

ELTHAM SCOUTS AT TAUNTON 1939 – 1945

By Kenneth Smith

Throughout the time that the Eltham boarders were at Taunton, the Eltham scouts retained their title of the 15th Royal Eltham, but formed their own patrols as an integral part of the 26th Taunton troop, and were under the authority and guidance of the Taunton Scoutmaster, Mr E.L.King, a very capable and friendly man. The same applied to the scouts from King's School Rochester while they were at Taunton, and both Eltham and Rochester scouts wore their own scout scarves.

The Taunton scouts had a large, permanent scout hut in which each patrol had a space. They also had the use of a permanent campsite in woodland on the Quantock Hills, at Park End, about seven miles from Taunton.

Taunton School had a Cadet Corps in addition to the Boy Scouts Troop, and it was compulsory for boys to belong to one of these organisations. Early on in the war, the Cadet Corps divided into The Junior Training Corps (army), Sea Cadet Corps (navy) and Air Training Corps (R.A.F.). A number of Eltham boys joined these Corps, but the Scouts attracted particularly those who had been scouts at Eltham, and in the later years, the majority of junior Eltham boys moving into the senior school also joined the Scouts.

There were no lessons on Thursday afternoons, when the time was given over to Corps and Scout activities. A Field Day, when there were no lessons all day, was usually held each term, to provide opportunities for the Corps members to visit military installations, and for the Scouts to get out on all-day hikes or engage in wide games. From time to time there were patriotic parades through Taunton, often linked to fund raising – e.g. the Spitfire Fund. Military and Civil Defence units took part in these parades, as did the Cadet Corps and the Scouts.

The following information on the Eltham scouts at Taunton is taken from letters I wrote to my parents.

The earliest record I have is for Saturday 25th May 1940 when four patrols of scouts went for a weekend camp to the campsite on the Quantocks. Kit was carried in a 'trek cart', a two-wheeled vehicle with a single shaft by which it could be pulled and guided, and to help get it up the hills, a rope was attached to the hub of each wheel and pulled by several boys. Buncombe Hill, the steepest part of the route, led up through woodland at a gradient of 1:7, so one was glad for any excuse to pause on the way up. In mid-summer, wild strawberries could be found not far from the road, and a stream of cool water - but one had to beware of the leeches! The journey took about two and a half hours. On reaching the campsite, each patrol pitched the hike-tents in which they slept, and lit wood fires on which food was cooked. Nearby was a spring from which water for drinking and washing was obtainable.

Every summer while we were at Taunton, we camped regularly at this delightful site for both weekend camps during term time and a longer summer camp during the holidays. Bilberries, known locally as wortleberries (or worts) grew on the hills, and were a welcome addition to our diet.

In 1940, Roy Sneesby was a patrol leader, the Eltham boys being in the Woodpecker patrol. Other scouts mentioned in my letters were Butcher, Gillanders, Harmon, Black, Buck, Brown and Wyatt. In a letter of 19th November 1940, I wrote, "Last Sunday we had a scout meeting (just the Eltham boys) and Pike took us and taught us a few new knots, and also told us to keep up the Eltham standard of scouting, which is above that of Taunton scouting." In December 1940, I was made patrol leader of the Woodpeckers.

Our activities included meetings at which we worked on preparing for tests leading to second and first class as well as proficiency badges, outdoor activities such as tracking, including making plaster casts of interesting animal and bird tracks, and noting the difference in human tracks made in the snow between walking forwards and walking backwards. Then there were outings for wide games and hikes.

In 1941 I described the Eltham patrol as one of the youngest in the troop, and, including the dates of birth, listed the members of Woodpecker patrol as:

Patrol Leader: K.M.Smith* 22.11.1926

Second	A.C.Black*	16.7.1927
3	F.Harmon*	30.5.1926
4	J.M.B.Buck*	27.9.1927
5	C.P.Miller	3.4.1929
6	J.G.Brown	6.11.1927
7	E.H.Wyatt	29.9.1928
8	G.C.Band	2.2.1929

*Boys who had been scouts at Eltham.

At the beginning of the spring term, Black and I painted our patrol corner in the scout hut, and I wrote, "We have also got the Eltham troop flag with which we are going to adorn our patrol corner, as we are the Eltham Patrol, and, I think, the only scouts who remain of the 15th Royal Eltham (Eltham College) Troop." In the summer of 1941, Black, Harmon and I went on our first class hike. This involved hiking the 7 miles to the Park End campsite by a designated route, camping overnight, and keeping a record of all that happened. This was the last test to be completed before we were awarded first class badges.

