

EXPLORERS CAMP – a brief history

Camp had its origins just after the conclusion of the Second World War. The Scripture Union, a Christian organisation working mainly with young people throughout the world, employed a young man, Dennis Davies to work amongst youngsters in Approved Schools and Children's Homes. He travelled from his base in Sheffield visiting these institutions throughout the country, and saw at the same time the possibility of creating a fellowship where youngsters from 'normal' homes met up with those he worked with. The Middlewood Fellowship was born.

It found expression in the Scripture Union Camp (not the only one called that!) and also Broads Cruises, Church Reunions and walking holidays in the Lake District. We perhaps don't realise today the revolution this work was creating. Not just the concept of the Fellowship but even more that all this work was mixed – the S.U. in general at this time only ran single sex holiday activities.

Dennis had been a student at Cliff College, the Methodist Training College in the Peak District and the first camps were held at the college, using the college facilities. Then came the breakthrough to tented camps and away from Cliff – 1953 in Lathkill Dale, followed by Edale in 1954, then Skipsea in East Yorkshire and Silverdale in Morecambe Bay, taking the camp story up to 1965.

As well as visiting institutions, Dennis also used churches to talk about his work. On his visits he would show the film he had made of Lathkill Dale (also a visit of the Middlewood Fellowship to the local Batchelor Pea factory!). It was because of one of the showings of this film called 'Life at its Best' that the writer was introduced to camp and immediately wanted to go.

Further camps followed, but eventually Dennis left the Scripture Union, becoming a freelance children's evangelist, mainly running missions in churches all over the country. The name of the camp could no longer remain the same and for a few years it was called the Christian Venturers Camp.

Dennis moved, with his family, to the Fylde area outside Preston in Lancashire and when the camps under his leadership ceased the local churches in the Preston area ran one year's camp at Silverdale. It was at this time (1969) that the Huddersfield West Methodist Circuit Youth and Education Committee invited the late Ken Woodhead and John Harris to run a camp for the young people of the Circuit. Dennis meanwhile had sold his canvas and equipment to Goodshaw Baptist Church and so we hired their canvas as we do today and ran our first camp back at the site at Skipsea, Dringoe Grange Farm, that we had used back in the 1950s. The slogan, 'a complete holiday in a Christian atmosphere' (an early mission statement?) was coined around then and has been used over years since. This was Summer 1970.

As we had in the early years from Silverdale onwards, two camps were run, each for a week as opposed to the 10 days before. One week, the first, was named the 'Rotherham Week', run by the Happs and Foster families, catering mainly for young people from that area, though it was possible to go to both. Dennis had not entirely left the camp scene and can be remembered helping in the Wye Valley in the drought years of the mid 1970s and speaking at the Camp Specials at Darley Dale near Thornthwaite in Nidderdale.

After more camps in East Yorkshire, Explorers Camp as it was now named, moved to its present home at High Lindrick Farm, where it has been since 1995 (apart from 2001/2002 when Foot and Mouth infections across the UK caused High Lindrick to be inaccessible). This is where most of us who go today will have known camp to be held.

Would those early campers of those S.U. Camps of long ago recognise Explorers Camp of today; what of camp today finds its roots in S.U. Camp?

It has been fascinating to witness gradual changes – design of tents for example (although amazingly we are back to bell tents again, albeit with a slight adjustment to the design), modern toilets instead of the cubicles that meant daily emptying into pits that were dug before camp could begin, the radical changes in worship which is held in the marquee instead of round the camp fire for which wood was collected daily, the generator power instead of the Tilley Lamps we used to trim and light and so on and so on.

What will never change is in the nature of God – He is always the same and so we have witnessed Him working powerfully in the lives of campers and leaders over all these years, aided by an incredible variety of gifted speakers and the humble service of a huge number of volunteer helpers. We may not sing to the accompaniment of Dennis's accordion, we may not have to dig pits or collect wood, but in all of the years the Eternal God has been at work. Today, many a Christian known to us trace their coming to faith at Camp (no doubt some unknown too) and others would testify to how they have grown spiritually (and physically!) and been given direction in life because of the challenge that always been at the heart of what camp has stood for and goes on being so.