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Linking Theory and Practice

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Celebrating the Centenary of the Woodcraft Folk

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Guest Editorial

Celebrating the Centenary of the Woodcraft Folk

2025 is the centenary of Woodcraft Folk, the co-operative movement's children's and young people's organisation. Throughout its history, the Woodcraft Folk has had a strong relationship with the consumer co-operative movement. This special issue celebrates the past and the present in the organisation, from the contribution of some of its leading figures, its contribution to gender equality, and putting co-operation into practice. Woodcraft Folk principles such as concern for the environment, gender equality and challenging discrimination, and promoting a world of peace have been part of its philosophy since its earliest days. For much of its history, its educational approach has been counter to dominant societal views. It was the first youth organisation in the UK to be co-educational. It has always been non-religious and its philosophy has been rooted in progressive educational values that encourage social justice, democracy, and an internationalist outlook. Its motto of *Span the World with Friendship* has meant developing partnerships with organisations elsewhere in the world where other youth groups would not tread.

Through its groups, outdoor activities, and camping, Woodcraft Folk has put co-operation into practice through the games that are played, the ways in which educational activities are organised, and the running of its camps. All of these themes are reflected in the articles in this special issue.

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.

One of the key members of the Woodcraft Folk between the 1930s and 1970s was Basil Rawson, and in this issue there is the first major article about Rawson, by Chris Olewicz, which discusses his contribution and importance to the organisation, his visionary approach to outdoor life, and his educational philosophy articulated in *The Woodcraft Way*. The article begins by summarising Basil Rawson's early life, outlining how the experiences of the First World War, love of the outdoors, interest in politics, and experience of various youth groups led him to join the Woodcraft Folk as an adult in Sheffield. From the 1930s to his death in the 1970s, he

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was a leading figure in the development of Sheffield Woodcraft Folk. He became Headman of the Woodcraft Folk in 1934 and was instrumental in the revival of the International Falcon Movement in the post-war period.

Richard Palser, in his article, addresses an issue that has rarely been discussed within Woodcraft Folk publications in the past and that is gender equality. Palser notes that the first leading figure in the organisation, Leslie Paul, had in the 1930s outlined the importance of understanding what co-education meant. The article then notes that until the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis had been on a formal approach to equality, with camping being seen as the main example of equality in practice. By the 1970s, with the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement, new tensions emerged in the organisation and it took some time for a more educational approach to equality to become incorporated within Woodcraft Folk practices.

Douglas Bourn's article reviews how the use of the term co-operation has been applied. It notes that for the organisation's first thirty years the emphasis was on learning about the consumer co-operative movement and ensuring camps were run as co-operative communities. By the 1970s, with the rise in interest in new co-operatives and the new games movement, co-operation began to take on a more direct educational meaning through its resource packs, approaches towards games, and a closer relationship within the consumer co-operative movement. Co-operative learning began to become a feature of mainstream educational thinking. The increased emphasis on co-operation within Woodcraft Folk culminated in its 2011 international Co Camp which was organised on the lines of a co-operative.

Saheli Nath outlines through Woodcraft Folk's Peer Action project how the organisation has not only put co-operation into practice, but developed critical thinking skills, and a sense of social responsibility. It emphasises the value of youth led initiatives in seeking personal transformation and social change.

Thomas Boxall reviews Woodcraft Folk's 2023 Camp for Venturers, thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds, in terms of putting co-operative values into practice. It demonstrates both the successes and challenges that emerged during the camp in terms of youth engagement, addressing differing approaches, and skills required to put co-operation into practice.

There are two pieces based on interviews with Woodcraft Folk members. The first, edited by Grace Dobbie, looks at the impact of Woodcraft Folk on the lives of past members. The case studies reveal the extent to which the organisation has influenced not only their career choices but also their value systems, including the development of an internationalist outlook and co-operative skills. The second, compiled by Laura Karstadt, looks at younger current members of Woodcraft Folk and through a series of questions and answers, the evidence reveals a group of people who have found the organisation not only fun, but also good at developing friendships, particularly international ones, helping to develop skills for living outdoors, and respecting the environment.

There are also two short articles that demonstrate Woodcraft Folk's practices. Anna Blewett shows what co-operation means through the organisation of its camps and the ways in which members of all ages work together to achieve common tasks such as peeling potatoes for meals. Abigail Cole and colleagues explore the use of play-based learning to introduce concepts of wellbeing to younger children in the Woodcraft Folk. Through the running of a Teddy Bear Hospital, children engage with abstract health topics by caring for their teddy bears, fostering early understanding of health, emotions, and self-care.

All of these articles demonstrate not only the relevance of Woodcraft Folk to the co-operative movement and the principles of co-operation, they show how a dynamic progressive youth movement can enthuse and engage many thousands of young people who wish to see a better, more just, and sustainable world. They also show that co-operative approaches to learning can

and do engage young people. The articles show that for co-operative principles to be effective, they need to be seen alongside broader themes such as empathy, compassion, and caring for others.

Douglas Bourn and Deborah McCahon
Guest Editors

The Guest Editors

Douglas Bourn is Professor of Development Education at University College London. He is the joint editor of *Span the World with Friendship* (Bourn & Palser, 2025) and was National Secretary of Woodcraft Folk from 1983 to 1990. Deborah McCahon is Chief Executive at Woodcraft Folk. Her role involves supporting a young Board of Directors, 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

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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

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‘Here is the Story of Brown Eagle’: Basil Rawson, Shefstanthing, and the Woodcraft Folk

Christopher Olewicz

This article charts Basil Rawson’s involvement with the Woodcraft Folk, which spanned five decades. The primary source is a little-known interview with Rawson, known as Brown Eagle, recorded in the early 1970s. Other sources include analysis of Rawson’s articles in Woodcraft Folk publications, minutes of Folk Council, and correspondence from Janet Giles, Rawson’s granddaughter.

Introduction

For nearly fifty years, Basil Rawson dedicated his life to the Woodcraft Folk. The founder of Sheffield Woodcraft Folk in 1929, within five years Rawson was elected Headman of the Folk (1934-1941), followed by a decades long spell as President of Folk Council (1941-1976). Across that span of time, he led the organisation through periods of expansion and retrenchment, of modernisation and reform, as the organisation worked to adapt itself to the ever-evolving needs of children and adolescents across multiple generations whilst retaining a broadly socialist outlook on life.

His achievements were many. Rawson (also known as Brown Eagle) received early plaudits for almost single-handily and without the support of the co-operative movement, building Sheffield Woodcraft Folk into “the most active and promising of all Things” (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 1). As Headman, he presided over the early zenith of the Folk in terms of membership numbers, before the Second World War halted further expansion.

After the war, he supported efforts to reform the Folk Charter — removing those sections committing the organisation explicitly to socialism — whilst writing a new education programme, *The Woodcraft Way* (Rawson, n.d.b, ca. 1952), which remained utopian in its outlook. He also led on the international stage, playing a key role in the reformation of the International Falcons, serving as its first President. Years later, he began the process of securing Lockerbrook Farm as a base for the Folk in the Peak District, which remains with the organisation to this day (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). Under Rawson, Richard Palser has explained, the Folk camp became a socialist society in miniature, a “reproduction of socialist communities

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in which our children learn by experience and practice a better and truer way of living" away from their largely urban social existence (Palser, 2004, p. 4).

Despite these achievements there now exists a significant knowledge gap regarding Basil Rawson's life and work. A significant factor contributing to this gap is the absence of any substantive personal reminiscence. Unlike Leslie Paul (Little Otter), his predecessor as Headman who wrote three volumes of autobiography, Rawson did not complete a memoir in his lifetime. A manuscript was being prepared at the time of Rawson's death but was not completed. It is now considered lost (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). The author suggests that further work is needed to assess some of Rawson's achievements as Folk President, as Rawson's submissions to various Folk conferences and committees ultimately do not reveal the totality of the man.

Rawson's own published work, such as *The Woodcraft Way* (Rawson, ca. 1952), applies the broad strokes of his philosophy to the practical application of woodcraft.

What follows is a first attempt at charting the full course of Basil Rawson's life and career. The primary source used is a little-known interview with Rawson recorded in the early 1970s as part of the research filmmaker Peter Gilpin undertook in preparation for his documentary short *Our World: Woodcraft Folk* (Sansom, 1975). Conducted across two sessions, the interview covers Rawson's upbringing, his career as a political activist and his later focus on his work in the Folk.

Other sources include analysis of Folk publications in which articles by Rawson appeared, minutes of Folk Council, and corroboration from Janet Giles, Rawson's granddaughter. With regards to the rest of his life, we must rely upon the memories of those Venturers who fondly recall their childhood experiences in the 1960s and 70s, when Rawson could still outpace them on a hill climb (T. Howard, personal communication, April 22, 2024). He was the man who "brought the magic" to the movement, inspiring successive generations of young people to make their lives within the Folk (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 26).

Beyond the scope of what is presented here is a detailed critical analysis of Rawson's educational approach. Whilst his own views can possibly be divined from the many articles he wrote, his opinions on a variety of issues relating to the Folk, such as its early flirtations with eugenics, are difficult to prove in the absence of further detailed personal reminiscence.

School Days and the War

Basil Rawson was born in Worksop on 5 February 1899 to Albert Robert Rawson (1873-1953) and Laura Rawson (1873-1916). Shortly after his birth, the family relocated to Sheffield, where a sister May was born in 1902. Once in Sheffield, Albert began working in the dairy trade (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). However, the family's financial stability was severely compromised when he was declared bankrupt, stemming from extending excessive credit to customers who could not repay their debts. This period of severe hardship led Rawson to experience "the dregs of poverty", even being forced to wear makeshift shoes crafted by his mother from cardboard (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 8:06). By virtue of living in a housing development owned by the local co-operative society which had low rents, they were able to avoid a worse fate.

Rawson initially left school at 13, but was called back because he failed his leaving exam. He later suspected that this failure was engineered by a teacher who had taken an interest in his poetry and wanted him to take the 11-Plus exam. Though he warmed to the idea, the family could not afford to have Rawson out of work, so he left again and found a job as an office boy at Brightside Foundry (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Already having spent time in the Scouts and the Boys Life Brigade (BLB), which focused less on drills than on lifesaving, leaving school gave Rawson a chance to more actively develop his hunger for "nature, harmony, [and] beauty" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 14:24). In his spare

time, he read books such as *True Stories about Indians* (Ellis, 1905). Aged 15, he hitch-hiked to Snowden with another boy.

> From that moment on … I realised the psychological effect of mountains, of high places, that for all man's power he was very small in nature, and largely subject to natural laws that if defied could punish. The inspiration of beauty … contrasting with the rottenness of civilisation … [the realisation] that beauty is something that can be seen in life. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 15:00)

War was looming. Rawson enlisted at 17 — "as patriotic as the rest of them" — under the Derby Scheme and went to France as a radio operator (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). On the front, he was wounded and then gassed along with four other men. Unlike his three comrades, he believed that he survived because of the fitness he had acquired from his nascent outdoor life (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Once recovered, Rawson went to Germany with the Army of Occupation, using his leave to travel widely across the country and in Switzerland, where he tried and failed to climb the Matterhorn (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). His encounters with other veterans sharpened his hostility to war as "a means of settling international differences" (Rawson, ca. 1970s). Eventually demobilised after the Medical Board gave him eight years to live, he decided to commit all the time he could to the outdoor life, "to beat the medicos" (Woodcraft Folk, 1951, p. 18).

Venturing into Politics

Whilst in Germany, Rawson was offered and accepted a place at Cologne University to study medicine. He completed one year, but at the age of 21 had to return home to Sheffield because his father became unemployed (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). Rawson went to Brightside Foundry as an apprentice draughtsman, attending night school to learn machine drawing and mathematics. Eventually he rose to the position of design engineer, planning installations for buildings such as air conditioning and ventilation systems. "How far this prepared me for my political thinking for educational purposes I don't know", Basil recalled, "except to say I was against ugliness … I looked for beauty and harmony, no doubt from my interest in nature" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 14:24).

In January 1922, Rawson married Martha Elizabeth Walker (1899-1986). Their son Donald was born in 1923 (Rawson, ca. 1970s). In his spare time, Rawson became involved with the Methodist Church, where he organised hobbies groups and summer camps for children, inspired by his own experiences in the BLB, where he became an officer alongside his developing interest in rambling, mountaineering, and hostelling. Martha would play the piano for the devotional classes and for the dances at the Church. "It ... blossomed as a natural partnership in working with young people. She joined the Labour Party and had the same feelings. I [knew she'd] adopted these ideas from her own thinking ... she caught my enthusiasm" (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Rawson also began his socialist education through attendance of a Sunday School bible class, the leader of which interpreted Christianity as a socialist doctrine (Rawson, ca. 1970s). He was taken by a fellow class member to Leeds to hear Keir Hardie speak, who afterwards began to question him regarding his involvement with the quasi-military BLB. Following the trip, Rawson began to move his BLB group further away from drills and signalling and towards woodcraft techniques and weekend camping (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Yet much of this activity fell by the wayside as politics began to dominate Rawson's spare time. Despite his status as a lay preacher and Sunday School teacher, and against the protestations of his union branch secretary, also a preacher in the Methodists, he began to drift from the church, who were not completely supportive of his youth organising efforts, which took the children away from Sunday School (Rawson, ca. 1970s). A final straw was the Church's refusal to provide financial support. (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024).

In 1922, Rawson joined the Labour Party, and the following year the Independent Labour Party (ILP), where he rose to the position of Secretary of the Sheffield Branch. In the early 1920s, the ILP counted over 1,000 members in Sheffield and included amongst its leadership many of the pioneering councillors who formed the first Labour majority Council in 1926. It was a good fit. “The ILP professed not the material advantages of socialism” he recalled, “so much as the social need for socialism, the attitudes to each other … the idealism” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 1, 10:55). A confident speaker who enjoyed debating and challenging hecklers, Basil settled quickly into the role of socialist propagandist.

In 1926, Rawson served as Assistant Secretary and Propaganda Secretary on the Sheffield General Strike committee. Three years later, he was selected as the Labour candidate for Sheffield Hallam constituency. Though committed to the fight, he admitted that winning “would have caused complications” due to his doubts “about being in any kind of cage, whether it was the council or in parliament” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 1, 23:11). During the week of the first Sheffield Woodcraft Folk camp in 1929, he had to travel back to Sheffield midweek to be present at the Town Hall to accept the Labour nomination.

Although he did not win the election, Rawson was thought to have preformed strongly, and when the Brightside and Eastern constituency became available, he was asked if he would like to stand. Ultimately however, Rawson, in his mind, was unable to compromise on his beliefs to the degree needed to be an effective party politician. “I was truly independent as I had an interpretation of socialism which was often different in advance of party line, and the discipline part didn’t attract me at all” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 2, 2:00). Although at times he felt the desire to get back on the campaign platform, that was the end of Rawson’s political career. Increasingly, he believed that a better way to convert people to socialism was through the political education of young people.

The Birth of Shefstanthing

The trail which ultimately led Rawson to the Woodcraft Folk began with his organising of a rambling club for the Brightside Section of the ILP. As a family club, the children of the members were often brought along, and Rawson found that they began to confide their problems to him, which often had to do with their parents. “It did depress me that even in socialist homes children often needed something more that they weren’t getting” (Rawson, ca. 1970s).

Rawson’s first contact with the Folk was Paul’s article “Why not a Labour scout movement?”, published in the ILP journal *The New Leader* (Rawson, n.d.a). Intrigued, he wrote to Paul to enquire about the organisation.

> What wasn’t fully clear in the Folk’s original documents, was the need for socialist education … to bring these boys and girls to the realisation that what their parents were engaged in had a bearing against their desire for a better life as expressed in socialist politics. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 7, 11:30)

The “attitude of peace, democracy, and co-operation” Rawson felt, had to be the practical awareness of the “ugliness of society around us, our resentment of that, and our intention to do what we could, not just to ameliorate the effects on our bodies, on other people’s bodies, but also to change society” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 7, 15:04).

Satisfied with Paul’s response, Rawson decided to raise the idea with the children of the rambling club of forming a Folk group. This small group, he thought, could act as a nucleus which could draw in other children around the city.

> I told the parents at a previous committee meeting about what I’d heard about the Folk. They thought it’d be a good idea … [So] on a ramble in February … a fine day, during the lunch time, I explained [to eleven youngsters] what I knew about the Folk and arranged for us to have a ramble. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 1, 21:22)

On 14 April, 1929, Rawson, Martha, and others hiked with a group of children to Stanage where they had a “pow wow” about living the woodcraft way. By a stone later christened the Rock of Resolution their Folk group was born:

> From the ancient grit-stone hill which the Saxons knew, comes our name … The 12 Kinsfolk and 62 Pioneers who met that weekend are determined that many more shall follow the trail from the great sprawling city that has long covered all except the outcrops of the ‘grit’. (Rawson, 1930b, p. 3)

In their earliest correspondence Rawson addressed the group as the Sheffield ILP Woodcraft Folk. Feeling that a name was required however, one boy suggested that, as they were breaking a new trail, they should call themselves the Trailbreakers (Rawson, ca. 1970s). The first full camp took place at Whitsuntide 1929. With more tents required, Rawson decided to organise a Supporters Council that would enrol parents of Woodcraft children to undertake money raising activities on behalf of the group. The idea of Supporters Councils would later be embraced by the national organisation (Salt & Wilson, 1985). Activity developed quickly. Within 12 months there were three groups, and in December 1929, the Sheffield Federation of Woodcraft Groups, or Shefstanthing, was organised.

Rawson propagandised widely for the group.

> Our charter is a Socialist and Co-operative charter … We regard modern civilisation as decadent and disorderly. We believe we must strive to develop our personalities and our abilities to express ourselves and our ideals … and equip ourselves with knowledge and tribal basis, upon which the foundations of co-operative life can be laid. (Rawson, 1934c, p. 51)

The task was not simply the:

> … fitting [of] ourselves for World Building, but … the more far-reaching duty of bending boys and girls together to go with us in the blazing of the trail … uprooting prejudices, traditions, and other barriers to freedom of thought and reason prior to the pointing the way to greater things. (Rawson, 1932, pp. 9-10)

From those early days, Sheffield Woodcraft Folk worked hard to forge links with the local co-operative societies, and there is little doubt that Rawson believed in the Co-operative Commonwealth. He achieved middling results. “We applied again to the Brightside and Carbrook Education Committee for recognition … We shall continue our efforts in this direction until we have convinced them of the value of our organisation to the co-operative movement” (Woodcraft Folk, 1935, p. 2). The following year, it was reported that propaganda had been carried out among the local guilds and that “all available members had attended the B and C Co-operators Field Day” where the Folk had given a “brief display of supple limb exercises, dancing, and games” (Woodcraft Folk, 1936, p. 1). Following a visit by Henry Fair (Koodoo) to meet with the two Education committees of both the Brightside and Carbrook and Sheffield and Ecclesall Societies, it was found that there was “still misunderstanding, and even some opposition” to the local groups and that many co-operators did not know the Folk was affiliated to the Co-operative Union (Woodcraft Folk, 1944, p. 2).

Despite the lack of support for Shefstanthing, in subsequent articles for *The Herald of the Folk* and in his efforts in Sheffield, Rawson reiterated his belief in co-operation and the Co-operative Commonwealth.

