

EXPEDITION TO WALES: WEST GRIMSTEAD PRIMARY SCHOOL, OCTOBER 9th-12th, 1984.

Everyone duly arrived on Tuesday morning- a mixture of excitement, concern, quietness and chatter. The variety was enhanced by the colours of socks, rucksacks, sleeping bags and lunch boxes. The first task was packing all the gear into the mini bus and the car - a feat somewhat akin to forcing a gallon into a pint pot(sorry, that should be metric!). Finally it was obvious that the roof rack would have to be used and Dougal, risking his limbs by clambering on top, Mr. Read, Mrs Parry, Mrs. Woodley and Mrs. Clark contrived to complete the task whilst Mr. Lygo-Baker endeavoured to calm the children before the journey.

We set off, looking forward to our days in Wales. As soon as we left West Grimstead, however, Mr. Lygo-Baker realised he had forgotten to 'phone Mr. Haddock to tell him we would not need his car for transport. So, Mr. Lygo-Baker had to make a detour to find a telephone box and spent the next few minutes desperately trying to recall Mr. Haddock's 'phone number.

The two groups, thus split, regrouped at the Aust Services for lunch. Towering above us as we munched our food was the Severn Bridge. Several children decided that, with all our luggage, to cross the bridge would be too hazardous an affair and immediately decided they would stay in England. The adults simply ignored their pleas and, after a diversion caused by Stella becoming locked in the toilet, we recommenced our journey. No going back now.

The party diverted to Brecon along a scenic route to buy milk and bread and, heart in mouth- (we had been told about the track up to the cottage)- we set off for Cwm-llwch. My goodness! What a journey! I thought the first part up to the car parking area was bad enough- I was by now clutching the car wheel with white knuckles already showing. Suddenly, can you believe it?, Mr. Jeffries, Mrs. Woodley, the main party and the mini bus sailed past a 'no vehicles allowed beyond this point' notice. Rather more cautiously Mr. Lygo-Baker hesitated but all too soon realising he could not reverse found himself at the wheel of a car desperately trying to fall apart so that it didn't have to go any further! Huge boulders, huge pot holes appeared like phantoms in an awful nightmare and, as if they weren't enough, we were suddenly faced by a boulder-strewn stream with an almost vertical face on the far side. The car made a gallant effort (Mr. Lygo-Baker now had his eyes firmly closed) to surmount this obstacle and suffered only minor injuries fortunately. If you could have seen Mr. Lygo-Baker's face and those of Adrian, Lee, Simon and Shaun you would have realised what the phrase 'A whiter shade of pale' really meant. Further amazing hazards were still ahead but finally we arrived, shaken and shaking.

The party were soon to be shaken by two further shocks. First, although pre-warned, was the realisation that the only toilet was an elsan bucket. To a man - well, almost - we all vowed never to use that! But the calls of nature, coupled with the alternative of satisfying them actually surrounded by nature, brought us to accept the necessity of getting used to 'the little shed'. The second shock, as we explored the cottage, was that there was no Elsan Blue and Mr. Jeffries told Mr. Lygo-Baker that we would have to go back to Brecon to purchase some. Mr. Lygo-Baker, remarkably quietly and calming a real desire to become hysterical, spoke to his car in an attempt to persuade it to make another trip back down that horrendous track! Mr. Lygo-Baker still swears to this day that he could hear his car crying tears of resigned despair.

On returning from Brecon, Mr. Jeffries and Mr. Lygo-Baker found Mrs. Woodley reeling from the discovery of what it is like to cope with the demands of 17 children in the Welsh countryside- near a stream. Soggy socks, soaked wellies and wet jeans began piling up. Simon, Shaun, and Adrian had got wet feet. But horror and homesickness were soon transformed into a sense of wonder as we set off together up stream, past glittering waterfalls, the autumn colours of heathland and the lonely cries of birds seeing their special territory being invaded. The beauty impressed us all - and was only shattered momentarily first when Kate Woodley got a bootfull of water and secondly when Mr. Lygo-Baker pointed out a buzzard- our first bird of prey - this particular buzzard was in fact a heron in disguise- a point not lost on Evan Jeffries!

