

Older workers (1955)

THIRD REPORT  
ON THE LATER WORKING LIFE IN THE  
BUILDING INDUSTRY

# Ageing Men in the Labour Force

THE PROBLEMS OF ORGANIZING OLDER WORKERS  
IN THE BUILDING INDUSTRY

BY

F. Le Gros Clark, M.A.

THE NUFFIELD FOUNDATION

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The Problems of Organising Older Workers  
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(Third Report on the Later Working Life in the Building Industry)

Nuffield Foundation, Nuffield Lodge, Regent's Park,  
London, N.W.1

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## FOREWORD

The accompanying report, the third upon age in the building industry that has been prepared for the Nuffield Foundation by Mr. Le Gros Clark, owes much that is of value in it to the generous help given by members of the London Master Builders' Association and the London Association of Builders' Foremen and Clerks of Works. They were asked in effect to view the problem as a technical one of the organizing of ageing men within the labour force; and on this problem as an incidental part of the supervisory function in modern industry they have concentrated their attention. As Mr. Le Gros Clark points out, it is an aspect of the matter that cannot nowadays be neglected in any study made of the possible place of elderly men in production. This exploratory inquiry may well be followed by many others of the same kind. Meanwhile, the Foundation is grateful for the advice and co-operation received from all sides of the building industry. In our present very limited understanding of the complex problems involved, criticism and discussion can only be useful and constructive; and it is hoped that they will follow freely the publication of these reports.

L. FARRER-BROWN  
Director of the Nuffield Foundation



### SUMMARY

If we wish to study what chances elderly men have of holding their place in the labour market, we have to examine the way in which modern industrial processes are organised. Since for many processes men are organised in teams or gangs, it is necessary to turn to the supervisory grades whose business it is to maintain the 'flow' of production. The present inquiry is concerned solely with the building industry; but similar inquiries are needed in other parts of the industrial field. Men age at varying rates; and care has therefore been taken not to define the term 'elderly' by any chronological age. The report is based on the replies received from 78 building employers and building foremen to a series of six questions.

The term 'industrially senescent' has been here used to describe a worker who, while still far from senile, is plainly approaching the stage at which he can no longer maintain either the pace or the standard of work commonly demanded in his accustomed job. Reference is made to other inquiries from which it is suggested that somewhere about 40 per cent of building workers (the proportion varying from trade to trade) are passing or have passed this stage by their mid sixties. The organising of more than a small proportion of ageing craftsmen and labourers on primary building contracts presents considerable difficulties, especially on civil engineering contracts where much of the labour may be casual and nomadic. The building industry has, however, an advantage in being able to offer a wide range of maintenance, repair and alteration jobs, where the pace is usually slower and where a reliable older man may more readily play his part. The view is taken that, provided the maintenance side of the industry is not overweighted with the older men, jobs of this kind can probably absorb at least twice as high a proportion of them as can constructional work or civil engineering contracts. Among the subjects discussed are the kinds of job to which an older man can most usefully be put, the comparative problems inherent in 'bonus' and 'non-bonus' contracts, the indications that a man is 'getting beyond it', the problem of taking on an ageing applicant, and the relations between older and younger men in organised gangs.

Estimates are made of the numbers of men aged 60 and over at present employed in the industry, and of the probable changes to be expected in the age structure of the labour force. It is concluded that, if the older men were to be more carefully distributed between the constructional and the maintenance sides of the industry, it should be possible to absorb a considerably higher proportion of the 'over sixties'; but it is appreciated that such a re-deployment of the ageing labour force would call for a co-operative effort on the part of all concerned.

AGEING MEN IN THE LABOUR FORCE

The Problems of Organising Older Workers  
in the Building Industry

The report recently published on 'The Employment of Older Men and Women'\* asks all industries to review their employment policy. In the present inquiry we try to assess how far it is possible for the modern building industry to use the labour of elderly men. No doubt what we shall say would apply in some measure to a wider range of industries; but it is not safe to generalise, since the conditions under which men work vary in so many respects.

It may be objected that it is quite impossible to define what we mean by an 'elderly' man. The mere number of years a man has lived is no measure by itself of his fitness for a given job. But all men must at last reach a stage when the signs and often the infirmities of old age are beginning to manifest themselves in an unmistakable way; the time is clearly approaching when they and their accustomed jobs will have to part company for good. What decides when that time has come for a man is the actual nature of his job, the stresses and hazards it daily involves, and the way it has now to be organised. The last of these is probably the most important. If the day of the individual craftsman working on his own has not entirely passed, it is passing for most industries. Work is organised in a 'flow' of production and in teams or gangs; it demands, not perhaps less skill and experience than formerly, but skill and experience of a new kind. If he is to maintain his place in industry, an elderly man must be capable of fitting into the new methods and the new forms of organisation. Is it more difficult for him to do so today than it was twenty or thirty years ago? He may, of course, if he is forced to quit his normal job, find some other less arduous work; but with that we are not here concerned. We are concerned only with the job in which he has spent his working life.

As a whole, the building industry has never adopted a fixed retiring age; and it provides few examples of any superannuation schemes for its manual workers. Most of its employees seem to quit in old age, simple because they are no longer able to maintain the necessary pace or reach the necessary standard. So we need only define an elderly man as one who, while by no means senile, is obviously on the verge of what we may call an 'industrial senescence'. There is evidence that around their mid sixties about 40 per cent of building workers have already passed or are passing into this stage - not, of course, because they age more quickly than other workers, but because the way in which the industry is organised begins to discriminate selectively between the fit men and those whose powers are failing. The proportion varies somewhat from trade to trade and if a man has found himself a 'sheltered' job, his chances of carrying on are usually better than in the open market. But, broadly speaking, this seems to be the level of wastage due to age that we have nowadays to expect.

