

# AMBER VALLEY CAMP

**By Peter Pollard**

Derby Boys' Grammar School was founded in 1160 – believed to be the second oldest in England – and granted a royal charter by the Tudor Queen Mary in 1554. By 1940 then, the school was a significant part of the life of the town, with its own academic traditions. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War and raids by German bombers on the cities of the Midlands, it was decided to evacuate the boys and staff to the wilds of Derbyshire for safety, and for them life was changed forever.

The place chosen was Amber Valley Camp. Not under canvas, but a collection of comfortable wooden buildings erected in 1939 by the National Camps Corporation to provide holidays for the children of Derby. It was situated about five miles east of Matlock and three miles southwest of Clay Cross in the valley of the River Amber, and it was there that the townie lads of Derby came to enjoy their new life in the country.

The Camp itself was built on a gentle eastward facing slope. The main entrance was at the top of the slope, from where a road ran downhill to the level playing fields at the bottom of the valley. On the left of this road was firstly, the Dining Hall with the Tuckshop attached to the left hand end and Teachers Common Room to the right, and lower down the Wash Place shower block. To the right was a large grassed area – on the right of this were the Caretaker's bungalow and the Sanatorium, at the far end the Assembly Hall/Theatre, while to the left were all the other buildings spread down the slope – six dormitory buildings named after Derbyshire towns ( Birchover, Cromford, Eyam, Wingfield and so on), classrooms, laboratory and gymnasium.

Most of the boys took up residence in the autumn term of 1940, although I didn't join until halfway through the spring term of 1941, following our narrow escape from the German bombs at Chessington. Getting there wasn't easy. The nearest railway station was at Stretton, one and a half miles away over hill and dale. No buses or taxis. Travelling by myself from London via Derby and Ambergate (the only triangular station in the world) meant tramping to the Camp to borrow a trek cart, back to Stretton to collect my luggage and finally dragging the load to the Camp, usually on my own.

All the buildings were of horizontally planked wood, and I seem to remember green painted shutters on some of the windows. Each of the dormitory huts had 25 two tier iron framed bunks, 13 on one side and 2x6 on the other separated by a doorway to the toilets and washbasins. At one end of the hut were two rooms for the resident Master, and at the other, two rooms for Praeposters and Monitors. Each boy had a locker and (usually) a lockable tuck box. In my box I kept a crystal wireless set which I had made in an old cigar box – it worked quite well when the "cat's whisker" was correctly adjusted.

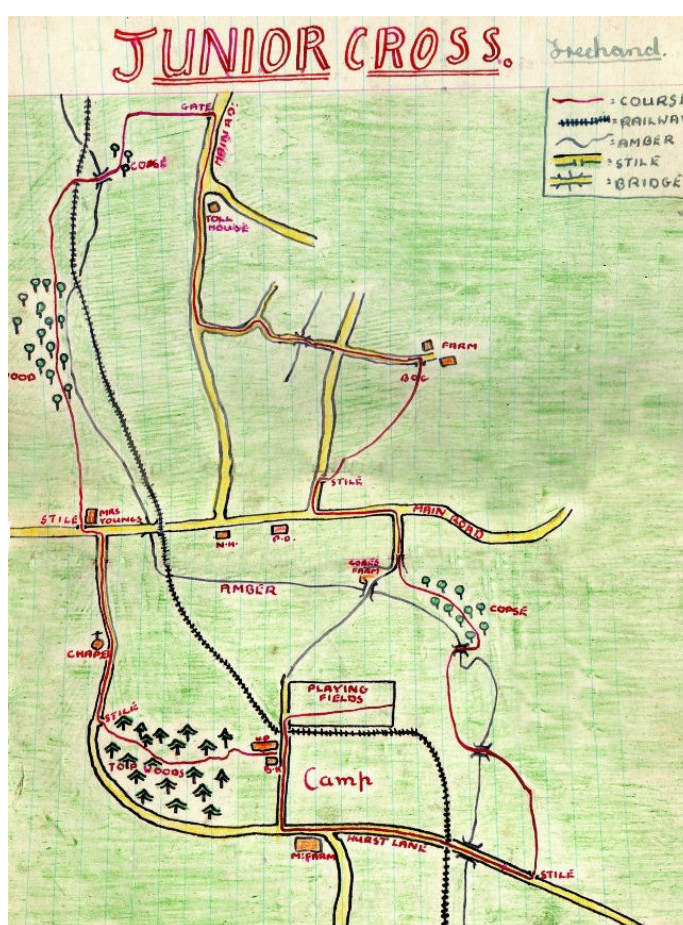
One night in midsummer, all the boys in my dormitory (including me) were talking and laughing loudly long after "lights out", which was against the rules. An angry Master came in, demanding to know who was talking. Being honest, I owned up and

earned myself six cuts with a cane on my backside: everybody else kept quiet and nothing happened, which taught me a valuable lesson. I also occasionally fell foul of the Praeposters and Monitors, who were allowed to beat with a plimsoll or slipper (but not a cane) for minor misdemeanours.

Not surprisingly, my memory has blocked the name of that sadistic Master, but I can remember some of the others with whom I had close dealings. There was the slight frame of Mr Collier James, the art master, bustling round the campus while sucking yerba mate herbal tea from a calabash gourd, and Miss Pullon who tried unsuccessfully to teach me the rudiments of piano playing: but the one I respected most was the sports teacher, a short muscular Egyptian named Said who instilled in me a love of gymnastics and taught me the techniques of cross-country running, both of which stood me in good stead later at college.