In February 1942 there is a mention of J.C.Pike, who was a senior boy and must have held the position of Troop Leader. There is also mention of Black as "the other Eltham patrol leader", indicating that there was more than one patrol of Eltham scouts. This was either the Kingfisher or Peewit patrol. Other younger boys named as scouts were Watkins, Taylor and G.Buck. In the middle of the month there was one of the official parades that the scouts were required to attend from time to time, together with the school cadet corps. This was for the chairman of the school governors. It was my duty to carry the Eltham scout flag at that parade. On the field day this term, each scout patrol was given a list of objects they had to collect from particular places, but without being seen by the scoutmasters. One of the objects to be obtained was the plaster cast of a red deer slot, and the Eltham patrol was very pleased with the excellent cast they obtained. In March, a new scout troop was being started at the Congregational church in Taunton, and the scouts from Taunton School were invited to the service of dedication of their flag. Both the Taunton and the Eltham flags were paraded at the service. At the summer camp that year, diversions from the regular programme included catching glow worms at night and small fish called 'bullheads' by day.

In March 1943 we shared in a service of commemoration of the Chief Scout, Lord Baden-Powell, who had died in Kenya in 1941. The scouts field day this term involved a train trip to East Lyng and walk to Athelney, where there was a mound called Burrow Mump rising steeply from the flat floodplain of the River Tone and the site of a fortification held by King Alfred. Five patrols, including the Eltham scouts, successfully defended it against attempts by the rest of the troop to gain access to the summit. In May the scouts took part in a 'Wings for Victory' parade in the town, and two days later, as part of their contribution to the war effort, went out collecting a number of plants from which substances could be extracted for medicinal and other purposes. On this outing, they collected fox gloves and stinging nettles. In the previous autumn, they had collected two rucksacks full of conkers. Band, Howard, Wyatt, Watkins, G.Buck and I attended the summer camp that year, which, as usual, was held during a fortnight in August at the campsite on the Quantock Hills. Describing the camp, I wrote, "It rained every day except three; we learnt a few things about wet weather camping!" In spite of the weather, we made plaster casts of badger and red deer tracks, which contributed to earning a tracker's badge.

The number of younger boys joining the scouts was increasing, and it was decided to divide the scouts into Senior and Junior scouts. While the juniors retained the traditional bird or animal names for their patrols, the seniors chose the names of famous people. The senior patrol of Eltham boys chose the name Livingstone, with (remembering Livingstone House at Eltham) green as the colour of their patrol flashes. Points were awarded each week to patrols that had worked well, and the Livingstone patrol came top with most points at the end of 1943.

In January 1944 I wrote, "In scouts, our numbers have grown." Events early in the year included a wide game with the scouts from King's College, Taunton, and a parents' evening at which I was the M.C. The patrol camp at Whitsun was one of the best I had attended. An account of that camp is attached. In June, we took part in a cross country race against other scout troops. It was held on a very hot day. Each troop

entered four runners. Our entry included two Taunton boys, and two Eltham – Ian Sandilands and myself. Sandilands won, and I came second. The summer camp, like the Whitsun camp, was very enjoyable. It included a night hike, and a twenty-four hours initiative outing with very limited supplies. From the campsite we hiked westwards to the Brendon Hills, passing Raleigh's Cross on the way. Near the tower on Willett Hill we found an empty firewatch hut equipped with bunks, where we slept for a few hours. I wrote, "We went out for the day with only a tin of soup, a tin of milk, some flour and sugar, and a blanket each. There were eight of us, and you can imagine the difficulty of having only two small tins as cooking utensils! We ate in relays. For porridge we picked and husked some wheat, and having soaked it overnight, we boiled and ate it next morning – it was very nice. Some of our patrol caught some rabbits and we roasted them in our oven back in camp. On the last day at camp we baked a lovely chocolate cake, the first big one we have ever made and it was better than what you can get in the shops nowadays."

In February 1945, as part of our education in public services, the scouts had a most interesting tour of the Taunton gasworks. On our field day in March, thirteen of us Senior Scouts hiked the nine miles to Castle Neroche, and on the way back picked primroses for the lady who was in charge of catering at the school. This was partly by way of thanks, and partly an investment for the future – she was very generous with the stores she gave the scouts when we went camping. In May the scout troop received an invitation to take part in a signalling competition open to troops in Somerset. The competition would be held just after the end of the summer term, and members of the Livingstone patrol were chosen to take part and represent the Taunton School troop, so several scout meetings during the term were devoted to signalling practice. The interest in tracking generated at weekend camps on the Quantocks carried over to some of the weekly scout meetings, which included visits to the fields by the river Tone searching for, and identifying, tracks.

The outing on the June field day was an eight mile hike to Fitzhead. It was raining for much of the time so lunch was eaten round a small fire in a cow shed. Visits to three churches were a further opportunity to get out of the rain, but an historic the barn was locked.