To discover the answer to the question 'How far can the building industry use the labour of elderly men?' we turned to the supervisory grades in the industry, chiefly the general foremen, whose business it is to organise the labour force on building sites. Most of them know what it is to have to deal with men whose age is obviously beginning to make them uneconomic employees. A foreman may not be trained to recognise the medical signs of ageing, but he is well aware of the practical limitations imposed by the jobs he has to organise. Not that the foreman's views on the matter can be accepted without reserve; for he, too, like the rest of us probably has his bias. He has to consider what he believes to be his employer's interests; and unquestionably, when younger labour is scarce, he will tend to take a more favourable view of an experienced elderly man. But this is a technical problem - the problem of

\* First Report of the National Advisory Committee on the Employment of Older Men and Women. Cnd. 8963 H.M.S.O.

organising building labour in a definite way for a definite contract; and if foremen are asked to take as unbiased an attitude as possible, their combined experience will give us invaluable guidance. It is difficult to see how we can get the information we need in any other way.

Our report is based on 78 communications received from building firms and building foremen; in most cases the firms seem to have consulted their foremen before giving their views. The 78 records refer in the main to a series of six questions that were set out in the inquiry form. The replies to these six questions will first be analysed in brief; and the practical conclusions they suggest will then be discussed. As it happened, not all the questions were asked of quite all the participants; but a sufficient number of replies was received to show that any further inquiry would probably have led to much the same pattern of comments and views.

Each of the six questions is underlined.

1. If a foreman finds a certain number of really ageing men in the labour force with which he has to deal, are there any jobs or parts of jobs he attempts to retain especially for them? How far is this practicable?

Most of the foremen seem to realise that such men would have to be kept off heights and very heavy work, as well as work involving an element of speed, especially perhaps the last. On the more positive side, several foremen would like, if they could, to set an old man to work on his own, or to hope he will only have to be found a job during the finishing stages of a contract. One foreman says, for instance, 'In most cases it is preferable to give them a job on their own; but I am afraid there is not much scope for this in these days, particularly with craftsmen. It is possible towards the end of a contract to find work for old labourers in the general clearing of sites etc.' Another writes, 'On high class work, where output per man hour is not of primary importance, a foreman would feel safer with a competent old tradesman, particularly on operations of a finishing character.... On a contract where price is a consideration (usually cheap class work) foremen cannot afford to employ a large percentage of older men'.

A good many of the foremen make little secret of their personal liking to have men of mature age and experience about them; and it is obvious that they would gladly overlook, if they could, some of the early symptoms of declining strength or staying power. But even allowing for that, we have to admit that, as far as special or reserved jobs for the ageing are concerned, they are not very plentiful on a modern building site. If older men could be drafted on to the site, just at the moment when more of them might be conveniently absorbed, it would be less of a problem. In other words, much depends on the size and duration of the contract, as well as on whether the work does or does not require a high measure of individual craftsmanship.

About a third of the foremen gave some detailed indication of the kinds of job into which they would try to fit elderly craftsmen and labourers. We summarise briefly what they say. It will be observed that they seem usually to have in mind an older man on whose skill they can rely; it is the unskilled man or the man who has never become an all-round tradesman who is so difficult to deal with when he is clearly 'getting past it'.

Carpenters: On contract work there is a tendency to keep the older men off carcassing and to concentrate them on second fixing (first fixing, too, if they can safely undertake it), interior fittings and bench work. Especial mention is occasionally made of such items as skirtings, locks, window boards, panelling, door frames, the cutting of roof timbers, the cutting and fitting of ceiling joists. Foremen concerned with housing maintenance and reconstruction seem mostly to agree on the ability of ageing men to undertake most jobs, with the possible exception of heavy shoring and the renewing of floor boards. 'I have found that on reconstruction he does not seem to mind the dirty work and has knowledge of how to get over the difficult jobs that are not shown on plans.'

Bricklayers: It seems agreed that an elderly man is usually safe on scaffolding; but there is considerable doubt of his ability to hold the pace on straight run building work. A foreman, it appears, would normally try to retain him for setting out and for brickwork at ground level; he would also tend to select him for cutting away and making good, man holes, main entrances and windows and light partitioning. On maintenance work there is not much difficulty, except with stacks, roofs and possibly high pointing.

Plasterers: There is doubt among the foremen whether an elderly plasterer can usually be employed on anything beyond patching up and making good; it is suggested by some that ceiling work is in many cases unsuitable. One writer would definitely confine them to the smaller contracts. But it is agreed that, where they are skilled craftsmen, they can be found work on cornices and mouldings, if such jobs happen to be still available.

Plumbers: There is not much reference to plumbers; apparently it is assumed that they are mostly employable to a late age, provided there is labour for the heavier operations. One firm adds that its elderly plumbers would be kept off work on gutters and stack pipes.

Painters: Though again little attention is given to this trade, it must be realised that house painting is often done under some time stress, even in redecoration work. A few of the writers suggest that most ladder, cradle and even trestle work is unsuitable for the elderly painter. High class work is reckoned best for an old craftsman; but there is little of that available nowadays.

Labourers: It is obvious that much here depends on the jobs a man is qualified to carry out. There are usually a limited number of jobs on a large building site, retained by custom for older labourers, e.g. as storeroom, watchmen, canteen attendants, first-aid assistants and in some cases time keepers and delivery checkers. Apart from this, a foreman may consider that reliable older men are helpful when it comes to timbering, striking shuttering and working hoists. It is noticeable that a number of the foremen tend to put them on the more static jobs, e.g. levelling of ground, trowelling of concrete, pipe laying, preparing materials on the ground and (in demolition work) the cleaning and stacking of bricks. We can no doubt assume that for an elderly man the climbing and humping about on uneven and encumbered ground is the most trying feature of site work. One foreman remarks that he finds the older men prefer 'rather to dig than to wheel a barrow, feed a mixer but not drive it; labouring for tradesmen, loading and unloading have little favour with them'. Other foremen question whether such men could be employed except on light servicing work with carpenters or painters, or for cleaning up and making good at the close of a contract.

2. Does a foreman find it possible and reasonably easy to organise the work in such a way as to place any obviously ageing men in jobs where they can play their part? Or does this at times require a good deal of thought and adjustment?

The answer is that it depends mainly on the type of contract, on the foreman's self-confidence and, above all perhaps, on his familiarity with the men. If the records are taken at their face value, almost two in every three of the foremen are inclined to say that it is a relatively simple matter. But something must here be allowed for a foreman's assurance of his own ability to handle his men. A fair number of the replies say much more cautiously that, while it is just possible, it requires some considerable thought and adjustment. It is plain that as a contract proceeds the problem usually eases. The less fit and effective among the ageing men may by that time have left the site; and a foreman has taken the measure of each man's capabilities. On maintenance work with a permanent labour force, few serious difficulties of adjustment will be met.

