

THE NATIONAL CAMPS CORPORATION

The National Camps Corporation was formed in the late 1930s, with assistance from the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), and was given 1.2 million pounds; half grant, half loan; by the government to build fifty camps in remote areas initially to enable children from towns and cities to be able to experience something of the countryside and animal life. It appears that the money ran out after thirty one had been built.

The House of Commons passed 'The Camps Act' which was given the Royal Assent in May 1939. One of the jobs of the Corporation was to make people 'camp minded'. The government appointed chairman was Lord Wyndham Portal of Laverstoke who had risen to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel during the First World War and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and was a Member of the Royal Victorian Order (MVO). After the first war he was a Director of the Great Western Railway before entering politics. After the Second World War he was to become Chairman of the GWR up until nationalization.

Lord Portal and members of his board visited 155 possible sites for camps which were to be built as residential schools, each for around 400 children. They were to have a secondary use as holiday camps for the said children. The third intended use was as evacuation camps for the children: a function for which they ultimately, and very importantly, served. However some of the potential sites they discovered were also found to be ideal for use by the Air Force authorities who often managed to get in first, forcing the Corporation to have to search again.

The huts at the camps were all very similar and were designed for the purpose by Thomas Smith Tait, (1882 – 1954). Tait was an architect with the company Burnet, Tait and Lorne and there is a Blue Plaque commemorating his work on his former home at Gates House, Wyldes Close, London, NW11. The huts were constructed of Canadian Cedarwood and those that have survived have done so extremely well over the last eighty years. One of the last camps to be built in 1939 at Sayers Croft in Surrey cost £25,968 to construct on fifteen acres of land.

Mr Clifford Morris FRPS