

let



us

play

GENERAL PUBLIC

# PLAY AREA

This play area is for children  
up to the age of 8 years

**NO BALL GAMES ALLOWED**



Have you ever  
come across a junk  
playground before?



Malvern Street Adventure Playground, Balsall Heath  
(Tony Brown & Peter Madden in centre)

No, I hadn't either

BOOTH STREET  
**PLAYGROUND**  
☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆  
is  
NOW OPEN TO ALL CHILDREN

IT IS HOPED THAT WITH THE HELP OF LOCAL PEOPLE WE WILL BE ABLE TO ESTABLISH A WIDE RANGE OF ACTIVITIES TO HELP KEEP THE KIDS OFF THE STREETS AND OUT OF TROUBLE.

THE TWO HOUSES AT THE BACK OF THE PLAYGROUND WILL BE MADE IN TO INDOOR PLAYSPACE FOR THE KIDS IN WET WEATHER.

YOU CAN HELP BY  
SAVING - OLD NEWSPAPERS, EGG BOXES  
JAM JARS, CARDBOARD BOXES - OR BY  
PROVIDING - NAILS, WOOD OR ROPE  
OR ANYTHING YOU THINK WE CAN USE  
IF YOU CAN HELP - CONTACT -  
DAVE SWINGLE AT THE -  
ADVICE CENTRE OR ON THE PLAYGROUND

**get children into  
A REGULAR<sup>15</sup>  
MIXING ROUTINE**

**WATER**  
★ WHEN ADDING WATER, WHEN CASE MIX TO ADD TOO MUCH AT A TIME. POUR WATER INTO HOLE AND MIX SLOWLY. IF TOO MUCH WATER IS ADDED IT WILL WASH AWAY CEMENT AND REDUCE THE STRENGTH OF THE MIXTURE. IT WILL ALSO CAUSE SPALLS IN CONCRETE! MIXING AS IT DRIES OUT. IF CHILDREN ARE HUGGED IN MIXING PROVIDE SMALL 'ADD SKEE' SHOVELS SO THEY CAN HANDLE THEM EASILY.

**TOP COAT FOR RAISED ANIMALS SHOULD BE A SKEWER MIXTURE THAN MORTAR. WE USED 1 CEMENT TO 1 1/2 SAND. IF YOU ARE USING CEMENT STRIPS MIX THEM WITH THE SAND.**

**plaster of paris**  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
is best mixed in a bucket. Use a separate bucket as particles of plaster will effect concrete mixing. Slowly add water stirring all the time. The hands are best for this as you can break up the plaster lumps as you mix. Wear rubber gloves. If powder paint is added to white plaster the blocks can be used as chalk after

**mortar**  
★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
1 BUCKET OF CEMENT  
3 BUCKETS OF SAND

**mix well together before adding water, add water slowly and continue mixing until creamy. When mixing mortar for personalised paving stones, add a tablespoon of ordinary household soda - this will produce a fine-grain finish on the top of the paving stones.**

**chalk**





Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth





it probably wouldn't be allowed these days, but it was the most amazing experience to learn about yourself and others

let

This project represents the collection and collation of an exciting new archive of material to capture the Birmingham adventure playground / play movement from the 1960's to the present day. Funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the project explores three lost or 'ghost' adventure playground sites that emerged in the post-war period (Balsall Heath,

Sparkbrook & Handsworth), the 1980s play movement within the city and one contemporary adventure playground site (Meriden, Chelmsley Wood).

General Public worked with primary schools in close proximity to three of the playground sites (at Ark Tindal Balsall Heath, Christchurch Sparkbrook, St Annes Chelmsley Wood). Pupils undertook oral history training and conducted interviews with people connected to the playgrounds.

Significantly, two new personal archives of material relating to the adventure playground movement in Birmingham were discovered. Former playworkers Dave Swingle & Geoff Gaisford kept photographic and written material that offers new perspectives on the history of play within the city.

The project's 18 oral histories, and associated archive material are intended to offer a snapshot of the Birmingham play movement from the 1960s to the present day. Through the archive process, a further set of playground locations came to light

- Bolton Road Small Heath, South Aston, Highgate Berrington Walk, The Council for Adventure Play in Soho (CAPS), Spon Lane Adventure Playground, Turner Street Winson Green, Hockley Flyover - to name but a few. These of course don't cover the full breath of activity in the city and the project is not intended as a definitive account; there were many more people who could have contributed their memories to the project.

Alongside this publication, the project will feature as outdoor exhibition at Balsall Heath City Farm (next to the site of the old Malvern St Playground) in June/July 2021 before touring to Meriden Adventure Playground, Chelmsley Wood for the summer holidays. In addition, the project will be archived at the Library of Birmingham.

The General Public website features all of the oral history interviews, material from the personal archives of Geoff Gaisford / Dave Swingle & films from the Media Archive of Central England.

[generalpublic.org.uk/project/let-us-play](http://generalpublic.org.uk/project/let-us-play)

us

play

GEOFF GAISFORD

RAY WILLS

VAL HART

HAQI ALI

ROHAN BROWN

DAVE SWINGLE

IAN ELLIS

DEBY MORGAN

HAKI KAPASI

JO BOWEN

SIMON RIX

ALI WOOD

ELLEN DELANEY

SHARON DUNBAR

SARAH HULBERT

LUCIE BENNETT

LEWIS HILL

REBECCA PRESCOTT

DEREK HORTON



SPARKBROOK  
ADVENTURE  
PLAYGROUND

PLAYTRAIN

MERIDEN  
ADVENTURE  
PLAYGROUND

COUNCIL FOR  
ADVENTURE PLAY IN  
SOHO (CAPS)

HIGHGATE  
BERRINGTON WALK  
SCULPTURED PLAY AREA

HANDSWORTH  
ADVENTURE  
PLAYGROUND

(BOOTH STREET)

SMALL HEATH  
ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND  
(BOLTON ROAD)

BALSALL HEATH  
ADVENTURE  
PLAYGROUND

(MALVERN STREET)

## GEOFF GAISFORD

**SPARKBROOK ASSOCIATION ASSISTANT AND PLAYWORKER,  
SPARKBROOK ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND, EARLY 1960S**

### **WHAT WAS SPARKBROOK LIKE IN THE 1960S?**

There were different areas – quite a lot of it had a lot of rubbish, and a lot of the houses were needing to be painted. Some of the windows were broken – even some of the doors were broken. Many of the houses used to have outdoor toilets, and those were quite often broken, but other areas – there was an area near the park that was quite nice, but it seemed to be a bit dark, and at night time many of the street lights didn't work, so it was sometimes a bit frightening for people if they went out at night, but we loved it!

### **WHAT DID YOU DO?**

My main job was to work down at the house [of the Sparkbrook Association] to get it painted and straight, but in my spare time I would go and help the play leader, whose name was Gene Pack, and I think he might have been named after a famous cowboy film star who was Gene Autry in the early days, and he started on the same day as me, and he would run the playground, and sometimes he would shout, "Ay up Geoff, would you come and give us some help?" And I used to love going up there because I hadn't been in a playground like that before. It was really new and I found it exciting.

### **CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT SPARKBROOK ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?**

I think it first opened in July 1962 and, as I said, it was run by a play leader, a lovely chap called Gene Pack, and it was a junk playground. Have you ever come across a junk playground before? No, I hadn't either. It was full of old car tyres, planks of wood, ropes, and everyone could make dens out of these things, and there would be – there was a playground hut, where they could actually go when it was raining, and they had lots of activities in the hut as well.

### **DID YOU EVER MAKE ANYTHING?**

Oh yes, well, it was really run by all the children. They enjoyed all of it, and Gene and I used to stand back and be there to help and, quite often, what they would do is ask me if I would hold the nails so they could hammer their den together, but quite often they missed the nail. And what did they hit, do you think? My hand, yep. But I used to love going up there and building dens with them, but it was mainly – they did that. They sometimes built dens that were really big towers.





### WHAT SORT OF THINGS HAPPENED IN THE PLAYGROUND?

Oh lots of things. There was an old hall, which had a very large concrete floor, which was terrific for playing football, and bouncing balls and kicking balls around. And then there were all sorts of building games. They used to chase each other, there were quite a few little hillocks made so that they could run up and down them, and they had their bikes as well, and they could ride their bikes down the hill. And then, in the playground hut, there were all sorts of things like painting and Lego – because we had Lego in those days believe it or not – Meccano and painting and also books as well.

### WHAT DID SPARKBROOK SMELL LIKE?

Oh dear! In certain places, it smelled terrible! It was really awful and some of the very old houses were in a very bad state of repair, and often what happened – you won't believe this – the landlords would take the kitchen stove out of the kitchen, and put it on the landing, and then put a family in the kitchen to live, and they would take the bath out of the bathroom, and put another family in there, and then there was a family in every one of the other rooms, and quite often the roof leaked as well, and so it smelt really bad at times. And the streets didn't smell much better, because quite often they didn't get cleaned at all, not like they do today.

### WHAT WAS YOUR FAVOURITE ACTIVITY AT THE ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

Gene and I used to read to the children, because there were a lot of children who couldn't read themselves. So we used to sit in the playground hut, on the floor, and they would all gather round, and we just read a story to them. I really wasn't in charge of the playground. Gene Pack, he was in charge of the playground and he was a lovely man, he was – the kids actually adored him actually, yeah!

### WHO WAS GENE PACK?

Funny, I didn't really know Gene much at all, except that we started here in Sparkbrook on the same day in July 1962, and I think he came from an adventure playground in London, and he then ran the playground every day, except for on Sundays, and he would leave the house at around about I think half past eight, nine o'clock, and go up to the playground and come back at lunch time and go back again, and he was there until the evening.

### DO YOU REMEMBER ANY OF THE PEOPLE YOU USED TO WORK WITH?

Oh definitely, the organiser was someone called Miss Elizabeth Tomkins and we used to call her Liz. And then there was Gene, and then there was me, and then we all lived in the house eventually and we were there all the time. But there was then Dr Barrows, and she was our what we used to call Our Doc, and she was lovely. She used to look after us as well and she was – I think she was the assistant chairperson, and then there was someone called the Reverend – oh you're testing my memory now – Jack Read, and he was the chairperson of the Sparkbrook Association.

### WHAT WERE THE CHILDREN LIKE WHO PLAYED ON THE PLAYGROUND?

Some of them were very rough – I found them quite wild, but once they got to know you, they were really lovely. I don't think they found it easy to accept strangers, and I was very lucky because they seemed to like Gene so much. Anyone who was close to Gene, like, I was living in the same house together, and I was working with children as well, I think they very very soon actually got used to me, and I found them really lovely, but many of them had quite a difficult home life. A lot of them didn't like school and so we had to be very careful because, quite often, they would want to go to the playground earlier than they should, and skip school. They were very good in the end. They always – I found they always did what Gene asked them to do, which was amazing. Because on the playground they could let off steam, but then they were amazingly good, far better than you ever expected them to be.

### CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE PLAYGROUND?

Well, if you saw it you would think it was a dump! Because it was strewn with all sorts of – what people were then at the time calling rubbish. But the kids loved it. There were piles of wood which they could build into dens, there was a toolshed where there were hammers and screwdrivers and pliers and a big box of nails, so that they could make towers and dens, and there was a rope swing with a rope and a big car tyre on it as well, and there were tyres which they could then roll down the little hillocks, and things like that. But they had to be a bit careful if anyone had left any nails around, so some of our job was to go round to make sure there was no nails in wood sticking out, so someone wouldn't hurt themselves.

### WHAT DID THE CHILDREN THINK OF THE PLAYGROUND?

Well, I never asked any of them what they thought, but because they turned up in such large numbers, I would have thought they thought it OK. Some days we had as many as 90 to 100 children on the playground. Even when it was wet, there were at least 40 or even 50.

### WHAT MATERIALS DID THEY HAVE AT THE PLAYGROUND FOR BUILDING?

There were all sorts of things. There were, as I've said, rubber tyres that people would give. Oh, we had – someone gave us an old motor car, and lots of planks of wood would be delivered by a lot of the shopkeepers around, they let us have for the playground, once they got to know what was going on, and also quite often the shopkeepers' sons would come along as well, and they would go back home and tell mum and dad, and dad would bring along a pile of wood and bricks and, oh I can't remember what else we had. Oh, quite a bit of thick rope as well. But really it looked a bit like a bomb site with these strange dens and buildings all round the place.

### **DESCRIBE WHAT THE DENS WERE LIKE?**

Well, some – most of them were quite small, maybe they could get one or two of the children in them, but there was one they made which was a gang or a group, and they built a very large one. They could get 20-odd in there altogether.

### **HOW DANGEROUS WAS THE PLAYGROUND?**

In many ways I think people today would say it was very dangerous, but back in 1960 there wasn't anything like the regulations we have today. But one of the important things was that both Gene, and when I was up there at times, and I, we would have to have, what we would call 'eyes in the back of our heads'. So we used to watch very, very carefully. We would always go round and test that the dens were strong enough, and particularly when they built a tower. And the other thing was that sometimes they would pull their dens to pieces, and of course that would leave nails sticking up through the wood, and so we'd go round – and that was very dangerous, because you could stand on those and that could really hurt. Also they could go septic, so we would go round and make sure all that was cleared away all the time.

### **DID CHILDREN EVER TAKE ANY RISKS ON THE PLAYGROUND?**

Of course – I think all children take risks, but strangely we didn't have that many accidents. What accidents there were, were very minor cuts and bruises. We didn't have anything like broken arms or anything like that. When you think about what they were doing, you know, there could have been lots more accidents. But I think because they were allowed a lot of supervision of themselves, and the older boys and girls would actually look after the younger ones from the nursery as well, because there would be children there from as young as three at times, up to 17, and the 16/17 year olds would look after the younger ones a lot, which helped Gene I think a lot as well.

People thought the playground was a bit dangerous but it wasn't a time when people were thinking about that sort of thing really that much, because children would be out playing late at night, on their own, so they were doing all sorts of things. So it was better, so many a parent thought, if they were at the adventure playground, than if they were out somewhere else. And that's why Gene used to have so many children there, sometimes as many as 100 would be on the playground. And it wasn't an ordinary playground like you see today. It was a muddy area with sort of, as I said, hillocks and all sorts of things on it, so it didn't look like today's playgrounds.

### **WHAT WAS THE SHADOWS CLUB?**

Well, the children needed to get to know me first, and after that we started up the dances in November. That's when we opened up the Shadows Club. But before that, they actually helped build it, paint it, clean it out, do all the work themselves, with me there, and they called it the Shadows Club themselves, because there were a lot of newspaper articles at the time, moaning I think, we used to say it was moaning,

about Sparkbrook and Sparkhill. And the newspapers used to put headings on it like the 'twilight area' or the 'shadowed area', so they said, "We'll call ourselves the Shadows Club." And I think also, because they also pinched a bit of it from Cliff Richard at the time as well, because his backing group was called the Shadows. I think it was a chap called – ooh, I've forgotten his name now – Hank Marvin, yes Hank Marvin – he was a guitar player with the Shadows.

### **HOW TALL WERE THE TOWERS THAT THE CHILDREN BUILT?**

The towers would be – would go up about as far as maybe the second floor. There was a tower that went up as far as two floors in a house, and then the playground itself was, I would say, it was large, very large, because on one side of it there was an old, burnt-out church hall, and that had been burnt down the year before on Bonfire Night. It must have made a very good bonfire. That left an area for us to be able to play football and such, and the roof was still there. It was all very safe. So that was as wide as a church hall, and as long as a church hall. And then there was another space about twice that size beside it, and then half that size again to the back fence, so it was a very large area really. It had two very big huts on it. There was the nursery hut along that side, then there was the big playground hut as well, and then lots of space for the children to play in and run about.

### **WHAT DID THE CHILDREN OF SPARKBROOK TEACH YOU?**

I think I learnt so much, because I was going to go and be a youth leader, because I'd enjoyed the work so much and I learnt so much from Gene Pack and also from the children. The children taught me that you really needed to let them have a say, and if you did give them a say, they did things much better, they behaved much better and they achieved much better. They did some amazing things, some of the things they did. Some of them, they did some writing, they did some painting and it was really, really good. And I learnt to let children, well to, in fact to help guide them. That was one of the things. And I ended up by being a teacher, rather than a youth leader, just because of the Sparkbrook kids really.

### **WHAT IMPACT DID THE PLAYGROUND HAVE ON YOU?**

It changed my whole life. It did! It changed. I was going to go and be a clergyman, I thought originally, and I came to Sparkbrook. And meeting Gene Pack, and what he did on the playground and how successful he was in the way he worked with the children, which I hadn't come across before, and then with us setting up the Shadows Cellar Club afterwards – so the Playground opened in July and the Shadow Club opened in November and, having then worked with the children, I'd found I wanted to work with children for the rest of my life. And that's what happened.



WHEN DANCES WERE HELD BY GENE AND GEOFF IN THE PLAYGROUND HUT THERE WAS A DEMAND FOR MORE ACTIVITIES SO GEOFF OPENED THEIR SHADOWS CLUB IN THE CELLAR OF THE SPARKBROOK ASSOCIATION'S COMMUNITY HOUSE.

### WHAT SORT OF ACTIVITIES HAPPENED AT THE SHADOWS CLUB?

There were two main activities, one was like a social club and the other a dance, jive and rock and roll dive. It started from seven o'clock in the evening till ten o'clock. From seven till about eight o'clock it was like what we would call a coffee bar. It was for the older children, teenagers, but most were from the playground. It was down in the cellars at the Community House in Braithwaite Road. Under the stairs was a big archway where they helped to build in the bar with their cold milk machine and their Pepsi and Colas. We also had a hot water boiler so they made coffees and teas and they sold crisps and biscuits. They ran it all. Gene would lock up the playground about seven o'clock and many would come straight down to the club and have a Pepsi. They had done all the interior themselves with my help. They painted it and damp proofed it and helped with the bench seating along the walls. There was a coal chute. In those days they still had coal chutes where coal was tipped down into the cellars. One of the boys was a building apprentice and he helped to turn the coal chute into a doorway which gave us an extra exit. They would put the record player on from eight till ten. It was then a jive dance, rock and roll place which they loved. Sometimes it was packed, the maximum of the membership was forty. They had their own committee which I would sit in. They would run their drinks bar, run the records and I would be there to check everything was safe. Some of them would go upstairs because we had the large room there which had been turned into a games room so they would have table tennis and billiards. Out the back there was a kitchen where the girls did cooking, hair dressing and makeup sessions. But the main thing they really wanted was the cellar bar and rock and roll. It was important so that it was setup so they were not out on the streets with nothing to do!



# SPARKBROOK ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND

1961-1962

SPARKBROOK ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND WAS SET UP BY THE SPARKBROOK ASSOCIATION SOMETIME IN 1961/1962. THE PLAYGROUND EXISTED UNTIL AT LEAST OCTOBER 1963 AND MAYBE EVEN LONGER, BUT IT WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LATER YOUTH/COMMUNITY PROVISION IN THE AREA (I.E. THE BUILDING OF THE MORE PERMANENT ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND IN FARM PARK IN THE LATE 1960'S, THE SHADOWS CELLAR YOUTH CLUB, AND THE 1980'S SUMMER PLAY SCHEMES).



# Sparkbrook Adventure Playground

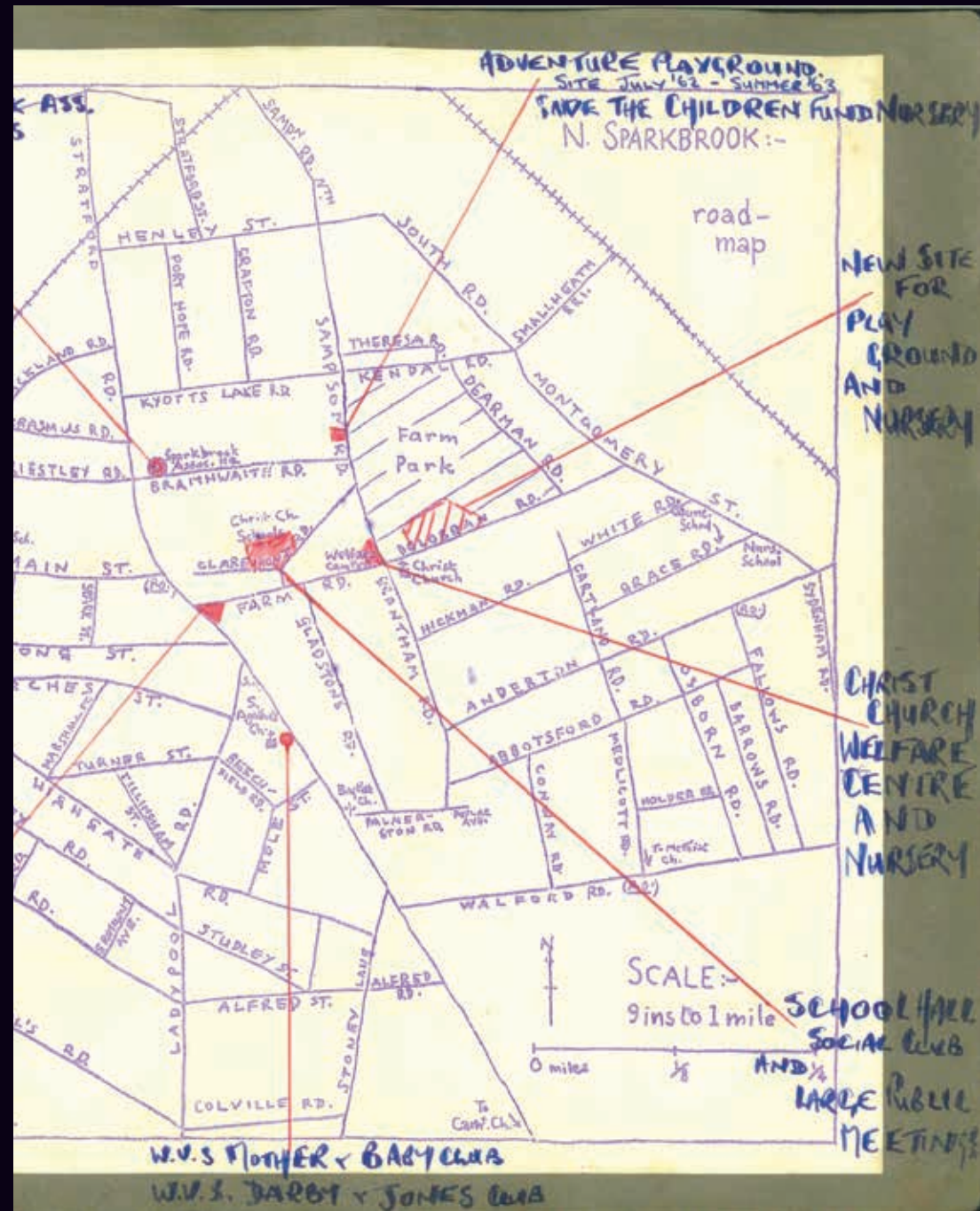


BIRMINGHAM'S first children's adventure playground opened in Sampson Road, Sparkbrook, last month. It has been built by members of the Sparkbrook Association and consists of a plot of waste ground on which are several small hills, three wooden huts and a pre-war motor car.

The car was given by Miss Elizabeth Tompkins, the Association's welfare officer, and was in use until a few days before the opening. The boy in the picture on the right had great fun pushing the spare wheel to the top of one of the hills and then watching it roll back down.

The children will be under the leadership of Mr. Gino Puck, who, at 24, is one of the youngest professional adventure playground leaders in the country. He has worked previously at similar playgrounds at Glimby and Reading, where 60 per cent. of his salary will be paid by the Corporation. He is holding the gate open for children in the picture on the left.

Opening the playground, the Deputy Mayor, Ald. E. E. Mole, said it was a pilot scheme for the rest of the city, if it were a success others would follow.





SACRAMENTO GATHERING OF  
PLAYGROUND KIDS WAITING  
FOR LUNCH



THE DEANAN FAMILY  
(THE BOUNCER CHES)



MR. POPE, DANNY KINGSLEY, Y.C.

