*'We stand for everything that the older schools do not. But we do so in the name of science.' (Ernest Westlake, 1919)*

# Finding a place for Forest School (1929-1940) in the history and future of education

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This essay springs from my involvement with Forest School Camps (FSC). I first camped with FSC as a child in 1979, and since then have camped almost every year. The story of Forest School (which ran from 1929–1940) and its origins has passed into the folklore of FSC, and as with all stories, has changed slightly with every re-telling. I wanted to be clear in my own mind about the chronology of events behind the establishment of the school, but also to see what elements of FSC's current philosophy were part of the original school's aims and ethos. I also wanted to explore whether Forest School's ideas were still relevant in a broader educational sense, and to compare contemporary responses to concerns about childhood with the educational aims of Forest School. I have used contemporary and historical sources to situate the creation of Forest School, and the influences upon it, in their historical context. A discussion of the school and its ethos follows. To conclude, I will examine to what extent modern educational ideas reflect the thinking behind Forest School.

Forest School was the brainchild of Ernest Westlake (1855–1922). Born into a wealthy Quaker merchant family, he was an amateur naturalist and geologist. He was brought up an only child by his father and stepmother,

and recalled a childhood spent in solitary play in the woodland on the edge of the New Forest near Fordingbridge in Hampshire, a setting which fuelled his interest in natural history (van der Eyken and Turner 1969). Westlake grew up at a time when the theory of evolution dominated the intellectual climate; he studied Science at University College, London, where he was tutored by the Darwinian biologist T.H. Huxley. Westlake married late and had two children, but was widowed in 1901. A series of disastrous investments led to him losing most of his own and his wife's fortunes, forcing him and his children to live with relatives. Thinking it was cheaper to live abroad, in 1905 Westlake planned an ambitious cycle-camping trip to France, accompanied by his nine-year old daughter and her governess. At Aurillac he discovered a prehistoric site, where he stayed to study the geology for the next two years. This was the beginning of his interest in the anthropology of prehistoric people, which took him to Tasmania for two more years, and eventually saw him elected a Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute (Westlake 2000).

Back in England in 1910, aged 55, he took out a mortgage of £800, secured on his late wife's remaining share of her father's estate, and bought 42 acres of land at Godshill Ridge, near his childhood home in Hampshire, on which he built a wooden bungalow and re-established family life. During this time, 'the geologist and anthropologist was gradually transformed into the humanist and educationist' (*ibid*., p.20). He became intensely concerned with the preservation of civilization which he saw being swept away in the chaos of the Great War. He used his scientific

knowledge to try to understand the rise and fall of civilizations, and came to the conclusion that

> the defects of civilization, and its constant failure to achieve a permanent progress are due in the main to man's neglect to educate his children upon the ancestral lines followed by the rest of nature. (Westlake, cited in Morris 1974, p.28).

As a response to what he considered to be the failure of modern civilizations, he founded the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry (OWC) in 1916.

In doing so, Westlake was directly influenced by the work of Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1949). Thompson Seton was born in County Durham but moved to Canada as a child in 1866. An artist, he specialised in natural history illustrations, but later wrote children's animal stories based on the wildlife of Canada. He also had a keen interest in native American people, their beliefs and lifestyles (Thompson Seton 1937). He was initially motivated to work with young people in order to provide a positive response to the problem of vandalism he was having on his home in New York State; he initiated a weekend camp for the boys concerned, 'hoping to turn their anti-social traits into something more worthwhile' (Morris 1970, p.184). He deemed the camp such a success that in 1902 he formed an outdoor organisation for children, initially called the 'Woodcraft Indians'. Thompson Seton's work has been widely credited as a major influence on the formation of both the Woodcraft movement of the early part of the twentieth

century, and the Boy Scouts, formed in 1907 by Robert Baden Powell (Morris 1970). There were fundamental differences in philosophy between Baden Powell and Thompson Seton; the latter's main objection to the developing ideology of the Scouting movement was its insistence on patriotism and militarism. Ernest Westlake's son Aubrey had been a Scoutmaster while a student at Cambridge; he too had become disenchanted with these elements of the Scouting movement. Ernest Westlake was inspired by and corresponded with Thompson Seton; in 1916 he made Seton the first Grand Chieftain of the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry.

