



Above: Bill Cook is the man behind the Scout's airgun competition. Below: The successful Scouts receive their prizes.

Scouting

James Marchington at the

HUNDREDS OF SCOUTS converge on Walton Firs camp site at Cobham in Surrey every October for the National Scout Air Rifle Championships. The competition is intense, with everyone keen to do their best for their troop.

The boys travel from all over the south of England and they camp on the site to compete over two days. They shoot at paper targets from a range of six yards in a wooden Scout hut, and the shooting is expertly run by NARPA's officials.

Shooting is a regular part of scouting for many boys, as Michael Holt explained. Michael is a member of the 6th Selsdon & Addington troop from Croydon, who won the Webley & Scott shield for the top team in the competition this year.

'Ernie Harris, one of the leaders of our troop, is very keen on shooting', explains Michael, 'and he runs air rifle shooting for us once a week. Our Scout hut burnt down, though, so we have to shoot in a

hut belonging to another troop now!

'We organise a district competition for five or six local troops — and we usually win! Most of the Scouts in our troop enjoy shooting, although a few of them simply aren't interested'.

Michael started shooting as soon as he joined the Scouts, about three years ago. 'There's a Master at Arms badge for shooting', he says, 'although I haven't got mine yet. You have to score 75 out of 100, and you must know how to strip down an air rifle and put it together again, too.'

'My scores are good enough, and I could strip a gun, too, but I haven't got round to it yet. I've got plenty of other badges, though — for first aid, cycling, athletics and so on'.

Bill Cook, the resident warden at Walton Firs camp site, is the man behind the competition. This is the fifth Championship that he has held, and he's delighted that many troops have kept coming back year after year.

'It really began as a mad idea of mine', he recalls. 'I discussed it with Dennis Commins of NARPA, Pat Whatley from Webley & Scott, and several other enthusiasts. They told me it could work, and encouraged me to go ahead. Webley agreed to supply the gear, and they've supported us ever since'.

Bill has found that the numbers have dropped over the past couple of years, but the hard core of really keen shooters keep coming back. 'We had 450 people competing one year, but now it's down to about 240', he says. 'The ones that just came to "have a go" have dropped out, and we're left with the ardent enthusiasts'.

Bill is a keen airgun enthusiast himself, although he doesn't shoot in the competition. 'I'm too busy really, even though I have a lot of help from other Scout groups in the area. I collect old airguns, and I've got two pre-War BSA's, an old Daisy and one or two others', he says.

'I give a small shield for first place in the recoiling own weapons section, because I've got a soft spot for recoiling weapons. I'm a traditionalist at heart'!

Bill tries to organise extra events to give the Scouts something to do when they aren't shooting. 'We usually have things like five-a-side football and welly flinging', he says, 'and this year the competition coincided with the Scouts' Jamboree of the Air. Scouts all over the world talk to each other by amateur radio — and this time we got Hungary and France as well as groups all over Britain'.

Bill is well aware of the need for absolute safety, and he has a strict set of rules to eliminate the possibility of an



Around

Boy Scouts Championships

accident. 'All the weapons must be brought onto the site by an adult, for instance, and I keep them under lock and key. That may sound a bit restrictive, but as a National Association we have to be extra vigilant and make sure we're above criticism'.

The National Scout Air Rifle Championships have been supported by the Scout Association from the beginning but they don't have full 'official' status.

Jim Davidson, an activities training assistant, explains: 'There are quite a few competitions like this in different sports which are held at national camp sites. They aren't big enough to make it worthwhile running them on a full national scale, because you don't get enough entries to cover the costs. We encourage people like Bill Cook to run events, though, in the hope that they will grow into something bigger'.

Jim reckons that shooting in the Scouts depends very much on the individual Scout leaders. 'If a Scout leader

is a keen shooter, then he tends to encourage others to take it up. Some leaders don't know enough about it, and a few of them think that airguns are dangerous.

'We encourage groups that show an interest to get in touch with NARPA', he continues. 'We reckon that's the best way to get started, because NARPA have the expertise. The other way is for Scouts to go along to a local club. After all, it would be silly to go to all the expense of setting up a range if there was one just down the road already'.

Jim is thinking of changing the standards for the Master at Arms badge, so that more Scouts will have the chance of earning one. 'The original idea came from the Scouts' area shooting adviser', Jim says. 'He wants to lower the standard of marksmanship you need to win a badge, because it's very high at the moment'.

Air rifle shooting certainly has a strong following in the Scout movement, and



changing the standards for the badge could encourage even more Scouts to take it up. Who knows, one day Scouts from all over Britain might compete in a full National Championship!

