



Introduction to Woodcraft Folk

Deborah McCahon

Deborah McCahon, the current chief executive, provides an introductory overview to Woodcraft Folk, its history, and current activities. She emphasises the importance the organisation has given to co-operation, how this has involved communities, and ensured young people's connections with both local and global issues. She notes the significant role that international camps have played within the organisation and how environmentalism has been a major feature of its activities since its formation in 1925.

For a century, Woodcraft Folk (<https://woodcraft.org.uk/>) has been a beacon of co-operation, community, and connection with and between individuals, their community, and the wider world. Founded in 1925 by Leslie Paul, the values-driven youth organisation continues with its bold vision: to equip and empower young people with the skills, knowledge, and confidence needed to create a fairer world for all.

Woodcraft Folk's roots lie in the ideals of the co-operative movement, blending a commitment to shared values, education, self-responsibility, and a love for the outdoors. The inaugural gathering in the summer of 1925 saw young people coming together to learn, play, and grow — a tradition that continues to this day through the iconic camping trips and festivals that are synonymous with the movement. The camping traditions have always been about creating a co-operative community, one which expects all participants to contribute; playing their part to ensure campers are fed and that the environment is cared for.

In 1930, Woodcraft Folk's first International Camp brought together youth from across Europe, planting the seeds of global solidarity that remain central to the organisation's ethos. By the 1940s, Woodcraft Folk groups were actively promoting peace during wartime, including hosting young people fleeing mainland Europe. These actions exemplify the dedication of Woodcraft Folk's members to social justice, even in the face of adversity. Woodcraft Folk continues to engage in the Refugee Welcome coalition and has been involved in a wide range of support initiatives for refugees and asylum seekers.

The 1970s marked another turning point for the organisation with the focus on environmentalism, as the Woodcraft Folk became one of the early champions of sustainability in youth education. Woodcraft Folk's engagement in climate science and decarbonisation has seen it lead a number of award winning youth-led responses to the climate initiative.

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Whilst Woodcraft Folk's organisational values have not changed significantly since it was founded, the organisation has evolved. Today it has over 200 volunteer run groups across the UK, from Stirling to Plymouth and Cardiff to Ipswich. Its young members engage in weekly group night meetings exploring children's rights, environmental sustainability, peace, international solidarity, and various social justice issues. Learning and exploring co-operatively through games, craft, social action, role play, and song develops Woodcraft Folk's values. Working with pre-schoolers to 21 year olds, Woodcraft Folk has an opportunity to embed learning and commitment to its values into each new generation.

In more recent years, initiatives like the District Fellowship movement, the tree programme, Camps for All and #DreamBigAtHome (the organisation's response to COVID) have expanded opportunities for young people to engage with issues that matter to them. From the earliest camping trips to today's innovative educational programmes, the organisation has always sought to foster critical thinking, environmental stewardship, and global citizenship among its young members.

As the organisation reflects on a century of achievement, they will celebrate the countless volunteers and young members who have shaped, and continue to shape, Woodcraft Folk's journey. Their energy and commitment have ensured that the organisation continues to thrive, adapting to the challenges of each era while staying true to its founding principles.

At the heart of these achievements is the organisation's unwavering belief that learning is best achieved through doing. From collective decision-making in groups to standing in solidarity with global causes, young people are encouraged to lead, collaborate, and grow. Its approach is inclusive and child-centred, creating spaces where everyone feels valued and able to contribute.

As part of Woodcraft Folk's centenary celebrations:

- UCL Press published a book of Woodcraft Folk history, *Span the World with Friendship* (Bourn & Palser, 2025), sharing insights to the organisation's approach to camping, international development, and youth empowerment.
- Camp 100 takes place in August 2025, bringing together 2,000 young people from across the globe for a 10 day celebration of international friendship.
- A touring exhibition, showcasing items from Woodcraft Folk's archive. The exhibition will visit the Rochdale Pioneers Museum, 3 November to 31 December 2025.

These events and others will be reflecting on the impact of the organisation — the difference it makes to individuals, communities, and the wider world. The touring exhibition, in particular, will focus on key milestones that demonstrate Woodcraft Folk's commitment to its values of peace, internationalism, and co-operation.

Together, we look forward to the next 100 years of the organisation, inspired by the wisdom of the past and the limitless potential of the young members we engage with.

Youth is not wasted on the young!

The Author

Deborah McCahon is Chief Executive at Woodcraft Folk and has 30 years experience of empowering young people to make a difference in their communities. Debs is passionate about increasing and widening participation, and developing opportunities for a greater diversity of young people to benefit from Woodcraft Folk's values-led education. Her role involves supporting a young Board, fundraising, and developing opportunities for young people to make the transition from participant to leader.

Reference

Bourn, D., & Palser, R. (Eds.). (2025). *Span the world with friendship: Progressive education, internationalism and the Woodcraft Folk*. UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800088498>