Two main problems seem to trouble foremen, the personal and the economic. 'The man himself,' writes one foreman, 'is a big factor; his personal opinion often disagrees with the type of work to which he may be allocated, especially if it is not of the type he has been doing for many years past; he often feels that his prestige is lowered in the eyes of his

fellow workers when set to what he terms a boy's job'. But another says, 'I find they do not resent adjustments as the job proceeds, which cannot be said of the younger element ... I find the older men more reasonable in trying to understand the employer's angle.' Plainly much could depend on the way the situation is handled. On the economic side changes in the methods of production are certainly making the problems of adjustment more complicated for the supervisory staff. 'Men who are on payment by results,' comments a foreman, 'are frequently impatient of the more painstaking methods of the older man, who even if willing to adapt himself, is often physically incapable of achieving their results; this is particularly in evidence with bricklayers; more difficulty and thought are experienced with this trade in organising the work of older men'.

Hints of this kind occur here and there among the records. What they mean is that foremen too are having to adjust themselves to new methods; and that much modern building work (like some other industries) seems temporarily in the process of becoming a 'job for the younger men'. If elderly men are to be assimilated into the work (and some of the foremen are sure that, if it is the firm's policy, they must be given clear instructions to that effect), the organising of them almost certainly needs more forethought and adjustment than it did twenty years ago. But again, as we have said, much depends on the nature of the contract.

Broadly speaking, then, adjustments can usually be made as the job proceeds; and few foremen would care to admit that the task is beyond their powers. But it is not, under existing conditions, a very welcome task; and there is more than a chance that, if ageing men have to be employed today on the production line, the pace of output will slacken.

3. In a mixed labour force, say of 50 or 100 workers, what number of really elderly men can a foreman conveniently deal with? Is there a strict limit in their number, beyond which the work would be difficult to organise, because there were too many jobs requiring sureness of foot, etc., to which the older men could not be put?

This is an attempt to arrive at some kind of 'yardstick' or estimate of numbers. It was obvious that the answer would depend once again on the type of contract or the work in hand. Some of the foremen, however, gave here rather broad interpretation to the term 'elderly'; and in consequence it is not always easy to discover what they mean. So far as some of them plainly have high class or specialised work in view, a limit of 20 per cent or so of elderly craftsmen is not unreasonable. These writers usually qualify their answers by contrasting the much lower proportion that would be possible in cheap building work or with a casual labour force. There is also a school of thought represented by the foreman who says 'On normal building work 20-25 per cent could be men getting on in years, provided always they are keen; it might not be possible, however, to employ them (in some trades) throughout the length of the job .... In painting, for instance, the older men would be taken on at interior work stage'. Another foreman remarks reminiscently, 'In the type of work on which I was engaged during the war a large proportion of the men were elderly .... When the younger men returned to the industry, it was perhaps with a little relief that one welcomed them, as it was very noticeable that their movements were quicker'.

Comments of this kind bear out what we have already found in dealing with the previous questions. Among the writers who have given more careful consideration to the problem, a clear distinction is almost invariably made between one job and another. For instance, the firms undertaking extensive civil engineering or demolition work would not allow an average of more than 3 to 4 per cent of elderly men. One of them would go as high as 5 per cent for the craftsmen, but not more than 2.5 per cent for labourers. On maintenance and some alteration work the proportion can plainly be much higher; the average, in fact, lies between 15 and 20 per cent, though one



or two of those who incline to the higher figure add frankly that it all depends on the nature of the contract.

As far as straightforward building contracts of various kinds are concerned, the estimates are fairly uniform. They mostly range between 5 and 10 per cent, with an average of about 9. It is agreed that on high class work the proportion could rise to 15 per cent or beyond; but we have the comment that 'there are certain jobs and certain jobs only for ageing men in the industry'; and that would seem to be the general view. The firm that makes this comment would admit a maximum of 10 per cent, about one man to each trade. A plastering specialist considers that a ratio of one in ten should not be exceeded; 'the ageing man would not in general stand the pace set by the younger'. A few firms make useful comparisons, as for instance 'if it is a reinforced concrete contract only a few could be used, approximately 1-2 per cent; if it is a housing contract, where the amount of finishings requires skill, the percentage would be 10-15'. On the whole foremen seem to prefer to have a few older men about them on the job; but they are frequently cautious in their estimates. They differ curiously in their views about brick two-storey houses as contrasted with multi-storey flats; and it is clear that they are often thinking of the comparative strain placed on some of the labourers servicing the tradesmen. The usual opinion is that brick two-storey houses present less difficulty, though this might be questioned under modern building conditions.

What it amounts to is that a foreman with the right temperament can probably make shift with a considerable proportion of older men, provided they, too, have the right temperaments, and provided the time factor can be more or less ignored. But for the ordinary run of foremen and in normal building practice today much beyond 10 per cent would begin to tax a man's organising powers. Of course, when it comes to finishing and making good, a rather larger proportion of older craftsmen and labourers might safely be infused into the labour force; but whether that is practicable would depend on the size of the contract. A maintenance foreman can usually manage with anything up to double the proportion possible on a constructional job, especially where they are reliable men who may be left to get on with the work in hand. Much depends in building operations on the hazards, obstacles and broken ground likely to be encountered; and it is on these that a foreman has his mind, as well as on the factor of costs, when he is trying to estimate what proportion of older and slower men he can comfortably fit in.

Given the normal proportion of maintenance to new construction going on in the country, the industry could probably use elderly men up to 10 or even 15 per cent of the labour force. But they would have to be rather carefully distributed over the whole range of varied contracts; and the numbers would probably differ somewhat from trade to trade. To put it in precise chronological terms, from what we know about the health and physical conditions of older workers it seems doubtful whether more than 15 per cent or so of the building labour force of the country could be efficiently made up of men over sixty years.

