



Baden-Powell's BIG SOCIETY

This year the Girl Guides celebrates its centenary, but these days there's more to it than camping, says Caroline Jackson

IF DAVID CAMERON'S Big Society idea didn't inspire voters in the requisite numbers, there was nothing equivocal about recent celebrations here in Cambridge when the 11th/9th Cambridge Scout Troop marked its centenary. At a reunion for any and all old members, Scout-made scones fortified those viewing the display of memorabilia in its Newnham Scout Hut.

Until recently, the troop's future appeared to hang in the balance, threatened by deficit. Happily, however, the hut's lease has just been renewed with the city council. We relished our cream tea in the knowledge that some things of value endure and yet seem capable of perpetual reinvention. Since its inception in 1907, the Scout Association has weathered many storms, from low-level derision to sinister suspicions of unwholesomeness. Yet Scouts have a habit of self-preservation. Having now welcomed over 300 million members worldwide from a standing start of only 20 boys at Brownsea Island camp in Dorset, Scouting is very much alive and well.

This year is also the centenary of the Girl Guides, the largest girl-only organisation in the UK with more than 500,000 members between the ages of five and 25. Almost half of all women in the UK have been involved in Guiding at some stage in their lives. Inaugurated in response to the demands of some self-styled Girl Scouts who demanded inclusion in Baden-Powell's new movement, he asked his sister Agnes to lead a separate scheme 'to make girls better mothers and guides to the next generation'.

Agnes embraced the challenge and imbued the Guides with their independence, declaring, 'Girls must be partners and comrades, rather than dolls.' Guides have

a history of pioneering – from their assistance with code-breaking during the Second World War to the founding in 1939 of Trefoil House, Scotland, which for several decades offered education for the physically disabled when there was no comparable provision in the mainstream.

This year saw Scouts reporting their biggest surge in numbers since the mid-Fifties, with more than 17,000 new UK members in the last year representing enviable growth of 4.7 per cent, while Guides have a waiting list of over 50,000. Demand for places far outstrips the supply of adults willing to volunteer as leaders.

Such news is refreshing when, as we keep being told, the climate is disastrous. While the severity of this past winter was blamed as a factor in lower than expected economic growth figures, it failed to stop hordes of Scouts camping out in the January drifts. This belied the widely reported shift of emphasis in Scouting activities, from outdoors to indoors, as indicated by the award of Activity Badges. Badges remain the aspiration of any self-respecting Scout or Guide. Admittedly, The *X-Factor* generation can now acquire an Entertainer Badge, a Street Sports Badge, a Circus Skills Badge but there are plenty more that still require the battling of earth, wind and fire. They represent a process of modernisation that has been finely judged. Gone are the Homemaker, Minstrel and Safety in the Home Badges that I earned as a Brownie in the Eighties (though I was compelled to teach my own children the blade-away – Brownie way to dry a sharp knife).