The other major influence on Westlake's formation of the OWC was the recapitulation theory of G. Stanley Hall. Westlake had read Stanley Hall's book *Adolescence* (1904), which described the 'natural' development of children in terms of evolution, with every child having to progress through certain 'primitive' stages. Westlake wrote

> Lack of this recapitulation gives the clue to what is amiss with modern life. This recapitulatory first-hand contact with nature; this simple open-air life; the life of the wilderness, the forest, the hills and the sea, which together with his social life was the chief factor in the formation of early man, is what we know as Woodcraft. (cited in van Eyken and Turner, 1969, p.131)

The importance of the natural environment in the formation of the child's personality cannot be overstated: for Westlake, only by providing

favourable surroundings could children grow appropriately. As his ideals solidified around the concept of the Forest School, the surroundings were described as the apparatus through which children would learn:

> In general the aim… will be to educate children upon evolutionary lines, i.e., through surroundings graduated in accordance with the historic stages of human culture. (Westlake 1930, p.29)

While the OWC was, to an extent, an attempt to build a woodcraft youth movement radically different to the Scouts, a central aim of the Westlakes' movement was to create a school in which children could be educated with the pedagogy of the 'Woodcraft Way'. The Woodcraft Way was based on three major theories. The first was Stanley Hall's recapitulatory theory, as previously discussed. Another was a philosophy based around the three Hs (Heart, Head and Hand) in place of the three Rs. Westlake, like many of his contemporaries, was influenced by the now little-known work of Patrick Geddes, a Scottish sociologist who advocated a theory of education based on the equal emphasis on the hand (physical / manual), heart (compassion / political) and head (learning / psychological / analytical) (Field 2000). A third theory was the concept of 'learning by doing', in which the work of John Dewey can be seen as an influence; Dewey argued that school should place greater emphasis on the broadening of intellect and development of problem solving and critical thinking skills, and felt strongly

that knowledge was of no value unless it could be applied in a practical and meaningful way to the child's life.

Alongside the woodcraft influence of Thompson Seton, the scientific influence of Stanley Hall, and the pedagogical influences of Geddes and Dewey, Ernest Westlake's ideas can be seen in the context of other educational thinkers. The OWC, while focusing on the primitive needs of children (and adults) in a natural environment, also had a strong belief in the social and cultural organisation of 'civilization' (Morris 1974); the word 'Chivalry' was chosen deliberately to reflect that element of a caring and ordered society (Westlake 2000). In his Woodcraft Indians movement, Thompson Seton had 'placed his faith in self-government, in freedom in education, and the right of children to govern themselves democratically in council' (Morris 1970, p.191); Westlake, like A.S.Neill, also admired the work of Homer Lane's Little Commonwealth experiment (Morris 1974). These were key influences on Westlake's thinking about how a school should be organised.

Ernest Westlake's writing also refers positively to the work of Maria Montessori, and he sought to extend her principles beyond the three- to seven-year old age group for which she was mostly associated:

> We believe that the Montessori principle, being the method of nature, is thoroughly sound, and that all that is needed is to extend

> its operations to every age, and its ‘apparatus’ to embrace every sort of human activity. (Westlake 1930, p.22)

Montessorian influence can be seen particularly in Westlake’s ideas around play. He wrote

> To play at being grown-up is the child’s way of growing up. Play, as all educators know, is children’s work; and in our playgrounds they will be able to play upon a grand scale. (*ibid*., p.25)

Montessorian ideas around the more passive role of the adult in the education of children also had a direct influence on Westlake; he wanted ‘grown-up folk [to] be relegated to the background as relatively unimportant’ (*ibid*., p.25). He felt strongly that the curriculum should be adapted to the needs and wants of the child, and that, while an educator could offer ‘the world’ to the child without prejudice, ‘the choice of a particular part of the road must be left to the particular child’. This was his definition of ‘freedom in education’ (*ibid*., p.37).

