

Eric Sprigg

12th Portobello (RHS) Memories

Although my Scouting connections have turned out to be probably the most important elements of my life, I'm not sure that I can recall many points which could be of general interest. However, I will try. Here are my thoughts, in no particular order.

Personal

Although it seems strange now, I was by no means an enthusiastic Scout in my early years. Indeed, my attendance was such that Derek Addison had me called up before the PL's Court of Honour, probably when I was about 14 years old, and I was threatened with being thrown out of the Troop. That made me change my ways and I became intensely involved with the activities.

I had come up from the Cubs, where I was Sixer of the Brown Six (if I remember correctly) and eventually went on to be PL of the Seagull patrol in the Scouts.

Camps

My first camp was at Eddleston (photo on right). That was in 1958 when I was already 16, a late starter. That camp is remembered for being the first camp appearance of Boris. No, not Johnson. Boris was a character who had first appeared in a Troop meeting wide game, with instructions for the game advertised as a 1066 Boris car in the Evening News. (I must admit that my memory is rather confused as to whether it was Boris or Horace, though I am tending now to believe that the latter name may have been given to a similar character whom I brought into wide games I ran at camps when I was involved with the Heriot's Troop).



At camps Boris's main appearance was in connection with the PLs' Night Hike. Here the PLs were given a trophy which Boris, in the shape of the Scouters, tried to steal from them. On this first occasion Boris won, managing to pinch the trophy from the tents where we PLs were asleep. However, we made a comeback at the later camp at Gifford, where the PLs were able to defend the Goblin's Hall ruin from the Scouters.



After Eddleston I attended virtually all summer camps, first as a PL, later as a Scouter, until I moved to London in 1970. Another that I remember was the one at Dunbar. Tynninghame Bay sounds the more likely name, for the campsite was very much at the seaside. Not being Sea Scouts, we landlubbers were obviously not so experienced with things like tides, so that as the week (or two) progressed, we found the patrol sites were *in* the sea. We had to strike camp and move to higher ground. I was fortunate enough to receive my Queen's Scout award in the presence of two other important 12th Portobello scouts – Walter Thomson and Gordon McConnachie.

Cub Pack

I had helped out at the Cubs for a few years until Miss Hamilton retired and I changed from Baloo (which better matched my shape) to Akela, probably about 1965. Then I ran the pack until 1970 when I escaped to London. I had several great helpers, I think the Anderson brothers early on, then Colin Patten, Adam Rennie and Ronnie Gilchrist (I hope I haven't forgotten anyone).

As well as the usual games, special events come to mind, like dooking for apples at Hallowe'en or Cub picnics to Longniddry. There was also an occasional visit (just one?) for Sixers and Seconds to the Scout hostel at Hermitage of Braid. And also at least one trip with the Sixers and Seconds to the cottage at Lauder. Of that event I remember particularly having to take one Cub back home to Edinburgh when he wouldn't behave. Life as a leader wasn't always easy.

Adventure Training

Starting in the early 60s the County under the leadership of Derek Mackenzie, David Bennet and others began to offer various adventure training activities. I participated personally in several of these, skiing, canoeing, sailing and sub-aqua, and other members of the Troop also participated at least in the first three.

Several Scouts and Scouters took up skiing and for a while were quite active, Gordon McConnachie, Rob Lawrie, Graham Henderson, Alastair Allanach, not to mention Alan Buchan and Alan Symon, who have just spent a ski week here in Austria with me. Various Scouts from the 12th went on to help out as instructors for the Ski Section and also took part in Ski Section trips to Austria (including my first visit to Fieberbrunn at Christmas 1965) and the Easterski weeks at Cairngorm. For several years I led the ski section and organised (with help) those Easterski expeditions, growing to more than 100 skiers on occasion (with some from other parts of the UK too). One noteworthy activity was the ski traverse of the Pentlands by 12th's Scouts & Scouters, from Balerno to Fairmilehead, in the snowy winter of 1963. Gordon & I also had a skiing holiday at Geilo in Norway that year.

The Rover Crew became involved in the Glenshee Ski Rescue Service when it started up in the middle 60s. I can remember sleeping in a room over the hen shed at the Dalmunzie Hotel – and us getting into trouble for switching off something that meant the hens got chilly! There are also memories of carting car batteries for radios (no mobile phones in those days) around the slopes at Glenshee and jumping off the Tiger chairlift at the holding down pylon with them. The best bit of Ski Rescue was always tea at Ma Fleming's on the way home and maybe the ceilidhs at the Spittal Hotel.



The photograph of the Dormobile with the broken window brings back memories of a weekend trip to Aberdeen for the Scottish Scouts' annual conference. Rob Lawrie and I had skived off to go skiing at Glenshee (while Gordon McConnachie and/or Walter Thomson kept up the 12th's representation at the conference) but a stone thrown up by another vehicle scuppered that plan.

For completeness I should probably mention the event when the 12th's skiing activities -as represented by myself- hit the front page of the Daily Express. That was the occasion when I managed to get lost at Glenshee, probably 1967 or 68. 'Skier spends night in igloo', (or something to that effect), the Express declaimed, which wasn't quite accurate, for I was found by the Mountain

Rescue by about 10 p.m. At least I learned to keep my compass in my anorak pocket, not in a rucksack which could be left behind. My Heriot's pupils greeted me not with an Igloo but with a Sprigloo!

