Laura Blair on contract caterers who have developed 'healthy' menus

ith the BSE scare at its were given freedom of choice; it is not the role of caterers, after all, to dictate what their clients eat.

They must, however, be aware of trends in diet, and at the moment the long-term change is towards healthier eating. Cream soups, fryups, meat starters, red meats and sticky puddings are slowly going the way of all flesh.

According to contract catering companies, "healthy options" involving less fat, salt, sugar, increased fibre and the clear labelling of the contents of dishes, increasingly form part of invitation-totender documents.

The recent refurbishment of the English National Opera's staff restaurant at the Coliseum, for example, was also taken by Gardner Merchant as a good opportunity to change the catering style. More emphasis has been placed on healthy food options, including salads and vegetarian dishes.

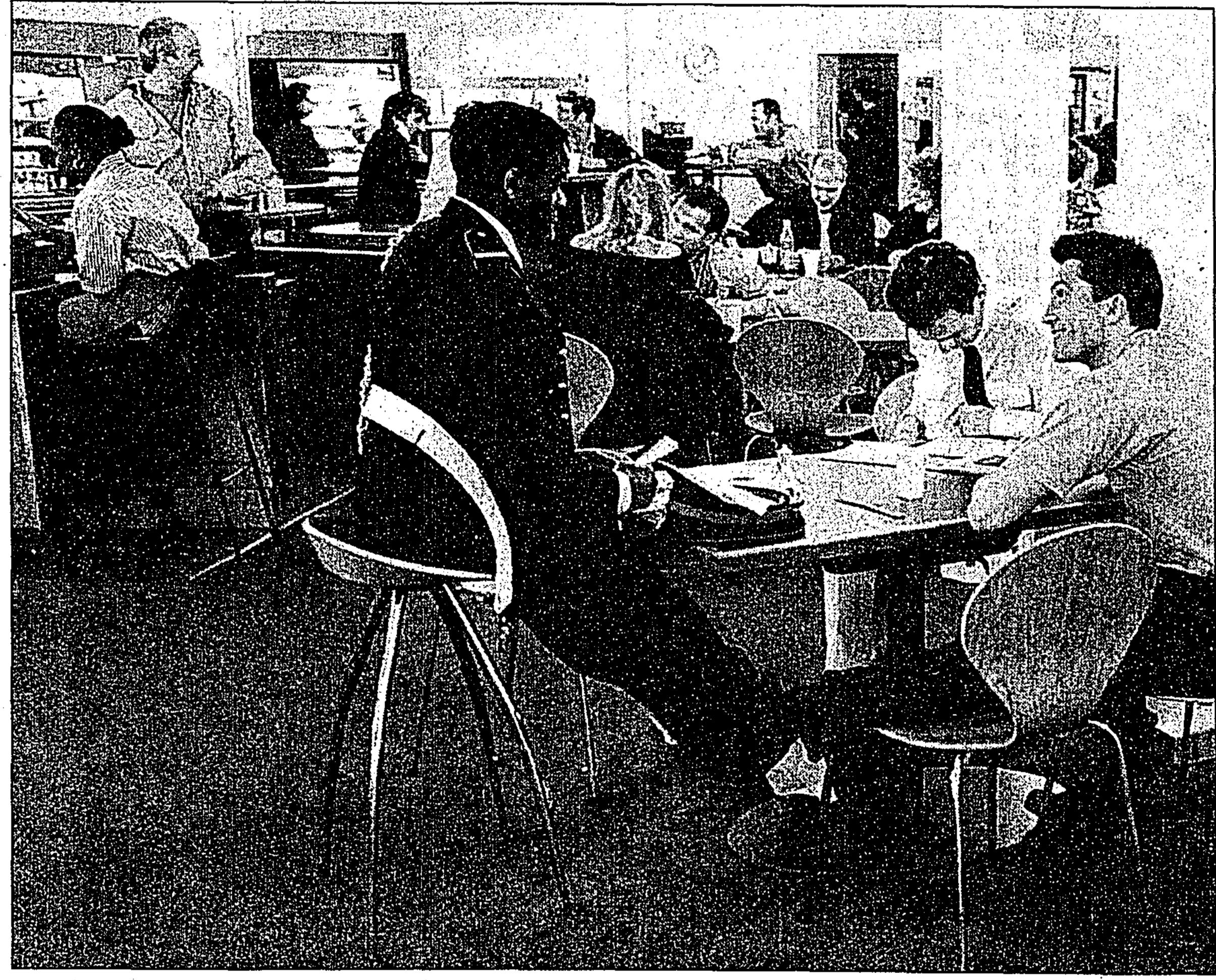
Ventilation in the restaurant, which is under the stage, was improved and the room made more spacious to make room for the singers' voluminous costumes previously, they were not able to sit on the benches, which were very close to the tables and screwed to the floor.

