

An idea that has lasted 100 years

by Neil Westaway

The Brownsea Island experiment

In this, Scouting's hundredth year, it is worth a few moments reflection on an idea which has had an extraordinary impact on young people throughout the world and continues to do so. An idea so radical in its time but so simple in concept that it rapidly spread throughout the world. Today there are about 28 million young people enjoying the benefits.

I quote Mr Ted Gatt, from an article in an English magazine. The year was 1906, the place, the country home of Mr Arthur Pearson.

During the course of the weekend house party P W Everett noted a comment made by one of the guests. "There are one and three quarter million boys in the country at present outside the range of good influences, mostly drifting towards hooliganism for want of a helping hand."

"The speaker was Major-General Robert Baden-Powell CB, the great national hero of the siege of Mafeking and idol of many boys throughout the kingdom.

Some discussion took place about the possibility of adapting his army training manual, 'Aids to Scouting', for use by boys. Prominent people were approached on the subject and reception of the idea was almost unanimously favourable."

But would the idea work? Was it a practical proposition? B-P, never one to rely on theory, decided that some experiment was necessary.

It did not take long to decide that the scheme had to be tried out under camping conditions. So the plans were laid for what was to prove to be arguably the most momentous camp ever held.

Details of that camp, held around



B-P instructing some boys on the Brownsea Island camp in 1907
Photograph courtesy of Scout Association UK

July/August 1907 on Brownsea Island in Poole Harbour on the south coast of England, have been recorded in dozens of publications over the years and its success as an experiment has been well documented. B-P, in his report on the camp (dated November 1907) said, "The results were such as to encourage the highest hopes as to the possibilities of the scheme when carried out on the larger scale."

The format and standards of practice set at that trial camp have not changed significantly since those early days. Neither, it seems, has the manner of dealing with young people.

Some of B-P's comments in his report on the camp will bring a smile to the face of many a current Scout Leader. For instance, "We found the best way of imparting theoretical instruction was to give it out in short instalments ... with demonstrations.

A formal lecture is apt to bore the boys". And again, "Discipline was

very satisfactory indeed. A 'Court of Honour' was constituted to try any offences against discipline, but it was never needed. In the first place the boys were put 'on their honour' to do their best. Secondly, senior boys were made responsible for the behaviour of the boys forming their patrol. And this worked perfectly well."

It is not the only thing that 'worked perfectly well'. Scouting had arrived and, spurred on by B-P's writings, spread rapidly throughout England and subsequently, the world.

For those interested, the story of the trial and its aftermath can be found on the internet.

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