> We feel sure that, as knowledge about us grows, and contacts increase, Co-operators will be willing to give the Folk better treatment and on a par with the help given by other progressive Co-operative societies in the country … The children are available; they like the Folk method of ‘learning by doing’. We must continue in our efforts to convince our committees of the power within their reach. (Woodcraft Folk, 1938, p. 3)

Through co-operation, the Folk could come to understand why man was “bewildered today, poor in the midst of plenty, competing and warring on a planet which can well support him in complete material contentment if he would only unite, organise, COOPERATE” (Rawson, 1934b, p. 2). The Woodcraft Folk was an organisation which:

> Itself arose against the landslide of civilisation, fighting against the worst evils of industrialism, protesting against the rivalries and unscientific ideas which permeate human society, putting against national rivalries and class privilege belief in a new world-wide economic order and world brotherhood: against the mental and spiritual starvation of the age strong bodies and unfettered minds; against mental confusion cool, clear, scientific thought; against competition co-operation; against war, peace (Rawson, 1934c, p. 53)

Isolated from the rest of the movement, which was largely based in London, there were many practical issues that had to be overcome separately.

> What sort of jerkin did the Folk wear — what was the correct shade of Lincoln green? … Ossoo and the Leicester folk between them solved most of these difficulties, with the aid of samples and photographs … Finance created another difficulty … nevertheless we pulled through the breakers. (Rawson, 1930a, p. 7)

Rawson produced his own trail charts and visual aids and divided the "very primitive and rather vague" test system from *The Folk Trail*, into practical "digestible portions" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 8, 1:52). While Rawson's group retained some of the traditions, such as burning their ordinary names on birch bark, he prioritised education over the escapist attitude.

> Although I appreciated its relevance, particularly at a time when Indian romanticism was attractive to children, to me [adopting Woodcraft names] wasn't essential, but I could see its point … [it] symbolised getting away from the established way, the old way. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 3, 27:22)

Over the next decade, Shefstanthing achieved consistent growth. Writing of the first twenty years of activity in Sheffield, he wrote:

> Hundreds of children have found happiness, health, and communal fellowship in our groups. The Folk, nationally and regionally, have felt the Shefstan impact. Shefstan members and ex-members have been appointed to National and Kin offices … What were once Shefstan experiments have since become part of national Folk educational technique. (Rawson, n.d.a, p. 7)

As well as the Folk, Rawson also served as Vice President of the local Basque Children's Committee, helping to bring over Basque refugees during the Spanish Civil War (Jones, 1988). Rawson also continued the Folk's international work, which had begun in 1929 when Leslie Paul met the Falcons in Vienna. In 1931, Rawson led Shefstanthing to Germany where, for the first time, the Woodcraft Folk and the Falcons camped together (Rawson, ca. 1952).

Brown Eagle the Headman

Following some further correspondence and some indirect connection through Leslie Paul's articles in *Wide Awake*, the two first met when Paul came to Sheffield to address a Folk conference. Rawson recalled that Paul "spoke well, but he upset some of our audience … He was a heavy smoker, and I had people coming up to me saying that shouldn't be a part of a youth organisation as idealistic as ours" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 3, 23:40). Later, when the London groups heard about Rawson's educational innovations and improvisations, he was asked to visit London to explain the idea. Although Paul remained quiet, the leadership generally liked the idea of a planned education programme, and Rawson was asked to write a pamphlet. He also lectured on the "Sheffield Scheme" at a Camp in Shornells (Woodcraft Folk, 1934).

The circumstances by which Rawson replaced Leslie Paul as Headman deserve some analysis. In 1933, Paul was absent from the National Camp at Wye Valley. Unaware that there was any problem, Rawson was surprised when, at a subsequent Folk Council meeting, Richard Goss (Kestral), Education Secretary, approached him and asked whether he would be willing to put his name forward as Headman. Goss said that Paul was becoming difficult to work with and "not open to new ideas" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 3:55).

> I was shocked. This was the first revelation I had that there was any real move against Leslie … I had a word with Leslie about it. I asked him if he knew about the move. And he said yes. [I told him that I wasn't] going to accept a situation where [I'd be] used as an opposition party against you … If there's any value in my Headmanship, then the whole movement has got to demand it … He told me, 'Quite frankly I've decided I'll not make a battle of it, I shall resign'. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 6:55)

Writing in *Angry Young Man*, Paul (1951) explains that his departure as Headman was rooted in his increasing exhaustion after years of activism inside and outside of the Folk. In the summer of 1933, he broke down to the extent he could barely walk. "One could not go on with this jolly camping and singing forever" (Paul, 1951, p. 200).

It was unanimously agreed that Paul should retain an influential position on Folk Council, and in 1934 he was appointed Chief of Council, a position he held until his enlistment in the armed forces, at which point Rawson succeeded him.

> We decided that we'd make full use of his ability and his knowledge of the Folk and co-operative movement … I as headman never tried to adopt a position of closing him down or stifling anything … There were a few clashes, but he did make a very big contribution as chief of council. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 10:32)

Paul's decision to enlist and his later distancing from the Folk was a considerable blow. Of *Angry Young Man*, Rawson felt that Paul had been overly critical of the 'Marxist attitude' of the Folk and its link with politics. Of Paul's commitment, Rawson speculated that:

> … something was missing in [him] ... and I couldn't place it. I felt that he too must be a victim of society … I forgave him his lapses … but … he was more distant from us than he ought to be. It was if his intellectual ability had drawn himself away from the masses … although he had declared himself a Marxist, and expressed himself in Marxist terms, he didn't seem to me as a proletariat, although he was obviously aware of the wrongs of society. He had a great ability, but he didn't have that mainstream of determination that should keep him straight on the road that he took. Somewhere, he lost faith in people I think and to him the church was a refuge ... I think in time he escaped from the jungle of politics and society. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 4, 15:21)

The 1934 Allthing proved a watershed for the Folk for another reason, as the decision was taken to move away from open air mass meetings and towards Annual Delegate Conferences to better suit a growing organisation (Rawson, ca. 1952). Rawson expressed his vision for the Movement as socialist in character.

> Today's struggle is, in effect, a race ... between the forces of Freedom and the forces of Slavery; between Progress and Reaction; between Democracy and Tyranny, and the choice is between the old ways of the Capitalist state with all its ugliness, its drabness, its injustice, its paradoxes, its tragedies, its efforts to persist, and that, more vague perhaps, but more desirable community — that New World — a world united — a world set free — to which our trail leads — and to the building of which we have set our hands. (Rawson, 1934a, p. 2)

The following year, the Woodcraft Folk was recognised by the Labour Party as the youth organisation of the Labour movement, which allowed Rawson and National Secretary Henry Fair the prestige and credo with which to further grow the organisation with increased support from the Co-operative Movement. From 1936 to 1939, the membership tripled and the Movement published a monthly *Broadsheet*, a newsletter for helpers, *The Herald of the Folk*, and children's magazine, *Pioneers*. By 1939, the membership had grown to roughly 8,000 (Prynn, 1983).

The coming of war, however, proved to be singularly disruptive.

> The blitz has altered Sheffield beyond all recognition … The centre is a wilderness, and acres of house property are down. We were 'out-Coventryed' as a Coventry man told me. Fourteen folk members are at present homeless, although living with relatives they are not in dire need ... Three have been evacuated to places more than 15 miles away. I have received offers of homes from Scunthorpe and Chesterfield. Folk work is suspended pending renewal of transport facilities. (Rawson, 1940)

The war placed many of its senior members in a difficult position regarding conscription. Several applied for conscientious objector status and were successful. Others were not, including Rawson's son Donald. A member of the Folk since the age of six, he was fined £5 for failing to present for his medical. A teacher by training, Donald took work with G. Fletcher and Sons Bakery, one of the few places conscientious objectors could find employment (Rawson, 1943c). The Leeds Tribunal board made no allowance for "the influence of background in youth's life" particularly the Folk, with "a few months membership of a religious sect" appearing to "carry more weight" (Rawson, 1943a). Despite retaining a lawyer, the decision was upheld, and Donald was imprisoned for a year (Rawson, 1943b).

Through the Falcon Movement, the Folk is remembered for the role it played in the Kindertransport Movement. Seventeen children were taken in by Folk members, with two girls being adopted in Sheffield. One of those, eleven-year-old Sue Pearson, from Czechoslovakia, stayed as a guest with the Rawsons until she was 16 and later became a headteacher in Sheffield. For the reserved Martha, it was quite a challenge, but Sue was soon accepted into the family (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024).

Post-war Rebuilding

After the war, the Folk began the long process of rebuilding their movement, both domestically and internationally. At home, they faced a challenge of restoring the membership. In 1946, an All-Councils meeting was held which set the target of doubling the membership within a year to bring the Folk back up to 1939 membership levels (Woodcraft Folk, 1946). This was not achieved, with considerable financial consequences to the organisation, which had expanded its administrative team in the anticipation of growth, with Fred Kempton (Springbok) employed as General Secretary alongside Henry Fair (Koodoo) as National Organiser (Woodcraft Folk, 1949). A Committee of Enquiry was set up to investigate the whole basis of the organisation and its role (Woodcraft Folk, 1950).

In his submission to the enquiry, Rawson rejected the idea of forming official links with the Labour Party, as was the case in other countries with International Falcon members organisations. He agreed that Clause C of the Woodcraft Folk Charter, which all Folk had to sign to gain full membership, should remove the 1939 reference to the training of children and young people "in the light of co-operative and socialist philosophy, for service to the working class movement" and replaced it with "the task of the Woodcraft Folk is the training of young people in the light of modern progressive philosophy for service to the people's movements" (Woodcraft Folk, n.d.). This, he felt was a barrier to recruiting new leaders who might be wary of the implied political overtones.

Abroad, Rawson was at the forefront of efforts to rebuild in International Falcon Movement (IFM). In 1947, he chaired the first Conference of the International Falcon Secretariat, and the following year was elected as President (Rawson, ca. 1952). Like the Folk, the original IFM had focused on socialist education, but were more regimental, and had closer links to political parties which had influence over their outlook and activities. "This meant," Rawson later recalled, "that those involved tended to interpret socialism in the terms of 'the adult party'" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 5, 13:35). The Folk on the other hand, contained leaders from parties from across the left, and focused on those elements of living and working where there was no difference between individuals. The Folk did not restrict their international activity to the IFM, and conflict with that organisation often focused on the Folk's insistence that activity had to be truly international and involve contact with the communist countries. This was a "natural result of the Woodcraft ideology" not merely tourism, but "building communities of children of different nationalities" (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 5, 9:14).

In the early 1960s, Rawson (n.d.b) published his definitive version of *The Woodcraft Way*, which constituted a comprehensive overview of the organisation, a compendium of tests mixed with his own philosophy, targeted towards Woodcraft participants. Rawson's matured outlook was

a philosophy of action, mixing physical, mental, and social development in six main groups: knowledge of the Folk, healthy living, self-reliance, social knowledge, social practice, and world. Those who had done “worthwhile things in the world” had never learnt their craft or developed their skill in an armchair at home (Rawson, n.d.b, p. 6). The aim was not just physical fitness, but social fitness. In the ceremonies and camp songs, the Woodcraft Folk spoke of their hopes, aspirations, and deepest thoughts, “of the one-ness of the human race … understanding, kindness, tolerance, friendship, love … consideration for each other” (Rawson, n.d.b, p. 301). These were the activities which Rawson felt would instil young people with the skills and character to create a better world. “It was my bible” Sheffield Woodcraft Folk veteran Terry Howard recalled (T. Howard, personal communication, April 22, 2024).

The model outlined in *The Woodcraft Way* was built on test work. Children would earn badges for completing various practical tasks, promoting personal growth at their own pace. These tasks were designed to be non-competitive and reflected broader educational goals, such as citizenship and global awareness. Another element which Rawson focused on was the importance of ceremonies as a means of “expressing our ideas and the innermost truths of our Woodcraft Life” (Palser, 2004, p. 4). As Palser (2004) has noted, these ceremonies highlighted the contradictions of the Rawson’s educational ideas — that his ideas about creating short term socialist communities where children learnt by doing could only be realised in ceremonies and rituals separate from the reality of urban life.

In February 1963, Rawson attended a leader training school at Wood Cottage, near Sheffield. The cottage was owned by the Barnsley Mountaineering Club. The Folk visited the cottage six times in that year, including a couple of Venturer Groups led by Rawson (Wood Cottage, 1963). It was during one of these trips that Rawson mentioned that it would be great for the Woodcraft Folk to have a similar centre and it was suggested that he investigate Lockerbrook, an untenanted empty hill farm owned by the Forestry Commission. Against stiff opposition he was able to obtain a lease in February 1964, winning out against local education authorities, other youth organisations, schools, and 22 individuals, Sheffield Venturers succeeded in obtaining a 21-year lease. Significant support was provided by Sheffield LEA, who were converted to the idea of Monday to Friday use by Secondary schools (Rawson, 1967).

> Basil put a bid in of £75 a year … what won the day was that Basil said … this centre is going to be used … for the education of young people … the early constitution of Lockerbrook was … as a Venturer centre. And that’s what those Venturers did, every weekend we went to Lockerbrook (Cowley, 2016).

The next year Rawson retired from formal employment, and despite warning the Folk Council that he could not continue indefinitely as Chair, he became “busier than ever”, particularly on the Folk’s international work, now “worldwide — east and west”, travelling abroad three or four times a year (Rawson, 1967). Rawson viewed retirement as a glorious opportunity to do full time what he had been doing part time. This is what he did, as well as looking after Martha.

> I wanted to give all that I could to the Folk while I lived. Anything I could offer nationally and internationally, I was ready to do it, whatever time it took, and whatever expense I could afford insofar as it came onto my shoulders. But I always had a nagging thought at the back of my mind that the time had to come when somebody else would have to do it … My feeling has been that while ever I was useful to the movement in my duty and my wish to give, that I didn’t want this to be a stumbling block. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 7, 6:40)

How his continued commitment to the Folk affected Rawson’s home life can only be speculated upon. “We often wondered how she [Martha] coped with Basil’s total commitment to the Folk and the time he gave to so many under privileged children” the family recalls (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024). Donald, who returned to teaching in the post-war era, continued to be involved in the Folk for a time, but stepped away, partly because of seeing the effect that his father’s commitment had on the family.

The Enchanter

Despite his success in rebuilding the Folk to a semblance of its post-war strength, Rawson was, when interviewed by Peter Gilpin in the early 1970s, able to admit that not all his ideas had been successful. “In any youth movement you … have to face up to times of disappointment, sometimes … disillusionment … I started practice which eventually were dropped because they failed” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 8, 7:15). One example of this may be the relative failure of the Senior Venturer age groups, designed to support older Woodcrafters to remain in the Folk as organisers (Palser, 2004). “Our feelings about the group was that it was our job to create a kind of leadership … Our boys and girls … either [becoming] folk leaders … or [going] into the working class movement” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 8, 5:30).

> I realise that I had hoped for too much and that the majority would stay in and become leaders. I hadn’t properly thought it out at the time that the system of which I regarded them as victims could prevent that, not just by destroying their enthusiasm … just by the mere fact that they had to leave school and go to work, and the system in industry would in many ways kill all their enthusiasms even if it didn’t change their direction of thought. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 6, 6:38)

As well as retaining older volunteers, Rawson also spoke of the difficulties of attracting younger children to the organisation. The Folk had taken many years to recover to its pre-war size and by the time it did, Rawson noted, society had irrevocably changed and so had the motivations for joining the Folk. In the early days, it was stimulated by the presence of poverty and unemployment, but also because the children of left-leaning families were more political. Competition from the mass media and a more acquisitive society, has made it “more difficult to teach or preach socialism” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 3, 18:40). In the later 1960s, with young people growing their hair and rejecting the attitudes of their parents, the Folk, he explained, had to be careful not “to sink into the false position of having the same attitudes as … adults outside” (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 6, 11:00).

> These changes are there, they are part of the effects of society, we have to recognise them, and we have to try and guide them … Insofar as their attitudes, their dress, their mannerisms, indicate a revolt against the adult society, we should welcome it. Because we ourselves are still rebels against the society which exists, despite its affluence … We mustn’t grow old and settled and in a rut, otherwise we shall find ourselves in the position of being against this rebellion on part of our young people … Our job is to guide, by practice of social life, by social living in our groups, and our camps, it into positive channels. (Rawson, ca. 1970s, reel 6, 10:17)

In 1973, during an excursion at Lockerbrook, Rawson took ill and had to be hospitalised. The well wishes were voluminous (Beglie, 1973). His illness meant he had to halt active work on a new edition of *The Woodcraft Way*, first published in 1952, with the movement having to pick up the task of developing the new manual themselves, which a small group of leaders did over a period of three years, leading to the 1976 edition. The book was split down into a series of booklets containing a single test that could be compiled into the complete edition.

At the 1975 Annual Delegate Conference, Rawson was made Honorary Life President of the Folk. “No one who was present on that moving occasion will ever forget the way Conference expressed its pride in our pioneer educationalist, and its joy at seeing Basil restored to health and vigour again” (Woodcraft Folk, 1976b, p. 5). In his preface, Rawson wrote:

> In our camp communities we learn through practice that happiness springs from the use of our democratic and co-operative principles. Use *The Woodcraft Way* to help you to understand how and why we must carry these principles into the world around us. I give you an old Woodcraft greeting of 50 years ago — Break Trails — to Peace and Freedom. (Rawson, 1976, p. 8)

Basil Rawson died in March 1976. For a man who had been given six months to live during the First World War, Basil Rawson, a man “so strong we thought him everlasting”, his passing had a huge impact on the Folk as “he always had such a following” (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024).

> At his funeral, the room was overflowing with so many people. The presiding officer, thinking he was just coming to the funeral of an elderly person, had to go round asking why there were so many young people in attendance. (J. Giles, personal communication, November 22, 2024)

It is fair to say, in conclusion, that Rawson's time as Headman and President of Folk Council was successful. By elaborating on "his own, and the movement's educational ideals", the editors of *Wide Awake* explained, Rawson's work had become "an eloquent testimony to his philosophy on life, its meaning and its purpose" and the belief in "what life could be like if we only wanted it badly enough and were prepared to work for it" (Woodcraft Folk, 1976a, p. 1). It was up to the Folk to continue in this tradition. Rawson had:

> … opened people's eyes; now we feel his loss, and to help us in our mutual struggle for a richer, fuller life, both as individuals and as part of a wider community, we can take comfort in the fact that the man lives on … in his works, in his ideas, in his friends and family, in the essential humanity of the man, that, in the space of one life, touched and influenced thousands. (Woodcraft Folk, 1976a, p. 1)

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Note

The Peter Gilpin interview consists of an eight audio cassette reproduction of a reel-to-reel tape interview with Basil Rawson, which the author borrowed from a Folk organiser. It is not stored in a public archive. The reel and minute numbers refer to the cassette reproduction used by the author.

