bred British holiday camp – was born in 1936 in bracing Skegness. It was launched by Billy Butlin with the revolutionary concept: "A week's holiday for a week's wages", which he reckoned was 45 shillings.

Fifty years later, Rank, the inheritors of Butlin's holiday camps, has woken up to the need for a radical new image, spurred on no doubt by the Dutch invasion. An even stronger incentive is the inexorable growth of consumer spending on leisure, which easily outstrips general economic growth.



*1 Centrepiece of Butlin's revamped holiday camp at Bognor Regis is an airy new swimming pavilion. Designed by Sargent & Potiriadis, the flamboyant £5m building features a rapids canyon, flume rides and a large wave pool as well as a large spectator gallery for shows.
2 Center Parcs' new holiday centre in Sherwood Forest revolves around a 70 m diameter "pleasure dome". Water slides, chutes and others swimming thrills are packaged in a naturalistic rock landscape.*

extensive water landscaping is installed artificially and operated by pumps. So are the more active swimming and leisure delights in the central complex of buildings, not to mention the full modern servicing to the loose network of 600 chalets. The whole development is, in effect, a totally engineered experience beneath a beguiling natural woodland veneer.

Probably more than the relatively passive facilities of ambience, accommodation and catering, it is the activities on offer in the new holiday centres that are the main attraction. To compete with the lure of the Mediterranean, this means water served up with every artificially induced special effect in a warm, indoor environment.

The centrepieces of both Center Parcs' Sherwood Forest village and Butlin's three revamped camps at Minehead, Skegness and Bognor Regis are large, flamboyant swimming halls. The special water effects take the form of dazzling combinations of wave machines, spa baths, waterfalls, whirlpools, wild-water rapids and snaking high-level flumes or tubular water rides.

At Sherwood Forest, the water hall comes in the shape of a giant geodesic "pleasure dome" 70 m in diameter. Designed by Center Parcs' in-house architects in the Netherlands, it is constructed of hefty laminated timber beams and triple glazed with translucent PTFE membrane.

Like the whole village, the array of water courses inside the dome is packaged to simulate natural landscape. It features

After selling off two holiday camps, Butlin's has embarked on a £100m investment programme over five years to revamp its five remaining camps, now called holiday centres. With a total capacity of 35 000 beds, the revamp amounts to the largest hotel development operation in the country. Main contractor is Tarmac, which has deployed a total of 6000 workers for the first three camps to be tackled.

Other British groups such as Pontin, Warner and even Ladbroke's caravan sites are following suit, each with its own multi-million pound refurbishment programme.

Within the past decade, the holiday camp image has descended from Billy Butlin's high-minded principles of popular recreation to the level of the

hi-de-hi soap opera. During that period, customers have dropped off by one-fifth to three million a year. The home-grown holiday camp has been overtaken by the universal holiday of the 1970s and 1980s, the fortnight package tour to the Mediterranean.

In its most obvious sense, changing the image of 'home-grown packaged holiday centres means adding the latest fashionable decor and, at the same time, upgrading living accommodation and catering facilities to the standards of the 1980s.

But a fundamental dilemma with communal holiday centres is that extensive developments of mass-produced buildings and leisure facilities – no matter how fashionably decked out – are hardly "away from it all" for

Britain's urban population. Center Parcs solves the problem by flying in the face of British packaged holiday wisdom.

The company steers clear of the seaside and insists on developing every village in the thick of virgin woodland.

Though it is a headache for the builders (see On site, pages 41-45), the approach ensures that, from the day it opens, every new development is steeped in a concentrated natural setting. Fully grown trees even break through the paving in the main squares of the villages.

Also contributing to the back-to-nature ambience in all Centre Parcs' villages are networks of streams, pools and lakes that lace their way between the chalets.

But, unlike the trees, the

extended chutes in concrete that emerge from the building to wind around trees and rockscape.

