

The Alternative Camps Scene

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The appearance of this article in S&S is the result of an animated discussion in the sauna at the 1998 AHP Conference. We were talking about possible forms and contents for the next conference and Martin was waxing lyrical about the joys of summer camps, and suddenly I thought 'What about a camp as a format for the next AHP conference?' So we asked Martin to write about his camps experience so that everyone in AHP can think about whether a camp might be an appropriate structure for a future gathering or conference. Do please let us have your views, and we'll publish them in a future issue.

John Button, S&S Managing Editor

Some years ago I returned to my London Home after a period of over six weeks living continuously in a summer camp environment and realised that I was in an altered state of consciousness. Keen to preserve, somehow, this fragile experience — already beginning to dissipate under the constant barrage of inner-city stimulation to which I had swiftly to habituate — I began to write some of my insights and reflections down on the nearest paper to hand: a brown paper bag. Sadly, as I again prepare to write, the bag is nowhere to be found, but I do remember that 'magic' was a key word.

Earth magic takes on fresh meaning when you are living in close contact with the land and nature. Pagan ritual and the celebration of seasonal festivals are no longer wacky New Age fads; they become the obvious thing to be doing; a focal point for

community involvement; partying taken out of its modern context of bar, club or sitting-room and returned to a natural glory under a canopy of stars. The cycles of the moon take on a more immediate meaning; a meaning which can be validated against experience. On a wet or cold night the community gathers in the huge barn-sized benders or marquee-like structures in the shadowy yellow glow of paraffin and candlelight. Drummers drum, dancers dance, matriarchs, patriarchs, young bloods, shaman/healers, mystics, cynics, — we all do our thing, all participants participating. Somehow it all came together. It ended, somehow, at the right time!

Being on the crew of one of these camp outfits for a whole summer is a bit like living abroad. Ironic — in many ways one is more in touch with one's native land than ever before, yet simultaneously out of

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touch with all the daily 'reality checks' of the average town- or city-dweller: the News at Ten, the soaps, the adverts, cars, roads, the rush. A camp community, and particularly the camp crew, begin to develop their own reality checks. Signs and portents may include wild animals, trees or birds, or the cards picked before morning meditation from the Angel or American Indian Power Animals packs. Last night's dreams may often be the conversation topic whilst the twigs are laid for the fire for that all important morning tea. Gradually a complex web of interpersonal drama develops, with each individual at the centre of their own personal growth epic — other individuals playing supporting acts or bit parts. In a self-selecting intentional community of people fascinated by such topics as healing, spirituality, the Goddess, magic and shamanism, as well as by the broader categories of personal growth and human potential, there's no shortage of friends with whom to share your reflections on your own process. And as with living abroad, when you come back home some of those daily habits which represented 'the way to be' before you went away, now become something to reflect upon in the light of the new 'ways of being' discovered in a new land.

Yet there is a resonance for me in that quasi-anarchic camp environment which suggests that 'coming home' is a better metaphor for the altered state of consciousness I was in than 'going abroad'. After all, the endemic alienation and ennui of this late 20th century is a very recent and, so far, short-lived phenomenon. Human society has spent countless millennia cooking around wood fires and singing

under the stars — only a few decades at the gas hob listening to the stereo.

Recent social history

A few paragraphs may help to place the summer camps phenomenon in context. In the early 1980s a number of camp-like gatherings known as the 'Glastonbury camps' were organised by Glastonbury residents and others. These were primarily intended to practise and share circle dance, paganism and the medicine-wheel teachings of the North American Indian tradition. From out of these gatherings grew the 'Welsh Dance' camp and the 'Oak Dragon' camps, both of which are still running. The latter began to address more diverse themes, notably astrology, paganism and healing — the organisers shared an intention to make a living from this kind of facilitation, and invested heavily in canvas and site equipment. Meanwhile, a hitherto separate strand of development, the free festival scene, centred around the month-long Stonehenge midsummer free festival, was approaching its nemesis. In 1985, in a quasi-military and at times dangerously violent confrontation with the Convoy, a nomadic community of vehicle-dwellers (further description could fill another whole article!), the 12th annual Stonehenge festival was prevented from taking place by the combined resources of five different police forces, including the riot squads used earlier against the miners at Orgreave colliery. For over a decade Stonehenge, the monarch of the free festivals, had been a focus for counter-cultural community-building, trading and festivity; the summer rallying-point for small travelling bands from all over the British Isles. It had become a victim of its own

phenomenal growth, estimated finally to be attracting some 120,000 people; if small is beautiful, then it's true to say that Stonehenge 1984 had become quite ragged at the edges. But at the centre there was now a core of people who had to begin to think proactively about what, for them, could take its place.

