

AGEING AND EMPLOYMENT

THERE are many general statements and assumptions about the employment of older workers in industry, but few facts to support those assumptions. An inquiry* carried out by F. Le Gros Clark into the effects of ageing on 251 manual workers in the furniture industry provides information which will, therefore, not only be useful for employers in that industry, but also in other kinds of manufacturing industry.

Most domestic furniture is produced in large factories, which are tending to increase in size and are achieving greater efficiency mainly through the detailed planning and simplification of a large number of successive hand-and-machine operations. Many of the men employed are no longer craftsmen in the traditional sense of that word; they have each been trained on the job to carry out a limited range of operations. Since comparatively few of the men in the mechanized furniture industry are all-round craftsmen, their chances in later life depend partly upon their own adaptability as operatives or labourers, and partly upon the degree of ingenuity and forbearance shown by shop supervisors and foremen in fitting the job to the man.

In consultation with shop supervisors and others, Le Gros Clark examined the industrial and medical records of 251 men whose ages ranged from 55 to 76; they all worked in large factories. They were still employed or had, in a few cases, recently retired. Men were not compulsorily retired at a certain age.

Of the seventy-three men aged from 60 to 64, sixteen had been transferred permanently to jobs of a light character; practically all of them were labourers. Ten other men were only able to remain at or 'near' their normal jobs after some concessions and adjustments had been made. The remaining forty-seven men were still working in the ways to which they had been accustomed for some years past.

An ailing or ageing labourer may be less easy to accommodate than an operative in the same physical condition. He has frequently to be found light labouring work; and that is usually a matter of searching for a job that he can be trusted to carry out at his own pace. The jobs that were found had to be free from the characteristics that had disqualified the labourer from his normal work.

On the other hand, the ten men, for whom some allowances on the job had clearly been made, were mostly operatives. They had not been transferred from their normal departments and some pains had been taken to adjust the work to their physical capacities. The adjustments made often followed on a medical recommendation. A cabinet-maker, for example, had, until the age of 59, been assembling heavy wardrobes; after a hernia operation he had been transferred to light drawer assembly, where he could still, at 63 years, maintain a good pace of output. There was clear evidence of the firm's flexibility in handling older men once deterioration in their health had been checked and their physical condition fairly well stabilized.

Of the forty-seven men still on their normal jobs, Le Gros Clark believed that about one in four were

not maintaining the level of output which they had once been capable; these men, too, would have needed some tolerance on the part of their supervisors. At a liberal estimate it appeared that about three in ten of the men in their early sixties were permanently incapacitated for full normal duty; in the case of several others some allowances had to be made.

There was little evidence that men were retiring or even contemplating retirement at the age of 65. Forty-two of the men between the ages of 65 and 69 were traceable from the records. Their patterns of employment were much the same as for those in their early sixties, except that larger numbers of them had to do some light or modified form of work. Sixteen out of these forty-two men (all but one were labourers) had been transferred to light jobs, or else had left their employer in so poor a physical condition that they could scarcely have undertaken any but the lightest work. No long-service employee among them had been discharged on an employer's initiative. Five of the sixteen men were bronchitic; the rest had records of arthritis, hypertension and cardiac debility. When an elderly man had no serious ailment of this nature, it was usually possible to maintain him on his customary work with minor concessions. Another twelve of the forty-two men, mostly operatives, had been provided with work of a distinctly modified kind.

Sixteen men in the records were aged 70 and over. Ten of these had little indication of sickness in their records. This is a common experience throughout industry; such old workers are doubtless in many industries no more than the constitutionally sound survivors of a diminishing generation. Their age had been allowed for in the ordering of their work. In no case was a man in his seventies in full production on what once had been his accustomed job. Each was employed now on very modified or easy-going operations or on tasks of a distinctly light character. Probably not one of these elderly men would have been physically capable of much further work when he did at last retire.

The inquiry clearly showed that some older men in the industry (though not necessarily in other industries) have often to give up their full normal work at about 60. Thenceforth, they only remain employable in furniture production to the extent to which readjustments and transfers can be arranged for their benefit on the shop floor.

In mechanized production of domestic furniture the overall tempo, though it does not necessarily force the pace of a man's individual movements, has to be maintained at a high level. This could easily discriminate against an employee who is ailing or slowing down. By the time they reach their mid-sixties, between one and two out of every five of the men would probably have had to be moved to light operations or to light labouring jobs. By the time they were in the seventies the proportion would be much higher. Similar figures are common in other industries.

