

TREETOPS

Treetops was founded in 1925 by two brothers, Frederick Paul and Arthur Shellard Merritt, with Frederick's first wife, Florence Ada, whom he had married the previous year, also having a one fifth share in the enterprise. They were part of an East London family living in Leytonstone and were at the time in business together as Merritt Studio, artistic advertising agents, with an office in Grays Inn Road in London. They were both members of the Clarion Cycling Club, a socialist organisation formed in 1895 in Birmingham, later expanding throughout the United Kingdom and their cycling activities took them from the East End out into the Surrey Hills.

The Surrey Hills now refers to an area of some 163 sq. miles of outstanding natural beauty, the ANOB being designated in 1958 and covering one quarter of the county of Surrey. Back then, the area was in the deep countryside, with London considered a very long way away, as it effectively was in those days when motor cars were a rarity.

Probably the brothers had heard of holiday camps, of which Cunningham's Young Men's Holiday Camp, at Douglas on the Isle of Man, is sometimes regarded as the first, although accommodation was in tents. The first hut based version, Caister Camp, was opened in 1906 by John Fletcher Dodd at Caister-on-Sea, Norfolk.

Presumably such an enterprise was in the minds of the young Merritts as they cycled Surrey's leafy lanes and particularly when they found that two 2.5 acre fields might be purchased at Farley Green, near Albury, in Surrey. Approaching the farmer who owned them, James Chennell, of the adjacent Hurtwood Cottage and using money borrowed from their elder sister, Ellen (Nell), Fred negotiated the purchase of the first (top) field, this being contractually agreed on 21st September, 1925 in the sum of £150. The second (bottom) field to the North was purchased the following year, on 1st December, 1926, in the sum of £100.

And so Treetops was started, in an area almost enclosed by trees, with families of Gypsies living in the woods a quarter of a mile up the road and with Tillingbourne, of Chilworth, providing an hourly bus service between Guildford and Farley Green, a mile distant and with grass growing in the middle of the road thereto.

As is still the situation, there was no main drainage system or town gas supply, while prior to the arrival of mains electricity, just electric light was provided by an on-site generator.

Treetops Holiday Camp started with accommodation provided in bell tents, chalets coming later, along with a timber built main building that eventually comprised a kitchen, with cooking carried out on oil stoves, a dining hall heated by an open log fire, a recreation room for dancing, table tennis and other social activities, heated by an enclosed wood burning stove and a games room, with quarter sized billiard table and dart board. There was also an ablutions block with male and female lavatories, wash basins and showers (cold water) and two bathrooms.

The original Treetops house was built, with Fred and Arthur working as labourers to keep the cost down, by the local builders, F.W.Woods and Son of Little London, on the way to the nearby village of Shere, then a quiet backwater but now a renowned and much visited village that has been used as a film location.

It is said that early visitors were encouraged to help with the building of what would later become their own chalet holiday accommodation, if they were brave enough to make a return visit. Similarly, it is said that part of an enjoyable holiday at the time would be to help with the hand digging of a swimming pool, on adjacent valley land, 33ft (?) long by 15ft (?) wide and 7ft deep at the deep end. When it first became operational, it was filled by damming the nearby stream at a point up the valley higher than the pool water level when full and gravity feeding the water through a clinker, gravel, then sand filter before it entered the pool itself. Mains water and an electrically powered mechanical filter were installed later.

Notable, amongst the probably predominantly left-wing early visitors, were luminaries such as Dr. C.E.M. Joad, of BBC Brains Trust fame, whose son years later was to become the nearest local farmer, supplying Treetops with milk and Leslie Plummer (later Sir Leslie), a Labour politician who was in charge of the Overseas Food Corporation at the time at the disastrous Tanganyika groundnut scheme in the late 1940s.

Treetops / Winterfold Holiday Camp early history compiled by Paul Merritt c.2010.

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