**Wolf Cubs and Boy Scouts 1953-1960**

**By Dave Taylor-Jones**

When I was a little kid, the best night of the week was Friday, then my brother Steve and I went to Wolf Cubs in Oxhey, the next stop from Carpenders Park on the Bakerloo line going towards Watford. The Wolf Cubs in the UK are for boys from the age of 8 to 10 years old. After this period you graduate to the Boy Scouts. Our Cub and Scout groups were called the 23rd South West Herts, and were associated and supported by the Oxhey Methodist Church. This church is a Victorian sandstone brick building of rather massive proportions that was built in 1905. It occupies the corner of King Edward’s Road with Chalk Hill, the road that leads up to Bushey. I had attended this church’s Sunday School from when I was five years old until I was nearly eight, sitting in little chairs in what was originally called the Galahad Room within the Church’s facilities, learning about the good works of Jesus. Our stepfather used to work nights at the Sun Printers in Watford and I think my parents needed to get rid of my brother and me on Sunday afternoons, so that they could have some time for a nap in bed after Sunday lunch. We duly collected the nice books that the Church presented us with each year for achieving 100% attendance. I still remember my best one, ‘The Ghostly Galleon’, but who was the author?

But all this early religion stopped once my Mum realised that Steve and I were playing “hookey” and instead of going to Sunday School, we were in Oxhey Park fishing for tiddlers with a jam jar. Perhaps that is why she enrolled us in the Cubs instead, where we could learn something more practical, as far as we were concerned.

Steve started going to Cubs before me, because I remember joining him on my 8th birthday in February and not being allowed to wear the uniform until I had passed my tenderfoot tests. This took about two weeks and then my Mum bought me the green jersey, green cap and yellow neckerchief. Yellow is the colour for the 23rd SW Herts Scout troop. The neckerchief was worn with the essential “woggle”, a small woven leather ring-like contraption that held the scarf tight around your neck. I felt great in the uniform and my Mum sewed on the badge for the Pack’s notation. Once a month, the Cubs would join the Scouts for Church Parade on Sunday morning. We lined up in King Edward’s Road behind the Scout group and then with our 23rd SW Herts flag flying in the breeze, we would follow the Scout flag bearer and march into the Church, swelling the congregation with our numbers. We Cubs felt proud in our uniforms, and I have to say that our green peaked caps with their yellow braiding were actually quite snazzy. The khaki short trousers however, could not mask our knobbly little knees.

The Cub Pack leaders organised all sorts of games for kids from 8 – 10, as a pre-training for the Boy Scouts. There was much competitive play and also some sensible training, mixed in with understanding discipline and getting a sense of community living. At times the play was a bit rough, which I liked, and both Steve and I often came out on top – so we got some credibility from our Cub peers.

The Cub’s meetings were from 7.00 pm to 8.30 pm on Friday evenings. The Cub Pack was led by a kind man whom we all called Akela, who was assisted by a young man called Baloo. Both these names are used in Cub language, inspired by the books of Rudyard Kipling. The evening would commence by all the Cubs, organised into teams of six boys, known as ‘Sixes’, forming a horseshoe shape around Akela and Baloo. This was known as the ‘Grand Howl’ and Akela would explain what we would be doing that evening, and any other information that needed communicating. Then the ‘Senior Sixer’, the highest ranked Cub, would hold a four foot high pole topped by a remarkably good, plaster effigy of a wolf’s head, and close the Howl by shouting, “Well, DYB DYB DYB,’ and all the pack would respond with, “Well, DOB DOB DOB”. This was a call to “Do Your Best” and the response was “Do Our Best”. Now I find it a bit cryptic, but at the time we accepted it all as just part of being a Cub.

