

THE MAGIC OF THE ISLE OF THORNS

By Horace Beddington

It is one of the great charms of Sussex, that she contrives to keep so many pleasant secrets and surprises hidden just round the corner. Some of these are mere lovely fragilities, to which publicity were a shattering and sudden death. But there are others, which deserve, for their own sake, to be more widely known. Of such is the Isle of Thorns, in Ashdown Forest, where every year some hundreds of boys and youths, mostly from south and east London, spend a couple of weeks learning something of the ways of heath and woodland. Though no waters beat around it, the name is apt enough and goes back to ancient times, even as Westminster was once called "the Thorny Isle." For it is en-islanded by seas of gorse and bracken and young trees, and it is not so long since the passage to it was difficult indeed.

Its history (so far as this article is concerned) began in December 1928, when Mr. Alfred R. Wagg, of East Grinstead, made to the youth of England at once a noble gift and a splendid gesture. He bought the Isle, and set about establishing a camp, extending in all to exactly a hundred acres, for schoolboys, members of working-men's and boys' clubs, and others who otherwise would probably never know their countryside, whose holidays away from home would be just a few days at the seaside in places almost as urban in atmosphere as the places they had left.

Two years later, in 1930, it was opened. In those two years a tremendous amount of work had been done. Acres of gorse, scrub and thorn, and some timber, had to be cleared. Then the camp was built, sleeping and messing accommodation erected, water and drainage and electric light and power installed, and in short, a camp, practically self-sufficient, and capable of meeting all the needs of some 150 lads, made to arise among the tangle of the Forest. And the result is a triumph, not of efficiency only but of artistry.



Isle of Thorns

Those with experience of such things do not usually expect a camp to be, in itself, very beautiful. They are so often exactly the same: flat meadows, dotted with bleak, black barrack rooms, or lines of tents. Not that anyone complains, nor should he. At least, if anyone did the large-hearted

organisers would reply, with excellent sound common sense, that, after all, the campers come seeking not architecture, but fresh air, and no pennies to spend on prettiness. The argument is indeed unanswerable. Wherefore is it all the more remarkable, all the more splendid, that the Isle of Thorns should be what it is.

For Mr. Wagg, I suspect, had larger ideas than those of the ordinary organiser, who, indeed, has as a rule few enough pounds to play with. In the midst of all this wide and mellow freshness, secure for all time from building, he determined to build nothing that might shatter the stillness around it, or mock the benediction of the trees. What consultations there were between him and the architect, the late Mr. John Coleridge, and the builders, Messrs. H. & E. Walters, of Forest Row, I know not; nor how many hundreds of pounds were spent. But the result is a masterpiece. It is comforting; it is splendidly austere. Here is no sham antiquity; no playing with half-timbering, or thatch, or mock-Tudor chimneys. It is purely modern in its ping simplicity of line and colour. And the effect is, astonishingly, Roman!

It is appropriate; for the Forest (like so much of Sussex) seems still to echo more of the Roman legions than of Saxon woodmen even, or Norman knights. A visitor remarked the other day that it seemed "Colonial". He was right, in a way: it has something of the air of the days when Britain was a Roman colony ...

It finds its best expression in the colonnade that faces the 120 ft. -long, blue-tiled, open-air swimming-pool. The arches are simple, the pillars short and strong and clean and unadorned, all in what looks like some white stone. And the tiled roof, topped by the water-tower, is of a kindly red, that will soften with the seasons. The water-tower itself is a triumph, and probably unique, in being quite pleasing to look at. It might be the top of some Brobdingnagian dove-cots.

The same design is maintained in all the buildings: the mess-room, the sleeping-huts, and the recreation hut. Inside, the note of simplicity is stronger still. Whoever ordered the furniture - I presume Mr. Wagg, or else the resident camp manager, Major the Hon. R.E.S. Barrington, D.S.O., sometime of the Black Watch - had evidently in mind the undoubted truth (would that some amateur sociologists could grasp it!) that healthy boys on holiday, if they are to enjoy themselves, must not only be boys, but young barbarians.

Hence everything seems to have been designed as for elephants at play. Thus, the tables and forms in the mess-room are of strong, solid oak - and heavy. The electric light bulbs are all guarded by wire cages. The very bowls in the wash-room are of stainless steel. Aluminium, I suppose, would be too fragile altogether. I did not examine the cups and plates, but I imagine they are of reinforced concrete, or some equally wear-resisting compound!

There are five sleeping-huts, four containing twenty beds, with two cubicles for masters or leaders, and one with ten beds and six cubicles.

The spring bedsteads bore mattresses (of the Army, or "biscuit" pattern), sheets, and four blankets, folded neatly, Army fashion, at the foot, and pillows which, I gathered, occasionally came in for hard wear. Beside each bed is a small locker. The masters or leaders are responsible for good discipline, which is always well maintained, and is supported by a system whereby each unit is awarded marks according to good behaviour.

The indoor-games hut, for use in wet weather (a phenomenon which most camps, by the way, seem to leave out of account altogether) is long, lofty, something like a great barn, 90 ft. by 50 ft. The flooring is of teak; the windows guarded by wire-netting and nothing breakable is to be seen. There is also a recreation-hut, for quieter moments, 60 ft. by 30 ft., equipped with wireless, a piano, table-tennis, and other amusements.