Cascading rockscapes – made out of boulders imported from the Netherlands – figure prominently inside the dome as well, and are topped with a liberal garnish of sub-tropical greenery.

At the Butlin's centres, the water halls, dubbed "Sunsplash", are more architectural in decor. The designers are architects and leisure planners Sargent & Potiriadis. The 1600 m² pool at Skegness, claimed to be Europe's largest water playground, features extensive high-level flumes draped in spectacular forms around the hall.

At Bognor Regis, a more formal layout revolves around a central spine of cylindrical concrete columns that erupt below the roof into tree-like arrays of laminated timber branches. Extended areas of poolside seating, on ground and mezzanine floors, enable the hall to double as a venue for musical shows and swimming events.

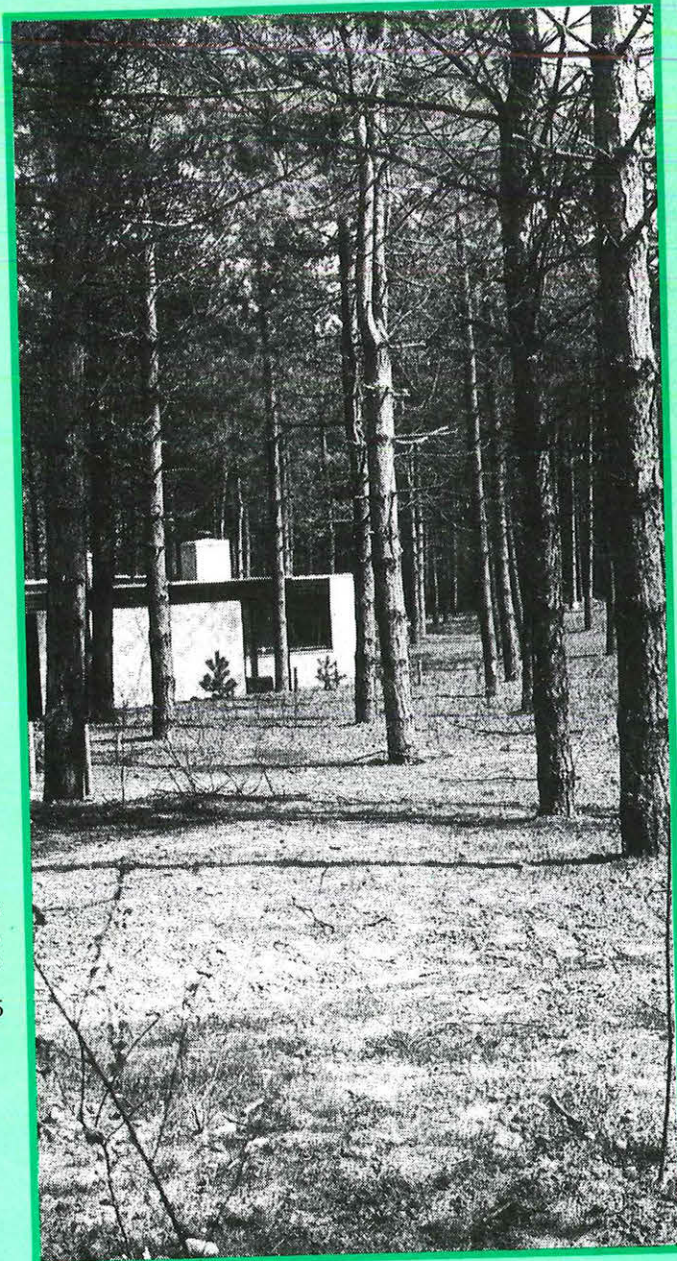
Such architectural extravaganzas do not come cheap. The development bill on Sherwood Forest (total capacity 3000 overnight visitors) is £32m; that on Bognor Regis (5500 overnight visitors) is £25m. Even though Center Parcs managed to win a development grant of £1.5m – the largest ever given by the English Tourist Board – such costs cannot be recouped purely on the traditional week's summer holiday.