Each of the Cub’s Sixes was led by a boy of about ten years old who was called a ‘sixer’ and his assistant in the six was called his ‘second’. Our sixes were named after a colour – I was in Blue. The evening was normally divided into different periods. We would be instructed how to progress through the Cub Programme by perfecting small tasks that perhaps not all boys would learn at home, like learning how to make a telephone call from a public call box. Do you remember? You lifted the receiver, put in your money and dialled the number. Then you waited until the call was connected and if it was and someone answered you pressed button A, to connect to the party. If there was no answer or you had dialled a wrong number, or you just wanted to stop the call, you hung up and pressed button B, to return your money. Of course after that, every time we saw a red telephone box, you opened the door and pressed button B, to see if someone had forgotten to make this operation, in the hope that you might get someone else’s money back. Back to the Cub tasks - you also learned how to tie basic knots, how to identify common trees, bushes and animals.

We also tried to do things at home to gain badges for specified activities, like Collecting. I brought in my stamp album and this was reviewed by Baloo. He asked me questions about it. After this he judged whether I was a serious enough collector and awarded me my Collector’s badge, which depicted a magnifying glass on a blue background. This was my first badge and it was presented to me in front of the pack at a Grand Howl. My Mum sewed the triangular badge onto the top of my right sleeve, just down from the shoulder. When you had gained six badges you won a special activity award badge, and were presented with a 5-inch sheath knife. Nowadays, I am sure that this award could not be made, as it is quite rightly considered as too dangerous for such young children to own a lethal weapon. However, sixty years ago we were in a different time and Cubs were trusted not to abuse this honour. We were very proud of our sheath knives and they served us well during our service in the Boy Scouts too. Mine was bone-handled and had a companion small sheath knife attached on the front of the big sheath. I wonder what happened to it ? They were prize possessions when both Steve and I were young. I expect my mother nursed a fear of them all the time and quietly disposed of them when we left home!

Then the best part of the evening took place – games. We had to compete at games like ‘Hopping Sailors’, where one boy was placed in the middle of the hall and the rest had to hop past him. You could only hop on one leg, with the boy in the middle folding his arms across his chest and trying to bump you over by hopping and bumping into you. When someone was felled, he joined the boy in the middle and you both tried to topple more boys, until there was only one left for everyone to get.

I remember one evening early when Akela threw a rope over one of the ceiling beams that was about 5 metres above the ground. He then fastened the free end and let the rope hang down. Boys were then invited to try and climb the rope. Of course at 8 -10 years old not many boys have very strong arm muscles, they just haven’t developed by this age, so not many boys could do it. The rest of the Pack did not know how much time Steve and I spent climbing trees in the spinney behind our house, so when I was offered my turn, I shot straight up the rope and was about to climb onto the beam, when a very surprised Akela called me to come down immediately. Still I got a round of applause from the Pack.

Baloo was a very kind young guy about sixteen years old, whose real name was Dave Garret. When Steve went on to join the Scout troop, I would walk via Dave’s house in Villier’s Road, Oxhey and collect him to go on to the Cub’s meeting. These houses are little terraced Victorian properties and I can remember his Mum letting me stand by their blazing coke fire in the lounge, waiting for him to be ready. Then Dave and I would go to the Cub’s evening together - such a kind gesture from an older guy.

The Community Centre, where the Cub activities took place, had bare boards on the floor and frosted glass windows set into corrugated sheet-metal clad walls. The exterior walls were painted a dark green colour and in fact the entrance part of this structure was the original church from the nineteenth century, which had been used before the Methodist Church was built. At this time it was called the ‘Tin Tabernacle’ and had been erected in Villiers Road Oxhey, and was then transplanted onto land adjacent to the newly-built Church. Here it was later extended and used as a Sunday School and Church Community Centre.

The Wolf Cub evenings would end with a closing Grand Howl and we would gather our coats and then head for the train station and home via the Villiers Road chip shop. Here we had three-penny servings of chips – wonderful hot fried potato chips laced with vinegar and sprinkled with salt. If by some incredible fortune you had more money, then this delight could be topped off with a bottle of Tizer.

There were several other boys from Carpenders Park who were also in the Cubs, like Ken and Derek Clarke. We took the train home together, walking up the dark streets that at that time were lined with woods near the station. Sometimes we dared to go via the “short cut”, through a spinney between the station exit and our road, St. George’s Drive. This way was quite frightening because of course it was pitch black in the woods and just as we were nearly out of the dark trees someone would shout, “Here comes the bogey man!” and we would all race across the open field to the safety of the lights of St George’s Drive.