Contract caterers in general pose the question; is it not absurd for employers to go to elaborate trouble to make workplaces hazard-free and healthy if the diet of those who work in them is neither?

Making food hazard-free means eliminating identifiable danger including harmful additives and bacteria, maybe even the remote threat of CJD. Notions of what constitutes a healthy diet change constantly — but then so do notions of what constitutes "health". Not so long ago, health was equated with age-defying beauty. Now we again worry that some don't eat enough, while others eat too much.

Healthy eating programmes are often seen as part of a keep-fit corporate culture. For example, at Fina, the petroleum company, whose contract catering is by Summit, and at Hewlett-Packard (catering by Aramark), healthy eating is part of a corporate policy that includes regular exercise and health check-ups.

But much of the healthy eating drive is fuelled by widespread public disquiet about the long-term wholesomeness of what we eat, inspired by a series of well-publicised



Backstage meal: ENO technical staff, musicians and singers take a break from the opera Fidelio

A bite at the opera

ments. More "natural" food is an established demand.

Nutritionists tend to play the science game with a straight bat, while still disputing the benefits of, among other things, fibre and cutting down on salt and sugar. But Anne Pawan, of Gardner Merchant's nutrition and dietetic services, insists that the uncertainties have been exaggerated.

She says: "There are still areas of doubt — but also conclusions which have not changed over the years. One is the need to cut down on fats." And the polyunsaturates (in some vegetable oils) are not the heroes they once were, the current preference being for monosaturates such as olive and fish and rapeseed oils. Here the caterers' healthy

possible our food is grilled or

roasted rather than fried." But eating is only partly about nourishment. Mostly it is about pleasure. Ms Pawan's advice to chefs is to "use salt lightly; but not so lightly that it will encourage people to sprinkle their food with salt themselves. The same with sugar; reduce it but the food must still be palatable."

Healthy eating is a balance between instinctive and acquired wisdom. A little of what you fancy then... and it is the gourmet, not the starkly scientific approach which is the order of the day. For example, Compass launched its first healthy eating programme as far back as 1983, but the recipes had been prepared by nutritionists, not food scandals, and a growing eating response is probably about the chefs, so they didn't work avoidance of deep frying and crème distrust of scientific pronounce- right. To quote Sutcliffe: "Where terribly well. Anne Turner, the fraîche instead of cream.

project manager of Eurest (part of the Compass Group), says: "Today we train the chefs in nutrition."

Virtually every contract caterer today has a healthy eating programme. The aim is to give customers what they want. The method is to give everyone an extensive choice — even fish and chips alongside non-fried fish dishes — and plenty of encouragement via point-of-sale publicity, colour codes, signage, and lots of information about the contents of dishes.

ngrained tastes and aversions don't disappear overnight, but they do change. Today brown rice has few takers in Britain — but a generation ago lager held the same position. Caterers say that part of the value of clearly identifying ingredients is to prepare consumers mentally for lower salt or sugar in dishes.

The trend, meanwhile, is to have core package of specifically healthy recipes, especially favouring Mediterranean cuisine because it is naturally low in fat and high in with good practice in ingredient selection and cooking methods,

Beware the consultants

Copying costs are falling — but they could be cut

even further

significant drop in the cost

of reprographics in the In first three months of the year is the biggest change in office costs recorded by the quarterly Times/Procord survey. The introduction of new and more competitive photocopier contracts, plus the growing popularity of all-purpose machines providing computer printouts, photocopies and fax facilities, are responsible for the reduction.

The change has brought annual office costs per employee down to £3,656; £25 less than in the final quarter of last year. But property management costs have re-