4. We ask you to suppose that a man of over 65 (i.e. the pensionable age) is gradually failing to maintain his efficiency, and that you have to decide when the time has come to dispense with his services or suggest he should retire. Could you describe on what general evidence you would base your views that he has become uneconomic? We are assuming here that no alternative or lighter work can be offered him.

The man can apply for pension: and an employer or foreman would thus have less reason to hesitate on sympathetic grounds. We may dispose immediately of two of the possible cases, that of the nomadic worker and that of the long-term employee of a family business. Most older building workers would fall somewhere between the two; for a good proportion of them even among the casuals are at least known to some of the local foremen and employers.

As for the nomadic building labourer in the extreme sense, a foreman often has a shrew idea of his capabilities after a week or so; and he is in any case usually discharged at the end of the contract. In the experience of one firm, 'it is very seldom that we have to suggest that he should retire or that we have to lay him off, as such men, when they find that they cannot keep up with the rest of the gang, leave of their own accord to get another and easier job. The first sign our foremen have that a man is becoming uneconomic is usually that the other men in the gang will not work with him'.

The firm that maintains a permanent body of craftsmen, on the other hand, treats them much as would any manufacturing concern under the same conditions. Most joinery shops, for instance, and specialised fitters say that they retain their regular employees as long as possible. This is no doubt true of a good many old established builders. 'Foremen,' runs the answer from one such firm, 'are generally sympathetic to the old hand, and are loth to deprive him of his living .... When reports from the various jobs or contracts, on which he has been working, coincide in suggesting that he is getting past it, it is usually correct to assume that this is the truth'.

But the records as a whole seem to fall into three distinct groups. There are those that imply simply that it is a matter of costing; there are about as many that try to measure the efficiency of a man's work in a more practical way; and there are a considerable number that make some effort to define the physical and psychological symptoms of industrial senescence. As for costs, it depends partly on the extent to which a costings department can measure individual output. But a further prime difficulty is that of carrying even a few ineffective men on a site where costs are severely competitive. 'A man still has to be paid the rate for the job .... To be employed in a lighter capacity he would have to be regraded and subsequently re-employed as, say a watchman, hut orderly or welfare man'.

For our purpose some measure of physical efficiency is more important, because it helps us to see at what point the organising of older men on the job actually begins to break down. Acquired skills seem rarely to desert a man; what leaves him is speed or at times interest in the work, or rather perhaps (to put it more precisely) the ability to complete a good job in the time that can at the utmost stretch be allowed. Either time or finish, or possibly both, have to go. Thus the foreman of a joinery firm remarks that in estimating the output of a labour force both the highly efficient and the not so efficient members have to be taken into account. 'When the standard of work and/or the rate of output of the older man fall below the lower level of the whole force, he becomes uneconomic'. This is helpful; and again 'the general effect (of a man's loss of output) on the production of his fellow workers' is mentioned by a construction company.

The comments of one old-established family firm are worth summarising here at length. The firm is engaged on a variety of contracts, usually with a labour force of up to 25 men. Symptoms of growing inefficiency in ageing men are suggested in the following terms:-  
Bricklayers: A decline in accuracy, e.g. bad levels and angles, work not plumb or square, inability to complete work with the same finished appearance as hitherto. Plasterers: Inability to obtain a satisfactory finish in setting coats and cornices, usually due to failing eyesight and an objection to wearing glasses. Plumbers: A lowering of standard in the finishing of work, e.g. pipe runs fixed out of vertical, untidy joints and a tendency to take insufficient care on the difficult jobs. Carpenters: Age is usually apparent in a lowering of the standard of finish and a lack of concentration. Painters: A decline in the standard of preparation and in obtaining a well finished job, e.g. bad joins in papering, due in the main to failure of eyesight and not of skill. Labourers: Ageing is usually

detected in the amount of physical fatigue and in the inability to produce the physical effort previously obtained. 'The labourer usually knows when it is time to retire'.

It is, then, less a failure of skill that counts than one of eyesight, endurance and possibly real interest in the job. The factor of eyesight is mentioned in several of the records; but it is difficult to determine what part it plays. There is some slight evidence from other sources that men occasionally feel that the wearing of glasses will affect their prospects of employment. More important are probably the increased accident risks in the case of ageing men, and the shifts to which they have recourse in a vain effort to elude the years. 'A man that is failing to maintain his efficiency', says one foreman, 'is quite easy to spot. He will start watching his charge hands and foreman. He will appear busy while under observation, but will slack off when not; some of them have this to a fine art'. Other writers draw attention to the curious changes in personality that do at times accompany old age. Old men, it is said, become 'argumentative', 'may fail to grasp simple explanations', 'will not carry out instructions', show 'a reluctance to undertake certain work', 'become awkward and cantankerous'.

The risk of accidents is referred to by a number of firms, frequently in relation to failing eyesight, unsureness of foot and so on. One correspondent, for instance, mentions 'such evidence as falling over materials or involuntary unsafe acts caused by physical disability. In view of the present position with regard to the employer's liability this is important'. Among the other symptoms said to be observable are more frequent absenteeism and, of course, an increasing slowness of performance.

Several of these comments may reflect a personal bias on the part of those who make them; but we set them down without further remark. In effect, however, the nature of the industry does almost invariably demand a certain pace of work, determined sometimes by the speed of a gang, sometimes by the materials used, sometimes by the factor of costs. Under such conditions a man aware of his age and his growing infirmities may follow characteristic paths of evasion. He may, for example, absent himself in an attempt to recover from increasing fatigue; or he may put up a mental resistance; or he may slow down when out of observation; or he may begin to neglect the finer points of craftsmanship. There is no suggestion of blame in all this. It is simply the normal reaction of a man who is trying to prescribe for his own increasing disabilities. As a matter of fact, if he could be left to himself, he would probably 'ease up' in almost exact proportion to his declining powers. But he can rarely be left to himself; and the majority of ageing workers probably retire from the industry at just about the stage where their failure to maintain the pace demanded of them by the conditions of modern building may no longer be concealed from a foreman. A few elderly men survive in light or 'sheltered' jobs. As we have already said, there is some evidence that around 40 per cent of building workers (the proportion varying from trade to trade) have passed or are slowly passing that stage by the time they reach their mid sixties.