In this stress upon freedom, play, self-government and communitarianism, Westlake can be positioned within the broader ‘progressive’ movement. The work of Edmond Holmes, author of *What is and What Might Be* (1911) was particularly influential on contemporary progressive educators. Holmes wrote in 1918:

> Give a child freedom for self-development, release him from the cramping and deadening pressure of autocratic authority, rigid discipline and mechanical instruction, and two things will happen. The spirit of liberty, equality, fraternity will begin to germinate in his heart, and his capacity… for making the most of his natural aptitudes and inclinations will at least be kept alive. (quoted in Brehony 1992, p.206)

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

As well as the discourse of freedom in education, there were other contemporary social concerns about children. One of the central concerns can be broadly described as an anxiety about the effects of industrialisation. This led to three distinct responses, which all have very separate ideological roots. One such response was the idealising of a pastoral history, part of the Romantic tradition of Rousseau's *Emile* (1762) and Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality* (1807). This response idealised children as a pure expression of Nature itself, and was concerned about the factory-type life led by children either in the workplace or, after the introduction of compulsory elementary education, in schools. The second distinct response was shown by growth of the Labour movement,

whose concerns were about social justice and the fate of the urban poor; the work of Rachel and Margaret McMillan can be located within this tradition. Thirdly, there was a very real concern that the Empire itself was at risk because of the poor levels of health of the working class, best exemplified by the difficulty in finding men of sufficient health to enter into the armed services during the Boer War. Notably, Beatrice and Sidney Webb felt strongly that education, in addition to health, was a key instrument in increasing British 'imperial' and 'national efficiency' (Brennan 1975).

To an extent, all these ideas are represented in the formation of what loosely became known as the 'woodcraft movement', and in particular the creation of Forest School. Ernest Westlake's belief in recapitulation situated the ideal childhood firmly within a natural environment, in which and because of which children are able to grow appropriately. He wrote

> … the conflict between instinct and occupation … ever since industrialism began, has been the chief cause of man's sorrows and the great obstacle to progress. (Westlake1930, p.17)

He saw that the separation of people from 'natural' human work, as exemplified by traditional occupations and crafts, was 'unmanly', and that consequently industrialisation enfeebled and enslaved humanity.

This idea can be understood as a direct descendent of the eighteenth century Romantic tradition; yet in Westlake's case it was not a regressive

stance, but one which was combined with a scientific progressivism which aimed to take the learning of the past and combine it with the advances of modern, evolutionary biological science.

While there is little record of Ernest Westlake's political views, the OWC membership had a broad interest in contemporary politics. Norman Glaister was involved in the OWC during the 1920s; in 1997 his son John described how members of the OWC would meet after the OWC's camps, forming what they called a 'Wayfarer's Circle':

> …that was when they would discuss education, politics, finance and things, and they did get round to saying to themselves, I suppose, 'Well, it's all very well talking about it, can we do something about it?' And that's how Forest School started. (FSC 1997, p.8)

After the creation of Forest School, the Wayfarer's Circle discussions on the political situation, and in particular unemployment, led to the formation of Grith Fyrd in 1932. These were camps, held on the other side of the wood from the Forest School, for young unemployed men. The idea was to give the benefit of a woodcraft education to a group of people who needed a positive environment in which to deal with the hopelessness created by the Depression of the 1930s. Like Forest School, Grith Fyrd was pedagogically innovative:

> Its advocates believed in an education of the imagination, rooted in a practice-based curriculum. They wanted to 'learn by doing'. .. what

> the woodcraft movements wanted to learn was how to live different lives; in a real sense, the Grith Fyrd camps were experiments in a practical utopia. (Field 2000, p.152)

The men felled trees and built themselves a community; they made their own buildings, furniture and clothes, and grew some of their own food (although ‘the aim of self-sufficiency had to be abandoned in the first year, when the crops were eaten by rabbits, but by 1934 the men were eating the rabbits’ [*ibid*., p.160]). The OWC organised classes run to be run by the WEA, and the men put on plays and concerts. (Westlake 2000).