The leisure companies, therefore, aim to entice visitors through a much extended season and often for a mid-year break of no more than a few days. This is when the leisure facilities cocooned in artificially heated and lit halls come into their own.

Butlin's Bognor Regis centre is now open for 28 weeks a year. Half-board rates now range between £65 and £124 a week which is well below an average week's wage today. And, still maintaining its low or down-market pricing policy, the company caters for large crowds of day-trippers: 10 000 at a time.

Center Parcs, however, plans to operate in quite a different league, with prices rising to £155 a week excluding meals. It aims to keep its holiday village open for 365 days a year and has proven its case in the Netherlands, with 95% occupancy over the entire year.

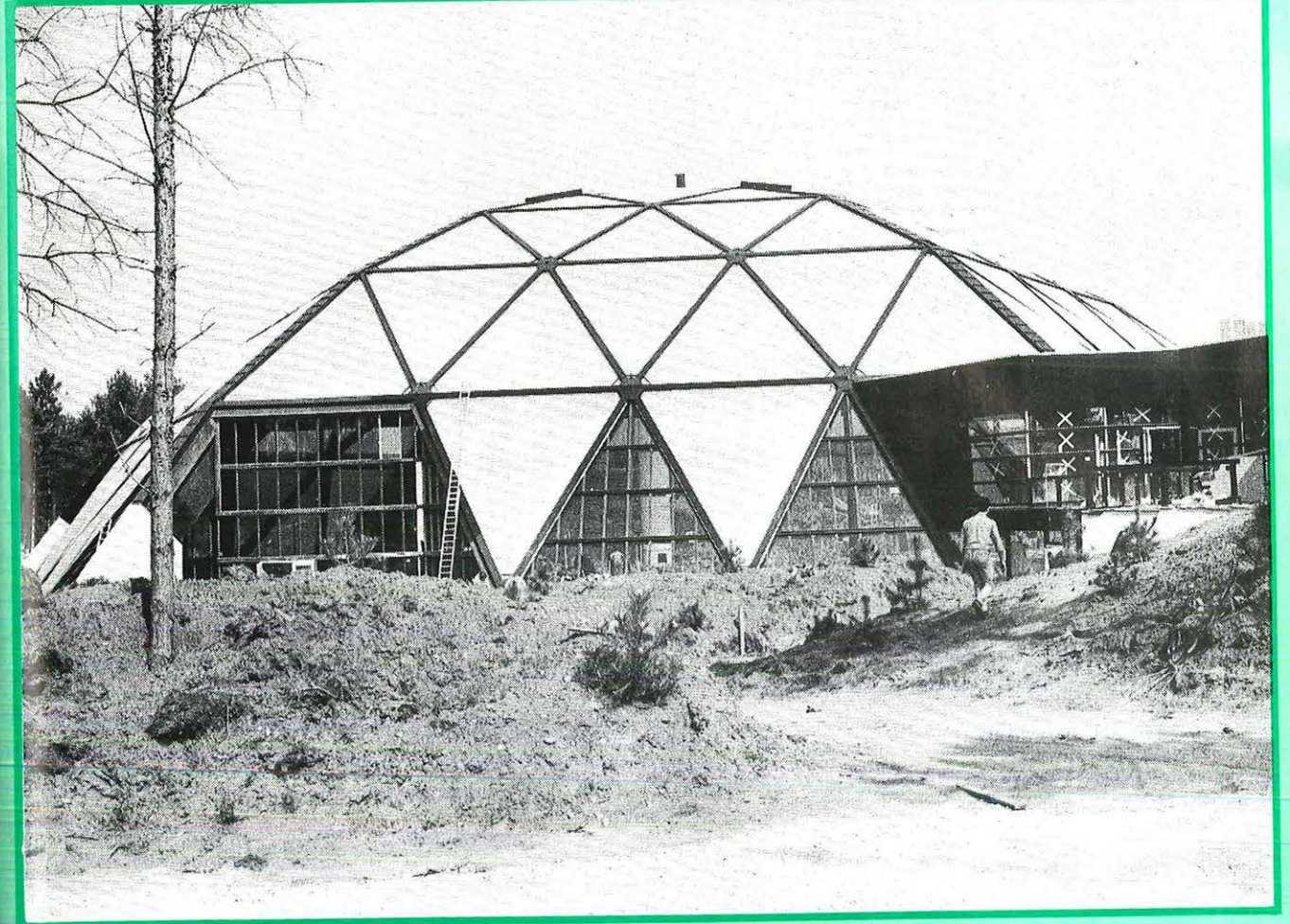
If such a record is achieved in Britain, it will signal the coming-of-age of a new generation of holiday villages.



