

Saracen Venture Scout Unit

September 1988 - December 2003

Meeting Place - Beach Road, Old Colwyn (Chapel St, Mochdre for short time till vandalism became too bad then returned to Old Colwyn)

Membership - Maximum 27, mixed Unit Age group 15yrs -20 yrs

Uniform, normal Venture Scout / Leader uniform, brown ties for members, green ties for leaders.

The lead up to the conception of 'Saracen' began in 1988 with survey of this age group within Scouting in the area followed by an introductory letter by its' founding leader, Denis Noble, sent to prospective members. Denis identified in his letter entitled 'Mixed Venture Scout Unit for "The Bay"', that Venture Scouting in the area had previously suffered from 'insufficient members to form an effective Unit' and a 'shortage of adult leader support'.

The vision for Scouting in the Bay was for a new Unit, aimed at young men and women aged 15 and above from the areas of Mochdre, Rhos, Colwyn and Old Colwyn. Denis was to lead the Unit, with the support of assistant leader - Dave Perry. In addition to Denis and Dave, the Unit had a number of people to call upon to support the leader team in outdoor activities. The meeting place was to be the Old Colwyn Scout Head Quarters on Beach Road.

'As part of The Scout Association our aims are to encourage the physical, mental and spiritual development of young people so that they find it easier to take constructive place in society. Members accept the Laws & Promise of the Scout Movement. Some of you will have had experience of the Scout/Guide Movements' when you were younger. Many of the things you did were presented to you on opiate with little personal involvement It doesn't happen like that in a Venture Scout Unit. If you become a member of this Unit you mil be expected to participate in Unit organisation and the activities provided by the Unit' (Unit Programme 1991: Saracen VSU Colwyn Bay).

The first job was to trawl the various Scout Groups in the area for suitable candidates and potential members - and in good time, the Unit started to meet together. Within the first month the Unit had christened itself 'Bayonets' - but it wasn't to last. Soon the Unit name changed to 'Bay-o-nets' due to adverse reaction to the military connotation of the original name. Members themselves didn't like this variation, so decided to make a complete change. The name was re-registered as 'Saracen' VSU (as a Saracen's armored helmet is part of the Borough's heraldic shield). T-shirts were designed for 'casual wear', incorporating the new Unit name.

Uniform, worn monthly (when guest speakers were present) and on special occasions was as prescribed by the Scout Association. The male version was described as 'Beige shirt with 2 pockets; dark brown tie; mushroom long trousers and a brown leather belt'. The female uniform was exactly the same but for the 'Beige long sleeved blouse and the mushroom plain skirt or slacks'.

Wednesday was meeting night. Saracen was made up of numerous personalities with varied backgrounds. Many were from different schools, therefore providing opportunities in meeting new people and forging friendships and developing social skills. Word of mouth encouraged new members to join - many with no previous Scouting involvement, whilst others progressed from their Scout/Guide Units into the new world of Venture Scouting.

Activities were planned through the Executive Committee made up of 5 Unit members who were elected into the positions of chairperson, secretary, treasurer and programmer. The fifth member was the QM, whose role was to maintain the Unit equipment, such as the climbing gear and tents. The committee's purpose was to plan a quarterly programme, published in the Unit newsletter called 'The NET', using ideas supplied by the members. They were also responsible for the recruitment of members, finance, the Venture Scout Award (which they assessed), and the general welfare of the Unit. This system of executive committee enabled Saracen to be self-governing, with adult leader back up.

In no time at all, the Unit had a name, leaders, members and an executive committee. And unsurprisingly activities were not in short supply.

The Unit took full advantage of the outdoors, having their own climbing equipment and an experienced leader. The Unit didn't have to go far to find suitable rock faces on which to climb or abseil. As their skills improved, they slowly moved up to more difficult climbs, and during the lighter nights in the summer, climbing was part of the Unit's Wednesday night meetings. Other activities typical of Saracen were hill walking in Snowdonia and the Cameddau range. The Unit had an alternative approach to this form of recreation. On nearly every occasion (and there were many), hill walking was not complete without a dip in the cold Welsh mountain streams and lakes. This became the norm.

Walking up Snowdon was a regular event for the Unit, developing their skills in map reading, route planning and general outdoor confidence. However, it wasn't long before confidence became second nature. "The Snowdon bivi" - a walk arriving at the peak by close to midnight, followed by an attempt to sleep in the classic, bright orange, 'flappy bivi bags' in any nook or cranny we could find near to the summit - braving the wind and rain, eating sandwiches, chocolate, sharing of whiskey, only to be interrupted by the odd moment of leakage inside their temporary home. So, come rain or shine, many of the Unit members walked in the dark along Snowdon's Pig or Miners Track towards the summit to enjoy the summer solstice (and maybe even the sunrise) on top the highest peak in England and Wales. The descent the following morning, through tired eyes, damp clothes and low cloud, was always made bearable by the thought of the full breakfast and the obligatory pint of hot tea, which awaited the Unit at a nearby cafe.

