

## My experience completing the Duke of Edinburgh award

Recently, my Rainbow and Brownie units have both been joined by Guides doing their bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award. This started me reminiscing about my own experience of completing the award as a young member around 10 years ago.



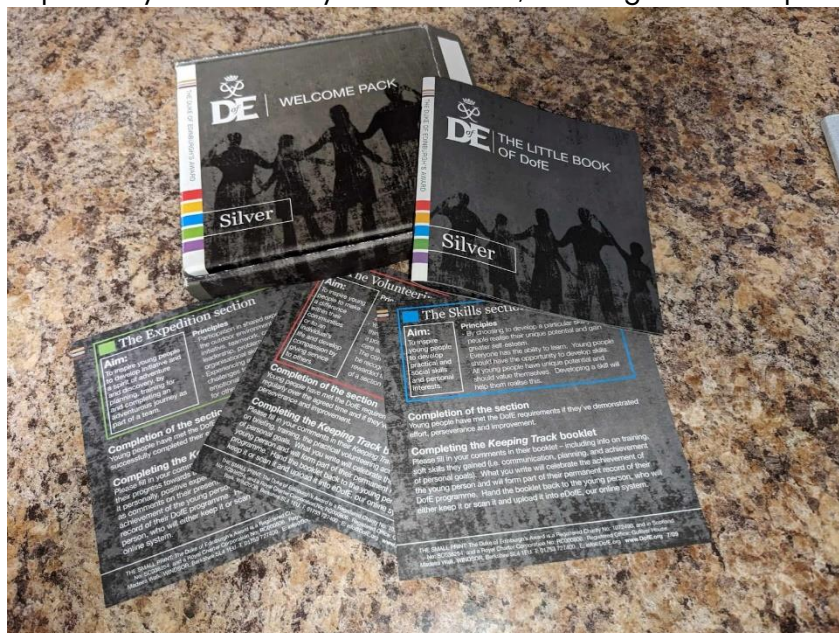
For those of you who aren't familiar with the award, the Duke of Edinburgh scheme can be completed at three levels; bronze (14+), silver (15+), and gold (16+). For each award you have to complete a certain number of months of developing a skill, physical activity and volunteering, as well planning and going on an expedition. As you work through the awards, the time commitments become longer allowing for more development and the expectations for the expedition increase in duration from 2 days and 1 night (bronze) to 4 days and 3 nights (gold), the amount of activity expected each day, and change from being somewhere known by the participant to somewhere unknown and with more challenging terrain. For the Gold award there is also the additional challenge of going on a residential in an unfamiliar environment. Many schools run the award, as do scout groups, guide divisions, counties or regions, and a variety of other youth groups. For more information on what the award is about and who can take part please see the DofE award website:

<https://www.dofe.org/>

As a teenager I completed my bronze and silver awards through my school, however, my Sixth Form college did not offer the Gold award so I approached Guiding to complete this with a group of other young members. Throughout all the awards I enjoyed completing the skill, volunteering and physical sections and working in a group to learn how to use a map, plan routes, measure distances with string, calculate walking times allowing for gradient increase, and practice skills such as taking compass bearings. The actual expedition I found very challenging with my bronze and silver awards. At that time I was

not a huge fan of walking and many of the other students participating in the DofE award scheme were far more used to this level of activity than me. This is definitely not everybody's experience of Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, but I found them quite competitive. Several groups would leave the same campsite in the morning and finish at another campsite in the evening, with groups almost racing to prove they could walk the longest distance, in the fastest time, over the biggest hills. We would then be encouraged to join in with a game of rounders after dinner when really all I wanted to do was go to bed! My experience of completing the Gold award with Guiding was a far more cooperative and enjoyable experience which I will tell you more about in a couple of paragraphs time.

The skill, physical activity and volunteering sections are carried out mainly independently, with a mentor for each section setting targets and then signing off after the required number of months (back in the olden days this was in a little square book, but is now all done online!). The idea is to either start something new or extend an existing hobby. As I was already quite busy, for my Gold award I decided to extend activities I was already involved with. I had already volunteered with my local Rainbow and Brownie units that my Mum runs for several years, so I extended this by volunteering with a different Rainbow unit (volunteering). I also raised money for charity by dancing (physical), and learned some new bellringing methods (skill). These were all very rewarding and encouraged me to push myself out of my comfort zone, learning lots in the process.



Then came the expedition! For the Gold award this involves planning, training for and completing an expedition of four days and three nights. This could be done walking, kayaking, cycling or on a horse (the groups I was in always walked and this was certainly the most common choice) and everything needed for the time had to be carried except for water which we were allowed to refill along the way. Mobile phones were allowed but only for emergencies. They were sealed up in a bag at the beginning of the expedition and then checked again at the end to make sure they hadn't been opened. Being the part I had previously found particularly tricky, I was understandable nervous about this as it

would not only be the longest expedition I had taken part in but also over the toughest terrain as for our practice walk we were in the Peak District and our main expedition in the Lake District. To prepare I went on a few walks of my own along the canal in Nottingham where I had moved for University. Packing my rucksack became an art, and one I was very good at, even weighing my toothbrush to find the lightest and calculating the sweets with the most calories for their weight (dolly mix in case you were interested).

By the day of the practice expedition I felt as well prepared as I could be but was still very nervous as, being away at University, I was only meeting some of the other participants for the first time. It did not go well. We suffered through torrential rain showers during which we always miscalculated when to stop and put our waterproofs on (always getting them on just in time for the rain to stop and taking them off just for it to start again), nearly had to use our emergency training for sheltering from lightning (getting to low ground, leaving our bags and all sheltering together under emergency bags), and I was so sick over the first night that I had to miss most of the second day of the expedition, instead resting in the trainers car. Despite all this, I came away feeling far more positive than ever before! This was my best expedition yet! Rather than a race, when one member of the team was struggling we would stop and carry some of their luggage for them, the expectation wasn't to play rounders after the walk but rather to rest ready for the next day, and we all knew we were there to support each other and get through it together.

