

Wakefield District Scouts and Jubilee Venture - the early years

In the mid-seventies Scouting in Wakefield was buoyant. The new training programme of the Advance Party Report of 1966 had settled down and there had been an expansion in the variety of activity and outdoor pursuits available to Scouts of all ages. Water activities were popular in the area: several groups had made their own canoes and the 31st and 40th Groups had built their own Mirror sailing dinghies. The District could muster over 30 boats for a whole-day marathon event and the Scout County (Central Yorkshire) had obtained and developed its own water activities centre at Aldwark.

The ADC (Development) at that time made a suggestion that as Wakefield had a river and canal close to the city-centre then perhaps Wakefield District Scouts should consider buying a narrowboat. A second-hand boat was viewed that was suitably priced for the District to purchase and then "do up". By creating a "wheelchair friendly" boat the Venture Scouts could provide a community service by taking groups of disabled or underprivileged groups whilst completing their community responsibility.

Wakefield Scouts' plan was that Venture Scouts would manage the boat and once a month would act as crew, boating on the River Calder and the local canal. The Ventures would thus progress in the community-service strand of their awards and by learning to handle the boat would qualify in the development of a new skill.

At a meeting of the District's Leaders where the idea of a District-owned narrowboat was discussed the problems of boys near water and concerns about the industrially polluted river and canals were raised. It happened that the officer in charge of youth services for the City Council was also present and he spoke of his remit being to better integrate the work of his department with young people's organisations such as Scouts and Guides. This man happened to have a place on the local committee to manage the Queen's Silver Jubilee Appeal established by Prince Charles in 1977 to support young people's organisations as they worked to help others. The idea of a boat where team-work and community service could be promoted as well as allowing Scouts and others a different experience of the locality was explained. The council officer thought that the idea was a good one and so a written application was made to the Prince Of Wales' Appeal.

The Venture Scouts were asked to give a presentation to the local appeal committee about the "boat" plan emphasising the community service aspect. Four weeks later the Jubilee Fund awarded the District a £5,600 grant with the stipulation that the money should be used to buy a new boat (not secondhand). A committee was formed from interested Leaders, craftsmen and Venture Scouts and a Midlands company was found that could build the shell of the boat, fit an engine and rudder all within the size of the grant money. Further fund raising was needed to fit out the interior. The Venture Scouts organised the "Big Drop" which was a sponsored abseil down 120 feet of Wakefield Cathedral's tower. £1,000 was raised towards this work on "Jubilee Venture" as the boat was called. Other monies were funded by the District.

A mooring for the new boat was found at Rutland Mills courtesy of Caddies & Wainwright (a riverside knitting wool mill).

The steel shell was delivered by road to Leeds on 8th May, 1978 and craned into the water. The 7 hour (by water) journey to Wakefield was undertaken the following week-end.

The plan for fitting out was undertaken by several leaders (professional joiners amongst them) and they managed to fit out a sleeping area for 8 in one week-end (this could also convert to a dining area). The leaders bunks at the rear of the boat were added at a later date. As with all things, life and jobs intervened in the timing of the project and it was early October before the boat was ready to use. Fitting out and training experience had been taking place on weekday evenings.

The first trip out was from Wakefield to Shepley Bridge (10 miles with 8 locks) and was clearly enjoyed by all as a second trip was soon undertaken.

At this time Scouts were allowed to take narrowboat holidays on commercially owned boats in the Midlands without any leader training being done (this was on Class C waters). Boating from Wakefield on the River Calder was very different and the RYA and British Waterways had no suitable courses for Scout Leaders to undertake. A training programme was devised by District and County and met the approval of the Scout Association who put the slightly amended requirements in the next issue of POR.

In 1995 the RYA produced a training scheme and qualifications for cruising the inland waterways. A leader with some existing experience, was assessed by RYA as an instructor; and Jubilee Venture was registered as a training centre to issue the RYA certificate. Recognising the responsibility which leaders have for the young people in their care and the expectation that they will begin to train their own crews during their outings, Wakefield trainers now ask leaders for longer training experience than the RYA certificate demands.

This is a precis of a report written by Geoff Auty.

Some of the people involved in the acquisition and creation of "Jubilee Venture"

Geoff Auty, Gordon Parkin, Alex Hull, Nigel Le Page, Philip Gill, Adrian Lewis, Bill Finnegan, Jack Caddies (Caddies & Wainwright), George Worall, Jim Townend, Malcolm Dutton, Reg Walker. Of course, there were many others operating in the background - too many to remember or name.