# Kids



BEFORE  
AND



AFTER CHILDREN'S PARTY



YOUTH CLUB - PLAYGROUND  
OUTING

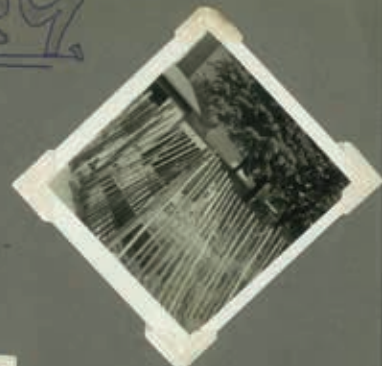


US AND GUINEA-PIG



POPE, DANNY KINGSLEY - KINGSLEY, Y.C.

# NURSERY A.P.







YOUTH CLUB OUTING TO WALE



5 OF MC 15 - 1941 CHILDREN



JOHN GARRY AND SKINNER  
YOUTH CLUB



YOUTH CLUB, BOYS WORKING  
AT THE PLAYGROUND



GLADIDINGS HALL  
ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND  
PAT CULLEN AND RITA HUGHES  
WITH PLAYGROUND CHILDREN



SHAMMO MCCARTHY - 13475 Y.C.



ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND



*G. Gaisford & S. Gregory*  
Report on the Adventure Playground

14th July 1962 - January 12th 1963

When the playground opened for the first time, the Deputy Lord Mayor performed the opening ceremony in pouring rain, and rain was to be the keynote of the summer holidays; when I checked at the end of the holidays I found that it had rained on at least three quarters of the days that the playground was open.

Because of my lack of contacts there was some initial difficulty in getting materials for the playground, but by the third week this had been more or less overcome. During the course of the holidays we saw many dens go up and mostly come down again very quickly, as we suffered from children getting in after the playground was closed. However, this entering of the playground out of hours fairly soon came to an end. The dens which went up were, on the whole, not very enterprising, being simple boxes of varying sizes; the biggest and best was put up by a gang of children, about a dozen or so, and this was large enough for the whole gang to get into. It stood throughout the holidays and was only taken down when the timber was needed for the bonfire. Some of the same gang also built an extremely good tree den in the playground's only tree.

Since the playground opened we have lost over twenty hammers; a number far in excess of what I had expected to lose. When I mentioned this to a local detective sergeant, he was surprised that I had any tools left at all and told me that in some of the childrens' homes the bringing home of a hammer "knocked" from the playground would be more likely to provoke congratulation than blame. Over the last few months though there has been very little stealing of playground property and, although there will doubtless be thefts from time to time, I think that the climate of opinion amongst the children about the playground will protect it from any more wholesale thefts. For example, recently I was very encouraged when three or four boys set off in pursuit of another lad who had taken a hammer, and returned with it, grinning, to announce that it was most unlikely that he would steal from the playground again.

One of the most depressing episodes of the holiday period was the wanton destruction of the two toilets and washbasins which were installed when the playground opened; these were completely smashed, probably by one of the teen-age groups in the area, but I think it very likely that some of the playground children were also involved. However, more encouragingly of the one hundred and two panes of glass in the large hut on the playground, only about ten have been broken and it has now been in use for some three months.

- 2 -

During the summer holidays we had large numbers of children using the playground, up to about ninety at a time on a good day, and even on wet days we often had thirty-odd, even though there was no place for them to shelter. How many use the playground now I am not sure; I do know that there are at least forty children whom I see every day without fail, and that there are at least another eighty who come sufficiently often for me to know them by name, as well as others whose faces I know but not their names. I should say that at the moment, when most activity is perforce centred on the hut, there must be around a hundred children who use the playground during the course of a week and of these about forty rarely play anywhere else. The ages of the children range from about two and a half to sixteen; though most of the "regulars" are between seven and fourteen years old. Of these not more than a quarter are girls.

Besides a nail-fund which ran sporadically during the summer holidays, and raised £3. 13. 5d. we have also had a shop, which ran for about a fortnight of the summer holidays and raised 18/3d. of which about 2/-d. would be profit. We have had raffles - for a rabbit, this raised 9/6d. for a dog (which disappeared and had to be replaced by toys) - 5/7d. for two boxes of fireworks, which cost us 18/-d and on which we made a profit of 6/10d. and finally a Christmas Tree which we got for the parties - it cost us 10/-d. and we made 4/-d. profit on it. Our latest and most venturesome project for raising money has been a dance, which has now been running for some eight weeks every Saturday night. Some of the older boys approached me one evening in November and asked if they could have a dance in the hut each week; they suggested that it be limited to children of 13 and over, that we should charge sixpence to come in and that it should run from 7.0 to 10 o'clock. Since it started we have also had a canteen running as well. We usually get anything from 25 to 40 children attending it each week. The children run it themselves, although either Geoff Gaisford or myself is always there, but it is the children who take the money at the door and run the canteen - and often help mop the floor at the end of the evening. The proceeds of the dance go to the playground one week and to the Shadows Club the next.

Bonfire night 1961 resulted in the Glad Tidings Hall being burnt down and so it was with some misgivings that I looked towards Bonfire night last year. However, in the event all went well, the bonfire went up on the night instead of before, no-one got hurt by fireworks, nothing got burnt down but the bonfire and even our neighbours were well pleased with us. Some of the children had decided to charge 3d. to watch the bonfire and we took 11/9d. on the door, however, since there were about a hundred children and adults there, we must have had some illegal entrants. Still it was a good bonfire.



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Since late October the hut has been in full and constant use; it has become the focal point of the playground rather in the same way that the toolshed was in the summer; but it has also become the centre for all activity as well. In the same way as outside, the children play freely without intervention, so they do inside having regard only to the safety of other people and the furniture. At first when we began using the hut before we had any quantity of furniture, play in the hut consisted mostly of wild chasing games and games such as "O'Grady Says", which the children played amongst themselves, and although we managed to get through the evening with some twenty or thirty children in the hut, we found that it was too cramped for games like this and that, in any case, they soon palled. However, we now have paints, crayons, plenty of paper, books, table tennis, various toys, building bricks and enough chairs, stools and tables. If you come into the hut almost any evening you are likely to find children playing table tennis, with other children playing chasing round the table, a couple sat playing draughts with probably another two or three watching the game, some children drawing or painting, while others are just running about playing perhaps cowboys and indians or some such game.

On Saturdays during the winter term there was no building on the playground at all, instead we have been having loads of logs and heavy timber delivered for sawing up into logs, which the children have been taking home for the fire. Since quite a few parents are now out of work, because of the bad weather, (many of them are unskilled building labourers etc), this has been a useful supplement to their fuel supplies. Getting the timber has been an activity in itself, as anything up to about eight of the older lads usually go on the lorry to pick the stuff up themselves. When the lorry has been unloaded, we usually have re-loaded it with brick-rubble and other rubbish from the playground. I estimate that during the last three months we have moved some fifty to sixty tons of rubbish, largely with the help of working parties from the university and the Birmingham colleges.

Just before the playground closed for Christmas, we held two parties on the playground, one for the under 13's and another for the older children. The first one I expected to be attended by about 50-50 children, but was in fact attended by about 80-90 children. At the second party, we had some forty-odd children. We were very fortunate in having most of the food for the parties given to us; for example we had:

- 108 chocolate teddy bears and 3 - 6½-lb. tins of biscuits from Cadburys.
- 2 crates of apples and oranges from a local greengrocer
- one bucket of jelly from Birds.
- 12 loaves from Hawsleys.
- About one hundred small cakes, and a large bowl of American Whip from Mrs. Jackson of the Mother and Baby Club.

- 4 -

and we had invaluable help from Mrs. Osborne and Miss Kent, who run the nursery on the playground. In addition, one of the older girls made a large Christmas cake at school for us.

When I returned after the Christmas holidays, snow was thick on the ground and the first group of children to arrive on the playground asked me to help them make a sledge; this was to be the key to the holiday activities. Over the holiday period I helped to make some dozen different sledges, and every day on the playground saw sledging and great snowball battles. The small hills on the playground are ideal for rolling sledges down or for ambushing people from when snowballing. Whilst some children were out in the snow there were usually plenty of others who stayed in the warmth of the hut where I was very glad of having plenty of voluntary help on the playground during the last holidays, for it meant that I was able to move in and out of the hut without having a trail of children behind me and without having to worry, while I was outside, whether anything was going wrong inside. Having plenty of help also meant that I was able to pass on to the helpers, those few children who seem unable to do anything without my help, this in turn meant that I was able to spread my time more fairly amongst the other children.

This holiday period marked a turning-point for the playground I feel, in that this was the first holiday when both the playground and the hut were open together for long periods. I was most encouraged by the appearance of a great feeling of belonging to the playground amongst the children, a feeling that showed itself in many ways. For example the way in which some of the children told the helpers how we did things; the indignation shown by the children towards those who were caught stealing from the playground; the way in which books borrowed by the children have returned the next day (one little boy even brought his round to the house on a Sunday morning); the way in which, when I want the hut cleaned at the end of the day (a big job involving tidying away, sweeping and mopping of a 40' x 20' floor), I often am able to choose who I want from volunteers; there have even been fights about who shall do it. Another example, while I was away at Christmas someone broke into the hut, but nothing was broken or stolen. All that the burglar did was to borrow a bow-saw to saw some logs in the tools shed and the bow-saw was still there when I got back.

That is the playground in general - but what about the individuals who compose it? Here is a short account of a few of them.

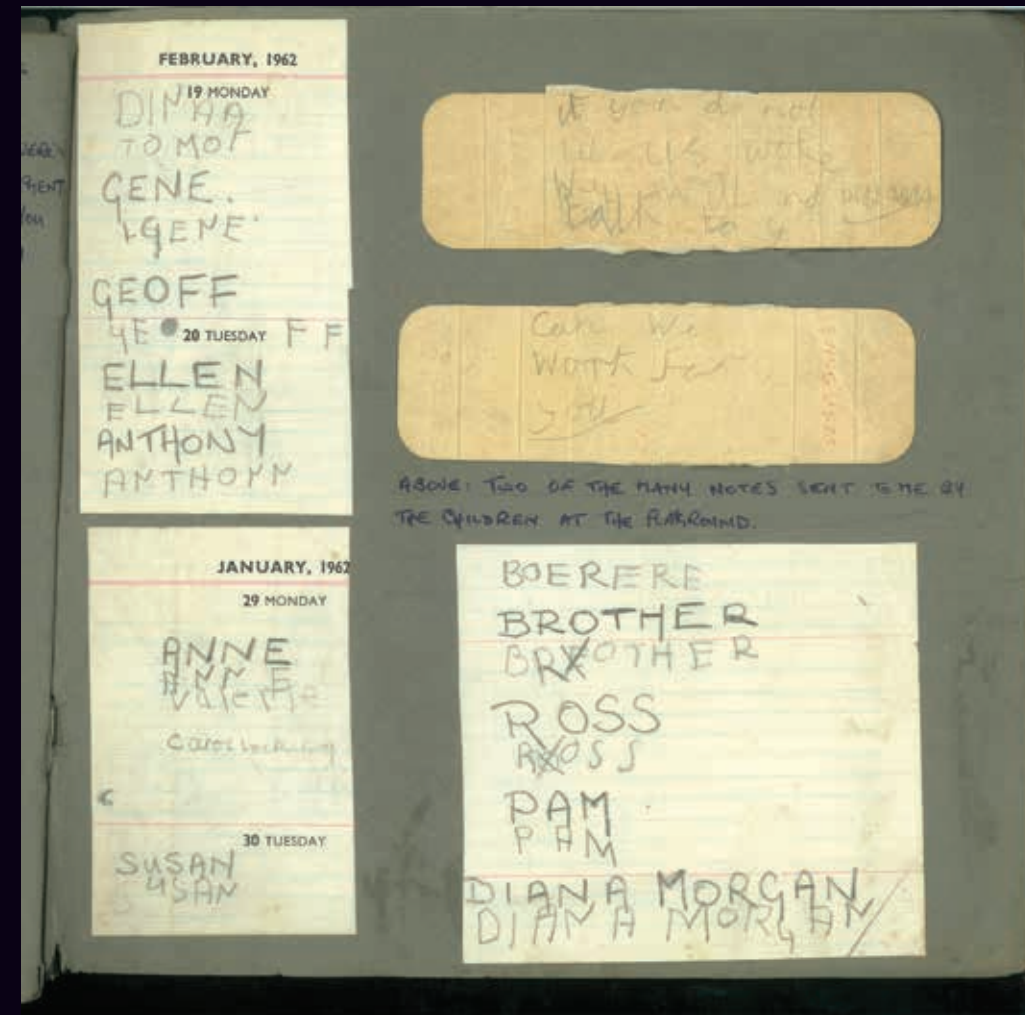


### What next?

On Saturday January 12th., whilst most of the younger children were at a party arranged by Hall Green Baptist Church, we took just over twenty of the older children, aged 13 and over, out to the Licky Hills sledging. We took the sledges we had made on the playground, many of them at the last minute on Saturday morning, and despite their crudeness compared with shop-bought sledges, everybody had a marvellous time. We were able to take the children thanks to the kindness of various people who gave their time and their cars for the afternoon.

As the weather gets better I should like to develop this idea further, first taking groups of children out for the day into the country walking or out to places of interest; later I should like to get small groups of them away for week-ends, say to Youth Hostels, where they could get the chance to meet other children of their own age, but with very different backgrounds. Perhaps later on we might even be able to start going off camping; all of these ideas, however, require help from other people in terms of time and transport.

Report by Gene Pack on the Sparkbrook Adventure Playground  
(typed up by Geoff Gaisford and volunteer Stephen Gregory).







# RAY WILLS

**PLAYWORKER,  
BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (MALVERN STREET),  
LATE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S**

## WHAT WAS BALSALL HEATH LIKE IN THE 1960S?

Red brick houses, you know, and all the slums and the conditions that people were living in. The kids were – there was a lot of demolition going on and a lot of bomb sites around. A lot of kids were playing on street corners. For me it was a very poor and deprived area. Obviously, there was a lot of different mix of people. There were West Indian, Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani. There were a lot of Irish. Quite a mixture of people, you know, and I saw the Ladypool Road market, which I thought was fantastic.

## COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT SETTING UP THE PLAYGROUND?

It was a challenge, because we had an adventure playground on a bomb site, and no money and no facilities. I had to work in a detached situation, getting to know the kids on the street, going round the schools, getting to know the kids in the schools, getting to know the kids in the wider community, getting to know the parents, etc. I had to work and encourage them to use that play space and make it theirs.

## WHERE WAS THE PLAYGROUND?

It was on Malvern Street, which is off Clifton Road, and it backed onto a nail factory. And, yeah, it was busy, getting to know the kids on the street, seeing them on the street corners, playing football on street corners, and you would join in with them and you'd talk to them and encourage them and say, "This is gonna be your place, especially for you, and you're going to build it." And we'd try to explain to them what we were going to do using waste materials, planks, any old building materials, and they'd create their own playground, building their own dens and swings, etc, and they would build fires and dugouts, basically whatever they wanted.

## COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

Well, initially, the first group of people I met were skinheads, and they were throwing stones at street lights. They spent their time throwing stones at streetlights, swearing and spitting and smoking cigarettes, about 14 years of age. And I got to know that group, they were the first group that I got to work with, basically, and then other kids came on board. I built a nucleus of kids around me. Kids got to know

me on the streets, "Oh, it's old Ray, he's one of us." I wasn't Mr Wills, I was Ray. And I got tools and I scrounged building materials from the corporations. They were burning a lot of stuff, so I went down to them and spoke to agents to encourage them not to burn stuff and asked them to bring it to us.

I got to know the kids and their families, each family in the area, because I spent a lot of time on the streets, going round the houses, taking the kids out to the pictures, doing all sorts of stuff with the kids. So I got this nucleus after a time. Whenever I appeared on the street, it would be all quiet and I would appear, and all the kids would swarm out, you know. They knew if I was there something would happen. I'd take them to the pictures or Cannon Hill Park.

I'd sit there with the families, they had big families, like Irish families with seven or eight children to a family, and you'd be sitting around. They had very little – poor clothing, thin clothing – and they were living in homes where water was running down the walls. There was all sorts of deprivation there. Margaret Selby was the community worker, and she encouraged me to meet with the families and all the kids. So I got to know the kids, and I'd go in the house and all the kids would come and sit on my lap, little kids, it was like that, that's the sort of relationship I had with the parents. The parents would say, "Go on out with Ray for the day," and they would trust me, and I would take all the kids out. I built this relationship, and they all came onto the playground, to build up the playground, and the kids built camps, dens, forts, all sorts of things on the playground, and the playground was open, you know, full time. There was probably a nucleus of about 400 kids, but not at any one time. They would come and go. Some days we would only get 20 kids, because of the weather or whatever, because at the time we had no building.

## COULD YOU TELL ME MORE ABOUT BALSALL HEATH AT THE TIME?

There was Old Balsall Heath and New Balsall Heath. There was a dividing line on Moseley Road. Yeah, the division was Moseley Road. On the other side of Moseley Road there were gangs – groups of youngsters, peer groups you go around with, friends and mates the same age. I'll give you one situation I was involved with. I was called onto the playground, rushed onto the playground, and there was a fight, and I went there, and there were these two girls – one from old Balsall Heath and one from New Balsall Heath. Of course I know them all, and they had knives on them and they were facing each other. They had the skinhead there, and the braces and the boots. They were girls, 13/14 year old girls, and they were going to kick the hell out of each other. I stood right in the middle of them both and talked them through it and got them to give me their knives and made them friends, if you like. They both came to the playground regularly, and took their brothers to the playground regularly.

## COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT A TYPICAL OUTING?

Yeah, every year Birmingham had its Tulip Festival at Cannon Hill Park. It was a big event but it was quite costly to get in for a family, and most the kids could not

afford to go in obviously, from Balsall Heath, their parents were on low salaries. I contacted the National Playing Fields Association and said I wanted to take the kids down to the festival, but how do I do it? How do I do it with no money? And he said, "Well don't worry about it Ray, because we can arrange it through the council, because we have got a representative of the National Playing Fields Association on every Council, and I'll contact him and you'll get a pass, to take so many kids down." And I said, "OK," and he came back to me and said, "It's OK Ray, phone this guy up and talk to him, he's a good friend of mine." And he said, "Oh no no no no, we're not having - you can't do that." I said, "Mr Abernethy..." He said, "No no no no, we can't do - you can't do that." So I say, "OK." So I get this phone call from Drummond, right, and he says, "You get on alright?" And I said, "No!" He said, "What do you mean, no?" I said, "He said to me no!" He said, "What?" He said, "Right, give me a time..." He came back to me, and he said, I phoned him up and he said, "Oh yes, OK, come down - how many kids do you...?" I had about 160/200 kids, something like that, and I had all these mums and dads come down with their kids you know, and we all trooped down the hill to Cannon Hill Park, and we got to the gate and the guy said - he looked at the paper - the pass I had, and I said, "We've got a pass from National Playing Fields," and he said, "I'll go and see." And he went off and came back and said, "OK, you can go in." So all the kids rushed in Cannon Hill Park, and we had a great day, fantastic!

### **DO YOU HAVE ANY GOOD STORIES ABOUT THE PLAYGROUND?**

There was a gang of youths on the playground, and they built this fantastic structure which had this planking of wood and a chimney and a fireplace, which they'd cook meals in this structure, and it had tunnels onto it, under the ground, and every week there'd be something new added onto it. It just went on and on, and it was massive. It was 20 odd feet high, you know, and it had runways coming down it. All sorts of hidden tunnels, trap doors.

Another instance that I can tell you is, we had a fence, a wooden fence around the playground, and somebody was stripping off the wood, and I thought it was the kids first of all and they said, "No, it's not us Ray." And this boy was telling me, "It's an old lady doing it," and I said, "No, it's not," and he said, "It is. She's coming round with a pram and she's ripping it off." I thought, "It can't be, no, surely not." Anyway, I waited there, in the evening I didn't go home, so I was stood around, because the playground was closed, so I stood around waiting and waiting, and this lady came round, this old lady with a pram. She got a hammer out of her bag and she started ripping the wood off. I went over to her and said, "What do you think you're doing?" "I'm getting some firewood". I said, "You can't do this, it's an adventure playground, it is for the kids". "What?" I said, "This is the fence." "Oh, I didn't know that". I said, "What, you got a problem?" She said, "I need firewood" I said, "Right, leave it with me. Give us your name and address." And I took her name and address, and I got back and seen the kids the following day, and I said to the kids, "You were right!" They said, "What are you gonna do Ray?" I said, "We're gonna get some wood together, and we're gonna deliver some

wood to her." So we started a firewood service for elderly people in the area.

The patron of the adventure playground was Sir Paul Cadbury of Cadburys Trust, you know, really nice man, a gentleman. When I'd just moved into the area, I went to a meeting at St Paul's Hall. It was a union meeting of all Balsall Heath Association and groups around. I put my foot in it really because I spoke up about the conditions - there was all representatives of all the corporations - and I spoke up about the conditions of the houses, where people were living and there was water running down the walls and, you know, toilets were flooded outside, outside toilets were flooded, and all sorts of conditions people were living in and it wasn't right. I got reprimanded by my social administrator, but then Paul Cadbury came round to me, and also the local minister, and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Thank you very much Ray."

Another time the police - I was on the playground, there was this other structure we'd built, it was lunchtime and the kids were at school and I was just sat on top of this structure, just sat down, and I had my sandwiches, and a police car drew up, alongside the playground. I hadn't been there very long and, of course, there wasn't much happening. And these two coppers were watching me, watching me, eventually they came over to me. "What do you think you're doing, eating your sandwiches, what are you doing - this is not - you shouldn't be - what are you doing - what are you looking at?" You know, dodgy. I said, "This is going to be the adventure playground." Anyway, I had a bit of trouble from it. He went off in a bit of a mood with me, this copper did. I talked to my association about it and they said, "We'll get a meeting with the local police liaison." So we got this meeting with the police liaison for Birmingham and I met him and it was sorted.

### **COULD YOU TALK ABOUT RISK?**

If you take away the risk, you take away life, because you just don't do nothing. When you're on an adventure playground, when the kids are on the playground, they use materials, and some of those materials, going back now to the 60s and 70s, were not actually very user-friendly, like corrugated tin, etc. So, despite all that, despite all the hundreds and hundreds and hundreds and thousands of kids who use the adventure playground, from the 50s right through to the present time, despite all the thousands and thousands of kids that have used them, there are very very very few serious adventure playground accidents, when you compare that to other accidents.

### **SO WHAT'S AN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND TO YOU?**

It's a place where children can do many things which it can't do in an organised situation, in a normal situation. They can build fires, they can cook, they can use tools, they can build camps, they can go on 'air runways', which are called 'zip-cords' now. They can use playing materials, they can use water, they can play games, they can - as they normally do, but there is - it suits all age groups too, and up to 20, so you have the older ones looking after the younger ones. It was a community. At a playground today, you go on a swing, and you swing on a swing, and that's it. What can you do? What can you do? You can't move nothing



# BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (MALVERN STREET)

MALVERN ST. ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND WAS SET UP BY THE BALSALL HEATH ASSOCIATION WHICH WAS A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT BASED IN COURT ROAD, BALSALL HEATH. RAY WILLS WAS THE FIRST APPOINTED PLAYLEADER IN 1969 AND THE CHOSEN SITE FOR THE PLAYGROUND WAS AN ABANDONED PIECE OF WASTELAND IN MALVERN STREET. IT OVERLOOKED THE REAR PREMISES OF A NAIL FACTORY, BACKING ONTO A PUBLIC HOUSE, A ROW OF COUNCIL HOUSE BACKYARDS AND A RAILWAY BANK SIDING. AFTER RAY WILLS, ROB WHEWAY BECAME THE NEXT PLAYLEADER, FOLLOWED BY DAVE SWINGLE IN 1977. IT WAS AROUND THIS TIME THAT THE ST. PAULS PROJECT TOOK OVER THE MALVERN STREET PLAYGROUND INCORPORATING IT INTO THEIR OVERALL ST. PAULS PROJECT. IN THE 1970S THE PLAYGROUND BECAME MORE COMMONLY KNOWN AS 'THE VENTURE'. THE PLAYGROUND IN SOME FORM EXISTED RIGHT UP UNTIL 2000 WHEN THE ST PAULS NURSERY WAS BUILT.