Akela and Baloo decided just after I joined the Cubs to take the Pack on a weekend one-night camp to Bovingdon, a country area about eight miles away. All went well initially, with us Cubs helping to put up the tents and lay out our ground sheets. You have to remember this was about 1953, so there were no sleeping bags, just grey blankets folded into beds that were held together with big blanket pins. Unfortunately the weather quickly deteriorated into a big summer rain storm and we were completely washed out. All the cubs were transferred with their soggy blankets to the farmer’s barn where we spent the night tucked up in the hay. As the rain did not stop on the Sunday we remained in the barns and our parents were called by telephone to come and collect us early. What a shame, but it did not put me off camping.

St. George is the patron saint of the scout movement and every year, on the closest Sunday to St. George’s Day, 23rd April, the Cubs and Scouts of the 23rd SW Herts would march from the Church in Oxhey up the High Street of Watford to the Town Hall. Here we would join other troops in celebrating the event. One year I was asked to be the flag bearer for the Cubs and after the march from Oxhey to Watford I was positioned in Watford Town Hall, along with about twenty other flag bearers, behind all the dignitaries leading the celebration. The flags were propped against the wall behind us. Unfortunately this particular year it was unseasonably hot, and the big Town Hall was completely packed out. I lasted nearly to the end of the ceremony, but then, feeling the effects of the heat and lack of air, I fainted, knocking over my flag, which in turn knocked over several others. I was carried outside and woke up outside breathing in smelling salts!

When I became a Boy Scout I had to change my uniform to beige short trousers, beige short-sleeved shirt, yellow neckerchief with that woggle and a green beret. In the Scout Troop we were organised into ‘Patrols’ which were named after birds. There were the Swifts, the Curlews, the Kestrels and the Owls. Steve became Patrol Leader of the Curlews, so when I joined the Scouts I was placed in his Patrol, where eventually I would become his Second. The Troop was led by Panther, a big strong man of about 28 years, who’s real name was Harry Hart. It took some authority to control 24 young boys who were between the ages of 11 to 16, but Harry was well up to the job. He was assisted by two younger men, Fleet and Doc. Fleet was about 21 years old and very dedicated to helping Panther. Doc was not a Doctor, but he did have round glasses and was studying to go to University. The Scout Hut was a dedicated building just next to the Community Centre, so all the Scout paraphernalia could be permanently left in there, unlike the Cubs who had to clear everything away into cupboards at the end of the evening, in order to let the building be used for Jumble Sales, Amateur Dramatics, Dancing Classes etc.

The Scout Hut was a rather rude affair, being constructed of light angle steel profiles and clad with asbestos. I am sure it disappeared sometime in the early sixties, when it became evident that asbestos was such a hazard to people’s health. But in the fifties we were all innocent of such things and I remember it with affection. It was not centrally heated like the Community Centre but had a couple of gas fires set into the walls, which were lit on cold, wet, winter evenings. Each Patrol was given a corner of the Hut to be their area, and Panther and his lads would occupy a centre part of the Church side wall – next to one of the fires.

Scouts progression in the fifties was arranged into three classes: Tenderfoot stage, Second Class and then First Class. Each stage was reached by completing defined tests like map reading, use and understanding of a compass, the use and selection different knots, etc. These phases were quite detailed, with about twenty subjects to learn and show proficiency in. The Tenderfoot stage took about 4 weeks. However, to get your Second Class certificate it took about two years, so you were about thirteen years old when you gained it. The First Class certificate took about the same period, so by the time you were fifteen years old you could be a First Class Boy Scout. Each stage required you to spend a minimum number of nights under canvas (i.e. camping) and for the First Class you had to make a 2-day hike, accompanied by just one other scout, and then present your experience written up into a log. I accompanied a scout who was taking his First Class Hike in the White Horse Hills of Wiltshire. We were given instructions in the form of map coordinates to follow, making the 15-mile hike between these references, and had to note all we saw to prove we had been there. We knew that we had followed the hike correctly, because we ended up with the last map reference, standing on the eye of the White Horse! We had a glorious two days tramping about the lovely Wiltshire countryside, putting up our tent on the hills and cooking sausages. My own First Class Hike was made when I was Patrol Leader of the Curlews, accompanied by Alan ‘Muscles’ Cross, Patrol Leader of the Owls and was closer to home starting in Redbourne Village and ending up in Whippendale Woods and finally Cassiobury Park in Watford.

