

Quantity Surveying in the Republic of South Africa

By J. E. Bowles ARICS, RQS, MAQS (Associate)

During the President's tour of South Africa I was fortunate to meet Mr. Wilkins, at whose suggestion I have prepared these notes regarding the nature of Quantity Surveying as practised here, which I hope will prove of interest to fellow members.

Having been employed in private practice both in England and now in South Africa I have confined my notes mainly to the role of the Quantity Surveyor in this particular sphere.

Background to Quantity Surveying in South Africa

Whilst it is generally accepted that Quantity Surveying as a distinct profession originated in the United Kingdom and spread from there to other countries, such as South Africa, it will, no doubt, come as a surprise to many members to know that South Africa had its "Standard System of Measurement" as early as 1906, whereas, according to the Preface to the First Edition of the SMM the United Kingdom did not have an official Standard System of Measurement until 1909!

This early "pioneering" work in South Africa was undertaken by the Transvaal Society of Quantity Surveyors who produced in 1906 a document entitled "The Standard System of Measurement of Builders' Work and Billing of Quantities".

Since 1906 the Quantity Surveying profession has evolved and developed along similar lines to, and compares well with, its British counterpart.

The majority of firms here employ "cut and shuffle" techniques of bill preparation, with some of the larger practices successfully using computer systems of varying degrees of sophistication.

The current document used by South African Quantity Surveyors during the preparation of Bills of Quantities incorporates metrication and is not radically dissimilar from the Fifth Edition of the Standard Method of Measurement of Building Work used in the UK.

There are of course many minor differences between Bills of Quantities prepared here and those prepared in the United Kingdom, although the basic principles of measurement are the same.

Some of the differences arise from the historical background of South Africa whilst others are of a technical nature.

An example of the former would be the necessity to prepare Bills of Quantities either in English or Afrikaans, South Africa having two national languages and therefore requiring the South African Quantity Surveyor to possess a reasonable standard of bilingualism as well as the other necessary attributes!

Other differences of a technical nature occur in the measurement and description of builder's work, and an example of this would be reinforced concrete slabs which, in South Africa, are measured in cubic metres with a separate item of "striking off and curing concrete" measured in square metres, whereas slabs would be measured in square metres stating the thickness under the SMM used in the UK with no separate item for striking off and curing.

The present situation

The day to day work of a South African Quantity Surveyor is very much the same as that of his colleagues

based in Britain. He provides pre and post contract services and acts as a contractual and financial consultant on building matters to both the Architect and Employer. There being no separate discipline of Valuation Surveying in South Africa, this work is also undertaken by the Quantity Surveyor.

The standard form of contract for building works used in South Africa is also very similar to that issued by the Joint Contracts Tribunal in Britain, except where the differences between English and South African Law have resulted in different requirements and wordings to some clauses.

Quantity Surveying as a profession has been recognised by Law in South Africa since the Quantity Surveyors' Private Act of 1927, now superseded by the Quantity Surveyors' Public Act No. 36 of 1970, which sets out the scope of work reserved for Quantity Surveyors and also makes it an offence for persons not registered with the SA Council for Quantity Surveyors to offer or undertake Quantity Surveying services.

It might also be of interest to mention that the South African Rents Amendment Act expressly provides for the employment of a Quantity Surveyor to compute building and depreciation costs for the various Rent Control Boards.

Apart from the registration of Quantity Surveyors, the SA Council for Quantity Surveyors has responsibility for the training and education of students, provides regulations concerning the Code of Professional Conduct and Scale of Professional Fees and has powers to enforce and discipline members who infringe these regulations.

The Council, however, does not set its own examinations, this aspect being dealt with by the Universities offering Quantity Surveying degree courses approved by the Council.

In South Africa there is at present only one association for Quantity Surveyors known as "The Association of South African Quantity Surveyors". This Association is responsible for the general administration and circularising of matters of general interest to Quantity Surveyors and also for undertaking research projects, nominating persons for appointment to the Council, organising and administering the benevolent fund, bursaries, etc.

The Association is represented at regional level by local "Chapters" who elect their own committees and report back to the Association regarding matters raised by the members. The Association is also represented on various Sub-Committees such as the Building Professions Liaison Committee, Public Relations Committee and General Practice Committee which have all been established to further understanding between the Professional Consultants, Employers and Building Contractors.

