

## **A detailed history of Walton Firs campsite**

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Bill Cook was the warden at Walton Firs from 1970 to 1989, when Dave and Sue McIntosh took over. This short history is mostly taken from the notes he passed on to Dave in 1989.

### **Pre World War II**

During the 1930s, the present site of Walton Firs was a private golf course, owned or leased by a gentleman named Mynett . The old wooden bungalow, now the Service Team quarters, was the club-house. The property, which was most likely leased, reverted to the Burhill Estates a couple of years prior to the outbreak of War in 1939.

Some time around 1936 “Scottie” Robertson, a Scout from the then Wandsworth, Putney & Barnes District, discovered the abandoned 9 hole golf course and through him a number of groups used the site for weekend camps.

Wandsworth, Putney and Barnes Scout District obtained the use of the land, including access to Manor Pond, for camping and Scouting activities at this time. There were no facilities and water was obtained from neighbouring premises. About 1937, WPB District held a District camp on the site, Imperial Headquarters (now Headquarters) were able to purchase the property in 1938. The Commissioner at I.H.Q. dealing with the transaction, was Colonel Walton. It is also suggested in some of the notes that the purchase was made possible by a considerable donation from Colonel Walton. Consequently the site was named ‘Walton Firs’. The ‘Firs’ are not fir-trees in any case, being Scots Pines!

The site officially became I.H.Q. property in 1939 but the outbreak of War on 3<sup>rd</sup> September of that year, prevented camping taking place, or for any official opening of the site to take place. Prior to the takeover, the toilet block and associated septic tank had been installed.

## The War Period 1939-45

Throughout the War period, a Royal Artillery Anti-Aircraft Battery was stationed on the site and they had the use of the toilets and water supplies. Up until the 1960s, there was still evidence of Nissen hut foundations by the entrance to Manor Pond area in Convent Lane. During the War years, the voluntary camp Warden was Bill Currie, a Commissioner from Wandsworth. He spent weekends on the site, to keep an eye on the property. When camping rules were relaxed, in 1943, Olave, Lady Baden-Powell officially opened the site and planted an oak. In the area near the present Providore, to commemorate the event. The 'Lady B-P' tree was destroyed in the gale of October 1987.

## Post War

After the War, the site was administered by Bill Currie as Warden and his Assistant Camp Warden was Bill Nutt, another Commissioner from the Wandsworth area. In the early 50s, Peter Lankaster was appointed as permanent Bailiff (as the Warden was then known). Service crews were now appointed from a bit further afield and included volunteers from Walton and Weybridge and from the Cranford, Hounslow and Heston areas. During Peter's term of office, the bridge over the Ravine was built and most of the main members of this structure were old, still sound telegraph poles. Work was also carried out to provide buildings as workshops and a small building which became known as "Smokey Joes" which served as a small shop in the summer and as a winter accommodation building.

In 1960, Peter became a Field Commissioner and Mr. Norman Squibb, a Scouter from the Isle of Wight, became Bailiff. Soon after this, the title of Bailiff was changed to that of Warden. Much development continued under Norman, by way of building and fencing of the site.

He extended the plumbing to include extra stand-pipes in the camping areas. Much of the timber used for this work, came from the wood-pile. The wood for this was provided and regularly supplied by the firm of Henry Smith of Wandsworth, coffin manufacturers. Some of this wood was of very high quality, oak, mahogany, etc., and they continued to supply the wood for many years, well into the early 1980s. Norman retired from the post, for health reasons, in 1964.

The new Warden was Malcolm 'Mac' Smith, transferred from the Great Tower site in the Lake District. Mac had been born in India, son of a Pipe-Major in a Scottish Regiment. During Mac's term of office, the Training Hut, in what is now called 'Cub Scout Field' was built. Tragically, Mac died on the site, on Boxing Day, 1969. An English Ash tree was planted in memory of Mac Smith, in 1970, by 'Paddy' Russell, a scouter of Morden and St. Helier, he being a friend of the family. Present at this planting were many friends of 'Mac', including the Camp Commissioners, the HQ Camp Site Manager, all the Service Teams, Peter

Lankaster, former Bailiff and many personal and scouting friends. Prayers were said by a former Clergyman friend of the Smiths.

