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Forest School: reclaiming it from Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT 'Forest schools' are an increasingly well-known feature of the educational landscape, having been adopted by many local authorities across the United Kingdom in an effort to build children's confidence and self-esteem through learning outdoors in a woodland setting. Their origins are usually described as deriving from a Scandinavian (particularly Danish) tradition which was introduced to the UK in the early 1990s. This article explores, and suggests links with, the history of a similar movement called 'woodcraft' which flourished almost a century ago, and which informed the pedagogy of a small progressive school (itself called Forest School) which existed in Hampshire in the 1930s.

You may have heard of something called 'forest school': many schools and local authorities in the United Kingdom have recently adopted it. A forest school is an area of woodland which school children visit on a regular basis (usually weekly) over the course of a term or year. Its aim is to build partcipants' confidence through mastering small achievable tasks in a woodland setting; rather than being about team-building or competitiveness, it nurtures, supports and develops the self-esteem of the participating children. The folklore around it suggests that the UK forest school movement began in 1994 after a visit to a forest school in Denmark by some education students and tutors from Bridgwater College. But in fact, there is a much longer tradition of 'forest school' in the UK, and it centres around the concept of 'woodcraft'. This article focuses on the historical antecedents of the modern 'forest school' movement and links it with a school of the same name which closed 70 years ago.

Forest School was a small progressive school which operated from some wooden huts in the New Forest, Hampshire from 1929-1940. Lessons were optional and held in the open air; children were equal members of the school's self-governing 'council'; the curriculum was project-based, with an emphasis on freedom, self-expression and meaningful activity; and camping was a normal

part of the school routine. While some elements of the school were similar to those of other progressive schools of the period, the emphasis on 'woodcraft' as a key philosophy was unique. The similarities between the modern 'forest school' movement and the 'woodcraft' movement of the early part of the twentieth century are striking, despite having different roots and flourishing in very different eras. I want to make sure that Forest School is remembered by those who are participating in modern 'forest school' activities, and celebrate the pioneers who established and developed the original woodcraft movement.

How did the early Forest School begin? It was the brainchild of Ernest Westlake (1855-1922), who was born into a wealthy Quaker merchant family, and became an amateur naturalist and geologist. He recalled a childhood spent in solitary play in the woodland on the edge of the New Forest, a setting which fuelled his interest in natural history. Westlake grew up at a time when the theory of evolution dominated the intellectual climate; he studied science at University College, London, where he was tutored by the Darwinian biologist T.H. Huxley. His interest in the anthropology of prehistoric people eventually saw him elected a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute.[1] Evolutionary ideas had changed the way people thought about the world, including the way children are educated. 'Recapitulation theory', whose chief proponent was G. Stanley Hall, described the 'natural' development of children in terms of evolution, with every child having to progress through certain 'primitive' stages. Westlake, who was influenced by Stanley Hall, wrote

> Lack of this recapitulation gives the clue to what is amiss with modern life. This recapitulatory first-hand contact with nature; this simple open-air life; the life of the wilderness, the forest, the hills and the sea, which together with his social life was the chief factor in the formation of early man, is what we know as Woodcraft.[2]

While Woodcraft's most famous offshoot is the Boy Scout movement, established by Robert Baden-Powell in 1907, others took similar ideas and went in a different direction. Both Westlake and Baden-Powell were influenced by Ernest Thompson-Seton (1860-1949), an artist with a keen interest in native American people, their beliefs and lifestyles.[3] Thompson-Seton became motivated to work with young people in order to provide a positive response to the problem of vandalism he was having on his home in New York State; he initiated a weekend camp for the boys concerned, 'hoping to turn their anti-social traits into something more worthwhile'.[4] He deemed the camp such a success that in 1902 he formed an outdoor organisation for boys, initially called the 'Woodcraft Indians'. Ernest Westlake was inspired by and corresponded with Thompson-Seton, and founded the anachronistic-sounding Order of Woodcraft Chivalry (OWC) in 1916, making Seton its first 'Grand Chieftain'. There were fundamental differences in philosophy between Baden-Powell on one side, and Thompson-Seton and Westlake on the other; the latter's main objection to the developing ideology of the Scouting movement was its insistence on patriotism and militarism, an approach which seemed

anachronistic by 1918, when the horrors of the First World War were fresh. The sense that the war had heralded the end of civilization prompted a wave of new, 'progressive' educational theories aiming to create a better future. The work of Edmond Holmes, author of *What is and What Might Be* (1911) was particularly influential on contemporary progressive educators. Holmes wrote in 1918:

> Give a child freedom for self-development, release him from the cramping and deadening pressure of autocratic authority, rigid discipline and mechanical instruction, and two things will happen. The spirit of liberty, equality, fraternity will begin to germinate in his heart, and his capacity… for making the most of his natural aptitudes and inclinations will at least be kept alive.[5]

Not only is freedom for children the key to unlocking their potential for learning, but it has the capacity to create an improved, fairer society, one which could never unleash the destructiveness of the Great War. Little wonder that Holmes' philosophy of freedom was so attractive a prospect.

