



# A Brief History of the Roots of Forest School in the UK

by Jon Cree and Mel McCree

This is the first of two articles on the past, present and possible futures for UK Forest School.

**T**his year, 2012, marks seventeen years since the first identifiable Forest School sessions in the UK and is the beginning of a new phase in it's history, with the launch of the Forest School Association (FSA) as a UK national body, working in partnership with other organisations to support Forest School.

It is a good time to reflect on the past. As James Arthur Baldwin said,

*'if you know whence you came, there are absolutely no limitations to where you can go'.*

Some Forest School history is fuzzy; to be expected in a social movement with multiple experiences and sparse literature. We tell the story from the writer's perspectives focusing on some key figures mostly in the UK. To a large extent, Forest School is nothing new in learning outdoors. Forest School roots are often attributed to Scandinavia yet there is a strong family tree in UK culture and elsewhere. The Forest School seed planted by Bridgewater College's 1993 visit to Denmark grows on centuries-old fertile soil, and it is this 'soil' we look at in this first article.

## Early influences in the 1800s

We have a rich tradition of taking children and young people into natural places, going back to late Victorian times. The Romantics, such as Wordsworth and Ruskin, emerged in response to the industrial revolution of the 1700s, rebelling against Enlightenment rationalism. They exalted the sublime in nature, creative freedom, imagination, childhood innocence, the dignity of the common man and individual experience. Romanticism was rooted in the German Sturm und Drang movement so it is no surprise that noted German-speaking child-centred educators from this time - Pestalozzi, Froebel and Steiner - placed a strong emphasis on the natural world as a learning environment. The American transcendentalists, such as Thoreau, Emerson and John Muir, also challenged the industrial capitalist mindset, writing on conservation, a spiritual relationship and 'being part of' not 'apart from' the natural world. These views still have an influence and relevance today in Forest School.

## Early 1900s

Although from an adult-led philosophy, Baden-Powell's scouting and guiding (est. 1907) shares an outdoors approach with FS. Closer to the FS ethos, a play-based, child-centred, socially-minded practice was developed with enthusiasm in the early twentieth century with several key pioneers. Margaret McMillan (1860-1931), in particular, used an imaginative play approach. Her 'Open Air Movement' has compelling similarities to current values and approaches in providing a natural, real-life environment. In her work as a social reformer and educator alongside her sister, Margaret combined her Froebel-influenced ideas on child development, hygiene and nutrition in an open-air school in London slum gardens in Bow (1908) then Deptford (1910). Despite the public challenges she faced, McMillan's school gained acclaim and improved post-war children's health, having a strong impact on the nursery school movement of the 1920s. We can draw parallels with current inner-city life where children have decreased access to green space and time outdoors for free play and where urban FS and other approaches have grown.

The Italian physician Maria Montessori (1870-1952) had a deep influence on UK nursery education history. She placed importance on children appreciating beauty and order within nature as a direct educating living force. In



1924, Susan Isaacs (1885-1952) started teaching at the new Malting House School, Cambridgeshire. Influenced by Dewey and Piaget's theories, she facilitated real-life learning journeys with much outdoor play, concerned with 'the meaning of the child's experiences to himself'. Isaacs was supremely qualified in observation as an experienced psychoanalyst and remarkable polymath. FS practitioners don't need to train to her standards yet her work highlights the importance of close observation and documentation. There is a need for practitioners to know how to observe and increase their sensitivity of response, reflecting on practice to identify where skills can be improved and scaffold when needed.



Malting House School and Susan Isaacs

Adventure education became prominent, with Kurt Hahn founding Gordonstoun School (1934), which inspired the first Outward Bound Trust Centre (Aberdovey, 1941). The emphasis on problem-solving, experiential education, first-hand contact and personal or social development has obvious links with FS. However, instead of local learning, visits are often located away on residential trips to experience 'wilder' landscapes.

### Scandinavian influences on the UK

Forest pedagogy in Scandinavia, which had some key developments after WWII, is connected with their culture of friluftsliv ('free-air life'). In 1957 a retired soldier, Gosta Frøhm, introduced the Skogsmulle school in Sweden for 5-6 year olds which was one of the inspirations for the 'I Ur Och Skur' (lit. 'In Rain and Shine') early years movement. At a later date Metsamoori started in Finland which, like skogsmulle, bases its practise around characters, songs and stories in the outdoors. Both movements embed a deep spiritual connection with the natural world, akin to earlier thinkers such as Froebel, the transcendentalists and romantics, not necessarily borne out in the UK FS movement. In Denmark, åbørnspædagogik, saw FS become an integral part of Danish early years programmes, aiming to create an environment where children can develop into well-balanced and independent human beings with good relationships to others, using local woodland to help expand nursery places.