The Somerset Scouts inter-troop signalling competition was held near Portishead on the north Somerset coast, just after the end of term. The signalling team to represent the Taunton troop was made up of four Eltham scouts, of whom I was one. I cannot remember who the other three were, but they just might have been Stephen Howard and the two Clarke twins. For the few days between the end of term and the day of the competition, the four of us in the signalling team, together with my young brother Stephen Smith (who had to wait to go home with me) camped on the school Lower Ground near the Scout hut. On the day appointed we travelled by train to Portishead where we were met by one of the organising scoutmasters and taken to the hills where the competition was to be held. Signalling was by flag. Two scouts from the team were posted on a vantage point, and the other two on another vantage point about a quarter of a mile away. Each pair was given a message to signal to their partner pair. While one of the pair signalled with his flag, his team mate read out the letters of the message to be signalled. Similarly, at the receiving end, one called out each letter as he saw it signalled, and his team mate wrote it down. Points were awarded for accuracy in sending and receiving, and for speed. Signalling could be by using either Morse code (in which case the signaller used a single flag, and the dots and dashes were represented by the distance from the vertical that the flag was moved) or by using Semaphore involving the use of two flags. All the other teams entering the competition opted to use Morse to signal their messages. We were the only team to choose Semaphore. We won the competition, and were rewarded with the trophy which, of course, stayed at Taunton. It was both a fitting way in which the Eltham scouts could thank the Taunton scouts for their hospitality during the war years, and was a mark of the continuing high standard of Eltham scouting.

An account of the Whitsun camp 1944

Although the Livingstone patrol was essentially an Eltham patrol, the second in the patrol at that time was a Taunton boy, D.S. Turner. As usual, food for the camp was obtained from the school kitchen, where the lady in charge of catering was very helpful. The following account of that camp is taken verbatim from a letter I wrote to my parents on our return to school from the campsite.

“We got out our menu and the list of stores we would need, and gave them in at the kitchen. Our menu:
Saturday Supper, stew, bread and marg. and coffee.
Sunday Breakfast, porridge, bacon, bread, marg. and coffee.
Dinner, sausages, rice boiled in water with tinned milk and sugar added.
Supper, rice with sardines, bread and marg. and coffee.
Monday Breakfast, porridge, baked beans, bread, marg. and coffee.
Dinner, soup, sausages, scrambled egg, coffee.

After school dinner on Saturday, we got our stores and kit, and packed them on the trek-cart. The Junior patrol-leaders were going up as well with their scoutmaster, but we were acting independently of them. When all the stuff was packed, we went off with the old trek-cart with iron rimmed wheels, and the Juniors started a little after us. Here I think I had better tell you a bit about my patrol. Turner D.S. is my second. He is the only Taunton boy in this patrol. His father owns some metal works at Walsall, near Birmingham. Band G.C. is third. He is ever so funny, and kept me in fits of laughter the whole camp. Howard S.J. is fourth. He was my second in the Woodpeckers, and I should say that he is the strongest fellow in our patrol. He was born and bred in Rhodesia; his parents have got something to do with the government. He has got quite a personality, and loves discussing things like Einstein's theory of relativity, and the differences between Christianity and Mohammedanism. He is an interesting fellow. Wyatt E.H. comes next. He is a Baptist missionary's son from north China. He is a 'stout fellow' in more ways than one. Six is Ian Sandilands, son of an L.M.S. missionary in Africa. He is about the same age and height as Howard, but thinner, and a jolly good runner. Number eight is a ginger-headed fellow called David Watkins, who is nearly a year younger than Sandilands. His father is on the railway as an engineer, I think, and a Baptist. The Clarke twins are the last two. They joined us last term and are about a month younger than Watkins and are not missionary sons. I know very little about them, except that they live at Oxford, and are in the 4th Form here. However, only seven of us started off together because Band had to play in a match and joined us later, as did Turner who had some work to do.

To continue with the original story. Having got the trek-cart piled up, off we went. When we had got to Kingston (the only village we pass, about 3 miles from Taunton) a rucksack fell off the front of the cart, and before we could stop it, the cart had gone over the rucksack and turned over on its side. Some of our porridge oats were spilt, and the T.C.P. bottle in the first-aid kit was smashed. We had just got it straight when Miss Kidner, leader of the Cubs in this District came along on her bike. She stopped and talked to us for a minute or two, and then, just as she was going off, she said, “This is the jolliest thing I have seen today.” Crumbs, we didn't think it jolly! 70 F in the shade, pulling a rickety old trek-cart with wheels liable to break at any moment, and then the wretched thing tipped over!! And she said it was jolly!!! Three-quarters of the way to the campsite we have to go up a hill which is half-a-mile long, and which has a gradient of less than 1 in 7. Two people pulled each of the ropes attached to the wheel hubs, two were on the shaft, and one (usually Sandilands) walked along at the side pushing the cart straight to stop the wheels buckling under!