For Westlake and his woodcraft movement, the importance of the natural environment in the formation of the child's personality could not be overstated: only by providing favourable surroundings could children grow appropriately. The combination of a child's freedom and an appropriately wild woodland environment were the central tenets of the school created by Westlake and his son Aubrey, which opened in 1929 with three pupils. The school prospectus proudly states:

> A child's life at the Forest School is regarded as a joyful adventure. Happiness, which is a child's birthright, follows from personal satisfaction of achievement and the natural life of an organised group. The Forest School prepares the minds and bodies of its children for life and living, aiming at a gradual unfolding of a complete human personality.[6]

A number of personal accounts of life at Forest School exist, some from pupils and others from staff. Such testimonies need to be approached with a certain amount of caution: memory can be self-selecting, and those whose accounts remain were personally involved with the school, and later Forest School Camps, for many years. From this we can assume their experiences were positive; but they were not necessarily typical. Nevertheless, their evidence is worthy of record, if only because of its rarity. Nellie Brand, a housemother at the school, was recruited by Cuthbert Rutter, Westlake's cousin and the first Headteacher, when she was nineteen. On protesting that she couldn't be a teacher as she had no teaching qualifications

> …he said he wasn't interested in paper qualifications, he wanted people who could love children but leave them free to make their own decisions and learn about things because they wanted to find out all about life.[7]

The school was housed in two wooden buildings and operated a rather Spartan existence on a shoestring budget. The staff at the Forest School often were not paid: they got their keep, and wages were paid only if there was surplus money after all other expenses were met. Sanitation was in the form of earth closets, although the school boasted that it did have running water. It was co-educational, and the curriculum included needlecraft for all (the children made their own school 'uniforms'), and there were mixed dormitories for the younger children. The children shared the chores with the staff, which was a key part of building the school's 'family-like' community. Its emphasis on 'the primitive arts and crafts' was in order that children could learn in a meaningful, real-life context:

> …the child uses the cup he [sic] has made, wears the scarf he has woven, sits on the stool he has carpentered… He becomes a student in the real sense of the word. He not only learns by doing, but he learns how to learn anything that he needs to know.[8]

The children were organised into age groups whose names were borrowed from Thompson Seton's Woodcraft Indians: Elves, Woodlings, and Trackers. The curriculum was assessed by 'tests and trials' of the children's woodcraft skills: one former pupil remembers vividly 'swimming across the river holding a lighted candle',[9] one of the Woodling trials (for children aged 8-12). In order to become a Tracker (12-15 year olds) a child had to be able to climb the 'tracker tree' – a particularly challenging one.

The school's prospectus described the site as 100 acres of woodland, 'a veritable children's paradise'.[10] Jean Westlake, Aubrey's daughter, was a pupil at Forest School. She recalled that this was true:

> We climbed trees, played in the sand pit, built dens and tree houses, stalked through the child-high bracken, laid trails, dug for clay and made pots, wove and plaited rushes, swam and dived in the Avon, sunbathed, rode the school ponies, cultivated our gardens, gathered wood and lit fires and in fact enjoyed everything that a primitive environment offered.[11]

Having said that, she also remembers:

> Sunday was staff day and we children were given a lunch packet after breakfast and expected to occupy ourselves until tea-time when we were allowed back in. I remember one winter Sunday when I had a streaming cold and it was raining. Life was indeed pretty miserable then.[12]

In the summer term, the school went on a two-week long hike, carrying their own rucksacks (which could weigh up to a specified 8lbs) and pushing the rest of their equipment in a trek cart. The first hike was to the sea at Lymington. Nellie Brand recounts one incident from this hike:

> On our last night out we arrived at a site rather late in the evening and decided not to pitch tents but to sleep around the fire. When Cuthbert got up to make the morning 'cuppa' he discovered that all the pigs that had been grubbing about under the trees when we arrived, were snuggled up between the children, all snoring merrily.[13]

Liza Banks was a pupil between 1935 and 1937. In 1997 she was interviewed about life at the school. She said:

