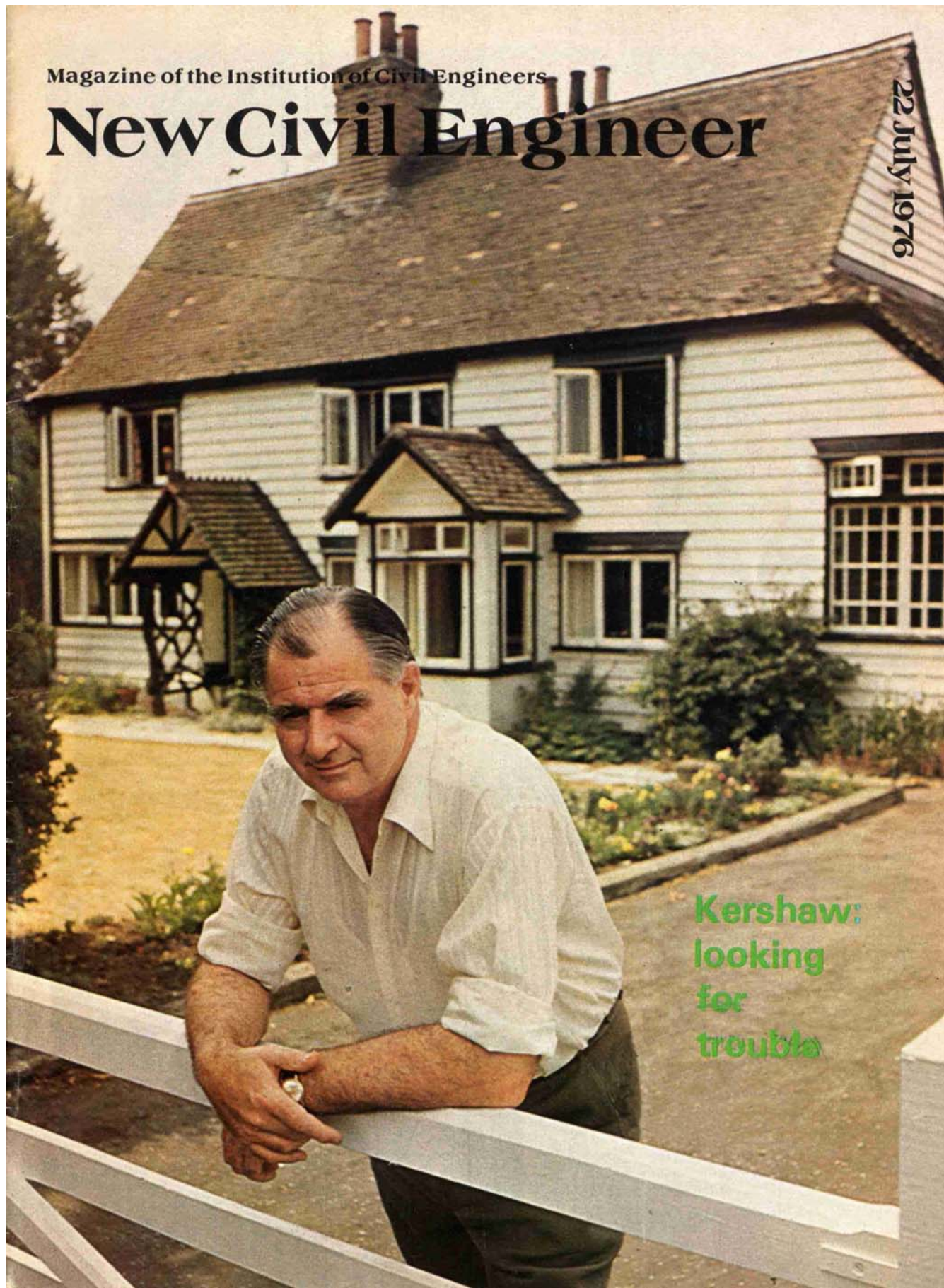


Magazine of the Institution of Civil Engineers

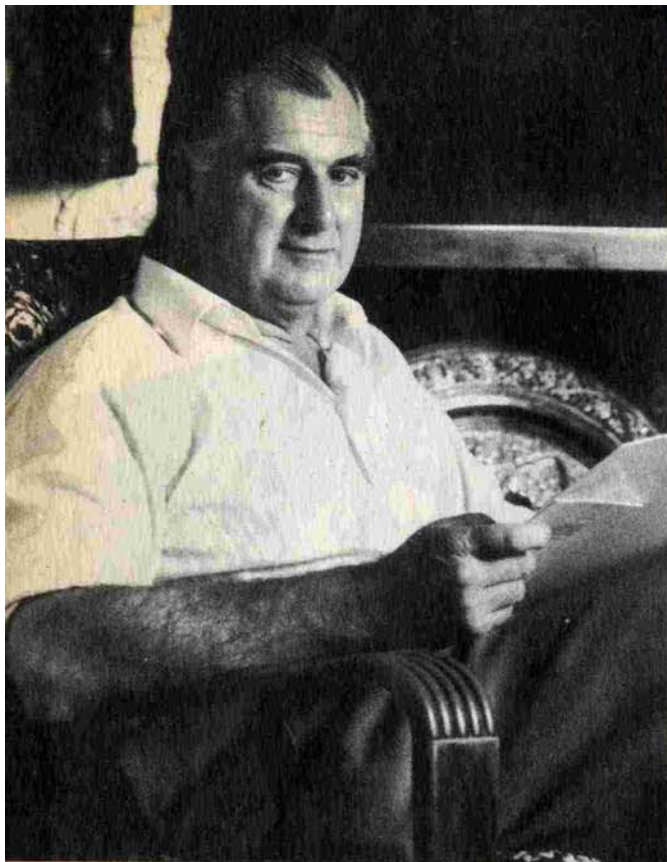
# New Civil Engineer

22 July 1976

Kershaw:  
looking  
for  
trouble







*Don Kershaw, dedicated to sorting out other people's problems.*

rigid hierarchical set-up. Among the listed 'deficiencies' in his introspective testimonial come: 'Difficulty in working under someone I cannot respect'; and 'less diplomatic with my seniors than my juniors'.

In the past this so-called lack of diplomacy has been seen as one of Don Kershaw's greatest strengths. Standing almost 2m tall and well into the heavy-weight scale, he is not the kind of man you pick an argument with. Several of his Tarbela colleagues are convinced that some of the job's most critical accelerations in progress can be traced back to Kershaw's 'ability' to lose his temper at precisely the right time during a site meeting.

Irascibility is not necessarily a desirable board-room quality, and Kershaw's pragmatic conclusion was 'employment at an interesting level in construction would mean working under managers with less experience, and that would prove unworkable'.

Having decided to work for himself, the choice of project management was automatic. Since he first left the UK for NZ in 1951, the organisation of contracts and construction has been his recurrent concern.

He spent 10 years in NZ after leaving Wallasey Borough Council 'because although the training was good, there

## PROFILE

# Don Kershaw: veteran troubleshooter

If battling against the odds to overcome technical and political problems and meet critical deadlines is the sort of experience needed to make an international construction troubleshooter, Don Kershaw has the right credentials. For 25 years his 'problems' have included union militancy in New Zealand, civil war in Nigeria, and two disastrous structural collapses in Pakistan.

Now, at 54, Kershaw has got the taste for trouble and, instead of waiting for it to come to him he is actively seeking it out. Within a few months of returning from Pakistan for an intended rest after two energy-sapping crises as agent at Tarbela dam, he had set himself up as a project management consultant and was planning to fly out to Nigeria to help a French contractor in difficulties on a road contract.

