

# The Essex Experience – Mike Bedgood, Pete Graves & Gordon Henshall



Robert Baden-Powell started Scouting to give poor inner city children a second chance. By taking them out of the city slums and into the country, he gave them a new set of experiences, a new sense of themselves and consequently a new view of the world.

The Essex Experience was a multi-activity camp for disadvantaged young people, aged 12-15, who were NOT members of a youth organisation and who MAY have been at risk of social exclusion. The aim of the Essex Experience was to support and develop disadvantaged non-Scout young people at risk from social exclusion by:

- Allowing each young person to experience group life and community respect,
- Helping young people become conscious of the need to organise themselves in order to succeed,
- Supporting the individual to create a sense of responsibility within a team,
- Allowing each young person to develop new skills.
- In simple terms, to provide FUN, FRIENDS & ACTIVITIES. A campfire is a great place to make friends and chill out.



The Essex Experience, therefore, was considered to be the modern version of the thought behind the original principle of Scouting.

First established in 1996, following funding from the Home Office 'Make a Difference' scheme, the event took place in September each year until the 'credit crunch' in 2008. The project was self-funding, from various grant-making bodies and local Councils, and raised approximately £1m over the time it operated.

It was held at Skreens Park, the 50-acre Essex County Scout campsite near Chelmsford. Besides the permanent infrastructure of buildings, including toilet facilities, and a lake for canoeing, further accommodation was provided by marquees and tents.



A large infrastructure was required for these residential activity camps for between 150-200 disadvantaged non-Scout young people (11-15 years), which was provided by a large team of adults from Essex Scouting and other organisations, all of whom were volunteers.

The one exception was a full-time Community Development Officer, Claire Fielding, who was employed to liaise with schools, industry and local authorities to encourage children to attend the Essex Experience, and encourage volunteers to help in a variety of ways.

The support structure included: training, activities; logistics; catering; first aid & welfare; child protection; fire & emergency; site services; communications; public relations; health and safety; drug awareness; risk assessment; electricity & gas supplies; support teams; security. Great emphasis was put on providing a safe and healthy environment for the young people.

One of the unique and radical aspects of the project was the dual challenge met by non-Scout young adult volunteers from local authorities, community groups and businesses across Essex. They participated in a five-day training course before the weekend camp acting as group leaders and role models to the young people during the camp.



The training course was granted a National Training Award (NTA) in 2004. Much of the training was based outdoors, such as raft building, which also provided opportunities for team bonding.



About 450 non-Scout volunteers were trained, many of which underwent life-changing experiences, over the project period.

Teachers from schools across Essex referred the disadvantaged young people, who they believed would benefit from attending. These included those from single parent family, one/both parents unemployed, troubled home life, lived in area of economic deprivation, had education problems, excluded from school, from an ethnic minority or had physical disability.

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Most of the disadvantaged young people benefiting from the project had limited opportunities or access to services that many young people take for granted. Examples of the real problems faced by a group of young people from one of the schools attending the Essex Experience (names changed) are: Kate – mum is blind; Phil – broken home; Mark – bereaved; Nicky – attention seeking; Louise – deaf/difficult home life; Adam – difficulty making friends; Jemma – emotional/behavioural problems.

Activities including canoeing, abseiling, climbing, go-karts, quad bikes, archery, rifle shooting, rafting and music, to name a few, were available for the young people. Of interest was radio construction, which proved to be very popular.

***Achieving was something most of the young people had never experienced.***



Programmes that provide positive activities for young people can have a significant impact on retention in education and training, the acquisition of new skills and have a significant impact on the personal development of the young people who participate.

They also provide a basis for promoting a healthy lifestyle as seen by the comments from the young participants; *“Being able to work with friends and I did things I have never done before”*; *“I have always been afraid of abseiling and climbing, but I conquered my fear of these”*; *“Learn about my friends more and my strengths and weaknesses”*; *“I learnt to canoe”* *“The experience of living on your own”*; *“The courage to do things instead of sitting and watching”* and *“I think I gained a lot of confidence to try out new things and enjoy life”*.



During the 14 years the programme ran it supported 4,000 disadvantaged non-Scout young people. And:

- It was the largest Community Development project in UK Scouting, being used by The Scout Association as one of their “Gifts for Peace”.
- It was a unique & innovative project, training non-Scout volunteers to mentor & lead disadvantaged non-Scout young people.

- The size of the residential activity camps was exceptional and required an array of support services, which reflected the expertise of Scouting.
- It had an impact on numerous organisations, beyond conventional Scouting, in particular Essex Police, Ford Motor Company, the Port of Felixstowe, as well as other voluntary sector organisations.
- In addition, the Essex Experience received excellent support from an ever-increasing number of local Council’s within Essex.
- The Essex Experience also worked outside the Essex boundaries, undertaking joint projects with Scouts de France.
- The Essex Experience was the recipient of many Awards, including the High Sheriff’s Awards.
- The Awards and achievements of the EE would not have been possible without the positive support of Chris Bailey, Essex County Scout Commissioner.



## **Footnote added by Pete Graves**

*Gordon Henshall wrote this article but did not explain his role in the Essex Experience. In fact it was his idea and he gained the ‘Make a Difference’ funding from the Home Office. This source was then replaced by funding from many sources, all of which Gordon organised, with later support from Claire Fielder.*

*To make the annual event happen, Gordon organised a series of working groups responsible for a particular support aspect of the weekend camp, as listed above. A Management Committee met regularly to ensure all these working groups were meeting their targets, and after the weekend event met with the group leaders to analyse how the it went – both the successes and shortcomings - so that the following event could be made more successful.*

*Gordon was later awarded an MBE for Services to Scouting, mainly due to his work on the Essex Experience*