

Duke of Edinburgh's Award by Malcolm Scriven

I spent my working life from 1978 until 2013 teaching – mainly A level Economics and Business Studies to 16-18 year olds. I found it a challenging but rewarding career, and still take pleasure in hearing from ex-pupils about their adult lives. I like to think that I was a competent teacher, but the most valuable work I did was outside the classroom.

I joined Stamford High School in September 1998. The Stamford Endowed Schools expect all their staff to take part in extra-curricular activities and I volunteered to help with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award expeditions. The Bronze expeditions involved two days walking and one night camping in Northamptonshire and the Silver involved three days walking and two nights camping in the Peak District. Most of the girls went on to the Gold expedition. They walked the length of the Lake District from Bassenthwaite in the north to Torver in the south over four days with three nights camping.



Silver groups preparing to start their expedition

Most had little or no experience of walking and camping when they started their Bronze expeditions, and we tried to provide comprehensive training on Saturdays throughout the year. Starting with basics from what kit to take and how to pack a rucksack through to nutrition, how to use a Trangia methylated spirit stove, First Aid, and map reading. At Gold, we added rudimentary mountain weather forecasting, emergency procedures and how to summon mountain rescue.

At the age of 14 some of our Bronze students were inattentive at the training sessions but having to sleep in a wet sleeping bag overnight because they hadn't rain proofed their rucksack made them concentrate a little more on the Silver Award. At the start they were nervous and lacked confidence. I remember one brief conversation as we left one group in the rain at the start of a Northampton footpath. "Can we phone you if we get lost?" they asked. "Of course," we replied, "what would you want us to do?" "You could come and get us in the mini-bus", was the quick and eager reply. "But we won't know where to find you." "Oh." In fact, we never lost a group. We knew the routes and where they were likely to go wrong. Although all supervision was 'remote' we usually had a good idea where they were.

We always had staff out within a mile or so of where they should be. On one Silver expedition in the Peak District a group phoned in to say one of the girls had cut her hand on barbed wire and they couldn't stop it bleeding. We phoned the member of staff who was tailing them and, luckily, he was within mobile reception. He reached them within five minutes of their telephone call prompting the comment "You lot are like Ninjas – you appear out of nowhere."

By the Gold Award, the nervous 14 year old had grown into a self-confident and determined young woman. On one Gold training expedition we had two groups walking together and camping wild in the hills while the staff camped at Shap. The forecast had been for rain but in the night it developed into a full gale. I woke in the early hours with the tent straining at its guy ropes and the fabric flapping and banging. I got up to check it was properly pegged down and saw that the others were also up. We were worried about the two groups in the hills and so got the tents down and drove off to the nearest road access to their footpath. As soon as we got there, three of us set off in the wind and rain to find them. We expected to discover something resembling a bomb site with some very wet and dispirited girls – this looked like the premature end of the practice, but after half an hour we saw them walking briskly down a slope towards us.



Silver groups at the end of their second day

in so can you give us those poles or a new tent?”. They finished the practice and went on to complete the qualifying expedition two months later.



A Gold expedition wild camp near Styhead Tarn

“Have you got any spare tent poles?” they called as they approached, “it was a bit windy last night and Fiona’s tent blew down with broken poles.” They had packed up the downed tent in the middle of the storm and put the three ‘homeless’ girls in the other tents after making a cup of tea. We asked if they were happy to continue. “Of course we are, but it was a bit cramped after we took Fiona’s team

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Keswick and Derwent Water from Latrigg

The experience of Duke of Edinburgh Award expeditions gave our students important life skills – taking responsibility for their own actions, planning, teamwork, and problem solving. Some hated the experience and have never been camping since. Others developed a love of the outdoors and now take their families walking in wild places. All experienced immense satisfaction from successfully completing their expedition and still remember the triumphs and setbacks of their experience. They have long since forgotten my cracking lessons on theory of the firm and I know which lessons have been more valuable to them in their adult life.



A Gold group finishing their expedition at Torver