Canoeing and sailing were in the Sea Scouts' blood but the Land Scouts also became involved. I never did all that much sailing myself but I remember well the canoeing trips down the Tweed where Peter Blythe often provided the transport facilities with the Group Dormobile. Under instruction from Jack Cuthill I had built a wood & canvas canoe which I assume became Troop property.

Other Troops

Over the years I did become involved with other troops. Barrie Gilliatt and I helped run the 2nd Portobello troop for quite a while. This led to the 2nd's using our cottage at Lauder. And the troops did use the same campsite on occasions (in particular, Loch Ken, though I don't remember any joint camps).

I do believe that there maybe were one or possibly more joint camps with the Heriot's troop. I was responsible for that unlikely combination, largely through my friendships with Herioters due to the skiing connection. I also attended several Heriot's camps.

I also helped out at the Liberton Kirk troop but that was only very briefly and didn't have any connection with the 12th's.

Rover Den

The Rover Crew was given a room in the cellar of one of the School houses in Regent Terrace, no. 4, I think, though it may have been no. 2. As well as being a good base for Crew meetings that also provided a useful bolthole for me in my 6th year at school when teachers excused me from class.

Lauder

The cottage at Lauder was a centre for many activities for a while and was also an activity in itself. Initially we built the toilets with their cesspit (to a GL McConnachie plan). I have already mentioned visits by the Cubs and the 2nd Portobello Scouts. I think we may also have run wide games and hikes from there, though I can't remember any details. I also believe that I can claim to have been the one who discovered the cottage, probably on some hike, though I again can't remember the details.

Scout Shows

The Troop put on Scout Shows, Gang Shows (though I'm not sure we were allowed to call them that despite using some Ralph Reader music), in the Tower Street hall. I think I can remember two of them, probably in the late 50s. What did we do? We sang: *Riding Along on the Crest of a Wave* (with actions which we were taught by Johnnie Small), *The Happy Wanderer* and *The Dambusters' March* come to mind. On the musical side Rob Lawrie & Alan Buchan were the most talented at the piano.

There were also sketches. The one that comes to mind is *The Blue Ray* in which Walter Thomson and I starred as detectives or agents. Probably suffering from stage fright, Walter forgot his line (he only had one) and I had to ad lib for him. Ah, memories.

A show in the Prep School hall also comes to mind, though that was just a parents' evening for Cub parents. There I can remember Alan Buchan as a young pianist. (photo of the 1975 event on right).



Bonaly

Although I did much work at Bonaly (in the early 60s, I guess), I can't really remember much activity there with the 12th. On a personal level I do remember spending a night in a tree shelter which Gordon McConnachie and I had built as part of our Backwoodsman badge efforts. Later, as a Scouter, Gordon & I (along with Malcolm Macnicol who was also a RHS pupil but in a Morningside troop) used one of the troop's tents as a base when we did our Wood Badges.

Jumble Sales & Fairs

The troop always needed money, for camping equipment, Dormobile, boats and the like, so every now and again we held jumble sales. These were mainly in the Tower Street hall but maybe sometimes at the Prep School.

The Prep School was more occasionally the venue of Summer(?) Fairs. These were grander affairs with many stalls of various sorts, refreshments and suchlike. All I can really remember from those days is that Miss Combie, a teacher at the Prep School, played her harp (I suspect that Miss Hamilton must have called on her help, for I can't really remember Miss Combie being involved with the Cubs – or was she?). I'm afraid my music appreciation hadn't developed enough to enjoy the harp music.

On a personal level I also remember having my own stall at one fair, where I had a classroom where I showed "films" with my MiniCine, a projector which could show shaky films (or stills), moved along by turning a handle.

Talking of raising funds, as well as Bob-a-Job Week, in later years I think there were Christmas card sales (maybe also organised at a County level).

Seagull Patrol

As I said I became PL of the Seagull patrol. We had various patrol activities but the only one I specifically remember was a cycle trip. We took the bus to Stow and from there we cycled across the abandoned railway track to Lauder. From there we turned back towards Edinburgh, although I cannot remember now how far we cycled from there, maybe only to Carfrae Mill. I cannot imagine now that we cycled all the way to Dalkeith, though I do remember that

we had a fantastic wind behind our backs – the youngest member of the group, Smith by name if I remember correctly, did say it was the best thing he had ever done as the wind blew us happily along.

?, Caprice, Jolly

Friday evenings wouldn't have been complete without the Scouters gathering after the Troop meeting in their usual haunts. For many, many years, from the 1960s, after the fish and chip shop near Meadowbank whose name I have forgotten, these revolved around the Alongi family and their restaurants, first upstairs at the Caprice in Musselburgh and later at the Jolly in Elm Row. And I still meet Gordon McConnachie, Michael Halcrow and others in the Jolly when I am back in Edinburgh (though now on Tuesdays). The 2016 photo on the right (Alastair, Walter, Gordon, Rob and myself) is one such occasion.



Miscellaneous

Another memory I have is of the 22nd November 1963. That was a Friday and the Troop held a wide game. I remember standing outside Portobello Town Hall and being told by some complete stranger that President Kennedy had been shot - it was a shock. And continued into the later evening, when the Scouters gathered as usual in the fish and chip shop up between Meadowbank and Piershill.

Eric Sprigg, April 2022