



# Woodcraft Folk Impact Case Studies

**Grace Dobbie**

This short article consists of five interviews with members of the Woodcraft Folk, past and present, conducted by Grace Dobbie, a new fundraiser for the Woodcraft Folk. The interviews demonstrate the long term impact that Woodcraft Folk has had on people's lives, inspiring them to be co-operative, active participants of democracy, and caring members of society.

## Introduction

Over the past month I have conducted interviews with various past and present members of Woodcraft Folk. I have collected memories of the movement to understand how Woodcraft Folk has shaped career choices across different generations. As someone who is new to the movement, this project has been a wonderful opportunity for me to learn about Woodcraft Folk's history. As a fundraiser, these interviews have illuminated the real, long term impact that Woodcraft Folk can have on young people throughout their lifetimes. I have heard how Woodcraft Folk has played a role in shaping careers driven by activism and political organising, co-operative purpose, and a need to help others. These truly inspirational stories offer hope for the exciting lives and careers of our current members: what will the impact of Woodcraft Folk's work in 2025 be in 100 years time?

## Lionel Sampson

Lionel Sampson is the Senior Policy Advisor to the General Secretary of the Communications Workers Union (CWU), a position he has held for 25 years. He joined the Bexleyheath Woodcraft Folk group as an Elfin (5-9 year olds), after his mum — a baker in the local co-operative shop — found out about the movement. His mum's socialist values, and Lionel's love of the group's "free and easy" co-operative ways, lead him to stay on until he was a Venturer (13-15 year olds).

Our 'trip down memory lane' evoked a real nostalgia for Lionel about his time in Woodcraft Folk. An episode that really stood out was his friendship with Christopher, a Polish boy whom Lionel met at the 1967 International Camp in Scunthorpe, when they were both thirteen. They had bonded over a shared love of football. Christopher stayed with Lionel at his family home after the camp, where Lionel fondly remembers his mother's incredulity at Christopher's enormous appetite and his willingness to try anything.

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Lionel was able to see Christopher again on a 'monumental' seven week trip to Poland with Woodcraft Folk soon after. For Lionel, even the journey itself was memorable, especially travelling across the channel by train on the Night Ferry. Across the seven weeks, Lionel and his fellow Venturers visited Auschwitz, before it had been turned into a museum. He describes this as a profound experience that "changed his way of thinking". A visit to Chopin's birthplace, Lionel reflects, was "meaningful" — if a little over his head at the time. It highlights the cultural exposure this Woodcraft Folk adventure had enabled for its young people. As Lionel recalls with delight meeting East Germans, Scandinavians, and Mongolians in Poland, I recognise a curiosity about other cultures and nationalities that has stayed with him. The East German teenagers clearly felt the same way; they were fascinated by his western clothes and eagerly received chewing gum from Lionel and his friends.

Lionel tells me a story about a badge that he swapped with an East German Pioneer on the trip; a pine tree for a Federal Deutsche Republic eagle. An act of comradeship, solidarity, and boyish friendship, which was unexpectedly dashed as the British group were crossing back into West Germany. Lionel remembers vividly the moment when an American soldier spotted the eagle badge on his shirt and demanded it be confiscated. The USA did not recognise FDR as a legal state. "Welcome back to the free world" his leader uttered sardonically as they passed through the border.

Lionel's memories of his Bexleyheath group seem to embody Woodcraft Folk's aims and principles well; there were environmentally focused activities such as community litter picking, as well as rough and tumble games. Lionel recalls being exposed to different types of people in an inclusive environment, such as the group being co-educational and welcoming young people with visible disabilities. He says Bexleyheath Woodcraft Folk "opened his eyes to humanity". Along with this profound social education, Lionel learned bonfire building skills and, very importantly, how to sew on a button!

Woodcraft Folk made such an impression on Lionel that he performed a presentation on the movement for one of his O-Level exams. He remembers talking about the history of Woodcraft Folk, its aims and principles, and displaying his green shirt with pride.

In his long career as a trade unionist, Lionel has clearly embodied his mother's socialist values and some of the co-operative skills he learnt at Woodcraft Folk. He is about to celebrate his seventieth birthday, and still proudly claims his Woodcraft Folk heritage.

CWU is proudly affiliated with Woodcraft Folk.

## **Laura Yates**

Laura Yates previously worked as a climate change campaigner for Greenpeace in the UK and Argentina until she retrained as a graphic designer. She now works freelance for nonprofits and publishers in Paris, where she has lived for the past 15 years.

