

## Scouting memories

I joined the cubs when I moved to Liverpool in 1951. My mum thought it would be a good way for me to meet friends, and she was right. The pack met in a hut round the back of St Edmunds Church in Waterloo. Outside was a patch of open ground, ideal for camp fires and games. On the other side was the YMCA where shadowy figures came and went and did things beyond our comprehension, like drinking and playing snooker.

Akela and Balew looked like a modern Richard and Judy. I fell in love with both of them - as doubtless had many cubs before me - and remember feeling very miffed when, eventually, they got married. But I got over it, turning out with the rest of the pack in a fine church guard-of-honour. And soon after, I joined the scouts, who met in the same hut on a different day.

I don't remember much about those early years in the scouts, apart from tying innumerable knots, marching in Sunday church parade once a month, and going off to camp. Our troop went to two places. One was in Cumbria, on the shores of Lake Coniston, with the Coniston Old Man glowering down at us through the rain. The other was in the grounds of the Montfort Fathers' residence in Church Stretton, on the not much drier lower slopes of the Long Mynd.

I did my first-class badge trek over the Long Mynd. My buddy and I pitched our tent on one of the hills, near a stream, and were woken up in the middle of the night when we realized our tent was moving towards the stream. A heavy downpour had turned the hillside into a waterfall. Never was a badge more wetly earned.

I have mixed memories of camps. The whole troop would pack all its tent and cooking equipment into the back of a huge ex-army lorry. Our rucksacks would go on top, and we would all pile in on top of that. It was a bumpy and fumey ride, and I would wait for the moment I knew would come. 'Stop the van', went the shout, 'Crystal wants to be sick!'

But the good memories are there too, especially the fry-ups and the games and the exploring and more fry-ups and the companionship and the camp-fire songs - and above all the growing sense of independence. I can distinctly recall being aware that I was being knocked into shape, being made to take responsibility for my actions, to stand on my own two feet. Two feet literally, sometimes. I remember being put on fatigues for talking after lights out. Carrying water from a standpipe up a steep hill, a heavy bucket in each hand, I forget how many times, but it seemed like my arms and legs would fall off. That is where I learned a Great Truth - that wet socks held carelessly over a camp fire burn just as quickly as dry ones.

Above all, there is the memory of the awesome sweeping grandeur of the Lake District, with its lakes so much larger than those I had been used to in Wales. Having learned to row on Newry Beach in Holyhead, I turned out to be an asset when the troop hired boats for a trip on Windermere. Most of the others had never been in a rowboat before. I don't think there was a badge for rowing, unfortunately.

I would fall asleep with the grey shape of the Old Man of Coniston just visible from where I slept in the tent. And every time I return to the Lake District now, that vision comes back to me. It's funny. I don't think I could name even one of my fellow-scouts from those camps now. But I remember the landscapes as if it were yesterday.