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‘A Frank and Free Comradeship Between the Sexes’: The Woodcraft Folk and the Second Wave of Feminism

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This article explores the extent and nature of feminist influence on the educational theory and practice of the Woodcraft Folk in the twentieth century. It starts by examining Woodcraft’s ideas on “the relations between the sexes” as outlined by Leslie Paul (1938, p. 55). It then examines in detail his understanding of co-education, and his claim that the organisation had achieved a “frank and free comradeship between the sexes” (Paul, 1938, p. 55). It argues that the equating of sex equality with a formal equality of opportunity, coupled with the lived experience of its co-operative camping communities, led to the belief that equality of the sexes had been achieved within the Woodcraft Folk. This outlook, which remained largely unchanged until the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, came into conflict with attempts to adapt to that new type of feminism. Rather than making the Woodcraft Folk’s membership more receptive to ideas of the Women’s Liberation Movement, these earlier ideas proved to be a barrier to exploring its ideas on gender as a social construct, resulting in a missed opportunity to re-work Woodcraft’s educational practice at a time when the second wave of feminism was at its height.

Introduction

In 1979, the Woodcraft Folk, as part of a broader discussion updating its aims and principles, adopted the following clause as part of its constitution:

> **Equality for Men and Women:**
> As an educational organisation we will ensure that equal opportunities exist for the development of both boys and girls in the Woodcraft Folk in order to help lay a solid foundation for equality in their future adult lives. (Woodcraft Folk, 1979c, Clause 1.6, p. 2)

The inclusion of the principle of sex equality is here linked to the educational practice of the organisation, since equal opportunities for the development of both boys and girls within Woodcraft will lay the foundation for their equality when adults. Despite having been in existence for over 50 years, this was the first ever mention of sex equality in its constitution — the document which all adult members were required to accept and abide by when joining the organisation.

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This addition to its stated aims was clearly a conscious response to the second wave of feminism which was then at its peak. According to the 1978 *Leaders' Manual*:

> The Women's Liberation Movement … is a very different movement from the caricature so often depicted in the press as something emanating from neurotic or attention-seeking women who hate all men and whose main hobby is bra-burning.
>
> It is a serious movement (not an organisation, incidentally), with many different strands of thought within it. It represents a new kind of feminism — much more far-reaching than the suffragette movement of 60 years ago. (Woodcraft Folk, 1978, Part II, Section 11, p. 6)

From this it would appear that the inclusion of sex equality in its aims and principles signalled an openness to the ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement. The first purpose of this article is therefore to identify exactly which ideas of the Women's Liberation Movement the Woodcraft saw itself as embracing, and how (and whether) this changed the educational practice of the organisation.

However, in order to identify the changes in the organisation's educational work that were the result of its response to the second wave of feminism, it is also necessary to explore its approach towards sex equality prior to this. The existing literature on the Woodcraft Folk, in so far as it mentions this issue at all, assumes that its "pioneering of co-education" (Davis, 2000, p. 114) in 1925 was a consequence of its commitment to sex equality. Indeed, this assumption has been so widely held amongst Woodcraft's membership that it could be said to be part of the folklore of the organisation. Yet just as there have been different strands of thought within feminism, so too what constitutes sex equality is open to different interpretations. Furthermore, what is understood by 'co-education' calls for greater clarification — after all, schools in England have often been labelled as co-educational because of their mixed intake, whilst segregating the sexes for subjects such as woodwork on the one hand and domestic science on the other.

This article will therefore firstly examine how the Woodcraft Folk understood sex equality and linked it to its educational practice prior to 1979, and then discuss how this, in turn, shaped its response to the second wave of feminism. It will argue that despite the 'progressive' elements of its approach prior to 1979, its early outlook and practice on this issue actually rendered it resistant to incorporating those strands of thought of the new feminism that had the most far-reaching implications for its educational work.

The Views of Leslie Paul in *The Republic of Children*

Woodcraft President Leslie Paul's (1938) *Handbook for Teachers of Working-Class Children* provides the best starting point for understanding Woodcraft's approach prior to 1979. This is because it contains the first full public explanation of, and justification for, its policy of co-education: "Early Woodcraft Folk literature never made much of this feature; it was just part of the organisation from the beginning and was neither publicised nor defended" (Leslie, 1984, p. 302).

Furthermore, Paul's book also marked the end of Woodcraft's flirtation with recapitulation theory and eugenics. The 1925 launch of the Woodcraft Folk as a mixed membership organisation had been a continuation of Kibbo Kift Kindred's previous practice, as much informed by John Hargrave's positive eugenics as it was by any commitment to sex equality on the part of its young founders (Palser, 2020). It was the approach to sex equality and co-education that emerged in the mid-1930s that became entrenched in the organisation's practice from then up until the second wave of feminism.

The Republic of Children had the following to say about relations between the sexes:

> The Woodcraft Folk is co-educational throughout. No discrimination is made between men and women, or boys and girls, and all the offices of the movement are open to both sexes. We wish to see a frank and free comradeship between the sexes springing naturally and unforced from our delight

> in each other and in our common tasks and pleasures. This we feel we have achieved and must safeguard, and the relations between the sexes can be kept cheerful and sensible by the exercise of a little common sense in group life. (Paul, 1938, p. 55)

Two different claims were being made here. The first suggested that there was more to co-education than Woodcraft's membership being open to both sexes. It is implied that Woodcraft was co-educational *throughout* since at no point did it discriminate between men and women, or between boys and girls. Co-education in Woodcraft meant equal opportunities in Woodcraft. The second claim concerned how the sexes actually related to each other in practice. Woodcraft Folk felt they had been successful in their aim of developing a "frank and free comradeship between the sexes" (Paul, 1938, p. 55), and that this was made possible by their equality of opportunity for girls and women. They argued that these relations developed spontaneously from their joint participation in all of Woodcraft's activities.

Paul does not make explicit his reasons for attaching such importance to achieving a frank and free comradeship between the sexes, but this becomes clearer when we take into account the overall purpose of its educational work — the training of working class children for future participation in the organisations of the working class movement. By the mid 1930s, the Woodcraft Folk had affiliated to the Socialist Educational International (SEI). In *The Republic of Children*, Paul (1938) says that the SEI sees the task of its affiliates being "to work out in *the present* the Socialist education of the future" (p. 55). Quoting the official programme of the SEI, Paul comments:

> The new education is that which bases itself, not upon the old ideas of individualism, but upon the ideas of co-operation and of collective ownership and control. 'To train vigorous personalities of a social character, whose aim is to realise a social ideal, ought to be the aim of all educators' who are conscious of the decay of the old competitive society and the struggle of the new collective society to give birth to itself. (Paul, 1938, pp. 55)

From 1935, the Woodcraft Folk published on behalf of the SEI a journal for helpers and leaders in the English speaking world. The first edition carried an unsigned article, probably written by Woodcraft leader and *Helper* editor Henry Fair, which explained that Woodcraft had faced a lot of opposition in the labour and co-operative movements over its stance on co-education. These critics often seemed to forget, he commented, that they had been fighting for the emancipation of women for a generation "yet they wished to deny the teaching of equality as between the sexes to children" (Woodcraft Folk, 1935, p. 7). The article went on to argue that ensuring that children understood the issue of equality would serve them well as adults when they joined the labour and co-operative movements:

> Our task as leaders and helpers must be to put before the youngsters of both sexes that they both have a part to play in the solving of the problems of the world and that by playing, working and learning together they will learn and appreciate each-others' point of view at a period in their lives when their basic impressions are being formed of each other. (Woodcraft Folk, 1935, p. 7)

The training of working class children, boys and girls alike, for an informed and active participation in the labour movement would also have appealed to many in the co-operative movement on which the Woodcraft Folk relied for support. In particular, there were considerable links between the Woodcraft Folk membership and that of the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG), and they shared a common commitment to social change and a future co-operative commonwealth (Palser, 2020). The influence of both the SEI and the WCG would have ensured that by the mid-1930s, few Woodcrafters would have quarrelled with the 1926 *Model Branch Rules* of the WCG which stated that "the object of the Guild is to promote a new social order, in which co-operation shall replace capitalism and women have equal opportunities with men" (Black, 1989, p. 119).

Co-educational Throughout?

It is useful to consider what Woodcraft's 1930s co-education looked like in practice. There is no evidence of any barriers consciously being placed in the way of girls' participation in the core activities of the organisation — whether at group nights or during outdoor activities. The

inclusion of girls in all the activities of the organisation was a bold policy on the part of the Woodcraft Folk since the mixed camps in particular were frequently objected to by outsiders. Paul (1938) dismissed those raising objections to mixed camps as seeing sexual impropriety everywhere. He also argued that co-educational activity was made easier by sex education, though this should be tackled “in a scientific spirit” by talks on the biology of reproduction of different life-forms, including humans — and so avoiding both “moralising or pruriency” (Paul, 1936, p. 21). There is no doubt that by challenging the segregation of the sexes which was then practiced by other children’s organisations, like the Scouts and Guides, it was challenging the gender stereotypes then dominant in English society. However, the extent of that challenge is open to question.

Equality of opportunity could only go part of the way to challenging the then dominant stereotypes, because ideas as to what constituted masculine and feminine behaviour were, of course, carried into the organisation by children as much as adults. This is most clearly illustrated by the organisation’s approach to activities intended to build and demonstrate physical fitness and endurance. The Woodcraft Folk constantly emphasised that their aim was to develop children fit in mind and body, and its system of tests rewarded by badges placed considerable emphasis on physical endurance. For example, the hiker test involved a fifteen mile hike whilst carrying a backpack. Since these tests of physical stamina and endurance, like all the other tests, were intended to show individual achievement rather than a competitive comparison of abilities, there was no necessity to segregate them so as to take into account the physical differences between the sexes. However, boys and girls may well have approached these activities very differently. As one oral testimony commented:

> There was a fairly even distribution between boys and girls but when it came to outdoors activities boys were always in the majority. I spent seven years being the only girl who ever went on hikes with a group of eight or nine boys — you know, when we were young teenagers. I think because we were so active that a lot of girls physically couldn’t have walked the distances that we used to walk. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

It is possible that other girls could not have walked the same distances, or more likely could not yet do so because they had not built up to it, but it is equally likely that they did not feel the same need to prove themselves ‘hardy’ as many boys did. Paul and many of the other youngsters who had formed the organisation were of a generation of boys whose experience of the First World War led them to look upon Woodcraft as “a way of making and proving one’s manhood without becoming a soldier and dying” (Paul, 1980, p. 2). Where the Scouts offered boys “masculinity building” activities that were framed within a military discipline, the Woodcraft Folk offered masculinity framed within the self-discipline of the “Red Indian” ideal.

In his defence of co-education in *The Republic of Children*, Paul finds it necessary to answer Woodcraft’s critics:

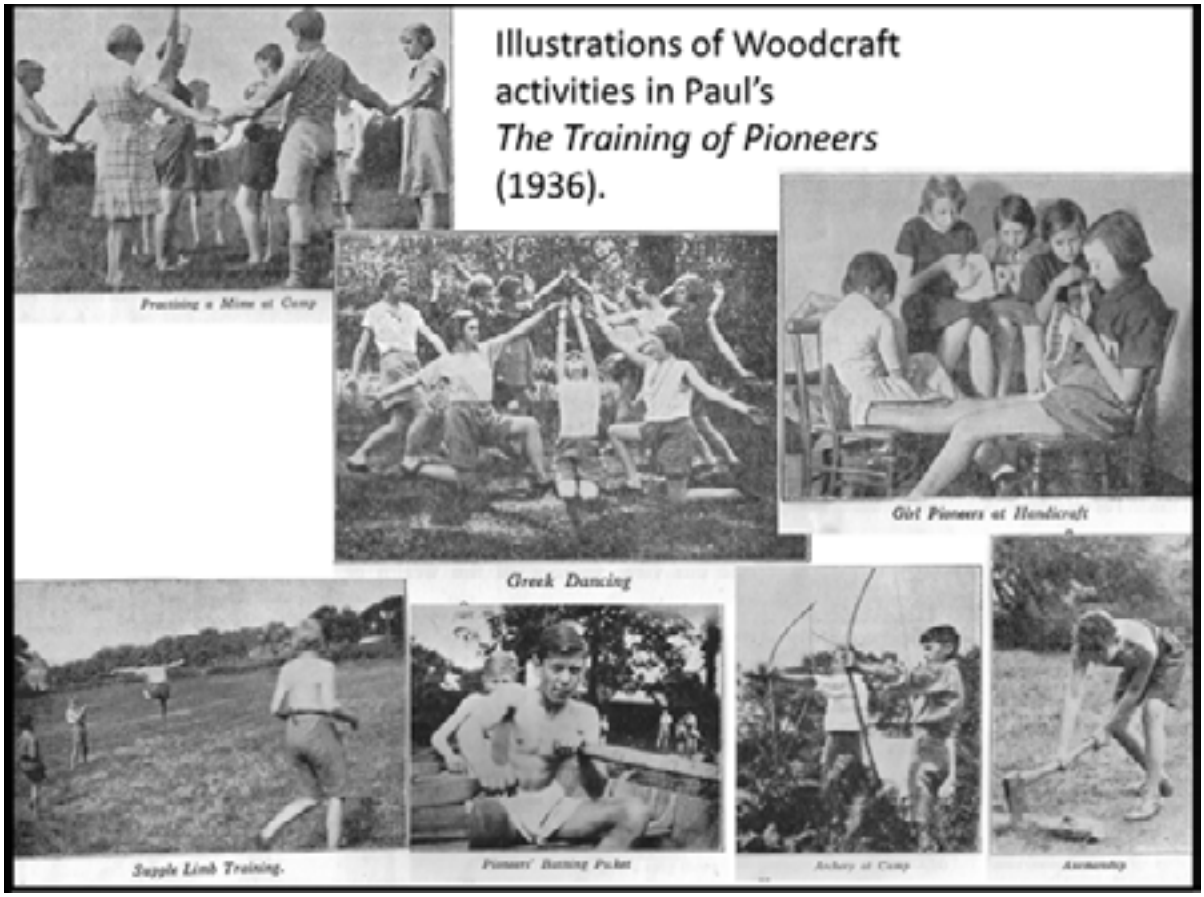
> Reactionary critics sometimes maintain that co-education “softens the fibres” of boys, and makes girls hoydenish. The critic is right to this extent — that if you want to make the boy a good soldier, you had best cut him off from contact with the other sex. (Paul, 1938, p. 56)

By implication, mixing with girls was likely to make a boy more pacifistic, more peace-loving, as these were widely held to be qualities found more commonly in women. These were, of course, precisely the qualities that Paul wanted to encourage amongst working class children, boys as well as girls, along with a co-operative outlook and a desire for social change.

However, Woodcraft’s challenging of the then dominant gender stereotypes had its limits. Paul clearly felt that some activities were more masculine, and by implication some more feminine, than others. For example, when he discusses dance, he discusses the two types that were popular in the Folk at this time — country dancing and (noting that he used the language of the time) what they used to call ‘savage’ dancing (Paul, 1938). The former dances were mixed, and there is evidence that boys often had to be cajoled initially into taking part. ‘Savage’ dancing on the other hand was “a type of dancing suitable for camp-fire demonstrations and stunts, and of

a more masculine character than country dancing. It is a good way of letting off steam …" (Paul, 1938, p. 147).

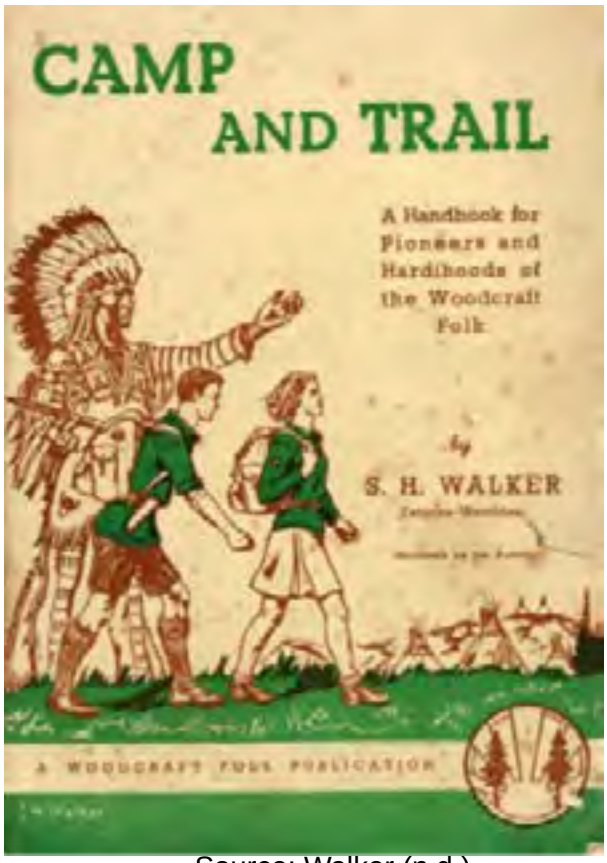
The gendering of activities in this manner was at times quite unconscious, as in *The Training of Pioneers* (Paul, 1936) where there are a number of photographs used to illustrate Woodcraft activities. Boys and girls are shown practicing a mime together, but Greek dancing and handicrafts are illustrated with pictures of girls only, whilst other outdoor activities are all illustrated with pictures of boys only.



Source: Paul (1936, pp. 8, 9, 15, 28, 32, 35, 37).

Yet it was because he saw some activities as more masculine in character that Paul (1938) also saw it as important to get the right balance of activities. He pointed out that the co-operative Junior Guilds were open to both sexes, but in practice they were a girl's movement because that is who it actually catered for. The Woodcraft Folk, he argued, had managed to achieve a roughly equal membership of the sexes, and in his view this was because a balanced group of boys and girls was always aimed at — and any separated activities were not allowed to undermine this (Paul, 1938).

This view of activities being more masculine or more feminine, and yet of finding the right balance between them so as to attract boys and girls to the organisation in similar numbers, was at one and the same time an acceptance of the idea that there are inherent differences between the sexes, and yet a desire to challenge and modify to a degree the gender stereotypes then dominant in British society. This two-sided approach can be illustrated by the rules governing male and female 'costumes'. They specified that males should wear shorts, and females should wear skirts, and this is how children were shown in most Woodcraft publications.



Source: Walker (n.d.).

However, it was increasingly common practice for girls to wear shorts at camp and hikes. One member recalls:

> The other thing we used to do was quite a lot of cycling in our area and we all wore shorts, even the girls. To local people then in 1932 — that was a bit unique. And certainly it was unique to sunbathe in a pair of abbreviated shorts and a top. But we grew up taking no notice of it. We used to do a hell of a lot of sun-bathing. There was no nude sun-bathing, it is true, we didn't go as far as that but it was quite revolutionary for the girls to wear sun tops, which were not a bikini exactly, for those days it was very daring. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

This concession to choice and practicality at camps and on hikes was sanctioned in the constitution (Woodcraft, 1964, p. 3), but skirts for females remained obligatory for all formal occasions until the 1970s (Woodcraft Folk, 1976a, p. 7).

Equal Opportunities for Men and Women within Woodcraft?

Of course, children also learn their future roles by observing the behaviour of adults. Given that there were no formal barriers to women playing the same roles within the organisation as men, the oral evidence is mixed as to whether there was any distinction in practice between them. One member's recollection is that "there always has been equality. In the jobs at camp you got female Camp Chiefs, men in the kitchen, you got females looking after the loos, and the majority of Group Leaders are women" (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5).