Going out to play inspired me  
to be creative, to know about  
things, and wanting to study  
about certain things, you know.



It just made my life  
a bit more exciting.

# VAL HART

## **INVOLVED IN BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (MALVERN STREET) AND MULTIPLE OTHER PLAYGROUND PROJECTS ACROSS THE CITY, 1970S ONWARDS.**

### **WHAT WAS BALSALL HEATH LIKE WHEN YOU FIRST MOVED HERE?**

I was shocked by what Balsall Heath was like, because it was like being in a war zone or something. It was like there had been a huge battle everywhere, and everything was sort of in ruins. I think what happened was, if you imagine yourself in a German bomber in the Second World War, coming over Birmingham, everything was blacked out, there were no street lights, but of course, there was no way of blacking out everything. So what they followed was, they followed the railway line, and they followed the river Rea. Do you know where the river is? Down the bottom through Calthorpe Park? Running that side? Well, the railway runs the other side over there, doesn't it? And so actually, Balsall Heath was right between those two and they knew exactly where to drop their bombs. They called Moseley Road 'bomb alley'.

There were these huge derelict patches everywhere, of ruined buildings and just empty sites and rubbish. It was absolutely horrible. I was really, really shocked. Rubbish everywhere, smells everywhere. It was revolting! Especially because this was where kids had to play, so it was a really shocking area. And it was very crowded. There weren't as many green spaces as there are now. You know if you go down Tindal Street, there is a little green space on the left - that was all houses. If you go down St Paul's Road, there's quite a big park there - well that was all houses. There were hardly any parks or any green spaces anywhere. One of the few was Balsall Heath Park. But, really, there was nowhere much to go or play, or do anything. Very, very crowded, very busy and a lot of people living here, and a lot of people with very little money, no work and very poor.

### **CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN THE BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?**

Well yes. I started working at a little school which started in 1975 in St Paul's Road, which was called St Paul's School. But actually, one of the things that happened was, that when they got this adventure playground, they discovered it wasn't just kids after school and in the holidays and at the weekends that were using it, but actually it was full of all these secondary-age kids during the day as well, who weren't at school. They were kids who had been expelled from school, or didn't go, and were

truanting. The place was quite full really, of kids. So, that's how the school got started - because these people said we should try to provide something for these kids who were just hanging around all day. So we started this little school in a terraced house, and that where I started working. I was there for about ten or twelve years. Then I moved over to what was the adventure playground site. But I was quite involved with it all from the beginning really, because we worked with the adventure playground.

### **CAN YOU DESCRIBE THE ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?**

Well, when I first saw it, which was in 1975, it was quite frightening. It was these great big huge structures, and the kids themselves had built it, together with a couple of play leaders. It was lovely for the kids. If you think that their alternative was playing on the bomb sites, they called the 'bomb pecks'. They were very, very risky places to play. Sometimes they came across all sorts of old bits of rubbish and bits of dumped equipment, and all sorts and dumped cars. It was dreadful. So, the adventure playground wasn't safe, but it was more exciting, and they had got adults around. But it was massive - great huge structures the kids had built themselves with their hammers and nails. They had a go at doing it themselves, and cutting up the wood, and banging it all together. When you walked onto it, it swayed! It wouldn't do for health and safety these days. But it was exciting actually, very exciting.

### **WHAT SORT OF ACTIVITIES HAPPENED?**

Well, there was a lot of activity, and sort of making things to play on and inventing games - all sorts of games associated with chasing people around or, you know, climbing up things and hiding things, and places and so on. There was quite a lot of drama. And then, of course, actually opposite the playground, there was a cinder patch, which was actually literally cinders. It was like - do you know what cinders are? It's like coal, that's been burnt and finished with, sort of ashes, not quite ashes, but a hard dirty surface. But that's what the kids played on for football. So, it wasn't very ideal at all. So there were lots of games of all kinds, and as well as that, the playground was also the base from where they took the kids out a lot on trips, so trips out to Cannon Hill and, in fact, the seaside. There were seaside trips. I can tell you the first thing everybody did on a seaside trip - as soon as they saw the sea - they ran straight into it, fully clothed. Every time!

### **DO YOU HAVE ANY MEMORABLE STORIES?**

Well yes, I suppose so. What happened was, with the adventure playground, it became safer over the years, and I moved over from the school to the adventure playground in 1988. By then, it had stopped being called 'the adventure playground' and by then it was called 'the Venture', which was a shortened version. It's what the kids have always called it. "Are you going down the Venture?" That's what they used to say. So, we called the place 'the Venture', and what I was running there was - I ran big big play



schemes in every holiday, and lots of activities after school, and at the weekends. But the big play schemes were really huge. By now, there were lots of children coming from lots of different countries into Balsall Heath, and there was a big mixture of people on the playground, which was lovely actually, really good. One day, we had started the farm in 1980, so we had this little farm with some animals and we had some goats. One day, I was there and I saw this little boy, and he never left the goats, and he was always on the farm and he spent all his time leaning over looking at the goat paddock. So I went and had a chat with him. I said, "I see you're looking at the goats. Do you like goats?" And he said, "Yes." Nothing more! So, I talked a bit more and it turned out that he'd only just come to Birmingham, and up till then, the week before that, he had been living on this goat farm in Pakistan. This was his only connection with home. He saw these goats and it felt like home for him. All the buildings and all the city was really, really strange for him, but that made him feel like home.

It was very interesting, because the kids themselves, you'd know this, you all have your own rules of what's right and what's wrong, don't you? And there was this one little lad, he was probably about eleven actually, and he got into a terrible fight, so I banned him. I said, "Right, you can't come to the play scheme. For the rest of the day, you can't come in, you've got to stay out." There was no way I could keep him out, because I hadn't put somebody on the gates to tell him not to come in, but he stood outside the gates for the whole day, on his own, and the other kids kept going and talking to him but he said, "I'm not allowed in." The next day he came in and was fine. But kids have their own sense of what's right and what's wrong, don't they? He was imposing the punishment upon himself. Obviously, I consulted him about whether he thought it was fair, and he did, so he did it.

### **WAS THE PLAYGROUND BUSY?**

The kids! I used to love it when there were loads and loads of kids tearing around, doing their own thing all over the place. We had lots and lots of activities on the play scheme, you know. We'd have arts and crafts in the hall and we had games happening in another room, and we had outside sports, and we'd have a trip going out. We'd have kids tearing around, inventing their own games outside. It was always incredibly busy. Certainly, at the point that I started there, we limited the numbers to 100 a day, but even then, we had queues of people waiting to come in. We had to say to people, "You can't come in, please, we can't take any more", because we couldn't. But after that, the numbers had to drop because the city got more and more interested in keeping the children safe, and the right number of children per adult.

### **WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THE CHILDREN OF BALSALL HEATH WHO USED THE PLAYGROUND?**

What did I learn from them? I think I learnt how interesting it was, that people could come from so many different backgrounds, and so many different places in

the world, and get on so well together. That's what I learnt. It was really interesting because, in some parts of the city, at the times when I was working at the Venture, there were a lot of problems in other parts of the city - where people were having riots and all sorts of tensions. People were very unhappy. Actually, in Balsall Heath, things always worked a bit better. One of the things is, the people in Balsall Heath had people coming from other countries for so long, they had learned how to live together nicely. I think that's what I learned.

### **WAS THE PLAYGROUND IMPORTANT TO THE LOCAL AREA?**

I think it was massively important, absolutely massive. Because there were so many families, all over the area, with children, and the Venture and the play scheme were the focal point. Everybody shared, people came from all different parts of the area to it. It wasn't just the children from one particular school, it was all the schools in the area, and there was a very good mixing together of lots of different people and different ideas. A lot of parents and volunteers came to help us. It was a very very good mix of people.

### **WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PLAYGROUND?**

Yes, it was sad when the adventure playground went really, but I can tell you what happened. At the top of St Paul's Road there was a nursery, which was for young kids before they went to school. In the year 2000 Balsall Heath won Sure Start money which, together with Lottery funds, meant we could build a lovely big new nursery. Everybody decided in the area that where the nursery should go was where the adventure playground was. So the adventure playground gave way to the nursery. It was quite hard, and in fact I can tell you that at that point, when it was all being built, and we had a play scheme happening, and there was a little boy, running up and down by the fence beside where the building site was, and he was saying, "Hate the nursery, hate the nursery, hate the nursery!" because he had lost his adventure playground, and it was quite hard on the kids actually.



Image: Mick Turner





How does  
butterfly?

draw each of  
go through.

What is our  
draw a picture of

become

he has to

doing?

will look when  
wished this





kids have their own sense of what's  
right and wrong, don't they?



# HAQI ALI

**ACTOR, WRITER AND DIRECTOR,  
PLAYED AT BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (MALVERN STREET),  
1970s AND 1980s**

## WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF PLAYING AS A CHILD IN BALSALL HEATH?

My memories as a child – my first memory is playing on a ‘bomb peck’. Does anybody know what a ‘bomb peck’ is? Well, during the war, when lots of bombs fell on Birmingham and lots of factories and lots of places were blown up, ‘bomb pecks’ were these places where there was bare land where once were buildings, but the buildings had been blown and crashed, so there were lots of craters there, and so that is where we used to play, and that’s where I grew up, until the Venture.

## WHO DID YOU PLAY WITH?

Well, I played with my sister, my brother. I played with the neighbours’ kids, and there was also the Romany gypsies that had moved in nearby, so I was playing with those kids as well. I became friends with all those kids.

We used to hang out and make dens and go scrumping. Do you know, on St Paul’s Road, where Balsall Heath Forum is, the flower garden is? Well that was also bare, and there were



just trees there. We used to play round there as well. And then, we kind of started playing at the Venture when I was about six or seven years old. And what I remember from the Venture is, it was a very scary place at the time, because of the climbing frames. They were just massive, they were humongous. Very dangerous as well – thrown together with rusty nails and old pieces of wood.

## WHO PLAYED THERE?

It was just a mish mash of lots of people from different countries and different nationalities, and there were different religions, you know, so we were tolerant about other people, and we learnt to get on with people and be friends.

## WHAT WAS THE BEST PART OF THE PLAYGROUND?

The climbing frame was the best part of the playground. I mean, I would say that was the most, you know, that’s what you saw when you came round the corner, and you’d see this massive frame, climbing frame that looked so big and dangerous. Have you seen the photos of the climbing frame? Right, because it kept changing and because, when they first built it, it was really dangerous! It was just like – and then somebody came along and, “Oh look, no, no, that’s dangerous, I don’t want my kid going up there.” So they said, “OK, we’ll fix that.” And they took that down, and over the years it’s just got smaller and smaller, and they took it down, and then it’s just a ramp, and eventually – it’s now a carpark.

## WHAT IMPACT DID THE PLAYGROUND HAVE LOCALLY?

Well locally, it brought a lot of people together, and it brought the community together, and it was great because, when you meet people, later in school, you’d just automatically be friends because you’d met them at the playground, and that was really important, not just that the kids – lots of people came, and then going to the events as well, because there were carnivals and open days, and every now and then they’d have a jumble sale, or something like that you know, and some activities, a family day, yeah. You’d have families coming down and lots of people, so it was a chance and a time to socialise with other people.

## WHAT IMPACT DID BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND HAVE ON YOU AS AN INDIVIDUAL?

It had a big impact on me because I got a chance to be creative there, and it just led on – one creative thing led on to another creative thing and led on to meeting other creative people. Then from the Venture, when I did join the theatre group, I realised how important it was to collaborate, to work as a team.

## IF YOU HADN’T BEEN ABLE TO GO TO THE PLAYGROUND, WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?

Then I would have – I dunno what I would have done. I would have gone crazy. I would have, yeah, I would have not – I don’t think I would have been an actor, or had the desire. I could

have just been a factory worker or – not that there's anything wrong with a factory worker – but I would have been something else, I suppose. It's kind of – going out and playing inspired me to be creative, to know about things, and wanting to study about certain things, you know. It just made life a bit more exciting.

#### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN TO HAVE SOMEWHERE TO PLAY?

It's important because it allows people, it allows your brain to develop, and your brain only develops – the best ideas have come from people who like to daydream and play, and when you daydream and when you play, you know, you're opening up all possibilities, and so it's kind of like – and that's why it's really important, because it allows the brain to develop. It allows you to learn things, it allows you to meet people and understand different people, yeah.

*If you take away the risk,  
you take away life, because  
you just don't do nothing.  
At a playground today, you go on  
a swing, and you just swing on a  
swing, and that's it. What can  
you do? You can't move nothing.*



Play toys / community art project by Dave Swingle,  
Malvern Street Adventure Playground, Balsall Heath



# SOUTH ASTON PLAYCENTRE



South Aston Adventure Playground, Olympic Games Mural

SOUTH ASTON PLAYCENTRE WAS STARTED IN 1980 BY JULIA PREECE, AN EX-WORKER FROM THE ST. PAULS PROJECT WHO STARTED THE PROJECT BASED AROUND EDUCATION, OFFERING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN A LESS FORMAL MANNER. NOT DESIGNED AS AN EXPLICITLY 'FREE PLAY' ENVIRONMENT, RATHER THE PLAY ACTIVITIES, STRUCTURE BUILDING, ARTS PROVISION WERE DEVELOPED IN LINE WITH LOCAL SCHOOLS.



Malvern Street Adventure Playground, Balsall Heath

# WALTER THE WHALE

1979

BALSALL HEATH  
ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND  
(MALVERN STREET)

INITIATED BY PLAY WORKER DAVE SWINGLE, THE WALTER THE WHALE SCULPTURE WAS AN ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECT AIMED AT RECYCLING METAL BED SPRINGS, CHAIN LINK FENCING, METAL RODS ETC. TO FORM A STRUCTURE WHICH WAS THEN COVERED IN CONCRETE. THE PROJECT WAS SPONSORED BY LOCAL BUILDING COMPANIES. PLAYGROUND CHILDREN WERE INVOLVED IN A TWO-WEEK PROJECT WHICH WAS INTRODUCED BY A DRAMA PRESENTATION WHICH LED ON TO THE BUILDING OF THE STRUCTURE.

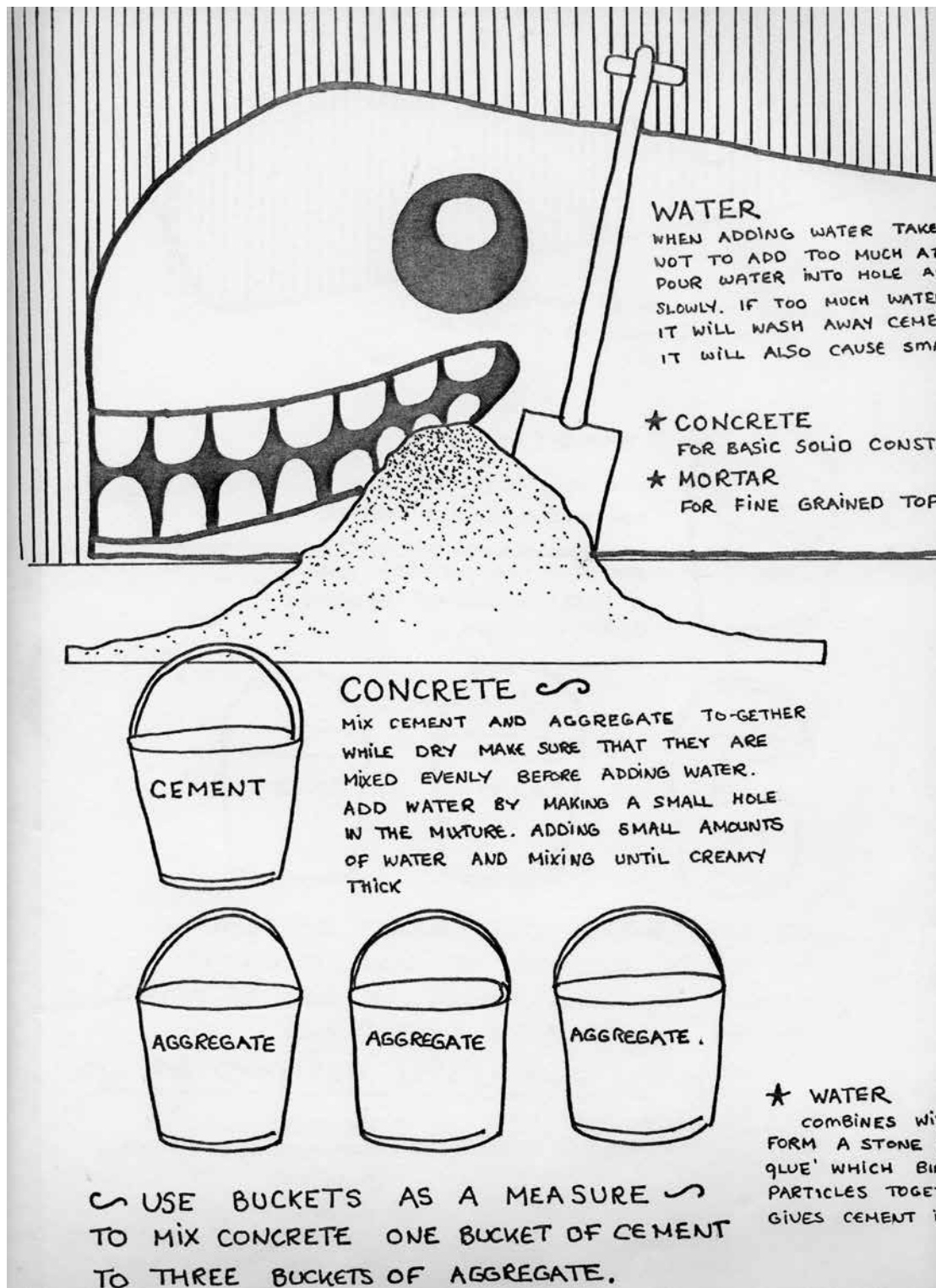
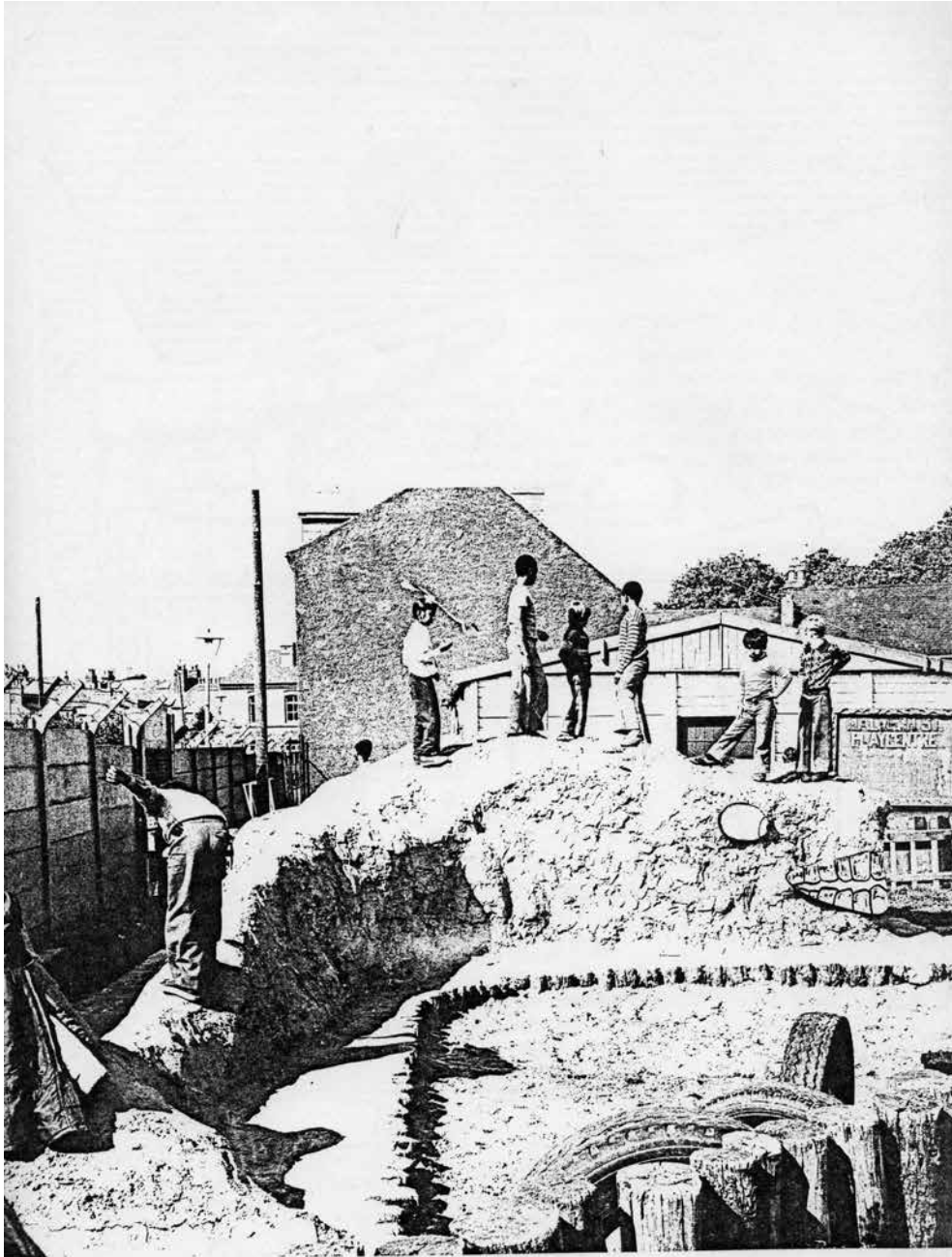




WALTER THE WHALE









# ROHAN BROWN

**INTERNATIONAL SALSA DANCER AND TEACHER,  
PLAYED AT BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (MALVERN STREET),  
1970S AND 1980S**

## COULD YOU DESCRIBE BALSALL HEATH WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP?

My parents come from – they're Jamaican descent. They came to Balsall Heath in the early 50s, and they had me, one of seven children, and Balsall Heath, Runcorn Road was the exact pinpoint.

## COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE LOCAL AREA?

In my opinion, it was pretty rough in parts. I would say there was a north and south divide. There was the pretty rough side with the prostitution and the drugs side of it, and then there was the other side where some really really decent families lived.

## DID LOTS OF KIDS GRAVITATE TOWARDS THE PLAYGROUND?

Yes actually. There was a cross section of children that gravitated towards Malvern Street. Before that I think there was a place called Bonanza. It was basically right at the end of the park. You know the park right opposite Malvern Street, Seven Streets Park? Where someone had donkeys, and a few fairground things, and they would have the small kids go around and ride on the donkeys, and it was just through that that we happened to see this Malvern Street thing, so it kind of tied up. We were playing on the donkeys, pretty young actually, and met with a few kids who went to Malvern Street. They were older kids, and they introduced us to Malvern Street, and the rest was history.

## COULD YOU DESCRIBE WHAT IT WAS LIKE THERE?

It's a bit of a haze right now because it's a bit difficult to remember. It was kind of like a battle zone, so to speak, because there were dens everywhere. Lots of big pieces of wood. Lots of kids running around. Lots of harmony, but disharmony in its own sense, because it was kids doing different things.

## WERE THE KIDS ALLOWED A FREE REIGN?

It was controlled chaos. And I say that because the organisers at the time were quite open to children having their freedom to express themselves the way they wanted to. Yeah, I would say it was pretty open at the time.

## WHAT SORT OF ACTIVITIES DO YOU REMEMBER?

There was absolutely everything. There was den building, there was – the den building competitions were the best, to say. There was a lot of sport. There was a lot of nature. You know, kids who were into books, there was a lot of storytelling. There was a lot of, you know, nature trail stuff. There was a lot of artwork. There was a lot of, what would you call it, farm-type projects going on also.