### Mid 1900s

Affected by war, outdoor education became established with a focus on leadership principles and independent learning. An alternative to scouting's perceived militarism, Woodcraft Folk formed after WWI (1924), linked to the New Labour Movement (McMillan was also a member). They defined woodcraft as 'the skill of living in the open air, close to nature'. A major tenet is that, irrespective of age and status, all members have an equal say in decision-making, perhaps influenced the development of child-centred practice.

There is a cultural transference issue in how FS has evolved in the UK, as we have had over three hundred years of industrialised culture in four or more generations since the Industrial Revolution. Scandinavia is less industrialised and less populated, there is widespread right to roam, grandparents may still work on the land, families are more prepared for all weathers and engage much more with outdoor experience. UK families with different lifestyles can be ill-prepared for being outdoors. This important difference is one that places FS in an active position within UK cultural change, introducing some families to fully enjoying the natural world for the first time.



### Early Antecedents of Forest School

### Post WWII

The focus on childhood changed dramatically through the post-war years to the late twentieth century. This has had a strong affect on the different approaches to practice found in FS, such as child- and/or adult-centred, attitudes to risk, the purpose of play and child rights. In the 1960s, tensions took hold between the protectionism of the Welfare State and the emergence of child rights, espousing the need for freedom, a tension that is still current in UK views on childhood. There was a dominance of a psychological child-development view based on Bowlby, Bruner and Piaget's theories. The government-commissioned Plowden Report (1967), that looked at a complete overhaul of the UK primary education system, embraced some radical changes. Among many of the recommendations one which chimes most with FS was that primary education should strengthen a child's intrinsic interest in learning for themselves. Its recurring themes recognized the value of play, the use of the outdoors, learning by discovery and the importance of observation and evaluation.





Progressive education encouraged children's freedom, yet a backlash occurred within UK schools where teaching standards were too loosely monitored, leading to controversy and a reaction against child-centred practice, perceived as a permissiveness that had led to social ills. Thus the new UK political landscape of the 1980s advocated protectionism and traditional pedagogy. Plowden's view that 'at the heart of the educational process lies the child' was abandoned in favour of 'the school curriculum is at the heart of education' (DES, 1981). It seems as if child-centred practice got lost here, painted as morally dangerous by the establishment, despite the pioneering developments pre- and post-WWII.

Growing in focus alongside education, play was valued but used as an instrument of social policy rather than valued for its intrinsic nature. The ongoing development of playwork in the 1970s and 80s highlighted the need for adults to advocate for free, spontaneous play as essential and to provide spaces where that could happen. Adventure playgrounds design created spaces where children could experiment, build and take more risks. Aside from facilitating safe tool use and co-operation, the need for supervision was partly in response to increasing adult concerns around traffic and stranger danger, which in the 1970s reduced children's street play and independent mobility dramatically. These concerns are still felt today and consequently children's time and space to play has reduced. Therefore, like adventure playgrounds, FS has become valuable as a place where children can be themselves and play outdoors.

In the 1970s, the emergence of academic child studies and environmental education (EE) encouraged children's voices and interaction in their local landscapes. Two milestone UN conferences in Stockholm (1972) and Tbilisi (1997) attempted to spell out how EE was to tackle the growing environmental crisis. In 1988 the National Curriculum was launched and EE was one of the cross curricular themes. Ironically, EE never gained status due to an ill thought-out and crowded curriculum and much FS takes place in 1980s-created EE wildlife areas abandoned in the 1990s. In the 1980s Van Matre's Earth Education and Cornell's 'sharing nature' approach from America spread in the UK, using a holistic, ecological conceptual and sensory approach. This was partly in response to what was happening to EE. Meanwhile field studies continued growing in many outdoor study centres. Getting to know woodlands and identification are important tools in the FS leader's kit, as can be the sensory experiences designed by Van Matre, Cornell and colleagues, although neither has the strong child-centred FS pedagogy.

After the prescription of the national curriculum and the target-driven culture that emerged in the UK education system in the 1990s, the soil of our social culture was ready for practitioners to rediscover the ideals of the pioneers and thinkers that worked in the UK and elsewhere for the previous century. In the next article we will look at how UK Forest School has grown since 1995. We will frame Forest School within changes in society, including environmental concerns, educational pressures and the growing demand for natural play opportunities. ■



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### Authors Notes

**Mel McCree** - An ecological educator, writer and artist, Mel McCree is completing her PhD research into adult approaches to natural play in Forest School. See [www.melmccree.me](http://www.melmccree.me) for further FS literature links



**Jon Cree** - Jon is Training Co-ordinator and 11 - 19 manager at Bishops Wood Centre, Worcestershire Children's Service. He has been running FS training since 2007 and working with teenagers for even longer, particularly those where formal

schooling doesn't fit their needs. Jon also got elected as chair of the newly formed FSA this year - hence this article!

See [www.bishopswoodcentre.gov.uk](http://www.bishopswoodcentre.gov.uk)

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