In furniture production the continued employability of ageing men depends on two factors. How far are shop supervisors able to break down and reorganize operations in the interests of ageing or

* Ageing on the Factory Floor. By F. Le Gros Clark. (Studies of Ageing within the Conditions of Modern Industry.) Pp. 36. (London: The Nuffield Foundation, 1957.)

ailing men? And what reserves of skill and adaptability have the ageing men themselves? In an industry of this kind it becomes difficult to employ an elderly operative or labourer in the production line, unless he has reserves of adaptability to fall back on. This often depended upon whether these partly skilled men have acquired sufficient craft experience to make them still employable at their age. The craft background of many of the older men has given them assurance of employment. Though a good many of them may have been employed for most of their lives on repetitive and machine work, their early training with hand tools would have sufficed to fit them for transferring at some stage to the finishing shop, repairs or jig-making, according to their degree of skill.

Against this, where operatives now in their middle lives have not been trained in craftsmanship but only for machine and assembly operations, in later years they may prove somewhat of a problem. Not only

will there probably be large numbers of them; they will lack the craft training that would have made them adaptable old employees.

Of the furniture industry as a whole, Le Gros Clark suggests that it will still continue to experiment with new techniques and with new and more efficient factory organization. That, inevitably, means concentration and division of labour; and in a factory where the timing of a large number of successive and converging operations is of paramount importance, it becomes difficult to allow too many operatives to fall too far below a standard level of output. A factory that has incurred heavy overhead charges in the employment of technical and other experts will have streamlined production processes to such an extent that it has to maintain a labour force that is physically capable of the effort and continuity needed. In other words, it has less flexibility than had an old-time workshop in employing its own ailing or ageing operatives.

FUEL CONSUMPTION AND RESOURCES

ONE of the four main purposes of the Clean Air Act is to prohibit in Britain the emission of dark smoke from chimneys, and on February 6 the Minister of Housing and Local Government, Mr. H. Brooke, announced that from June 1 emission of such smoke will be liable to incur a fine of up to £100. This will apply to factories, shops, offices and the funnels of ships and railway engines as well as to domestic chimneys, and from that date all new furnaces installed for burning pulverized fuel, or more than one ton an hour of other solid fuels, must be equipped with grit- and dust-arresting plant approved by the local authority.

These regulations will be applied through statutory instrument No. 167 (C2) of 1958, which was laid before Parliament on February 6 and appoints June 1 as the day for the operation of all those provisions of the Clean Air Act which were not brought into force by statutory instrument No. 2022 (C19) of 1956. It would seem, however, that much still remains to be done in the way of educating both the public and the local authorities on the importance and benefits of smoke control. In replying to a question in a broadcast discussion the following evening, a group of speakers, which included a member of Parliament, showed a regrettable lack of public responsibility and even ignorance of the fact that domestic fires rarely emit dark smoke as defined in the Act—"as dark as, or darker than, shade two on the Ringelmann chart".

Some reference was made to the importance of smoke abatement in a debate in the House of Lords on February 5. Lord Macdonald of Gwaenysgor, who opened the debate, referred to the importance of the most efficient use of coal and the need for adequate independent scientific advice: he was concerned that this should be available to the Minister of Fuel and Power. Lord Stonehaven, who stressed the value of the National Industrial Fuel Efficiency Service, referred to the savings to be achieved by scrapping the obsolete and inefficient Lancashire boilers still in use, the importance of adequate instrumentation and of competent stokers. Lord de L'Isle insisted that

adequate provision for storing fuel is essential if fuel is to be handled economically for central heating systems. Lord Teviot and Lord Hall both referred to the contribution of science to the efficient use of fuel and power resources, but the major interest of the debate centred in the review of these resources which Lord Mills, the Minister of Power, gave in his reply.

Lord Mills suggested that we are approaching a turning-point in that field. Coal is still the foundation of British fuel economy, but while its consumption has increased by 10 per cent since 1948, that of oil has increased by 91 per cent. There is also a tendency for an increasing proportion of fuel to be consumed in refined forms: since 1948, coke consumption has increased by 15 per cent, gas by 27 per cent and electricity by 99 per cent, so that they now account for 40 per cent or more of inland consumption, compared with 25 per cent before the War. Taking all fuels together, 60 per cent is consumed by industry, 13 per cent by transport and 27 per cent by the domestic consumer. Half our coal supplies go to making fuel or energy, 18 per cent to the domestic consumer, 6 per cent to transport and 26 per cent to industry and commerce, which consumed 60 per cent of electricity supply and more than half that of gas.

Lord Mills said that planning must be based on the assumption that the inland demand for coal will continue to grow, but more slowly than that of other primary fuels. Its direct use by the railways and householders will decrease, but there may be large increases in the demand for coal by coke ovens. As regards small coal, stocks amount to 6 million tons, mainly from deep mines, although two-thirds of open-cast coal is in that form, compared with half of the deep-mined coal. Demand for oil is likely to continue, but the power station oil-conversion programme has been reduced by one-third, to the equivalent of 6 million tons of coal. The advent of nuclear power as a third fuel, however, has brought us to the turning point. Nevertheless, nuclear power at present represents very big demands on capital