## THE DEN BUILDING COMPETITIONS, WAS THAT A REGULAR THING?

It was a regular thing, yes. It was quite early-man-type thing to be honest, because they would advertise when the competition was, people would turn up and get put into groups. You were given a hammer and about 50 nails, and you could pick as much wood as you want, you'd get help to do it, and you could build a den, wherever you wanted within an allotted area, and health and safety didn't really come into it. But it was the most amazing experience.

## DID YOU EVER WIN?

I think we won a couple of times, but really, I mean, we were all competitive, but we just had so much fun doing it, it didn't really matter who won.

## HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU WERE THERE?

I lived on Runcorn Road and a bunch of us always played football on the street or in the avenues and were always shooed away by Miss Brown or whoever, so Malvern Street was like a safe haven where we could actually just let rip and let loose. So it was a very cathartic experience when you were there, because everything was open for you to just express. You know, it was just a beautiful experience.

## WAS THERE MUCH CONTROL?

Yes, there was a band of control, but somehow they, they actually – for example, a game of football, they knew that, or it seemed as if they knew, that we were bending the rules a lot of the time, so you know they just allowed children to be children. There was an element of control when it came to fighting and cursing and swearing, you know. There was a lot of it, but they were good enough not to be that strong arm that just kicked you out if you said it once or twice, because they knew kids were kids.

## WERE THERE ANY ACCIDENTS?

I remember being in a few scrapes with nails and hammers and falling off my own den a few times, but that was the beauty of growing up as a child, I think the invisible ethos was, you know, in life these things are going to happen and you have to learn to work your way around things, you know? I think part of the problem is with some places, they wrap you in cotton wool too much and you don't really have that space to express and learn about yourself, how you respond under pressure

when you've just grazed your knee, you know? So I would say, with the den building competitions, it probably wouldn't be allowed these days, but it was the most amazing experience to learn about yourself and others. I think most of what I am today, that was the breeding ground for it. I've done many, many different things, and a lot of it started at that centre.

### **ARE THERE LINKS BETWEEN THAT PLAYGROUND AND THINGS YOU'VE ENDED UP DOING AS YOUR CAREER?**

Yeah, well, I mean, if I go through as a synopsis of the different things I've done and where it started, you know, I played semi-professional basketball and professional and it all started with Malvern Street. And I've done county athletics, which started at Malvern Street. I forgot the art side was a big side of it also, I did a lot of plays as a child, and it really helped me to see the world as a platform to express myself. I've been film extras. I'm also an MC. I MCed from time to time with the Miss World events, and I MCed at some of the largest Latin events in the world, so I would say really, Malvern Street, it was like the platform where a lot of seeds were able to grow.

### **HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARISE THE IMPACT OF THE PLAYGROUND LOCALLY?**

I think, in my opinion, when I drive around various areas, I don't see children having that outlet, and I would say that attributes to certain types of crime in the areas. So having Malvern Street, where it was at the time, you know, I think it drew a lot of kids to it, and it took a lot of pressure off parents. It took a lot of pressure off children doing – basically being delinquent. It really channeled their energies into something very very positive, and I would say the ethos of the whole place was about channelling energy and being positive. So if that wasn't there, I would have said that they probably wouldn't have had that positive platform, and possibly gone onto doing not so great things.

### **HOW LONG DID YOU GO THERE FOR?**

I really can't remember, but it felt like as long as I could until I was too old to go. I mean, at the time I was, at the age of 14, I was playing semi-professional sport, so that took me away, and I was travelling round the world. But yeah, I was there 'til a later age, but the amazing thing is, my brother is five years younger than I, I brought him there, and my daughter who was ten, I brought her there, so we got two different generations going there.

### **WAS THAT COMMON FOR FAMILIES IN BALSALL HEATH?**

I think a lot of people connected with Malvern Street as being that hub of this great invitation to playing or expressing, you know? Yeah, I think Malvern Street was, I think it is something that is definitely needed around.

And there was a point where I became a helper. I became a trustee of sorts, I

was classed as one of the sporting successes of Malvern Street, playing basketball and athletics, so I then started to help out with the basketball training and with the athletics training and just as a general mentor to the smaller kids. So that is a point that I could see, that was very important to helping potential community leaders to help themselves. I then disappeared abroad and came back as an older individual, but still volunteered when I could, so every now and then I'd go and visit Val, and she was amazing at getting you to do stuff, and to keep you connected, and I think all the communities needs that, once you get to a certain age, that you give back to the people who were once where you were.

### **DO YOU MISS BALSALL HEATH?**

I certainly do miss Balsall Heath. I'll say this, living in Balsall Heath as a child, and going to the outskirts, Balsall Heath didn't have a great reputation, because of the prostitution. But it's always a funny thing, when you're on the inside you don't see what people see on the outside. On the inside, it was exactly what you just said, people getting on. I grew up in a culture where there was a lot of Irish families, and a lot of old English families who would look after their gardens, and they would be cleaning the doorsteps every Sunday before they went to church, and a lot of people would know each other's names, and I think Malvern Street was that place that really looked at keeping people together, forging people together, getting people to speak, getting people to express, and so forth. So I think Balsall Heath was pretty unique in relation to the other areas that I've been to, and the Malvern Street programme was right at the epicentre of that.



# BOOTH STREET HANDSWORTH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND

BOOTH STREET OPENED IN 1973 ON A DERELICT PIECE OF OPEN LAND IN BOOTH STREET, HANDSWORTH. THE AREA WAS DESIGNATED AS AN AREA FOR REDEVELOPMENT. IT WAS ATTACHED TO A COMMUNITY ADVICE CENTRE RUN BY BIRMINGHAM CITY SOCIAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT WHICH OFFERED ADVICE ON RE-HOUSING, BENEFITS AND FAMILY SUPPORT. THE PLAYGROUND WAS SET UP BY BIRMINGHAM CITY PARKS DEPARTMENT AND WAS FUNDED BY A GOVERNMENT URBAN AID GRANT FOR A THREE-YEAR PERIOD. THE PLAYGROUND OPERATED BETWEEN APRIL 1973 AND 1975 AS A 'JUNK' PLAYGROUND.

It wasn't adult directed



It was supported and encouraged but it was based on their ideas & their hopes and dreams





# DAVE SWINGLE

**PLAYWORKER, HANDSWORTH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (BOOTH STREET),  
BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (MALVERN STREET)  
AND SMALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (BOULTON ROAD), 1970S**

## WHAT'S AN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

There's a distinction between an adventure playground and a junk playground. I started off with the junk playground concept that had come out of Denmark. Then, as time went on, it became an adventure playground, which were to me really just assault courses created by adults. It was more the creative junk aspect that I was interested in. The fact that you could just give kids tools and materials and they would create spontaneously what they wanted to do, whether it be a den or a climbing frame or a swing, a monster. It wasn't adult directed. It was supported and encouraged but it was based on their ideas and their dreams and hopes.

## COULD YOU DESCRIBE HANDSWORTH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

It was a derelict piece of land in the middle of an area that was being redeveloped. So there were lots of empty houses, lots of boarded up houses, houses with people still living in them amongst the empty and boarded up houses. So there was a wealth of material there, so the kids could just go into an empty house and just rip out all the doors. The actual playground area was fenced but it was only a 4ft/5ft high chestnut fence on a wooden frame around it, so the kids had got access 24 hours a day to it. It wasn't like the adventure playgrounds which had big walls or fencing around them. It was, I guess, pretty ugly, which the neighbours didn't like, but that seemed strange because the whole area was pretty ugly, that was being torn down. It was well-used, so it was very difficult to keep grass on there. If it rained it would just turn into a mud bath!

There was a terraced house, two houses that became a play house, and the council workers came and tarted it up a bit for the kids, made sure there was a toilet, and they put in new windows, Georgian glass windows. What happened was, when they'd finished, the kids would come back at night, take out the putty, climb in, play table tennis or snooker or have a cup of tea or whatever they wanted to do, and then put the glass back in. The idea was that I didn't know, but obviously you could just go and see. So we never mentioned it as long as they didn't cause any damage. We just let them get on and do it.

## WHAT SORT OF THINGS HAPPENED AT THE PLAYGROUND?

The older teenage kids would build climbing frames and swings and platforms. They

Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth



had a whole series of routes that they would swing round the site. The younger kids would build dens, whether it would be digging a hole or putting a roof on or actually just making little huts out of the scrap material coming in. It was mainly that sort of thing. Fires were always interesting for the kids. A bonfire that they could just throw on the scrap timber or whatever. Then obviously in the play hut itself we had more traditional play activities – painting, arts and craft, snooker, table tennis. But again, they were all makeshift because the rooms in a terraced house are not big enough to take even a 6ft snooker table, because with the sticks you couldn't get round.

#### **ANY OTHER STORIES YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE PLAYGROUND?**

The other one I associate was in front of the two terraced houses we had an under 5s playground put in for us by, I guess it must have been the council. We were also running a play group in the daytime for parents and young kids, parent/toddler kind of thing. The builders had been there and they had put up a playground but they'd put turf down all around. This kid came up to me and he said, "It's very nice," he said, "but I don't understand why they've used second hand grass."

#### **WAS THERE ANY HEALTH AND SAFETY!?**

The only safety provision was me walking round and making sure all the structures were solid. The kids would repair them if they weren't. They did all the repairs because it was in their interests because they wanted to play on it. If you're swinging from one platform to another platform and one's likely to collapse on you, you think, "I'd better get some more nails and reinforce it." Of course, we had no technical knowledge of how to put these structures up. It was very much dig a hole put a pole in, or a post in, joist usually.

I think, generally, kids know what the risks are and they learn. Particularly in that environment, because they've built it. I think that where adults are just putting up metal structures as a playground are much more dangerous, because kids think that they're safe. They think they're built to be safe. You put a bit of rubberised flooring underneath it and, "Oh, I can fall off and not hurt myself." But if you've actually built it, you know that the tower is rocky or the swing is rocky.

#### **AND WHAT WAS BOULTON ROAD ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND LIKE?**

Boulton Road was in Small Heath in the same sort of area. It was all being pulled down. The play centre, play ground, was attached to an advice centre. The idea being that parents could go in there, get advice on being re-homed, welfare benefits, whatever, and the kids would use the playground. It was only very short term, because it doesn't take long before the bulldozers move in and everything comes down. We had to have a six foot six wire fence put all round it, which sort of restricted it a bit, because they didn't want kids having access except when it was supervised. The play centre was an old off license, which was quite interesting,

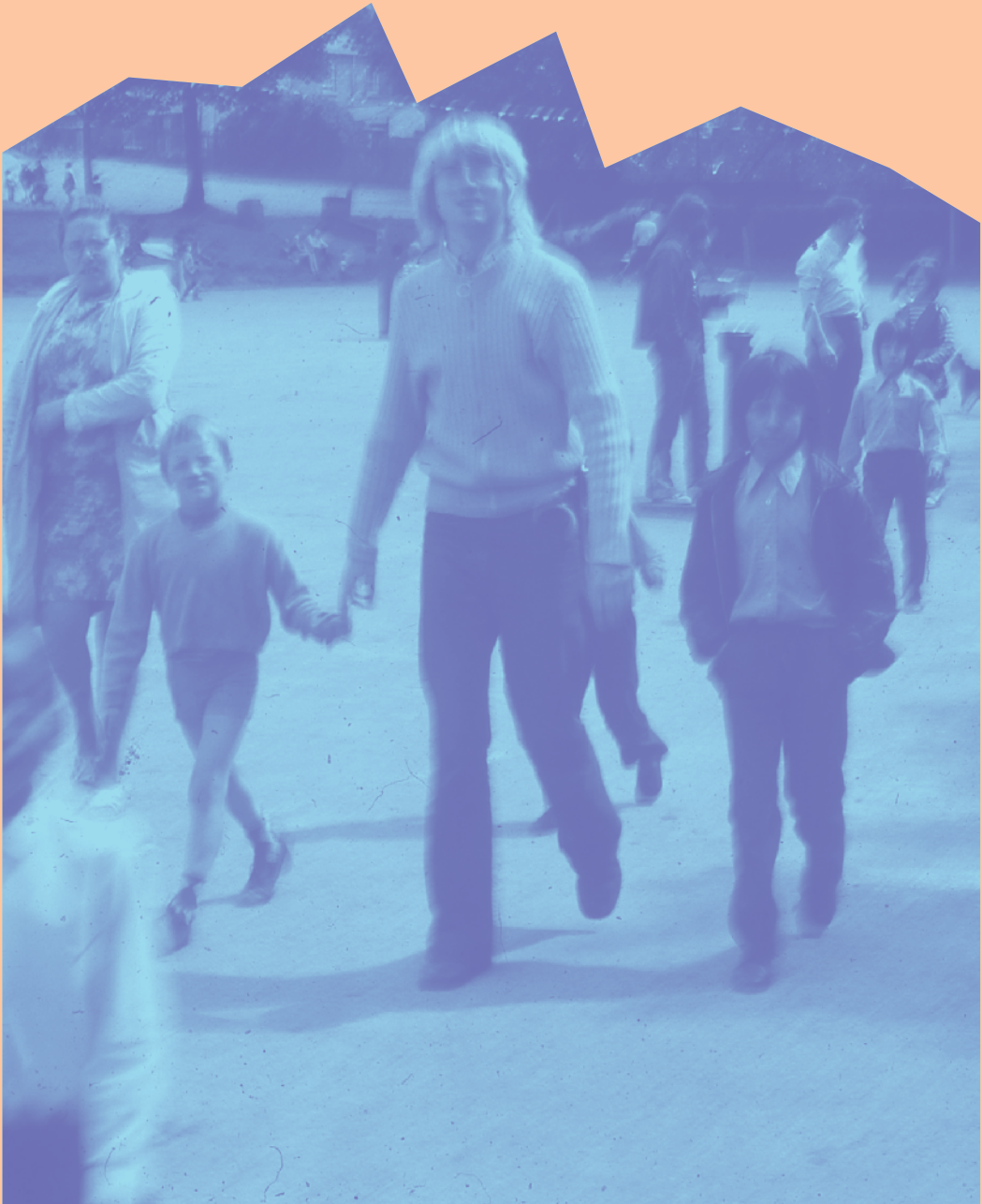
which meant we could use the cellar for indoor play activities. We put a set of stairs into a loft space so they could use that for older kids. It wasn't a great success, because of the nature of it – every time you went in they were knocking down another house. Probably that was only there for twelve months.

#### **COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT THE HIGHGATE, BERRINGTON WALK SCULPTURE PLAYGROUND?**

It actually came out of Boulton Road, where we'd been working with a group of kids. It started off with this little kid, Jimmy I think, who was obsessed with lollipop sticks. He used to collect these lollipop sticks and he'd stick them in the ground to make a shape of a dragon or a snake or whatever. He was only six or seven, or something like that. So we said, "OK, how can we do this?" And we started looking at using some bricks with the kids to mix up some cement to actually make Jimmy's dragon, or whatever it was, into a garden area. And from that, when Boulton road closed we went to Highgate to do some work there, and there were a couple of three/four story maisonette-type areas which were very run down. So we went in with a summer play project, and the idea was that we would put up a concrete playground with the kids so they'd got something to play with, play on. So they designed them in terms of turtles and various other animals. They were involved totally, in that we had a garage we kept the materials in, so they would get to the garage, and they would take the wheelbarrows out, and they'd take the sand and the cement, and they would mix the sand and the cement, and they'd actually make the sculptures themselves, based on their designs. It was an incredibly hot summer. I think it was 76. It was a really really hot summer, and we had to get permission to have a hose pipe to mix it up because there was a water shortage. Dennis Howell was the Minister for Drought, and the moment they appointed him it started to rain. I think we had torrential flooding.



Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth





Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth





# IAN ELLIS

## PLAYWORKER IN BIRMINGHAM, 1970S ONWARDS

### COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT HOCKLEY FLYOVER ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

It attracted a lot of children. At that time there was a relatively new estate just behind the playground. So, if you imagine coming over the flyover, the playground's on your left, that estate was at the back there. And a lot of the kids from that estate used to come down, and a lot of the kids from South Road – I mean it's not an estate, but the houses up that road and the roads around it. It did actually attract kids from quite a wide area around there, because it's not like some playgrounds that are right sat within quite a defined community, it was almost a bit on the edge, but it was very well used, very, very, well used, and I mean I guess, in that summer, we would have around 80 to 100 kids a day, run lots of different activities both inside the hut – it really was a very small building. It was extended a few years after that, with another building attached to it, but I mean we used to have loads. It was packed with children, we won't again go into health and safety! A very vibrant place.

### WERE THERE ANY OTHER PLAY SCHEMES IN NORTH BIRMINGHAM AT THIS TIME?

At that particular time, that was 1978, and before then as well, using unused spaces to run activities for children in a quite informal way was very common and, over that summer, as you moved the other side of Hockley Flyover into Hockley itself, there was another play scheme running. Now it was in a disused area that wasn't even an underpass, but was under a road, and it might have been under Constitution Hill, what road it was on – Barr Street seems to ring a bell. But there was another play scheme being run there, there was a play scheme being run on Hockley Port. There were play schemes running up on Finch Road in Handsworth, and there was a little playground there, that was never open full time, but that was run by the people who ran the intermediate treatment set up, which was a part of social services in those days. And then there was something else going on in Lozells, which then became Lozells Recreation Group, based at the Methodist Hall on George Street, I think it is. So, there were an awful lot of play schemes running at that particular time. Hockley Flyover was the most permanent at that time, but then Hockley Port became so a little while later.

### COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE COUNCIL FOR ADVENTURE PLAY IN SOHO?

That started in the late 70s and was started actually by a woman, who used to be on the committee at Hockley Flyover, Jill Strode she was called. Initially it was a group

of parents there got the money to start a playground, but there was no playground there, so when I went there in late 1980, I was based at St James Church on Crocketts Road, quite well connected with Holyhead School, with a brief to get things going, to run sessions wherever I could, run play schemes wherever I could, and start trying to get a playground started. And the site we eventually got was just off Wattville Road, so down the bottom end of Wattville Road, just by – well I presume it's still the school, Wattville Junior and Infants School, there's a left turn called Cross Street, and then that meets a little road called George Street, and just on that corner, behind there was a gate, and that's where the playground was. And it was a fenced-off area and at the end of it there was quite an extensive hard surface play area that went right through to the bottom of Crocketts Road, but yes, that's eventually where the playground was. But we only started running activities on that site from I guess about 1984, 1985. In the three to four years before that I was just running activities wherever I could.

### COULD YOU DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY AT THE PLAYGROUND?

So, this was at the time of the Manpower Services Commission, and we got money to employ six people, many of those were young people who I'd known since I'd been in Handsworth, and they'd come to activities I'd run up in the Crocketts Road area, and we were building the playground. And we put down paving slabs, and then acquired from somewhere a lorry back container, and that was put on the site, and that was our storage facility. We had no toilets. For water we got a standpipe that went under one of the manholes on the corner of Cross Road and George Street, and that's where we would get our water from. For a couple of summers, that site was a really lovely site, I mean it was a mess when we took it over, we had to completely clear it, but it was a kind of a natural amphitheatre, with little slopes down to an area at the bottom, and every day we would build a fire down there and we would cook for the kids, and the kids would cook for themselves. So, we would just do a big pot of veggie stew, wrap potatoes in silver paper and bung them on the fire, and honestly at times we would be feeding 40, 50 or more kids there.

### COULD YOU TALK MORE ABOUT THE ROLE OF FOOD ON THE PLAYGROUND?

The provision of food – I wouldn't say that it was something we planned. Because of the natural amphitheatre, it kind of, it became an obvious – because it was a little – we put logs around and it became a little sitting area. And then starting a fire there was quite good fun, and, you know, children do love fires, unfortunately, and having it under a bit of supervision was a good thing. And I think it started just by somebody coming along with some potatoes and silver foil, chucking them in and then we thought, well, and then we ended up buying a big cooking pot. And one of the dads actually, who volunteered on the playground, used to do a lot of that, and he loved to cook, he was the main cook in his family, and he had four kids, and we'd just buy a whole bunch of vegetables and cook them up into a big stew, and it was kind of a stew soup that we'd serve in plastic bowls, and the kids would help to make it, they'd help to cut up the



vegetables and stir it. I mean I'm not going to say that it helped them to learn to cook or anything grandiose like that, but it was, it meant that they could stay down the place for the whole day, and the parents knew that they were being fed.

#### ANY MEMORABLE STORIES FROM THE PLAYGROUND?

We were donated a shed that was in segments, and we were never able to put it up because it was too deteriorated, but the floor sections, on one wonderful day we stacked them up one after the other, running down the side of this little slope down to the bottom of the amphitheatre, connecting them up and it became a huge slide and we got a whole bunch of bits of cardboard and had a wonderful day, with kids just sliding down there and playing games, doing whatever.

We tended to do quite a lot of full-day themed activities, that we'd - when we had the use of the canteen area, so we'd imagine a theme, like a space theme, and then we'd do games, craft activities all around that theme. And one week, outside on the playground, for some reason I don't know how this came about, we did a load of activities around bears, and the last day I hired a bear suit and arrived at the playground hidden in a bear suit. So, the kids captured me, and they took me into the area under one of the structures, and they looked after me, they did it very well, and went up the shops to buy supplies to feed the bear. It was completely anarchic, honestly. I mean, there was a railway line, disused railway line, ran along the side of the playground, so there was quite a big area that we could make use of. And we weren't close to many houses. We kind of backed onto the houses on Cross Street, but virtually all of them had young children who were at the playground the whole time, so there was never any problem with parents. I mean the parents were really helpful and became involved, and that's where we used the toilets of course, because there was nothing else. It was very, very anarchic.

After I left, a building was erected on the site and the playground was run for a time by Frances Thompson before, sadly, the building was burnt down.

#### ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

Ooh, I should tell you, there is one other very important aspect of this that I should mention, and if you did have a chance to talk to Sheila Rushforth she would tell you much more about it, because she was absolutely instrumental in this. We were very conscious that adventure play at that period tended to be boy-dominated and male-dominated. There was a bit of a macho thing with throwing telegraph poles around, and there was quite a big movement, all over the place but very much in Birmingham, about opening up play facilities and playgrounds to girls, exploring why that wasn't happening and taking steps to make sure that girls felt they could attend activities. So, a lot of girls' nights were run, girls-only sessions. But what Sheila did, with a number of others but she very much led it, was to produce a video that ended up being a national video, called Poles Apart. It was very influential nationally in opening up the whole thing to more girls, and Sheila was instrumental in pushing this, not only in Birmingham, but nationally.



It was very,  
very  
anarchic

# COUNCIL FOR ADVENTURE PLAY IN SOHO

(CAPS)

IN THE LATE 70S, SOCIAL SERVICES HAD AN OUTREACH OFFICE IN ST JAMES CHURCH ON CROCKETTS ROAD IN HANDSWORTH WHERE THEY HAD A COUPLE OF COMMUNITY WORKERS BASED. THEIR EFFORTS LED TO THE FORMATION OF THE COMMITTEE OF LOCAL PARENTS WHICH BECAME CAPS AND WHICH STARTED RUNNING PLAY ACTIVITIES IN THE AREA AND CAMPAIGNING FOR AN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND TO BE ESTABLISHED AT THE CORNER OF GEORGE STREET AND CROSS STREET JUST OFF WATTVILLE ROAD. THEY EMPLOYED THEIR FIRST PLAYWORKER IN 1979 WHO RAN ACTIVITIES IN THE CHURCH HALL AND LOCAL SCHOOLS AND IAN ELLIS JOINED IN LATE 1980 WITH A BRIEF TO BOTH RUN ACTIVITIES AND, WORKING WITH THE LOCAL PARENTS, TO GET THE PLAYGROUND STARTED. ACTIVITIES AT THE PLAYGROUND SITE STARTED IN 1984 BUT UNTIL 1988 IT WAS A PURELY OUTDOORS. THE SITE HAD BEEN FENCED IN THE EARLY 80S AND IT HAD BEEN TACITLY AGREED THAT A BUILDING WOULD BE ERECTED AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME. THIS HAD TO WAIT UNTIL 1987 FOR FUNDING TO BE AVAILABLE. IN 1987 IAN ELLIS WAS REPLACED BY FRANCES THOMPSON WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY WORKED AT THE LOZELLS RECREATION GROUP. THE BUILDING OPENED IN 1988 BUT UNFORTUNATELY WAS BURNT DOWN IN 1989.