The 23rd SW Herts went on a summer camp in the school holidays to the Isle of Wight, to an area near Blackgang Chine, about six miles from Ventnor. The beaches were surrounded by steep ravine-like cliffs of crumbling clay that were eroding fast and were a bit dangerous. This area is near the southern tip of the Isle of Wight and is not a great bathing place – in fact it has a history of smuggling from the past centuries. We were allowed to use a farmer’s field in which to pitch our tents, about two miles back from the Chine. Each patrol had it own tent and we were inspected every day after breakfast. Patrols drew their rations from the Stores and were responsible for cooking their own food, washing up after meals and keeping their tent and area clean. There were enormous differences in levels, depending on the diligence of the Patrol Leaders. The Curlews were led by Steve and tried to be the best patrol. Our main competition was the Swifts, led by Peter Hardwick and his brother Martin, who was his second. The Owls tried a bit but actually had rather low standards, and the Kestrels, to which my friend Colin Heathcote belonged, just seemed to muck about all the time.

Sometimes what were called ‘Wide Games” were organised by Panther and these required the Troop to be divided into two groups who had to defend a designated area against the other half. You were given a ‘life’, which was a strand of coloured wool which was tied around your left arm. If the opposing team managed to rip off your ‘life’ you were then ‘dead’ and this disqualified you from continuing the game. If, however, you managed to reach a special tree without losing your life you won. These wide games were often played in the dusk of evening to make them more exciting. They required quite a lot of guile and good hearing - I loved them.

We had some success when we put our camping skills to the test in the Delecta Camping Competition held at Phasel’s Wood near Kings Langley. This was an annual weekend competition which attracted competition from about twenty different scout troops in the area and into which our scout troop doggedly entered every year. The first time Steve and I took part in the competition it poured with rain all weekend, including the Camp Fire sing-along on the Saturday night, which was extremely soggy. You had to cook on open fires, for which you collected wood from the surrounding country areas, so on this wet weekend this caused no end of problems, as most wood that we found was soaking wet. However, both Steve and I were amazed to find, that the team next to us, always had dry wood. We observed them closely and found that they had a secret store which they must have collected the week before the competition and hidden. They went on to win the competition – the cheating rats. So the next year we trained religiously with our squad and got them used to making the all the necessary gadgets out of branches of wood (like washing up racks, mug trees, etc.), which won you points. We also had our Mum make us a beef stew, which we took in preserving jars for Sunday lunch (the Scouts motto is “Be Prepared” and we were this time). Steve was the patrol Leader, I was the Second and the other scouts were drawn from other patrols - Martin Hardwick, John Newman, Martin Malvisi and Ian Ashcroft.

When the big weekend came there was no van available to deliver all our camping materials to Phasels Wood, so we used the 23rd’s track-cart. This was a heavy wooden two-wheeled cart, which the six-boy team pulled from Oxhey to Kings Langley, a distance of about five miles. The weekend weather was varied, but our first job was to collect loads of dry wood and stow it under a tarpaulin. We pitched the tent in record time and had everything ready for inspection by the invigilators. On the Sunday, when it rained, Steve had us make an oven out of a biscuit tin, which was positioned at one end of the fireplace. He caked the tine with clay and completed it with a chimney at the back. The pre-cooked beef stew was placed in the oven and heated up. When the judges came round to inspect the meal (as they did for every team) they naturally assumed that the stew had been cooked in the oven and found it delicious – we got top marks! The Delecta Shield presentation was always made with the last team being read out first – a count-down in reverse - and we waited anxiously for our position. Well, we came first and won the competition (the first time in the 23rd S.W. Herts history), and received the enormous shield. Unfortunately there was no-one present from our troop to witness this proud event, nevertheless we hauled everything triumphantly back to Oxhey in the track cart.