3 At Bognor Regis, Butlin's traditional barrack blocks of flatlets have been refurbished and given a new image with shades of Costa del Sol.

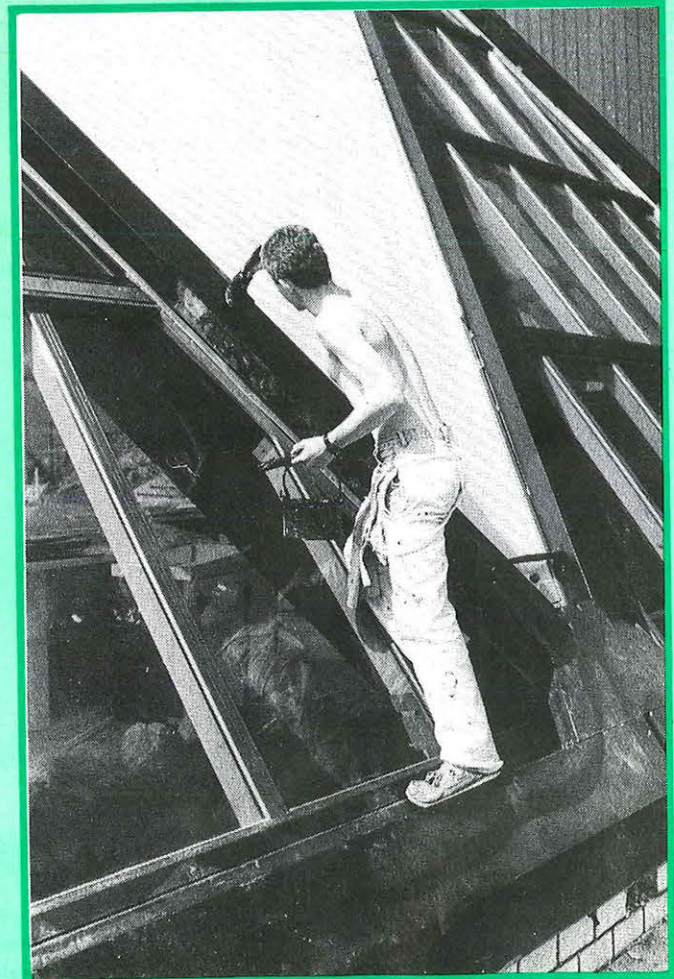
4 At Sherwood Forest living accommodation is in self-contained well equipped chalets. All chalets are attractively arranged in clusters beneath the trees and look out over streams and ponds.