5. Is it your experience that really older and possibly slower men mix well with younger ones in a working gang? If older men of this type have to be employed, is it preferable to put them in a gang of their own?

More than 60 per cent of the records venture a view on the employment of separate gangs; and, while many are uneasy about mixing young and old, the proportion of those opposed to any policy of separating the ages is of the order of 5 to 2. Some of the foremen are strongly opposed to it; and we are indeed left in doubt how far most of the foremen who advocate the practice of separating young and old have actually experienced it at work. They have little to say on the subject; and a few qualify their

remarks by adding that separation would be preferable if ageing men have to be employed.

Several of the foremen, who would isolate the older men if possible, really prefer to have them working individually on their own, or at most with one or two selected younger men who could both benefit from their experience and help them out. The views of those who are completely opposed to any idea of separate gangs may be judged from such phrases as the following:- 'If all the older and slower men were placed in a gang together, the tempo of production would inevitably be governed by the slowest member', 'In such a gang you only have to have one lazy man to reduce the output of the gang to his level; a man of sixty working with younger men knows that he has got to pull his weight or he will be noticed; the same man in a gang of slower men knows he is not so likely to be noticed', 'When a bunch of old men get together, they are the most quarrelsome, contentious persons it is possible to imagine'. Allowing that here again there may be some bias, the argument is a strong one. Whatever the composition of a gang, some pace has to be maintained; and men on the margin of old age may well have their morale sustained by association with men of less mature years. Segregation, in other words, is psychologically a questionable practice in this industry (even if it is not so in other industrial fields) unless an ageing man can be set to work completely on his own.

The records are coloured by the idea of bonus incentives. At least a third of the writers refer to such schemes, and several others probably have them in mind. Whatever foremen may feel about the advisability of mixing old and young they tend almost invariably to suggest that a bonus produces or accentuates friction between the ages. Some of the foremen, of course, have no experience of working bonus schemes; and these seem usually to favour mixing the ages. It is admitted, however, by more than one writer that the attitude and age of the foreman may affect the working of even a bonus scheme. 'Group bonus,' says one of them, 'does cause a slight grievance .... but providing the percentage of ageing men is spread over the various trades, all should go smoothly'. Another gives it as his experience that 'even on bonus work the younger labourers will carry the older men, so that all may have a share; if they feel the ageing man is pulling his weight to the best of his ability, there is little grouching. Among operatives there are far more requests to remove ageing men from bonus gangs'.

About 20 per cent of the records make some reference to the factor of temperament; and many of these are clear that the foreman's job is to mix men of compatible minds, almost regardless of age. Intolerance, it is said, is by no means always on the side of the young. Now it is certain that, if temperaments are well adjusted, almost any gang will stand the test. But foremen remain cautious; and some would hesitate even at the best to mix the ages of concreters and bricklayers. Occasionally the good traditions of the industry are mentioned with approval. 'There is,' says one foreman, 'plenty of good natured leg-pulling, but the younger men usually do their best to make things easy for the old'; and another remarks that 'unless you pick men of the same temperament, there is always trouble; I am very careful when mixing my gangs'.

What has undoubtedly impressed many foremen is the advantage to themselves of having grades of experience and skill mixed in a gang, even where the higher level of experience may be coupled with some decline in speed. It is for a foreman the natural way of going about the job. On building and site preparation the younger men should be learning the knacks and refinements of their work as it proceeds; and much of this can safely be left to the older employees. The agility and strength of the young is expected to compensate for any failing on the part of their elders. Almost 25 per cent of the records stress this factor of mutual need. Only the older men, it is said, know how to steer round difficulties; the younger craftsmen of today have had too little experience of high class work; the presence of older men seems to impart stability and a steady rhythm of work. All this is true; and it underlines the fact that most foremen are themselves craftsmen of standing who have

a natural sympathy for the older craftsmen or labourers on the job.

Foremen of this kind tend to find the new methods and the application of bonus schemes rather disturbing. The transition comes at a time when a fair proportion of the younger men do seem to lack experience and concentration. The difficulty, if it is a difficulty, will only be overcome by training courses that produce young tradesmen of a reliable quality. Even then, if the pace of construction is to be speeded up, we may not for some years solve the problem of absorbing older men; and this is particularly true for the ageing bricklayer, plasterer and labourer. While, in brief, a good many of the abler foremen can probably combine the ages on a bonus job, the fact has to be faced that most of them would prefer to be relieved of this degree of responsibility. Separate gangs of young and old do not seem ordinarily to provide a solution.

6. When you have obviously elderly tradesmen or labourers applying for a job, can you explain how you would judge their suitability for the work? We should be glad to know on what general evidence you would base your decision that they can at their age maintain the necessary speed and standard of performance.

The question has a special importance for the building industry, because men are often moving from contract to contract; and an older man may find the intervals between his periods of employment growing longer. It can indeed happen that a shrewd foreman (as one of them implies) will see in this a sign that a man is becoming less employable. Certainly there are many foremen who would prefer to have some personal knowledge of an ageing applicant, or at all events to have him recommended by a fellow worker.

It is admitted by several firms that much will depend on the type of contract and on the labour available. The usual practice is for a foreman to rely on his judgment and then to watch a doubtful case more closely for a week or two. Normally during the first week's employment a man may be discharged at two hours' notice; and this gives the foreman the chance of seeing whether a man fits the job. At least a third of the records agree that the only sure method is that of trying a man out.

So far as it rests, however, with a foreman's ability to sum up an applicant, we have some indications of the way his mind may work. The man is usually asked his experience; and here it is plain from the communications that an ageing labourer who had never worked in the building industry is not likely to be taken on. A man's movements and gait are observed. Any suggestion of failing eyesight would be at once noticed. If the face has a 'worn out' look and the hands give no evidence of power of quick reaction, a foreman may hesitate. Unsteadiness of gait or an apparent lack of incentive would often be decisive; a foreman cannot afford to take on an accident risk. But much still depends on the kind of job a foreman has in mind; and there are times when a man's craft experience will outweigh his obvious physical failings.