A couple of years previously, in an extraordinary cultural amalgamation, a band of peace activists setting up a camp at Molesworth Common, Cambridgeshire (a proposed cruise missile base with a sister at Greenham Common) met with a band of convoy travellers looking for a winter park-up. The result was a remarkable peace camp called 'Rainbow Village' — an article in the *Guardian* about their free food kitchen attracted my attention to such an extent that I eventually went to live there. That camp, too, later suffered a military-style eviction, but I believe it paved the way for further such amalgamations of idealism and practicality. So in the mid 1980s, with no Stonehenge to go to, an appreciable number of seasoned Convoy travellers were contributing their practical skills, and their lifestyle, to the newly developing summer camp scene.

Evolution

Metaphor can again be useful in describing the genesis and development of the camp scene. Tribe-like in nature, camp outfits have tended to spring up around charismatic individuals or, latterly, to have been skilfully accumulated by a 'born organiser'. Camps are, furthermore, amoeba-like in growth. For example, Rainbow Circle was the name of the new camp organisation which precipitated out from Oak Dragon in 1985/86. This new outfit comprised dis-

gruntled members of Oak Dragon's site-crew who were disenfranchised from the policy- and decision-making in what was essentially a pyramidal structure of management. The choice of name represented an intention to bring some of the spirit of egalitarianism and vision generated at the Rainbow Village peace camp. Some nine years on, Rainbow Circle itself split into 'Rainbow Circle' and 'Rainbow 2000' camps. The issue was essentially the same: in an ill-defined quasi-anarchical community it is those who take the responsibility for getting things done who begin to hold the strings; abuses of power, whether projected or tangible, become a talked-about reality; concepts of 'us' and 'them' are defined, amid accusations of controlling behaviour and counter-accusations of passivity. Rainbow Circle are currently grappling heroically with the issues around creating a constitution to define a truly egalitarian and circular way of being with each other in a camp community. Rainbow 2000, meanwhile, have become more businesslike; more glossy and, arguably, the better able to offer a meaningful structured learning experience for their customers.

The camp outfits mentioned so far are relatively large; there may be well over 200 at a morning meeting listening to workshop facilitators describe the group that they are offering. There may be up to six alternatives to choose from (very like an AHP conference). But there are now also many smaller camp alternatives available to those who would trade diversity for intensity; one of these is the 'Passages' camps. Back in 1990, at the last Rainbow Circle Music and Dance camp for which I acted as a focaliser, faced with fewer participants than anticipated, I and

my co-focalisers decided to experiment with having everyone do the same workshop, rather than offer choices. It was a break with the usual way of doing things and was not well received by the site-crew. We recognised, however, some of the advantages of intensity over diversity, and in the following year we held the first of our 'Passages to Awareness' camps.

Originally conceived of in partnership, the lion's share of the setting up and administration work for this camp was performed by my colleague who lived very close to our site in Somerset. For some three years our partnership was most evident in the close and intuitive co-facilitation style we developed, which incorporated our shared enthusiasm for finding a format for integration of both the therapeutic and the meditative modalities for growth. From the outset, we had no division between 'site-crew' and 'campers' — apart from the initial set-up work, all ongoing camp tasks, cooking, digging toilets, facilitating children's activities, sawing wood, cleaning, looking after the hot tubs and so on, were shared among the people present. We developed the concept of the 'working support group': at the beginning of a camp the community was divided, according to a variety of creative random methods, into seven or eight smaller support groups, each comprising about eight members. These groups would meet twice a day, once for emotional support, and once to perform camp tasks on a rota basis.

As our community of 'regulars' grew, we developed a core group in which I was subsumed as a sort of chamberlain to my colleague's benign monarchy. This metaphor for our management structure has

been useful in a number of ways: making sense of some of our internal tensions; adjusting, when our 'king' married, to the appearance of the new queen at court. Again, the model has helped us to gain perspectives on the perennial issues around authority and guidance within a community; the projections upon authority and concomitant disempowerment, and the excesses of authority, rebellion and subversion.

Our camps have tended to be theme-based, often associated with the seasons. Our Beltane camp at the beginning of May is usually about renewal, rebirth, aliveness and sexuality; the final camp of the year in September is about taking stock, preparing for a quieter, more reflective period, ordering and evaluating the summer insights. The early August camp will include some ritual or ceremonial recognition of the Lammas time. We no longer have a specifically designated 'healing camp', nor a 'music and dance camp' — in a sense, all our gatherings contain these vital elements. We are small enough to circle and cook around a single camp fire; chanting and singalong sessions are a common ingredient, as are the community games after supper, usually intergenerational rough-and-tumble football matches with only an approximate idea of the score, which last until twilight and are followed by storytelling around the fire for the young at heart. In the early days we would pack every day with opportunities for intense group process; we've since learned the value of programming in plenty of time off to simply be in our beautiful field. Overgrown blackthorn hedges and brambles, a huge, ancient badger sett and a natural spring issuing from the steep hillock which

looks along a valley towards Glastonbury Tor: this is an environment which provides space both to sit above it all, to watch and to dream, and also to be in the thick of it — whether hooked into the latest camp drama, or into a beautiful sparkly costume ready for the evening's festivities.