Another link between Forest School and a left-leaning concern with social conditions was the appointment of Aubrey’s cousin Cuthbert Rutter to be the Forest School’s first headteacher. Rutter had first-hand experience of the life of the urban poor; he had begun his career in an early ‘Borstal’ school, moving on to teach in an elementary school in Bethnal Green, east London. What he saw were ragged children, bullied into learning; he felt that

> ‘these boys should be camping, possibly hunting for some of their food, working to make their shelter, enjoying wild games of warfare in the woods. What could we do in the school room?’ (quoted in van den Eyken 1969, p.136)

While not overtly political in its inception, the woodcraft movement as epitomised by the OWC had knowledge gained from work with poor urban communities of the impact of industrialisation on ordinary people. As a result, it was concerned with improving society for everyone, especially the working class, the loss of whose traditional ways of life was felt to be a central cause of social dysfunction. It saw woodcraft as a way of achieving a better world; in this respect its aims were similar to those of the Labour movement.

A more surprising feature of Westlake's philosophy was that he felt that woodcraft could be a key factor in the maintenance of the British Empire. Like the Webbs, he argued that colonial settlers needed a much broader education in order to be able to work effectively:

> The idea … of Woodcraft… is to form such a *school* of manliness and freedom, that the English race may continue to be worthy of its past and to lead the way as the world's peacemaker. (Westlake 1930, p.56. Author's italics)

This makes Westlake a rather unlikely ally of the national efficiency movement, as epitomised by the Boys Brigade and other organised youth movements, including Baden Powell's Scouts, whose 'over-riding concern at an official level [was] with imperial defence and racial survival' (Springhall 1977, p.15). The key difference, of course, is that Westlake saw Woodcraft as enabling Englishmen to be 'the world's peacemaker'; whilst

the more militaristic youth movements aimed to train their members to spring unquestioningly to the defence of an expansionist and defensive Empire.

The Westlakes were Quakers, who

> believed that religion is inseparable from everyday life and indeed life in all its forms should be seen as sacramental. They felt that there was a divine spar within every man and woman and that no intermediary, in the form of priest or minister, is necessary between an individual and his God.' (Westlake 2000, p.13).

This spiritual dimension to the work the OWC and Forest School is clear from Ernest Westlake's writing. In his book 'The Forest School' *(*Westlake 1930, originally 1919*)*, he outlined a philosophy which combined Stanley Hall's recapitulation theory and a Biblical image of Paradise regained:

> while we regard the Fall from the life of instinct to the relative imperfections of consciousness as a necessary step in growth, we desire, of course, to epitomise it as much as possible: and for this we believe our recapitulatory method to be the best; for the child who has lived in Paradise will ever bear within him its memory. (*ibid*. p.30)

Perhaps Quakerism, with its focus on individual spirituality and its rejection of priests, informed Westlake's pedagogy; he wrote

> We conceive that the function of the teacher is not to talk about God, but to give to the child the sense of nearness of that spirit which fills heaven and earth and the souls in particular of those who walk in love and humility. (*ibid*. p.31)

His vision of the teacher as a guide rather than leader situates Westlake within a progressive educational philosophy begun by Pestalozzi and continued by Froebel and Montessori. Children are seen as instinctual and spiritual beings for whom freedom is vital if their natural growth is to occur.

Freedom, growth and individuality were the basic themes of progressivism (Selleck 1972). All three themes are clearly demonstrated in Ernest Westlake's discussions of the Forest School. And yet at the same time his quasi-religious spirituality, his insistence of the central role of Nature in the growth of human beings, and the apparent contradiction of his nostalgia for an ancient pastoral life and his enthusiasm for modern scientific evolutionary theories combine to make his contribution to the history of progressive education unique.

