

BOY SCOUTS AT ELTHAM 1937 – 39

A few recollections by Kenneth Smith

In September 1936 I went to Eltham as a boarder in Junior House, and a pupil in Form I. A year later came the move into Upper I. For those of us who were boarders, this was a sort of halfway house between the Junior and the Senior School. Academically, Senior School did not start until the 2nd Form when the school was invaded by a fresh intake of Day Boys, and the number of classes doubled from a single stream to a double stream. However, as a Boarder, the move to Upper I meant that one moved up into the Main School with the seniors. It also enabled one to join the school's 15th Royal Eltham Scout troop.

Scout meetings were held in the evenings, I think on a Saturday. In the winter these were indoor meetings in the gymn. In the Autumn term of 1937, those of us who were to be enrolled into the scout troop stood at one end of the gymn with our patrols, and the three Scoutmasters, Mr Turberville who was Group Scoutmaster with oversight of a number of local troops, Mr Moss who was Troop Scoutmaster, and Mr Higgins who was Assistant Scoutmaster, faced us from the other end. Each boy who was being enrolled was taken forward to the Scoutmasters by his Patrol Leader, made the Scout promise, shook hands with his left hand, and, if I remember rightly, was garlanded with his scout scarf and given his scout badge. Following the enrolments, there was a vigorous game of British Bulldogs.

The five patrols whose names I remember were Swifts with very dark blue, almost black, shoulder flashes, Curlews green flashes, Peewits green and white flashes, Woodpeckers green and mauve flashes, and Kingfishers with kingfisher blue flashes. In February 1938 I wrote to my parents, "Yesterday in Scouts I learnt a bit of first aid, eg. how to do a sling, a foot bandage and a hand bandage." A week later, "Yesterday we were doing semaphore on Scouts. I like it very much, and Wells told me that Mr Moss (the scout master) said that we might pass our 2nd class signalling next Saturday, so Frank and I are going to practice during the week." Frank Wells was in the Swifts patrol, whose patrol leader was Izzard. Most of the scout meetings during the winter months were devoted to preparing for, and then hopefully passing, the various tests that led to Second Class, followed by First Class and Proficiency badges; but each meeting included games of some kind during the second part of the evening.

In March I discovered that I had won a competition in the London Missionary Society magazine "News from Afar" for which the prize was a book worth one shilling, so with that prize I purchased "Scouting for Boys."

The Scout Hut was built in the Spinney, not far from the front gate, and all the scouts had some share in its construction. I think it must have been started in the summer of 1937. My recollection is that basically, it was a rectangular wooden framework to the sides of which planks were nailed horizontally, clinker-built. In the centre of one side was a brick fireplace. I remember in the spring of 1938, nailing on purlines to which the tiles, which I think were wooden, were fixed. Frank Wells remembers that a falling wooden purlin hit 'Bakey' James on the head without visible effect - 'Bakey' was a tough nut. The finished building had a pleasing, semi-rustic appearance. The Scout Hut was formally opened on the 19th of March 1938 by the Scout District Commissioner. The next day I wrote to my parents as follows, spelling and all! "The Scout Hut was opened yesterday. We all got into our Patrols (I am in the Kingfishers). The commishoner came allong and inspected us, then Patroll leader Edmunds gave the commishoner the key, the hut was opened, then after the commishoner had come out, we went up to the tuck shop, and had a slap up tea (other members of different troops were there), then I and some of our troop cleared up, and we went down to the gymn and had some games till seven, after that we went into the hut where the fire was burning, the lights went off and we had a good sing-song. (After tea there were some speeches). We won the Scout match, and so we got the shield, the score was one, nill."

The only event in 1939 of which I have any record or memory is of the scout camp held near Westerham during some very sunny weather in the Easter holidays. This was a good introduction to the practicalities of camping. These included putting into practice the ability to light a wood fire with not more than two matches, putting up a tent firmly enough to ensure that it did not blow down, and how to sleep on hard ground. No fancy sleeping bags in those days; each scout was issued with two blankets, and

had the use of a groundsheet against the damp. The secret lay in how one folded the blankets, and in the digging of a small depression known as a 'bum hole'. The blankets were each folded in half lengthways and inter-leaved in such a way that there was one fold on each side, and four thicknesses of blanket. It was important to have as much blanket under one as on top, so one inserted oneself into the middle with two thicknesses of blanket underneath and two on top. The foot end was firmly tied round with a bit of rope. A pile of neatly folded clothes provided a pillow, but one kept one's socks on one's feet! The so-called bum hole was really a depression in the ground in which one's hip bone fitted when lying on one's side. It was important to dig it in the right place before making one's bed!

I took two photographs at that camp. One is of the scouts lined up outside their ridge tents with kit laid out on groundsheets ready for inspection. The figures in this group, from the right, are J.C.Pike and R.G.Sneesby. Others on this photo included (I think) Garrick and the younger Marrack. The other photo is of an informal group standing round the camp fire. It is not easy to identify figures, but I believe this group includes Mr Turberville, Mr Moss, Garrick in the dark jacket, and the older Marrack, while seated in the foreground without his shirt on is George Gillanders.

There was an annual summer term meeting with the scouts from Caterham School. These were held alternately at Eltham and at Caterham. On our visit to Caterham one year, we all took part in a flag-raiding wide game. Each troop had a base marked by a flag, and the object of the game was to capture the opponent's flag. The school at Caterham is surrounded by wood covered hills which provided excellent cover for a game of this sort. In my enthusiasm to find a route by which I could approach the Caterham base unobserved, I managed to get myself trying to hide in a large bed of stinging nettles! Wearing short trousers, the incident left an indelible mark on my memory in addition to the red marks on my knees.