

For Homerton magazine.

Children's Holiday Venture

In the 1960s and 1970s many Homerton students took part, as volunteers, in the running of summer camps for deprived children in Germany, Austria and the UK. The camps were started in the early 60s under the auspices of a registered charity, Children's Relief International (CRI), based in Cambridge. Initially, the main beneficiaries were the children of families who had fled to the west at the end of the Second World War. Later, camps were run in the UK for children from deprived areas.

It is now about 50 years since we ran the camps and we thought it was a good time to celebrate our golden anniversary. To this end we have established a website which will enable past volunteers to share their memories and photographs. The link to the website is at the end of the article. We have sought to publicise the website in various college magazines and we are most grateful to the Homerton magazine for publishing this article to bring information about the project to Homerton graduates. When we published our material in other college publications, the hit rate on the website rose significantly so we know that there is an interest out there. We hope that the response from Homerton supports that belief.

The first camps in the early 60s were run by groups of male chauvinistic Cambridge undergraduates. It was not long before they realised that they needed the help and support of the ladies and so they turned to Homerton and the ladies colleges of the University. The fact that Homerton was a college where students concentrated on education meant that these volunteers were bringing relevant knowledge and experience to join the enthusiasm of all members of the team. I led a camp in Germany in 1967 and well remember the vital part played by Janet, Judi and Marj (and one other whose name, to my shame, I cannot remember) as they took charge of the cooking arrangements. Before the camp they drew up the lists of essential requirements, some of which had to be bought in England before departure, and designed the menus against which the regular shopping expeditions would have to purchase. Catering for about 30 hungry children and 10 equally hungry adults, in the open air all day, was a challenging experience for us all. Girl guide experience was invaluable. But there was much more than just cooking.

From an early stage the camps were mixed. The presence of female team members was essential when it came to the care of prepubescent and teenage girls. Young boys were not averse to a motherly hug after an accidental knock or during an emotional bedtime, not a natural skill for an average male undergraduate. This account is from my point of view as a male team leader. If it is wrong, I hope that you who remember the camps will correct and add to the story I tell.

Today, there would be a flood of health and safety documentation, police checks, driving checks and all the other paraphernalia of modern enterprises before being allowed to take charge of a group of young children for a two week camping holiday. Obviously there are good reasons for this but one simultaneously feels nostalgic for a time when there were very limited rules and we were at liberty to do pretty much as we wished.

For my part, I remember in particular two activities: the small camp and the team dressing up and hiding in the village. Several of the camps developed the practice of establishing a sub-camp at a walkable distance from the main camp to which expeditions would be sent for two or three nights of more basic camping. A practice developed whereby a small group went from the main camp to 'attack' the sub-camp. Surprise was the essence and as the 'attack' became an expected feature more ways were found to approach the small camp while maintaining the surprise element. I well remember wading up a river to get to the small camp. The subsequent surprise made the wetting worthwhile. A more peaceable activity was when the team got into disguises and tried to merge into the village in such a way that the children would not find them. Philip Seddon (Jesus College, 1964-67) would still be working with the road gang if we had not taken pity on him and pointed him out to the children.



The question is, 'Which is Philip?'

Most of the activity was in the open air, hiking over the hills, walking in the woods playing football or lazing around the camp.



Judi Venner walks in the woods with two children while a group of girls are ready to leave on a hike with their guides.

.Blonde Marj Bannister stands beside David Beeby while red headed Janet Billingshurst hides behind his shoulder. All three girls are Homerton students from 1967. I hope they see this and feel able to get in touch.

On the camp I led in 1967 I was lucky to have a very musical team and doubly lucky because one of the team had managed to scrounge a redundant organ played by air pump from a church near Cambridge.

1967, you will recall, was the year of "The Sound of Music". We did several collections while the film was running at



the old Regents Cinema in Cambridge. So, armed with the organ and sheet music, we travelled out to Germany (yes, I know it should have been Austria) and set the hills alight around St Peter, near Freiburg, with the sound of music. Half the children that year came from an orphanage run by Catholic nuns. The nuns came to visit the camp in a van driven by the orphanage's priest. The priest celebrated mass after which we naturally gave a concert for the nuns of the music from "The Sound of Music". It was a very memorable and moving performance. How much the children understood of the story I do not know but they, the nuns and the team enjoyed it.

As a final note, I must emphasise the purpose of the whole exercise. We are celebrating the golden anniversary over a period in our lives when we not only enjoyed ourselves but also, I believe, did some good. To celebrate properly we need to hear from you. So please get in touch with the website and add your memories and photographs.

The link is: <http://www.chvarchive.net>