

# At the sharp end

tales from the field

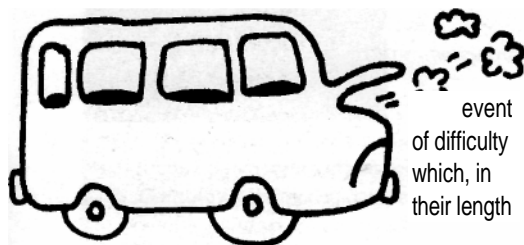
## THE WORST WEEKEND OF MY ENTIRE LIFE!

**I**t was the worst weekend of my entire life and what follows are only a few edited lowlights.

**Edited because, as Freud would have said, there is only so much pain which can willingly be recalled and because there is only so much which can be asked of even the most sunnily-disposed of readers. Nevertheless, let me solemnly swear to you now, that every word of what follows is true.**

And, as is so often the case in this business, it had all began in a sprit of optimism and of fun. A weekend on the Pembrokeshire coast during the height of summer, a chance to relax and provide a well-deserved break for hard-working young people upon whose shoulders the success or otherwise of a demanding Summer Playscheme depended. The presence of a visiting group from Europe could only add to the prospects of enjoyment.

It was in this spirit that I attended for interview at the local Social Services transport depot. True, obtaining permission to borrow a minibus had not been entirely easygoing. The words 'trip' and 'young people' had not been greeted with in that wholehearted spirit of enthusiastic partnership and facilitation which is, no doubt, today characteristic of colleagues in that area. When a decision was forthcoming from the Director - by whose hand alone a request of this magnitude could be determined - it was accompanied by the stipulation that 'the person in charge' should present her or himself, in person, at the Transport Depot for inspection. To the Depot I went. One and a half-hours later I emerged with a minibus which had clearly done service before the establishment of the 1946 Childrens' Departments and having received a set of instructions about its care, maintenance and what to do in the



and complexity, appeared to have taken most of the intervening years to complete. I had been given to understand that, were anything to go wrong, I would be personally responsible for a general and irreparable rupture in the quality of relations between the Youth and Social services and that only a meticulous implementation the Thirty Six Point Rescue Plan would be likely to sway the disciplinary hearing which would inexorably follow.

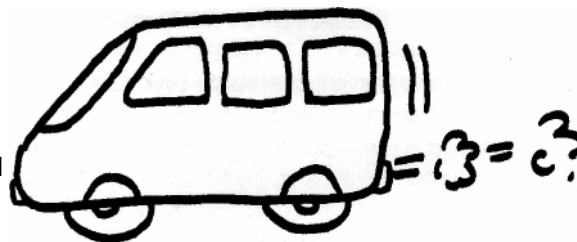
Reader, I was young. Before I had even left the yard, I remembered none of it. The holiday spirit was still strong enough for me to know that I would never need to I ( think of it all again.

When we broke down on the motorway, some half a mile away from the Port Talbot roundabout, I was already a lot older. Now Port Talbot has, no doubt, a series of sterling qualities, but its attractiveness as a venue for a holiday weekend is not one of them, a point which was not lost on the festive group of young people on board. We made our way perilously to the roundabout's Beefeater restaurant where, in those pre-BSE days, we were grudgingly corralled into one corner of the establishment within sight and smell - but not touch or taste - of the steaks served to more fortunate customers. Point One in the Thirty Six Point Plan involved telephoning the Police to report the location of the vehicle and, presumably, to make things easier for them when later sent to arrest the driver for gross dereliction of duty. Not being able to recall, immediately, the detail of Point Two, I settled for what I could remember, called the Police and arranged to be picked up at the restaurant and accompany them to the breakdown spot.

When we got there, the bus was gone. Gone. Completely, utterly and totally gone. A minibus which had broken down in a shuddering, moaning, smoke belching, metal grinding, fire threatening, catastrophe had spontaneously healed itself and set off on its own for home. Either that, or we had been followed by Depot staff, aware of the recklessness and untrustworthy character of the individual to whom their vehicle had been entrusted. I knew it was a judgement.

I spare those of a sensitive disposition from the distressing details of the days which followed. Of how another bus was brought from Cardiff, made its way to the Pembroke coast in

the early hours of the morning and promptly died at its first sight of the Youth Hostel. Of how that turned out to be a wise decision because the Hostel was, for that weekend, under the charge of a Relief Warden, a nervous youth who had clearly missed not a paragraph in his Rules of the Organisation and who responded to the high spirits of our party by



attempting to apply each one of them. Of the nightly visit, in striped pyjamas, of a splentically angry middle-aged gentleman who had driven some miles down the coast to share his feelings at being kept awake by the noise of our revellers. Of the American man who, claiming to be an agent of the CIA monopolised the only public telephone within hitchhiking distance for the whole of a Saturday afternoon while we tried to contact the A.A. Of the fact that it rained. And then it rained. And then it rained some more. Of my humiliating return to Cardiff in the second brokendown minibus hoisted onto the back of a breakdown truck, surrounded by young people speaking in German and a driver from Blaenau Ffestiniog who would speak only in Welsh, until the effects of 48 hours without sleep meant the two languages were entirely indistinguishable.

The first van was recovered by the Police some days later. The engine had cooled while we enjoyed the hospitality of the Beefeater and, in that condition, had been liberated by some local entrepreneurs and driven off. Within a mile it had steamed to a halt once again, and been abandoned for a second time. Reluctantly, charges of wasting police time were abandoned likewise.

There are many morals to this story, and a series of conclusions which I have been able to compile at leisure. They are available in a neat and comprehensive Thirty Six Point Plan which I would be happy to provide for those whose sensitivities are so blunted that they have been able to reach the end of this account without tears.

Mark Drakeford is a sometime, somewhere youth worker.

**Do you have a humorous youth work story to tell?  
If so, Ymlaen would like to hear from you. Contact Liz Sharp at the address on page three.**