

## **Experiences at St. Madoc Christian Youth Camp 1947 – 52/4**

In the summer of 2005 (or 4)! Four of us – Malcolm and Joan (nee Vaughan) Jones and my wife, Peggy (nee Phillips) and I, Graham Nicholas (known as Nick), decided to visit St. Madoc Christian Youth Camp. As we got to the top of the concrete lane we found a gate shut and a notice PRIVATE. As we were young and fearless and it wasn't raining, we opened the gate and drove down the concrete lane and parked in the place below the chapel.

As we started walking up the path past the chapel we were spotted!! The look on the faces of those who had spotted us was as though the question going through their mind was "What are these geriatrics doing coming to a youth camp?"!! No, not really. When we explained why we were here and related some of our reminiscences at Llanmadoc, we were given a wonderful welcome, a conducted tour of the chapel, kitchen, dorms and finally, tea, biscuits and a lovely chat in the dining room. We thoroughly enjoyed our visit and we hope that they had enjoyed our reminiscences.

During the summer of 2006, Howard Roberts, a very dear friend, and I, visited the camp on at least three occasions. We had a cuppa in the Café/Shop/Post Office which was opened up some time after the original was shut down. It was a village enterprise which an old work colleague of mine Randolph Jenkins and others were responsible for setting up and running. We returned there for a lovely light lunch after visiting the camp.

We walked from the café to the camp which Howard hadn't visited before. We met Matthew and explained why we were here and told him of the precious visits made by others and me 59 years ago. By the second and third visit Matthew suggested that my old friends and I should put on paper what we had experienced all those years ago.

So this is it.

Although many, many others came from Jerusalem Baptist Church in Briton Ferry, these memories are based on what can be recollected by Malcolm and Joan (who have lived in Cardiff for 50+ years), Ian and Norma (nee Williams) Gower (who have lived in Hatfield, Herts for 50+ years) and Peggy and me who live in Neath. All three couples have celebrated their Golden Wedding Anniversaries over the last few years, which is nice.

The war having not long finished, during which holidays were virtually non-existent, it was with eager anticipation that a group from Jerusalem Baptist Chapel, Briton Ferry, near Neath in South Wales were to be taken to Llanmadoc during August Bank Holiday Week (at the beginning of the month in those days) 1947. A smaller group had been there in 1946, Norma included, but this was the first time that Ian and I amongst others had been there, (Peggy, Malcolm and Joan started in 1949.) to taste the delights of Saint Madoc CYC as it was known then. All these holidays were arranged by a few people and we are indebted to all, but especially "Simsie", the late Miss Eileen Sims. She was marvellous, and it was only in hindsight, that we realize how good she was to us.

Delights there were, and I mean it. There were none of the mod-cons of today 2008, but what wonderful carefree times we had, rain or shine; and we made our own entertainment.

So, what differences are there now?

### Mode of Transport

Nowadays, all journeys are made by car right into the camp. In the early days, each with our cases we caught a bus from Briton Ferry to Neath. Then another bus from Neath to Swansea from where we caught a third, upstairs in a double decker bus, marvelling at the views we saw on the way down to Llanmadoc where we were dropped by the old Post Office.

For the first two or three years, we had to carry our cases to the camp. For the boys, this usually meant carrying 2 cases as we felt we couldn't let the girls carry theirs – the journey was about 1 – 1.5 miles. In those days there were no wheels on cases. In later years, a tractor and trailer was available to carry the cases, but we still had to walk.

### Costs etc.

The cost then was £2 or 2 guineas a week (2.20p), and we had to take our ration book! for a number of years. There were 100 – 120 of us there during the week. We were always joined by a smaller group from Bicester, while over the years there were groups from Ebbw Vale, Ystradmynach, Swansea, Llanelli and Port Talbot. In 1951 there was a group from mainland Europe comprising of French, Finnish and others.

### Beds

These were iron framed, double-decker bunks with straw (later some were with kapok, a bale of which we found on the beach) mattresses (pallias) and pillows. Over the years single wood framed beds were introduced. There were probably about 25 persons in each hut.

