

Some early recollections of the 9th Wembley Group.

I was born in 1920 and lived in St Anne's Road, in a house backing on to the Cemetery and grounds of St John's Church.

It was, I think, in 1929 that the old Brigade Hall was gutted by fire. The St John's branch of the Church Lads Brigade never really recovered from that and folded up. When the hall was re-built it was put at the disposal of a new consortium sponsored by the Church. They were "land" Scouts; the conversion to the sea Scouts came much later, after my time. The scouts wore big Scout hats, khaki flannel shirts and navy blue shorts, and each one had a stave as part of his uniform. The Cubs wore navy blue jerseys and grey shorts. All shorts in those days kept your knees warm! We all had black and white halved scarves (white on the left).

The first Pack Meeting was probably in September 1930. There were four of us there – two Scouters and two would-be Cubs. The Cub Mistress was Miss Kathleen Walsh (who later became Mrs Bowtell) and the ACM was Miss Ruby Provo (who later became Mrs Carmody). The two boys were myself and Tom Martin (who lived in Lancelot Road near the LNER railway bridge). A week or two later we were joined by David John (his father was a professional musician) and Tony Souter.

I can recall no details at all of the happenings during my few months in the Pack except that it was tremendous fun - and I developed a very loud voice through bellowing DYB, DYB, DYB and DOB, DOB, DOB!!

What was the year 1930 like, anyway, through my eyes? Wembley was still only a large village. There was open countryside all round. Gypsies camped on Horsenden Hill. Even though the Stadium existed, Wembley Central Station was called "Wembley for Sudbury" as if nobody expected to visit Wembley itself! There was very little motor traffic. Trams ran along the High Road and Harrow Road, and it was a common sight for a conductor to be busy with a long pole trying to hook his tram 'arm' back onto the electric wire. The tram lines were a hazard to any boy with a bicycle. Occasionally a horse would slip over in the cobbled High Road and a crowd would gather to see it released from its harness, helped back on its feet and re-harnessed to the cart. The passing north-bound LMS express trains snatched the mail bags from the apparatus near the Lyon Park Avenue–London Road iron bridge as they thundered past.

A man earning £3 a week to keep a family was well-off. Most sweets cost two old pennies for a quarter pound. Mr Pass, the chandler in the High Road, sold us tiger nuts and locust beans to chew. Walls Ice Cream men came round the streets on their tricycle wagons, labelled "Stop me and buy one" and sold us "snowfruit" ices for one old penny each. Subs for Cubs were one old penny per week and I earned mine by doing shopping for a lady who lived opposite. We boys played with peg tops and whip tops, rolled steel hoops two feet in diameter by pushing them with a hook arrangement called a "skimmer", played cigarette cards (mainly two games called "knock 'em down" and "on tops") and just like all generations lived for football.

On Sundays we got no games. We wore our best clothes for Children's Church, Sunday School and walks with our parents. On Empire Day (24 May) those of us who were Scouts, Cubs, Guides, Brownies etc. went to school in our uniform. King George V was our king and the Emperor of India and ruler of vast areas of the world which most of us thought we would never see. On Boat Race Day everyone supported either Oxford or Cambridge and most children wore a dark blue or light blue favour to show it. Small planes did sky-writing advertisements in smoke. The summers were always hot and the winters brought plenty of snow.

Mr Titus Barham lived in a large Georgian house in what is now Barham Park. He opened his grounds to the public on “Rose Day” in June and my favourite place there was his museum where there was even an Egyptian mummy. The hospital Fete was held in his grounds each year and there was a massive carnival touring the streets, sometimes led by Mr Barham on a white horse. The Vicar was Mr J.W.P. Silvester (father of Victor Silvester of ballroom dancing fame) and the local doctor was Dr Goddard. The world was happy and wonderful to some of us boys – but other young boys were dying of tuberculosis.