This author has a different memory of the 1960s, when my father was regularly Camp Chief and my mother responsible for food ordering and preparation. Emptying the chemical toilets and waste disposal were always dealt with by men, as was lighting the paraffin stoves and lamps, whilst first aid was usually the responsibility of a woman.

One member's testimony suggests that where a couple were both involved in Woodcraft, this led to a change in gender roles within the family home:

> A Folk family is one where traditional roles are dropped. You are much more likely to find shared roles within a Folk family where parents are looking after children, so that one or the other can help in the group or go to a meeting or go to a camp or whatever. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

Again, my memory is that whilst my mother and father jointly ran a Woodcraft group, when my father went away to National Folk Council for the weekend or went abroad to represent the organisation at a conference, it was my mother who was left to look after us children. This chimes with another member's recollection that this de-gendering of roles was true at local level but:

> … as you rose up the scale — the same as everything else, the number of women became fewer and fewer. And for a long time I was the only woman on the National Council … I suppose there must have been many occasions when I was the only female in the meetings, but I was never conscious of that fact, because we were all Woodcrafters. (Salt & Wilson, 1985, p. 5)

This under-representation of women on the National Council was raised at the 1934 Althing (Conference). According to the minutes, "Beech Tree urged the need for better representation of women on the National Council. Gowan, seconding, emphasised the point. Kestrel pointed out that sex equality in the Folk was already existent" (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5). Mayflower considered the motion unnecessary, presumably for the same reason, and Trailmaker wished for elections "irrespective of sex". The absence of any formal barriers to women and girls' participation in the life of the organisation was seen as sufficient to ensure equality of opportunity, and equality of opportunity meant sex equality was already existent in the organisation. This raises the question of how the unequal participation of women in the leadership was to be explained. White Raven "explained the poor representation of women was due to the fact that women were not prepared to equip themselves to lead the Folk" and Calumet pointed to the unions where there were "equal chances to take office" (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5) but women did not participate. Kwoneshe informed the conference that "all men vote according to what the women tell them to vote" (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5) — presumably meaning that equal representation was not needed as women were the 'power behind the throne' anyway.

The proposal was defeated with only 8 votes for and 69 votes against (Woodcraft Folk, 1934, p. 5). Even allowing for a majority of delegates being men, the vote suggests that most of the female delegates agreed that equality of the sexes already existed within the organisation, and that the unequal representation of the sexes on the national leadership was because women themselves shied away from taking on that role.

A Comradeship Springing Naturally from our Common Tasks and Pleasures

Clearly this insistence that sex equality already existed in the organisation was in part ideological — the equating of a formal equality of opportunity with equality in practice. However, this was further reinforced by the lived experience of a shared life in Woodcraft. Despite the different roles played by men and women within the organisation, there is a terrain upon which relations between them would have felt different to those in their work and everyday domestic lives. Involvement in Woodcraft may or may not have changed the dynamic within the family home, but at group night and at camp, the relationships between children, between children and adults, and between adults, were no longer framed by the family. Whole families might be present, but their roles as parents and children were fundamentally different to those experienced in the family home.

This was especially true in the camping community where: all adults shared the responsibility for the care of all the children regardless of their familial relationship; all adults and children were expected to take an equal part in the cooking and other tasks required to maintain the camp as part of a rota system; and finally, all adults and children were expected to take part in and contribute to the programme of activities of the camp. The relationship between adults and

children was one where both male and female adults participated jointly in activities with the children, not simply standing on the side-lines observing or supervising by issuing instructions. This was symbolised by men and women, boys and girls, all sitting on the grass in a circle for the daily ‘council’ meetings — foreshadowing the insistence of second wave of feminism upon finding non-hierarchical ways of holding discussions. It was this that engendered a sense of comradeship between men and women, and even if there remained areas in which a lack of equality was transparent, it still felt radically different to their day to day lives. It was a terrain on which men took responsibility alongside women, a terrain where women felt they had gained genuine respect, a terrain in which there were indeed opportunities for women to play a leading role. Furthermore, the resulting skills and self-confidence gained by women could be carried over into other spheres, making a difference to both their domestic and public lives.

Woodcraft and the Second Wave of Feminism

Four decades on from the Althing discussion of female representation in the leadership, the 1976 Annual Delegate Conference saw “considerable discussion over the role of women in the W.F., and the desirability of more women on the N.C.” (Woodcraft Folk, 1976b, minute 6b). As if discovering this male dominance for the first time, a delegate had drawn the Conference’s attention to the “startling fact that following the retirement of Peggy Aprahamian there would be no elected woman member on National Folk Council” (Posner, 1976, p. 1). As Posner argued in the Woodcraft journal *New Day*:

> It would seem that we are electing a leadership that is in no way compatible with the avowed ideology of the Folk — of the equality of all people irrespective of race, religion or sex … Many of us, even some of the best and most respected comrades in our movement, find it difficult to difficult to appreciate the meaning and practice of real equality, and that does not exclude the writer of this article. For after all, the ideology and habits of centuries of the dominance of man are not easy to break. (Posner, 1976, pp. 1-2)

To illustrate this Posner (1976) gives some examples of comments made by Woodcraft leaders. They are remarkably similar to those voiced at the 1934 Althing: that there is no problem of equality as behind every good man is a good woman; that they do not vote on a person’s sex, but on the role they play in the movement; that women being involved at a national level could lead to “more problem families” (Posner, 1976, p. 2) as they might then neglect their families. He goes on to propose that a syllabus on equal rights be drawn up to encourage discussion on what this means at every age level within the organisation, and that steps be taken to positively encourage women to stand for election at district and national level.

The October issue of *New Day* saw two more contributions, both from women, and both focusing on the obstacles to women standing for election. Linda Osborn (1976) points to the problems that women, especially mothers, may have in speaking out in public. Having a family disrupts this developing ability as women may find themselves outside of situations which require public speech, and so they have to start from scratch in building up their confidence again — especially since “there are those among us who are inclined to ridicule at large meetings” (p. 8). She also suggests that whilst women and men may share jobs in the home, the woman tends to take on the major responsibility for younger children and this makes going away for a weekend more difficult (Osborn, 1976). In her contribution, Josie Burnett says that whilst there is equal opportunity in Woodcraft, time and family commitments prevent women playing a greater role at District and National level. Whilst the mental and physical stimulation encountered in Woodcraft is rewarding, it leaves leaders emotionally drained, and this in turn leaves their partner at home feeling rejected (Burnett, 1976). Despite offering some practical suggestions, both appear to reluctantly accept that women with young children would not be able to contribute until their children are older.

However, now Woodcraft Folk members were not simply responding to feminist ideas which highlighted the difference between formal equality of opportunity and actual equality of

opportunity. The 1978 version of the Woodcraft Folk *Leaders' Manual* devoted eight pages to the "new thinking about women" (Woodcraft Folk, 1978). It challenges the argument that the status of women is determined by their biology, arguing that what men and women see as male and female roles are stereotypes acquired during childhood and re-inforced by the mass media, and goes on to demonstrate how women's roles are also the product of discrimination. Though not using the term, it is here echoing the sociological distinction between gender and sex whereby masculinity and femininity are seen as socially and culturally constructed, whereas male and female are biological categories. Making this distinction would have been anachronistic in the 1930s Woodcraft Folk, for as Barbara Blaszak has pointed out, "the discovery that gender roles are socially constructed is recent, a product of second wave feminism" (Blaszak, 2003, p. 491).

The *Leader's Manual* (Woodcraft Folk, 1978) consequently suggests some questions that the organisation needed to ask itself, questions which would highlight the limits to equality of opportunity then existing within the organisation. In group discussions do girls play as active a role as boys? Have we encouraged both adults and children to discuss any of the issues relating to sex inequality and gendering? When husband and wife are in the organisation, do we ensure they can both attend training courses and conferences? Why, in an organisation that aims to include the whole family, are there so few women on the National Council? It then has a page of suggestions for activities with older children, activities that are intended to encourage a questioning of gender as a social construct. The first activity is to carry out a survey of a week's television and the roles and images of women it projects. Second is a discussion on a sample of advertising text and the assumptions it makes about what women want. Third are discussions about family life, such as "what are the advantages and disadvantages of single-parent families?" (Woodcraft Folk, 1978, p. 8). Lastly, it suggests general questions for discussion, such as "should Ms be used in place of Mrs or Miss, and does it matter?" (Woodcraft Folk, 1978, p. 8).

If the authors were suggesting that the organisation had to make changes in its practice, the response of many existing adult members was one of, at best, complacency. When in the following year, 1979, the Woodcraft Folk conference debated updating its constitution to specify "Equality for Men and Women" (Woodcraft Folk, 1979c), many Woodcraft members, women as well as men, felt that this was not saying anything new. They simply took it as read that the Woodcraft Folk had always practiced equality between the sexes. Thus, looking back on this in 1982, Woodcraft leader Peggy Aprahamian commented "It is interesting to recall that this addition [to the constitution] had previously been opposed by members who claimed that a truely *[sic]* integrated movement did not need to define the obvious" (Aprahamian, 1982, p. 3).

For many members it was obvious that the Woodcraft Folk stood for the equality of men and women because the sexes were truly integrated in the organisation. Whilst, perhaps reluctantly, supporting this new clause in the constitution pledging equality of opportunities for the development of both boys and girls *within* Woodcraft, members rejected an addendum which committed the organisation to striving "to break down the barriers to sexual equality facing people, particularly women, in our society" (Woodcraft Folk, 1979a, Item 1.6; Woodcraft Folk, 1979b, p. 7). This was moved by Julie Thorpe, one of the young women now joining the organisation who had not grown up with it from childhood. The motivation of those opposing the amendment is not immediately clear since the minutes do not record the content of the speeches for and against it. It is conceivable that members felt that, as an educational organisation, the Woodcraft Folk's official aim should be to ensure equality of opportunity for its child members rather than seeking to break down barriers to sexual equality in society more generally. Yet the same conference determined that since the Woodcraft motto was "Span the World with Friendship" it should "take a firm and determined stand against all forms of racism and prejudice within our society" (Woodcraft Folk, 1979a, p. 1).

Aprahamian's comment on the reluctance to adopt any constitutional change on sex equality was made in a major article in the second edition of the new national journal which she edited, *Woodcraft Focus*. Its title was "Moving beyond Gender" (Aprahamian, 1982), but here the use of the term gender was simply used in its grammatical sense rather than the broader sociological

meaning. She notes: “Gender is the means by which we indicate in language the sex of a human being — or other living creatures. Hence man/he, woman/she etc” (Aprahamian, 1982, p. 3). The article discussed whether to ’degenderise’ the organisation’s songs and ceremonies, as terms such as ‘brotherhood of man’ could be seen as undermining the educational message of equality between the sexes. Just two months later the following motion was proposed at the 1982 Annual Delegate Conference (ADC).

> This ADC recognises the power of language to strengthen the foundations of equality and determines to work to that end by ensuring that the language we use is direct, clear and does not discriminate against any group of people. (Woodcraft Folk, 1982a, Resolution 6)

The mover, Peter Wood from South Barnet, pointed to song lyrics like “The Family of Man” (Woodcraft Folk, 1982c, p. 8) and according to the minutes twelve people spoke on the resolution “and at times the discussion was quite heated” (Woodcraft Folk, 1982b, p. 5). A vote was taken to refer the motion to National Council, so avoiding a divisive vote on its contents, and Ruth Moulton is recorded as asking that “everybody’s comments be respected whether they had been in the Folk for a very long time or for a very short period” (Woodcraft Folk, 1982b, p. 5).

Amongst the ensuing letters to *Woodcraft Focus*, which Aprahamian edited, was one from Rosamund Cran, a new leader in Stockport who was “very much involved in the Women’s Movement” (Cran, 1982, p. 10). She welcomed Aprahamian’s carefully worded article and suggested that changes to the words of some Woodcraft songs could serve an educational purpose when discussed with children in group meetings. In contrast, a letter from another leading member Wad Klos (1982, p. 10) argued that everyone knew what expressions like ‘All men are brothers’ actually meant because of the context in which they were used — and attempts to ‘degenderise’ all songs and ceremonies would be never ending. He went on:

> Now, despite my comments so far, I am aware of the sexist attitudes that prevail throughout society and I would unequivocally urge all our members to speak out against these attitudes wherever and whenever encountered. What I cannot accept however, is that these attitudes prevail in our organisation. (Klos, 1982, p. 10)

Here, then, is the reasoning behind a reluctance to make any changes in the organisation’s practice. Sexist attitudes may prevail in society, but in the Woodcraft Folk they did not. Klos was not just speaking for himself when making this claim — he spoke for a section of the membership which, like him, had grown up in the Woodcraft Folk and for whom sex equality in Woodcraft was a given. Furthermore, changes in its existing practice, particularly its songs and ceremonies, threatened to undermine the “frank and free comradeship between the sexes” (Paul, 1938, p. 55) that long-term members felt had been achieved and must be safeguarded. For some long-standing members, the Women’s Liberation Movement represented a middle-class outlook which placed challenging women’s oppression above working class unity. They felt that the young feminists who were increasingly joining the organisation threatened to undermine the organisation’s past working class composition and roots (Palser, 2004).

The debate in the pages of *Focus* was brought to a close by an article entitled “Redressing the balance” by Peter Woods of Central Barnet District. “What I believe we need to do on the issue of discrimination against women is to understand it in its myriad forms”, (Woods, 1982, p. 4) he argued, and suggested ways in which leaders could address these myriad forms in their educational work with children. One was to organise a debate in your group, and allocate two people to record the length and frequency of contributions made by boys and girls, and the number of interruptions of other speakers. He also suggests observing leaders’ responses to boys and girls — how much they favour boys in the time they devote to each. Exercises designed to expose gender stereotypes of a similar nature to those in the 1978 leaders’ manual are also included.

These and similar proposals that would take the Woodcraft Folk’s educational practice beyond a formal equality of opportunity towards one which challenged gender roles were never embraced by the organisation as a whole. This is despite the fact that feminist ideas and endeavours to

develop an anti-sexist practice were now evident in both the state and voluntary youth services (Davies, 1999; Spence, 2010). Whilst the 1980s saw the influx of many younger parents who had been influenced by the women's movement, and who were eager to take up challenges to gender stereotyping and find ways to empower girls, in many groups and districts the educational practice remained largely unchanged.

That there was resistance to change on this issue is best illustrated if we compare the response to the second wave of feminism with the organisation's response to the challenge of tackling racism. In 1982 the ADC debated a resolution moved by the Wimbledon District. It stated:

> This ADC acknowledges that the Woodcraft Folk has always enjoyed a considerable number of children from Britain's ethnic minorities, but has difficulty in attracting leaders from the parents of Britain's ethnic minorities. This ADC calls on National Council and its committees to investigate this problem. (Woodcraft Folk, 1982a, Resolution 4)

Not content to admit the organisation's failure to attract *leaders* who were from ethnic minorities, an amendment was put forward saying that the organisation had always "had difficulties in attracting leaders and *children* from Britain's ethnic minorities" (Woodcraft Folk, 1982a, Resolution 4). The amendment was overwhelmingly carried. Far from there being a reluctance to discuss this issue, delegates mandated the national leadership to investigate "this problem". Rather than maintaining that the organisation had always been opposed to racial discrimination, in the ensuing discussions the organisation re-examined critically is previous "multi-cultural" approach — and in its place adopted an "anti-racist work policy". As part of this, it went on to publish educational resources to assist group leaders in integrating anti-racism into group activities (Bourn, 2025). No such measures were taken in relation to women's equality.

It is not hard to see the reason for these different responses. Where the absence of non-white faces amongst both child members and leaders exposed the gap between the membership's ambitions and the organisation's actual achievements, the balance of the sexes in the membership and the lived experience of their collaboration within the organisation encouraged complacency.

Conclusion: An Opportunity Lost

It is ironic that it was actually the Woodcraft Folk's responsiveness to the feminist ideas that continued to circulate in British society after the first wave of feminism which later turned out to be an obstacle to its embracing of the ideas of the second wave. The impetus for further experimentation in ways to empower girls, to challenge sexism amongst boys, and to bring the talents of more women into the organisation's leadership was lost as a consequence. The Woodcraft Folk's equality of opportunity coupled with the comradeship developed out of its co-operative camping community, rather than providing an alibi for complacency, would have laid the foundations for the absorption of new methods if approached in the spirit of a critical re-evaluation of its existing practice.

An example is perhaps sufficient to illustrate the point being made here. One practice that was carried over from Kibbo Kift into Woodcraft and is contained in *The Republic of Children* was the division of the Fellowships (groups) into male and female "Clans" (Paul, 1938). Though this was not the stated intention, rather than this segregation undermining the mixed activities of the fellowship it benefited the girls in one important respect. The 'tribal democracy' of Woodcraft involved a fellowship council which discussed and prepared proposals on the activities and running of the fellowship, and the Clans elected children to participate in it from their ranks. The existence of a girls' Clan ensured that they were equally represented, and must surely have ensured that girls' voices were not drowned out by the boys as could easily happen in mixed discussions. The girls' Clans were also intended as a means of assisting members in their preparation for tests, and for preparing mimes, songs, or other contributions to fellowship entertainment. After the war, many groups went over to mixed Clans, and in most districts the use of Clans was slowly abandoned altogether. Looked at in the light of the 'Work with Girls'

(Davies, 1999) developed in the youth service in the 1980s, where ‘girls only’ activities were used to give them space to develop their confidence and skills, Leslie Paul’s Clan system could be said to be well ahead of its time.

A Note on Sources

Primary sources that are available in the online Woodcraft Folk Heritage Archive (https://heritage.woodcraft.org.uk/home/) are listed with the reference number (FH) and URL.

Primary sources that are available in the Woodcraft Folk archives at the Institute of Education, University College London, are included in the references with their catalogue number starting YMA/WF/.

The Author

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Co-operative Learning: The Distinctive Contribution of the Woodcraft Folk

Douglas Bourn

The Woodcraft Folk was formed in 1925 and from its earliest days it developed close working relationships with the co-operative movement. Societies such as the Royal Arsenal in South London gave financial support to some of the earliest groups that were established. This close relationship has survived to the present day despite various hiccups on the way, including an attempt by the co-operative movement to set up a rival organisation, the Co-operative Youth Movement, in the 1940s and 1950s. This article, whilst noting this close relationship, aims to review the extent to which the Woodcraft Folk has seen co-operation and co-operative learning as an essential component of its educational practices. Reference will be made to the assumed ethos of co-operation throughout its history and how in the 1980s, influenced primarily by external forces from progressive educational movements, co-operation became recognised as a more central element of, not only its ethos, but also its educational practices.

Introduction

Throughout the history of the Woodcraft Folk, co-operation has been a constant theme through its educational programmes, its philosophy, and organisational relationship to the consumer co-operative movement. This article situates a review of the Woodcraft Folk engagement in co-operative learning within broader debates in education around the usage of the term. Whilst co-operation has been central to the organisation's philosophy since its foundation in 1925, the article identifies the 1980s period as marking the beginnings of a significant change within the Woodcraft Folk in how the term was applied in its educational activities. It discusses these changes within the broader context of a growing movement for co-operative learning, particularly in North America and Europe. Finally, it reviews how the Woodcraft Folk International Camp of 2011 could be seen as the culmination of how co-operation has become central to the organisation.