The next Warden was another transferee from Great Tower, Bill Cook, who had been a Cub, Scout, Rover, A.S.M., S.M., D.S.M, and A.D.C., in Walton and Weybridge. During his twenty years at the site, ladies' toilets were added, the new toilet-block and its pump-house were built and the Pembroke building erected. The Site Cub Scout Day was instituted in 1973 and the Scout Air Rifle Championships were started in 1977. In that period the new Providore was built and that period also saw the provision of a new Bungalow for the Warden and his family. Also in the 1980s, a new system of site management came into being, giving the Warden a considerable amount of budget control and each Warden, from then on, submitted yearly budgets. The highest Walton Firs camping figures were recorded during this period but have no doubt been surpassed since. On provision of the new bungalow, the old cedar wood bungalow became Service Team accommodation. The old site office, at the camp centre, was removed en-bloc to another site and the site office moved to a room inside the Service Team bungalow. The transfer of the Service Team to the cedar building did entail heating, lighting and plumbing alterations. The new Warden's bungalow had been built by Skiltons, another Cobham building firm. Shoosmith & Lee no longer did new building projects although they continued their long association with Walton Firs in the assistance plumbing-wise, in emergency situations. In 1987, the administration of the site was changed to come under Bedford Scout County. The Site Advisory Committee was reformed and consisted of Scouts from Bedfordshire and also representatives from some of the major users of the site and the Service Teams. A site committee had existed since the early 1970s and some of its members transferred to this new committee.

It was decided that the site should have an emergency sick bay and the site office in the Service Team bungalow was converted to this, a new site office and reception building being put up in the position formerly occupied by the old site office. It is of interest to note that the memorial garden seat at the camp centre, is in memory of a Wandsworth Scouter, long associated with the site and the provision of the seat's foundations was the work of 1<sup>st</sup> Teddington, long associated with the site.

Bedford County and especially its Service Team have always been strong supporters of the site special events, particularly our Cub Scout Days.

### **The storm of October 1987**

The devastating storm of October 1987 caused much damage to the site but did not prevent the Air Rifle Championships taking place that weekend. The approach road to the site had to be opened up to allow this event and this work was carried out by the Warden, his wife and two local scouters from 4<sup>th</sup> Walton on Thames Group. A couple of hundred trees were destroyed and many more

damaged. Power cables to the Providore were dragged out of their junction boxes and the site had a complete atmosphere of devastation. Telephone communication was destroyed but a system of communications was instituted, using Citizens' Band and Amateur Radio bringing in the services of a C.B.er in Leatherhead and amateurs in Richmond and Luton and the Warden's stepson as a telephone contact in Epsom. That weekend, thanks to the very professional service of a Service Team Leader (BBC Engineer) power was restored, and tested, to the site Providore. Camping for the next few weeks had, of course, to be cancelled until areas were cleared and some emergency rules put into force. The disaster meant much extra work, building and forestry-wise, including repairs to the Chapel. The Service Teams were backed up every weekend by a strong Service Team from the County and extra power saws, etc., were hired. What had seemed an almost impossible situation gradually was taken in hand.

Bill Cook left his post as Warden in October 1989, on retirement and finalised his note by saying, "To list all those who have helped the site over the years since 1939 would be an impossible task so, I close, with this sincere thought: Thank you all, both those mentioned and those not so named."

## 1987 onwards

Sue and Dave McIntosh took over as Wardens in October 1989 when Bill Cook retired. They were also ex Royal Navy and Dave gave up his job as an Electrical Officer in the Merchant Navy to come to Walton Firs.

There was still quite a lot of damage remaining after the 1987 hurricane and a further big storm in January 1990 meant there was even more trees to clear. Advice was taken from the Forestry Commission and Walton Firs entered into a re planting scheme for which a grant was received to help put back native trees. 3000 saplings were planted over the following 12 months.

During the 90's archery, climbing & abseiling, canoeing and an adventure course were introduced to the site. The site was also re wired and a new water system fitted. All these jobs were completed with the help of the Volunteer Service Teams. During this time the perimeter fences were renewed and others repaired and CCTV was fitted with cameras covering the driveway and car park.

At the end of the 90's another accommodation building was added making three in total. The second hand, timber building came from Brunswick Square in London and the frame work was erected by the people who had originally taken it down. Everything else was completed by the Warden and Volunteer Service Teams. All the team members helped with the work and everyone felt very proud with what they had achieved - an accommodation building with bunk rooms to sleep 24, a kitchen & dining area and a wash room suitable for people with special needs.