Meals are prepared on the premises, in a kitchen of vast possibilities, and served in the mess-rooms. Each party has to provide its own orderlies to prepare the tables, fetch and carry from kitchen to mess-room, and sweep and wash up afterwards. A sound system, and one which builds up, as nothing else can, the enduring comradeship of camp. Speaking of domestic matters, it may

be mentioned that the camp has its own filtration-plant for water, and its own (and very up to date) sewage system; and that the water in the bathing pool is cleansed and filtered seven times a week.

Outdoor games are, of course, well provided for. There are two football grounds, two cricket squares, and two hard tennis-courts, as well as a clock-golf putting-green, and a well-turfed bowling-green, which last is open to local people, non-campers, and is much appreciated.

But what pleased me most was the small, nine-hole, golf course. I like it because it differs so much from the ordinary solemn course, of which it is a delightful parody. It seems to declare that, whereas football and cricket are worth playing seriously for their own sake and certainly there is a large awareness here of what is cricket and what is not), golf is at best a game only, a business of knocking a little ball into a little hole with a crooked stick. And so the holes are each about a foot across, and shallow, about the size and shape of ornamental tubs. And there are no greens. One goes round as a rule with a single club, without wasting much time over the niceties of driving or approach, or putting. I should rather enjoy seeing Cyril Tolley (say) going round those nine holes with just a mashie . . .

There are two places above all where it is a delight to linger. These are the aquarium and reptiliary. Both are copied exactly, though, of course on a smaller scale, from the London Zoo. In the former may be seen and studied, as far as may be in natural surroundings, such lesser beasticles and fish as live in English ponds and rivers: the frog, and the toad (with his lovely liquid eyes) and the newts, plain or crested after their kind, and the stickleback, the minnow, and the caddis-worm, in her drain-pipe house of mud and pebbles, and the carp. (Incidentally, that grand book, Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, is in the camp library.) Later there may be some tropical fishes, queer colourful bodies. The reptiliary is peopled with British snakes and other reptiles: the grass-snake, harmless (though smelly, if you handle it) and a great killer of snails; the adder, venomous but seldom deadly; the slow-worm or glass-snake, which breaks its tail in two if taken, and which is really no snake at all, but a legless lizard; and frogs, and toads, and lizards. The outer wall around this particular place has an overhanging inward edge; there is no fear of any inmate getting out.

And now, what of the lads that come here? They come from east and south London, as a rule: from schools in Hoxton, Finsbury Park, Hackney Wick, and a Dockland settlement; from all that part of London where a child is familiar with trams and lamp-posts long before he knows a tree, and the hammer of traffic is an everlasting wan background to his thoughts. Not that there is anything particularly pinched or puny or pathetic about them. Far from it. For all that they may not know an elm-tree from an oak, they have all the Cockney sharpness of wit about them. Nor are they poor physically. On the contrary, Major Barrington told me that their physique is, generally speaking, superior to that of the average country boy, and adduced the interesting theory (which is all too true), that the country folk are so very inter-bred. They are sharp, and they are quick, and they are reasonably hardy. What they do lack, in comparison with the country lads, is stamina. "You take them for a walk in the country-", said Major Barrington; "they can't stick more than two or three miles." Naturally! What part has the long slow, stride of the countryman, who covers fourteen miles or so in the course of his day's work, in the swift life of London? (The same thing was noticed regarding the Cockney regiments in the Great War.) They have a proper pride in themselves, and in their schools, expressed in their behaviour, and testified to by the roll of names, executed with such jealous care, in the visitors' book. Some of the best of them come as probationers from a certain London police-court. This experiment, instituted by a far-sighted magistrate, has abundantly justified itself.

The usual time spent here is two weeks, taken either during the holidays, or (in the case of certain L.C.C. schoolboys) as a blessed interlude from term . . . There are weekenders, also. In addition, there is a building for hikers, members of the Youth Hostel Association, and a camping-ground for Scouts. Both these last fend for themselves, though they can buy provisions through the camp

commissariat. Charges (which must be paid to the Manager on the day of arrival) are: boys under 16, 12/- a week; over 16, under 18, 15/-; adults, 18 and over, £1; schoolboys, parties under the jurisdiction of the School Journeys Association, 10/- a week. There is housing for 104; but a further 30 odd can be accommodated in tents.

Last year the number of school-boys, staying for two weeks, was 585, and of club members, also for two weeks, 238. There were 551 Scouts and members of Toc H there for a week or part of a week; and 193 overnight visitors. The average age of the boys was fourteen. Most of them gained two pounds in weight during their stay, and some six.

And finally, a word as to the setting of the Magic Isle of Thorns. Westward is the main East Grinstead road, running north and south, and southwards the Nutley road, running east and west. But eastwards and to the north is nothing but the lovely brown and russet of the Forest, flecked about with golden gorse that always seems in bloom, backed by birch and beech, with elm and ash and thorn; and beyond, a faint blue line to the southwards, the long slow curve of the whale-backed Downs. .

It has been said, and truly, that over certain places, places of deep piety or sudden death, over great cathedrals and great battlefields, there hangs for ever a vast silence.... so that despite all the roar of traffic the least reverent tourist turns aside to muse on long-dead soldiers and saints. So strong is the influence of the soul of man; it lets fall here and there its seed, and weeds come up or flowers, which there is no killing...

Well here, in a different way, a very different way, one senses that atmosphere again: the echo of departed, voices. Here, on the quietest afternoon, when the camp is all deserted, and even the birds are still, the air seems vibrant yet with shrill clamour of rowdy youth, ringing with their larking and their laughter; with the click of bat and ball, the splash of diving bodies... somehow all attuning perfectly with the evening twitter and of the birds.

Such is the magic of the Isle of Thorns.