What is Co-operative Learning?

Whilst the term co-operative education has been around for over 200 years, going back to the writings and times of Robert Owen, the concept of co-operative learning has perhaps a more recent history. You can see elements of a distinctive pedagogical approach in a range

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of publications and programmes by co-operative educationalists that refer to themes such as mutuality, equity, and justice. But it is only in the last thirty to forty years that the term has become part of educational discourse in response to the challenges of individualistic and competitive based education systems. The emphasis within this educational discourse has been on encompassing a sense of positive interdependence, interaction, recognising individual accountability, and working as a group (Gillies, 2007; Johnson et al., 1994). Within this discourse there is also a recognition that co-operative learning includes a process of socialisation, of learners working together to achieve common goals, and group-based tasks (Gillies et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2000).

Slavin (2015) does bring in some important contextual factors that are relevant to any discussion on co-operative learning. The first is the important role that motivational perspectives bring. The second is social cohesion and the extent to which a group's interactions are influenced by a sense of cohesion. The third is the developmental perspective, where interaction and working together can enhance and deepen understanding of a topic. The fourth is the elaborative perspective where ideas that have been retained are elaborated upon, particularly through peer tutoring. Whilst all these approaches have some validity, they are all focused on improving the quality of learning within a school context. They are also proposed as being relevant across education systems and despite the reference by Slavin (2015) to motivation, they do not appear to be linked to broader social and economic questions about society, nor to addressing the impact of individualistic forces within education. They are seen as techniques that teachers and educators could consider. These approaches to co-operative learning, particularly in North America, could be seen as part of a broader approach to groupwork within formal education (Solomon, 2024).

A broader perspective on co-operative learning can be seen in the work of Bash (2014), commenting on the writings of Gundara and Sharma (2013), who states that co-operative learning could be seen as a device for expanding children's horizons. Bash however raises concerns that co-operative learning can sometimes be seen as no more than a gloss on a process orientated towards pre-determined learning outcomes, a tool for effective classroom management. Bash also notes that in western societies, competition appears to stand out as a characteristic embedded in the lives of children, both as individuals and in their collective existence (Bash, 2014). Gundara and Sharma note that the "role of cooperative learning in educational institutions is to help learners to adapt to a changing world" (Gundara & Sharma, 2013, p. 243). They go on to state that co-operative learning strategies need to deal seriously with the issue of autonomy of learners and constructively engage with the competitive impulses amongst learners.

It is the extent to which co-operative learning is an adaptation of the competitive ethos or whether it is a conscious alternative that perhaps poses some of the biggest challenges to the field. Bash (2014), in commenting on the work of Gundara and Sharma, notes that if a fundamental dimension of co-operative learning is one that is "based on mutual trust" and "a shared vision of learning" (p. 182), this cannot be divorced from a recognition of the tensions and potential conflicts inherent in the diversity of the classroom.

A focus within a lot of the literature has been related to games and it is not therefore surprising that the focus has been on developing more co-operative approaches, particularly within physical education in schools. Fernandez-Rio (2016) refers to three phases: building group cohesion, co-operative learning as the content, and co-operative learning as the framework. His approach recognises that if the educator wishes to move beyond just co-operative games to a framework of co-operative learning, this requires long-term planning and building upon games and forms of group activities.

Much of the discussions around co-operative learning have come from psychological perspectives or in more recent times linking the term to mathematical based games.

Wilkins (2011) in his review of the different forms of co-operative learning identified the following themes:

- As a learning philosophy linked to the ideas of Robert Owen, John Dewey, and Holmes as linked to humanistic and democratic forms of education.
- As a form of experiential learning which is group based and interactive with a process that includes elements of reflection.
- Effective group working.
- Learning in a co-operative group.
- As a distinctive pedagogy.
- Part of a social movement.
- Expression of values and educational beliefs.
- Agent of change.
- Social capital and self-actualisation.

What is evident from the literature referred to above is that co-operative learning is related to developing models of learning, of ways to work together, of techniques to use within the classroom to encourage greater interaction, but not necessarily seeing them as challenging dominant social ideologies. Much of the literature does not directly address the relationship of co-operative learning to challenging dominant social, economic, and ideological norms that emphasise competition, individualism, and neoliberalism. What the literature on co-operative learning also tends to ignore is that co-operative education is not new and has been linked to an international movement for many years.

Consumer Co-operative Movement and Co-operative Learning

Although the consumer co-operative movement emerged as an economic model to challenge the dominant capitalist one, it has since its founding fathers, the Rochdale Pioneers, had a strong educational component. This has been reflected not only in its support of educational programmes but also in promoting co-operative values of responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity (International Co-operative Alliance, 2018).

Co-operation may have been based on a form of social and economic organisation, but through the co-operative movement's broader work, it has also become a vision of how people and communities work together, learn from each other, and aim to secure a more just and equitable world. This has meant that in the UK and in many other countries as well there has been a close linkage between consumer co-operatives and the promotion of education principles which are seen to be different to the dominant economic model of competition and individualism.

Noble and Ross (2020) refer to the importance of considering how we learn, what we learn, where we learn, and how we learn when discussing co-operative learning. They suggest that active learning must be at the heart of the pedagogy which leads to critical thinking and reflective practice. Co-operative learning spaces, they suggest, should be collaborative, solidaristic, and shared (Noble & Ross, 2020). MacPherson (2009) raises similar themes in posing the dichotomy between individualism and communitarianism and suggests that key is the ways in which individual development takes places within co-operative communities. His work is however primarily focused on relevance of the debates to co-operatives in general rather than learning as such.

Woodin (2014) has noted that co-operative education historically has been built upon the twin themes of developing a “co-operative character” and contribution to civic and educational life. He went on to state that co-operative education has been much more than individual improvement and acquisition of knowledge, and includes the development of “collective awareness and social action” (p. 7). An example of this within the formal education system in the UK in recent years has been the co-operative schools model (Woodin, 2014). This means seeing co-operative learning as posing a different approach to education than which is dominant in most societies. This therefore suggests that co-operative learning should be as much about being a pedagogy of learning, an ethos based on some clear values and principles. If co-operative learning is more than just playing a few games, then it has been part of a distinctive educational approach.

Whilst the work of the Woodcraft Folk has been acknowledged in some of the discussions on co-operative education (Woodin, 2014), there has been little discussion of its importance in putting into practice a form of co-operative learning that moves beyond the perspectives outlined by Gillies, Johnson, and Slavin, to one that situates it within broader social and educational debates. This article now turns to how historically the Woodcraft Folk has always promoted a form of co-operative learning, but how in the 1980s this became much more explicit within its educational activities.

The Woodcraft Philosophy

The founder of the Woodcraft Folk, Leslie Paul, in one of his earliest publications for the organisation, stated that the aim was to work for peace and co-operation. This emphasis on co-operation was based on an anti-capitalist ethos and opposition to competitive ethos (Paul, 1938). Paul declared in an article in 1930 that the Woodcraft Folk is avowedly co-operative and for co-operative education, stating that its task is to build a new co-operative commonwealth (Paul, 1930).

In Paul’s *Republic of Children* (Paul, 1938) the reference to co-operation was also seen as being part of a child’s personal and social development. To act in a co-operative manner was seen as being part of how one lived and this was articulated in the way Woodcraft Folk activities, particularly its camps, were organised. Everyone had to play their part in creating a co-operative community.

There was also another side to the Woodcraft Folk’s support for co-operation and that was linked to its social and political philosophy. Paul saw the Woodcraft Folk as a working-class movement and this led to close ties with the consumer co-operative movement. The ethos of the Woodcraft Folk in the inter-war period had a clear socialist and co-operative ethical basis. Much of this was based on a rejection of capitalism. All groups during this period had to sign up to a Charter which included the following: “We ... declare that the welfare of the community can be assured only when the instruments of production are owned by the community” (Paul, 1938, p. 48). The declaration for Pioneer aged children, ten- to thirteen-year-olds, included “to work for world peace and co-operation” (Paul, 1938, p. 57).

Co-operative principles were implied, however, rather than being explicit in the educational activities of Woodcraft Folk in the 1920s and 1930s. Co-operation was emphasised through outdoor activities with camping seen as an ideal co-operative community, with adults and children working together on an equal basis. Both group night activities and camps were highly structured, and this enabled everyone to work together for a common purpose. A symbolic feature of both group nights and camps was, and remains, the circle. Tents at Woodcraft camps have always been organised around circles and group nights always begin and end with a circle. This ensures there is no hierarchy, children are not situated in rows like at school. As Paul wrote, “the circle creates a sense of community by making the camp a unity” (Paul, 1938, p. 173).

Palser (2020), in his review of the politics and pedagogy of the Woodcraft Folk in its first twenty-five years, notes the linkages in ideas between the organisation and those of Robert Owen. The similarities he said were in terms of co-operative communities, especially in the case of the Folk camping. The Folk had elements of a counterculture, of a different lifestyle based on ceremonies, rituals, customs, and songs. There were also linkages in terms of internationalist outlook, progressive educational approaches, and the seeking of social change.

Relationship with the Consumer Co-operative Movement

In the 1920s and 1930s, the consumer co-operative movement had a strong educational ethos. In his *Republic of Children*, Leslie Paul (1938) states that he saw in the co-operative movement the basis of how to organise children on working class lines. This meant ensuring that the movement incorporated cultural and organisational approaches that were less hierarchical and more democratic than many organisations at that time. When Paul established the first ever Woodcraft Folk group in South East London in 1925, he quickly found in the local co-operative society, the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, a willing supporter (Attfield,1981). Gradually as Woodcraft Folk groups emerged around the country, support from local co-operative societies enabled them to purchase camping equipment and cover the costs of hiring halls for weekly meetings. Support from the national body of the co-operative movement came in 1933 with a £10 grant by the Co-operative Union. In 1938, the Co-operative Union set up a committee to create a national co-operative youth organisation with two sections, one for youth, the British Federation of Co-operative Union, and one for children, the Woodcraft Folk (Woodcraft Folk, 1941).

The plans broke down as it became apparent that the Co-operative Union wanted to take over the Woodcraft Folk. The results were a breakdown in relations in the immediate post-war period (Davis, 2000). As a result, for much of the 1940s and 1950s the co-operative movement whilst giving support to the Woodcraft Folk, did so reluctantly. There were also criticisms of the Woodcraft Folk from some members of the co-operative movement for the organisation's more political stance on many issues and the development of its Pioneer links with youth groups in Eastern Europe.

Gradually during the 1950s and 1960s, the relationship between the Folk and the co-operative movement improved. More and more, Woodcraft Folk leaders become involved in co-operative educational work and as co-operators saw through their visits to Woodcraft Folk international camps during this period, the organisation was practising co-operation. The culmination of this change in attitude was the Woodcraft Folk's fiftieth anniversary camp in 1975, which was held in the grounds of the Co-operative College at Stanford Hall near Loughborough in Leicestershire.

Learning About Co-operation as a Body of Knowledge

Whilst the Woodcraft Folk's philosophy continued to mention co-operation, it was not developed as a skill within its educational programmes. There was reference to co-operation within its ceremonies and declarations such as the one for Pioneers (10-13 year olds) including "to work for world peace and co-operation" (Rawson, n.d., p. 11). Co-operation was clearly part of its approach to camping. Instead, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the focus was on learning about co-operative societies, how they were organised, and the national structure of the movement. This can be seen in *The Woodcraft Way* (Woodcraft Folk, 1973), the booklet for leaders of pioneer groups which sees this learning as part of a broader badge of activities on citizenship.

The 1978 edition of the *Woodcraft Folk Leaders Manual* still emphasised co-operation in terms of knowledge about the co-operative movement. There was, however, at least a recognition of the importance of co-operative principles:

> The very word co-operate — which means to work together — sums up the essential characteristics of all Woodcraft activities. We teach our children that ‘no man is an island sufficient of itself’, that individuals are inter-dependent and that this must apply to nations as well as to individuals if life on this earth is to survive. (Woodcraft Folk,1978, p. 17)

The discussion on co-operation goes on to state that co-operative principles have always been relevant to the Folk and that its aim is to “educate young people for cooperative living” (Woodcraft Folk,1978, p. 17).

Emergence of Co-operative Learning as a Distinctive Educational Approach

By the late 1970s, the impact of societal changes in North America and parts of Europe were beginning to have an impact within education. The emergence of a counterculture in the late 1960s led to a rise of movements such as de-schooling and challenges to the dominance of an individualistic, competitive, and exam orientated education system. A series of academic studies in North America in the early 1980s showed the effects of co-operative versus competitive goal structures on pupils’ learning. Evidence showed “that cooperation was more effective than interpersonal competition and individualistic efforts; cooperation with intergroup competition was also superior to interpersonal competition and individualistic efforts” (Gillies, 2016, p. 39).

Some of these themes were having an impact within the co-operative movement in the UK through the impact of several education and member relations officers in societies and the work of the Co-operative College. There was also the growth of different forms of co-operatives be they in forms of businesses, housing, or ways in which voluntary groups came together. Co-operation and co-operatives became a popular term and was seen to become associated with an alternative to right wing ideological thinking in the 1980s. At the time, Watkins (1986) linked the development of co-operative principles to social progress. The Woodcraft Folk during this period also began to work more closely with the member relations and education officers of co-operative societies, particularly in terms of the role of methodologies of learning. It was this closer alignment that led to several aspects of the co-operative movement giving increased funding to the Woodcraft Folk for a range of projects including one on its history, its work on development education, and in the development of co-operative games discussed below. It was during this period that there was a major expansion in the membership of the Woodcraft Folk with the number of groups almost doubling. This led to a considerable number of new leaders becoming interested and involved in the co-operative movement. In 1988, a meeting of co-operative activists in the Folk identified there were over fifty Folk members who were either on boards of societies or on relevant committees (Woodcraft Folk, 1988).

Games Became the Catalyst for Change

In the 1970s, there was the emergence of a New Games movement which aimed to promote a more co-operative and communal approach to games and play. *The New Games Book* (Fluegelman, 1976) became the catalyst for a new social movement that eventually had a major impact upon the Woodcraft Folk. This movement was inspired by the work of Stewart Brand and the opposition to the Vietnam War in America and to pose different forms of games that were not based on aggression and competition (New Games, n.d.).

The most influential publication for the Woodcraft Folk to come out of this movement was Terry Orlick’s book *The Cooperative Sports and Games Book*, published in 1978. Orlick (1978) stated that competition was irrational and is linked to an excessively goal orientated society. He suggested that children nurtured on co-operation, acceptance, and success have a much greater chance of developing strong self-concepts (Orlick, 1978). Orlick was a psychologist and in looking for examples of alternatives to goal orientated societies, he found the play activities of indigenous communities in North America as his inspiration.

Orlick saw the need to reduce the emphasis on winning and losing, the fear of failure, and the promotion of self-esteem. In co-operative based games, Orlick saw that they promote inclusion rather than exclusion, promote problem solving, and foster positive student interactions such as communication, understanding, sharing, and trusting (Orlick, 1990).

Throughout the 1980s, a series of publications appeared which developed this thinking including Pax Christi's *Winners All* (McMullan, 1980) and Weinstein and Goodman's (1980) *Playfair*. Weinstein and Goodman (1980) stated that competition can lead to exclusion, it disconnects people, and that people need to feel and be part of a group and this was the first step in active participation. Perhaps the most influential of all was Mildred Masheder's (1997) *Let's Co-operate* (originally published in1986). Masheder's book, although aimed at practitioners, is more than just a volume listing a series of games. It links the games to broader social skills such as developing a positive sense of oneself, creativity, communication, getting on with others, and peaceful conflict solving. Within these themes are examples of activities that deal with areas such as fairness and justice, positive gender roles, anti-racist attitudes, and love of nature.

Many leaders in the Woodcraft Folk welcomed these new publications. Masheder's (1997) book, for example, became recommended as part of a pack for new leaders. It became the focus of numerous leader training sessions in the 1980s and provided leaders with a clear philosophical and educational basis to group night and camping activities through play.

The culmination of these developments on the Folk was the publication in 1989 of its own co-operative games book, *Games Games Games*, which was funded by the co-operative movement (Dewar et al., 1989).

A symbol of this interest in co-operative games was the popularity of parachute games. First outlined in the New Games publications, the use of old parachutes became a focus for circle-based games. Woodcraft Folk groups throughout the country started to get their hands on old parachutes and they became very popular not only for group nights but camps. An article in the Woodcraft Folk's *Focus* magazine, reproduced from a Canadian pamphlet demonstrated the value of parachute games in promoting a sense of co-operation: "The very dynamic of moving the parachute means that co-operation must be the goal for the group and a parachute reinforces this idea by being demonstrably more fun when everyone cooperates" (Olsen, 1986, p. 3).

The focus on co-operative games reflected the interest in society more generally from progressively minded families who were seeking alternatives for their children to the dominant competitive nature of other youth organisations or what was happening in schools. A leader in Leicester in 1984 noted how by promoting "an alternative to competition and strife", she was able to secure support from several local parents to start a group in the city (Craven-Griffiths,1984, p. 4). She noted that one of the successful early activities of the group was co-operative games: "At first some of the children asked who had won after we played the games, but they all seemed to approve of playing games for fun not winners" (Craven-Griffiths,1984, p. 5).

Co-operative values therefore became an important selling point to the Woodcraft Folk in the 1980s and 1990s. Its constitution was revised in 1979 and updated several times in the 1980s to take account of increased reference to areas such as co-operation:

> We believe that to further our aims it is vital to educate young people through the principles of co-operation. To achieve this we will provide a programme which ensures that our members practise co-operation through all the activities in which they participate. (Woodcraft Folk, 1983, p. 1)

This renewed emphasis on co-operation reached its culmination in 1980 when the organisation decided to change its strap line from the "progressive alternative" to "co-operative children's and youth organisation". This change was the result of discussions within the leadership of the time about the dangers of being seen as an 'alternative' when there was a desire, at the time, for it to be seen more as a mainstream organisation and one that worked alongside other youth

organisations. There was also a recognition that the term ‘co-operative’ was now becoming a positive term within society.

Its policy statement on *Education for Social Change* (Woodcraft Folk, 1986) pronounced that the Woodcraft Folk was the children’s and youth organisation for the co-operative movement. This policy statement also re-iterated the growing theme within the organisation of emphasising its distinctiveness in terms of a co-operative outlook:

> The philosophy upon which the Woodcraft Folk was founded is as relevant today as it was in 1925. We live in a society which is increasingly competitive, individualistic and inequitable. We show children that by cooperating together and sharing resources and skills, we can improve ourselves and society. (Woodcraft Folk, 1986, p. 2)

Revisions to educational handbooks for group leaders during this period reflected this change of emphasis. The theme of co-operation was reflected in many aspects of the *Pioneer Leaders Handbook* of 1991 (Woodcraft Folk, 1991) including games, craftwork, music making, and educational projects. This handbook for leaders working for ten-to twelve-year-olds stated that “games should be conducted in a spirit of co-operation and fun” and craftwork should encourage members to “co-operate together” (Woodcraft Folk, 1991, p. 24). A similar handbook for leaders of slightly older children, thirteen to fifteen, the *Venturer Book*, linked co-operation to democracy and rights and responsibilities (Woodcraft Folk, 1993). What was signification about this publication was that it reflected a move away from traditional badge-based activities, such as craftsmen and music making, to more theme-based approaches that included co-operation, democracy, addressing sexism and racism, peace, and health issues (Woodcraft Folk, 1993).