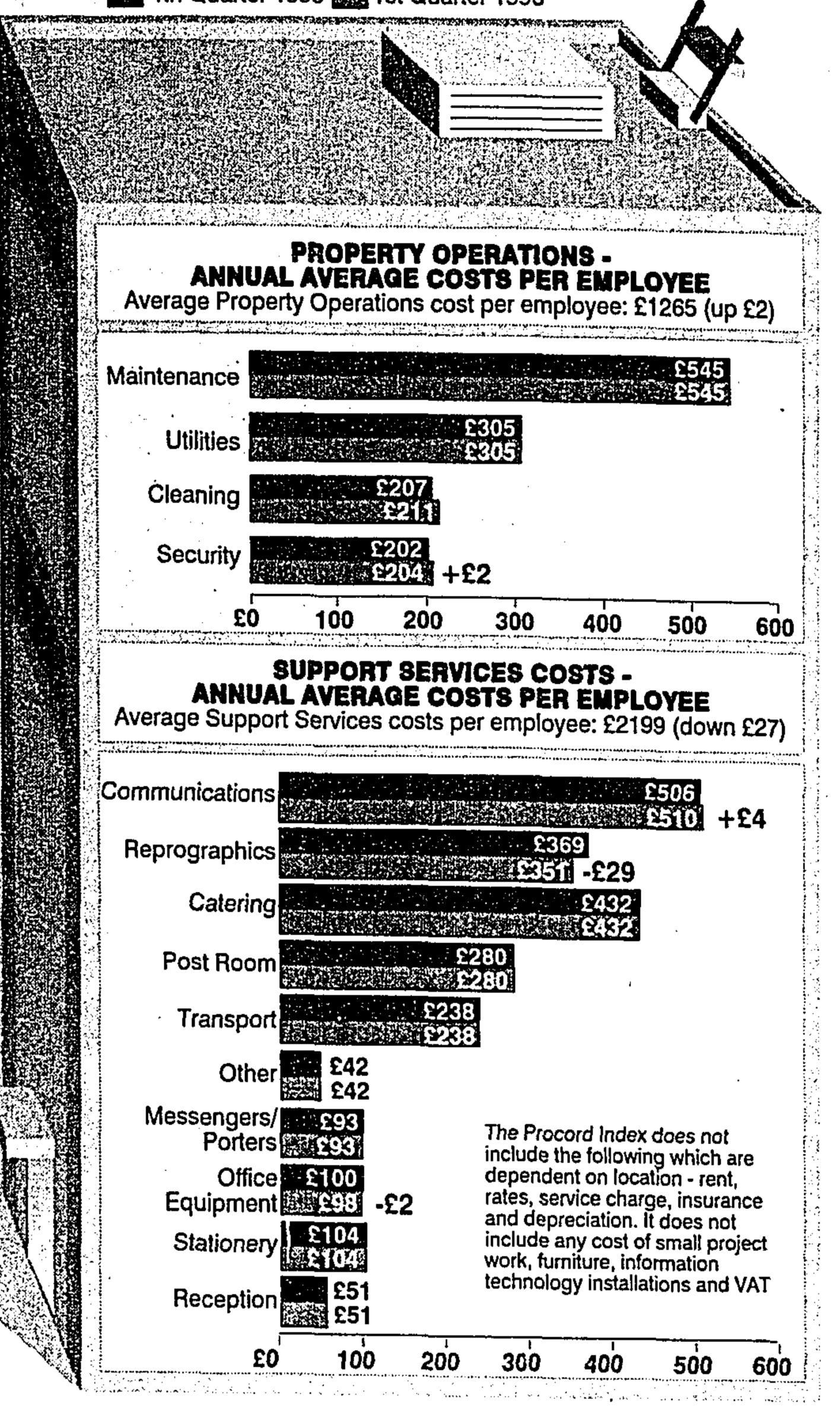
mained static. Barry Varcoe, Procord's international performance manager, says: "The boom time for the photocopier industry was the mid-1980s, when businesses were so eager to hire the latest equipment that they landed themselves with onerous and expensive contracts. Now that the contracts are expiring, companies can negotiate more favourable terms, especially as there are a number of

surplus suppliers in the market." The most dramatic example discovered during the survey of 250 office buildings around Britain was the replacement of a £14,000-a-year contract for the provision of two copiers by one for £6,500 which included new

machines. The reduction in costs could have been greater but for the activities of "stripers", according to the Business Equipment Users' Association. Carmel Rowley, the association's director, says that these unqualified photocopier sales people, who present themselves as "copier consultants", are preying on business worries about the industry's

They claim to know "the tricks of the trade" and offer to extricate customers from contracts. But often they end up pocketing duties, such as manning the

THE TIMES/PROCORD OFFICE COSTS INDEX 4th Quarter 1995 2 1st Quarter 1996



large fees — for minimal work. The drop in reprographic costs found in The Times/Procord survey was partly offset by an charges, which is attributed to the growing use of mobile telephones, faxes and other information technology devices.

Mr Varcoe also claims that cleaning and security costs could soon rise because of concerted pressure from companies supplying these services to raise their

He says: "Cleaning and security staff will come from the same supply pool within the catchment area of an office, so contractors will be under pressure themselves to match wages offered by their rivals. They will find it difficult to undercut those seeking more lucrative deals.