In 1985, Laura joined what was then the Highgate Woods (later Muswell Hill) district of Woodcraft Folk in north London as a 7 year-old Elfin, she stayed until she reached 21 as a DF (District Fellowship), and returned in her mid-20s as a Venturer leader. She says her recurring fond memory of Woodcraft Folk is of sitting around a campfire singing from her song book, which took place at night at every camp. Laura's song book (pictured along with her Woodcraft Folk shirt), has continued to play a role in her life; she likes to sing at bedtime or on hikes with her pioneer-age daughter from that very book. What a beautiful legacy, especially as Laura's daughter, living in France, has not been able to grow up in Woodcraft Folk. The co-operative values seem to have made their way to her despite this!

As a north London representative on the DF committee, Laura recalls learning an "amazing" sense of self-sufficiency through organising national fundraising events, camps, and workshops. An example of this was the rush she and her friend got as they hired a coach or planned a camp

menu on behalf of their DF group — they felt empowered as young people to take control and get stuff done!



Photo credit: Laura Yates

Throughout our conversation, Laura emphasised the power of Woodcraft Folk’s aims and principles as common values that enabled a “shortcut to friendship”, especially across groups of DFs around the UK. It was the co-operative values, Laura says, that distinguished her experiences of camp from festivals or plain camping. It is these values and memories that kept her in touch with Woodcraft Folk friends, who Laura observes have almost all had a common thread of political or social engagement in their careers. Laura muses that perhaps it was a self-selecting process, that as young people, herself and her peers were attracted to Woodcraft Folk because of pre-existing co-operative values at home or in other areas of their lives. Although she concedes that it is difficult to disentangle innate values from learnt values at Woodcraft Folk, ultimately their experiences as young people were still hugely influential.

Laura describes the sense of “natural continuation”, from her political activity and national youth organising as a DF, to her activism as a young climate change campaigner for Greenpeace. It was a cause she “still felt really strongly about”. The first time Laura was arrested for peaceful direct action, she remembers with a smile, was with her Woodcraft Folk friends.

Around this time, Laura was volunteering as a Venturer leader — she remembers running a workshop at a Woodcraft Folk national camp around Greenpeace campaigns with young people. In a time before Extinction Rebellion was able to rally younger teenagers on the climate emergency, Laura wanted to try out creative campaign brainstorming with this age group. She recalls a great enthusiasm and a resonance between Greenpeace and Woodcraft Folk values.

As a freelance graphic designer, Laura still works with Greenpeace and other environmental campaigns on projects — the activist threads seem to run right through her life. As do Woodcraft Folk friendships — she shared with me that she recently reunited with Woodcraft Folk friends back in the UK.

## **Val Keyworth (Folk name Heather)**

Val recalls:

Woodcraft Folk has influenced my entire life and given me friends at home and abroad, many of whom I am still in contact with.

I joined the Folk in 1952 aged 7 (the lower age limit then). As an only child it was the best decision my parents made. At 16 I became District Minute Secretary and District Secretary sometime later — a job I had for many years. I also served on the National Council for a short time in the late 1960s.

My early working life included Secretary to Sheffield Council's Community Relations Officer and following our son's birth, I had a part-time job in the Sheffield Youth Service which covered support to the many excellent Youth Clubs in Sheffield and brought the Sheffield Folk into contact with the Falcons in Bochum through the Sheffield Town Twinning scheme.

After being District Secretary came support for Lockerbrook Outdoor Activities Centre. When Basil Rawson gave up running the Centre through ill health, the Sheffield District stepped in and I changed to Secretary for the newly formed Lockerbrook Committee, during which time we appointed our first resident wardens. I helped run a Folk group from 1961 until about the late 1980s, and attended local, national, and international camps.

My mother was for 25 years Secretary of the Sheffield Woodcraft Folk Supporters Council, who raised money for the District camping equipment. Several Folk members went on to serve as Sheffield City Councillors — two as Lord Mayors and one as an M.E.P. I am still in touch with these friends and over 20 years ago we set up a local walking group called Left Foot Forward and we meet twice a month for increasingly shorter walks, but necessary conversations. We are all shareholders of Wortley Hall, which belongs to the labour, co-operative, and trade union movements, and meet there on one of our monthly walks and lunch.

I cannot emphasise more the influence the Folk has had on me and my family. I met my husband in the District and our son grew up in the Folk, leaving to go to University in the mid 1990s.



Photo credit: Val Keyworth

## Ciara Jeffries

Ciara Jeffries has always worked in socially-conscious roles — from social work, to running parenting classes, family support work, and at a homeless charity.