By May 1931 I was a Scout in the 9th Wembley Troop. The Scoutmaster then was Mr Freddie Neale and the Assistant Scoutmaster (ASM) was Mr Don Sladden. Another ASM, probably a bit later, was Mr Ellis Williams and another Mr Norman Crampton. There were two patrols in the Troop in 1931, the Bulldogs and the Foxes; and I was in the Bulldogs. My Patrol Leader (PL) was Ted Stevens who some years later became Scoutmaster. The Second (they weren’t Assistant PLs in those days) was Edward Lawrence; and there was another member of our patrol called Bert Ayton, whose father had a beautifully equipped shed in the garden (Dagmar Avenue, I believe) that we used as a patrol den on Saturday afternoons. I think the PL of the Foxes was Norman Farndon and the Second was Jack Stevens (Ted’s brother). On my first night at scouts we all went to Barn Hill, walking of course, where we each tried to light a fire with two matches.

The hall was excellent and it had a fitted trapeze which was fun but a bit dangerous. One evening when I was about 16 years old I had to take on of our scouts, Ron Smalley, to the doctor, then to the hospital, after he crashed from the trapeze and broke his arm.

In the mid 1930s there was a craze for playing roller skate hockey – and we would go early to Troop Meetings to play it in the hall before any adults arrived, because it was banned there! Ted Stevens’ father and my father were members of the Parents Committee who imposed the ban, so we had to be careful. Mind you, we did once persuade my father (who had come to enforce the rule) to play in goal for us!

We had lots of wonderful camps. Our favourite site was at Harrow Weald near a pub called “The Case is Altered”. It was there that I saw a sitting pheasant and yelled to everyone that I had found an eagle! Just imagine nowadays trying to get a trek cart, laden high with kit and equipment, from Wembley to Harrow Weald with a dozen boys pulling and shoving. You would be killed before you reached Crawford Avenue. Yet we often did it in the 1930s.

In 1933 our Summer Camp was held near Yarmouth in the Isle of Wight. I still have some photos – as I have too of the 1935 Camp at Bosham, near Chichester. It was at Bosham that “Spook” Lee Bapty was told to cast the anchor from our newly-hired dinghy. He did, but there was no rope attached and several of us had to duck-dive at low tide to retrieve the anchor! You can see why they didn’t turn us into Sea Scouts! By then our Scoutmaster was Mr Charles Marsden, a delightful man to whom minor calamities frequently occurred because he couldn’t see an inch without his thick glasses.

In 1936 we had a fortnight on the Implacable, an old man o’ war captured from the French at Trafalgar. It was anchored in Portsmouth Harbour and used for Sea Cadet and Sea Scout training. I have photos of that expedition too. It was there that we learned how to sleep in hammocks – and not to stand up in them to put your trousers on!

I wish I could put in chronological order all the Troop happenings of the 1930s, but I can’t.

Some names of Troop members that I can remember though are Les Lucking (he is still a friend of mine now), Arthur Miller, David John, Raymond Mann, Don White, Sid Matthews (he was an RAF

pilot killed in the war), Derek Vink (his father was our District Commissioner, a man greatly liked and respected), Joe Yarwood, Jack Duffell, Clive Timberlake, Bill Wilson, Rameses St George and his brother, Venables, Briggs, Lyon, Vorley, Maddock, Williams, Jackson, Wyatt, and Pennicott (I believe he became a game warden in Africa).

As the 1930s rolled on, so did the war clouds over Europe. In 1938, with many other young men I joined the Territorial Army and gave less and less time to Scouting. In 1939 war broke out and suddenly all life had changed for me. I was off to the war. Had it mattered that I had been the 9th Wembley's first-Cub, and their first holder of the Scout First Class Badge, All round Cords and King's Scout Badge; that I had attended umpteen Cup Finals and International Matches at the Stadium as a Scout, been to two National St George's Day parades at Windsor, been one of England's Scout Representatives at King George VI's Coronation (where I spoke to Lord Baden Powell, our Founder)?

Perhaps those personal things did not matter any longer, but my Scouting did. I had the capability and adaptability of a well trained Scout which served me well throughout the war – and later in life, I feel. Certainly all my memorable experiences in Scouting brought me back into the Movement in the early 1950s when my two sons were needing a Scouter in their group. After they had left Scouting I forgot to leave! And when you get forgetful they make you a Commissioner!!

Meanwhile, what of the 9th Wembley? Our family had an attachment to the 9th Wembley and my father remained for many years a member of the group Committee. My sister was to make the biggest contribution of us all to the Group; and it is the best for me to hand the story over to her to continue.

By Eric Cooper
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