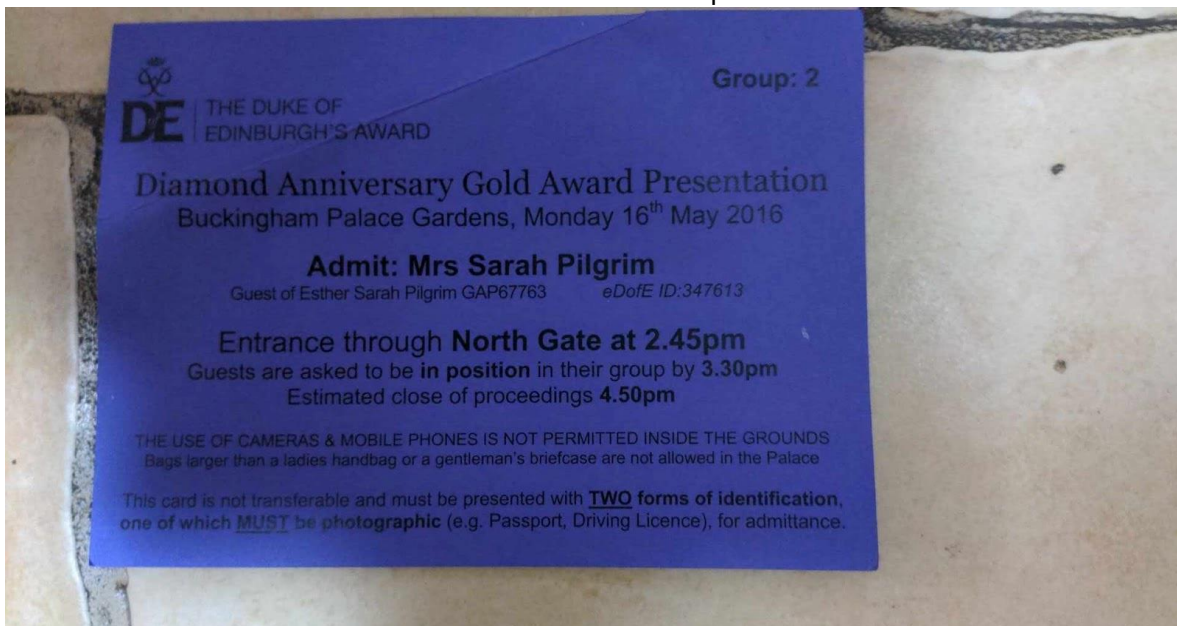
The actual expedition in the Lake District went much more smoothly and holds many fond memories for me. I love walking in the lake district and our days were filled with spectacular views. Of course, all of us had times when we struggled but we expected this and supported each other so that we all made it through together as a team. Some of my most memorable moments are:

- Crossing a small stream and falling flat on my bottom in it just as our leaders rounded the bend behind us. I then struggled to get up with my backpack, turtle style.
- The night it was one girl's birthday and the leaders decided to surprise us all with a cake. They turned up at our campsite around dinner time (not late, probably about 5:30) to find that we had got to the campsite, had dinner and were already tucked up in bed. Yes, they did make us get up to sing happy birthday and eat cake!
- Sitting at the top of one particular hill taking an extra break and enjoying the views as another participant was struggling, unpacking her rucksack for her and being pleased that I could help as she had previously done the same for me.
- Watching our expedition assessor (who seemed ancient to us, but was probably a little past retirement age), part of the mountain rescue team, and his dog casually running up hills we'd just been puffing and panting up.
- The feeling of immense satisfaction as we crossed a set of stepping stones and saw the youth hostel we were staying in that night, marking the end of our expedition.



My local award ceremony for my Gold award. I think this was in Chelmsford cathedral and involved hearing about lots of the different things people had done to complete their awards. It was nice because lots of the people I did my expedition with were there as well.

The other part of the Gold Award is completing an residential in an unfamiliar environment. This was an amazing experience. I attended a few days (probably a weekend but I can't remember) at Icando in London. Despite coming from Essex I had rarely been to London and I didn't know anyone else who was going to be there either. Although I can't remember all the details, I had a fantastic time. The main activity was a monopoly challenge around London in small groups, using the tube which was quite a new experience for me. We also had fun at the center, although the only activity I really remember there was watching Moulin Rouge. Although it may seem nerve racking going somewhere new with people you don't know, I cannot recommend it enough. I had a fantastic time and it made me feel so much more capable and confident.





After completing the Gold award you are normally invited to attend a local celebration ceremony and an official presentation that a member of the Royal family attends. This is normally at St James's palace. I just happened to complete my award around the time that the DofE scheme was turning 60 years old. For this they released a special Diamond Award (to complete this I learnt to knit, an activity I now love, and raised money for the scheme) and invited a few lucky participants to receive their award at a party in the grounds of Buckingham palace. Here we were split into groups and presented our award by a celebrity. Mine was awarded by the astronaut Chris Hadfield but also among the celebrities there were Oliver and James Phelps, Jane Torville and some well-known TV presenters. We also didn't get just any member of the Royal family in attendance - we got the Duke of Edinburgh Prince Philip himself! He took the time to come and talk to every award recipient there, no mean feat as there were a lot and after the presentation we were free to explore the gardens.

As you can hopefully tell, completing the Duke of Edinburgh scheme is not easy, it is designed to be a challenge, and as such it can be an extremely rewarding experience that I would highly recommend. Just make sure you find a supportive group to complete it with and you will create memories to be treasured for years.