The test of performance is mostly carried out on a 'rule-of-thumb' method. 'If a labourer is willing,' says one foreman, 'and can keep going for the working day, he can be made use of'. Another indicates how he judges the various trades. 'Carpenters,' he says, 'must be able to move about quite freely, bend down to fix skirtings or climb on to a hop-up or stool to fix a picture rail; but in bench work if any, there would be greater allowance made. Bricklayers can be less agile, but once on a scaffold they must be able to bend their backs and be capable of an effort on corner work or on the line. Plasterers are always strong across the shoulders; and they should remain so if they are to continue at work; they must also be able to do ceiling work, as there are few light jobs available. Painters can possibly get away with slightly less effort than other tradesmen'. He adds that 'labourers are a little deceptive until they are tried out'.



Broadly speaking, the state of the labour market has no small influence on the decision to try an elderly man. It is recognised that he might well have gravitated to a more or less 'sheltered' job with a maintenance firm or public authority; and the question in the mind of a foreman may be why he has not done so. If he is known as a good worker with a steady record of employment, he would usually be given a trial; but if, as occasionally happens, a foreman has no previous knowledge of him, his chances are more remote. In brief, the nomadic character of much of the industry makes it somewhat less favourable for the ageing; and a man might be well advised to have found himself a settled job, if he could, by his late fifties.

CONCLUSION/

### CONCLUSIONS

The varied and complex nature of the building industry makes it impossible to generalise about the employment of older men. It has few of the characteristics of a factory industry. If we take the extremes, we have on the one hand civil engineering contracts employing a very large proportion of casual labour, and on the other hand maintenance and jobbing yards that may employ a more or less permanent staff. The conditions are clearly quite distinct.

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In civil engineering contracts, for instance, the proportion of elderly men taken on will often depend quite frankly upon the availability of young labour. The proportion preferred is small, not more than 3 or 4 per cent. A foreman or agent is here at a disadvantage, in that he frequently knows nothing of a man's previous record. Not all foremen can trust their judgment at sight, and they may be suspicious (as some of the records suggest) that an ageing man would not be applying for a job unless he had proved unsatisfactory to local employers. Work of this kind is usually organised in gangs; and a gang is an organic unit maintained in a delicate balance of temperaments. One slow or incompatible man in a gang influences the pace and output of the whole gang. It is for this reason that many of the writers insist on the need of forethought in adjusting the composition of their gangs.

To put it briefly, the casual nature of most civil engineering contracts makes it difficult to absorb many older men; it is exacting work on broken ground (not on a factory floor) and under varying weather conditions. What mainly limits the employment of the old is the average foreman's inability to judge at sight whether an elderly man is likely to prove an economic proposition.

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In maintenance or alteration work, whether it be with a building firm or with a public authority, most of the men are or could be fairly permanently employed. They may have drifted into that type of work while they were in their fifties and still thoroughly employable. Many of the jobs are completed by one or two men working on their own; and if they were not efficient and reliable operatives, they would usually have been discharged before they were becoming industrially senescent. Experience is here more important than time stress; and since a man's basic skill rarely deteriorates, and since he and his employer have had the chance of knowing one another intimately, there seems little reason why he should be retired until the job is literally beyond his powers. It must, however, be added that it is better for a man to gravitate to this type of employment while he is still vigorous; there seem to be many tradesmen who wait until age is far advanced before they seek jobbing or maintenance work.

The evidence suggests that the proportion of elderly men in maintenance may safely be made twice as large as on constructional work. This estimate is supported by one or two restricted surveys. For instance, the age composition of 8307 men engaged on maintenance work was compared with that of 4896 engaged on building construction. About 9 per cent of the men on maintenance were over 60 years of age, as contrasted with less than 4.5 per cent among the constructional workers. The proportion is not dissimilar from that suggested in many of the replies to question 3 above. It is a subject that deserves much closer study; and further evidence might be sought from various branches of the industry, including the medium and small maintenance firms.

Firms that specialise to some extent on high class work may be in much the same case as maintenance firms. They usually rely upon a nucleus of tried employees, and can often call upon a certain number of 'regular casuals'. It is the quality of the work that counts rather than the time; at all events a wider margin of time can be allowed for the completion of the job. Here again a craftsman will probably continue to be employable up to the stage at which the physical and mental adjustments that compensate for his age (economy of effort, steady rate of production, planning and forethought) begin at last to break down.

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Most building work, however, lies between these two extremes; and it is to the ordinary run of building contracts that our records in the main refer. In the construction of houses, blocks of flats, schools, public buildings and so on, some of the labour is necessarily 'casual'. There may be a number of 'regulars' employed by a firm; and the chances are that many of the local craftsmen will be known to trades foremen and charge hands. But if competitive costs are involved, the fact that a foreman has not been in permanent contact with an ageing worker must create some doubts as to his ability to hold the pace. Throughout the whole field of industry foremen and operatives need time to take measure of one another; and this is especially difficult in building. A man of unknown ability has often to be tried out in a gang; and a foreman is conscious of two doubts. How far will an ageing man be compatible with the rest of the gang? And would it not be less disagreeable to refuse him a job at once than have to discharge him later if he proves incompatible?

The size of the contract makes no little difference in the decision. Not only is there more chance on a large housing site for older labourers as watchmen, checkers and odd job men. There is also the fact that, as the job progresses, there is continuous work needed on cutting away, finishing off and making good. Most of this can be securely left to the older craftsmen; and many foremen would probably prefer to have a few experienced if elderly men following up the gangs.

It may be that the slighting references made here and there to the young men of to-day reflect no more than the mood of each passing generation of craftsmen but they possibly contain a modicum of truth. There has been a break in the transmission of skill and experience; and the post-war generation is in process of acclimatising itself to new methods of construction. It has not yet completely done so; and in some instances the training the young men received may not have produced good all round craftsmen. Undoubtedly the training schemes will improve; in the meantime, it is questionable whether many of the young bricklayers or carpenters of to-day are as well equipped for skilled finishing and alteration work as were their fathers at the same age, though the training of plumbers and plasterers is probably more traditional.

