

Dick Whittington lives again

The North-South divide has given rise to a new class, Britain's migrant workers. Alexander Baron visits a building site in London.

Germany has its guest workers, South Africa has its black migrant workers, who travel hundreds of miles from their homeland to seek work to support their families. These men often live under conditions no British worker would tolerate. Or would they?

Recognizable only by their accents, Britain now has its own brand of migrant workers, who leave families and loved ones in the north to search for work in the south.

Many northerners who uproot themselves in search of a livelihood in the supposed affluent south return home bitterly disappointed. But one group who do reap the rewards of a healthy regional pay differential are building workers.

The money is the only thing remotely healthy about their lifestyle. On a building site in the heart of the West End I found three such nomads: Frank, 33, from Manchester; Terry, 28, from Wearside; and Harry, 32, from County Durham.

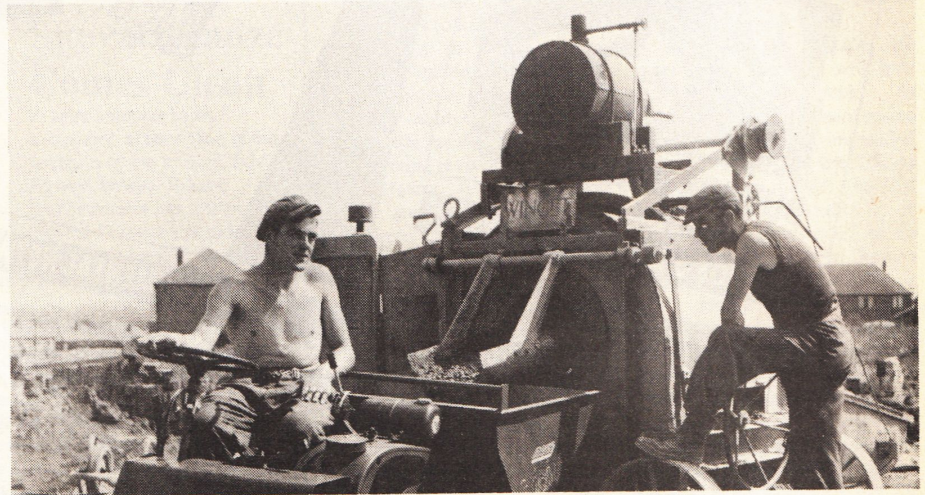
Terry is a plumber; Frank and Harry are plasterers.

The money is the only thing remotely healthy about their lifestyle.

They are strictly here for work, and have been living on the

job for the past four weeks. The building project they are working on is scheduled to last about three months - a total refurbishment of a four storey retail store.

They have the bare necessities for existence - sleeping bags and an electric kettle, which is coated



Times have changed for the British working class. Photo : TUC Library

with a thin film of brown plaster. There is dust and dirt everywhere, especially dust.

They work up to twelve hours a day, seven days a week.

The security man calls them at seven-fifteen. Frank is always the first up. Harry, with thick Sunderland accent and Yorkshire Ripper moustache, sleeps in. Frank goes over to the cafe for sandwiches.

About the only thing they can do at knocking off time is go to the pub. Having washed and brushed up in a makeshift, dust-caked washroom, they set off in spotless jeans, T-shirts and trainers for the West End.

None of these men drinks

heavily, but they eat appallingly. This Saturday night, for example, Harry has bought a large tin of soup and a tin of potatoes, and is debating whether to heat them with a blow lamp or boil them in the electric kettle.

I asked them how long they had been down here.

Frank: "On and off about four or five years."

Outlook: "Why do you work down here instead of Manchester?"

Frank: "Money. You get more down here."

Outlook: "What would you get in Manchester?"

Terry: "A hundred and twenty."

There is some disagreement, but one thing is clear. Wages in the north are extremely low. Here Terry is on eight pounds an hour.

Just as important as money is the flow of work. Harry explains: "I've been self-employed three years, and I've never been out of work. Yet when I was working up the north-east, you'd maybe work

Finding suitable short-term accommodation isn't easy. Plaster-caked boots and soiled jeans are not welcome everywhere.

It's impractical for them to go

"We're not migrants. We belong here."

home every weekend, but they usually manage one in two. All three make sure they take their dirty laundry home with them!

This Saturday they've been working late. Frank has gone home, and Harry and Terry are stuck in for the weekend. They return to the site shortly before midnight and are let in by the

six weeks, twelve weeks, and then you're back on the dole for maybe two or three months."

What do they miss most about working down south? All three are agreed on this: their families. All three are family men, and Frank and Harry have mortgages. They could all afford homes in London, but Frank says to buy the sort of house he has in Oldham would be out of the question.

Terry comes from a small fishing village on Wearside. He does not own his own home, but for him the idea of moving to the south permanently is scotched by family ties. His wife in particular is reluctant to move.

nightwatchman. Harry is quite drunk. They are both happy tonight, even though tomorrow they will be up plastering at eight o'clock while others are enjoying a lie-in.

Monday they'll be ringing round trying to find digs. The project manager isn't happy about their sleeping on site; in any case this job will soon be finished. For skilled building workers like Harry, Frank and Terry, the next job will be easy to find. The work may be regular, and the money good, but for Britain's migrant workers the fringe benefits are non-existent.