The likely pattern of the future Don Kershaw is mapping out for himself includes flying visits to remote parts of the world to listen to construction or contractual problems and advise clients, consultants or contractors on ways of overcoming them.

After 30 years of working for other people the decision to go solo was not

an easy one. It was reached after the same sort of step-by-step analysis of his personal situation as he would expect to apply to any of his contractual conundrums. While one suspects the answer was at the back of his mind all the time, it was confirmed only after a 12-page self-appraisal dossier had weighed the options and pointed to independence as the most likely route to job satisfaction.

At first glance, Don Kershaw's background seems to equip him well for a top management post with a contractor, consultant or client body. Having run his own project and the inspection side of a direct-labour organisation in New Zealand, been chief resident engineer and later project and general manager for consultants on the giant Kainji scheme in Nigeria, and spent more than three years as head of contract management and subsequently agent on the world's biggest and most troubled project at Tarbela, he has seen big-time construction from all sides.

What the detailed self-analysis did reveal was that, however well suited his experience and qualifications were to a management role, Kershaw's temperament makes him unlikely to fit into a

was then no money to do any work with.' Looking back he sees the decision to emigrate as 'probably the best thing I ever did. I learnt more in New Zealand than I have ever learnt'.

Certainly the timing was good. He arrived in the early stages of a hydro construction boom on North Island, which was to see six major hydro schemes built head to tail down the Waikato Valley. Everything was done by the direct labour department, then in its prime as the biggest and most important construction team in New Zealand.

Starting as a senior engineer on site investigation work, Kershaw progressed quickly to inspection engineer for the valley—a direct-labour equivalent of chief resident engineer. The experience instilled in him two important principles.