We made our way up to the Tarn and found small newts in some abundance. As we descended the hills, the small cottage that had appeared fairly uncomfortable at first sight now seemed cozy and welcoming. The adults began the preparation of the meal in the light from the gas mantles and the blaze of a log fire. 17 hungry children sitting at tables, after much hard work by Stella and Jayne, smelling the sizzle of sausages- and suddenly the lights begin to go down, the gas rings get lower and the whole scene becomes more and more romantic. Did I say romantic? IN fact what was happening was that the gas was running out! After several desperate 'phone calls, Mr. Lygo-Baker and Mr. Jeffries had a prolonged wrestling match with numerous gas cylinders in the dark in order to restore the situation to something like normal.

Normal is not a word one can use to describe the first bedtime. Everyone's intention seemed to be to make as much noise as possible- and, if you thought it was bad at ten, you should have heard it by half-past eleven! Outside, however, the moonlight was soft and apart from the farmhouse at Cwm-llwch, silence had descended on the Brecon Beacons.

Believe it or not the second day began as noisily as the first had ended- and it began early. By half-past seven, breakfast was eaten and the first chores were being completed. Oh, by the way, Simon, Shaun and Adrian had got wet feet again. After several diversions but in warm sunshine with mist below us in the valleys, we began the ascent of the Beacons- Mrs. Woodley determined to prove that she really was a natural mountaineer and Vicky, sporting fashionable pixie boots, Jayne and Stella equally determined to prove they were not.

As we approached the steep side of Corn Du, what a motley crew we looked! 20 Ben Gunns escaped from Treasure Island! We were overtaken by a group of army cadets taking the same route. They were to be amazed, however, by the fact that not only did we all reach the summit of Pen-y-Fan, even Mrs. Woodley -Stella by now striding out ahead as if she had been born on the mountains- but they were actually beaten to the summit by Paul Parry- renamed Sir Edmund Hilary for the morning- though if truth be told he looked more like Sherpa Tensing by the end of the week despite several unplanned dips in the stream. At least, Simon, Shaun and Adrian did try to keep clean by continually washing their feet!

The descent from Pen-y-Fan, a difficult task for the experienced, was carried out most sensibly- much credit to the children- (oh, and Mrs. Woodley, of course). So it was back to the farm, Lesley and Dale deciding it was quicker to return by running downhill (and shrieking loudly) Shaun and Adrian forward-rolling (much credit due here to Mr. Lygo-Baker's P.E. teaching), Darren sliding down on his backside, and Kate Woodley hiding her anorak so well that none of us ever saw it again. On the way down the river bed, a sheep made a valiant attempt to frighten Mr. Lygo-Baker by leaping over bracken towards him. Mr. Lygo-Baker did an excellent impression of being scared merely to humour the beast.

So it was back to a cup of tea and a little light sketching. This was followed by, as most events were, Cwm-llwch's favourite game- trying to get your wellies wet. Simon, Shaun and Adrian excelled at this with all the other children trying hard to keep up with their fast pace. But Hayley, James, Paul, Evan, Nan, Helen soon realised that Shaun would be given the title of past master! He suddenly produced his master stroke- after Simon had attempted the coup de grace by being first to soak his jumper, and Adrian had soaked both pairs of his own footwear as well as a pair borrowed from Lee- Shaun arrived at the farmhouse door having won the gold medal- complete immersion! Supper time that evening was accompanied by wet, steaming clothes hung in front of the fire and by a no mean achievement on behalf of Mr. Lygo-Baker- he actually cooked a not inedible omelette. Wales was obviously bringing out the best in all of us. It was certainly making Mrs. Woodley laugh!

The quiz on the story of Tommy Jones was only marred by Mr. Lygo-Baker making a quite acceptable mistake- at least acceptable to all but Evan and Paul. Hayley won the mars bar by the way. Spurred on by a desire to go to the shops the following day but worried by the sudden appearance of stories of Welsh ghosts and beasts about to appear, the second night was quieter than the first with the cottage still wreathed in beautiful moonlight.

It is here, however, that I must mention the hazelnuts. Collecting nature's bounty was one of the delights for the party- and cracking hazelnuts caused many a laugh. There is, I am certain, a place for hazelnuts but I am now convinced that that place is not a bedroom. Standing sternly lecturing children on the need to be quiet and ~~the~~ healthily stealing across the floor only to tread on yet

another hazelnut causes further outbursts of uncontrollable giggling. Such is the quickest route to utter frustration.