Every year, around Easter, Bob-a-Job week took place. Cubs and Scouts were required to raise money by visiting their neighbours’ houses and doing a job for them, for which they were paid a Bob, i.e. one shilling. A shilling (12 pennies) was exactly one twentieth of a pound which doesn’t sound like much nowadays, but if we consider that in today’s money, accounting for inflation, it would be about 2.50 pounds. Jobs were cutting lawns, weeding flower-beds, running errands and things like that. Afterwards you had to give the person a sticker to put in their window, which was a yellow colour with a red tick which showed that that house had been ‘done’. You had a card to list the jobs and the money received and you had to take it all completed back to the Pack or Troop.

The Scouts also raised money for the church by making Jumble Sales. This required the Scouts to spend evenings in the week and on Saturday morning, touring the neighbourhood of Oxhey to collect unwanted stuff from people’s houses. This stuff could be furniture, clothes, shoes, books or anything really that people did not want anymore. We used the track-cart to make the collection, and then brought it all back and stored it temporarily in the Scout Hut. On the following Saturday afternoon a Jumble Sale took place in the Community Centre and all the items were arranged on different stalls. Older scouts were asked to man the stalls and take the money. I normally was on the shoe stall. The organisation of the stalls was made on Saturday morning and then at 3 o’clock in the afternoon the doors to the Community Centre were opened. I was always amazed at the throng of people who made a mad rush to be first in. It was pandemonium for the first hour with people grabbing shoes trying them on, not giving them back if they did not fit, and generally arguing over the purchases. The older women were the worst. There was a cake stand, a jam and chutney stand and a tea stand. After about 4.30 things calmed down a bit and you could go and get a tea and a slice of cake. Then all the things that had not been sold, and were disposable, were put on a bonfire and burnt up in an area between the Scout Hut and the Community Centre. Panther let us select things that had not been sold and take them home, if we wanted to. I remember once taking about eight Leslie Charteris “The Saint” paper-back books home to read.

Steve left the Scout troop when he was sixteen years old. I think the lure of teenage life, girls of course, starting an apprenticeship in London, and starting Technical College were all so far from the Oxhey Scout life, that he just couldn’t maintain the continuation. Later I gained my First Class badge and, like Steve, I needed a change too. Harry Hart was disappointed with us both as he had rather counted on us becoming future Scouting assistants. I tried to explain to him that I had fallen out with religion and found it difficult to go to church and to make the pretence of believing in God. Scouts have very simple creeds that Baden Powell invented when he formed the Scout Movement in 1910. During the nineteen-fifties a promise that was repeated at every Cub or Scout Meeting was:

‘I promise to do my best,

To do my duty to God and the Queen.

To keep to rules of the Wolf Cub Pack/Boy Scout Troop

And to do a good turn to somebody every day.’

My problem, I explained to Harry, was the God bit and attending Oxhey Church to say prayers and sing hymns. I didn’t believe in it. He said not to worry – it didn’t matter. But it did to me, so I left.

However, I was always grateful to young men like Harry Hart and Dave Garrett. They quite selflessly gave so much of their spare time to instil in young boys the Scout’s programme of informal education, with its emphasis on practical outdoor activities, including camping, woodcraft, hiking, and sports. Also the goal of Scouting is "to contribute to the development of young people in achieving their full physical, intellectual, social and spiritual potentials as individuals, as responsible citizens and as members of their local, national and international communities.” This is laudable and so very much better than hanging around on street corners, and having no real chance to find someone who you could look up to. I think personal inspiration is very important when you are young. The Scout Movement provides this through pragmatic example by very well-intentioned people.

Now the Scout Movement has gone through all sorts of changes to keep pace with the social changes that occur as time roles by, and in the UK, Christian religious belief is no longer necessary in order to be a Scout. Cubs are now called Cub Scouts, but I hope that the emphasis from Baden Powell on woodcraft, camping and hiking is still maintained because who knows when you just might get lost somewhere and need to ‘Be Prepared’.

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