### Toilets

As far as the men's toilet was concerned they were fabricated huts containing 3 cubicles, each containing a chemical toilet. The 'door' of each cubicle was made of sacking which completely covered the entrance. At the bottom of each 'door' was a piece of 4feet by 2inches wood the length equal to the width of the cubicle. This piece of wood held the 'door' in place. The chemical toilets were emptied into the cesspit every morning by the caretaker.

### Washing facilities

Rainwater from the roof of the pavilion was channelled to run into large water tanks, one on each side of the pavilion. There was a bench by each tank and 3 or 4 enamel bowls also on the benches. They were dipped into the tank and then we washed in this water.

### Water for drinking and cooking

In the early years, this water had to be carried every week day, from the pistle in the village. It was situated beyond the old Post Office and as far as I can remember, 6 or 7 people with various utensils were involved each of those days.

Various other points of interest??!

On Wednesday afternoon, (Foreign guests week 1951) all the campers were invited to visit the grounds of Mr. & Mrs. Burr's house. We were given cakes/biscuits, pop/squash and played various games. A photograph is included showing some from the 'foreigners' trip playing one of the games.

The village shop was a great point of interest and adventure. It was run by a Mrs. Rees and her daughter, both of whom were very, very deaf. The shop was like Aladdin's cave and looked a bit of a shambles but both ladies knew exactly where everything was. After initial communication problems, we spent many a pleasant visit there.

At night, when some of the heavy sleepers were in the land of nod, the pyjama collars were sown to the pillow case. This was usually successful. But when an attempt at the same time was made to tie a toe of a protruding foot to the bottom bed rail unfortunately the victim usually woke up.

The lighting was provided by paraffin lamps – 2 per hut, hung on the rafters; it was some years later that electricity and water were laid on, but still no showers, or proper washbasins in our time.

We were usually divided into groups carrying out various duties. Fetching water from the village: preparing vegetables: serving meals: laying tables and washing up. When cleaning the veg. and washing the dishes we sang hymns and songs of the times some of which were 'My grandfather's' clock & 'You are my sunshine.' Even though I say it myself the harmony was really good – a combination of chapel upbringing and Welsh voices! Sadly there has been a serious decline in the ability to harmonise as is apparent in Rugby International Matches also the introduction of modern' songs' to replace hymns.

The washing of the dishes for 100 – 120 was carried out this way. 1 or 2 people did the washing up in 1 or 2 large zinc baths – incidentally the washing up water ended up looking rather a mess. The remainder of the team walked around in a circle, picking up the washed dishes, wiping them as they walked and then put them in piles ready for future use. The singing and banter helped to make all these tasks enjoyable.

One morning I was one of a team in the kitchen, and the tray of bacon rashers the cook was carrying tilted, depositing a fair number of rashers onto the kitchen floor. At the best of times this floor was very far from being in pristine condition. Unperturbed, she picked up the rashers one by one and wiped them, both sides, in her apron. When she had finished, she said with a gleam in her eye – 'No one will know anyway!!'

Another incident occurred, which I did not personally witness was that the cook's teeth fell in the gravy! At least she didn't have to clean them again that day!

It must be pointed out that the kitchen of those days was nothing like it is now. The cooking facilities were ancient & I have already commented on the condition of the floor.

### Blankets

If anyone shook their blankets at the end of the week, quite a lot of dust and sand scattered about! I don't know how often they were washed! I presume we took our own sheets – but I can't remember.

### Health

Despite the episodes with the bacon and the cook's teeth, the blankets and also the state of the washing up I cannot remember anyone being ill with a tummy problem. There was one occasion when a young girl had appendicitis and an ambulance was called for. In those days, the track to the camp wasn't wide enough for an ambulance to use it. Instead it had to come through the field where the caravans are now – there weren't any then. On its return journey, the ambulance got stuck so a number of us went to help its progress. Unfortunately the rapid rotation of the wheels in the mud, left its mark on us, but it eventually got out of the field.

We always attended Sunday morning services in the chapel in the village, walking of course. Our evening services were held in the Barn/Chapel.