Ian Ellis  
Council for Adventure Play in Soho (CAPS) -  
by the corner of Cross St and George St off Wattville Rd in Handsworth.

## DEBY MORGAN

### PLAYWORKER IN BIRMINGHAM, LATE 1970S ONWARDS

#### CAN YOU TALK ABOUT PLAYWORK IN THE CITY?

I think what happened with play work, over the years, for me, is that it was a bit of a flavour of the month. When I first came – in my twenties, when I came into the play world – it was a bit more radical. Like-minded people, probably quite white too.

Birmingham City Council was divided in twelve areas, so there was a play project in every area. Most of these were playgrounds, but about eight of them had a hut built. So the playgrounds would operate when it was busiest, you know, after school. There was a need for a bit more shelter, and people wanting to do arts and crafts, and perhaps involving the wider community, rather than just the kids that were out there.

What I understand was there was a play centre or a play hut built in each area. There was Farm Park. There was Small Heath Play Centre. There was Chinnbrook. That was when there were about twelve areas. That was probably more in the 90s. We had a play development officer who was the guy who ran Handsworth Play Centre for many years.

After we had twelve areas it was broken down to prioritise six areas, I think. That was when the care movement came in, so there was a bit of a battle between play workers and care workers. We're not a care provision, we're a play provision. Play is a completely a different thing. It's a service for the children, not a service for the parents. A care provision is a service for the parents. A lot of play workers were fighting to keep play alive. At the time, would that be when NVQs came in maybe, everything was being tightened up. The guy that was lead at Hockley Port went to North York to work. A lot of the people did move out of the area.

#### COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT UPPER SUTTON STREET OR SOUTH ASTON WOMEN'S PLAYGROUND?

I think we did some training in South Aston, but I think it was in the days when they used to have the women's forum in the city council. I don't know if there was a connection with that, but it was a women-led adventure playground, if I remember rightly. What I remember about that was that they had a lot of structures that had obviously been made by adults that were like tepee-framed structures, but then inside they all had different themes, and some of those were interchangeable. I remember one had a load of mirrors in it. It wasn't bought stuff they had put together, it was all recycled stuff. There was another one, I remember, had all hats

in it on pegs and things so you could play with that. There was a garden centre or a nursery centre there, and I have a feeling it may have just been there temporary over a few months, over a summer or something.

#### DID YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH PLAYGROUNDS IN HANDSWORTH?

There was one right on Nineveh Road in Handsworth near where the socialist bookshop was. There's a little island there now. There's a shop on the left, but it had a back yard. The guy there – what I remember about that was that the guy wouldn't take any funding from the city council because he didn't want to then be involved in all the regulations and checks. We sort of supported them a bit with – we had papers and crayons and things that all came from the education department then. So we used to give bits and stuff.

He had a bike project – you could dump old bikes there then mess about with things, put together some good ones. You could take a bike offsite for 10p so it ran all on trust. My story that I remember about that place particularly, they had shovels and picks and things in the back yard. It was all boys as well – mainly boys. I can't remember any girls. They'd dug through concrete and gone about eight feet down in the ground, just to see how far they could go down. They would have kept going, I'm sure. They also made a sort of big wooden slide that wouldn't have passed any health and safety checks. The children built it. It was temporary.

#### WHAT IS PLAYWORK TO YOU?

For me, play is a service for children, whereas care is a service for adults. You can sit them together. You can obviously make good quality play in a care provision, but as a play worker, play was the primary important thing that maybe – you know. A lot of play schemes became places where parents would look for care provision rather than play provision. Then a lot of funding came into care and wasn't there for play. So a lot of play provision became after school clubs. So I think there was a bit of a division then between those projects that went towards the care provision and play ones that became a bit more temporary and occasional.

#### DID YOU DO ANYTHING IN FARM PARK, SPARKBROOK?

I went to Farm Park Play Centre after being at Burbury Park Play Centre. The brief that I was given when I went to the Sparkbrook Neighbourhood Office was that it was predominantly older boys that were using the play centre, and they wanted to encourage them to go to the youth projects. There was Concord Youth Centre, and there was Sparkbrook Community Centre, that is now a health centre. But Farm Park was the hut and, basically, when I first went there it consisted of some footballs, some crickets balls, balls that were always going missing and never got returned, and a pool table, so obviously all the boys just queued up to go on the pool table. It was really popular and my brief was to get them to go to the youth club because that's what the council wanted.



So my role really was to try and make the play centre fit the purpose of the Asian children play brief, because I worked with Haki Kapasi on the Asian Children Play research project, which was about local kids missing out, not gaining access to local council provisions. There was quite a lot of active stuff, going into the mosques to do play training. I did, with Haki Kapasi, some projects where we went round where we knew there were different play scheme or play work funded projects by the city council and we did - not really a consultation, but activities with the kids like flag-making or kite-making. It would be around their identities, to explore what they wanted as their play experiences. I suppose for me, a lot of it was to do with trying to get the parents to see the value of it, as opposed to extra studying, or the fact that you can study better if you've actually had a bit of a play time or fresh air. It was a time when city council seemed to be a lot more conscious about that the workforce that was delivering should reflect the people they're working with, and I think there was a few of us that were white, middle class backgrounds that were in the play world at that time.

#### WHAT ABOUT PLAY TRAIN?

Obviously Play Train did a hell of a lot in Birmingham, in terms of really really good training. Haki Kapasi did a lot of research into racism awareness training and play work training. She got a bursary to go and look at different projects around the world, and then came back and piloted More is Caught than Taught, which was a play training with a bit of care element in there, but very much about empowering communities.

That was a project that I think reached a lot of adults in terms of changing awareness about the importance of play, and looking at race and racism in society. More is Caught than Taught was actually initiated by a guy called Jack Guillebeaux from Alabama, he was also active in the Civil Rights Movement. Haki visited their project in Alabama as part of her research. He's been over to Birmingham a few times for play conferences and things. He was very inspirational. Haki Kapasi has always been very inspirational for me, and just going back to the beginnings, with being aware of the battle between that guy who had kids in his back yard that was doing up bikes and doing brilliant work, and seeing loads of funding going from Birmingham City Council going to people from Harborne just getting on a coach to go to the seaside for the day, which is valuable in itself, but is a different kind of thing. Not play work, I'd say.

# TURNER STREET PLAYWEEK

come and  
BE  
a

clown

caveman

cowboy

moonman



red indian

robot

monster

pirate

10.00 am - 4.00 pm  
TUESDAY to SUNDAY  
april 16th - april 22nd

1974

dressing up   building   dancing   painting  
carving   storytelling   modelling  
photographing   singing   making up

# MALVERN ST. ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND PENINNY FAIR

1979

“AS I RECALL THE PENNY FAIR WAS THE CULMINATION OF A LONG SIX-WEEK SUMMER HOLIDAY SCHEME. WE HAD RUN THE SCHEME ALL OVER THE LOCAL AREA, INCLUDING DRAMASCAPES, A MUSIC FESTIVAL AND AN OUTREACH PROJECTS FOR ASIAN CHILDREN LIVING ON RUNCORN ROAD WHERE WE TOOK PLAY TO THEM IN THE TERRACES.

THE FAIR WAS THE FINAL DAY OF THE SUMMER SCHEME 1979 AND AIMED TO BRING ALL OUR PLAY GROUPS TOGETHER. WE SPENT THE WEEK BEFORE WORKING WITH THE CHILDREN TO CREATE THEIR OWN GAMES - HOOPLA, CATCH A DUCK, KNOCK DOWN THE BOTTLES, DARTBOARDS, PLAYING CARDS, FOOD AND DRINK STALLS, A FANCY-DRESS COMPETITION, RACES (THREE LEGGED, SACK RACES ETC) AND THEIR OWN POSTERS AND LEAFLETS. EVERYTHING WAS MADE BY THE CHILDREN, INCLUDING THE COSTUMES, STALLS, BUNTING, FOOD AND FLAGS. EVERYTHING COST 1P. AND THE STALLS WERE ALL RUN BY THE PLAYGROUND CHILDREN. ON THE DAY PARENTS AND CHILDREN IN THEIR DOZENS TURNED OUT AND ALTHOUGH WHAT WAS MEANT TO BE A FUN CELEBRATION TURNED OUT TO BE OUR BEST FUNDRAISING EVENT OF THE HOLIDAY.”

DAVE SWINGLE

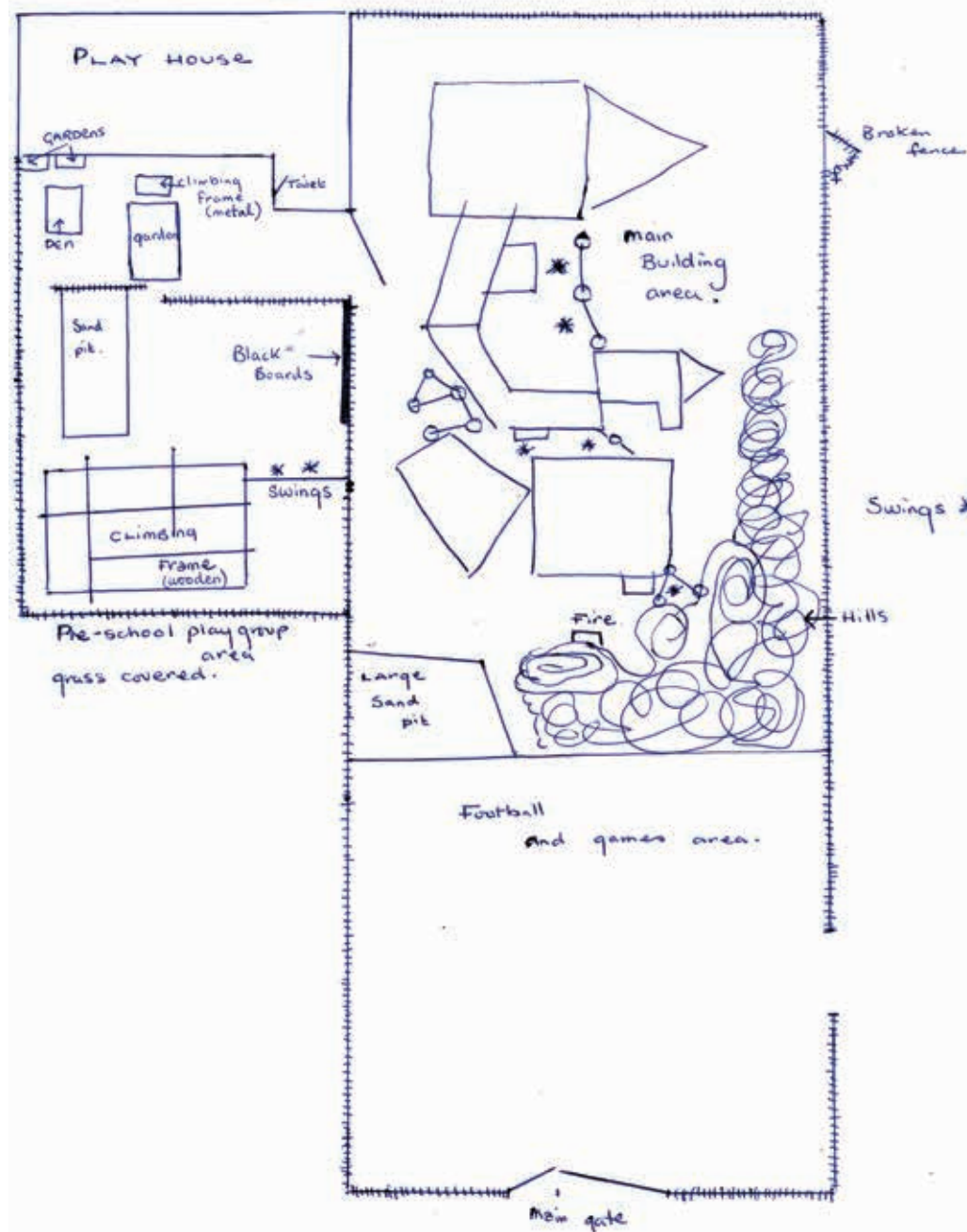




1. COMPLAINT. MUDDY HOLE IN KIDDIES CENTRE PLAYGROUND

Dear Sir,  
I hope you will not think that I do not appreciate the children's play centre, but I think it is worth while bringing this to your notice. There is a large muddy hole in the middle of the centre, which is very muddy and wet, due to the weather we have been having. My children were only playing there for half an hour yesterday, and they were that dirty I had to bring them in and bath them and wash their clothes. I know children get dirty, but they were in a terrible state. I am a working woman and look after my children as well. I hope you will appreciate the position I am in. I think the play centre is one of the best things that has ever happened to Handsworth. It keeps my children from playing in the streets and I think it is much safer. I will gladly donate to ward the play centre, when they start collecting. I am sure other mothers will soon bring the same complaint to your notice.  
Thankyou for all you have done.

Booth St Playground -  
23 MARCH 1974





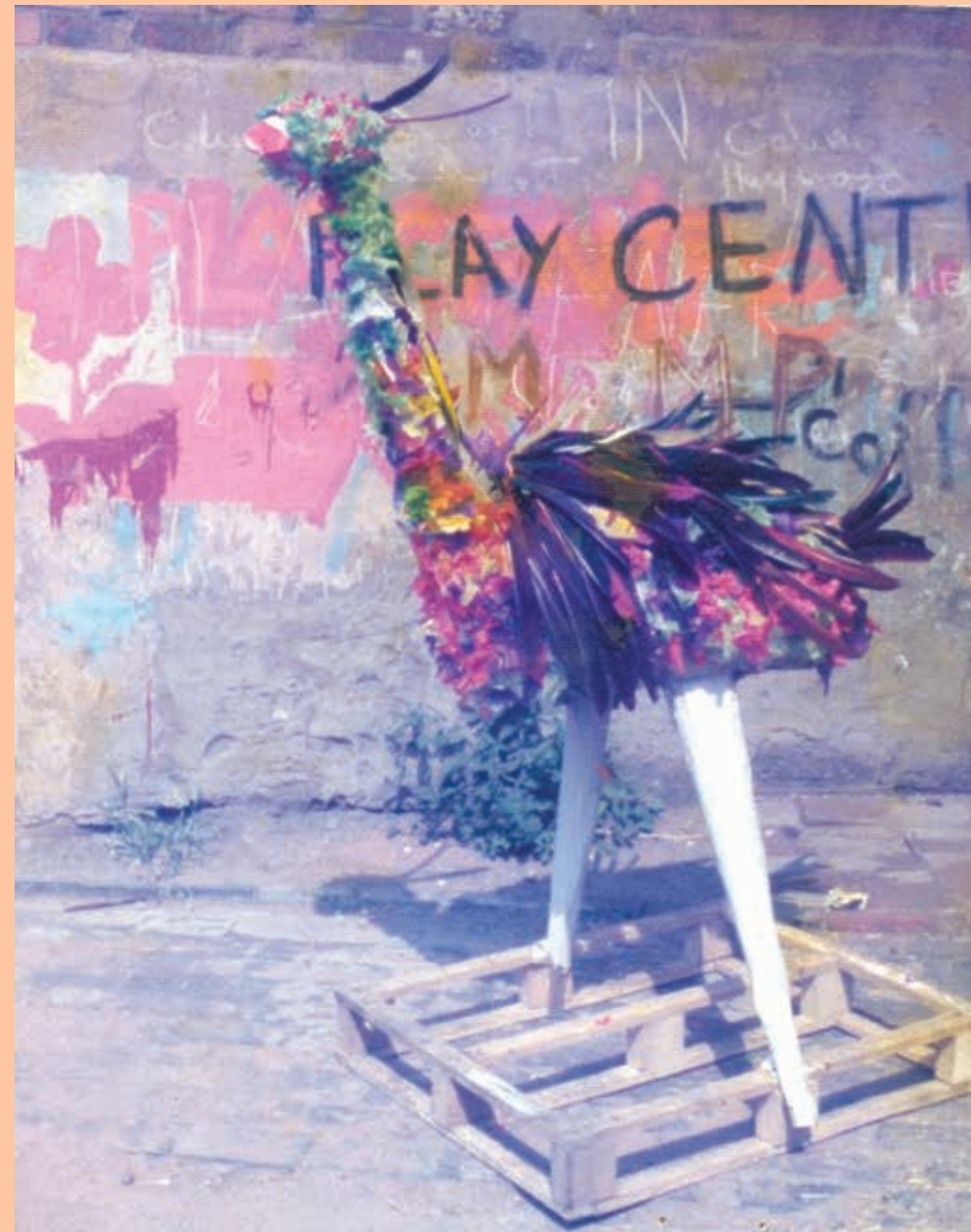
Article  
UN

## Article 31 Action Pack

*Children's Rights  
and  
Children's Play*

Resources for action to  
implement Article 31 of the  
United Nations Convention  
on the Rights of the Child

**PLAY-TRAIN**  
TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT  
FOR CREATIVE PLAYWORK



Carnival Float, Small Heath Playcentre, Bolton Road





Let Us Play Exhibition (June 2021), Balsall Heath City Farm  
(on the site of the old Malvern Street / Balsall Heath adventure playground).





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# HAKI KAPASI

**CONSULTANT, RESEARCHER AND TRAINER,  
INSPIRE CONSULTANCY LIMITED**

## WHO FUNDED PLAY PROJECTS WHEN YOU STARTED?

In those days Play was basically provided by the local authority and voluntary sector. The voluntary sector was huge in terms of providing play. Grants were given by the local authority to local community groups, like a church group or just a group of residents to run summer playschemes, or maybe Easter playschemes. In Birmingham there were loads of summer playschemes run by the voluntary sector. Some of the work that we did at Play-Train was to train those local community groups to deliver good quality play during the playschemes. We did playwork and lot of arts and crafts training like encouraging creative ideas with junk material.

We also did "Live" training which involved spending one day in a playscheme with the staff who would be joining in and observing. The idea was to improve how they'd deliver play to children.

In Birmingham, and this would be a national picture, a lot of training for Playworkers was provided by the local authority. In those days there seemed very little distinction between the voluntary sector and the local authority. There was a real partnership between them, because the local authority knew they needed the voluntary sector to deliver play provision. There were about 15 local authority Playcentres in Birmingham plus Adventure Playgrounds.

At that time, in the early days, all the play facilities were free for children – they didn't pay for it. They'd come in after school, or during the school holidays, half-terms, the whole of summer and Easter. The children did arts and crafts, play games and hang around and just play. Very few ran Christmas, December play provision. All the holidays and all the half terms, we'd be working full time for children, and all for free.

There was lots of training and play provision – lots of both. In terms of the quality of play – people knew about play, they were conversant about play. People from the local community would come into play training through the Introduction To Playwork training, then go to another level of training, which would be twelve weeks, then a year of training to get their certificate – there was a progression route. Some people who were volunteers would end up as full time Playworkers. The idea was always about building capacity. That's a modern term but it was happening in those days.

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PLAY AND CARE?

The difference was now children were in the care of adults whose parents paid for it. Playworkers would say, well, "care" is not free, children are not allowed to go home, so how is that free play? There was a transactional relationship now, as opposed to a free come and go, let's experiment, let's do this or that. Now, there was an attitude that, We have to "care" for these children – not that Playworkers didn't care, but it was more free in an open access Playcentre. The central focus for Playworkers is the child and the child's play. Playwork is about the adults creating the environment, providing the resources for children to play freely as they wish. That's play. The agenda is only the child. It's not the parents. It's about what the child wants to do.

## COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT PLAY-TRAIN?

I always describe the people who worked at Play-Train as inventors in the shed. We were funded by the Arts Council, it was West Midlands Arts then. We had a very lovely close relationship with West Midlands Arts. and it felt like, in those days everybody had good a relationship with everybody – we knew each other and it wasn't bureaucratic. It was all about the relationships. The funding allowed us to be creative and innovative.

Before my time, before Play-Train was formed, Rocky was running the Play Resource Centre at Ward End Park which was part of a national network of Resource Centres – The Federation of Resource Centres. Harry Shier was working at the Resource Centre and he could see all these amazing resources and he thought why don't we train Playworkers to use these resources? So he started Play-Train beginning with workshops on how to use the resources in creative ways. He was then joined by Janette Bushell.

Harry and Janette were the main people working at Play-Train promoting creativity in play. And then I joined, and I think I brought another dimension to it. At the Port 86 I'd delivered a lot of training about race equality, gender. The arts wasn't my strength. I think with me being involved, Play-Train was able to do a lot of other playworker stuff, rather than just the creativity.

My report from my research project on access to play opportunities for Asian children – Asian Children Play – came out in 1991. Harry and I used that as an opportunity to present a paper at an international conference in Australia. It was at that conference we came across Article 31. Somebody from the UN spoke about Article 31, which is the child's right to rest, recreation and play and cultural activities and it got Harry thinking about this. It was his initiative but we always worked as a team – Janette had left by then but we were joined by Jacqueline Contre who was the Play-Train Administrator and Sue Smith as a Play-Train trainer. Harry organised the Article 31 conference with the team's help and it was the first ever conference for that in the UK. Very few in Playwork had even heard of Article 31 before then.

Then he created the Article 31 project which led on to consulting children. It kind of had a life of its own. Harry got a lot of funding to do more work around



consulting children and Article 12 which stated that children have a right to be consulted on all matters which affect them.

In about 1996 Harry and I went to America to look at anti-racist initiatives over there. There we met somebody called Jack Guillebeaux who worked for the Federation of Childcare Centres of Alabama. That meeting impacted my work hugely. Personally, it changed my life, and the way I did training. We brought Jack and his programme, *More is Caught Than Taught*, over for a conference. When I left Play-Train we agreed that I could continue delivering that programme on my own.

We had quite heavy-duty international figures back then. Play-Train organised these conferences with Roger Hart, the leading exponent of Article 31 and Article 12 and Jack Guillebeaux, both from America. That's why I think people liked Play-Train, because we'd go and find these people that nobody had heard of. It was such a lovely blend of creativity, innovation and we were free to do whatever we wanted.

As Article 12 was growing, I left Play-Train and started my own business called Inspire Consultancy Limited.

### COULD YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE PLAYSCHMES?

Students were very involved in the holiday playschemes. Working on a playscheme was almost a rite of passage. There would be 70, 80 students working on summer playschemes that we would train over a weekend in playwork. The interesting part of that is, the traditional route to play is: volunteer, work on a playscheme, go on some ad hoc training organised by the local authority and get a job as a Playworker, and maybe you might go on to do a year certificate course, but there was very little after that.

There was a grass roots community entry into playwork. It was a community development process as well as a play process. I come from a community development background and the professionalisation of Playwork, I felt, was double-edged, because it hindered volunteers and prevented a route which was critical to the success of play and playschemes and children having access to play.