Another Snowdon trip was representing Scouting as one of 4 Units in Britain to climb the major peaks in the UK (Ben Nevis, Scafell, Slieve Donard and Snowdon) for Comic Relief. We were supposed to phone in to Radio 1 when we reached the summit. The poor mobile telephone network in those days let us down - they didn't work at 3 of the summits including ours. However we still had a good play in the snow!!

An activity which paid dividends, and which managed to include the majority of the members was conservation work. The Unit spent weekend's away working as volunteers with the National Trust in Dinas, near Betws Y Coed. This mainly involved hacking away and burning the invasive rhododendron, which was slowly encroaching on the Dinas Estate. The beauty with Dinas was the hard work during the day, followed by an overnight stay in the house, which involved members of the Unit preparing a hearty meal for the evening. Staying at properties of this standard was becoming a habit for the Unit.

Saracen was fortunate first of all to have good leaders. Secondly they had good members who got on. A sense of humour was a must, and if you didn't possess a good one - you soon did. Thirdly, was the location. They were never far from the mountains and the hills, so walking and climbing was always on their programme of events. But weekends away were the highlight of the Unit's calendar year.

Above Trefriw, on the shore of Llyn Crafriant is a converted farmhouse owned by the Scout Association, called "Cornel". Cornel became a regular and important fixture in Saracen's history. In the romantic sense, it became home for weekends throughout the year for the Unit. Unit members participated in mountaineering courses, developing their outdoor skills on the hills, as part of their ongoing mountain leadership training.

Work weekends became a regular feature, where work focused on maintenance projects on Cornel, such as painting, DIY, unblocking drains, laying a water pipe to the camp field, thinning trees, planting trees, digging trenches, filling trenches, to name but a few.

Inside the house meanwhile, Unit members were hard at work preparing the meal for the evening. This was always a 3-course special. A simple tasty starter such as egg mayonnaise, followed by a warming stew of sorts, and a pudding consisting of a tart, usually drowned in custard or cream. At Christmas, speeches would take centre stage, followed by toasts and then more speeches usually continuing into the early hours. Mornings were usually a gentle, subtle 'get out of bed' with a mug of tea, hand delivered by the early risers. Then, up for breakfast, before venturing outside to finish off a job, or begin the task of cleaning and tidying Cornel before departing later that afternoon. Weekends at Cornel were always cherished, and having to leave this beautiful spot and saying goodbye to friends before returning home, was always tinged with a sadness, mild exhaustion and sleep deprivation.

As well as learning about planned activities in the Unit programme, more details were provided on meeting nights. Annual summer expeditions were the ultimate activity and required attention to detail and good planning.

Early on in Saracen's history, in 1989 the Unit visited the Yorkshire Dales on their first summer expedition. This was followed in 1990 by the Unit's first overseas expedition to Austria, which took in hill walking (which was logged to their ongoing mountain leader records), white water rafting and sightseeing.

Two years later, Ireland beckoned and many of the peaks in Macgillicuddy's Reeks saw Saracen boot prints, whilst 'the daily obligation' saw us swimming in lakes, streams and even the cold North Atlantic Ocean in the rain during a rest day.

Experience and skills picked up by Unit members went towards their Venture Scout Award - achieved by many in the Unit. One member (Richard Griffiths) achieved the Queen Scout Award during a 50 mile hike over the mountains and hills of the Lake District. Accompanied by three other members, navigating their way over Scafell Pike, Esk Pike, Great Gable, Bow Fell and finally Pike of Stickle, before finishing in Ambleside. This they achieved. However, confidence was nearly shattered from the onset, when they found they could not use the planned campsite in Grasmere, the starting point of the walk. To make matters worse, they decided to camp under a tree in heavy rain only to tear the outer of their tent during a moment of panic with an aluminium pole. In the morning, they discovered that they had camped on a public right of way, and were legally classed as obstructing the Queen's Highway!

From about 1992 onwards, many of the 'older' Venture Scouts were leaving for University or working away from the area. Times were changing. Saracen had to accept and adapt to this change. There was also a shift in young people's attitude and culture, from about the middle of the 1990's. Recruiting new members to the Unit became more of a challenge and the Unit never again approached its' peak membership.

2003 was an important year for Venture Scouting in Colwyn Bay. On the 31st December 2003, all Venture Scout Units ceased to exist across the movement worldwide. Saracen, which had existed in Colwyn Bay since 1988 finally closed, and its assets were distributed around the District and to Cornel and Hafod Scout Centers.

Saracen had an impressive record of developing young men and women from round the area that have now taken those skills around the UK and indeed the world. Much of Saracen's service activities are left as an enduring memory to the Unit at Cornel Scout Activity Centre; in the various large and small projects that they delivered as part of the Cornel Service Team.

During 2003, the change of the sections meant that the Service team at Cornel had to change and an Activity Centre Explorer Unit was formed to continue the work of Saracen VSU and Crusader VSU (from Telford).

The Unit is comprised of 14 to 18 year old Explorer Scouts from the Conwy and Shropshire Districts. Saracen's legacy thus continues with the young people dedicated to the Cornel Scout Centre, Explorer Unit.