By the time we got to the bottom of this hill, Buncombe, we were pretty tired, and had a rest. The Juniors caught us up and their scoutmaster asked us whether we could get up O.K. I said, No, not as we were, but that if we left some of our stuff at the bottom, and came back for it, we could manage. But this wasn't a good idea, because there were some gypsies about 100 yards away, and no one wanted to stay and look after it, and if we left two, five would not be enough to get the cart to the top of the hill. At that moment, a British army convoy with guns came through, and at the end a Yank lorry. The scoutmaster stopped the Yanks and asked them if they could take some of our stuff up to the top. They said yes, so we gave them some and off they went, and off we went. About three-quarters of the way up we met one of the British lorries with its gun. Another lorry was coming down the hill, and one of the Tommies seemed rather keen

on getting us past, so he helped us up. We got to the campsite and got our tents up, and had supper. We were in no hurry, and by the time we had washed up and washed ourselves, it was about half-past ten. We decided that as it was so warm, we would sleep out in the open, under the trees.

On Sunday morning we were all awake by six, and Sandilands and Howard lit the fire. I wanted to see whether there were any mushrooms on Gibb Hill, so a couple of us went to see. We saw the sun rise, but did not find any mushrooms, so we tried unsuccessfully to catch a rabbit instead. When we got back, breakfast was just about ready, because the porridge had been cooked the night before, and only had to be warmed up. Breakfast was over by 7.30, and by 9.0 we had washed up, folded and put away our kit, and were ready for a game of puddocks on the Beacon. The scoutmaster wanted me to help with the inspection of the Juniors and to take prayers that morning. It was 11 am before I joined the others, who were sitting and chatting in the shade of the Seven Sisters – a clump of trees on the Beacon. The temperature was 72 F in the shade, the hottest day of the year so we did not feel very energetic. Just after mid-day we wandered back to the campsite for dinner. In the afternoon, several of us went into the woods to find the badgers paths, and places where they rubbed against and smoothed rocks and trees. We also looked for, but did not find, evidence of the fox we had heard the previous night.

That evening, the Juniors were going to have a night game at 11 p.m., so they came along to us at about 10.30 and we all had a campfire sing-song, and then prayers, and the Juniors went off for their game. During the day, we had built a biscuit-tin oven and added an old metal chimney pipe we had found lying around. It had a conical lid to it, and as we had a fire under the oven, it meant that we could keep it alight after blackout time, so the scoutmaster asked us to keep some coffee hot for the Juniors when they got back from their game. So we put the billy in the oven and sat round singing what we could of the hymns we knew. The Juniors got back about 12.30, had their coffee and went off to bed. Some of us decided on a night walk. We set off to go to the Muchcare Plantation about half a mile from the camp, but we just walked on until we had walked nearly two miles and reached the trigonometrical point on Wills Neck, the highest point on the Quantocks. There we sat down and watched a lot of flashes. By the time we got back it was 2.30 am. As we came into the campsite, we saw a glow-worm, so I picked it up and put it into a glove which I had in my mac pocket, and tied the top to stop it getting out. Sandilands and Wyatt who had not been on the walk were talking to each other, so I told them to talk more quietly, but Band said it was O.K. because he had been over to the Scoutmaster's tent and heard him snoring! I was then informed that the air-raid warning had gone. We must have been on Wills Neck when it went, but not heard it. We all went to bed and slept soundly.

We were up at 7.0, and breakfast was ready by 7.30 (we had again cooked the porridge the night before). We washed up, and had finished washing ourselves by 9.45. Then we went up on to the Beacon again, but as I had lost my tennis ball the night before, we couldn't play puddocks, so we sat down under the Seven Sisters talking and (using a magnifying glass to concentrate the sun's rays), burning our names on Band's note book. We came back for our last dinner, which was very nice. We took our time washing up, changing, and loading the trek cart. We set off at about 3.15, and were back at school by 5.30, which is good going.

I think that the most striking thing about this camp was the spirit of it. Everybody thought ahead, and dirty jobs were done cheerfully and without grumbling. When it came to washing up, one or two people started on it without being asked. The fetching of water was shared out equally as well, and collecting wood was quite good fun; we usually hauled some logs along when we came back from washing, even though we knew there was enough there for the next meal. Meals were quickly cooked, because things that needed boiling such as rice and porridge were cooked when we had some spare time. I think part of the success was in the fact that we did more or less what we liked – we had no fixed programme. For a weekend camp, I think that is best – certainly it was for this one at any rate, because the weather was so warm. And I reckon that I have got the pick of the Senior Troop, and we all get on very well.”