

A LIFE OF CAMPING WITH NORTHANTS DA.

My family's introduction to camping started when we were invited to join friends for an Easter weekend. We were in a borrowed ridge tent which, on the second night we found was not waterproof and we got a little wet.

The decision was made. If we were to continue camping we had to be properly equipped and so off we went to a camping exhibition where we purchased a tent suitable for a family of five. Frame tents were then in their infancy, so ours consisted of two ridge tents joined together with a communal area in the centre for cooking, eating and relaxing during the day.

At the exhibition was a Club stand, it was then the Camping Club of Great Britain and Ireland. We were told about District Associations and the areas they covered. We lived in the area covered by Northants DA. After a friendly chat we decided we would join. So off we went home to await the arrival of our membership cards and the Club Magazine which duly arrived after a few days.

Fearing the unknown we decided to just go and have a look before venturing out with all our camping equipment. After finding the site in a farm field, we gingerly looked over the gate to see about ten units, all white ridge tents.

We were spotted by the steward who came to the gate. After the introductions we were invited in for a cup of tea and a chat giving us details of what went on at the weekend meets and what we needed to bring with us. Toilet facilities were very primitive then, consisting of a communal toilet tent with a hole inside to "squat" over. A sign was hung outside indicating whether it was "Free" or "Engaged". The provision of these facilities was the responsibility of the weekend steward.

As numbers camping increased, each unit was encouraged to provide their own toilet tent, again with a hole. This was again changed with the advent of toilet fluid when every unit was required to have a suitable toilet which emptied into a communal pit again the responsibility of the steward to provide.

Fortunately most sites now have a suitable manhole where toilets can be emptied. At the DA's AGM, in past years, the subject of "toilets" could always be relied upon to provide a "lively" debate.

In our early years camping like most families we relied on a portable camping stove powered by bottled gas for cooking and heating water often augmented with a primus stove fuelled by paraffin. A small metal oven could be used over one of the burners to heat precooked food.

After gathering all our equipment together the great day arrived and off we went to our first DA meet. Again this was in a farm field, at Woodford near Kettering. I had to work on Saturdays so it was late afternoon before we arrived. It was only a small field with about 20 units in attendance. Again it was all ridge tents with the exception of just one caravan. We met the weekend's Steward and paid our fees, which then were "per night", per adult" and "each child" depending on their age. He also took orders for milk to be delivered on Sunday morning. No one had a refrigerator then so keeping milk was a problem. The only pitch left large enough for our unit had a nettle patch on it. After chopping these down we managed to erect the tent. By the time we had settled in and started our first meal it was early evening and many of the campers were off on an evening walk. We soon made friends who gave us lots of help and advice.

A separate area was set away from the main camping for the CCY to pitch their tents. The Youth leader and his wife were camped adjacent.

CCY membership was different in those days. The majority were Members children, but older youth whose parents were not members could also join. I believe they were called "Class B members".

Sunday afternoon arrived and it was time to return home. We had enjoyed the weekend and this was to be our life which we enjoyed for over 50 years.

At the end of our first year we went to our first Northants DA Annual General Meeting. This was held in a Church Hall in Northampton and commenced at 3pm. Procedure was quite different to the present day. Notices of Motion were accepted at the meeting together with nominations for Officers and Committee. Paper votes were taken for each vacancy rather than a show of hands. This prolonged the meeting quite considerably. There were usually a number of Notices of Motion, some of which often were quite contentious. Subjects sometimes applied to National Club rules as well as DA rules.

Great changes occurred over the years, units changed from Ridge tents to Frame tents, with sewn in groundsheets which offered a great deal more room for sleeping, cooking and relaxing.

As members became more affluent the number of caravans attending meets gradually increased. Initially, caravans were small with basic facilities and a toilet tent was still used. We purchased a Sprite 400 which we used regularly for over ten years. In this we had a small gas fire, an oven and a beds, luxury indeed.

With the increase in unit comfort the length of the camping season began earlier and ended later. This immediately produced a small problem. Most campers used butane gas to fuel cookers and heaters. If the temperature dropped below freezing it ceased to operate. The answer, we all had to turn to propane gas.

Activities undertaken changed over the years. Initially it was walking, football, cricket or rounders, then on to badminton or shuttlecock and latterly to volleyball. Evening entertainment in our early years was often organised by the Youth Leader. This would often be a sing song around a warming camp fire. Songs about falling “green bottles” and “flying pigeons” were usually favourites. As the years progressed the DAs coffers increased and a Marquee was purchased, together with a generator for lighting and also amplifiers. These proved to be a great asset giving a greater variety of entertainment and member participation.

In 2000 my wife and I had to decide how and where to celebrate our the 50th “Golden” anniversary of our marriage. As the majority of our friends were campers it was not a difficult decision. We would hold it on a camping weekend at West Haddon if possible. The then Committee took over when I asked if this was acceptable. They also took over all the arrangements. The great day arrived. Two marquees were erected, and preparations proceeded. My wife and I were told to go for a long walk and everything would be ready when we got back. Everyone camping was invited together with many old friends and family. At that time I was Chairman of my local Parish Council and was involved with a large soft drink company regarding a planning application which my village was not happy about. Unbeknown to me the DA had formed a choir and had been rehearsing a well known song with words changed about my fight. This proved to be a great success and brought a few tears in the process. We had a great evening and I think we may have broken the “11 o’clock” that evening.

During my 50 plus years with Northants DA I served on Committee, as Chairman, Secretary and Sites Secretary and was awarded the Club’s “Certificate of Honour”. I look back over those years with great pleasure and pride.

Pat Coaley – Our very first President and currently Vice President of Northants DA