

THE WOODMEN OF ARDEN

Where once gentlemen would practice archery, in preparation for war, they now practice golf, in preparation for death. But in a few places around the country there are links with our bellicose bowmanry of yore, and the Woodmen of Arden in Meriden, Warwickshire, is one such.

This club was formed in 1785, though as is common with all folk customs and events they lay claim to greater antiquity, having supposedly re-started their society then. But 1785 is a decent age in itself.

The meetings of the club are known as Wardmotes. The most significant is the August gathering, at which seniority in the society is resolved by shooting at targets from a considerable distance, using the traditional yew longbow. The arrows likewise follow the old style, being of wood with a silver head rather than made from carbon-fibre or plastic.

The club has a membership limited to 80, and limited too in that membership is so sought after that it is, according to report, almost by inheritance. One member was added to the 80 in 1835, when Prime Minister Robert Peel was elected, none having departed this earth - or the region - to create a vacancy. When he was toasted by the members the secretary fined all present for having raised their glasses to a woodman who had thus far obtained no honour!

Most prestigious of events in the club are shooting for the silver horn donated in 1787 by The Warden (in effect President of the Society) and founder, the fourth Earl of Aylesford. The Countess of Aylesford donated a silver arrow the following year for another trophy. The horn is shot for at a distance no less than 90 yards, no more than 120, determined by the drawing of lots; the arrow at 90 yards without variation.

Whoever hits the first gold in shooting for the horn is named Master Forester for the year, and second gold gains its bowman the title of Senior Verdurer. This being a gentlemen's club, the archers naturally wear special clothing: white trousers; green tailcoat, and green tie beneath a buff weskit. If hitting a small target from 120 yards seems extreme, than one legend of the club puts it in the shade. A neighbour annoyed the archers by driving his carriage behind the targets, and one hot-head let loose an arrow at the cad, grazing his arm from what was reputed to have been 300 yards.

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