In 1919, with another precarious mortgage, Ernest Westlake purchased the 100 acre Sandy Balls Wood in Godshill, Hampshire, with the express aim of opening the Forest School. But Ernest was never to see the fulfilment of all

his work: in 1922 he was killed in a road accident, and it was his son Aubrey who oversaw the creation of the Forest School, which opened in 1929 with three pupils. The school prospectus proudly states:

> A child's life at the Forest School is regarded as a joyful adventure. Happiness, which is a child's birthright, follows from personal satisfaction of achievement and the natural life of an organised group. The Forest School prepares the minds and bodies of its children for life and living, aiming at a gradual unfolding of a complete human personality. (Forest School 1929)

A number of personal accounts of life at Forest School exist, some from pupils and others from staff. Nellie Brand, a housemother at the school, was recruited by Cuthbert Rutter when she was nineteen. On protesting that she couldn't be a teacher as she had no teaching qualifications

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

The school was housed in two wooden buildings on the Sandy Balls estate at Godshill, and operated a rather Spartan existence on a shoestring budget. The staff at the Forest School often weren't paid: they got their keep, and wages were paid only if there was surplus money after all other

expenses were met. Sanitation was in the form of earth closets, although the school boasted that it did have running water. While it shared some of its philosophy with other progressive schools such as A.S.Neill's Summerhill, notably self-government and optional lessons, it had a distinct ethos of its own. It was co-educational, and the curriculum included needlecraft for all (the children made their own school 'uniforms'), and there were mixed dormitories for the younger children. The staff were known by their first names – even by nicknames (Cuthbert Rutter was known as Kirk). The children shared the chores with the staff, which was a key part of building the school's 'family-like' community. The school sought to 'establish a traditional hardihood… the school work, as far as possible, is carried out in the open air. Camping… is a normal part of the school routine' (Forest School 1929, p.6). Its emphasis on 'the primitive arts and crafts' was in order that children could learn in a meaningful, real-life context:

> …the child uses the cup he has made, wears the scarf he has woven, sits on the stool he has carpentered… He becomes a student in the real sense of the word. He not only learns by doing, but he learns how to learn anything that he needs to know. (Forest School 1929, p.4).

The children were organised into age groups whose names were borrowed from Thompson Seton's Woodcraft Indians: Elves, Woodlings, and Trackers. The curriculum was assessed by 'tests and trials' of the children's

woodcraft skills: one former pupil remembers vividly ‘swimming across the river holding a lighted candle’ (Westlake 2000), one of the Woodling trials (for children aged 8 – 12). In order to become a Tracker (12 – 15 year olds) a child had to be able to climb the ‘tracker tree’ – a particularly challenging one.

The school’s prospectus described the site as 100 acres of woodland, ‘a veritable children’s paradise’ (Forest School 1929, p.1). Jean Westlake, Aubrey’s daughter, was a pupil at Forest School. She recalled that this was true:

> We climbed trees, played in the sand pit, built dens and tree houses, stalked through the child-high bracken, laid trails, dug for clay and made pots, wove and plaited rushes, swam and dived in the Avon, sunbathed, rode the school ponies, cultivated our gardens, gathered wood and lit fires and in fact enjoyed everything that a primitive environment offered. (Westlake 2000, p.45)

Having said that, she also remembers:

> Sunday was staff day and we children were given a lunch packet after breakfast and expected to occupy ourselves until tea-time when we were allowed back in. I remember one winter Sunday when I had a streaming cold and it was raining. Life was indeed pretty miserable then. (*ibid*. p. 42)

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

> On our last night out we arrived at a site rather late in the evening and decided not to pitch tents but to sleep around the fire. When Cuthbert got up to make the morning 'cuppa' he discovered that all the pigs that had been grubbing about under the trees when we arrived, were snuggled up between the children, all snoring merrily. (Brand nd, p.15)

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

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

> Forest School caused me to be the sort of person I am. (FSC 1997, p.11)

Eliza was the daughter of Sir William Nicholson, the painter, and other pupils included Robert Graves' son and daughter. Just as with other progressive schools, Forest School attracted the children of the middle-class intellectual left, who chose it in preference to the stultifying conformity of the public school (Brehony 1992). However, being wealthy was not a pre-requisite: Eliza Banks' fees paid not only for her but for another child whose family was less well-off (FSC 1997). From discussions with ex-pupils it appears that most children attended for about 2 or 3 years, before returning to more conventional schools. Many had gone to Forest School having had difficulties in more mainstream schools; Eliza Banks' mother knew her daughter was temperamentally unsuited to an 'ordinary' school, although she did later send Eliza to another school where she had to work extremely hard to catch up with a more academic curriculum. Only one pupil sat his School Certificate and university entrance whilst at Forest School: Peter Hedger was later a longstanding camp chief in Forest School Camps.

