

The Guardian

Martyn Halsall goes
to building school

Self savings

Property

TIM AGERBAK subscribes to the gradualist school of building, having potted on the transformation of a 200-year-old stone barn in the Pyrenees for the past 28 years. Phil Bixby likes a little more pace, aiming to complete work from foundations to fitting-out in three weeks.

They met on a former garden site in Whitley Bridge, near Selby in Yorkshire, where Tim, a teacher at Atlantic College in South Glamorgan, became the pupil of Phil, an architect turned self-build headmaster. Round the corner from the Jolly Miller, as the Derby pounded from the radios, the house that Tim and Phil and more than 20 other people built was nearing completion on deadline.

Self-build is now the largest single source of new homes in Brit-



ain, producing an estimated 12,000 houses a year, including 2,000 built by groups. Phil Bixby founded Constructive Individuals in 1986, when he supervised the building of a timber-framed house with a group in Milton Keynes.

This year his company has four courses planned in Whitley Bridge, its first foray into the North, and next year expects further expansion. Each trainee pays £400 plus VAT for three weeks' practical training, tool hire, food and site accommodation.

They arrive with a basic tool kit, varying degrees of skill, and backgrounds which have ranged from

skilled craftsmen to a retired ballet dancer. Phil sells each house confident his graduates can go away and build their own.

The almost instant timetable includes caveats. Trainees arrive to find foundations prepared, although a garage assignment adds that experience. They also work alongside trained bricklayers to gain the background rather than the skills a good brickie takes years to acquire.

Each process is outlined in a lecture under canvass in the tutorial tent, before being instantly applied on site, with trainers supervising progress. Home completion, such

● Topping out . . . class of '89 at Whitley Bridge

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID HICKES

as decorating and fitting out, remains in the DIY province outside the three-week timetable.

Speed is not encouraged for its own sake; Bixby estimates a couple investing all their evenings, weekends and three weeks holiday would take eight or nine months to build themselves a home.

Advantages include cost savings of between 30 and 50 per cent. "At the end of the day you have also got exactly what you want," said Bixby. "You get enormous satisfaction from doing it; you learn a tremendous amount in practical skills — and if you can build your own home then you can undertake practically anything."

Former City banker Paul Tutill, aged 30 and living in Folkestone, was among the latest Constructive Individuals. After 13 years in banking he became interested in property restoration and went on the course to broaden his skills. Experience brought a dilemma.

"I think everybody on the course will feel confident to build their own house," he said. "After that it's a question of do you stick with that, or do you go back and resume your career — let's say the option is very interesting."

Marc Yelland, a 31-year-old switchboard operator and reception porter at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in central London, went on the course looking for confidence, his building skills limited to "a bit of DIY".

Experiences as varied as erecting rafters and roof tiling had "broadened my own knowledge of what goes on," he said. "I found it very interesting, very rewarding." He had also appreciated being able to use different, advanced tools and would go home to Woodford "prepared to have a go myself".

For Tim Agerbak "there's a great mystery about what's behind the plasterboard, but when you've seen every ingredient and helped to put it together it's not a mystery any longer."

His wife Linda, a political researcher, said: "It's demystified things for me; I've lost my fear of heights and circular saws; I've learned how easy plumbing is and wiring, but then we've been extremely well taught. I've also learned project management — how to do things in a certain order." She appreciated the mixing of skills and personalities. Jobs were allocated and progress assessed over tin mugs of tea round the overturned cable drum which served as an outside table.

For Phil Bixby the main problems of being head tutor were directing over-enthusiasm and maintaining a balanced perspective. His trainees were loathe to stop for tea-breaks, concentrated too much on detail and poured too much intensity into physical tasks.

Most of the trainees on the last course departed intending to build or convert their homes. Constructive Individuals wants to increase the proportion of women and northerners on its courses, whose members have been aged up to 70.