> I adored that school. Whenever Mother came to fetch me for the holidays I used to go and hide. There was a hundred acres of wood. We knew every inch of the wood as children, because we were… up all the trees… Forest School was a brand new thing. Only people who were radical thinkers, and in these days you'd be called progressive… it was much more outrageous than anything that you see now going on… The rest of society was very much more staid and structured… I'm sure, looking back on my life, that my time at Forest School caused me to be the sort of person I am.[14]

Liza was the daughter of Sir William Nicholson, the painter, and other pupils included Robert Graves' son and daughter. Just as with other progressive schools, Forest School attracted the children of the middle-class intellectual left, who chose it in preference to the stultifying conformity of the public school.[15] However, being wealthy was not a pre-requisite: Liza's fees (of £33 per term) paid not only for her but for another child whose family was less well-off.[16] From discussions with ex-pupils it appears that most children attended for about two or three years, before returning to more conventional schools. Many had gone to Forest School having had difficulties in more mainstream schools; Liza's mother knew her daughter was temperamentally unsuited to an 'ordinary' school, although she did later send her to another school where she had to work extremely hard to catch up with a more academic curriculum.

By 1938, the school had outgrown the site at Godshill, and moved to Whitwell Hall in Norfolk. At its peak, the school had about forty pupils aged between five and sixteen years. The coming war ended this particular experiment in education: staff were called up, the buildings at Whitwell were requisitioned for military purposes, and the school closed in 1940.

The historical contexts for the development of the two Forest Schools were very different. Westlake's school developed from a concern about the way industrialisation and capitalism were eroding the 'natural' ways of life, and a belief that narrow and authoritarian schooling could never develop children in the necessary 'evolutionary' way. The twenty-first century version of a Forest School is more concerned with children's confidence and self-esteem, and the way that children's lives are less 'free', are based increasingly indoors, and are

more structured than at any time in history. A 1999 review of how children's live have changed over the twentieth century found:

> Children are suffering more mental health problems and stress because they are being kept indoors… Many children are being restricted in the amount of freedom and creativity they can enjoy and are not allowed to play independently because there is a growing fear among parents about violence…[17]

While Early Years philosophy has long promoted the importance of outdoor play space for children, and has made much more use of the pedagogies of freedom of Montessori and Froebel, the compulsory school sector has been slow to utilise these ideas. The Forest School movement started at Bridgwater College was initially focused on Early Years, but has since become a successful method of working with older children and young adults, particularly children with learning difficulties, and those deemed to be disaffected by mainstream curricula.

It would appear that current concerns around the nature of childhood impact upon the way we perceive the purpose of education. The modern Forest School movement, with its emphasis on personal and social development, can be understood as a response to this 'crisis in childhood'. Westlake's Forest School was, to a large degree, a response to the crisis of the First World War. With the benefit of hindsight, Westlake's Forest School can be understood as part of a worldwide progressive educational movement, the impact of which can still be seen in modern pedagogies. It remains to be seen whether the modern Forest School movement will ever be situated within a broad shift in educational philosophy and practice, or whether it will, like Westlake's Forest School, remain on the margins.

Notes

[1] J. Westlake (2000) *70 Years a-Growing*. Hawthorn Press.

[2] E. Westlake, cited in W. Van der Eyken & B. Turner (1969) *Adventures in Education*, p. 131. London: Penguin

[3] E. Thompson Seton (1937) *The Gospel of the Redman: An Indian Bible*. London : Methuen.

[4] B. Morris (1970) Ernest Thompson Seton and the Origins of the Woodcraft Movement, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5 (2), 184. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/002200947000500209

[5] K. Brehony (1992) What's Left of Progressive Primary Education?, in A. Rattansi & D. Reeder (Eds) *Rethinking Radical Education. Essays in Honour of Brian Simon,* p. 206. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

[6] Forest School *Prospectus* (1929), p. 5, FSC/8/1, Institute of Education Archive.

[7] N. Brand (nd) *Early Days in the Forest School*. Waymark no. 1. (accessed February 2007 at *www.fsc.org.uk*)

[8] Forest School *Prospectus* (1929).

[9] J. Westlake (2000).

[10] Forest School (1929), p. 1.

[11] J. Westlake (2000), p. 45.

[12] ibid., p. 42.

[13] N. Brand (no date), p. 15.

[14] Forest School Camps (1997), p. 11.

[15] K. Brehony (1992).

[16] Forest School Camps (1997) *Our Story: fifty years under canvas with FSC*, p. 11.

[17] Norton, C. (1999) After a century, we've produced the stressed-out, cooped-up battery child, *The Independent*, 2 September.

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