

Hitler Youth Camp in Sussex, July 1935

In July 1935 Lionel James allowed one of the fields behind his and Ethel's house *Moses* (now *Oak Hill*) at Five Ashes, Sussex, to be used for a camp by a party from the German *Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten* (National Political Institute of Education) school at Oranienstein in Hesse-Nassau. This was actually a sort of elite military boarding school, rather than part of the *Hitler-Jugend*, *Bund deutscher Arbeiterjugend* (Hitler Youth, League of German Worker Youth), though they wore the same uniform. The first such schools had been established by the Nazi Government in 1933, and the NPEA Oranienstein was founded in 1934. They later came under the direct control of the SS, for whom they were expected to provide recruits. Only "racially flawless" pupils were admitted, the education was intensely political, and life was highly competitive, with some 20% failing to meet the required standards.¹

From the press reports below, it seems that the arrangements for the camp were made through the Boy Scout troop at Westminster School, of which Lionel was an old boy, and where his youngest son Bob was still a pupil (Hil and Trev had left school by then). A party from Westminster joined the Germans for part of their camp, and a report on the Westminster boys' exchange visit to Germany in August 1935 appears in the school magazine² (see below). The report carefully avoids any political comment, except to note that they preferred to visit nearby towns rather than joining the Germans in their classes, and found them decked with "incongruous swastikas".

It is possible that the exchange was inspired by a letter in the March 1934 school magazine³ from an Old Westminster resident in Germany, John W. P. Bourke, encouraging members of the school to visit the new National Socialist Germany "with an open mind". Bourke spent much of his life in Germany, both before and after the War, though his record in the school archives⁴ notes that he worked with the Friends' (Quaker) Relief Service in Europe 1945-8, which suggests he may have been an idealistic pacifist, rather than any sort of fascist sympathiser.

Some family memories of the camp were retained, especially by Lionel's twin daughters Pac and Mog, who would have been 16 years old at the time, and were apparently rather taken with some of the blond and blue-eyed Aryan lads – some family members may be in one of the photographs below (see caption). In 2015 the occupant of Lionel and Ethel's old house, Di Blackden, said she was aware of the story, but knew no details.

In retrospect, the episode is clearly something of a family embarrassment, though it was no doubt arranged with the laudable, if possibly slightly naïve, aim of encouraging international friendship and co-operation. It is a pity that there is no record of Lionel and Ethel's assessment of their guests nor of their subsequent thoughts on the visit.

John Barnard
Updated 26 April 2021

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Political_Institutes_of_Education

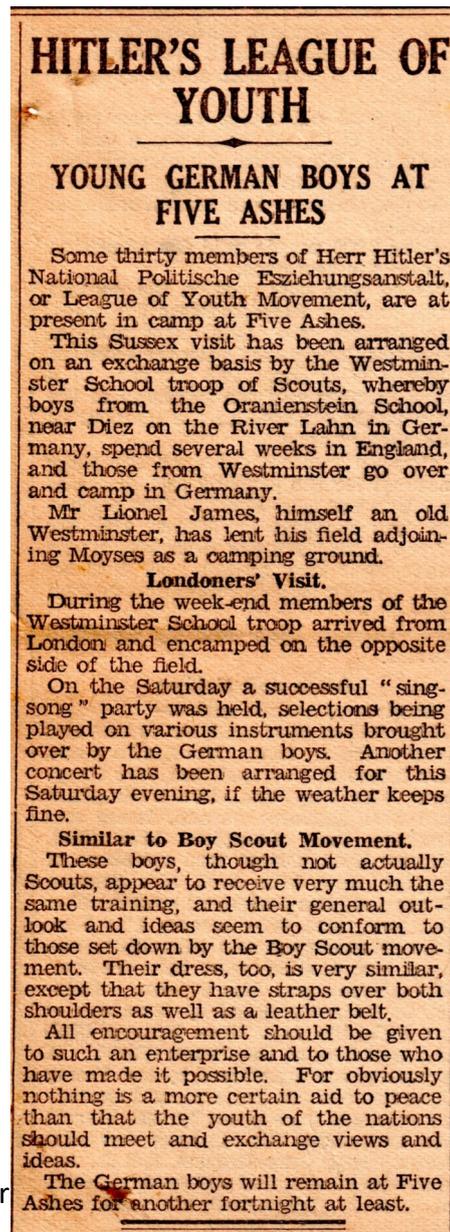
2 The German Tour, *The Elizabethan*, Oct 1935, Vol. 21, No. 11, p. 197 [<https://elizabethan.westminster.org.uk/>]