During the 2000's other activities have been added including a maze, Frisbee golf and giant games. The toilet blocks have been refurbished and more ladies toilet facilities provided.

We have started 2006 by trying to source suppliers who will provide the shop with sweets and soft drinks that do not contain artificial additives and colourings. We have managed to find a company to supply a new "slush" machine and that will deliver drinks that are 99% fruit juice and free from additives.

## Walton Firs American links

"My good friend Bill Cook, the former long tenured Warden at Walton Firs Scout Camp, recently sent me copies of both "Scouting" and "Surrey Scout". I read both with interest, particularly in respect to the articles about "Interlink '94", and the fact that it was supposedly the "first" Anglo-American event in Surrey. Cliff Beck partially corrected the statement by offering evidence that Interlink '94 was not the first joint event. In fact, the first occurred at Walton Firs in October of 1980. I was there in 1980 with Troop 184 of the American School in Cobham (featured today in the photos in "Scouting" from Interlink '94). Now I remember Bill Cook introducing me to Cliff and the 9<sup>th</sup> Walton Air Scouts, with whom our Troop participated in the competition. And I remember it as a grand event, for learning about what the British Scout movement is all about, and the excellent skills that Scouts from both sides of the Atlantic were able to share that weekend. Now Cliff forgot to tell you that the second and third such events actually occurred in 1981 and 1982, again at Bill Cook's Walton Firs site. I was Scoutmaster of American Troop 184 in 1981 and 1982, and again they were very successful, fun international Scouting events.

A word about Walton Firs ... we remember some great times at the site. "Chief" Bill Cook ran a marvellously clean, tight ship at the Firs, and I will vouch for a lot of Scouters who appreciated the "Firs" environment, where every camper was expected to do his best to leave his camp ground in a little better condition than what he found it in. Our lads in Troop 184 were expected to live up to the principles of the Scout Oath and Law, and so abiding by the rules were not a problem ... Living close to Walton Firs, we took full advantage, and you could see us camped out there on the coldest February weekends! I am proud of three American Eagle Scout candidates from Troop 184 who undertook work projects at the Firs in the early 1980s. David Griffiths rebuilt the Chapel perimeter and altar, Michael Piker designed and constructed the Totem pole in front of the Warden's bungalow. While a third scout named Michael Tedford constructed the gateway to the Campfire circle.

I can ramble on, so to speak on the many fine Anglo-American experiences I and my family have enjoyed over the years, and continuing through today. And I just somehow feel that if all the facts were REALLY known, there probably were a few more Surrey "Interlinks" that have been lost forever to memory." W. Blumreich III

## Walton Firs – The name

The Commissioner at I.H.Q. dealing with the transaction, was Colonel Walton and thus the site was named 'Walton Firs' – nothing to do with Walton on Thames – the site, in any case, being in the Parish of St. Peter, Hersham. The 'Firs' are not fir-trees in any case, being Scots Pines. It may be of interest to learn that the trees from whence the site logo and brand were taken, were trees to the north of the property and not actually in the site's boundaries.

## The Ravine

Bill Cook who was the warden before Dave McIntosh, wrote this: -

'To digress, people often had ideas about the origin of the Ravine. Versions of its origin varied from it being an old river bed to being an old road. A river could not have so existed, owing to the close proximity of the River Mole. Also, where was the use of such a road? The old Portsmouth Road had existed for centuries and the present Seven Hills Road (in older times known as 'Old Common Road') is shown on maps more than two hundred years old. The present writer of these notes, when Warden of the site, in the 1970s raised the matter with Surrey County Archeologists and their explanation seems the real and obvious one. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the area was subject to much landscape gardening layout, the area occupied by the present Manor Pond was a marshy expanse with a stream running through it. The stream still exists and travels West to East through the pond. Part of the area, immediately below the present Ravine was dammed, to make a lake. The volume of earth to provide this dam closely approximates to the volume of the Ravine and it is obvious that the Ravine area was excavated to provide the earth to dam the water and thus produce, artificially, Manor Pond and the little Adder Pond to the west of the main stretch of water. The writer of these notes is convinced that this is the true story of the Ravine's origin.'