

Air Scouting



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Suggestions to have an Air Scout Branch were first put forward in May 1927. They were not accepted as the Branch might be 'led away by attractive non-essentials' and there was insufficient manpower in the Movement to maintain it. But, in the 1930s, Scout Troops in the vicinity of airfields and gliding clubs were encouraged to include air activities in their programmes and an 'Air Patrols' pamphlet was produced.

The Second World War provided the incentive. In November 1940, the Committee of the Council of The Boy Scouts Association (now The Scout Association) approved the principle of a fully recognised Branch. Shortly after the Government formed the Air Training Corps, the Air Scout Branch was launched for air-minded youngsters too young for the ATC, where the minimum age was 16.

The Branch was born in January 1941 to an immediate and enthusiastic response, with demands for literature and advice as Troops and Patrols were formed in many parts of the country. Recruitment was little affected by uniform restrictions imposed by clothes rationing and it was possible to introduce a distinctive uniform in which, for the first time, a beret replaced the traditional Scout hat.

Major J.M. Henderson became the first Headquarters Commissioner for Air Scouts in 1941. Early in 1942, Rex Hazlewood, whose name will be associated with Scouting's early days,

accepted the invitation to join the staff as Headquarters Travelling Commissioner with special responsibility toward the Air Scout Branch.

Aided by several enthusiasts, he organised National Air Scout Camps at Avington Park, Hampshire; the first was limited to Patrol Leaders and Seconds, now called Assistant Patrol Leaders, over the age of 14. Excellent co-operation from the Fleet Air Arm Station, Worthy Down, ensured the camps were a great success.

In December 1942, there was a huge Air Scout Exhibition lasting six days at London's Dorland Hall. Opened each day by a distinguished air hero, 10,000 people visited the Show.

In 1943, there were two more Air Scout camps; one at Avington Park and in the north at Rattlingate Wood, near Carlisle. Both did much to establish a high standard of camping for Air Scouts, many of whom were comparatively new to Scouting. These special camps were held at various places each year and finally concluded with one at Dunstall Hall, Burton-on-Trent in 1945 in which there were 24 Patrols.

Air Scouting reached its numerical peak in 1944. With the end of the War the following year, numbers began to fall, but there was no lack of enthusiasm in those who stayed on. In October 1950, as a result of successful negotiations with the Air Ministry, a scheme was introduced for Air Scout Troops to be granted Air Ministry recognition

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provided certain conditions were met. Members of recognised Troops were permitted to wear a special badge and to have the advantage of certain much needed facilities including opportunities for flying experience in service aircraft for Air Scouts who had reached the required standard of training.

Originally, the badge awarded to Troops gaining Air Ministry Recognition featured a gold albatross above a roundel against a sky-blue background. This was superseded in 1968 by a badge comprising an RAF roundel with a gold Arrowhead badge in the centre on a blue background.

To begin with, few Troops were strong enough to qualify for recognition but the scheme itself gave the incentive, and by 1955, nearly 40 Troops were given Air Ministry recognition. In that year, the Assistant Chief of Staff at the Air Ministry, Air Vice-Marshal J.G.W. Weston, accepted appointment as Headquarters Commissioner for Air Scouts. Very quickly, he prepared and received Committee of the Council approval for a revised policy.

Scout gliding courses were introduced in 1955.

In 1959, the Association bought its first two-seater glider and, in the same year, Air Vice-Marshal Weston was succeeded as Headquarters Commissioner for Air Scouts by Sir Bernard Chacksfield who held the appointment until 1972. He was succeeded by Group Captain W.S.O. Randle, who, in turn, handed over to Group Captain G.N. Brierley. In the meantime, the position was retitled Headquarters Commissioner for Air Activities and has since changed again to National Adviser for Air Activities.

For some years, up to 1978, the Association maintained an Air Activity Centre at Lasham, near Alton in Hampshire. Increasing demand on the airfield facilities for other flying purposes gradually diminished its suitability for Air Scouting and the Air Activity Centre closed.

Today, Air Scouting depends very largely on the local availability of suitably qualified instructors and similarly, for practical experience, Troops rely on help from local flying and gliding clubs. On both counts, the Association is extremely grateful for the excellent co-operation and goodwill shown to Air Scouts by many of these local clubs.

There are approximately 140 Air Scout Groups in the United Kingdom, over 50 of which are recognised by the RAF.

Air Scouting's 60th anniversary was in 2001.