

Andy Auster – Volunteer 1971 – 1973

For me, my first camp in 1971, without wishing to sound grandiose, was a life-changing experience.

Tony Gray, Mike Carding and I were undergraduates at Hatfield College, Durham University. One Sunday morning, Tony came up to me and asked what was I doing over the long summer vacation. I replied that apart from being with my parents on holiday in Wales, playing cricket, watching Aston Villa, rugby training, and hop-picking in September... not much! Tony explained about PHAB, and asked would I like to come on a PHAB Camp? Tony was, and still is, such a wonderfully generous, inspiring, eccentric character, and I had no hesitation in agreeing to be a volunteer on Senior Camp in Oswestry, which was to be led by the amazing Dag Saunders in 1971.

What a great trio of personalities: Tony, Dag, and Mike!
The same must be said of the other volunteers and the great PHAB young people who arrived in a coach from Birmingham. We were simply young people having fun. No-one wore stickers saying they were able-bodied or disabled. There was no them and us ...only 'us'; it was an incredible feeling. I had to come back! So I went on Senior again the following year, before arranging Creeping PHAB with Tony Gray in 1973.

Partly because Mike Carding had set the trend the year before, but mainly because we were mad, Tony and I decided to make use of PHAB's proudest possession – an old converted ambulance, falling apart at the seams, called *Agamemnon* – to do a Touring PHAB Camp for 16-19 year olds!



Andy looking out of *Agamemnon* 1973

I contacted a farmer, well-known to my parents, in mid-Wales, who let us begin the holiday under canvas in his beautiful fields, populated by sheep, by the River Dovey, where we were blessed with wonderful weather. Under twinkling stars, I recall asking Rob, a thalidomide victim, did he like the peace and tranquillity? He replied '*not much*' it was '*too quiet*'. A more poignant moment, whilst in conversation with Rob, was to occur later in the trip... We then headed to Cheltenham, where my fiancé Liz's parents helped arrange for us to stay in a Scout Hut. I then made use of my contacts at Emmanuel College Cambridge for the next destination, where we punted on the Cam, enjoyed tea with a retired 'old soldier', and combined fresh air and exercise, with ale and fish and chips, which was all very special. I had prevailed upon a friendly Vicar of a Church in Kensington to let us sleep on the floor of his church for the final leg of the tour in London! In preparation for a BBC Proms performance at the Royal Albert Hall, we 'borrowed' sheets from Emmanuel College, and made two banners which stated 'Creeping PHAB'.



The Creeping PHAB Crew in Cambridge 1973 (Andy is standing behind the "A")

We were again blessed with glorious weather. We ‘promenaded’ through London with our banners and, after several hours of queuing, gained access to the Arena, right in front of the stage. As the ‘live’ broadcast began, we unfurled our PHAB banners, and shouted “P – H – A – B... PHAB”! The concert began with a solo pianist playing a Beethoven Sonata, before we were treated to some orchestral classics. After the Beethoven, I once again turned to Rob, who had found Wales far too quiet, and asked whether he had enjoyed the music, fully expecting him to say it was boring. To my amazement, he replied, ‘*Andy it was fantastic!*’ This brought a tear to my eye. I do not know what he is doing now but I remember with awe how he played ping-pong with the bat in his mouth, and darts with the dart between his toes, due to having no arms; just an amazing young lad.

Afterwards, on the way back to the Church we stopped at a ‘hostelry’ in Chelsea and, as I was ordering the drinks, a kind gentleman came across and said he would like to buy the whole party a drink. I said that that would only be possible if he would come and join us... We felt strongly that it is very easy to walk by on the other side of the street or put money in a collection tin, rather than engage... So if people were kind, which many were, we always encouraged them to engage with us, which this person did. Very generously, not only did the gentleman join us, and buy us all a drink, but he invited us back to his rather ‘swish’ apartment around the corner for a party well into the night!



Chilling out on Creeping PHAB 1973
(Tony Gray front left; Andy Auster back right)



All aboard Agamemnon! 1973
...PHAB's 1959 converted ambulance...

Birmingham PHAB Camps has enriched many lives... including mine.

I became a music teacher in Gloucester where I set up a ‘Phab England’ PHAB Club running weekly activities, and Easter and summer camps until I moved away in 1978. Later I was to learn about Share Music Camps, which brought disabled and nondisabled young people together for outdoor activities, and music-making. For almost 15 years my summer holidays involved going up to the Lake District, and The Calvert Trust at Keswick, either as a volunteer, or in later years as leader. My daughter, Helen, and son, Tom joined me as well. In latter years I have been involved in projects helping Russian orphans, and engaged in ‘Special Olympics’ projects in Kazakhstan, working with those who were lobbying for the integration of disabled people into society out there.



Taking a stroll on Creeping PHAB... 1973

My eyes were opened to the joy of integration by those *Birmingham* PHAB Camps I went on in the early seventies.

Andy Auster is pushing the chair.
Stephen Gardner—orange shirt— **child from first Camp, 1967.**
Robert—tall guy at the front —**lad who enjoyed the BBC Proms!**

I would simply conclude by stating: PHAB is fabulous, and thank you Tony (Gray) for inviting me to go on a camp!