The following morning saw the Beacons shrouded in low cloud and we drove through light drizzle towards the caves at Dan-Yr-Ogof. With Mrs. Woodley navigating we spent a pleasant time travelling round country lanes despite the fact that quite a few began to seem most familiar! At the caves we did not have to wait long before our guided tour. This was spoken in English but the Welsh accent made it difficult to understand. The strange mystery of stalactite and stalagmite growing like cave fungus and the awesome dark beauty of cool caves made a real impression for the majority of us had never seen such a complex before. The dinosaur park also impressed. Some of us managed to be selective in choosing our souvenirs whilst others supplemented their diet with even more sweets. We left the caves looking even more like the cave dwellers than the original inhabitants.

This troglodyte impression was increased as our necks were inspected by the gentleman at the Mountain Centre which we visited next. He seemed particularly impressed by Darren's. The centre was interesting and answered quite a few questions that had arisen on the previous days about the area. The children left happily since they had been promised some free time. This meant choosing another area- the car park- to try to perfect the game of getting wet. The game was now accompanied by loud whistles since Shaun had chosen as his souvenir a silver whistle. Being told that whistles were the mountaineers' distress signal did not deter Shaun from attempting to attract all the mountain rescue teams from Inverness to Dartmoor. Surprisingly, as we left straggling back in twos and threes to the cottage, everyone seemed to have failed in the game since we were all reasonably dry. Soon after our return, however, Simon, Shaun and Adrian revealed their skill once more- once more wetting their socks and assorted shoes. I am now convinced that Wales, when translated from the Gaelic, actually means 'Wet Wellies'.

Mr. Jeffries, Evan, Nan, Hayley and Lee could not be deterred from going on another walk in the hills and Mr. Lygo-Baker became temporarily insane when agreeing to let his hair be washed- a traumatic experience not to be repeated! Yet another excellent meal- with more excellent help from Jayne, Stella and Darren, and yet another excellent Lygo-Baker omelette- followed. The potato was the only real problem. Unfortunately on the first evening, Mr. Lygo-Baker (due certainly to the lack of light) used less than half the packet thus producing rather wet, runny spud. This meant that the potato this last evening had more of the consistency of concrete. It even bent Mrs. Woodley's whisk!

The evening was meant to be concluded by a sing song but several of the party found sleep as difficult on this occasion as they had on the first night. Accompanied by Shaun's whistle, Lesley's voice, and a chorus of gigglers, it was only sheer exhaustion in the end that produced silence- a silence only broken by Mr. Lygo-Baker achieving the ultimate in snoring's repertoire, managing to develop from imitating a vacuum cleaner to taking his bird of prey topic seriously by imitating an owl- and finally by Lesley, who eventually got the message we had been telling her all week, when she shouted out in her sleep, "Shut your mouth!"

The final morning saw hurried preparations- in fact everyone worked hard. We even searched for Kate's missing anorak. The main party and Mr. Jeffries lugged the equipment down to the mini bus and the car in the car park, leaving the rest to clean and tidy the house. Sterling work was done by Nan and Stella sweeping out the rooms whilst Evan and Darren made another vain attempt to seek out the lesser-spotted Woodley anorak. We said our sad farewells to Cwm-llwch and began the journey home.

We were soon back at the Services at the Severn Bridge eating our last packed lunch and already beginning to reminisce. Tiredness was now creeping up on all of us and poor old Shaun admitted to having an earache. "Oh, dear, Shaun," said Mr. Lygo-Baker, quite concerned. "What's caused that, do you think?" Shaun was quick to reply. "It's that silly whistle I bought". Others suggested it could also have been rising damp.

As we sped back to Salisbury, no one regretted their trip and everyone determined that one day we would go back. (Mrs. Woodley said we'd got to look for Kate's anorak). I am sure that we all meant that- Cwm-llwch could have no greater compliment. It really is a beautiful place.

p.t.o.

My thanks are due to all the children for their company and their smiling faces, to the parents back home who helped and encouraged (probably to get rid of us for a week) especially Mrs. Hammond for her help with the food, to Mrs. Woodley for her refusal not to find something amusing in everything that happened and to Mr. Jeffries who inspired the visit and whose good humour helped us all to survive. Thank you all.

Alan Lygo-Baker.  
Headteacher.  
October 18th, 1984.