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The fact that on group bonus contracts some men in their sixties, and even in their late fifties, fail to maintain the pace (or have a rooted dislike for this mode of production) creates a problem of a special kind. It disturbs what has always seemed to be the natural relations between the old and young. The old, it was felt, should initiate the young, and the young watch and help the old. There are many knacks and shifts that cannot be taught in a training course, or if taught will not be fully assimilated until they are met in practice. In the building industry trades foremen, charge hands and craftsmen may be to some extent interchangeable; they may indeed change places from one contract to another. A general foreman has thus been accustomed to rely on his experienced craftsmen to play their part in ensuring the smooth running of a contract. So far as the mere pace of production discriminates against the older man, there is risk that the full transmission of skill will suffer, that there

has to be more 'making good' on a site than should have been necessary, and that the task of supervising the younger men is made more difficult.

It is the least favourable view we can take of bonus schemes and payment by results. No doubt the problem is one that needs study. The industry, as we have suggested, is in a state of transition and has still much to discover about the newer techniques of production. It is not impossible that the techniques themselves are capable of much refinement and experimentation. For instance, the tempo of work on a contract might be gradually increased, so that by the time construction is under way the older operatives may be drafted out of the gangs on to the finishing and interior processes. They will meanwhile have done much in the early weeks both to train the younger men and to initiate a smooth rhythm of excavation and construction.

It would be interesting at this stage to know what proportion of older men are actually now employed by the industry. The following Table has been compiled from the Age and Occupation Tables published in the Census Report (1 per cent sample) for 1951; and presumably the numbers have not changed much since that date. All the categories of building labourers have been grouped together; most of them are probably civil engineering labourers. It must be noted that the terms painters and carpenters undoubtedly cover a fair number of men outside the building industry (though not cabinet makers).

Table 1 Proportions of Older Men in the Building Industry

Trades	Total	Total - 60 and over	Percentage - 60 and over
Bricklayers	151,900	10,400	6.8
Plasterers	41,500	2,800	6.7
Painters	335,500	30,000	8.9
Plumbers	100,900	7,900	7.8
Carpenters	281,600	27,900	9.8
Labourers	448,800	44,600	9.9

The proportions of the men of 60 and over in the industry have been affected, of course, by the large post-war intake of younger men. In earlier Census years the proportion of older men in several of the trades had been considerably higher. As the total labour force becomes more stable, and as the men move on gradually in age from decade to decade, the proportion of older men will rise perceptibly; and it could probably rise several points for all the craftsmen without disturbing the industry. The present proportion of older labourers may be somewhat nearer the maximum the industry can absorb.

In a few years time, then, the proportion of 'over sixties' among the craftsmen may well have reached 12 per cent or more. Judging by previous Census reports, we may regard this as a fairly normal proportion; and it gives some support to the suggestion already made (p.6) that the building industry could possibly employ 10-15 per cent or more of elderly men, their numbers being somewhat carefully distributed. This must not be taken to mean, however, that men in their early sixties are usually 'ageing' or 'ineffective'. The main criterion is undoubtedly their ability to maintain the pace of production. 10 per cent of manifestly elderly men is about the upper limit a foreman could comfortably handle on a large building site to-day. On a small contract the proportion might have to be lower, except where a builder is personally supervising men with whose capabilities he is already familiar. On maintenance work or

where the quality of the work is the main consideration, the proportion could rise much higher.

It is a common impression that many ageing men gravitate to maintenance work, e.g. in the 'small works' department of a building firm, with a local authority or jobbing builder, or in a factory maintenance staff. To what extent this happens, we do not know. It is possible that the high labour turnover of recent years has compelled some maintenance employers to carry a larger proportion of older men than they would have preferred. The national labour force sorts itself out in its own characteristic way; and since most of this type of work is on a basic rate, it has less attraction for many of the younger men. It seems, however, that we are safe in suggesting that the proportion of older men on maintenance could often be at least twice as high as in primary construction, and that it could without damaging costs reach a level of 15 per cent or more.

The number of building workers engaged at any one time on repair, maintenance and alterations is probably large. The Table below, taken from the Ministry of Works' Returns, shows the distribution of the labour force in May, 1953, about the period when our enquiry was made.

Table II

Numbers Employed by Type of Work

Houses and Flats

Non-Housing Work

Site preparation and erection of permanent houses and flats	Other Housing Work	New Work including Civil Engineering Work	Other Non-Housing Work
330,350	170,054	225,224	243,755

It may be assumed that 'other housing work' means in effect housing maintenance. The figure under this heading is possibly a slight understatement since returns were not received from a number of small firms. For housing as a whole the proportion of workers engaged on the maintenance of existing structures can scarcely be less than 35 per cent. 'Other non-housing work' presumably includes a large amount of alterations and extensions to existing factories and plants, as well as their general maintenance; but it definitely does not cover most of the permanent maintenance staffs of factories, hospitals, and other establishments.

Thus we cannot be quite certain how many men are engaged purely on maintenance and repairs. But it cannot be less than a third of the national labour force, and may even at times approach a half. If an extensive plan of housing repairs is undertaken, the proportion will naturally tend to rise. Let us suppose that there are about 350,000 men employed on this type of work. 15 per cent of them would be 52,500. This number could comfortably absorb almost 70 per cent of the craftsmen aged 60 and over at present employed (see Table I above), as well as a fair proportion of the older labourers. Since there is reason to believe that the majority of craftsmen remain fit for all types of building work into their mid sixties and beyond, this should be quite sufficient to absorb most of the ageing men who can no longer stand the tempo of straight contract work. It is here assumed, incidentally, that at least 40 per cent of the carpenters and painters referred to in Table I are employed outside the building industry proper.

It must be said emphatically, however, that to overweight the maintenance side of the industry with the 'over-sixties' would be bad economics. Costs have here to be considered just as much as in construction work; and perhaps the main argument for directing so much attention to maintenance work is the fact that there seems already a tendency among the older men to gravitate towards it. We are obviously in a better position to plan where we have an existing practice to guide us. As a matter of fact, costs would probably not suffer, for it is often preferable to have operations of this kind in the hands of reliable older men.