Building 26 June 1987



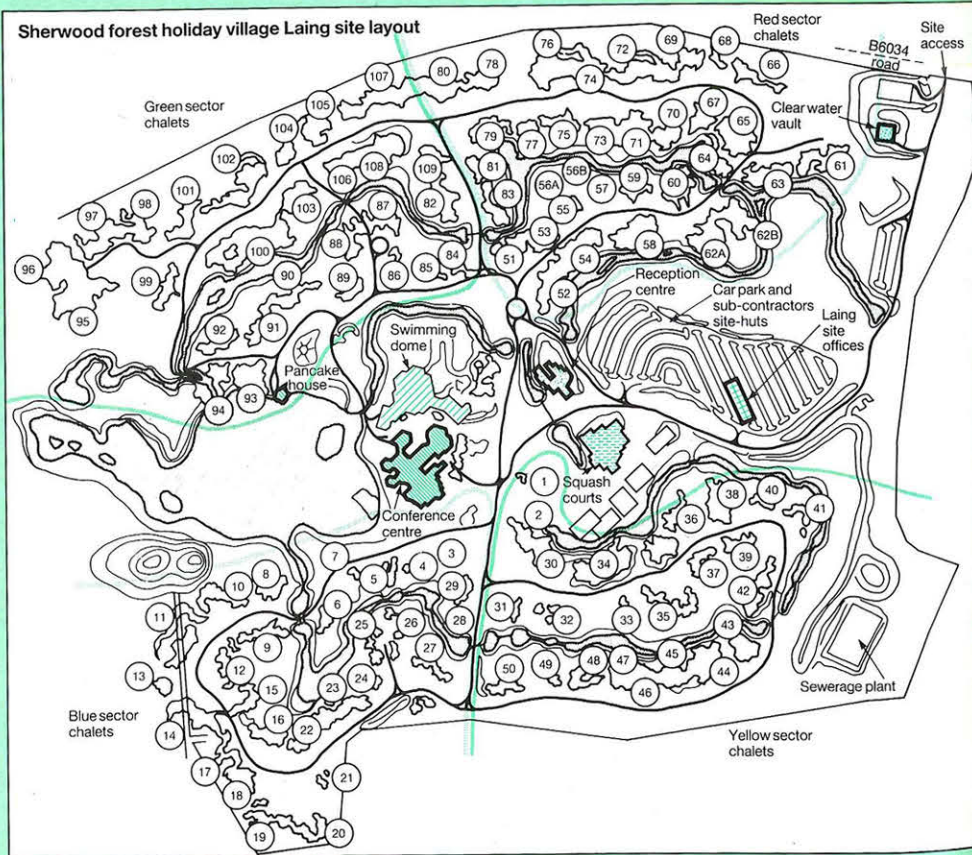
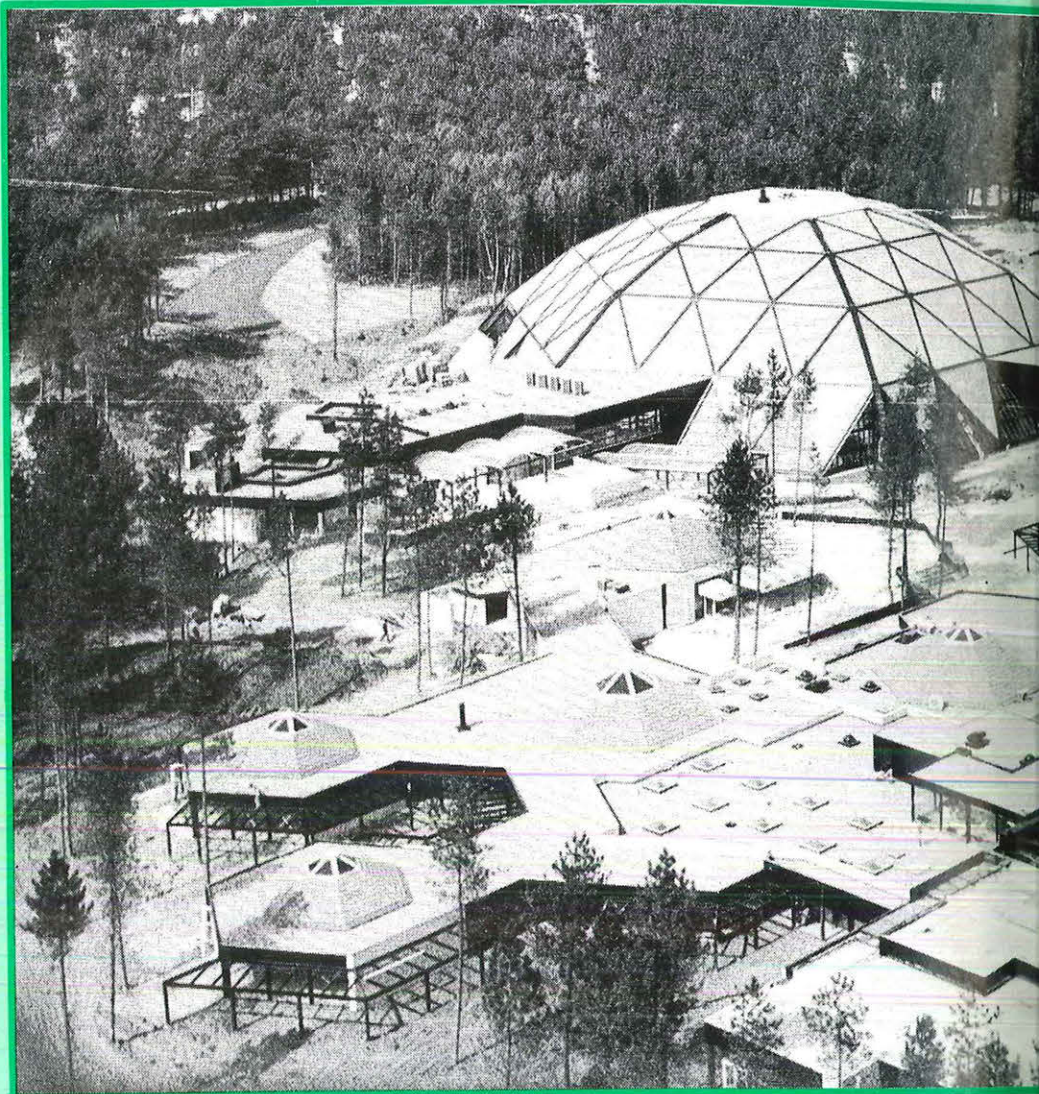
IN THE FOREST GREEN