Co-operation as a Skill

The emphasis on co-operative learning within the Woodcraft Folk was part of a broader trend within progressive educational initiatives. The Woodcraft Folk’s own Development Education Project from the 1980s, which had involved working closely with development agencies such as Oxfam and Christian Aid, led to two very influential resource packs, *Getting on with Others* (Woodcraft Folk, 1987a) and *Images* (Woodcraft Folk, 1987b), both of which had strong co-operation themes.

A major progressive educational movement in the 1980s was the world studies movement which aimed to encourage all schools to recognise the need to bring in global themes into all aspects of the curriculum. One of the major outputs of the world studies movement was a publication *World studies 8-13* (Fisher & Hicks, 1985) which made several references to activities that proposed working together and encouraging co-operation. It referred to the need to foster “more just and co-operative human relationships” (Fisher & Hicks, 1985, p. 66). It goes on to suggest that activities should promote co-operation through fostering self-respect, communication, and empathy.

In a later publication by Hicks and Steiner (1989), co-operation is suggested as one of the key concepts within world studies. Here it is discussed as not only working together, but to do so to tackle common problems. They also suggest co-operation is essential to resolve conflicts, however to be effective and rewarding, it requires a high level of communication and sensitivity to others.

A leading figure in this movement was Robin Richardson who saw co-operation as a skill alongside critical thinking, empathy, assertiveness, conflict resolution, and political literacy. Co-operation, he said, is seen as young people being able to appreciate the value of co-operating on shared tasks and be able to work co-operatively within other individuals and groups to achieve a common goal (Richardson, 1976). It was this emphasis on co-operation as a skill that becomes influential in the Woodcraft Folk.

Another volume by Miriam Steiner, *Learning from Experience* (1993), linked co-operation to groupwork and critical thinking. Her work had been very influential with a group of teachers in Manchester, where she was based, who came to see the Woodcraft Folk as an ideal organisation to put these ideas into practice. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, inspired by these approaches, the Woodcraft Folk in Manchester grew from just a couple of groups to more than fifteen.

What was significant about this world studies movement and why it resonated with some Woodcraft Folk leaders, was that it situated co-operative approaches to learning alongside issues such as peace, which were major political issues in the 1980s. Co-operation was much more than learning about the co-operative movement. It was even more than how you organised your camps or your vision of a future society. It was an approach to learning, part of a distinctive pedagogy, but what made the way the Woodcraft Folk engaged with the co-operative principles different from say the New Games movement was the explicit connections between co-operation, peace, and a more just society.

These developments not only had an impact upon the Woodcraft Folk but on the co-operative movement in general, particularly in its work with schools. The Co-operative College's (1987) *Studies Manual for Secondary Schools* in the 1980s, for example, connected this approach to co-operation alongside understanding the movement's organisational structure. It referred to the themes of democracy, equity, trust, mutual interest, and participation, but stated the goal was a common identifiable goal of being co-operatives.

It was from these developments within the Woodcraft Folk, influenced by the world studies movement, the linkages with the peace movement, and the beginnings of changes within co-operative education in general, that led to a bringing together of a range of progressive educational traditions. From the 1990s onwards within the Woodcraft Folk, co-operation was much more of a central theme in its educational practice. It was much more than how to organise camps or learn about the co-operative movement, it was part of a distinctive pedagogical approach.

The culmination of these developments was the 2011 Woodcraft Folk International Camp, called Co Camp.

Co-operation as both a Process and an Organisational Structure: Co Camp 2011

Co Camp was seen as a way of bringing together the increased focus on the theme of co-operation in its educational programme with a closer association with the consumer co-operative movement. Added to this was, for the first time at an international camp, an attempt to consciously organise the event on clearly co-operative based lines.

For the first time, the Woodcraft Folk organised its camp on a co-operative model.

This was done by participants in the camp becoming members of Co Camp which turned the whole camp process into that of running a co-operative. The members elected the board for the camp which included young people as well as leaders. This organisational structure and roles were agreed well in advance of the camp itself. The camp board worked closely with the broader consumer co-operative movement and there was close involvement from representatives from the Co-operative College.

In addition to these structures, the camp included a range of educational activities on the theme of co-operation, including how to set up a co-operative enterprise and discussions with leading people from the consumer co-operative movement. One successful example was Co-opville, a specially devised simulation game for up to fifty players which introduced the concept of co-operatives and allowed participants to try and run a business on co-operative principles (Woodcraft Folk, 2011).

This example is perhaps the clearest within the practices of the Woodcraft Folk that brings together principles of co-operative learning with those of co-operatives. Running a camp as a co-operative and bringing in the themes of co-operation into the programme of the camp was a considerable achievement and aspects of this approach continued in its Common Ground Camp in 2022.

Conclusion: Co-operative Learning — A Distinctive Pedagogy for Youth Work

This article has outlined how the term ‘co-operation’ evolved within the Woodcraft Folk and how its interpretation mirrored progressive educational traditions. What made the Woodcraft Folk’s approach distinctive in the 1980s and still does today, is the interpretation of co-operative learning which goes beyond working in groups to a whole pedagogical approach and ethos that brings in themes of social justice, peace, and social change. Whilst there continues to be a range of articles and books on co-operative learning, they are dominated by an approach that is about accommodation within dominant educational discourses. The ways in which co-operative learning have been taken within business management and mathematical education as a form of group work suggests that the Woodcraft Folk’s pedagogical approach remains distinctive and closest to some of the ideas espoused in the consumer co-operative and new co-operative movements. To the Woodcraft Folk, co-operation is much more than having links to the co-operative movement, important though this is. It is about a distinctive educational approach that challenges dominant orthodoxies about the value of competition.

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Peer Action Collective: How Woodcraft Folk Fosters Moral Courage through Transformative Learning Experiences

Saheli Nath

In the early 20th century, Woodcraft Folk pioneered an innovative approach to cultivating peace, co-operation, and global citizenship through experiential learning. As a progressive alternative that emphasised the nurturing of critical thinking, conflict resolution, and social-emotional skills, its participatory model enabled children to learn about the practical application of peace principles via co-operative games, outdoor adventures, and democratic decision-making. By analysing the organisation's pedagogical approach and its recent Peer Action Collective (PAC) initiative, this article explores how experiential, co-operative education can foster moral courage, critical consciousness, and social responsibility among young people through transformative experiences. The study highlights the potential of youth-led initiatives in catalysing both individual transformation and collective change, while also addressing challenges and implications for transformative learning theory and practice.

Introduction

The Woodcraft Folk, celebrating its centenary in 2025, originally emerged during a period of significant social and educational reform after the First World War as a progressive youth movement committed to peace, social justice, and environmental stewardship (Harper et al., 2016). Founded on the principles of co-operative education, international friendship, and experiential learning, as the movement developed, it drew inspiration from progressive educators like John Dewey (1933) and Maria Montessori (1992), who emphasised the importance of learning through direct experience and critical reflection. The organisation's distinctive approach combines outdoor education, democratic decision-making, and social action, creating spaces where young people can develop both practical skills and critical consciousness. This pedagogical framework has proven remarkably adaptable, enabling the movement to remain relevant while addressing contemporary challenges ranging from environmental crisis to social inequality.

At the heart of the Woodcraft Folk's pedagogy lies a profound belief in learning through doing, manifested most visibly in its camping programmes and co-operative activities that foster deep connections with both nature and the international community. These experiences

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serve as what transformative learning theorist Mezirow (2012) terms “disorienting dilemmas”, challenging participants’ existing worldviews and sparking critical reflection. Through collective problem-solving and decision-making, young people develop the psychosocial attitudes and skills necessary for promoting positive social change. *Woodies*, the participants in Woodcraft Folk’s activities, often benefit from “the emergence of a shared feeling called *communitas*, which is a deeply felt … sense of belonging and community” (Buechner et al., 2020, p. 87). The movement’s emphasis on intergenerational learning, amity, and self-governance creates opportunities for young people to explore new roles and perspectives, while its commitment to co-operation over competition distinguishes it from many other youth development approaches.

As we mark the Woodcraft Folk’s centenary, it becomes crucial to examine how this historic movement continues to evolve and respond to contemporary challenges, particularly through more recent initiatives like the Peer Action Collective (PAC). This article explores how PAC exemplifies and extends Woodcraft Folk’s traditional approach to developing humanistic mindsets while addressing pressing social issues. Through analysis of PAC’s methodology and impact, we can better understand how structured youth development programmes might cultivate moral courage, critical consciousness, and social responsibility in young people. This examination holds particular relevance as we consider how to prepare our youth to address increasingly complex global challenges while maintaining the human connections and ethical frameworks necessary for sustainable social change.

Table 1: Emerging themes in PAC’s publicly released news articles and online posts in 2024 (PAC, n.d.)

Higher order themes	Second-order codes	First-order codes/ relevant terms and phrases
Youth engagement and empowerment	Youth empowerment	Peer researchers, changemakers, youth-led, voice, social action, make a difference, take action, leadership
	Research and action	Peer research, interviews, surveys, social action projects, campaigns, workshops
	Skills development	Communication skills, confidence building, research skills, facilitation
Social issues and relevant mitigation and prevention efforts	Violence prevention	Youth violence, knife crime, anti-social behaviour, safer communities, reduce crime rates
	Education	School exclusions, alternative provision, attendance, discipline, support systems
	Mental health	Support, counselling, trauma, isolation, safe spaces, trusted adults
Partnerships and influence	Collaboration	Teamwork, partnerships, networking, multi-agency approach
	Diversity and inclusion	LGBTQ+ issues, different backgrounds, cultural awareness
	Funding and support	Youth Endowment Fund, #iwill Fund, Co-op, National Lottery Community Fund
Community development	Policy influence	Frameworks, strategies, decision-making, amplifying youth voices
	Positive activities	Youth clubs, sports, arts, engagement, safe spaces
	Community impact	Local area, make change, improve lives, safer and fairer places, community activities

The PAC Model: Framework and Implementation

PAC operates through an integrated framework that combines research, action, and reflection in a cyclical process of learning and development. Young participants aged 10-25 engage in peer research projects that investigate pressing social issues in their communities, from

youth violence to mental health and discrimination (Woodcraft Folk, n.d.). This research process is deliberately structured to enable young people to develop their own questions and methodologies, supported by trained facilitators who help maintain ethical standards and rigour. The framework emphasises youth leadership and decision-making while providing necessary scaffolding for successful project implementation. Table 1 summarises the key themes that emerged from a content analysis of PAC's news releases and publicly available reports since its inception in 2024 (PAC, n.d.).

The implementation of PAC's model follows a graduated approach that commences with building research skills and critical awareness before moving into action planning and project execution. Peer Facilitators, trained in co-operative values and approaches, play a central role in supporting their peers through this process, creating safe spaces for difficult conversations, and helping to navigate complex ethical and social considerations. The collective nature of the work ensures that participants learn not only from their own experiences but also from each other's successes and challenges. Regular reflection sessions help participants integrate their learning and adjust their approaches based on emerging insights.

PAC's framework distinguishes itself through its emphasis on integrating personal development with social action, ensuring that individual growth contributes to collective change. Participants engage in projects that address real community needs while developing skills in research, leadership, and collaboration. The model's flexibility allows it to be adapted to different cultural contexts and community needs while maintaining its core principles of youth empowerment, research-orientation, and social responsibility. This adaptability has proven crucial for the programme's effectiveness across diverse settings and populations.

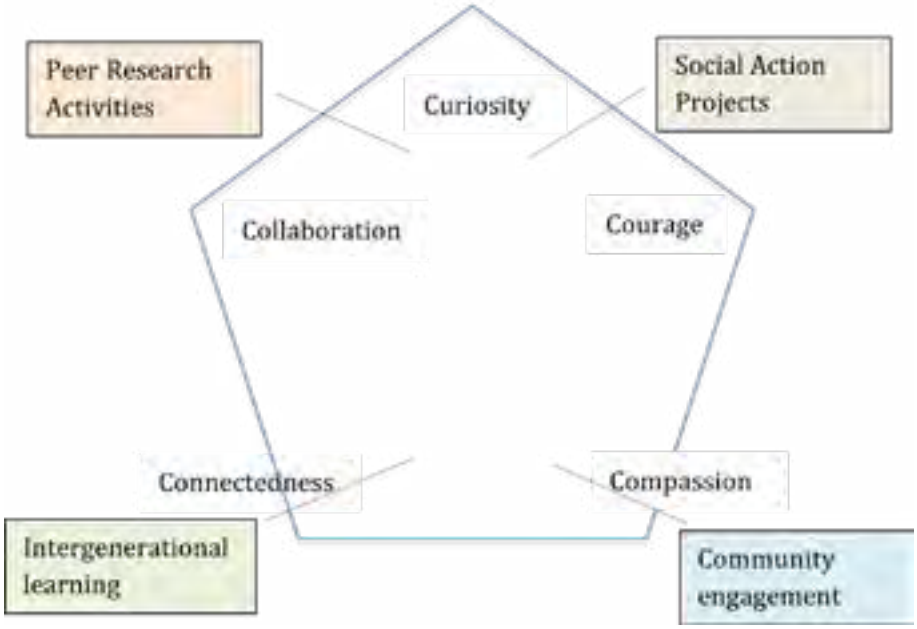
Developing Moral Courage through Transformative Learning Experiences

Moral courage, recognised as one of the most important ingredients of leadership (Novogratz & McNulty, 2022), is defined as an "individual's capacity to overcome fear and stand up for his or her core values" (Lachman, 2007, p. 131). As early as the 1990s, Lucas (1994) emphasised the importance of the courage of conscious intention to successfully go through the transformative learning process that leads to reformulation of existing meaning perspectives. She noted that people lack courage because "they fear breaking away from the mass, being left out, ridiculed, rejected" (Lucas, 1994, p. 86). The development of moral courage within PAC occurs through a carefully structured process that creates opportunities for young people to confront challenging social issues while receiving appropriate support (see Figure 1). Through their research and action projects, participants encounter situations that prompt them to question existing assumptions and develop the courage to advocate for change. These experiences serve as transformative learning opportunities, pushing young people beyond their comfort zones while ensuring they have the necessary support to process and learn from these challenges (Mälkki & Green, 2014). The presence of peer support and mentoring relationships helps participants build confidence in their ability to take ethical stands and pursue meaningful change.

Fostering moral courage typically needs a supportive environment for taking informed risks and learning from both successes and failures. Participants in PAC work together to identify issues that require intervention, develop strategies for addressing these issues, and support each other through the challenges of implementing social action projects. This collective approach helps distribute the burden of risk-taking while creating opportunities for shared learning and mutual support. Moreover, the regular practice of group reflection enables participants to process their experiences and develop a humanistic mindset, which facilitates the pursuit of a life of purpose, inner meaning, and thriving (Gotsis & Grimani, 2024). As noted by Sekerka and Bagozzi (2007), "multiple points of self-reflection, self-evaluation and self-regulation that the individual faces along the way to action are like 'little mental acts' of moral courage throughout the decision-making path" (p. 145). In the future, this could allow young people to lead authentically in the workplace

by overcoming bureaucratic pressures to conform to the status quo, while understanding and accepting the professional and personal costs of doing so (Hannah et al., 2011).

Figure 1: PAC diamond for humanistic mindset development through transformative experiences



The intergenerational aspect of PAC's model adds another dimension to moral courage development by providing young people with access to diverse perspectives and experiences. Older participants and mentors share their experiences of ethical decision-making and social action, while younger participants bring fresh perspectives and new approaches to addressing social issues. Dialogues with distinct groups of stakeholders lead to the cultivation of critical consciousness, where PAC participants "come to understand, analyze, and take action against systems of oppression" (Seider et al., 2020, p. e451; also see Freire, 2000). This exchange creates rich opportunities for learning about different ways of understanding and adjudicating truth claims about various social and environmental problems.

Challenges Moving Forward

Despite PAC's initial successes, several significant challenges and tensions warrant critical examination. The programme's goal of producing tangible outcomes through social action projects may sometimes create pressure that works against the deeper, more gradual process of personal and moral development. Reliance on grants and public funding could make young people feel compelled to demonstrate immediate impact through visible projects rather than focusing on the slower work of building understanding and developing authentic responses to social issues. Bradach et al. (2008) shows how a thrust to track progress and deliver results to funders in similar programmes could lead to burnout among volunteers. This tension between immediate results and long-term development requires careful consideration in programme design and implementation.

In addition, the structured nature of PAC's approach, though well-intentioned, could raise questions about the authenticity of personal development within programmatic frameworks. While the programme's structure provides necessary support and guidance, it may also constrain the organic development of moral courage and critical consciousness. The challenge lies in finding the right balance between providing structure and allowing for genuine personal growth. Conner and Strobel (2007) suggest that such programmes should try to validate and celebrate "different styles of leadership, allowing youth time to discover and develop their strengths and recognising and praising these strengths" (p. 295).

Questions also arise about the scalability of PAC's resource intensive approach and its accessibility to communities deemed "unappealing" in terms of making a significant difference. Specht and Courtney (1995) elaborate on how human cognition often functions to categorise some aid recipients as "worthy poor" and others as "less eligible" (p. 9) when it comes to impact work. Cultural considerations present another significant challenge, particularly as PAC seeks to work with increasingly diverse populations. The programme's approaches to social action and community engagement could reflect particular cultural assumptions that might not resonate equally across all communities. Scholars from Indigenous communities have previously lamented the preponderance of a Western-centric approach to impact work and called for "two-eyed seeing" integrating Indigenous knowledge and frameworks in social action that encourages culturally competent practice and decision-making (Martin et al., 2017). These issues require ongoing attention and innovation to ensure the programme can effectively serve diverse populations while maintaining its transformative potential.

Future Directions

The future development of PAC offers rich opportunities for innovation in both research and practice, particularly through the integration of digital technologies and innovative approaches to impact assessment. The creation of digital platforms could enable greater collaboration across geographical boundaries while preserving the human connections essential to the programme's effectiveness. Longitudinal mixed methods methodologies for measuring impact could help capture both the immediate and long-term effects of participation while remaining true to the programme's transformative aims. These innovations need to be pursued thoughtfully to enhance rather than dilute the programme's core commitments to youth empowerment and social change.

Expanding PAC's reach while maintaining programme quality would require careful attention to both structural and pedagogical considerations. The development of participatory research networks could enable knowledge sharing across different sites while empowering youth as legitimate knowledge producers. Novel approaches to facilitator training and programme implementation using e-learning interfaces and artificial intelligence (Chen, 2023) could help address issues of scalability and accessibility. These developments should be balanced against the need to maintain the programme's effectiveness and transformative potential.

Conclusion

As Woodcraft Folk marks its centenary, the Peer Action Collective demonstrates how traditional youth movements can adapt and evolve to meet contemporary challenges while maintaining their core values and principles. PAC's integration of research, action, and reflection offers a robust framework for developing moral courage and critical consciousness in young people. The programme's initial successes and challenges offer valuable insights into the broader field of youth development and social change.

