

Chris Spackman - The Boys' Brigade and urban cultures, 1883 – 1933: a relationship examined

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The lived reality of membership of the Boys' Brigade between 1883 and 1933 has been somewhat neglected in the field of youth histories. Existing histories have focused on the position of founders and headquarters of youth movements, thus neglecting the experience at the local level. Our current understanding of membership of youth movements is based on an interpretation that camping was the most appealing aspect, with historians including John Springhall and Stephen Humphries asserting that this element of the programme was the greatest attraction for most Boys. However, these arguments have not adequately addressed the role of camping within the broader programme of work of youth movements, have afforded insufficient attention to the relationship between the regular sessions and camp, and have overlooked participation figures. This thesis advances our existing understanding by addressing this issue within the specific context of the urban space, providing a unique insight into the lived experience of membership of a Boys' Brigade Company, whilst offering a comparative aspect often lost in prevailing histories. Through contemporary accounts, statistics from annual reports, oral testimonies, and newspaper articles, this thesis demonstrates that the practical application of the agenda set at the apex of the organisation was applied differently across varied spaces. Additionally, through a more thorough examination of the lived experience of camping, this thesis argues that previous histories have placed too much emphasis on camping as an attraction for young people to join a youth organisation, with the position maintained here that this activity was available to limited numbers from the 1880s to the 1930s, with more Boys experiencing life in this organisation at the weekly classes. This shows that the existing consensus approaches youth movements in broad homogenous terms and overlooks the regional variances in application of the agenda set from headquarters. This is significant to our understanding as it indicates that the urban space was a unique environment where youth movements adapted to local circumstances. Therefore, the Boys' Brigade is presented in this thesis as a vehicle to improve our understanding of the ways young people interacted in the urban space in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. It offers an indication of the lived experience of membership of a youth movement that is missing from much of the existing histories and provides a clearer indication that the application of the organisation differed across space and place, thus presenting an original contribution to the field of youth histories.