Two major challenges faced Laing in the £32m contract for Center Parcs' first holiday village in Britain. The self-contained settlement with its futuristic geodesic dome had to be built in the heart of Sherwood Forest, and it had to be ready in just 14 months. Martin Spring reports.



Building 26 June 1987

1 The holiday village revolves around a large "pleasure dome" and a cluster of restaurants and leisure facilities. All lakes, ponds and streams were artificially created as part of the contract.



when the holiday villages open, whereas the trees that are essential to the back-to-nature ambience take years if not decades to mature. So it is more effective, Center Parcs argues, to move the holiday village to the trees rather than the conventional way round.

For the contractor at Sherwood Forest the problems were all too evident from day one. In March 1986, Laing's site manager, Stewart Lowe, was faced with 200 ha of virgin forest with hardly a track inside and none of the services, such as power and water, that are vital to a contractor's operations.

"For the first 10 weeks we just felled trees to make tracks so that we could move around the site," recalls Lowe.

All Center Parcs villages have two separate networks of major routes threading through the sites – the roads and the waterways. Paradoxically, it is the watercourses that are the lifelines in the initial stage of operations or, to be more precise, the dry beds of the planned watercourses.

The Center Parcs theory is that, to allow visitors to experience dense woodland as soon as they enter the site, the roadways are cut through the narrowest of gaps between the trees.

Waterside meadows

But the watercourses, which include a series of small ponds and waterside meadows, occupy slightly wider swathes through the woodland and, therefore, form convenient temporary routes for the contractor's earthmoving plant; before the water is introduced, of course. The sequencing also allows the sewers and all the other mains services to be laid beneath the roadways without interference, followed by the permanent road surfaces themselves.

Throughout the job, those trees that were not pinpointed for felling were protected by a strong taboo. Destroying a tree at Sherwood Forest carried a penalty of £40. "We want to make sure that at the end of the job, we still have a forest," explains Dom Camilari, Center Parcs' in-house project manager.