The tensions and paradoxes identified through critical examination of PAC's approach suggest important considerations for the future development of youth programmes. Questions of authenticity, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness must inform ongoing programme development and implementation. The balance between structure and organic growth, immediate impact, and long-term development, requires careful attention, and continuous refinement.

Looking ahead, PAC's approach to developing moral courage through transformative learning experiences offers promising directions for preparing our youth to address complex global challenges. The programme's emphasis on integrating personal growth with social action, supported by intergenerational learning and peer facilitation, provides a model for growth and development that remains relevant in our rapidly changing world. As we face increasing

polarisation coupled with various social and environmental challenges, the importance of developing ethically courageous, critically aware, and action-oriented young people becomes ever more crucial.

The Author

Dr Saheli Nath is an Associate Professor of Management in the College of Business at the University of Central Oklahoma, and a Board Member of B Academics. She is passionate about engaging students in transformative learning experiences that help them better understand the importance of responsibly leading and managing purpose-driven organisations. Her commitment to reimagining business education and fostering responsible leaders led her to the Woodcraft Folk, whose participatory approach to youth development offers valuable insights for cultivating ethically minded changemakers.

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Venturer Camp 2023: A Co-operative Approach to Youth Residentials

Thomas Boxall

When thinking about small festivals, large parties or youth residential activities, a common approach is to outsource to professionals who run a top-down organising team. Within Woodcraft Folk, this is not the way we operate. Venturer Camp 2023 which took place for a week in the summer of 2023, is a testament to how co-operative values can contribute to the efficient co-ordination of a residential activity for approximately 450 people. This reflective article will explore how co-operation can positively contribute to youth residential co-ordination, where it falls down, and what we can learn from the process, drawing from my experience as a Volunteer Camp Co-ordinator.

Introduction

Woodcraft Folk is a UK based youth movement with 200 nationwide groups who meet weekly and camp in the summer in big and small groups. There's a running joke about scratching your ear at the wrong time in a Woodcraft Folk meeting and ending up with a new voluntary role, although this wasn't the case for the way in which I ended up co-ordinating Venturer Camp 2023. I had recently broken into the national events space, through co-ordinating the setup week of Common Ground 2022. This was an international camp for approximately 2,700 people from around the world with ages ranging from 6 months to 60 years. The camp ran for ten days in the summer of 2022 and was organised by Woodcraft Folk and IFM-SEI (International Falcon Movement — Socialist Educational International). During the camp, I was congratulated for my efforts with the setup week, and it was suggested I should co-ordinate the next Venturer Camp, a national camp for Woodcraft members ages 13 to 15 which runs every three years. Co-ordinating a Venturer Camp sounded like a challenge, it sounded new, it sounded exciting, and it sounded like something I could fit in alongside starting university.

Throughout the second half of Common Ground, I spent some time talking to different people about what a Venturer Camp should be and what the movement craved for in the next one. Venturer Camps are supported by older young people who volunteer in various ways. The most recent one had been held in 2019 with around 400 people in attendance. Having conversations with these volunteers was extremely valuable as it gave me an understanding of the amount of dedication some volunteers pour into making these events a success.

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After recovering for a few weeks from a summer of camping, it was time to start thinking practically about what we wanted to achieve. The goal was simple, reinvigorate the youth after their key developmental years were stolen from them as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The co-ordination team also set ourselves the stretch goal of running an event which wouldn't burn out volunteers, rather leaving them refreshed and relaxed — despite supervising a gaggle of teenagers in a field for seven days! These goals are alongside the usual traits of a good Woodcraft Folk camp — providing a space where young people are free to live in a world as we want it to be, a safe haven from outside pressure and troubles. Woodcraft Folk camps aim to give young people unforgettable experiences, whether this be camping, playing new games, or even getting stuck in to the cooking, alongside some time for rest and socially bonding with peers.

Starting the Planning

As the metaphorical starting klaxon sounded, we were hit with a tough question which would dictate the next 12 or 24 months of the co-ordination team's life. This was a really crucial question to solve early on as the uncertainty makes it hard to plan anything, ranging from booking a site to booking infrastructure to put on the site! The question, on the surface seemed simple, but the subtleties made it a challenge to answer; when should the next Venturer Camp be held? In times gone past, the question was answered automatically, with Venturer Camps being a triennial event; however, the pandemic threw a bent tent pole in the pole-bag. As of the 2019 Venturer Camp, the next camp was due to be held in 2022; however, after being delayed from 2020, Common Ground took the 2022 summer spot instead. This left me and my team a choice of 2023 or 2024. Turning to our network of Venturer Leaders and their groups, based around the UK, they voted for 2023, citing that they wanted a year off from major nationwide events before Woodcraft's Centenary Celebrations in the summer of 2025, as well as the young people wanting to rekindle friendships formed at Common Ground.

The next piece of the puzzle was to find a site in which we could hold the camp. Given the short lead time (approximately 10 months) we were working with, our choices were quite limited. Fortunately, Woodcraft Folk manages an 18-acre campsite in the Wye Valley which had suitable availability in the summer of 2023. Once our booking at the stunning Biblins Youth Campsite was confirmed, we were able to push on with finding enthusiastic volunteers to bring the camp into existence.

Finding Volunteers

Volunteers would be the driving force pulling the camp into existence, turning empty fields into fields full of happy teenagers enjoying an organised programme and eating well-planned food. Finding keen, willing, and enthusiastic volunteers is mostly done through chatting to people at large events and following up with some social media posts to the masses, inviting them to get involved. The year choice, regrettably, drove some people away because they had time to commit after the summer of 2023, but not before.

To take on a large role for an event like this was a new thing for many members of the team. This is something which Woodcraft is really good at promoting, usually with excellent mentoring. However, for Venturer Camp 2023 we didn't have time or capacity in the team to look after those pouring voluntary hours into making the event a success. Not having these structures in place tore the co-operative plans in two, resulting in things getting dropped and only being picked up months later by overstretched volunteers already struggling to manage with their role. There's a notion in Woodcraft of "it'll be alright on the night" which proves the flexibility and co-operative nature of our volunteers, however, there are some things which need a bit more forethought put into them and so can't be left to the night before the event starts.

Finding enough volunteers to make the camp happen proved more of a challenge than I think anyone was expecting. I was fortunate to fill out the key roles (Programme Co-ordination, Food

Co-ordination, and Site Infrastructure Co-ordination) with volunteers relatively early on, which green-lit the project to continue. However, filling out the remainder of the core roles (Admin & Bookings Co-ordinator and Communications Co-ordinator) proved more of a challenge. This is where good co-operation between myself and the Woodcraft Folk National Office staff assigned to work on this project proved essential, as we split these roles between us alongside working on our main roles in Venturer Camp. Not having dedicated volunteers in post drastically increased the amount of time we all needed to pour into the camp, which is a shame as having a bigger volunteer team would have meant that there was less pressure on individuals and a greater feeling of shared responsibility for a project on which we're all working collaboratively.

The role of Camp Co-ordinator involves quite a lot of metaphorical firefighting, with teams bringing their most difficult problems to your inbox, in areas where you have no expertise. This is where you have to rely on their specialist subjects and the knowledge they bring, so the right decisions are made, even if the Co-ordinator just acts as a sounding board for them. Good organisation is essential to have within Co-ordination teams. It can benefit in many other ways, ranging from individuals taking more accountability over their areas of camp if they're given ownership of it, through to teams working better together and ultimately making their little bit of camp as slick as they can.

Making Changes

As the Co-ordinator of a project like this, there's a lot of pressure to change things and to make them better. Woodcraft Folk is really good at coming together and camping, with over fifty camping or residential expeditions taking place each calendar year throughout our network of groups and districts. Some of these camping expeditions take place with one district and some with multiple districts, however, they're all relatively small ranging from 20 to 150 attendees. These smaller camping expeditions have their ways of doing things, carefully honed after years of practice. The large-scale national events are less well practised, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic stopped all residential activity for over a year, disrupting the natural flow of events.

For Venturer Camp 2023, we aimed to improve on a few things, the biggest thing being volunteer wellbeing. After seeing the masses of exhausted volunteers after Common Ground, I knew we had to do something about it, we had to be better. The biggest change we made to improve on volunteer wellbeing was to communicate better with the groups coming to Venturer Camp. We asked groups to bring enough competent adults so that volunteers could co-operate to have time off to rest and recuperate in the middle of camp. This fantastic display of co-operation between geographically separated groups was an impressive example of what happens when you have a group of highly competent Woodcraft Leaders in a field together for seven days. Many villages (a collection of three or four groups totalling 100 people camping, eating, and completing activities together) found that through bringing enough leaders, everyone was able to have some downtime. This enabled them to engage with the children and young people in a way that surprised the young people, having not seen their leaders this relaxed on a residential before.

Another big change we made to Venturer Camp 2023 was to expand the age range. A decision was made early on to allow anyone aged 13-17 to attend as a participant. This plugged the hole opened by moving the camp back 12 months. Expanding the age ranges meant that the camp was more accessible and enabled young people to come who had part of their teenage years interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were many 16 and 17 year olds who would have missed out on their Venturer Camp experience who were able to attend in 2023. Lots of these young people have gone on to show an interest in volunteering at future events, whether that be the next International Camp or the next Venturer Camp. Expanding the age ranges like this was quite a big risk in terms of how the 13 and 17 year olds would get on together. In reality, a beautiful display of co-operation came from the teenagers where both 13 and 17 year olds took part in the same activity and worked together to complete it. This was especially seen with the

canoeing we offered in the river, where young people co-operated together to paddle their way down the River Wye.

Bringing Things Together

The intervening months between the project starting, plans being made in Autumn 2022, and boots hitting the ground in July 2023, were filled with meetings, conversations, spreadsheets, and co-operation between teams and volunteers within them to make the best laid plans. At the end of June 2023, we had a team meeting on site for a weekend where a significant proportion of the team were together in a physical space for the first time. This was an interesting weekend where we got to see the camping pitches, count stored marquees, and see the rising levels of the River Wye. Alongside the leisurely strolls up and down campsite debating pitch size for villages, we had some really important conversations, where teams were able to share their progress, worries, and plans for the next four weeks. Some of these conversations led to eye opening realisations of how far back some elements of planning went. These face-to-face conversations emphasise how important effective communication is to co-operation.

To summarise the next month in one word isn't a challenge, it was manic. Teams had lists of tasks they needed to get done before hitting site, ranging from placing the all-important food orders, to planning equipment used in villages, to finalising what workshops centres would be running. There was a never-ending to do list. The importance of co-operation between team members to pull this off is not to be understated. This was seen especially in teams where they didn't manage to co-operate effectively, where members disappeared for weeks on end, not committing fully to the project. Unfortunately, this happened in this last month, to a team which couldn't fail, leaving other volunteers to pick up the pieces around them. Moments like this leave questions about the flat, co-operative structure employed within the co-ordination team at Woodcraft Folk events and how things could be different if we took a different volunteer structure with more clearly defined leadership roles.

Looking back beyond the teams' month of madness and beyond our on-site meeting, we find a bigger issue with the co-ordination of Venturer Camp — Communication. Effectively communicating with a team of volunteers is a real challenge as, for some volunteers, their role in Venturer Camp is really important to them but to others, less so. Finding the balancing point here, so everyone can co-operate to make this camp happen, is a real challenge. On reflection, it would have been better to take a step back and work out timelines in the Autumn of 2022, or having a shared way for people to indicate availability. Despite the communication challenges, we did manage to co-operate, with the teams falling into an understanding of each other's availability and that enabled individuals to collaborate within teams to make the best camp they could.

Eventually, we got there. Eventually, boots hit the ground. Eventually, the first tent peg was forced into the ground. The first few hours on site at a Woodcraft Camp are tender, delicate, and something to be savoured before the madness of Setup Week begins. As marquees are dusted off, trestle tables unfolded, and craft equipment drawn out of storage, the site begins to come to life. Volunteers begin to work together to create something beautiful. This something is a culmination of months of work from volunteers, in some cases putting more hours into this than their day-job. As civilisation begins to form in the field, seeing teams work together to divide up the biscuits, to lay out programme timetables, or to test the cheese toastie grill is a really satisfying accomplishment when witnessed from the Co-ordinator's perspective. This project took over my life for 12 months and to see it come together was an incredibly empowering feeling. The camp only came into existence because of the months of planning done by a team of volunteers, co-operating to make this thing happen because they care about perpetuating Woodcraft Folk to fresh groups of young people. The co-operation between different people, from different walks of life, at different stages of life is only something you would find in an organisation like Woodcraft Folk and is something more organisations should take example from!

Something not often publicly talked about is the finances of these events. We took a bold move with Venturer Camp 2023 to make it as accessible to volunteers as possible by reducing financial barriers to volunteering by charging volunteers a third of the participant price. The risk with this paid off, but only due to the amazing fundraising which was done — some through a National Woodcraft fundraiser, and some through a dedicated fundraising campaign. Three DF (District Fellowship) members (part of the 16-20 year old semi-autonomous division of Woodcraft Folk) travelled by coracle and kayak for two days down the River Wye, to arrive to camp on the first day by boat. Through doing this, they raised over £1,000 which contributed to making Venturer Camp more accessible to all. Seeing the co-operation between friends to do something daft like this, to raise funds for a project, was a really heart-warming moment.

Bringing Things to a Close

By the end of camp, co-operative spirit was at an all time high, despite energy levels dwindling. After a camp takes place, there is usually a small team of tired volunteers left to clean up the site, returning it to a usable state in less than three days. For Venturer Camp, we were left with about 10 people, who had all been camping for over a week already. We were all equally exhausted and equally committed to the cause of getting off site as quickly as possible. Through the co-ordinated exhaustion does come some amusing moments — for example the group of us dancing to *We Like to Party* by the Vengaboys while doing literally any task, ranging from taking down a marquee, to unloading a van of equipment back into storage. This camaraderie is a direct result of the good co-operation shown by everyone and the bonds formed throughout the camp, well it's that — or the levels of exhaustion felt by the team!

The success of Venturer Camp 2023 is a testament to the power of co-operation. The camp demonstrates that achieving a shared goal — making a fun, safe, and sustainable event for children, young people, and adults alike to enjoy and celebrate the best bits of Woodcraft Folk, and the common values we share being bound together through all being members of this youth movement — is only possible through collective effort. Within the co-ordination team, co-operation was vital. Through co-operating together, we were able to distribute tasks evenly between volunteers who in turn pulled their weight in getting the work done and the plans made, overcoming challenges together as one. The spirit of co-operation extends beyond the core team — with local groups and districts also being run by teams of volunteers — preparing the young people to come to the event, showing the collaborative nature of the entire organisation. By working together, the co-ordination team not only ensured the camp was a success, but also strengthened the bonds between members in the movement. Co-operation is not just an integral part of Woodcraft Folk, it is an integral principle for any successful project, and I'm honoured to have been able to carry the flag through co-operatively co-ordinating Venturer Camp 2023.

The Author

Thomas Boxall is a young adult who grew up as an active member of a local Woodcraft Folk group. He has held many different voluntary roles ranging from Local Group Leader to Regional Treasurer to National Webmaster. He took on the challenge of co-ordinating Venturer Camp 2023 to ensure that young people would be able to have their Venturer Camp experience, after the COVID-19 Pandemic threatened to steal it from them.

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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-abouts 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.

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Young People's Stories

Lauren Karstadt

This short article gathers together a range of testimonies from young people involved with Woodcraft Folk. It includes their length of involvement, things they have enjoyed and learned, and the difference that Woodcraft Folk has made to their lives.

Introduction

Woodcraft Folk has long been a beacon of co-operative learning, teamwork, social action, and global citizenship in young people. Through its unique approach to education and personal development, it instils in participants the values of equality, sustainability, and collective responsibility. This article includes a number of interviews between young people, sharing what they do within Woodcraft Folk, what they have learnt and the impact they feel it has on their lives.

The testimonies of young people involved in Woodcraft Folk reveal the profound and lasting impact of these experiences, shaping them into active, compassionate citizens. One young person shared how being part of a Woodcraft Folk group taught them the power of working together: "We all had different skills, but by listening to each other and sharing ideas, we achieved things none of us could have done alone. I now understand how co-operation can bring about real change". These experiences go beyond the activities themselves, instilling a mindset of collaboration that young people carry into their schools, workplaces, and communities.

Social action is at the heart of the Woodcraft Folk ethos, empowering young people to take meaningful steps toward positive change. A participant reflected on this: "Being involved in campaigns and community projects showed me that my voice matters. I learned that even small actions, when combined, can make a big difference." This sense of agency and responsibility helps young people develop confidence in their ability to contribute to a more just and sustainable world.

The impact of Woodcraft Folk extends far beyond childhood, as former participants continue to uphold its values throughout their lives. The commitment to co-operative learning, inclusivity, and active citizenship ensures that young people not only gain valuable skills but also develop a deep-seated belief in the power of collective action to shape a better future. As Professor Douglas Bourn (2025) highlights, this distinctive approach nurtures a generation of thoughtful, engaged individuals ready to span the world with friendship and work toward global progress.

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In Woodcraft Folk's tradition of amplifying the voices of young people, in their own words young people share their individual Woodcraft Folk journeys.

Hernani (age 17)

Please describe how you have been involved in Woodcraft Folk

I went to Woodcraft Folk at my local group in London. I moved to another part of the country when I was 10 but still went to summer camps and other events with my friends. I have been to lots of Woodcraft centres, to Common Ground 2022, and to Venturer Camp 2023.

What have you most enjoyed?

I have enjoyed the camps, the dancing, the friends, and meeting new people from different parts of the country.

What have you learnt?

Lots of life skills like cooking and washing up. I have learnt about different cultures and also about climate change. I have learnt that everyone should be treated equally and that if others try, then everyone can be treated equally.

What difference has Woodcraft Folk made to you?

It has meant I could keep my friends even when I had to move away and still go on amazing camps and trips with them. I have really enjoyed camping which is something that my family and school friends would not take me on that experience.

How is Woodcraft Folk different from other activities you engage with?

I can be myself at Woodcraft. It is having fun and being outside which is different from other activities.

Daisy-Mae Rixon Howard (age 17)

Please describe how you have been involved in Woodcraft Folk

I have been involved through my family since I was 4 years old. I have been part of my local group and have been to every camp since I joined. I have also been to National Venturer Camps and International Camp 2022.

What have you most enjoyed?

I most enjoy the camps! Card games, slug wars in my sleeping bag, and being with my friends, campfires, merrymoots (entertainment at camp) and pea fairs. I like that everyone gives me a big cheer when I perform in the merrymoot.

What have you learnt?

I have learnt valuable life skills such as how to wash up and the basics of kitchen work and hygiene. I have learnt bushcraft skills like building a fire and keeping it going, making friendship bracelets, and a lot of good card games. I have also learnt about other cultures such as at Common Ground when we shared with a group from Zimbabwe and from Germany, and they taught us lots of their games, campfire songs, and traditions. I have learnt a lot from one of my leaders Marianne who has taught me some basic BSL (British Sign Language) as well as how to make friendships with people who are not your age.