First, the value of good labour relations which Don Kershaw believes can only be inspired from the top. Progress on the vitally urgent Waikato scheme was at times threatened by labour problems, involving a strong communist influence in the trade unions. 'We learnt very quickly,' Kershaw recalls, 'that you don't order a New Zealand worker to



work, you ask him, and once you realise that they are bloody good workers'.

Waikato also taught him the importance of construction experience in the design and supervision teams. It became a rule in the Waikato hydro-electric power department that no-one was allowed to occupy a position on the inspection staff until he had held an equivalent place on the construction team.

'This made the inspection staff much more respected than you often find on construction jobs,' says Kershaw, 'and it also meant they understood and could usually help with the other chaps' problems.'

Kershaw has fond memories of the country, and retains firm links through a flourishing New Zealand Institution of Engineers UK Association, whose 40 members meet six times a year and provide active help for young NZ engineers seeking work in the UK.

Returning to Britain in 1961, he joined Lindsay Parkinson as a sub-agent in charge of sub-contracts (75% of the contract) on the M6 in Cheshire ('I had to step down several pegs there, but jobs were hard to get, and it was a damn good team'). He stayed for two years before joining Shellabear-Price for a short time as agent on its muckshifting contract on the Edmund Byers (now Derwent) reservoir in Northumberland.

Abroad again, he worked as chief resident engineer for the Anglo-Dutch design consortium Balfour Beatty/NEDECO on the £46M Kainji hydro-electric scheme in Nigeria. That was Kershaw's first contact with Italian contractor Impregilo, and it was an impressive one: 'They made the fastest start I had seen on any job, and were ready to divert the river almost before we knew they were there.' To keep pace Kershaw had to build up his staff quickly and, drawing on his NZ experience, made sure that a big part of the team were ex-construction people.

The hardest test at Kainji came not from any engineering difficulties but from Nigeria's political unrest. In October 1966, two years into the job, the site was the scene of one of three Ibo massacres that started the civil war. About 400 Ibos were killed in the riots and the job stopped overnight. With full government support, Kershaw and the contractor's agent arranged safe passages to Eastern Nigeria for the remaining Ibos and order was restored.

Amazingly, the job was back in action in three weeks and back on programme in three months. Key to the success, Don Kershaw maintains, was the spirit of trust that developed between the client, contractor and consultant.

'The Nigerian government promised to meet extra costs and Impregilo started recruiting additional Italian artisans the same day. The Nigerians were true to

their word and an extra-contractual settlement was made within six weeks. Once that kind of relationship had been established there were no problems and the job was finished on time and within cost.'

Kershaw did not stay on site to the end, but his close contact with Kainji remained when he returned to Balfour Beatty's London office in 1967. As project manager, he visited the site every two months until the job ended in 1969. From 1969 to 1972, during which time Balfour Beatty was hit hard by the Terson collapse and was taken over by cable giant BICC, Kershaw became acting general manager of the B-B consulting wing, Engineering and Power Development Consultants (EPDC), and supervised the company's move to Sidcup and reorganisation of house supporting services.

He left in 1972 to face his hardest test of all at the now notorious Tarbela dam in northern Pakistan. Even then, as head of contract management, a newly created post, Kershaw inherited a heavy load of unresolved contractual matters built up over the previous four years. Management of the thirteen-firm contracting consortium, Tarbela Joint Venture, led by his old friends Impregilo, was centred on the site, and one of his first problems was to appreciate and reconcile the differences between the British and Italian engineering philosophy and approach.

'The Italians have a motto: "the field is in the lead", which makes field staff very good at getting things done, but less

concerned with contractual procedures and records. My problem was to see that TJV was being paid for its efforts'. This meant winning the confidence of the construction-minded Italians, and teaming them with British counterparts, who were more inclined to think about payment and contractual implications first and act later.

'The UK still produces a very good all-round engineer' says Kershaw, 'but at Tarbela I learnt a lot from the Italian-lead team whose output was phenomenal and who refused to admit any task was impossible.'

'The melding of the best qualities of the various European team members produced a magnificent management team which with the support of the consortium executive and the co-operation of the Pakistani staff produced results of great pride to those who participated.'

Kershaw became TJV's agent, just at the time the disastrous collapse of tunnel number two as the reservoir filled for the first time. (Readers unfamiliar with the subsequent events should see NCE 3 October 1974, and 9 and 16 October 1975).

It is a time Don Kershaw looks back on with considerable pride, but which left him physically and mentally exhausted. His return to England last December was with the intention of taking a long rest and recording some of his experiences in a book on contract management. The book is under way, but the long rest has been curtailed by his decision to go looking for other people's troubles and help them.

*Kershaw spent more than three years as head of contract management and agent for Tarbela, the world's most troubled dam.*