"The best way for a business to react to these pressures is to demand that staff carry out extra

reception desk, or that they obtain other skills, such as first aid qualifications."

Mr Varcoe advises companies increase in communication looking at their security costs to avoid the temptation of comparing their figures with other companies. "The provision of effective security is more complicated than that," he says. "The starting point must be a risk assessment, which needs to consider the specific risks of the industry in which the company is engaged, the location of premises and less obvious dangers, such as the possibility of flood or a road tanker that is carrying chemicals crashing into the site.

"A company can then work out the most effective way of doing the job. Employing lots of guards might not be the answer because just one or two men might be able to monitor effective intruder systems and raise the alarm."

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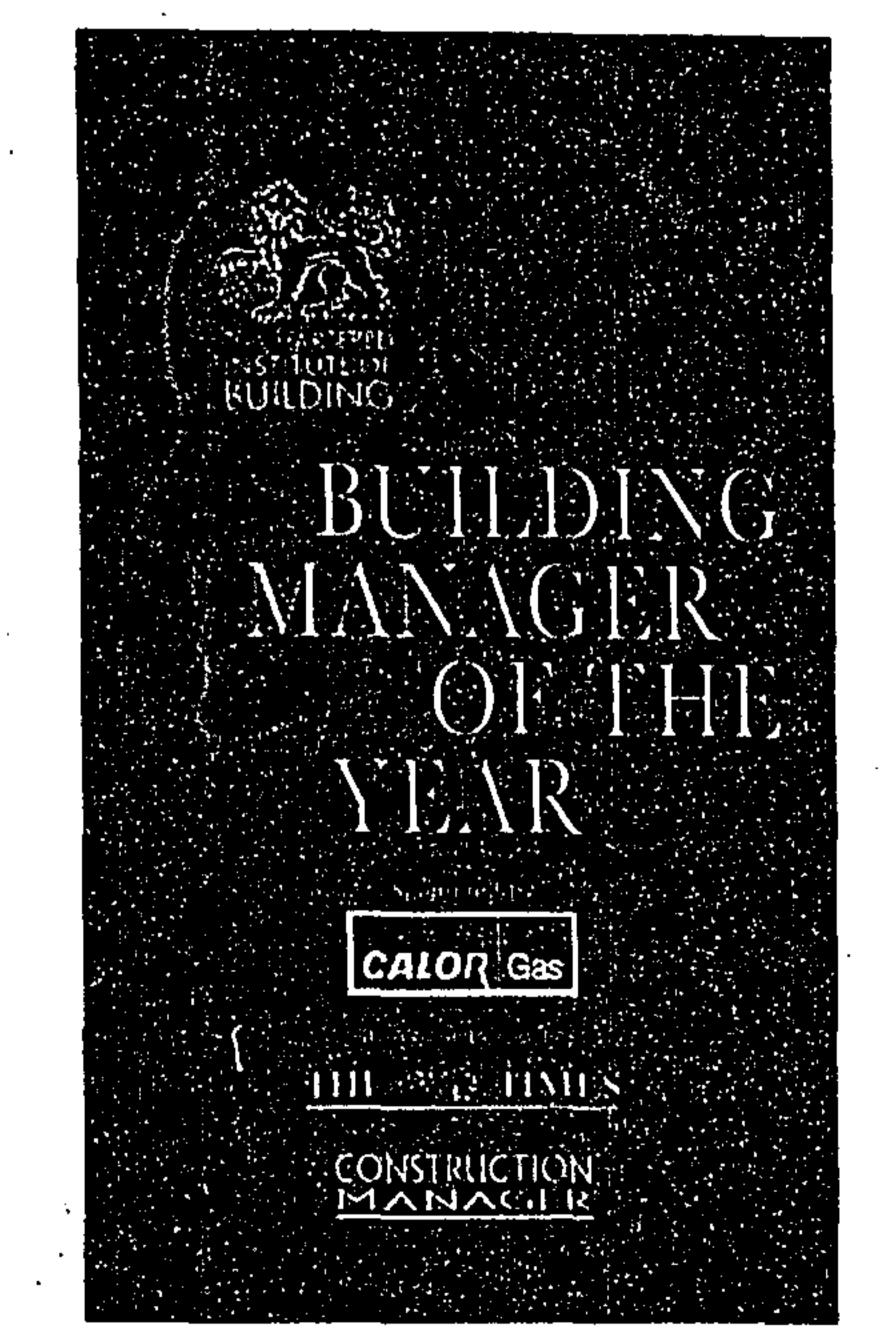
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