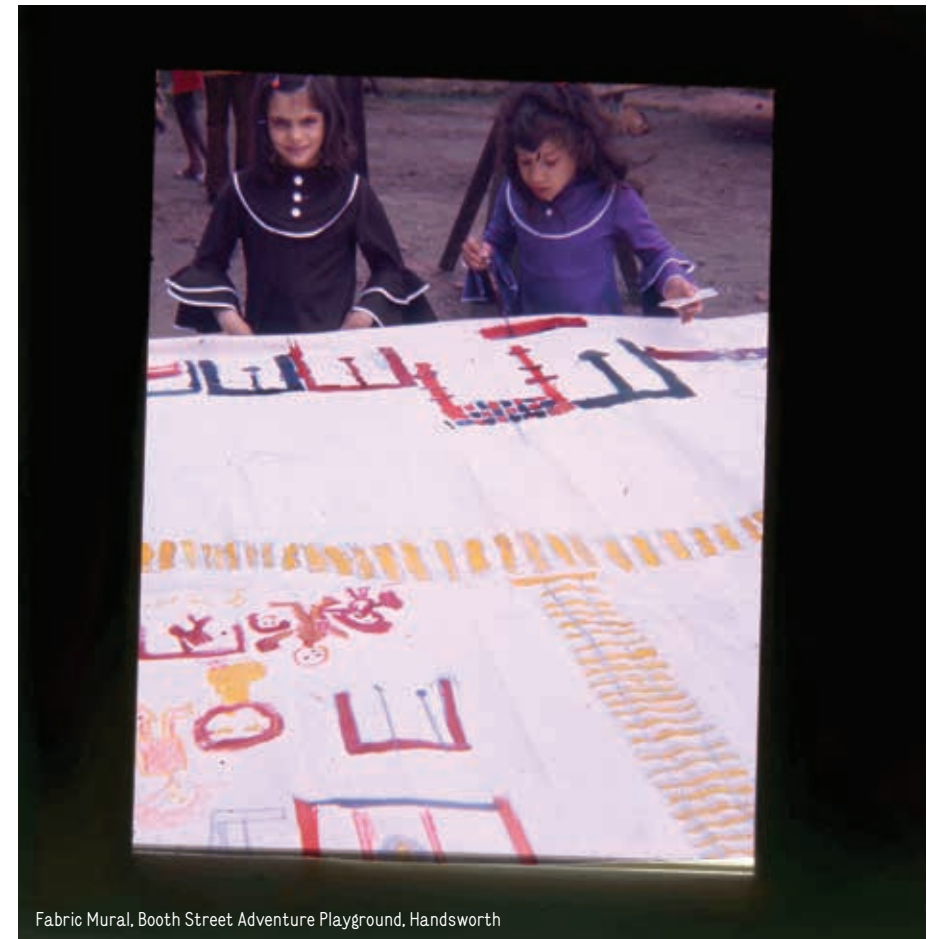
### COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR WORK WITH ASIAN CHILDREN PLAY?

Asian Children Play was investigating access to play provision for Asian children. I carried out a national piece of research looking at how could Playworkers encourage Asian children to come and use their facilities. Sometimes a Playcentre was set up in a predominately Asian community, but no Asian children would use it, so like, well what's going on here? My research was looking into the barriers to Asian children using it. Some of them were very practical. After school a lot of the Muslim children went to madrasa, and they couldn't go to the Playcentre. Or, maybe, in those days, girls were not encouraged to go.

It was very radical at the time. I'd done my research. I'd really done my research and at the end of the book, I just said, in order to increase access to your play provision for Asian children do this. I made concrete recommendations – these

are things that you can do to encourage more Asian children to use your play. For example, do your outreach work. Go out to the Asian communities. Tell them about your Playcentre. If necessary, take play to the mosques. The development from that was we took play into the mosques.

Building relationships was the main action from the research findings. Make parents feel safe, feel that their children will be safe here. If necessary, get the madrasa class into your Playcentre just so that they become familiar with you. It's about creating familiarity. Have a girls' groups. At that time, there was a big thing about running girls' groups. Again to familiarise the girls and their parents with the Playcentre. Let the community be familiar with you. Also, open at weekends. If children are at madrasa during weekday, the only time they can come is at the weekends and you're closed. What good is that to anybody? Because play is about when children are free.



Fabric Mural, Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth

# PLAYTRAIN TIMELINE (THE FIRST 20 YEARS)

## 1979:

- National Playing Fields Association launches Play Resource Centre in Ward End Park House (peppercorn rent negotiated with the City Council). Rocky Sharrock leads as Resources Officer, and Harry Shier as Assistant.

## 1980:

- As the piles of reusable scrap mount up, Harry is concerned that many adults working with children lack both skills and imagination to make good use of them. West Midlands Arts provides funding for a pilot series of "junk crafts" workshops at the Resource Centre.

## 1981:

- With the success of the pilot, WMA funds two-thirds of a salary for an "Arts Training Officer" and the City Council finds the other third. Harry gets the job and calls the new project "PLAY-TRAIN". Regular workshop programmes are run throughout the year.

## 1984:

- WMA increases funding and PLAY-TRAIN starts to generate income. A second post is created and Janette Bushell joins. As well as the workshop programme in Ward End, PLAY-TRAIN travels throughout the West Midlands taking creative play workshops where they are needed.
- PLAY-TRAIN runs a way-ahead-of-its-time kids' computer programming project with robot turtles, 30 years before the emergence of Coder Dojos

## 1985:

- PLAY-TRAIN gets sponsorship (and free equipment) from Yamaha to run a ground-breaking kids' electronic music project, and hires Cara Tivey, keyboard player with Everything but the Girl (who also had a UK number one with Billy Bragg), to take the lead.

## 1986:

- Without warning NPFA closes the Resource Centre and makes all staff, including Play-TRAIN, redundant (they expected the City Council to take it on, but the Council called their bluff and let the staff go, then opened their own play resource centre on the same site). Harry and Janette launch a campaign to keep PLAY-TRAIN going.

## 1987:

- Volunteers agree to form a management committee with Tom Pettit as chair. A new independent charity is created and WMA agrees to transfer the PLAY-TRAIN grant from NPFA to the new charity, so the new independent PLAYTRAIN is born. The City Council offers PLAYTRAIN a new home in Sparkbrook Community Centre.

## 1988:

- Janette leaves and Haki Kapasi joins
- Jacqueline Contré joins as PLAYTRAIN's first Administrator.
- Sue Smith joins as third Training Officer.

## 1991:

- PLAY-TRAIN launches Asian Children Play researched and written by Haki Kapasi.

## 1993:

- World Play Summit in Melbourne Australia. Harry and Haki attend to present the findings of Asian Children Play. Harry learns about A31.

## 1994:

- Article 31 Action Pack published
- Harry and Haki attend the International Play Association (IPA) USA conference in Birmingham Alabama, and subsequently visit innovative anti-racist projects around the USA, where Haki meets Jack Guillebeaux and learns about "More is Caught Than Taught".

## 1996:

- Article 31 Action Network launched
- Jack Guillebeaux visits the UK and facilitates the More is Caught Than Taught conference and Training Black Trainers workshop.

## 1997:

- First pilots of the Article 31 Children's Consultancy Scheme at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and Walsall Museum and Art Gallery, West Midlands.

## 2000:

- Haki leaves to launch Inspire Consultancy.
- PLAYTRAIN coordinates "Playfest 2000", a millennium celebration project bringing together children from the five countries of Britain and Ireland in a creative celebration of the right to play. The kids seized control of Cardiff Town Hall for a weekend.
- Harry leaves and moves to Nicaragua, Central America.
- Claire Mills takes over as PLAYTRAIN's first Director.



# BOLTON ROAD SMALL HEATH PLAYCENTRE

BOLTON ROAD PLAYCENTRE WAS RUN BY THE FSU (FAMILY SERVICE UNIT) FROM 1974 TO 1976. IT WAS ATTACHED TO AN ADVICE CENTRE IN BOLTON ROAD, SMALL HEATH AND FUNDED BY GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR A TWO-YEAR PERIOD WHILE THE AREA WAS REDEVELOPED. THE ADVICE CENTRE PROVIDED ADVICE ON RE-HOUSING, BENEFITS, SOCIAL INTERACTION, PLAY AND COMMUNITY ACTION.



Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth



What would happen was a play centre was set up in a predominantly Asian community, but as Asian children would use it, so like, well what's going on here? So my research was what were the barriers to children using it?



## JO BOWEN

### SELLY OAK ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (CORONATION ROAD), 1980S

#### COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT HOW THE PLAYGROUND WAS SET UP?

Urban Renewal moved into the area, and were doing lots of work, house-based in Dawlish Road, and they suggested that we work together as a community to provide some play space. So what we did, there was a waste piece of land on the corner of Dawlish Road and Coronation Road, and the first year we cleared the site up, because it was an open piece of land that was just waste land, and we set up sessions, that the kids could come and play games and things. So there were lots of parents, volunteers from – some of the students from the university, because at that time, every student had to do a voluntary piece of work while they were students. And so, all the local residents, we all got together and we formed a committee. We started then building with the children, so we had hammers, nails, saws, wood. Basically that's what we did. There was no fencing, so we couldn't have ball games, because it was too dangerous, because it's a main road, quite a really busy road, and a main bus route. We did that, and we used to get so many children coming in the morning, and then so many more children, different children, in the afternoon.

I talked to somebody called Pat Moxen, who worked for Urban Renewal at the time, and she suggested that, because Urban Renewal were in the area, they would support a project for children to have somewhere, a safe environment, to go. So I got together with a few of my friends and neighbours from Tiverton Road, Dawlish Road, I lived on Harrow Road, and we got together, and the piece of waste land was designated open space, public space, so we cleaned it up, then went to court to ask permission to say could we put a fence up, because it was designated a public open space. We worked with Birmingham City Council via Urban Renewal, and they agreed that we could put fencing up. We got funding from Cadburys. The next year, we got the fencing put up, and it was even more successful then, so we had lots of students come, we had lots of parents come, people who wanted to volunteer, who weren't students, who weren't parents, to work with kids. So, we decided that we needed a building, we needed somewhere there were toilets for the kids. So, then we set about doing applications for funding. Actually, we did get funding, we got a lot of support from the city council, and we built our adventure playground, which was purpose-built for adventure play.

#### WHAT IS AN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

It's having a sense of freedom, that you can play in a safe environment. We did hammers, nails, saws, den building. It's to enable children to play, to experiment, to socialise, to learn how to be sensible with hammers, nails and saws, very dangerous tools. And we had from, you know, four, five year olds up to 16 year olds. It's the kids' adventure playground, it isn't an adult's adventure playground, and we encouraged the children to say what they wanted to have. So, even down to designing the building, and what they wanted to see in the building. And it became a competition, to be honest, that, you know, whoever came up with whatever, we'd put it together as a package. And we had an amphitheatre, a big amphitheatre, which sort of like, had seating all around, but the kids could actually play football in the bottom of it, so that the ball wasn't going over the fence, the kids weren't kicking it into somebody else who was playing, doing another activity.

#### COULD YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT THE AMPHITHEATRE?

Ofsted came along, the Ofsted inspector, who, being an Ofsted inspector myself, I was completely gutted when she said it was too dangerous, it needed to be filled in. It was filled in. Oh gosh, it was a proper amphitheatre. It was concrete at the bottom, it was brickwork, it was a real amphitheatre. I have to say, in all the years that I was involved and my kids went there, not once did we have an accident, did anybody get injured or falling down. I mean it might have been 15 rows down. It was a big amphitheatre, because we could do shows, the kids could do performances in there, they could have, you know, karaoke in there. We'd get people to come, speakers to come and work with the kids and talk about health and safety, the police came, the fire service came, we did all the things that you'd want your kids to have a little bit of independence, but a little bit of knowledge at the same time, in an enjoyable setting. So it wasn't an educational setting, but it was education without them realising they were being educated.

#### WHAT CHILDREN CAME TO THE PLAYGROUND?

Some children didn't have breakfast, they didn't get lunch, they didn't get tea, and so we had the facilities there that, if that was the case, we'd make sandwiches for the kids who didn't have stuff. And you build this safe environment for children, because lots of kids don't have a safe environment to be in. And in the road that I lived on, my family lived in, we had one family that the father was an alcoholic, mother was beaten up all the time. She left. She left five children, one girl, four boys, they all turned to drugs – not like drugs today, but they were glue sniffers, they were always stealing and things. But they had somewhere they could go to that they weren't labeled, and I think if you don't label kids per se, you know, they found a place they could go that was a safe environment.



### ANY MEMORABLE STORIES FROM THE PLAYGROUND?

I said about some of the children from the children's home coming to the adventure playground. We did have one little boy who used to come, and he had a falling out with one of the key workers at the home, and he ran away from home. We didn't know that at the time. I have to say. Anyway, somebody broke into the building, the adventure playground, and we found out it was this little boy who'd run away. He actually had done no damage really, he'd just opened - we had skylights in the roof, and he got onto the roof, and he opened it up, and he spent the night there, and the only thing he did was he got into the cupboard with the sweets in, because he was hungry, and he ate the sweets. But that was the only time anybody ever, in all the time that I had any involvement with it, ever got damaged, never got graffitied. The kids knew there was no swearing, no fighting. That little boy just slept in there because he knew it was a safe environment.



Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth

### SPRING HOLIDAY 1974



SATURDAY - PLAYGROUND SUPERVISED 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

SUNDAY - PLAYGROUND SUPERVISED 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.

BANK HOLIDAY MONDAY - PLAYGROUND SUPERVISED 10 p.m. to 6 p.m.

### TUESDAY 28th MAY

PLAYGROUND SUPERVISED 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

#### SORRY

NO under 5's  
PLAYGROUP

#### MODEL MAKING COMPETITION

Come along and make a model of anything you like - out of wood, clay, cardboard, plaster.

START 2 p.m. Models judged at 4.30 p.m.


### WEDNESDAY 29th MAY

PLAYGROUND SUPERVISED 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

10.30 to 12.30

Giant  
Painting 

1 p.m. to 3 p.m.

Pre-school Playgroup  
under 5's in Playcentre  
and pre-school  
Playground. 

#### SPORTS

START 3 p.m.  
three legged race  
relay's.  
egg and spoon  
Skipping  
much more and prizes.

Teenage Club - 8 - 10 p.m.

#### DISCO

DISCO This will be the last teenage Club until September -

Admission 5p - food - drinks and music.

### THURSDAY 30th May.

PLAYGROUND SUPERVISED 10 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Booth Street Playground  
are entering a mixed Rounders  
team in an inter-play centre  
competition at Farm Park.



Pre-school  
Playgroup  
1 p.m. to 3 p.m.  
under 5's.



3 p.m. Outdoors Cooking  
Bring along something  
to cook, or buy a  
sausage and Potatoes  
1p each.





EASTER HOLIDAYS  
AT  
TURNER STREET PLAYGROUND

- Tuesday, April 9th - Easter Egg Hunt
- Wednesday, April, 10th - 5 - a side Football Competition for Sparkbrook, at Farm Park.
- Thursday, April 11th - Visit to Handsworth Park, where there will be puppets to entertain you, and Inter playcentre 6 - a - side Football Competition (Juniors) at Salford Stadium.
- Monday, April 15th - Midlands Theatre Group performance for children at Farm Park (in the morning).
- \* Tuesday, April 16th - THE TURNER STREET PLAYWEEK begins, and goes on until next Sunday.  
Be there at 10 o' clock to see The Procession in the streets around the Playground.
- \* Wednesday, April 17th - PLAYWEEK
- \* Thursday, April 18th - PLAYWEEK  
Plus - Inter playcentre 6 - a - side Football competition (Seniors) at Salford Stadium.
- \* Friday, April 19th - PLAYWEEK
- \* Saturday, April 20th - PLAYWEEK
- \* Sunday, April 21st - The PLAYWEEK ends with a Fun-Fair at Turner Street. This is the day when all parents are specially welcome.
- Monday, April 22nd - A trip to Sutton Park (Bring 10p.)

Cathy

Malvern Street Adventure Playground, Balsall Heath



Small Heath Playcentre, Bolton Road





# SIMON RIX

## FORMER PLAYWORKER AT MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND, 2000S

### WHAT'S AN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

Well, I think at the centre of the ethos is self-build and community. So, the adventure playground, yes, it's there to provide for the play needs of the children in the area, but that's - what does that mean? Each setting is different, each area is different, each child is different - there are different play needs. So, the adventure playground is an intensely flexible, and, as I say, self-done, self-directed, self-built, and it's a permissional environment, because like - because it's done by us together, it gives permission to leave the world outside, to leave the ways of being outside, to leave your troubles outside, to leave your sense of disempowerment, which I think is profound in all people, you know, in this society. Leave that outside, and, because it gives that permission, it also gives a huge message of responsibility. It gives that message that everything that we do here, everything that we are here, contributes to what this place is. And so, it's a cue for reflection, as much as it's a permission to be different.

### WHAT DO YOU MEAN ABOUT BEING DIFFERENT?

So we were all sitting round the fire at Meriden and a new lad came in with one of the regular users, and they were older children, and this lad was like, quite a stocky Asian lad, you know, some Asian lads of that age get really whiskery, at kind of like quite youngish, and so he was like that in his appearance. We'd been doing baked potatoes I think, there was a lot of silver foil about, and so he got this silver foil and made this wig out of this silver foil. And he put it on his head, and then he went round the playground going, "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" And I looked at this, and I thought to myself, "Where else could that lad feel comfortable to do that?" And where else would he not be beaten up for it, you know? I think that kind of like encapsulates what the adventure playground is aiming to be. It's aiming to be a place where that guy can put on his tin foil wig and look for 'lions and tigers and bears, oh my!'

### SO THE FIRE WAS IMPORTANT AT MERIDEN?

The fire at Meriden was very very central, like, you know, there being no building and all that kind of stuff. So, you'd have like boys, secondary school age boys, coming in and going, "I've had a really bad day, can I chop some wood?" So, I would then hand this particular teenager a splitting maul, and some grown up that wasn't used to that

might say, "Ahh, that boy's got an axe!" And like, yeah, that boy has an axe and the boy knows where the chopping area is, he knows that the axe doesn't come out of the chopping area, he knows about the 'two arms' length rule', you know, he will chop the wood and he will break something up, smash it, break it up. Then he'll give the axe back, and he'll put the chopped up wood in the wood stall, and be thanked for it.

### HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED IN MERIDEN?

Well the first contact I had with Meriden was when I was still actually running 'Design and Build (Play)' because, the staff from Meriden, like, he - the story is, that it was set up under the Children's Plan, and under the Children's Plan there were supposed to be 50 adventure playgrounds set up, and funding was put out to local authorities. That was Blair's government. Those were the 'Pathfinder' authorities which got that money. Now, not all of those authorities produced an adventure playground. Solihull got 'Play Builder' money, which was kind of like the level underneath 'Pathfinder', and originally Meriden was set up to be a fixed equipment site, with some 'play rangers' who came along. But there was Ruth Shand, who I think she was part of 'Extended Services' in the education department, who was part of the management of the original project, and Steve Dawes, who was the original senior playworker. They got the idea of making it into a proper adventure playground. So, they sent the staff that they had there down to a Design and Build (Play) structure building course, which at the time was the only structure building course in the country. Now there's none! We used to run it at different sites, you know. One of the points of running the course was that a site that didn't have enough money to do a rebuild could, you know, reduce its expenditure by running it as a course and so, yeah, that was at Shoreditch Adventure Playground that was, they came down and did that course. So they did that and they started building some structures. And yeah, that was like, you know all I'd really heard of it, until, as I say, I was tipped off there was this job going and Design and Build (Play) had wound up, so I applied and gave it a go.

I got the job as senior playworker, yeah; and at that time, the job as senior playworker was considered a part time job. I was being paid 20 hours a week, and like, I said, "This job isn't a part time job." You know, "20 hours a week doesn't even cover the opening commitments, so I'm just going to be here full time!" Because a lot of the - a lot of what's central to developing community facilities like that, is just being there, and making sure that every time you say the gates are going to be open, they will be open, and when somebody passes round at the wrong time hoping you'll be there, you are. And so, yeah, I just went in there full time, because I wanted this adventure playground to be a success, and I wanted it to be a community organisation.

So, I thought to myself - this is a Tory authority in times of austerity, and I'm running a non-statutory service funded by this authority - this is going to end in a fight! And so, the strategy was to become indispensable yeah, to the community, and in so doing, to build a critical mass. That was what it was all about - critical

mass, which would carry this service through that fight to the other side. Well, as I say, it was all about being there, and that meant being there and providing a quality play environment.

So I was very, very, very well supported by Tracey Brant, who was my line manager, and Ali Lush, who was her line manager as well, and like, you know, I sat down with them and I said, "This is my vision...", I said, "I've got a background in the voluntary sector, so I'm really used to just doing what I want, and like you know, so, if we kind of like - if you trust me and loosen my leash a bit, I'll come back with something that I hope will be good. I started up the 'friends group'. This again was partly strategy to loose ourselves from the control of the local authority, and to enable the organisation to stand on its own two feet. So yeah, I started this 'friends group'. It was quite a lot of local parents and some industry professionals. Ali Wood's been there from the start, and we started doing some fundraising and just getting these little successes under our belt, you know, kind of like starting to operate as a committee.

#### **ANY MEMORABLE STORIES FROM THE PLAYGROUND?**

When we built those swing platform extensions, and there was a little bit of timber left over and I thought yeah like, "What shall we do with this?" We made a giant chair, you know, it was like five foot tall, something like that, and yeah, it was just a giant chair. The kids like, they got this giant chair up on to the new launch platform to make it three levels you see, and they were climbing on and launching off this chair. And I looked at this and I thought, "Yeah, that's absolutely sound, it's in the swing arc, the fall heights are controlled, you know, so, yeah, that's fine, let them carry on doing that." Then one day, I was like on the other side, the landing platform side, and a lad launched off the giant chair, and when he got to the top of the arc, you know, right in front of my face, he let go of the rope, and my heart went into my mouth, yeah, and he clapped behind his back, caught the rope, and swung back again. And that just shows you, because like you know, after 30 years, I thought I had seen everything in adventure play, you know, but there, right in front of my nose he did something I'd never seen before that actually sent my heart into my mouth, and it just shows you how adventure play will always break boundaries. It will break your personal boundaries, it will break societal boundaries, it will break every single boundary, and you've never seen it all.

I'm especially fond of Lewis, who still goes down there now. He's like, got some special needs and that, and like, when he first came down, he'd come down with SoLO, the disability group. But he was always like, really into making things, and he'd come in, "What you started? What you making today? What you making? What you doing?" He'd follow me around, you know, kind of like, drill this, hammer that. Now, he's not coming with SoLO anymore, he's a lot more independent, and the staff there actually have a 'Lewis's list', yeah, which is like the list of jobs for Lewis, and

he comes in and gets his list and he gets on with the jobs, you know - I'm chuffed to bits because, like, his confidence is growing, his competence is growing, and I said to him, I said, "Lewis, you make sure you keep photographs of everything you've done here, everything that you've worked on, you keep a photograph of it." And the play workers are assisting him to do that, and because you see, he will make somebody a really top quality mate, you know, if right, they can get over the fact that he's got slight special needs, you know, and him being able to build up a portfolio of evidence of his competence now, you know, kind of like, I'm touching wood that that's gonna, you know, really help him out in the future.