No one would suggest that an ageing craftsman should be automatically drafted into maintenance work. All we need is that he should find the transition an easy one if he wants to make it. For this purpose some current superannuation schemes may have to be reconsidered; if they involve a fixed retiring age or a restriction on the employment of men in their late fifties, they are likely to dam up the normal flow into maintenance work. Since it is national policy to encourage more men to remain at work, the courses they themselves adopt to enable them to do so deserve some recognition.

At the same time, as we have already pointed out, it is possibly better for men to gravitate to maintenance work in their early or mid-fifties. The job is one that needs skill and judgment. It is, in fact, a job for a man who has had time to know his employer and to become familiar with the local property. Much of it is likely to be old property; and in the handling of it the new methods of construction, to which a man has for some time grown accustomed, may provide little guidance. It seems probable that, as time goes on, many men in their fifties will come to benefit from a short 'refresher course' in the details of maintenance work. Such a course would have the further advantage of giving maintenance and repair work the standing it should enjoy in the minds of the public.

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We conclude, then, that the building industry as a whole is fairly well adapted to give elderly men a chance of remaining in employment, provided (and this is the important point) they are carefully distributed throughout the full range of building jobs and contracts. If they are not carefully distributed, there is bound to be a steady loss to the industry of men who are still reasonably effective, i.e. of ageing men who have not managed in time to find themselves jobs on maintenance and similar work. While such men might often in theory gravitate to jobs outside the industry altogether (always a doubtful prospect in later life) they would represent a loss of building experience. But the re-deployment of the older men within the industry would require planning and forethought on the part of all concerned. The balance of the industry would otherwise be seriously disturbed; and employers who found themselves burdened with an undue proportion of elderly operatives would have a justifiable cause of complaint.

It is solely with the organising of labour under modern building conditions that this inquiry is concerned; and that usually means the organising of the 'flow' of work on building sites. No study of the ageing man in modern industry that does not consider how far he can be organised into the normal team or gang work that is typical of production to-day has much inherent value. The real problem is what is to be done for him when he can no longer hold the pace; and behind that problem lies the question what are the factors that decide he can no longer hold the pace or reach the standard demanded. We have attempted to answer these questions as objectively as possible; and in so doing we have indicated what seems to us a practical path to solution.

## APPENDIX

### Selected Extracts from the Communications

A few further comments may be quoted verbatim from the records as possibly throwing light upon the problems of age in modern industry.

1. 'An elderly man does not find it so easy to leave one contract and get a job at another; he is therefore usually more painstaking with his work and may become more economical in high standard work, in that it may be unnecessary to do the work a second time'.

2. 'The writer is of the opinion that older men in the building trade are, generally speaking, the better craftsmen; we do not hesitate to employ them when an opportunity occurs. It seems to us that there is a case for enabling older men to start work later than the normal time, but this does make site management difficult. On the other hand, there are many positions within the industry that older men can fill, provided they themselves are content to give of their best for reduced hours at an economic wage'.

3. 'Older men, starting perhaps in the late fifties, gradually forsake the fast tempo of new constructional work for the generally slower speed and easier conditions of jobbing work. I would say that most jobbing builders have a far higher percentage of older workers than the large contractors. Bearing in mind that the industry as a whole employs more men through small and medium builders than through the large contractors, this may be the answer to the problem.'

4. 'Most building firms are engaged on a wide variety of work; and some work is obviously more suitable for the older craftsman. The older employee would therefore tend to gravitate to the department specialising in continuous local work, probably on very small contracts, where the pressure is not so great as it is on the larger contracts where bonus schemes are operated'.

5. 'As in most things, there are naturally awkward periods when an old man would have to be a little flexible and not too difficult about a job he might consider beneath his dignity. No amount of organisation will find a job that is not there; there is thus a requirement on the man to be reciprocal'.

6. 'In the building industry a man starts to be a craftsman when he is forty, reaches a high standard at fifty, and then retains his skill but loses his speed'.

7. 'One of the primary factors must necessarily be the economics of the contract; if the older men are obviously not doing their share, it is the foreman's duty to his employer to discharge them. However, the foreman has also a duty to the men to see that the contract is smooth running, to see that any disordering factors and grounds for dissension are removed or adjusted, and to regard his men as individuals needing individual consideration. It requires a good deal of thought, adjustment and readjustment to fit the older men into the labour force; but the efforts are fully repaid'.

8. 'A man's age is not a true indication of his service value. I have known men who at, say, middle age have become disinterested, stale, without initiative and hence slow and wasteful. On the other hand, many men above the normal retiring age have proved valuable servants. Such men are conscientious, knowing from experience the best way to approach a job, adopting good economical methods of doing work, having clever manipulation of their tools, using their energy wisely and taking advantage of every opportunity for improvisation. While their movements in walking and climbing are slower, it is often offset by their plodding ways; and every movement of a tool in their hands is achieving its purpose'.

9. 'It must be remembered that in the building industry conditions between the wars performed their own sorting out; the older man of to-day has survived the test of those competitive years and is in consequence probably above average. The probability is that, due to better conditions, men generally retain their physical powers somewhat longer than formerly; but I do not think that the proportion of men who are getting on in years can very well be increased on a building site or ever will be'.

10. 'The employer feels that the older man cannot give full capacity for the basic national wage rate; yet the old man requires the basic rate to meet his liabilities. Could not a pension scheme be thought out whereby, for example, the older man can be employed for a reduced national rate of 2s.6d. per hour, while the insurance pays 1s. an hour, making a full rate 3s.6d. an hour for young and old? For those men who through ill health have to retire at whatever age, a doctor's certificate of incapacity should suffice to obtain a pension adequate for their security'.

11. 'It is our view that a good workman, when he reaches an age at which he can no longer keep pace with other men on contract work, tends to transfer to the department carrying out alteration and jobbing work, or to a smaller firm where his ability to carry out tasks with less supervision offsets his physical handicap....In the case of labourers the small work is generally lighter, since the labourer has to attend upon one tradesman only. Small work is usually carried out in a certain district, so that older men find the reduction in travelling acceptable. We think there is a tendency for older labourers to take up work in other industries, unless they have acquired skill such as bar bending, scaffolding, etc'.

12. 'The older operatives need not necessarily be segregated into separate gangs.....The older worker tends to feel that he is being singled out or designated as a less efficient worker if he is put into a special gang composed solely of old people'.