

## **Pictures at an exhibition**

What do you think of this one then? That's us you know, me and the lads. "The constructors" that Frenchie painter called it. Bloody typical though - he got it wrong. See, we wasn't constructors, we was erectors. And before you start, I do know the jokes. All of them.

What we did was erect scaffolding so the constructors could construct. That's what we're doing there. In the picture. We each put a few bob in for it - well the families did for Jeff, Rick and Den. Commemoration. Then a 'grateful city and populace', so we was told, added the rest. That's why we're here tonight and why I've got me best togs on. Sort of guests of honour you might say. Funny thing, bad conscience, aint it? It don't bring no-one back though.

We was all London lads. But the bird flu plague put a stopper on construction and erection both. Bit of a ghost city, was London. So we hit the road like a lot of others. Though I say it myself, we was a bit more far-sighted, didn't want to join the refugees. We stuck together. No scrabbling round the Midlands for us: got our passports together, got the medical clearances and off up here to Scotland. Immigration was a doddle with our skills because after all that ethnic cleansing stuff there was a load of rebuilding to do. Not enough erectors for all those big tenements, specially not with even worse problems over in Glasgow.

We fancied Edinburgh though, thought it had a bit more class. Capital city and that. Don't believe it when they say all Scotties sound the same. Edinburgh accents are a lot easier to get your head round than Glasgow ones. Well, if you don't mind me saying so, you don't sound like much of a Scottie. No offence. You think it's a bit daft London lads like us rebuilding stuff trashed by anti-English riots? Can't argue with that. Still, they was shorthanded and pretty ashamed of themselves too. Not a good start for a new country - they just wanted to get the evidence cleared up pronto.

Good money. Had to keep your head down a bit in the evenings and watch what pubs you went into, but we stuck together. Anyone got a bit of lip the rest of us'd be there. Just looking ready if needed shut most things down before they got started. The fuel shortage was a bit of a bummer until we got a set of bikes to whack around on – enough of us for a right little cycling club.

Our main problem was the Noxies. You must have come across them. The Knox Army of God they call themselves, but noxious by name, noxious by nature we reckoned. As far as we could see they had the whole town shut on a Sunday, specially the pubs and offies. We had to stock up on a Saturday and play cards in the digs. Weekdays we'd be up on the erection (look mate, we really do know all the jokes) and we'd see a crowd of them down on the street. They'd be chivvying people – put a hat on, cut your hair, go home and change your clothes, read the bible. Gone a bit quieter now, haven't they? Course, we knew they was nutters, but it was still a surprise, what happened.

Yeah, he's painted us on a lovely day. He was right about the weather too, though you wouldn't think so on a day like this with all that clammy mist in from the sea. Even before the bird flu, London wasn't a right laugh in the summer. It would hit 40 degrees and the sky'd sort of vanish into the smog. Here it never went above 30 that June, and the fuel rationing cleared off most of the traffic. Lovely blue sky for weeks, nice bit of a breeze off the sea. Den was ever so proud of his tan. We had him painted with his shirt off just to remind us how proud he'd been.

Where we was erecting used to be a school named after some dead geezer, George Heriot. Big gothic pile near the centre of town, great view from the erection (yeah, yeah). Don't know what they'd been throwing at the outside, but lots of stonework damage as well as paint and stuff all over it. Trouble was they couldn't empty it – full of refugees from when the floods washed that chunk off Leith. Still haven't managed to rehouse them all yet have they? Anyway, lots of families holed up inside, had been for months. Long enough for the Noxies

to get onto them. Later it turned out there'd been all kinds of wild stories put round - drugs, violence, sex. Real Sodom and Gomorrah stuff, the Noxies reckoned.

So it was another lovely day, not a cloud in the proverbial. Not so lovely was the huge mob of Noxies who turned up mid-morning. Brian saw them first, way before they got to the front door, and gave us a shout. The three of us down the bottom hauling poles up – we was only two thirds done – nipped up the erection sharpish. Safer out the way we reckoned. We saw the big red jerries right off. Like we told the inquiry, smelt a rat. See, with the rationing it was hard to get your hands on fuel. Had to be an inside job from one of the depots, all those identical red jerries. Didn't want to hear that though, did they?

Front door smashed, in they went. Shouting, then screaming from inside. What do you do? Eleven of us against how many of them? We stayed put – even now don't think we could have done any good. Then smelt the fuel from right up top. Noxies surging out again. A bloody big bang. Vapour going off - someone had tossed a match.

None of us'd ever been in a huge fire like that. Heads out the windows high up, women, kids, screaming. Bastards had poured fuel at the bottom of the stairs, first floor upwards people couldn't get out. Well, what do you do? 999 on the mobile. Got the lads into a chain, pulling people onto the erection, passing them down. Smoke everywhere, noise, chaos. Everything got hot. Fire engines finally arrived, their lads came up top too, hosing it all down, but it had well took by then.

Course, we'd been only two thirds done. That top end of the erection, not properly secured. Or maybe it was just the fire burned it through at the wall. Not sure. Came down, didn't it. So did the poor sods on it. And Jeff, Rick and Den.

Anyway, turned out we was heroes. Trouble is, three of us was dead heroes.

I like the picture myself. Me and the lads. That's how I like to remember us, all together on a nice sunny day.