

LONDON CENTRE

A 'birthday' for eleven centres

No fewer than eleven Centres of the Caravan Club have sprung from the original London Centre. They are North London, South London, North Essex, South Essex, Herts, Beds and North Bucks, Upper Thames, East Surrey, West Surrey, Kent and Sussex.

The London Centre, eighth in the Club's history, was formed at Chessington Zoo, Surrey, on October 18, 1937. Two of the founders are still very active in Club affairs. N. E. Robinson was Vice-Chairman, and C. W. Churcher, now Hon. Secretary of South London, was a committee member. It rapidly became one of the most active in the Club, with a dinner dance and other winter events, and rallies on various sites, including the Tudor House, Bearsted, Kent, which has been the scene of many rallies and parties since.

Christmas Rally

Continuing the tradition set by THE CARAVAN with its Christmas rally of 1935, the London Centre held 'one at the Moat House, Wrotham, Kent, destined to become another favourite venue, at Christmas 1938. With the exception of 1940-44 a rally has been held every year since, South London taking up the series when the Centre was divided in September 1945. Guy Fawkes rallies have been held since 1938 except for the war.

London Centre members contributed greatly to Club work. For about ten years until after the war the Centre provided the whole of the Executive Committee. Since the permanent staff were then very small and no travelling expenses were paid for voluntary work, it was felt that Londoners could best carry this burden.

It was also London members, notably the then Club Chairman, Mr. J. St. A. Jewell, who was killed in an air raid during the war, and the late Major W. Moore, Hon.

Treasurer and later Club Chairman and Vice-President, who pulled the Club through the internal crisis of 1937, when it nearly collapsed. London members too brought out the only two numbers of the Club's first members journal in 1937, before THE CARAVAN was invited to resume responsibility for the Club and the position of official organ.

At the 1938 National Rally in Warwick Castle Park, which marked complete recovery from the crisis, the London Centre won both the new cups, the, Inter-Centre Sports and Competitions cups.

Private site

Another achievement was the opening of a private site at Reculver on the North Kent coast. The Centre was the first to appoint a sites committee, and it organised an historic combined Sunday social and mass site inspection, in which the whole Chilterns area was covered by car parties each with an allotted task.

During the war the Centre helped to keep the Club going by holding social functions every year. In the difficult years after the war, some technical discussion evenings proved popular.

Division into North and South left most of the older officers in the South London Centre, 'which set off at a record pace with no fewer than ten rallies in 1947 in spite of the limitations of 'basic petrol'. North London, then known officially

as the London and Home Counties (North) Centre, was a little slower off the post-war mark, but by January 1948 had itself passed the 500 members which was the London Centre total at the time of partition in 1945.

For several years, the two Centres combined for an annual dinner dance at the Palmerston Restaurant, London.

Upper Thames

During the late 1940s Oxfordshire was separated from the London Centre and attached to the Midland Centre, but it remained far from the focus of any Centre until the Upper Thames Centre was formed on March 18, 1950. The story of the further sub-division of North and South London as the Club expanded must be told in another instalment. Honour should be given now however to some of the leaders who laid the foundations of Club success in this region.

Key figures

E. J. Maidment, first Chairman, C. G. Cowing, first Hon. Secretary, and L. C. Hawkins were key figures now alas largely forgotten. All served on the Club Executive. To F.H. Parrott, for many years Executive member and a director of the Club Company, the Club owes much, notably Inland Revenue agreement that its surpluses were not liable to tax. Admiral Sir Noel Laurence, First Hon. Liaison Officer for Countrywide Preservation, then Vice-Chairman of the Club, Chairman and Vice-President, came from the London Centre. W.H. Fletcher, Executive member, T.F. Johnson, Hon. Treasurer, and later Chairman of the Sussex Centre, W.H. Rickinson, one of the honoured band of pre-1935 veterans still going strong, J.N. England, Executive member, I. Sylvester Fox, W.F.A. Norman, Executive member and still on the Club's Membership Committee. T. Parker, W.F. Ward, W.J. Pugh and D.J. Bridgeford are only a few of prominent names from those years.

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