Ciara joined Whiteheart Woodcraft Folk group in north London when she was just five years old, after her mum heard about it through a friend. Her mum started volunteering and Ciara joined. They have both been involved in the movement ever since. For Ciara, happy memories of Woodcraft Folk are centred around the ritualistic nature of circle time, the creed, and campfires. She says those lyrics formed her as a person. They taught her meaningfully and subconsciously about peace. Woodcraft Folk also imparted in Ciara a love of camping. Her district embarked on tent adventures up to five times a year, including at Cudham. Many Woodies remember the independence that they felt whilst camping with their groups, whereas Ciara remembers her mum always being there! Ciara still camps regularly with her mum.

As well as family, friendship has clearly been at the heart of Ciara's experiences of Woodcraft Folk. She fondly recalls the international camp in 1995, where she befriended a group of Portuguese young people. For a camp in Austria, Ciara and her group learned folk dances to perform for their fellow campers. She also bought them gifts from home; language barriers were clearly not an issue with her sense of kindness and fun.

In her group, Ciara remembers feeling empowered to learn about the world in a creative way, such as through drama sessions and open, youth-led discussions about relationships and safety. On camps she learned independence and how to live communally; at Whiteheart she learned from her peers, who were varied in ages and backgrounds. Ciara reflects that she was always “helping out” and given responsibility to lead, even as an Elfin or Pioneer. Although Ciara admits that the influence of Woodcraft Folk is difficult to separate from that of her family (which is lovely in itself), she delineates a common thread of “caring roles” in her own career and the careers of her Woodcraft Folk friends. The legacy of her time in the Folk as a child, she says, was the confidence it gave her and the ability to speak to all kinds of different people.

Ciara describes Woodcraft Folk as “part of my family, world, and life”. It is where her mum met her step-dad, it is where her children grew up, and one day where she hopes to take her future grandchildren!

## Mickey Lowe

Mickey Lowe, 20, is a multi-hyphenate, a cage-fighter-gardener-youth-worker. Mickey has spent his whole life in Woodcraft Folk, unsurprisingly as his parents both run his group in Birkenhead. Since Common Ground (the last international camp in 2022), he has been a DF.

Mickey works as a project coordinator for a youth charity in Merseyside, where he says he feels the same sense of community and purpose as at his Woodcraft Folk group. Mickey’s charity creates spaces for young people, often from disadvantaged backgrounds in deprived neighbourhoods, to “just be kids”. He speaks passionately about how important it is to give these young people the opportunity to have fun, despite the challenges in their immediate environments. It is admirable that at such a young age, he is a role-model and enabling those co-operative values. Mickey seems to care enormously about his role at the charity, as well as gain enjoyment from it; he reflects that Woodcraft Folk helped give him that need for purpose in his work.

Mickey’s other jobs, cage-fighting and gardening, also seem to stem from passion and community. He says that he met members of each network through Woodcraft Folk, and they have since played a significant role in his life, grounding him in community.



Photo credit: Mickey Lowe

Through Woodcraft Folk Mickey has had many opportunities to travel and meet other young people with common co-operative values and interests. He tells me about a trip to Bavaria for an international camp when he was thirteen, where he walked the camp with a few mates holding a football. The message was clear: let’s play footie and become friends. He built a goal and through casual kick-about connected with other young people from across the world through football, achieving mutual understanding (despite language barriers) and

cultural sharing. More recently as a DF, Mickey has travelled across Europe and beyond (to Finland, Slovenia, Germany, and Zimbabwe to name a few) as part of the International Falcon Movement's E-mpACT project, which aimed to address youth needs during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. It focused on digitalisation, non-formal education, international solidarity, and intercultural sharing, and involved young people from eight countries and four continents. Mickey reflects that E-mpACT gave him the opportunity to develop his leadership skills, connect with a wider purpose of education for social change, and experience places and cultures he might not have been able to otherwise.

From my chat with Mickey, I really got a sense of how important Woodcraft Folk has been in shaping his life and work. From tales of mischief and freedom he was afforded at camps as a teenager, to the network of friends he has made across the country through becoming a DF; Mickey's story is one of "spanning the world with friendship" and hope for the future.

## **The Author**

Grace Dobbie is a recent history graduate, who joined Woodcraft Folk as the new fundraiser in late November 2024. Although she did not grow up in the movement, Grace is really enjoying all that she is learning about Woodcraft Folk; she is looking forward to attending Camp 100 in the summer, her first international camp. Grace is the author of five case study articles, which explore the impact of Woodcraft Folk on members' lives and careers.