3 Correspondence, *The Elizabethan*, Mar 1934, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 29

4 <http://collections.westminster.org.uk/index.php/bourke-john-william-patrick-1909>



LJ/38/1

Kent & Sussex Courier, 5 Jul 1935, p.9

LJ/38/2

Source unidentified – not found in British Newspaper Archive (27 Mar 2021)



LJ/38/3

The girl with the pigtail in the background might possibly be one of Lionel James's daughters, with Lionel himself standing further right. The woman seated between them could be "Nannie" Beard, and the young man in a white shirt (i.e. not in the Germans' uniform) sitting on the ground to their right is possibly Hilary James. The woman standing, partially concealed, left of centre might be Ethel James.



LJ/38/4



LJ/38/5

The boys wearing scout uniform are presumably from Westminster School, and the older men on far left and far right could be their scoutmasters.

LJ/38/6 (*The Elizabethan*, Oct 1935)

THE GERMAN TOUR, 1935

On Monday, August 12, a party of Westminsterers, led by Mr. Llewelyn, left Victoria and travelled via Ostend, Cologne and Nassau to reach the school at the Castle of Oranienstein on the Tuesday morning. Here we had a welcome breakfast and sleep and were feeling considerably restored when we journeyed to the camp at Obernhof. The camp was situated on one bank of the River Lahn with the mountains towering up from the other. The Germans had already been in camp for several days and so we were fortunately spared the horrors of pitching a camp and preparing for a long stay. It was, therefore, to very efficient quarters that we were conducted by the exceedingly charming Germans. The Lahn provided excellent bathing and the surrounding country good but energetic walks. Canoeing was one of the sports of the camp, and provided us with a means of conveyance far more pleasant than cycling on the German bicycles and a welcome change from walking, a method of exercise to which the Germans seemed much addicted. One day we visited Frankfort and saw a production of Schiller's "Wallenstein" in the Square. This open-air play was most impressive, set amidst the old German houses, and interesting even to those who could not understand the language.

On the Sunday we struck camp and moved to the school, where term was due to begin. Here, it was suggested, we could study German methods of teaching and learning by going into class with the Germans. The majority of the party, however, preferred to go into Diez, the neighbouring town, and enjoy the many and varied attractions of a foreign town. The more energetic cycled (a menace to the natives on the wrong side of the road) to Limburg, and explored this strange old cathedral town decked with incongruous Swastikas. The castle was near the Lahn and bathing was as good as at the camp, improved by virtue of a highly unstable high dive stand. It had been suggested by their Head Master that we should teach the Germans Rugger; and so on a broiling hot afternoon we tackled and scrummaged with Germans at least twice our size and with three times our enthusiasm. The next day we made our sorrowful departure and reached Victoria convinced of the great charm and hospitality of the Germans.

M. F. D.

LJ/38/7 (*The Elizabethan*, Mar 1934)

Sir,

As an O.W. who has been working in Germany since the end of 1932, that is, before the Nationalist-Socialist régime came to power, I should like, through your columns, to make a suggestion as earnestly as I can. Many members of the School will no doubt be going abroad in the summer. Let as many as possibly can come for part or all of the time here to Germany. That the new Germany is not a mere vanishing phase is now probably clear to most people. That it is also not an object of abuse and contempt, as the world at large has been taught to consider it, is becoming increasingly clear.

A first-hand acquaintance with the new Germany is, for many reasons, of vital importance. But it is not possible unless one comes here with open eyes and an open mind, ready to believe that the press and party politics have not said the last word about National-Socialist Germany. Above all, one must take every opportunity of talking with people, people of all kinds, wherever one goes.

The German exchange is, of course, heavily against us. But this is partially offset by the system of Registered Marks; and I understand that further special facilities for foreigners travelling in Germany will be in force this summer. In any case, living and travelling in Germany is cheap.

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully,

JOHN W. P. BOURKE.