"For the first 14 weeks we lived like gypsies," continues Lowe. "We accommodated ourselves temporarily in caravans, we generated our own electricity from portable gas canisters, we brought in fresh water in containers and we communicated with the outside world by portable telephone."

Of the utility services, electricity, water and telephone

Laing's site staff at the Center Parcs holiday village in Sherwood Forest will find that their previous job, a district general hospital in Derby, opens to the public some months after their present contract. In the meantime they have created a self-contained and fully serviced holiday village for 3000 people out of virgin forestland at a cost of £32m. Next week, the first onslaught of holidaymakers will occupy the village and sample its sub-tropical "pleasure dome" and other leisure delights.

Speed has been of the essence in the development of Britain's first Center Parcs village. When the Dutch company, which has eight such villages so far in the Netherlands and Belgium, invited Laing to tender, regional director Steve Moore weighed up the extent of the work involved and concluded the firm could achieve it in two-and-a-half years. The client's response was: "How would you feel about doing it in 14 months?"

It was a challenge that Laing accepted, and on 15 May this year the contractor successfully handed over the site on the scheduled day of completion. Although the company reputation was of course at stake, there was another more direct incentive to complete on time. Because the client could not afford to lose trade at the peak of the holiday season, damages for late completion were set at a whacking £250 000 a week.

Laing had at least two advantages in tendering for the job, says Moore. "We're Britain's largest building contractor, with a local office in Nottingham, so we have a long-standing local labour force and we know the local subcontractors. And having an in-house civil engineering division for the extensive infrastructure also helped."

For a labour-intensive project – people working on site peaked at 650 – it was important to control works directly through a hands-on construction operation rather than at arm's length by management contracting.

Although the transformation of virgin forest to self-contained village could not be more dramatic, the development team did have a secret head start. Each Center Parc conforms to a tried and tested formula and is designed entirely by the company's in-house architectural department in the Netherlands, all of which makes for high-speed production.

Where Sherwood Forest varies from the norm is that it is the first of the company's holiday villages to be developed outside Belgium and the Netherlands. The fact that it is a deviant of a standard product has, not unnaturally, led to a number of difficulties, although to some extent these had been anticipated by appointing Ove Arup & Partners to translate technical detailing and specifications to the British scene.

These are all fully operational

2 The first 14 weeks on site were devoted to laying the infrastructure of service below future roads. During the period, the future watercourses were used as routes for site plant.

3 Each existing tree was protected by a £40 penalty for destruction.

4 Water chutes and pools in the pleasure dome were cast in concrete above a basement containing filtration and pumping plant.

5 The 70m geodesic dome was constructed out of laminated timber beams specially imported from the Netherlands and erected by nominated contractor Nemaho.



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could be picked up from existing mains supplies running along the A614 road that bounds the site. Gas had to be directed from the nearest village five miles away. Sewerage caused the biggest problem, as a full treatment plant had to be purpose-built at one end and the treated outfall connected to an existing mains sewer 2.5 miles away.

Within the site, sewers had to be sunk as deep as 7 m below ground level so as to provide an adequate fall over the four mile main road of the village. In total, some 30 miles of gas service and TV-audio cable, 35 miles of street lighting and 11 miles of drainage were laid around the site.

In the rural backwater of central Nottinghamshire, the statutory authorities, as well as the local planning authority, entered into the breakneck spirit

of the project. "The statutory services were most helpful," Lowe says. "They managed to cut service deliveries from 20 weeks down to three weeks."

Colour-coding the site

Logistics played an important role in enabling the contractor to tackle the large site within the fast programme. The 600 chalets spread across the site were divided into four manageable sectors, with two more for the central buildings, and each sector was allotted to a separate team under a senior manager.

"The sectors were encouraged to compete with each other," says Lowe. "In the chalets, three of the four teams stayed neck and neck right up until completion. In addition, we colour-coded all materials for delivery direct to each sector, and marked out the routes and

sectors on site with arrows in the appropriate colours."

