

B-P - Chief Scout of the World

Lord Robert Baden-Powell of Gilwell (1857-1941) was a decorated soldier, talented artist, actor and free-thinker. Best known during his military career for his spirited defense of the small South African township of Mafeking during the Boer War, he was soon to be propelled to extraordinary fame as the Founder of Scouting.

GROWING UP

Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, known as B-P, was born in Paddington, London on 22nd February 1857. He was the eighth of ten children of the Reverend Baden Powell, a Professor at Oxford University.

His father died when B-P was only three years old and the family were left none too well off.

B-P was given his first lessons by his mother and later attended Rose Hill School, Tunbridge Wells, where he gained a scholarship for admittance to Charterhouse School. Charterhouse School was in London when B-P first attended but whilst he was there it moved to Godalming in Surrey, a factor which had great influence later in his life. He was always eager to learn new skills and played the piano and the violin. While at Charterhouse he began to exploit his interest in the arts of scouting and woodcraft.

In the woods around the school B-P would hide from his masters as well as catch and cook rabbits, being careful not to let tell-tale smoke give his position away. The holidays were not wasted either. With his brothers he was always in search of adventure. One holiday they made a yachting expedition round the south coast of England. On another, they traced the Thames to its source by canoe. Through all this Baden-Powell was learning the arts and crafts which were to prove so useful to him professionally.

Not known for his high marks at school, B-P nevertheless took an examination for the Army and placed second among several hundred applicants. He was commissioned straight into the 13th Hussars, bypassing the officer training establishments. Later he became their Honorary Colonel.

MILITARY LIFE

In 1876 he went to India as a young army officer and specialised in scouting, map-making and reconnaissance. His success soon led to his training other soldiers. B-P's methods were unorthodox for those days; small units or patrols working together under one leader, with special recognition for those who did well. For proficiency, B-P awarded his trainees badges resembling the traditional design of the north compass point. Today's universal Scout badge is very similar.

Later he was stationed in the Balkans, South Africa and Malta. He returned to Africa to help defend Mafeking during its 217-day siege at the start of the Boer war. It provided crucial tests for B-P's scouting skills. The courage and resourcefulness shown by the boys in the corps of messengers at Mafeking made a lasting impression on him. In turn, his deeds made a lasting impression in England.

Returning home in 1903 he found that he had become a national hero. He also found that the small handbook he had written for soldiers ("Aids to Scouting") was being used by youth leaders and teachers all over the country to teach observation and woodcraft.

He spoke at meetings and rallies and whilst at a Boys' Brigade gathering he was asked by its Founder, Sir William Smith, to work out a scheme for giving greater variety in the training of boys in good citizenship.



BEGINNINGS OF THE MOVEMENT

B-P set to work rewriting "Aids to Scouting", this time for a younger audience. In 1907 he held an experimental camp on Brownsea Island, Poole, Dorset, to try out his ideas. He brought together 22 boys, some from private schools and some from working class homes, and took them camping under his leadership. The whole world now knows the results of that camp.

"Scouting for Boys" was published in 1908 with tremendous sales. Boys formed themselves into Scout Patrols to try out ideas. What had been intended as a training aid for existing organisations became the handbook of a new and ultimately worldwide Movement. B-P's great understanding of boys obviously touched something fundamental in the youth of England and worldwide. "Scouting for Boys" has since been translated into more than 35 languages.

Without fuss, without ceremony and completely spontaneously, boys began to form Scout Troops all over the country. In September 1908 Baden-Powell had set up an office to deal with the large number of enquiries which were pouring in.

Scouting spread quickly throughout the British Empire and to other countries until it was established in practically all parts of the world.

He retired from the army in 1910, at the age of 53, on the advice of King Edward VII who suggested that he could now do more valuable service for his country within the Scout Movement.

With all his enthusiasm and energy were now directed to the development of Boy Scouting and Girl Guiding, he travelled to all parts of the world, wherever he was most needed, to encourage growth and give inspiration.

In 1912 he married Olave Soames who was his constant help and companion in all this work. They had three children (Peter, Heather and Betty). Lady Olave Baden-Powell was later known as World Chief Guide.

CHIEF SCOUT OF THE WORLD

The first international Scout Jamboree took place at Olympia, London in 1920. At its closing scene B-P was unanimously acclaimed as Chief Scout of the World.

At the third World Jamboree, held in Arrowe Park, Birkenhead, England, the Prince of Wales announced that B-P would be given Peerage by H.M. the King. The news was received with great rejoicing. B-P took the title of Lord Baden-Powell of Gilwell; Gilwell Park being the international training centre he had created for Scout leaders.

B-P wrote no fewer than 32 books. He received honorary degrees from at least six Universities. In addition, 28 foreign orders and decorations and 19 foreign Scout awards were bestowed upon him.

In 1938, suffering from ill-health, B-P returned to Africa, which had meant so much in his life, to live in semi-retirement at Nyeri, Kenya. Even there he found it difficult to curb his energies, and he continued to produce books and sketches.

On January 8th, 1941, at 83 years of age, B-P died. He was buried in a simple grave at Nyeri within sight of Mount Kenya. On his headstone are the words "Robert Baden-Powell, Chief Scout of the World" surmounted by the Boy Scout and Girl Guide Badges.

