

THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF OPEN COUNTRY PURSUITS

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I do not think an excuse is needed for writing about Open Country Pursuits in a Mountaineering Journal. There are many activities which can be included under this title, but at White Hall, Buxton, the Open Country Pursuits Centre of the Derbyshire Education Committee, Mountaineering, in all its aspects, is one of the most important.

For generations the gymnasium and football fields have been essential features of English education, but the contribution which Open Country Pursuits have to make has not been so long, or so widely, recognised. A generation or two ago the hills were the particular preserve of a small and, for the most part, a relatively well-off handful of enthusiasts.

To-day the Lake District, Snowdonia, the Scottish Highlands, and the Peak District are national playgrounds, and young people flock to them in thousands. Educational theory and practice are now trying to catch up with this development. Obviously, to ramble or to climb requires less organisation and less expense, once you have left school, than to collect twenty-one other people and get a pitch for a game of football or hockey. Open Country Pursuits, with their more natural and less artificial rules-of-the-game, do offer disciplines of adventure and self-reliance which are no less important than the lessons to be learnt from our traditional national games.

Our enjoyment of these pursuits, and it may be our safety, does importantly depend on certain skills of hill-craft. Our wilder playgrounds are full of people some of whom know little of these skills; there are far too many accidents and near-accidents, and search parties for people lost in moor or mist. The Open Country Pursuits Centre is a place where the basic techniques of hill walking, of finding the way, of learning where and where not to ski, light camping and cooking, caving, canoeing, or rock climbing, in short of enjoying the open country without unnecessary danger or discomfort, may be learnt and practised.

Derbyshire's is the first local education authority to establish a centre of this kind, and at the inauguration, New Year, 1951, the Director of Education, Jack Longland, supported by the Warden of the Centre, Peter Mosedale, stated their aims. These included



Centre for Open Country Pursuits, White Hall, Buxton.

Photo, Ken Oldham.

the provision of basic training in hillcraft in all weathers and in the allied sports of climbing, caving, camping, canoeing, and ski-ing wherever conditions are suitable; to set before those coming to the Centre a vision of greatness in Nature and in Man, to inspire them with it and to persuade them to approach it in humility. This involves the training of self-reliance, the discipline of living together, the opportunity for the boy and girl to use their abundant physical and nervous energies in activities which can do nothing but good. It involves an uplifting of the spirit and a challenge to the whole personality. It provides natural penalties, sharper than a referee's whistle, for inefficiency, slackness and selfishness. All these advantages can be gained without overtaxing strength, providing the work is continuously adjusted to the age and condition of the student and to the weather.

Everything taught, no matter how elementary, is based on sound principles and practice, so that any part of the teaching will serve as a foundation for further training and experience to build on.

The Centre does not aim at producing an expert in any activity, its aim is to start the beginner on the right road, the safe road, the most rewarding road. Educationally there are two main ambitions. The first is to extend physical education in the broadest sense to the out-door world to deal similarly, but to a lesser degree, with other matters such as geography and natural history. The second is to give young people experience of living and taking responsibility in a very energetic small community, to improve their knowledge of each other and of themselves, and to encourage them to regard life as an adventure in which the most satisfying rewards come to those who put most into it. The desire is to make those who come to the Centre more aware of the importance of high standards at work, at play, and in their service to the community.

Nearly five years have passed since White Hall Open Country Pursuits Centre was opened, and the enquiring reader will ask—has it been a success? May I say, not only as an admirer of the work carried out, but as a modest helper, it has been an unqualified success. To the pupil the courses have been so arranged that they have provided the old-time urge of wonder and discovery, the fascination of the unknown, the attraction of the unfamiliar, the break away from the treadmill of ordinary affairs. Caving and potholing expeditions, with their allurements of mystery, give a sustained thrill, even more so than climbing (with a top rope) a gritstone climb. Parties that have successfully found their way by map and compass across the moors, especially in mist, have a great

sense of achievement, particularly so if the rendezvous is a camp site; there are many joyous exclamations as the primus stoves begin to roar.

The influence of the Centre has fallen on masters of schools too. Many have formed rambling clubs; one enterprising master led his pupils along the Pennine Way, and included a descent into Gaping Ghyll; at the same time a Grammar School boy was climbing his first 4,000m. peak in the Alps, later to be followed by some first-class Dolomite climbs. Other pupils have gone further afield on arctic expeditions.

However, all pupils are not necessarily would-be mountaineers, many may not know a piton from a bergschrund, but they know more important things than this; they know what it is like to stand on a bald bleak knob in the sky, while the sun goes down and lights twinkle in the shadowed valley below; they know the struggle of heart and lung and limb on the long upward pull, and the sharp sudden thrill of a summit gained. The Nectar of the Gods to them is a drink of spring water with a cheese sandwich; they know what sleep can be on pine needles in the purple night.

What is the reaction of the pupils? As the course proceeds and they begin to get into the stride, their enthusiasm becomes unbounded; they begin to realise that happiness is most often met by those who have learned to live in every moment of the present. When the time comes to depart, it is not infrequent to hear that a tear is being shed. The leading boy and girl of a mixed party, in expressing their thanks, said that not only had they been imbued with the spirit of adventure but they had found the real comradeship of the hills; the Warden and his helpers were not only experienced mountaineers, but real friends—friends they would wish soon to meet again.

To the helper at the Centre, and there are many who volunteer, what greater joy can there be than introducing the younger generation into activities which have given us good health, exercise, peace, happiness, contentment, and above all, treasured memories?