Unfortunately the examinations of the Institute of Quantity Surveyors are not as yet recognised by the South African Association of Quantity Surveyors. However, it is hoped that the President's recent visit to this country and his meetings with representatives of the bodies concerned will soon result in the acceptance of the Institute's examinations thus enabling qualified members to obtain membership of the Association without the necessity to sit the local examinations.

Quantity Surveyors employed by Building Contractors can be members of the South African Association of Quantity Surveyors providing that they comply with certain requirements, mainly regarding the use of their professional designations and do not purport either to do the work of a quantity surveyor in private practice or to offer independent advice on matters of contract, pricing, etc.

The current depressed state of the world economy has been felt in South Africa as in most other developed and developing countries and has caused a considerable cutback in the number of building projects being undertaken by both the public and private sector. This has resulted in a sharp increase in unemployment in the building industry and the number of insolvencies among building contractors.

Generally Quantity Surveyors have not been as hard hit as other consultants and those members made redundant generally have not found it too difficult to obtain employment elsewhere, although it has often necessitated moving to a different part of the Republic.

Together with unemployment we have also experienced the "inflationary spiral" of building costs although this has been partially offset by "keener" tender prices submitted by Building Contractors, owing to the general shortage of new work.

Various methods of calculating and adjusting for increased costs of labour and material have been tried in this country, including "proven costs" methods requiring invoices to substantiate changes in market prices, often with supporting audited statements from a public accountant.

The latest method generally known as the "Haylett Formula" utilizes a regularly issued schedule of indices indicating the fluctuation of prices for various sections of building work, referred to as work groups, which correspond generally to the building trade categories. These indices are compiled by the Department of Statistics from information submitted by Contractors, Manufacturers and Suppliers involved in the Building Industry.

Future developments

The current recession in the building industry in this country had added a "boost" to proposals that Quantity Surveyors should become more actively involved in the field of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering and members are being encouraged to prepare Bills of Quantities for these services and to inform their clients of the relative advantages of this practice. Various seminars and discussions on this subject have already taken place and more are planned for the future, but it is as yet too early to establish whether many Quantity Surveyors will wish to take up this challenge!

Other developments and proposals for the future include the revision of the Standard System of Measurement to bring this document up to date in respect of the

latest techniques of building construction and also a complete revision of the standard Form of Contract to eradicate various anomalies and inconsistencies which have come to light in recent years.

There are also plans to provide a National Cost Information Service for Quantity Surveyors which would include detailed cost information on various types of buildings as well as a Building Cost Index and the Association is considering the setting up of a pilot scheme in this field.

The Contractor's Surveyor

From inquiries I have made it would seem that the greatest difference between the work executed by the Quantity Surveyor employed in a Builder's office in South Africa compared to similar employment in the UK occurs in the preparation of estimates and quotations.

The reason for this difference lies in the fact that here in South Africa we have an abundant supply of low cost labour, and therefore building operations tend to be highly labour intensive when compared with the execution of similar work in the UK. Before anyone shouts "slave labour" I should like to make it clear that the conditions of employment and wages paid to building labourers, particularly black or coloured workers, compare favourably with those in most other African countries and many black and coloured workers are collected from and returned to their various residential districts by their employers.

There are also stringent Government regulations concerning the employment of black and coloured workers to ensure fair wages, compensation for injury, holiday bonus scheme, medical aid fund, pension fund, etc., plus subsidised fares to their places of employment.

It might also interest members to know that Artisans in the Building Industry receive and have received for many years, the same wages regardless of their colour.

I hope that I have made my point and will leave this subject now as I have no wish to enter the political arena!

Conclusion

I hope the points set out above have been of interest to members, who will appreciate the considerable degree of similarity between quantity surveying as practised in South Africa and in the UK. This had made it comparatively simple for members arriving from Britain to quickly adapt to local conditions here, and vice-versa.

There is a very strong interest in overseas developments shown by Quantity Surveyors here and so it was very gratifying to see our President from the UK undertaking his recent tour of South Africa, which must surely strengthen the ties between members practising in these two countries.

It is sincerely hoped that we shall have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Wilkins in South Africa again and that some presidential tours in the future may again include this country on their itinerary.

Thank you, or perhaps I should say "baie dankie"!

Note: It is hoped to publish shortly a similar article by Mrs. Le Roux on the various types of building contracts used in South Africa. Mrs. Le Roux is co-author with John Bowles of a recently published book on quantity surveying practices in the Republic.