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Yellow is old hat as new colour code changes building site tradition

Yellow hard hats have been as common a feature on building sites as wolf whistles and low-slung trousers for decades.

The days of the traditional helmets are numbered, however, after the country's biggest construction companies agreed a new colour-coded scheme for headwear - which does not include yellow.

The guidelines for the construction industry have been adopted by Highways England, which will insist that all staff and contractors ditch their yellow hats during work on motorways and A-roads from the start of next year.

Black helmets will be reserved for supervisors, orange for slingers and signallers, and white for site managers and "competent operatives". Everyone else, including visitors, will wear blue. Network Rail, which has its own system, says workers must wear white helmets, or blue if they do not have a trackside safety certificate.

The rules have been introduced by BuildUK, which represents 27 of the construction industry's largest main contractors and 40 trade associations representing more than 11,500 specialist contractors. A spokeswoman said: "We want a very clear way for people to recognise key roles on any site where they are working. As a qualified operative, Bob the Builder should really be wearing a white hat." Yellow was traditionally the colour of hard hats worn by general labourers, once the backbone of the construction and road digging industry. It was a popular choice because it could be easily seen. Increasing mechanisation has meant the number of unskilled labourers has dwindled as they are replaced by skilled staff. Labourers will now switch to blue hats. The rules apply for all new construction sites.

Ultan Cowley, author of *The Men who Built Britain - A History of the Irish Navvy*, said the demise of the yellow hat would be mourned by the hundreds of thousands of men who crossed the Irish Sea in search of work.

"They used to work in suits, flat caps and wellies with the top turned down but when safety workwear became obligatory they picked up the yellow hard hats," he said.

Franz Kafka is reputed to have developed the first hard hat for builders while working at an insurance company in 1912, although some historians say it was simply a development of the hard bowler hat worn by gamekeepers when they were out riding.