The most extensive activity on site was probably the bricklaying. The client was adamant that all chalets and central buildings of the development be built out of identical concrete bricks. They are in fact concrete blocks in a light grey colour cast to brick sizes so as to impart a domestic scale to the buildings. A manufacturing contract was agreed with ARC in Peterborough, although special moulds had to be acquired in Germany and rushed to the plant.

ARC produced a total of 5.6 million special bricks for the project, peaking at 100 000 a day. On site, as many as 159 bricklayers were waiting to lay the bricks as soon as they arrived. "There was no problem



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in the supply of the bricks," Lowe claims. "But there was a transportation problem in getting 40 heavily loaded vehicles a day through the mud of the site."

Laing's most acute constructional problem concerned the roofs of the chalets. Despite the dismal British experience and their distinctly undomestic profile, Center Parcs' Dutch designers insisted on flat roofs and specified a single-layer rubber membrane manufactured by the Canadian company Carlile. "This was the first major application in Britain," says Lowe, "It was applied on site using welded joints, and the welding could only be carried out when dry. The trouble was that we were laying the roof coverings in February and March during pretty continuous rain, and the flat roofs made things worse by collecting

water. "So there was nothing we could do but wait until the weather cleared up. Then we blitzed all the roofs together once they were dry."

On the management side, problems occurred in co-ordinating the various subcontractors. About half of the 40-odd subcontractors were nominated by the client: they were virtually all Dutch companies which had worked on previous Center Parcs projects. Foremost among these was Nemaho, which imported the giant laminated timber beams for the 70 m diameter swimming dome from the Netherlands and erected it on site – a major feat of construction in its own right.

"First of all there was the language difficulty, as only one out of Nemaho's team of 10 could speak English," says Lowe.

"Then we had to learn their building techniques, which vary quite a bit from English practice. When we came up against problems, Center Parcs had a standard response. We had to go off to Holland to learn how it had been done before."

Center Parcs' strict formula approach extends to specifying Dutch materials as well as subcontractors. Not only were the structure and fabric of the dome, along with the water filtration and circulation plant, imported from the Netherlands, but even the natural boulders were specially imported.

Even more problematic for Laing were the direct contractors who had been appointed by the client and demanded access to the site from Christmas on. "They wanted us to open up ceilings so that they could install

audio-visual cables and to make way for them underneath the dome to install heavy water filtration plant," says Lowe. "We were given no advance idea what they would want, and so we were unable to co-ordinate them with the other site operations."

One of Lowe's management staff mutters darkly about the coercive approach of Center Parcs. "In Holland, they are a big fish in a little pool and exert a strong control over the local contractors and material suppliers. They expect to play the same game in this country by using all their old colleagues."

"It's pretty questionable that as much as 35% of all the materials on the job should have been imported from Holland," he continues, "especially since the English Tourist Board has sunk £1.5m of public money into the project. I'm sure the French are refusing to play along with all these imported suppliers and contractors for the proposed holiday village in their country, which is already delayed before start on site."

Completed on time

Despite these misgivings, Laing has delivered the goods. "Center Parcs have told us that we're the first village to have been completed on time and full of greenery," says Lowe.

Laing is now looking towards Center Parcs' next British holiday village, being planned for Thetford in Norfolk. "We've gained vast experience at Sherwood Forest that no other British contractor will have. So naturally we're keen to tender for Thetford," says Lowe.

Center Parcs also professes to look forward to another Laing contract. "But the next Laing contract will be shortened by one month," warns company director Joe Timmermans. "On the Continent, where the contractors have had plenty of experience, we've got it down to 11 months."

Sherwood Forest Holiday Village, near Edwinstone, Nottinghamshire

client
Center Parcs
architectural design & project management
Center Parcs
consulting engineers & quantity surveyors
Ove Arup & Partners
main contractor
John Laing Construction
contract value
£25m
contract period
61 weeks
contract type
ICE 5th edition