

THE JOB.

I think the hardest job I ever did was working on a building site in the north of England, when I was a sixth-former at the local all-boys grammar school. The workers, as you can imagine, were exclusively male. I was the only student and I only had the job because of the kindness of my best friend, Mervyn's, mother.

Being a young student, of course, I was a target for some of the workers. On my first day a trowel of cement was thrown in my face. This was accompanied by an expletive from the offending 'brickie' and I reciprocated by using similar language in the hope that this would give me some kind of status.

Given my school background, girls were only ever seen and admired from a distance. Nevertheless, I had been brought up to be respectful and would not have dreamt of wolf-whistling at any passing female. This was not the case for my fellow-workers, of course, and any passing young woman would receive a chorus of wolf-whistles, as the men turned their gazes away from the brick-work to admire the passing beauties, as they saw them. Some of the girls even appeared to enjoy the attention, although I am not sure that this was not just their way of coping.

A key learning point for me was the extension of my vocabulary. At school I had learnt Latin, French and, of course, English. But life on the site broadened my English considerably. I learnt that 'The F. word' could be used, not only as a verb and an adjective, but also as a noun, and could substitute for many items of vocabulary, thus making the full use of the English lexis redundant. I soon became familiar with applying contextual information when the next rendition of 'Why don't you 'f' the effin' effer' was uttered, as I learnt this could mean anything from 'Please take that wheelbarrow of rubbish to the dump' to 'Now go and make me a cup of tea, young man, as you are too useless to do anything else!'

The culmination of this particular summer's travails was the arrival, one particular morning, of a van containing celebrating men. This signalled a call for strike action, and everyone immediately downed tools, cheered loudly, and disappeared towards The Woodpecker Public House to 'down a few effin' pints' to toast their liberation. I, of course, did not join them, as it would have been an afternoon of potential humiliation. I was not 'a real man' in their eyes, only having the capacity to consume a maximum of three pints over several hours, to their obligatory norm of eight.

Nowadays, we are concerned about the impact on our mental health of 'social distancing'. In those days I worried about the impact on my mental health of 'social proximity'. Just a few years earlier that Welsh songstress, Mary Hopkin, had charmed us all by singing 'Those Were the Days.'

I am not sure they were for me!

Chris McDermott.