Dance Camp East

This camp, based in Norfolk, is a much larger gathering than any of the Passages camps. Dancing and music-making are probably the prime activities here, but from early on in its development a predominant subtextual theme has been community building. Led in the early years by a matriarch organiser, the camp swiftly accumulated a core group which subsequently developed a keen interest in the Scott Peck model of community building and met, monthly throughout the year, over a period of years. From my own experience in Passages camps I have learned how the camp as a whole can often mirror splits and tensions in the core group. Perhaps the marked success of the Dance Camp East as a community to which people return year after year can be attributed to the determination of this core group to work on their own community building between the annual camps. Last year, in a moving and imaginative ceremony, the core group stood down and a new group of volunteer organisers stepped tentatively forward as the new working party who will carry forward the Dance Camp East tradition. The following perspective is offered by the originator of the Dance Camp East.

The current fast-growing campscene came directly out of the fairs and festivals of the late 1970s, which in East Anglia flourished from around 1973 to 1982.

Thousands of people were attracted to these large events, where music, dance, theatre, children's activities, crafts and ceremony came together in the open air over long weekends during the summer months. It was possible to spend the entire summer under canvas travelling from fair to fair, and a mobile community developed with close ties between individuals and families who met largely at these gatherings. In an atmosphere of celebration, relaxation, creativity and trust many people experienced a release from their everyday difficulties and cares. Their children could roam freely and safely, they could wear flamboyant clothes, in some cases they could experiment with 'substances', they could dance and sing and take part in a revival of Celtic traditional rituals with a feeling of participation which made these gatherings different from rock or folk festivals. There was also often a very local identity, as many of the visitors, stallholders and entertainers came from the locality and mingled with the core of travelling traders and musicians.

With the growth of the 'Peace Convoy' in the late 1970s, organisation of the fairs became much more difficult. Clearly many of the travellers came to the fairs in a spirit of co-operation and friendship, but a harder element had become abusive and destructive both to the environment, damaging property and trees, and also to what were, in effect, managing committees struggling to create an enjoyable weekend for a very large and mixed group of people. There had always been a difference between the so-called 'free festivals' and the fairs, which generally had a much broader appeal to people of varying ages,

wealth, and lifestyle. By the early 1980s the East Anglian Fairs were no more; many people still remember them with enormous affection, identifying them as a powerfully liberating force for change, both socially and individually.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a new phenomenon was appearing — the camps. In 1998 over a hundred camps were held all over Great Britain, from Cornwall and Wales in the west to Norfolk in the east, all along the south, especially in Somerset, and a few in the north. New sites are being opened in this country and also in France and Spain, so that once again a travelling community meets up each year in the summer, moving from camp to camp with a strengthening network of like-minded individuals and families.

Camp culture

Increasingly we perceive our lives in the 1990s as pressurised, alienated from nature, isolating, competitive and in extreme cases devoid of meaning. For many people there is a deep yearning for contact, support, community, harmony with nature and the easy pleasure of companionship. When all this and much more is found in the camp environment a very profound transformation can occur. It is not just that we relax and 'chill out'; it often feels as if a new (or perhaps an older) way of being is experienced. Perhaps with only the thin material of a tent or a van between one person and the next, and between ourselves and the earth, we realise the values of simplicity and co-operation. Closeness between people seems to develop very quickly. It is not easy to hide emotions or be superficially

pleasant in this environment, so many people say they feel more real, more themselves, and more able to take risks. Needless to say it can be very challenging, as well as liberating.

Most of the camps encourage camping in circles of about 20 people, so any new campers are absorbed into the culture with ease. Of course there are tensions and problems between people, but it is apparent that in general these evaporate more quickly the more experienced the group becomes in living communally. Some camps encourage regular sharings in the camping circle, and usually there is some form of larger daily camp meeting where any issues can be raised, listened to and hopefully resolved. A typical camp would incorporate some of the following activities — a large camp meeting every day, workshops, children's activities, discussion groups, an on-site cafe, showers and loos, a sauna, hot-tubs, a shop and plenty of open space for relaxation and play. Many camps have a central theme, for example astrology, drumming, permaculture, midsummer celebration, dances of universal peace. Others are multi-faceted and varied.

This article can only hint at the flavour of the alternative camps by briefly describing one or two and setting a historical context. There are a lot out there; they are happening this year, too! The *Camp Scene Directory* is an annual publication in which most of the alternative camps list their gatherings for the forthcoming year. Some of the more popular ones become fully booked very early on. The *Directory* is available from Bethlehem Taylor, Three Rainbows, Studleigh, Devon EX16 9QQ, tel. 01884 881467.