

Scout Section News

A few weeks ago while visiting 3rd Havering's excellent family camp at Skreens Park I was impressed by the number of Scouts walking the country lanes around the camp site taking part in the Hornchurch District Hiking event. I have to admit to a pang of envy at that point, knowing that last year our own Barton Challenge was cancelled due to lack of support and in previous years has been one of the less well attended district events. Well, by midday on Saturday June 21st, envy was replaced by pride as I drove the last of twelve teams to their start location and passed numerous groups of waving Romford Scouts happily plodding along in day glow jackets.

Over the last couple of years a number of leaders have told me that they can't get their Scouts interested in going for a hike. Well I manned one of the last checkpoints on Saturday and I can tell you that each and every team was full of excited tales of adventure (or misadventure) and was having a thoroughly good time. And that is the key - if we want to get more Scouts outdoors and hiking we need to make sure that our hikes aren't just hikes - they are mini adventures. A wobbly footbridge, a muddy bridleway, walking through a field of cows or a wide game on an overgrown bit of common land are all simple things that will turn a featureless plod into a memorable day out with friends. But the most important thing is to not be too ambitious when route planning.

There is a perception that the Barton challenge is all about long walks, map reading and writing log books. All of the above are part of this event but to do well the teams need a little more. I believe that providing there is no risk of personal injury, there is great benefit to be gained from allowing young people to make mistakes. Providing a safe environment in which to do this is one of the great strengths of Scouting. But having made a mistake, the benefit is only realised if we allow young people to both learn from them and learn how to recover from them.

During the course of the Barton Challenge I frequently met up with or received nervous phone calls from teams who had made navigational blunders. I'm not going to use the 'L' word to describe teams that were in the wrong place because I don't think it applies. In every case after a little prompting the teams were able to tell me more or less exactly where they were. Even the team that eventually won admitted to making a significant map reading error but they recognised it, recovered from it and still kept to time without needing to consult an adult.

Perhaps one of the things that separated the top teams from the bottom teams was that the lower teams seemed to lack the initiative and motivation to cope with and recover from mistakes without some input from the leaders. But that's why we give teams our emergency phone numbers. So the less experienced have someone to consult in case of a problem and if that gives them the confidence to turn up and become more experienced then it must be a good thing.

To Scouts who are growing up in a world of Sat Nav systems and motor cars, strolling around the Essex countryside with a map, compass and log book may seem irrelevant. But events like the Barton are testing far more than navigation skills. We are testing observation, team work, leadership and the ability to recognise and recover from mistakes. Attributes which are as relevant today as they ever were. But the most important thing for the 55 Scouts who took part in the Barton Challenge was that their mini adventures were cracking good fun!

Well done to all the young people who took part and a big thank you to the leaders who organised and help run the event. I'm already looking forward to the next one!

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