The Pavilion had a table tennis table which was in use for a lot of the time and various entertainments took place at night. For 2 or 3 years, meetings were held there in the morning. One year, Malcolm wouldn't get to go there, so we carried him in his bed into the Pavilion to make sure he heard at least one talk!

In the evenings, Monday to Friday we gathered in the Dining Room for cocoa after the service I think and then the 'Sandpaper' was read out by Bill Thomas (Editor). This was compiled by Bill and Steel Thomas (Chief Reporter) and comprised the various kinds of events which had happened during the day. This was eagerly awaited, listened to and always enjoyed.

On Friday nights – weather permitting – we lit a bonfire on the headland and it was always a nice occasion.

At least one year, Don Gibbon, who incidentally donated one stained glass window to the Chapel, brought his father along. He was in his 80's or 90's and slept in our dorm fitting in easily. On one or two nights, he must have been having a dream when he kept saying, 'O dear, dear, dear, dear'. This woke quite a few of us and we started to say it ourselves in the same way. Well, we ended up laughing hysterically and probably woke the whole dorm. When we meet, we often talk about Llanmadoc, and usually this incident crops up and we start saying 'o dear, dear etc'.

### Earning our keep

For the first few years, Ian, Malcolm and I only came for one week and then only with the group from Briton Ferry. But then for 3 or 4 years, we stayed on after the main holiday to 'earn our keep' for 2 or 3 weeks. These too were great times. The first task we had was to widen the lane/track which led to the camp. This is now the wide concrete lane which is the only entrance, but wider still than in our days. Another task was to paint the chapel roof. This was really a large area but the task

was expedited when I accidentally tipped one of tins of paint, so as to avoid a mess and save paint, I'm sure we did it in half the expected time.

Another task was to clear the ground and make a rockery under the apple tree across the path from the entrance of the chapel. There were 7 of us and we must have pleased Mr. Jeffreys who was the manager there. At the end of the working days, we held tools aloft in order to 'innocently' hit down apples to the multiple of 7. Let's say on our first 'walk', we got 6. So our second 'walk' needed 1! Say 4 fell - we needed 4! I think one day we got 21.

The last task I remember was this. The chemical toilets had to be emptied early every morning. This particular year, indeed for a few years the caretaker was Albert. He had a false leg, and we could hear him approaching before we were able to see him. One day, his leg gave up and he was expected to be away for a few days to get it repaired. We were assigned to carry out the task of emptying the chemical toilets into the cesspit, the existence of which we had never thought about, nor knew of its location. We drew lots for the first day, and Ian lost. He carried out his task courageously. Malcolm and I were overjoyed when Albert turned up after missing only one day. Ian was awarded the D.F.C. – Distinguished Filler of Cesspits.

It was after this noble task that a lyric was composed to the tune of the song London by night – if anyone can remember it.

A Cesspit by night is a wonderful sight  
There is magic abroad in the air  
Some people say they like Cesspits by night  
But me I like Cesspits by day.

Regarding the beach, there were very few pebbles if any, just wonderful sand both sides of the headland, and certainly no reeds or whatever as is now on the Llanelli side of the headland.

We can remember most of our friends from Briton Ferry, a lot of who have sadly passed on. I hope the ones still alive will forgive me for not mentioning their names – they are too many.

We will mention David and Clive from Llanelli who sang a duet 'The Bold Gendarmes'. Then there was Perti Palmio from Finland, who stayed a week with a foreign group and stayed on a week to 'earn his keep'. Jackie Goode from Swansea, Keith and Martin Patton from Port Talbot.

If anyone who was at Llanmadoc reads this ramble, it would be lovely if you got in touch, and perhaps a reunion could be arranged for all us 70+ years old.

In 1973, my wife Peggy, our eldest daughter Karin and I were converted, saved, born again (see John 3: 3) or whatever term you use. Peggy and I were converted under the ministry of Rev. Neil Richards, of Neath Free Evangelical Church. There is always a close affinity with the minister under whose ministry one is converted, but we have never heard a preaching and teaching ministry to better what we heard then. It is our fervent prayer, that our other two daughters and their families, and the wonderful friends we have known over the years, will come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ..