Then, the other story which has got some amount of currency now is the Mace story, yeah. Now, the playground was used by pupil referral units, and they'd come down once a week to do free play, and sometimes they'd be involved in special projects like structure building. And you know, the children at the PRUs, often labeled ESBD, there is a tendency to pop off. It's not a calm or safe environment really, under the current education system, in those institutions. Anyway, we were open for a public session, and one of the kids that attended with the PRU's came down, and he came down off his own bat, and he came in the site like, and he was in a real grump, I could see he was. So he sat himself down and I went over and sat down with him and said, you know, "Are you alright mate? What's up?" And he said to me, "It's not fair," he says, "I always get into trouble me, always. I wouldn't mind if it was me that had done it but it wasn't, and it's not fair." And I said to him, "Well, you're bigger than other children your age, you know, and you're also loud, so if there's something going on, and you're there, people notice you," I said, "And it's not fair, but that's how it is." He's like, "Oh, can I have the hammer and nails?" So I said, "Yeah." And I went and got him the hammer and nails, and he went to the wood pile, and he went through it and selected an old banister spindle that was in the wood pile, and he set to work on this; and while he did that I kind of like 'went over there' and 'did something else'. And what he was doing, he was getting this banister spindle and he knocked nails, you know, at all different angles, all at one end of this, like, banister spindle. And I came round in the course of whatever it was I was doing, and I said to him, "Ooh", I said, "That looks like a weapon." "Yes," he said, "It is." "Oh," I said, "You know what that looks like? It looks like a mace, yeah," I said, "It's a funny thing about a mace, you know, it's a ceremonial weapon. A bishop would carry a mace, because they weren't allowed to carry a blade, so they couldn't carry a sword. And then there's the mace in the House of Commons and they use it in ceremonies, and it sits there in the House of Commons and it represents the power of the church in the House of..." And we talked, you know, we talked about maces. Then he gets up, and he picks up his mace, and he sets off across the playground, and I walked with him, because he had a mace. But you see, he picked it up on the flat of his hands, he was carrying it on the flat of his two hands in front of him, and he went across the playground to where the fire circle was, and there's a lot of other



children there, lighting candles in the fire, and, like, you know, holding their candles, and he made his way through this group of children; and he came up to the fire, and he knelt down, and he placed the mace in the centre of the fire, and he stepped back and sat down on a stump and he watched it burn. That's a really powerful story, from a lot of directions, because he had devised his own ceremony to dispose of the anger that he had put into that mace, and he'd controlled it and he'd done it and he'd watched it happen. It ran through my mind, about different scenarios and different circumstances, in different settings, where he wouldn't have had access to those materials and those tools, and if he did, then someone would have gone, "That child's got a mace!" and would have tried to take it off him, and then there would have been a fight, and then somebody could have got hurt, and the impact on that child's life could have been huge. And a lot of settings would have decided that they're not going to take the risk that someone's going to get hurt, that there's a massive impact on that child's life, and whoever else's life. When people talk about risk they don't often regard the emotional risk, which is taken, both by the child and by the playworker, in opening the door and walking into situations that you don't know what the outcome is going to be. But that's the purpose of play, and the reason, I think, that that scenario went the way it did is because, well firstly, there was the permission that goes with responsibility. Next, the frame, the play frame that the child was in was protected by the playworker, but extended, so the extension was into the arena of ceremony, and through that, the child was able to play it out.







Meriden Adventure Playground, Chelmsley Wood



# TIMELINE

Meriden Adventure Playground Association (MAPA) – a registered charity – is a grass roots organisation that has evolved to support the development and progress of Meriden Adventure Playground – an open access service originally and still primarily for 5-16 year olds, although recent projects also now target under 5's and over 16's as well as supporting parents and families on low income.

The playground is the only open access service left in North Solihull's deprived wards as a result of government austerity plans.

## 2006-7:

- resident survey identified need for a safe play area that offered variety and challenge.
- lottery funding granted to create playground in meriden park, chelmsley wood and to employ three-part time playworkers to provide support and safety.

## 2010:

- In the three years from 2007, the playground becomes a cherished community asset. The playground includes self-built climbing and swinging timber structures, a zip wire, a fire pit and a sandpit.
- Lottery funding expires, but Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council steps in and provides funding for staff and site maintenance.

## 2012:

- Recognising the challenges of "austerity" on council funding, local volunteers form MAPA. MAPA raises funds and takes on more responsibility for managing the site: – Employs two playworkers – Develops CommunityCafé. – Assists parents in financial difficulties by providing food bank vouchers, clothing and bedding. – MAPA slowly becomes a community hub.

## 2017:

- Number of children attending annually increases into the thousands with over 1000 children registered to attend without parents' supervision. This provides much needed support to parents as well as children.
- MAPA gains charitable status to better secure the future of the playground.
- Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council announce they will stop funding in September 2017, and despite protest and a community campaign, they do so.
- MAPA increases their fundraising efforts and start working with Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council to secure the playground's future.

## 2018:

- Negotiated a licence to use the site with Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council as a precursor to negotiating a six year lease from 2019.
- Local community raise £20,000 via events and activities which keeps the playground open until three year funding from the Lottery's Youth Investment Fund, Children in Need and the Tudor Trust secure salaries for 5 playworkers and 5 youthworkers.
- Supervision and staffing structures are set up; monitoring of practice begins.
- Close partnership working with SoLO, Urban Heard and Gro-Organic.
- Consolidation of trustee board.
- Construction of a MAPA website.
- MAPA takes over youth night previously run on site by Early Help (SMBC) and opens on a second night as well with plans for other development work in the area.
- Staff began offering free food daily as children were clearly hungry. With funding from Family Action, we ran family cooking sessions throughout the summer, producing some great MAPA recipes.

## 2019:

- Ongoing negotiations with the Council for a six year lease. A substantial award from HS2 to enable us to install two large converted shipping containers to grant us indoor space for an office, meeting/training room and gathering/activity spaces for children and young people, is on hold until the lease is agreed.
- Funding from the Clothworker's Foundation, Pockets Parks and Awards for All enabled us to do repairs and development work on site resulting in a new treehouse, the famous third tier 'Nutter's Platform', a wheelchair ramp and 'death slide', a shelter and the reboarding of several platforms, plus the installation of a central lighting column and CCTV (thanks to Ben Purewal of E-Consulting Ltd.!).
- Celebrated our first National Playday – hopefully the first of many – which was attended by 1200 people and was a huge success, and also our first Fright Night at Halloween – a truly scary and hilarious event.

## 2020:

- Helped by the Colebridge Trust, MAPA Trustees embarked on a program of strategic work, developing a budget plan and fund-raising strategy, and clarifying our aims and clarifying our aims and objectives for the next five years.

# ALI WOOD

## CHAIR OF TRUSTEES, MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND

### CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN MERIDIAN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

I've been involved for 11 years, which is older than most of you, so it feels like a long time. But the things that I have been doing there have changed over those years. At the beginning I wasn't doing what I'm doing now. I got involved originally when it first started to be built. I trained a lot of the staff in order to be able to work with kids like you. I've carried on doing some of that but, in the meantime, the council who used to pay all of the staff took all the money away. My role changed so I have to get the money in so that we can pay the staff because we need to have staff there.

### CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE HISTORY OF MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

Originally 11 years ago, it started because there were quite a lot of adults who felt that there weren't enough opportunities for kids to play, because there's lots of traffic. There's big roads in Chelmsley Wood. Quite often, kids of your age weren't allowed to just go out and play, whereas if you talk to your parents and grandparents or whatever, you'll find, when I was a kid, you just went out to play and you didn't go back home until you were cold or wet or hungry, you know. So, we decided we wanted to create a playground where children could come and feel free to do a lot of the sorts of things that you probably can't do anywhere else. So, like, there's a fire pit and you can cook on the fire, and you can climb stuff, and swing stuff, and use tools. And there aren't many places where you can do those sorts of things. So that's what we wanted to do. That's what we wanted to do - create a playground that was different and would give you guys some freedom.

### DO YOU HAVE ANY MEMORABLE STORIES ABOUT THE PLAYGROUND?

One that's coming to mind was Play Day last year. Play Day is something that happens across the country and, for the first time, we did it as well. I don't know if you came, but we had mud fights and a mud bath and we had a water slide where we threw coloured paints on the children, so that when they slid down, they would come out the other end a completely different colour. We had races where we had people blindfolded while we tried to do an obstacle course, and we had a tug of war with mums and dads. We did an awful lot of funny, whacky, playful stuff that didn't cost anything, and that was a wonderful day and we had over a thousand people.



One of the other interesting memories is that a few years ago we had some older children who came in, and they weren't behaving very well. Now we don't sort of say, this is how you should behave, because it is about being free, but they actually they were angry, they were fighting, they weren't playing, and they were making other children's lives a bit difficult.

It suddenly dawned on us that the reason they were doing it was because they were hungry. And actually, we have a lot of children around here whose mums and dads are struggling to earn enough and to buy enough food. So that was a real interesting moment, because then we started making sure we have food every day for those who wanted it, and now we give food every day. So that's been quite a big memory that changed everything. And their behaviour changed when they weren't hungry.

### **CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT WHEN THE PLAYGROUND ALMOST CLOSED?**

When the council pulled out their money and we thought, we're never going to survive because we need to have money to pay the staff and do everything we need to do. We were wondering what on earth can we do, and where can we suddenly get money from, and all these families, all these parents suddenly wrote letters. We had 10,000 letters to the council saying, you must not let this playground close. Now, they still took the money away. What that actually did was it meant that lots of parents came and rallied round and volunteered their time, and many of them still do, to make sure that we stayed open. So, parents will come, and that summer they were doing cake sales and car washes and head shaves, sponsored things. And somehow that's kind of stayed since, so there's a real relationship with families, and we do help families as well. We give out emergency food banks. We help with second hand clothes and bedding and things like that. There's a real strong relationship with local families, who all come in and help in all sorts of ways, and that's wonderful. We wouldn't be here without that.

### **CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE COUNCIL TRIED TO CLOSE THE PLAYGROUND?**

We were very upset. We had people crying. We had children crying. We had staff crying. We went to council meetings. We had to go and try and put our case. That was all quite an education for us, because most of us had never done anything like that before. We even had a picket line where we went and put banners. We went in front of the council house to try to catch the councillors going in to say, "Save us!" Some of the counsellors were going round the back doors so they didn't have to face us. It was quite interesting. We went to lots of public meetings and we made a big stir and we went on the telly, and we went on the radio, to try and raise awareness. They still took the money away.

It wasn't entirely their fault because lots of councils have had to do that because they haven't had as much money as they did. But because the community all came together, we managed to survive anyway.

### **COULD YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE FIRE PIT STORY?**

Ah, the fire pit story. This was, you know we have fire pit, particularly in the winter. You need it. Or in the colder times. You really need a good fire. On this particular occasion, there were a group of young moms sitting around the fire pit having a cup of tea. Their children were off playing. They were all talking. One of them was training to be a child minder and she'd heard an African proverb that day, when she'd been on her course. The proverb said, it takes a village to raise a child. What that means is, actually, if you want to raise a child, if you want to bring a child up, you actually need a lot more than just the parents. You need a lot of other people. You need a community so that you can look out for each other. She was saying she'd heard about this proverb and she said, do you know what, she said, "I was thinking, the playground is our village." When I heard that, and I suddenly realised how much the playground meant to them and our families, I went round the back of the fire pit and I cried. I really did. I thought there's no way this play ground can close. No way.

### **WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO GET INVOLVED IN PLAYWORK?**

Because I think that children are the most oppressed group in society. I'll explain that. I think that children are oppressed in the sense that a lot of grownups don't see how clever, how competent and able and capable they really are. So, in my working life, I've always wanted to make things more equal for children and give children more opportunities and give children freedom.

For me, play is a service for children, whereas care is a service for adults...



A lot of play schemes became places where parents would look for care provision rather than play provision



# HIGHGATE BERRINGTON WALK SCULPTURED PLAYAREA

THE BERRINGTON WALK SCULPTURED PLAY AREA WAS SET UP IN 1976. IT WAS AN OUTREACH PROJECT RUN BY THE FSU (FAMILY SERVICE UNIT), FUNDED BY WEST MIDLAND ARTS & DELIVERED BY DAVE SWINGLE AND LOCAL CHILDREN. IT ATTEMPTED TO TRY AND CONNECT WITH RESIDENTS IN A DEPRIVED AREA OF BIRMINGHAM. THE PROJECT WAS A SUMMER PLAYScheme PROJECT OVER THE SIX WEEKS OF THE SUMMER SCHOOL HOLIDAYS AND AIMED AT INVOLVING RESIDENTS AND CHILDREN IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF DESIGNING AND BUILDING THEIR OWN PLAYAREA IN THE HEART OF THEIR COMMUNITY.

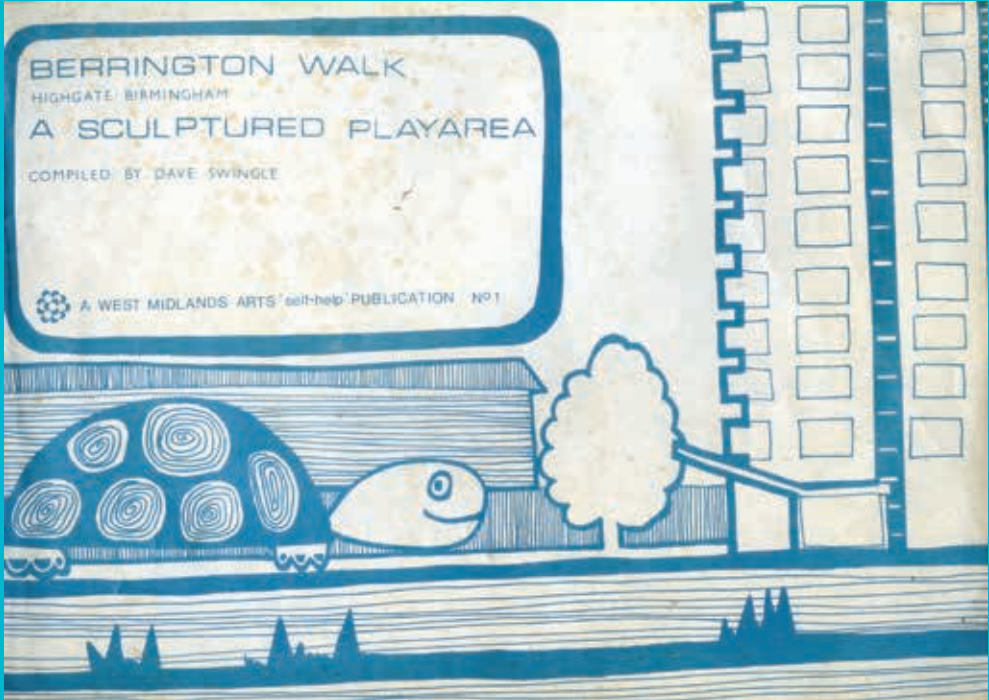








Animals for carnival float, Small Heath Playcentre, Bolton Road





# ELLEN DELANEY

## SENIOR PLAYWORKER, MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND

### WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PLAYGROUND AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY?

The relationship between the playground and the local community is huge. It's a massive massive relationship we have with the community. I have people come to me who have got no food in their cupboards, so they'll come to me and say, "Ellen, I've got no food in my cupboards and I need some bread and I need some milk." So we'll give them some bread, we'll go out and buy them some bread and some milk. I also do something that's called a Helping Hands referral. So, I fill in a form for them and it goes off to the Helping Hands charity and then they go and deliver food for them. So, I know that that family that night or the next day, that family will have something to eat. Also within the community, if people need clothing they come to me as well and ask me if I've got any school uniform. In the holidays we do uniform swap shop. So, when you're too small for your jumper, your mommy can bring it down to the playground all washed and then exchange it for a bigger jumper because that will help somebody, won't it. Because if you haven't got money for uniform you really



do struggle don't you. Your mummy and daddy will be stressed and go, "How am I going to afford this uniform?" But they know they can come to us and we'll give them a uniform.

### CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE COUNCIL TRIED TO CLOSE DOWN MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

I cried. I absolutely cried, because it's so important for you children and the community that the playground is there. Because it's not only for children, it's for adults as well isn't it, you know.

While you children are off playing and having a most amazing time in the playground, the parents could be sitting down and having a cup of tea, and they can be discussing their problems with the staff and if we can help in any way we will help. It's our job to do that. Why would the council want to close the playground down? It's silly isn't it, it just doesn't make sense to me. It's needed. The playground is needed for everybody.

### WHY DID YOU WANT TO WORK AT MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

I kind of fell upon the job. I was a dinner lady, and I actually used to work here, at St Anne's. I used to be a cleaner here many many years ago, because my children came here when they were younger. I used to be a cleaner here, and I used to help out in the community as well. I used to be a community outreach worker in Chelmsley Wood. So, I used to work in other schools as well. It kind of come around where I was a dinner lady and I was bringing all my children's stuff into the nursery. So, I was bringing in dolls, and I was bringing in footballs, and I was bringing in stuff for the children to play with. I didn't realise, at the time, that I was doing playwork. Because playwork is about providing opportunity for children to play, so on your playground you've got lots of things to play with, haven't you? Well, that's play work. Lots and lots of loose parts, they're called. Lots of things being brought in for you to play with. So, I was doing playwork at the time, and I didn't know that I was doing it. So, I got asked to do a playwork qualification and that's how I got involved in Meriden Park.

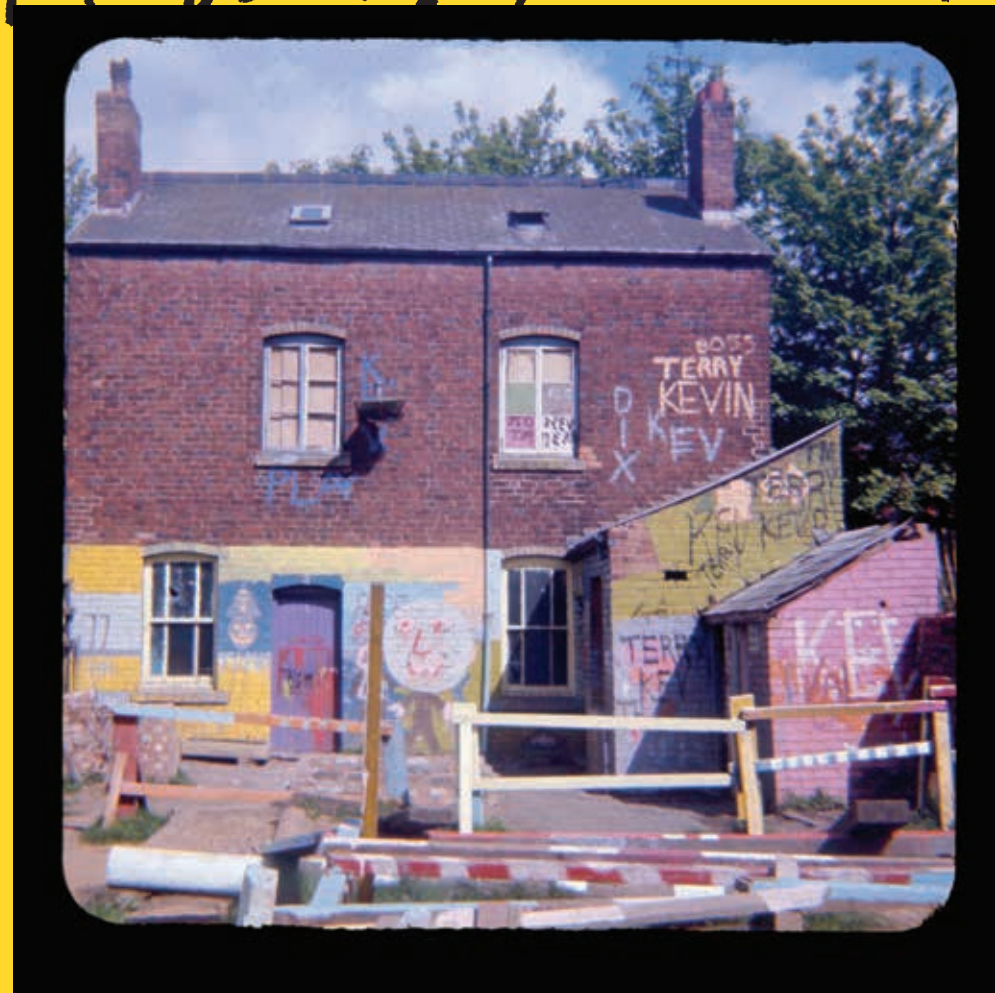
### HOW DO YOU FEEL KNOWING THAT CHILDREN HAVE A WILD IMAGINATION WHEN USING MERIDEN?

It is the best best feeling knowing that children are running around the site being creative, using their imagination, because it shows that you're children, and it's important that you're out there running around, because it helps you later on in life. Because it's no fun, is it, when you're sitting in front of a television watching a television? It's horrible, isn't it? It's boring isn't it? You'll end up with square eyes. It's better to be outside using your imagination. It's good for your brain. It's really really healthy for your brain to be outside, running around. It's good for your immune system. It's good for your legs and your bones and it helps you to grow. Every child needs to play. It's important. It's so important.



Terry, head builder, Booth Street Adventure Playground,  
Handsworth (also see graffiti on building image right)

It's no fun, is it,  
when you're sitting in  
front of a television  
watching a television?  
It's boring, isn't it?





SPON  
LANE  
ADVENTURE  
PLAYGROUND.

# SLAP

NEWS-SHEET no 1

## WHAT'S ON AT HALF-TERM

- FEB 16<sup>TH</sup> SAT - Barbecue - bring your own potatoes  
SUN Sorry Closed!  
MON - Mini-Olympics, lots of prizes..  
TUES - Fancy Dress - Under 10's.  
\*\* WED - Newspaper collection 5.00p.m. \*\*  
THURS - Film Show - FREE.  
FRI - 5-a-side football competition.  
FEB 23<sup>RD</sup> SAT - Barbecue - bring your own potatoes.

OPEN EVERY DAY 10.0'CLOCK.

All usual indoor + outdoor activities.

NEW! NEW!

SOUP-TIME - 1.0'clock 1p a cup.

\*\* Please save your newspapers - we get \*\*  
£16 per ton !!

SPON  
LANE  
ADVENTURE  
PLAYGROUND

# SLAP

NEWS-SHEET no 2

We've had a very busy week on the Playground.  
About 200 children came down during the Half  
Term Holiday Week!

THE FANCY DRESS  
COMPETITION.

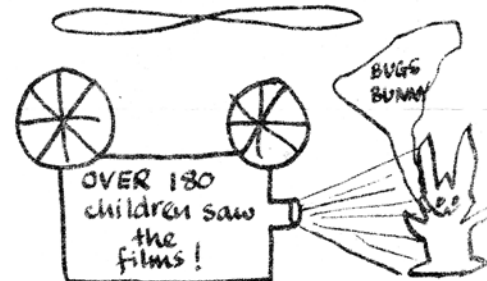


FIRST: Ann Smith  
Howard Court  
Stephen Day.



SECOND: Roy Ashton  
Thames Court  
Linda Laverage

THIRD: Patsy Ryland  
Avon Court  
David Beaver  
Frobisher Court.



\*\* NEWSPAPER \*\* We have sold the newspaper £9.92!  
So please carry on saving! [Let us know if you would  
like us to collect it.]

# SHARON DUNBAR

**PLAYWORKER,  
MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND**

## **COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THE COMMUNITY AT THE PLAYGROUND?**

We are a little community based in Meriden Adventure Park. A lot of parents will come down if they're experiencing troubles, problems with their children, with school, or personal problems, they'll come down and they'll speak to any one of us. Some of them have got our phone numbers, they will call us, and, you know, just having that friendly voice at the end of the phone, or someone that I can go and speak to. "Oh Sharon, oh Ellen, can you help me out with this?" You know what I mean, we're always happy to help out anyone. As I said, we're a big family down there and we're a little community within the park.

## **DO YOU HAVE ANY MEMORY STORIES OF THE PLAYGROUND?**

Memories of 2008 and just starting there, I just thought what an amazing scheme, you know. That summer was so hot, it was really really hot, and it was so amazing, and we learnt a lot from that summer, you know, just all the messy play that we did. I think we've got pictures of ourselves just covered in flour the one day, because we were supposed to be making something, I think it was play dough, and then one of the kids just went round and just covered one of the staff with flour, so we ended up having a flour fight. And then, you know, we've had really successful Halloween nights, I mean our most successful was the one this year, so it was more of a fright night, which is really good. We took some young people on a coach trip to the seaside, and that was amazing, because some kids had never been to the seaside, they'd been on canal boat trips, you know. So it's about sharing our experiences with these young people, because I know that some young people, their parents don't get the time to take them out and learn them different things for different reasons, so we try and allow the kids to experience as many things as possible.

## **CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE COUNCIL TRIED TO CLOSE DOWN MERIDAN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?**

Oh wow, if there was a fly on the wall. We all went up to the council, to the council place, where they were having this meeting to vote on whether to keep the playground open, where they'd found out a lot of information about us and there were members of staff, there were parents, there were community leaders, and there were children that play at the playground. So all of us were there, and I think we had a spokesperson, so it was a young person from our park, and she was actually in care, so she wasn't living with her mum and dad she was living with someone else, and she wrote this letter and she stood up and she spoke to the members of the council saying what this place meant to her, you know, and we all stood up and clapped, didn't we. It was amazing.