For example, in 1944 I came second in the annual junior cross-country race (see picture) while my good friend Stan L'Estrange came second in the senior event. By an extraordinary coincidence I ran against him two or three years later when I was at Pangbourne Nautical College and he turned out for the Army Apprentices School at Arborfield, both near Reading.

Later in the same year I won the under 14 high jump in the annual athletics championships, with a leap of 4'3", and came second in the quarter mile and hurdles. Times weren't very good, but then we were racing on a grass track in a flat field at the bottom of the valley, although the rough grass didn't handicap the winner of "throwing the cricket ball", who hurled the ball an incredible 78 yards!



*Freehand map of Junior Cross Country course  
1942-43-44*

The cricket pitch was in the same field too, but I am sorry to say that I did not take to the game. I thought it slow and very risky when fielding anywhere near the bat. I much preferred fielding on the boundary, where I could practise whistling with my fingers.

However, my friends and I had our own version of cricket. In another meadow near the river we played a variation of the ancient game of tip-cat. This involved placing a six inch billet of hard wood across a small gap between two bricks on the ground, then hoicking it into the air with a big stick and whacking it as far as possible. You scored by estimating the number of strides needed to cover the distance – if a fielder could do it in less than claimed you were out, which kept the score down. You could also be caught out, or strike out by missing the billet three times. Like baseball, it is not as easy as it sounds.

Close by this meadow was a bend in the River Amber where we had our "bathing pool", about 10-12 feet in diameter and 4 feet deep (see picture 1). Obviously there wasn't room to swim, but it did have a board for jumping in with a big splash. It was wonderful on a hot summer day.



*Bathing Pool in River Amber, summer 1943.  
I am about to jump, Swindell is waiting.*

We did have some real battles, though. In the Top Woods, behind the Dining Hall, there would be occasional catapult fights, with boys dodging from tree to tree. It was really quite dangerous, but I don't recall anyone being seriously hurt, although I damaged my ankle badly when I fell out of a tree. There were several small huts in the woods, but as corrugated iron and plywood board were difficult to come by, my group of friends dug a six feet cubed pit, roofed over with branches and turf, and having a trapdoor entrance with steps, a bench seat all round and a brick fireplace and chimney for roasting chestnuts.

On the other side of the river was a steeply sloping field rising up the eastern side of the valley, which was perfect for tobogganing in winter. Across the foot of the slope ran a six feet high embankment for the Ashover Light Railway, possibly to keep the line clear of flooded water meadows, and this too seemed to be ideal as a means of stopping after a long downhill run. Until one day I came down so fast I hurtled up the near side of the bank, bumped across the rails, plunged down the far side and impaled my face on a barbed wire fence. "My word, you have been in the wars" said Matron, as she stitched me up.

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In my last year, these activities in the woods were channelled into the Junior Training Corps under the command of one of the Masters, Captain Gillard. There were about eighty army cadets at the Camp, who drilled and had lessons in fieldcraft and practised at the rifle range. Sometimes after a session at the range we would dig the lead out of the wooden posts, then melt it down and pour it into moulds in the workshop. However, the best part of being in the JTC was going on exercises with regular soldiers. I was always amazed by how the men could go to ground at the bottom of a 200 yards long stretch of rough moorland slope and remain completely invisible until they bobbed up in front of us at the top. These field days were always great fun, firing blanks from ancient rifles and throwing thunderflashes

It occurs to me that I haven't mentioned the academic or social scenes, but in truth I remember little of them because our lives were so active and focused on the great outdoors. For example, as there were no buses and few bicycles, we had to walk everywhere. Every Sunday morning we walked a mile each way to Brackenfield Church. Occasional expeditions were made to the cliffs of Gladstone's Nose ("The Snitch") to search for the much prized translucent mineral fluorspar, or to Clay Cross where (in the absence of rationed sweets) we bought a jar of cod liver oil and malt and walked back scooping it out with our fingers like liquid toffee.

There were two departures from the Camp which were especially notable. The first was on the eve of breaking up for the Christmas holidays, when a grand raffle draw was held in the Dining Hall. The top prize was a large food hamper in a wicker basket, full of luxury goodies. In those days of austerity, shortages and rationing, everybody coveted it. Imagine my surprise when my name was called out, as I had not been able to afford a ticket! Remembering the beating I had received for being honest, I suppressed my misgivings and carried the prize home to my parents. I still feel a bit guilty about it, though.

The second memorable departure was at the end of a summer term: everybody went home and I remained confined to the Sanatorium with mumps. When I was finally better my Father collected me, and I shall never forget that drive south in an open topped Hudson Terraplane on a glorious summer day, along the empty country roads of central England, with my Dad.

I finally left Derby School at the end of summer 1945, after 13.5 terms, and the School returned safely to the old buildings in Derby. It was the end of a wonderful time and place to grow up. Sadly, the Amber valley was flooded in 1958 to create the Ogston Reservoir. Most of the old Camp is now underwater, and the Dining Hall is the clubhouse for the Ogston Sailing Club.

Even more sadly, after more than eight hundred years of traditional academic excellence, Derby Grammar School was turned into a comprehensive school in 1974, struggled on for another fifteen years but finally had to close its doors for good in 1989. Fortunately, in 1994 a new independent Derby Grammar School was opened at Littleover, and is flourishing.



*Form 2b in summer 1942. I am on the far right.*

***Peter Pollard***

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