What difference has Woodcraft Folk made to you?

It has given me lifelong friends and experiences other children don't have. I feel like I can deal with living in a field, being around bugs, and co-operating with others which I feel has helped my resilience.

When I did citizenship GCSE at school I found a lot of what we explored was similar to topics we do at Woodcraft Folk.

How is Woodcraft Folk different from other activities you engage with?

Woodcraft is different because it gives me freedom to have my voice heard, be outside in the natural world, and be with my friends. Woodcraft has helped me see how I can make a difference in the world which not many other activities do.

What would you like to see Woodcraft Folk do in the future?

Expand and have more groups across the UK as well as make more connections with other international partners.

Fred and Tom Bailey (age 12)

Please describe how you have been involved in Woodcraft Folk

We have been involved with Woodcraft Folk for 9 years. We joined our local group at Waltham Abbey and Harlow district when we were 3 years old. Our parents are group leaders. We have been involved with national and international projects such as Everyone's Environment and Kids Got Rights, been to bushcraft camps, camps with our local group, Elfin sleepovers at Cudham, and went to Pioneer Camp 2024 at Biblins.

What have you most enjoyed?

Tom: I enjoyed going to Barcelona and Austria as part of the Kids Got Rights project. I liked when we were with our international friends and we had an evening where we shared snacks from different countries.

Fred: I most enjoy doing bushcraft and making things. I have made so many cool things that I know my friends at school do not know how to make. I like going to bushcraft camps and meeting with friends.

What have you learnt?

Tom: Lots of skills with bushcraft, fire lighting, and using bushcraft knives. I have also learnt about children's rights and how important they are and which countries don't have the UNCRC (UN Convention on Rights of a Child).

Fred: I have learnt a lot about children's rights, making things at bushcraft camp, and also about our environment. I have learnt how to show other people how to play "How bad are bananas?" to teach them about our carbon use.

What difference has Woodcraft Folk made to you?

Tom: I made a lot of new friends and enjoy going camping. The first time I ever went on a plane was to the Kids Got Rights weekend in Barcelona.

Fred: I have made lots of friends and been to lots of different places. I have met people from other countries and then met them again at Common Ground international camp.

How is Woodcraft Folk different from other activities you engage with?

Way different from school. The activities show that adults trust us to make things at bushcraft and also how to have conversations with different people.

At Woodcraft we can have fun and learn at the same time.

What would you like to see Woodcraft Folk do in the future?

Tom: More bushcraft camps and activities.

Fred: Make more change for the environment.

Sadie Lamont (age 19)

What have you most enjoyed?

I have most enjoyed my participation in DFs (District Fellowship). I was inspired to go after meeting a few DFs at camp 100 when I didn't think I would come back to Woodcraft. I'm really glad I came to DFs and realised there's another side to Woodcraft than wide games because the responsibilities I've been able to take on as a DF have given me a lot of confidence and purpose.

What have you learnt?

Being given the opportunity to help co-ordinate events, lead workshops and have responsibility for the well being of others has given me a lot of unique experiences for a young person. I have developed admin and communication skills that are really transferable to my every day life. Through my involvement in Woodcraft I've also gained an understanding of my skills what I'm passionate about.

What difference has Woodcraft Folk made to you?

Woodcraft has made a massive difference to my life, I've met some of the coolest people I know and developed some really genuine friendships. The skills and experience that I have obtained from my position on DF committee as Safeguarding Rep and various other roles for Woodcraft have helped me gain opportunities outside of the organisation.

How is Woodcraft Folk different from other activities you engage with?

Woodcraft Folk's strong emphasis on Youth Voice is what has given me the opportunities I have had. Being trusted with the impactful tasks I have been is really empowering.

What would you like to see Woodcraft Folk do in the future?

I would like to see Woodcraft Folk putting more emphasis on diverse membership so a broader range of people can experience the benefits that I have.

Astrid Taylor (age 12)

Please describe how you have been involved in Woodcraft Folk

I have been going to Woodcraft Folk in Cardiff since I was an Elfin, so six years now. I have been to Common Ground, Pioneer Camp and a district camp at Biblins. I am part of the planning team for Camp 100 and we've been to Darsham and Height Gate for meetings.

What have you most enjoyed?

I have really enjoyed meeting new people and forming close friendships with people who are often a different age or from a different school to me. I also really enjoyed meeting international

delegates at Camp 100 as it shows how much language does not really matter in making friends.

What have you learnt?

I've learnt to be more myself. I've had the opportunity to meet lots of different people which has inspired me as I have seen how unique everyone is. It's shown me that you can be yourself and that's OK.

What difference has Woodcraft Folk made to you?

I feel I have gained more independence and confidence to lead group nights but also to apply these leadership skills when working with other groups, such as in school.

How is Woodcraft Folk different from other activities you engage with?

Unlike other activities such as sports clubs which have quite a narrow focus in Woodcraft Folk you do a wide range of activities. This has helped me to feel more confident when approaching new activities and I've found new interests.

What would you like to see Woodcraft Folk do in the future?

I would like to see more ethnic diversity within Woodcraft Folk. My school is very diverse and this has given me an understanding of different perspectives.

The Author

Lauren Karstadt has been involved with Woodcraft Folk her whole life, starting out as a 6 month old woodchip at a summer camp with New Barnet District. In 2017 Lauren joined the Woodcraft Folk staff team as a development officer for the new groups project in the east of England, since then her role, skills, knowledge, and experience have developed, becoming Programme Manager at the end of 2020. Throughout the COVID-19 lockdowns Lauren worked with a group of volunteers to develop our digital youth work offer and is currently the project manager for Woodcraft Folk's centenary camp.

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Five Peelers, 5,000 Potatoes: How Collaborative Cooking and Eating in the Woodcraft Folk is Building Co-operation from the Ground Up

Anna Blewett

This short article explores the potential of 'clans' — mixed-aged working parties responsible for preparing, serving and clearing up after meals — to embed multi-generational co-operation at Woodcraft Folk camps. These residential events, where children and young people greatly outnumber responsible adults, are shaped by the need for sustenance, shelter, purpose, and a sense of belonging; this amounts to a huge amount of physical and emotional labour. Amid (perhaps because of) these conditions, the Woodcraft Folk model of clans creates significant displays of creative collaboration, joint problem solving, and peer-to-peer support. The experiences of Wivenhoe Woodcraft Folk in Essex suggests the perennial obstacles to and opportunities of co-operation play out most positively in tiny ad-hoc field kitchens, embedding a habit of collaborative thinking and acting in our young people.

Introduction

Today's young people face an unenviable spread of existential threats. The world has always been a scary place: global conflict, poverty, and social isolation surely coloured the zeitgeist of Woodcraft Folk's foundation in 1925. But a mental health emergency among our young people, and the scale of the emerging climate collapse could, I think, reasonably overwhelm any burgeoning instinct for activism towards social change. Nonetheless, the Woodcraft Folk movement, with its focus on empowering and facilitating young people to strive for positive change, seeks to embed a sense of agency, as well as co-operation and collaboration, in its members. The very coalface of this endeavour, at least in my small corner of the movement, seems to be the communal field kitchen.

Commonground: Multinational, Multigenerational Kitchen Clans Feeding 80 at a Sitting

In the scorching hot July of 2022, Woodcraft Folk hosted the International Falcon Movement — Socialist Educational International (ISM-SEI) at Commonground: a 10-day camp at Kelmarsh in Northamptonshire. More than 2,700 people from 22 countries attended, ostensibly for a

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programme of 150 workshops around social change devised and delivered by a panel of young adults. But while the scheduled activities initially faltered amid disorganisation, translation issues, and a collective inertia or shyness, co-operative ‘clans’ incorporating every camper instantly mobilised in more than 20 tent ‘villages’ across the 124-acre site.

For those without a working understanding of the movement’s roots and methods, clans present as ad-hoc working groups that jumble together ‘kinsfolk’ from different age brackets and social groups. They group (usually via a chalkboard with lists of names) dreamy five-year-olds and bored teenagers with experienced leaders, awkward attending parents (who may feel participation is a bit beyond their remit), and everyone in between.

Clans are a common feature of all Woodcraft Folk camps; campers are generally assigned to clans at the start of the event and are called away from their own activities and back to this grouping every time the rota has a job for them. Tasked with collecting, storing, preparing, serving, and clearing away food for upwards of 80 people three times a day, the village clans at Commonground quickly became the embodiment of co-operation, with all the spreading benefits that come with it.

Over mountains of raw potatoes, onions, peppers, and carrots, multigenerational mobs fell to work peeling, deseeding, and slicing. Teenagers who had never met discussed first food allergies and then shared experiences of neuro-diversity, sexual orientation, and gender as they hauled water and scoured pans. Some children learned from their clan adults to safely use a knife and attend a hot pan, taking their first steps towards feeding themselves and others. Others displayed such a competence that they were able to take the lead in these tasks while adults facilitated, acting as sous chef.

Young adults fretted over inadequate gas rings and debated flavour profiles and food waste, sometimes in second or third languages. Older adults were required to serve shifts in a central storage hub, breaking down huge, shrink-wrapped towers of coconut milk cartons or cauliflowers, sorting, and distributing them for deployment in kitchens. These supplies had to be loaded into festival carts (their loan negotiated with joyriding groups of young children) and hauled back to villages by many hands.

Collectively, clans conjured huge, sustaining meals to feed multitudes, transforming carts of raw ingredients into fuel for their grateful village. The physical experience was educational: to comprehend the heft of the rations, the power needed to haul them, and labour to process them is to realise some of the universal challenges of being human hidden from view in Western consumer culture. The aesthetic of this work — bright coloured plastics, scuffed aluminium, canvas, and wood — deserves an essay of its own but the giant saucepans, industrial kitchenalia, starched tea towels, and military-like tents of camp seem to underline the status and value of the work. Infrastructure for collective eating dwarfs the domestic; it speaks of solidarity and practicality in the face of adversity.

Re-connecting with our Food

The precedent for collaborative cooking for social cohesion is well established. Parallels can be drawn with everything from langar (the community food and kitchens of gurdwaras), to the communal canteens traditional to kibbutzim, to the South African braai. The challenge of feeding any community — which will inevitably have intersecting and perhaps conflicting nutritional and cultural requirements — is a perfect playing field to practice relational problem solving. These settings provide a kind of ‘third place’ in food consumption: neither the domestic family sphere with its internal politics, nor commercial spaces where hospitality is transactional and dependant on our financial stake. When we eat as a clan, each individual has — literally — an equal and unarguable place at the table.

Co-operation can get messy. In a field kitchen, the challenges — often knotty and overlapping — just keep coming. Where can food be stored to keep wasps, sunlight, and hungry teenagers

away? How should five kilos of leftover bean chilli best be disposed of when bin bags are flimsy and the nearest dump a long cart-ride away? What does a balanced meal look like for a seven-year-old who only eats white bread and Marmite? And just how much porridge scraping can be expected of a hyper-active four-year-old, or their exhausted parent?

Domestic issues are pulled into public discussion. What does conscious consumption of meat look like? How dirty is *too* dirty when it comes to washing-up water? And does the calculation change when it has taken four people and 25 minutes to haul, boil, and distribute the water in question? When is it OK to eat food dropped on the floor? When isn't it? Debate, decisions, and actions become public, collective, and — ideally for Woodcraft Folk purposes — democratic. And these dilemmas are sharpened by the real hunger of outdoor life, the absence of domestic labour-saving devices, and usually, sleep deprivation.

Yet despite these challenges the camps I've attended have shown that field kitchens are often calm places of mindful, meditative activity and co-operation. Without screens, without the distractions or comforts of home, groups fall to quiet work. Arguments about participation are, to a degree, solved by the convention to join in — positive peer pressure! — and obvious need for that person's input. No one, no matter their age, skill level or mobility, is redundant when there are so many mouths to feed!

Yes, meals run late. Seasoning is rarely on point. Choice is limited and the execution of each dish probably lacks finesse. But the lessons to be learnt are quite exhilarating. The child who throws a tantrum when their parent cannot provide the perfect snack will generally accept any food if served to them by someone just one or two years their senior. A disengaged teenager will become a reliable member of the kitchen brigade if given some autonomy and agency over their task. Every one of us, softened by our reliance on twenty-first century gadgetry designed for one user, can learn to be more mindful, conscious, efficient, and co-operative in a kitchen where water containers, pans, and tables can only be moved in partnership with others.

Enduring Impact

The impact of collective cooking as experienced via Woodcraft Folk is enduring; the experience of food at camp very often dwarfs other elements in the memory. Whether we have learnt how to safely hold a very sharp knife, why a friend's family boycotts a specific cereal brand, or that we can break our own unhealthy food habits, the ripple effect is huge. The blossoming of collectivism and co-operation shared at camp can take hold of young people who in turn model and seed it in their own home communities. Clan values spread in Woodcraft Folk 'districts' and their groups to children and adults who have not attended camp, but experience the collective cooking in meeting halls or public spaces.

Across district, regional, and national camps clan duties, and co-operative cooking, eating, and clearing, are ingrained practice. Participating becomes a foundational cooking experience for children with diverse experiences of food and eating, and a practical template for co-operation to be cherished.

The Author

Anna Blewett is a freelance journalist, sub editor and copywriter with 18 years of experience in commercial publishing. Since 2022 she has been a leader at her local Woodcraft Folk district in Essex devising and facilitating sessions in collaborative cooking, sustainable crafts, and exploring nature with young people aged between six and fifteen.

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Teddy Bear Hospitals: A Novel Approach to Encourage Physical and Mental Health Activities for Woodcraft Folk Children

Abigail Cole, Oke Obiuwevbi, and Sham Kattan

In this think piece, Abigail Cole and colleagues explore the use of play-based learning to introduce concepts of wellbeing to younger children in the Woodcraft Folk. Through the running of a Teddy Bear Hospital, children engage with abstract health topics by caring for their teddy bears, fostering early understanding of health, emotions, and self-care.

One of the core principles developed over the last 100 years of Woodcraft Folk is to encourage living the value of everyone looking after each other. Looking after each other is a broad term, which can cover physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Encouraging this core value of is key to any child's development, but how to convey it to our young Woodchips? Through Cole's previous experience working with young children on the concepts of healthcare, and her background as an anaesthetic doctor with a specialist interest in paediatrics, she has been trying to introduce the children to the concept of physical and mental wellness through designing and implementing a number of activities that involves the children bring their teddy bears to a teddy bear hospital.

As a doctor working in the NHS, Cole promotes health education on a daily basis amongst patients, though explanation, diagrams, leaflets, and online resources. Yet the concept of health, healthcare, wellness, and mental health can be abstract concepts to our young Woodchips. Through relating these to them, via the medium of play, imagination, and playing doctor to their teddies, complex ideas can start to be germinated.

In order to help run the sessions, Cole reflected on her days as a medical student — she was involved then with a volunteer based organisation that promotes health education amongst primary school children, called Teddy Bear Hospital. So, harbouring the core principle of working as a co-operative, she reached out to her local University of Anglia Ruskin Teddy Bear Hospital Society, as well as the Pioneers within our district with an interest in working with the younger children, to help run the session.

Bringing on board these young volunteers meant the Teddy Bear Hospital had multiple benefits, not only for our Woodchips, but also for our Pioneers helping with the session and gaining

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experience running activities with younger children, and for the medical students to gain experience with interacting with children and how to communicate effectively with them.

The session ran as a “round robin” with four activity stations each manned by a volunteer/ medical student or Pioneer. They introduced the children to concepts such as healthy eating, keeping your bodies healthy, what happens when we see a doctor, what are emotions, how to stay safe in my home, and how to wash hands properly.

Feedback from parents of Woodchips, as well as the Pioneers and medical students, was incredibly positive. One Pioneer wrote a wonderful account of her experience running the session:

> I wanted to help at Teddy Bear Hospital because of multiple reasons. I love kids, I love to try out everything, I love to help others, I think it will really help when I am older and also I wanted to put my experience to the test. In primary school, I took a first aid training course and successfully passed so I really wanted to prove and see how well I could really deal with scenarios and the kids. (Session evaluation form)

It showed resilience in the Pioneer volunteer as they had to negotiate the difficulties with communicating with young children “I found the kids quite challenging to deal with … They are quite shy but when they start to warm up to you and get used to it, they are brilliant and take things so well” (session evaluation form).

Furthermore the session helped to educate the Pioneers on how we can all have a part to play on affecting each other’s mental health and wellbeing: “They practically live off of whatever vibes you give them so just show them positivity and they will be sure to stay happy as can be” (session evaluation form).

Given that mental health and wellbeing was a major concern identified by Woodcraft Folk members at the All Party Parliamentary Group meeting (Woodcraft Folk, 2021), then running activities such as the Teddy Bear Hospital, engaging our youngest Woodcraft Folk members in discussions helps this generation grow up speaking openly about their physical and mental health with their peers, and can only serve as a conduit to improving social change and positive thinking around these matters.

The Authors

Dr Abigail Cole (MBBS, FRCA), is an Anaesthetic Registrar who currently works at Great Ormond Street Hospital. She qualified as a doctor in 2011 from St George’s Medical School. She has been a member of Woodcraft Folk for the last three years and is a regular leader of Wivenhoe Woodchips group, where her two young children also attend. Dr Oke Obiuwevbi (MBChB), is a Resident Doctor, who qualified with her medical degree from Anglia Ruskin University in 2024. It was when studying that she helped with Wivenhoe Woodcraft group, running the Teddy Bear Hospital. Sham Kattan is a member of Wivenhoe Venturers Group. She has a keen interest in first aid and hopes to study medicine and become a paediatrician in the future.

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Notes for Contributors to the Journal

The *Journal of Co-operative Studies* is a peer reviewed international academic journal which aims to promote research, knowledge and innovation within the co-operative sector. The *Journal* is published by the UK Society for Co-operative Studies in Manchester, England, a city strongly associated with the co-operative movement since the days of the Rochdale Pioneers. It is distributed in Canada in partnership with the Canadian Association of Studies in Co-operation and in Ireland in co-operation with the Irish Society for Co-operative Studies.

The editors welcome contributions on most aspects of co-operation, co-operative management, governance and leadership and related subject areas in relation to a range of co-operative sectors. This includes worker, consumer, retail, housing, credit, insurance, information technology, environmental and other forms of co-operative endeavour; international co-operation; and other sectors within the social economy including mutual businesses, co-operative banks and building societies, community businesses, and member-based non-profits.

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1. **Articles of 4,000-7,000 words** which, either by reporting the results of empirical research or through developing theoretical perspectives will contribute to knowledge about co-operation and related subject areas. These articles will be subject to anonymous peer review by two specialist referees. Authors are invited to submit an outline proposal for discussion.

2. **Shorter articles, generally of around 2,000-4,000 words** which are assessed on the basis of their general interest and readability. Such articles are not subject to formal peer review although the editor may seek comments and suggestions from members of the Editorial Advisory Board which would be discussed with the author as part of the editing process.

3. **Think Pieces:** we invite prospective contributors to submit very short (maximum 1,000 word) articles which may be controversial or somewhat speculative in character. Their purpose should be to stimulate discussion and possible future new directions for co-operative research.

4. **Reviews and review articles**; the former should be between 600 and 1,000 words, the latter 2,000 words.

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