Theatre Group Visit, Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth









Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth

# SARAH HULBERT

**PARENT VOLUNTEER,  
MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND**

## WHAT ARE YOUR BEST MEMORIES OF THE PLAYGROUND?

I think that some of my best memories, and some of my favourite memories, are things like when we have rainy days and we don't expect many people to turn up, and we don't think people will have fun, but what actually happens is we end up with giant muddy puddles, and 20 children that are covered all the way from their head to their feet in mud, and they have to go and get in their parents' cars, and there's lots of fun, and lots of laughter and lots of slightly cross parents. They're probably my favourite memories, and they're the ones that make the best pictures too.

## CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED WHEN THE COUNCIL TRIED TO CLOSE DOWN THE ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?

Oh, it was awful. Because the playground's so important for all the people that use it, not just the children, but the adults too. We were all pretty upset that it looked like it was going to close, and we spent a lot of time trying to fight the council to get them to continue their funding, to keep it open. And then we went to all the court dates, and on one the children came with us as well, and we had a huge petition, and then when we realised that none of that was going to make any difference whatsoever, we started looking at ways to make money to try and keep the playground open.

Oh gosh, we did lots of things. We spent days and days standing at the shopping centre asking people to sign the petitions, with big banners that the children helped to create. We did fundraising days, we made cakes and sold them through the cafe, we went to all the court dates that the council had discussing what was going to happen, we wrote reports on how important it was, and interviewed some of the children so the council could see how important it was. Ali and I went to see our local councillor and had a chat with her to see if there was anything she could do. She was very supportive but not very helpful, because their mind was made up that they needed to save that money, and it had to come from somewhere, and it was going to come from the playground. Everything we did felt a bit like we were just meeting dead ends, and nobody was really interested, and we were going to lose anyway. So to keep the playground after all of that was amazing, and we all appreciated it so much, that we still have it and we still fundraise now for it, and it's one of the reasons that I volunteer there. I used to be there just as a





parent, but once they threatened to close it down, that's when I started giving them my time and commitment, because it's so important for my children to still have it.

It was kind of a slow build because, obviously you first receive warning that there's a possibility that they might withdraw funding, and so first steps then are just to try and show people how important the playground is, especially the people that are in charge of making the decisions. So, you know, we started by just alerting the community to the fact that there was a risk there that we may lose the playground, and just trying to encourage people to use the playground, to increase the numbers; to just show generally to the community, as well as to the council, just how important the service the playground provides, and how important it is to all of the people that use it. So, the first thing really was just sharing on social media, letting people know what was going on, just talking to people generally, encouraging people to come in to the playground and to use it. And we started collecting data through some of the groups and things that are run, asking parents there just how important it was to them, and kind of collecting all of this data to show to the council. I mean, I think my involvement was kind of limited, because I'm not paid staff and I wasn't in on the, you know, meetings in the offices, and I didn't get all the information that was available, although I must have had quite a lot because, obviously I became quite involved with the playground at that stage, because we just didn't want to lose it, so it became a big part of my family's life for quite a long time. It frustrated me that people just don't seem to understand the value of the playground in this area. It could be, I mean, it's a big area with a lot of children, and I know we get good numbers in the summer. I think people don't appreciate just how valuable a resource it is, and I found that quite frustrating, so I think we all tried really hard with that. And then we came up with a 27.5p campaign, because what we established was that it costs, for every council tax paying household within the local area, 27.5p per year to keep the playground open, which is nothing. So we, a few of us together came up with, you know, "Are your children worth 27.5p a year on your Council Tax?" And that was quite powerful actually, once people actually understood the cost and where it was going, and seeing us out on the street, seeing us talk to people, having us out there with the banners and the petition and showing on social media, it did encourage a lot of new people into the playground. So, when the Council – when we appeared just to be hitting brick walls all the time, it didn't matter what we said or what we provided, the answer was always, you know, "No, this is still going ahead. We understand where you're coming from, but this is going ahead." It was incredibly frustrating for all of us. And so, that's when we turned our attention to fundraising. And, I mean, as parents there's only so much we can do. Really, the majority of that was left to Ali and the office staff, who have managed to actually secure some pretty good, pretty substantial funding, in order to pay for staff, but I think as parents we're quite restricted. It's the small stuff that we do – we raise for the small stuff so that they can concentrate on the big stuff.

## WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PLAYGROUND AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY?

I think a lot of the local community don't understand the playground. They don't understand what it is and how important it can be for them and for their lives. But I think once people start to get involved in it, it becomes really important to them and their families, because it is a way for adults to connect and get together. And they provide loads of different services, not just play as well, so they do lots of things for the local community that people maybe aren't aware of, like giving people access to food banks, free school uniforms, and they have clothes exchanges, where people can donate clothes and pick up clothes for free, baby stuff for people that have just had babies, they source furniture for people that have just moved into a new home and have got nothing. It's actually a hugely important resource for the community, but most people don't know that.



# LUCIE BENNETT

PARENT OF LEWIS, WHO USES MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND REGULARLY



## COULD YOU JUST TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT THE IMPACT THAT IT'S HAD ON YOUR SON'S LIFE?

Lewis has moderate learning difficulties, so he has at times struggled with what people might see as the most basic things people develop as they grow up – confidence, independence, skills, how to make friends. He has gained all of that just by coming here. He has recently, in the past 12 months as well, this is the first place he has started to travel to independently himself, because he felt confident enough to do so from home to bring himself here. He's made friends, he has learnt new skills, his confidence mainly, he is able to do so much more for himself just because he has been coming here. And I trust the place a hundred per cent with him, he has always been safe here.

## COULD YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT SOME OF THE THINGS LEWIS GETS UP TO HERE?

He's a very able builder, I think, that might be the best thing to say. He has used a variety of tools. I've walked in here at times and he's been axing wood, I think that's from a very young age, that was one of the first things I think he was doing. He has helped build a lot of the things that are in here now – mud kitchens, I think he's helped with the swings. He's a very hands-on learner, so he watches, so that's what I mean by some the skills he's acquired are because some of the staff have patiently gone through things with him, and he's picked up skills from them. He's done a lot here. I think he's built a pizza oven, he's constantly helping to tidy up. He literally will do anything they ask him to do, he loves helping them out and just being here in general.

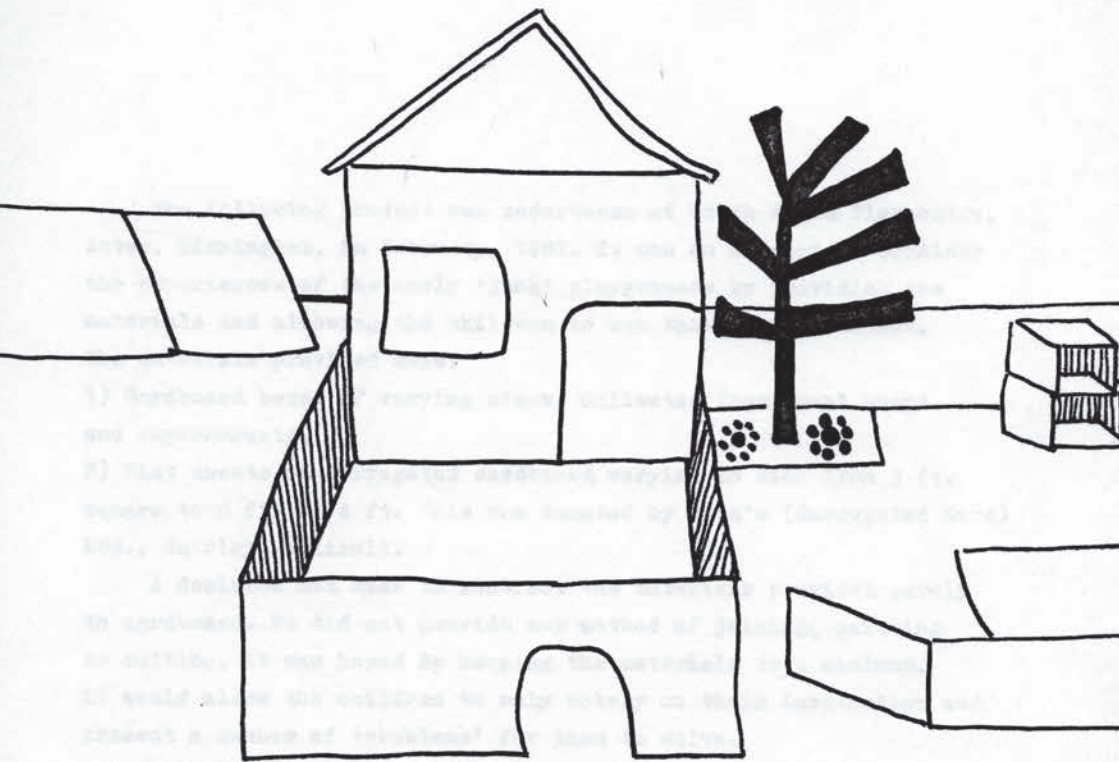
## COULD YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT THE STAFF AT THE PLAYGROUND?

Amazing. They genuinely like having the kids here as well, they love it being full of kids, watching the children play. The kids eat here, there's things they can access here, it's generally an amazing place for them to go because the staff are so welcoming. Even if it is pouring down with rain, there's always staff here. Lewis has been here and got literally soaking wet through on numerous occasions, which means the staff have too, just so he can be here and play, so, amazing.

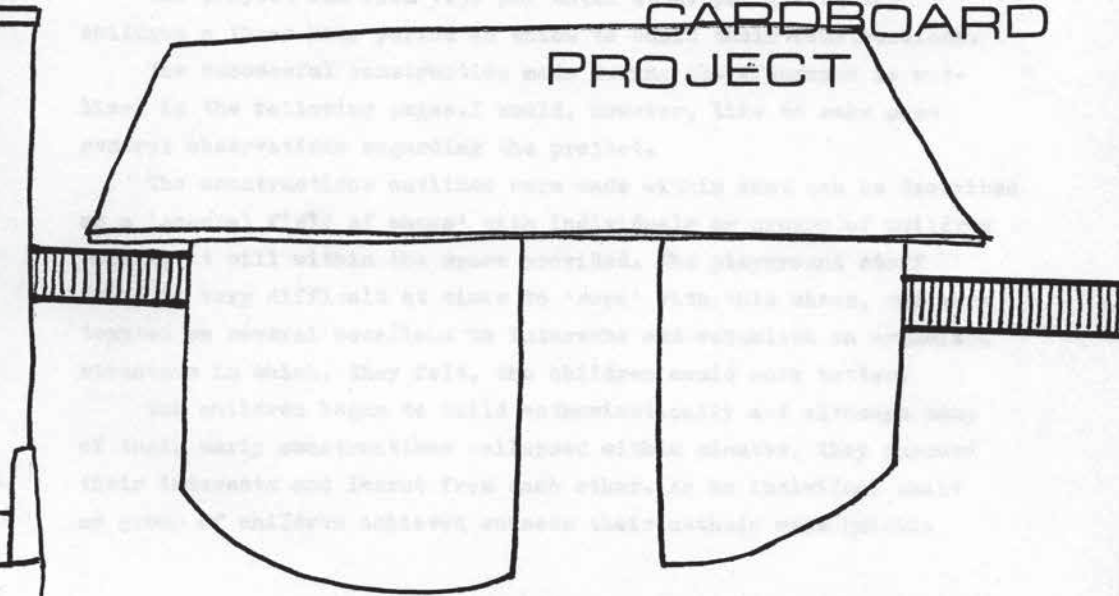
## WHAT SORT OF IMPACT DO YOU THINK THE PLAYGROUND HAS LOCALLY, WITHIN THIS PARTICULAR COMMUNITY?

It's somewhere for the kids to go. I think, during lockdown, it probably impacted a lot of the children not being able to come here. I know it certainly did Lewis, because he was so sad that he couldn't come here, because he was coming here every day. He would come straight home from school and get changed, he's got safety boots and work trousers, he'd come straight down, so I should think it's had a massive impact. I mean, I think all areas need a park like this. I certainly would have loved a park like this when I was a kid, making dens and just proper old-fashioned play. So definitely a positive impact, because it's somewhere for the kids to come, and be safe. It keeps them off the streets.





## SOUTH ASTON CARDBOARD PROJECT





## LEWIS HILL

**PLAYED AT MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND,  
NOW A JUNIOR VOLUNTEER**

### **WHAT HAVE YOU BUILT AT THE PLAYGROUND?**

The things that I have built is the treehouse in the park, I've repaired the Tango swing, I've redone the Tango swing as I've said, and I did the Stone Henge, that was with Simon, digging all the holes and putting the posts in, and I repaired the fireplace, I built a wood store, that was for the fireplace, and I did loads of stuff really, and that's what I did.

### **WHAT TOOLS HAVE YOU USED?**

The tools what I have used is axes, drills, saws, hammers, sledge hammer, spades, drills, sledge hammers, pickaxes, angle grinder, anything, any other tools like chisels, spanners, and that's it, that's all I could think of, so, yeah.

### **COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT THE PLAYGROUND?**

The thing about the park is it's a safe place for people to go, and I've been there for seven years and it's a really nice place to go and speak to my friends, and help out many things, and speak to the adults, and it makes me happy place to go, and I'll go there after school and go and help out and speak to the staff. The staff are really nice, so yeah, it's a happy place.







## REBECCA PRESCOTT

**PLAYED AT MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND, NOW A JUNIOR VOLUNTEER**

**COULD YOU JUST TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT MERIDEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND?**

Well, I love the park, because I've been coming since I was younger, and I used to be running round and everything, making friends here. I used to love it, enjoying the swings, and climbing up the climbing frame, building sandcastles.

**HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN COMING HERE?**

I used to come here, I think I started, because my grandad started bringing me, I think he started bringing me when I was about eight.

**HOW OLD ARE YOU NOW?**

I'm nineteen now.

**CAN YOU REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS LIKE AT THE START?**

Well, they used to have swings at the back, and I used to be on them all the time. My grandad used to be looking for me and, if he couldn't find me, I'd just used to be down the back on the swings. Now they've got different swings.

**COULD YOU TELL ME HOW YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE PLAYGROUND HAS CHANGED?**

Well, when I was younger, obviously I used to be on all the swings, and in the sandpit building sandcastles, and making friends and everything. But now, obviously I'm older, I'm 19, so I'm not going to be doing that, but now I help volunteer, and help with the kids, if they ask me, if they want anything, help the kids and, yeah, just volunteer here, and put my effort in to help the park.

**DO YOU HAVE ANY MEMORABLE STORIES?**

I do have a memory that when I was younger and it happened, it gave me a nightmare, I couldn't sleep. But it was one Halloween, I can't remember how old I was, but it was a Halloween party, and I come down to the park, and Ashley was dressed up as a zombie, and he started chasing me, and I was crying and everything, and he come to me and says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's alright, I'll stop."

### HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE ADULTS HERE?

Oh they were lovely, all the playworkers they were lovely. If you hurt yourself, tripped over or whatever, then they'd be there helping you, and they were lovely, they'd play with you, and have a laugh, and put a smile on your face. Lovely. They still are now.

### HOW DO YOU FEEL WHEN YOU'RE HERE?

Well obviously, there's the little kids running round and everything, but there's always someone, if you want, like playworkers, if you want to speak to a playworker, there's always someone there that you can talk to, and then there's always kids if you want someone to play with, there's always the kids, and they're always the kids in there, and they're fine for you to play with them, so you've always got someone there.

### COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE IMPACT THE PLAYGROUND HAS HAD ON YOUR LIFE?

Well obviously, me coming when my grandad started bringing me when I was eight, and now I'm 19 and I still come. But the playworkers, if you ever need someone to talk to, they're always there and they'll always support you no matter what you need. So, the playworkers, they're lovely, and I couldn't be more thankful for them being there when I needed them.





## DEREK HORTON

### **PLAYWORKER AT HOCKLEY PORT ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND AND BALSALL HEATH ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND (MALVERN STREET)**

I taught Fine Art at university for a long time and I'm currently mostly engaged in writing and curatorial projects. You ask what constitutes an adventure playground, and I think the term is one that's changed its use over the years. I think adventure playgrounds now can often refer to something that's made or designed by professionals, by adults, for children to use. But certainly, in my understanding of an adventure playgrounds, coming from working on them in the 1970s, and the history of them before that, post-war from Scandinavia particularly, adventure playgrounds for me are places about children making their own space, creating their own structures on which to play, being helped and supported by adults only to the extent that they need to be, in terms of perhaps some degree of help with the construction and making sure that they stay safe. But essentially adventure playgrounds for me are things where children make their own decisions, design their own structures, and determine their own play.

### **AFTER YOU WORKED AT MALVERN ST & HOCKLEY PORT ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS, WHAT DID YOU DO?**

I left Malvern Street adventure playground to go to work on adventure playgrounds, but also other community arts projects in Peterborough in Cambridgeshire. I worked for the city council there, and my title I think was community arts development worker. And I was involved in a variety of different projects, working with a tenants' group and setting up a tenants' newspaper, working with a number of adventure playgrounds that were entirely funded or partly funded by the council, in different areas of Peterborough. I didn't work there for very long, largely because my priorities and the council's priorities were very different, and it was certainly a very different environment to working in Malvern Street, where effectively I was a local government officer. And although the brief was to work with communities and residents' groups and schools to some degree, and other organisations to develop community arts projects and develop playgrounds. There was very much a kind of council steer on how things should be done.

I got into trouble quite early on by working with residents on the council estate that I lived on. Because I was given a council flat as part of the deal when I took the job on and moved to Peterborough, so that I had somewhere to live there, I was renting a council flat, I got involved with the local tenants' association there in various campaigns and in setting up a newspaper, which inevitably brought me into conflict straight away

with the council's housing department. And so there were all kinds of political difficulties around working for a local authority, and I quite quickly decided it wasn't for me.

When I left, I came back to Balsall Heath and I set up a project that was a kind of joint initiative in relation to ideas that I had that stemmed from some sort of community theatre-type work that I'd been doing at the playground earlier. Having been involved in groups like Welfare State International, I did a summer school with Welfare State, and so I was quite interested in kind of live art-type work, and this initiative was something between me and Dick Atkinson, who was the director of St Paul's Project, that ran the playground, that funded the playground at the time, and Dennis Turner who was a Local Authority Education Department adviser. And we set up a project with local primary schools, all of the Balsall Heath primary schools were involved in it to a greater or lesser extent, and it was to do with language development, particularly for second language learners, in which I was involved as a kind of clown character, and we produced books and I did live work in schools, but that wasn't directly connected to the playground, that was a sort of independent project.

So I did that for a little while, but I'd also become much more interested than I had been earlier in the visual arts world too, and that was very much informed by some of the people that I came into contact with through working at Malvern Street, who were involved in community arts but were also involved in a more kind of art making exhibition-based kind of art world too. And I got increasingly involved in that in a variety of different ways, and began making work, sculptural work that, in certain ways, although it was on quite a small scale, was informed by the use of materials and the ways of working that I'd become very familiar with through working on playgrounds. And I began being involved in making work, exhibiting work and, through that, being invited to do talks and some visiting teaching at art schools, and that slowly developed to a point where I decided that I wanted to pursue that in a different and more formalised way.

So I did a part time MA in Fine Art at Leeds Polytechnic, as it then was, and subsequent to that ended up working at the polytechnic, or Leeds Metropolitan University, as it had become by then, and then I spent quite a long time working in art education in higher education. And subsequent to that I've been involved in curating, with two other people run a gallery in Leeds for several years, and I'm also involved in writing about art and I edit an online magazine, so I've become much more involved in the world of fine art and art education and not had any direct involvement in community arts, or certainly adventure playgrounds, for a very long time.

But, looking back on it, I can see all sorts of ways in which it was quite a formative experience, and working on playgrounds and in community arts has certainly – and I wasn't necessarily aware of it at the time I don't think – but certainly looking back at it now, I can see a kind of logical thread that runs through all of those 40-plus years, that kind of in various ways, in relation to creativity and in relation to working collaboratively, have been quite consistent themes through

all the various different things that I've done since that time when I was in my very early 20s, when I was working on adventure playgrounds in Birmingham.

### HOW ARE THINGS DIFFERENT TODAY COMPARED TO WORKING IN THE 1970S?

I think one of the key differences is probably the way things are funded these days, where there tends to be, I think, much less independent activity. I mean, that's wrong, maybe not less independent activity, it tends to be more institutionalised, because, on the whole, activities are funded and arts projects are funded, either by the Arts Council or by local authorities or by some combination of the two. And there's a way, in the kind of quite anarchic independent things that I recall happening in the 60s and 70s, I think would be difficult to replicate now. And I'm not necessarily saying that's a bad thing, because I think some of the anarchy of the past maybe isn't particularly anything to be celebrated. But I think certainly something has been lost in terms of adventure playgrounds. And again for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, availability of land. It was very easy in a post-war situation where there was, you know, there were still bomb sites in Birmingham in the 1970s, there were sites that had literally been bombed during the second world war and had never been redeveloped. And there was a lot of council-owned land that was unused, so that there was much more space, certainly in Birmingham and I think in other cities too, that was available, where it wasn't difficult to negotiate access to and use of land for things like adventure playgrounds. And I think that the extent to which land is now at a premium, is much more privately owned and policed in various ways, makes it much more difficult to imagine how adventure playgrounds as I knew them could exist.

And alongside that, for all sorts of reasons that are maybe quite positive reasons, there's a different kind of emphasis on health and safety now, but in ways that have institutionalised that, that again would make it impossible to operate with the kind of rules that we had on some of the playgrounds that I worked on, you know, both in Birmingham and later in Peterborough, where we had rules like 'no hand tools for under 5s', and 'no power tools for under 10s'. I mean, it's unimaginable now to think about kids working in a very direct way with tools on large-scale structures built out of telegraph poles and cable drums and so on. It's very hard to imagine a world in which that would either be possible, in terms of law and regulation, or would be kind of tolerated by parents, who in their own turn now have grown up in a much more regulated and restricted, and health and safety regulationally-determined world.

So for those reasons as well, it's very hard to imagine quite the ways in which playgrounds existed in the 1960s and 70s, and the ways that we worked on them, being able to function now. And as I said earlier I think, you know, I do think something's been lost as a consequence of that, in terms of the ways in which children can take control of their own lives, can be directly involved in working with supportive adults, but not directed by those adults, in ways that are about them having a real choice and a real control over how they play, how they live and what they do with their lives.



Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth





Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth



Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth





Playhouse & Under 5's Area, Booth Street Adventure Playground, Handsworth

KODAK SAFETY FILM

FILM

**THANK YOU:**

**Interviewee's:** Geoff Gaisford, Ray Wills, Dave Swingle, Val Hart, Haqi Ali, Rohan Brown, Ian Ellis, Deby Morgan, Haki Kapasi, Jo Bowen, Simon Rix, Ali Wood, Ellen Delaney, Sharon Dunbar, Sarah Hulbert, Lucie Bennett, Lewis Hill, Rebecca Prescott, Derek Horton.

**Children at Christchurch Primary School, Sparkbrook:** Ameera, Noor, Heze, Lena, Ahmed, Zakairah, Ariba, Natheer.

**Children at Ark Tindal:** Amani, Zahra, Zainab, Asma, Sarah, Mousa, May, Jayden.

**Children at St Anne's Primary School:** Shannon, Josh, Leon, Tia, Ella, Matilda, Daisy, Reme.

**Staff at Christchurch Primary School:** Mrs Bains, Mr Khan.

**Staff at Ark Tindal:** Mr Reeson, Mrs Westwood.

**Staff at St Anne's Primary School:** Mrs Shaughnessy, Miss Healey, Mr Cunningham

**Images within the publication:** The majority of the images within this publication come from the personal archive of Dave Swingle, apart from:

- Images of Sparkbrook Adventure Playground courtesy of the personal archive of Geoff Gaisford.
- Images of Malvern St Adventure Playground courtesy of Mick Turner / Balsall Heath Local History Society.
- One photo by Ian Ellis of the CAPS playground in Handsworth.

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**LET US PLAY**  
**GENERAL PUBLIC**

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General Public is the collaborative platform of artists Chris Poolman & Elizabeth Rowe. Broadly speaking, they devise large scale public art projects that incorporate elements of fiction, myth-making, local history re-invention and heritage rebooting.

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