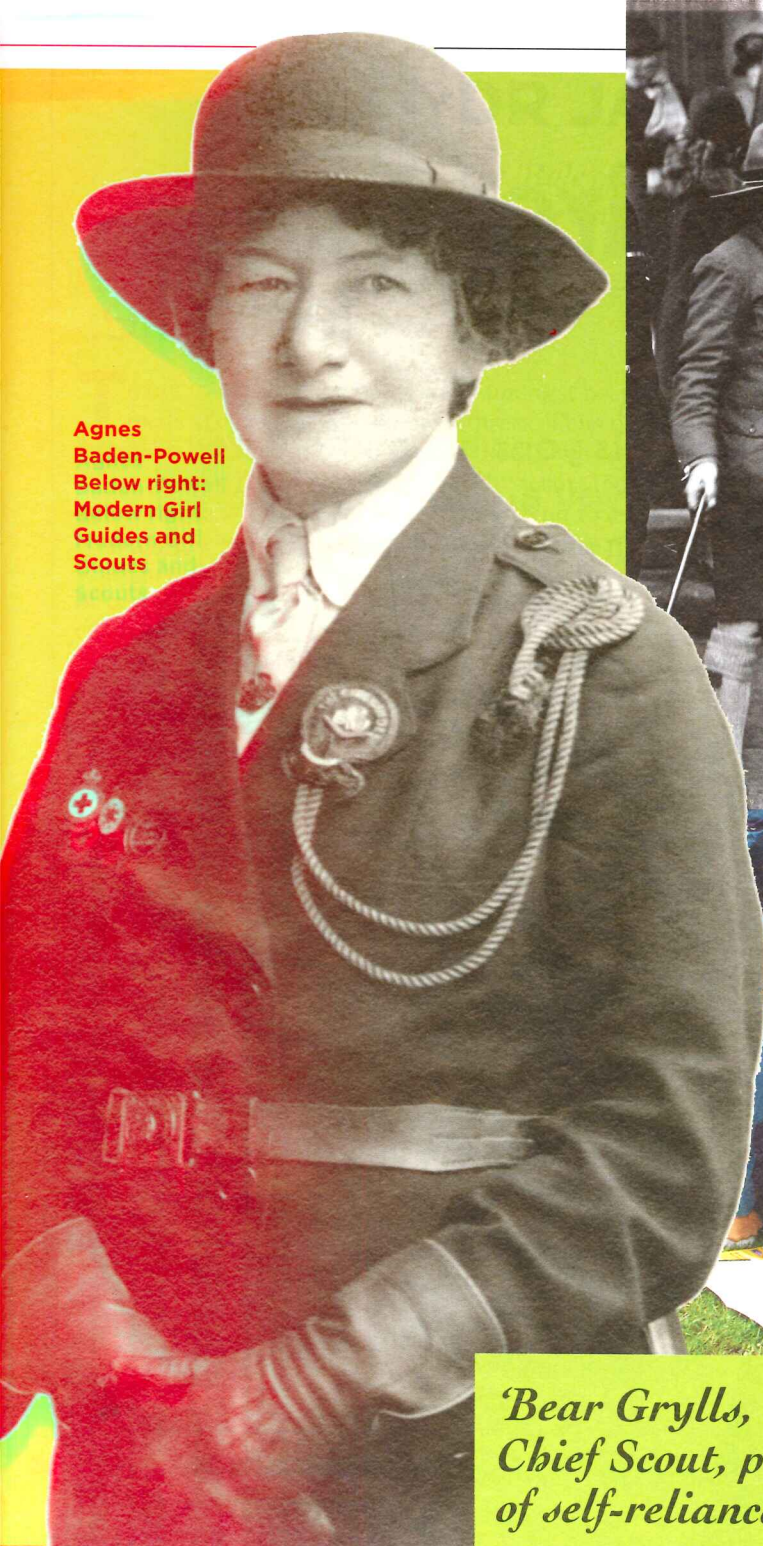
According to the Scouts' own Active Citizen website, around 10,000 Scouts were eligible first-time voters in this election. One suspects, however, that spending an evening being guided through one's virgin democratic rights, or even a spot of sex education – both of which are now available alongside a series of new 'Guiding

Guides' to such contemporary challenges as 'Managing Money in the Credit Crunch' and 'Street Safety' – are less attractive activities than the opportunities for challenge and danger. After dark, games of manhunt on Grantchester Meadows with the risk, better still, hope, of falling into the Cam are appealing to a generation that has lost so much to the torpor of Health & Safety. I am unlikely ever to have the will or skill to construct a rope bridge over a river, but I am delighted that my children can. My son can muster an edible meal-in-a-mess-tin in minutes. My daughter competes, relishing a recent 'Swedish night' (with the exception of the pickled herring, which was never likely to appeal, given that she sees 'those big, grey birds' flying, daily, over Coe Fen).

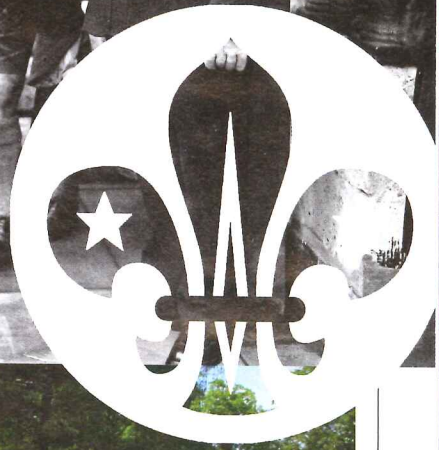
Bear Grylls, the movement's current and 10th Chief Scout, talks the talk infectiously: 'Scouting is empowering, wild and fun.' He personifies the Scout triumvirate of self-reliance, care, responsibility. Evidently, he and the new Prime Minister did learn something in common at that school of theirs. Certainly, when our son, for whom the ultimate, and only, effective sanction for heinous misdemeanour is the threat of missing his weekly fix at the Hut, was interviewed there for admission, we had renewed cause to bless the Scouts. The entire conversation between him and his interviewer charted the events of his recent Scout Camp on the Essex coast, from illicit fires at Frinton to the joys of Brightlingsea Lido with bungee jumps on Clacton Pier in between. We cherish the single missive received during that week away. A grimy postcard bears the message, 'The money's holding out, Love D'.

Let's hope we can say the same when he starts at Eton. At least we won't worry about his survival skills. ♦

FOR MORE ABOUT GIRLGUIDING UK go to www.girlguiding100years.org.uk.



Agnes Baden-Powell
Below right: Modern Girl Guides and Scouts



'Bear Grylls, the movement's current and 10th Chief Scout, personifies the Scout triumvirate of self-reliance, care, responsibility'

GETTY IMAGES

Wartime Girl Guides
Above right: Lord Baden-Powell, who received an honorary degree of Doctor of Law at Cambridge University, 1931