By 1938, the school had outgrown the site at Godshill, and moved to Whitwell Hall in Norfolk. At its peak, the school had about forty pupils aged between 5 and 16. The coming war ended this particular experiment in education: staff were called up, the buildings at Whitwell were requisitioned for military purposes, and the school closed in 1940.

After the war, former staff members at Forest School planned to re-open the school, and several meetings were held to discuss how to do it. In 1947 the desire for action led to a reunion camp being run at Whitwell Hall. Thirty children attended, and it was so successful it was decided to run another camp in 1948. This was the origin of Forest School Camps (FSC), which runs to this day. Originally, children were recruited through advertisements in publications like the New Statesman; others joined through contacts in the Socialist Sunday School or the Communist Party. In 2007 FSC will run 28 camps. Whilst it is still a largely left-leaning, middle-class organisation, its aid fund, created by donations and a subsidy included in camp fees, enables children from less well-off families to camp for free; efforts are also being made to increase the social and ethnic diversity of the camps.

Whilst FSC is the most obvious legacy of the Forest School, a survey of current thinking and practice in education gives an interesting insight into how mainstream some of Forest School's 'cranky' ideas have become. In 2006 the DfES published a Manifesto called 'Learning outside the classroom' (DfES 2006), which states:

> We believe that every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age, ability or circumstances (DfES 2006, p.2)

The document is lavishly illustrated with pictures of children learning in various non-school settings, including in woodland and doing adventurous activities. It includes a quotation from Archibald McLeish, the American writer: ‘There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience.’ The echoes of Forest School’s ‘learning by doing’, and its emphasis on the necessity of a real purpose for children’s learning, are clear.

An even clearer link is with the current Forest School movement. In this context, a ‘forest school’ is an area of woodland which school children visit on a regular basis (usually weekly) over the course of a term or year. The movement began in 1994 when a group of staff and students from Bridgwater College in Somerset returned from a visit to Denmark, inspired by the emphasis on outdoor activities given by Danish schools. The college is now one of a number of UK centres running courses on Forest School; its prospectus says:

> Forest School is a unique educational experience. Its principal purpose is to tailor an educational curriculum to a participants’ preferred learning style (rather than vice versa). Its philosophy is to encourage and inspire individuals of any age from 3 years upwards… through mastery of small achievable tasks in a woodland environment, to grow in confidence and independence so that they develop a sense of self-worth… Unlike other forms of outdoor education which generally concentrate on team building, challenging

> activities or competitiveness, the Forest School embraces an entirely different approach through the nurturing, support and development of the self-esteem of participants (Bridgwater College nd).

Although the language of self-esteem, learning styles and nurture is contemporary, there are clear links to Westlake's Forest School and its prospectus. In particular, Westlake's school's aim to give opportunities for full personal development, to develop a child's natural interests, to develop competencies and confidence through woodcraft 'tests and trials', and the emphasis on a caring and co-operative ethos can all be seen in the Bridgwater College description of its Forest School.

The historical contexts for the development of the two Forest Schools were very different. Westlake's school developed from a concern about the way industrialisation and capitalism were eroding the 'natural' ways of life, and a belief that narrow and authoritarian schooling could never develop children in the necessary 'evolutionary' way. The twenty-first century version of a Forest School is more concerned with children's confidence and self-esteem, and the way that children's lives are less 'free', are based increasingly indoors, and are more structured than at any time in history. A 1999 review of how children's live have changed over the twentieth century found

> Children are suffering more mental health problems and stress because they are being kept indoors… Many children are being

> restricted in the amount of freedom and creativity they can enjoy and are not allowed to play independently because there is a growing fear among parents about violence… (Norton 1999)

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

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