

Lessons of History: The Power of Taking Control

Marc Armitage

Playwork across the four nations of the United Kingdom presents a very varied field of work: playworkers are engaged on adventure playgrounds, on play buses and mobile projects, in after-school clubs, in leisure and recreation centres, in woods and on local streets. The way play projects are funded also varies significantly as does the purpose of individual settings. However, there is still something that links these disparate groups and provides a common understanding and identity that labels them all as 'playworkers'.

This article aims to highlight the role that collectivisation, networking and the development of infrastructure has had in shaping playwork and this shared identity in the UK since 1961. It will provide source material for those interested in a more comprehensive history and suggest what lessons there might be in this for the future of playwork both in the UK and around the world.¹

Collectivisation, Networking and Infrastructure

An early history of what eventually became playwork is full of well-meaning individuals and organisations that saw their work with children principally as a form of protection, particularly protection from the evils or ignorance of society. In the period following the Second World War, creating opportunities for children simply 'to play' and the perceived role of the adult as an enabler, fostered a change in attitude that found a home in the growing field of local community action and neighbourhood development. The result was the appearance of largely individual, unconnected community play projects and adventure playgrounds.

It was a natural step for many of these individual play projects to gradually begin cooperating and providing mutual support. The period between 1960 and the beginning of the 1980s saw a gradual collectivisation of playworkers and the emergence of a *playwork movement* distinct from that of broader community activism. This grew from a very local level into networking across district or city and eventually, in a number of areas, to regional level. **Hull Community Playschemes Association** (HCPA) provides a typical example. The originating members of the association were very much linked to community development in the Spring Bank area of Hull in Yorkshire in the mid-1970s and were providing free, open-access holiday playschemes and temporary adventure playgrounds in the local neighbourhood. By the early 1980s, the Association had grown city wide and had a more defined play focus, eventually employing more than thirty playworkers with a play resource centre and equipment loan service, an adventure playground, a double-decker play bus, and a team of field playworkers providing playschemes and after school clubs.² Representatives from this and other similar local playwork networks went on to establish a regional body, Yorkshire and Humberside Play Association.³

The early 1970s was a busy collective time for playworkers and it was a logical step for national networks to follow with a number of organizations being established including **Fair Play for Children (FPFC)** (1973)⁴ and the **National Play Bus Association** (also 1973)⁵ but this wider collectivisation was not without its controversies. One issue has continued

¹ In writing this article a number of 'key figures' in the playwork sector were asked what they felt were the major influences on the development of playwork since 1961. Some of those are quoted however, the views expressed are entirely my own.

² Little did I know as a junior school pupil attending one of the associations early adventure playgrounds (set up in the gap between a number of demolished houses) that in little more than ten years time I would join HCPA in my first playwork job and eventually become secretary and then vice-chairperson.

³ Now known as Yorkshire Play <http://www.yorkshireplay.org.uk>

⁴ <http://www.fairplayforchildren.org>

⁵ Now called Working on Wheels <http://www.workingonwheels.org>

to provide the sector with a significant challenge. In the early 1970s playworkers were attempting to define what it was they did and this was not helped by a rivalry that developed between the 'Play Leadership' approach to playwork, largely based on programs such as holiday playschemes and after-school club provision, and that of the hands-off approach of the adventure playgrounds. "[These] two distinctive disciplines were in many respects ... worlds apart in theory and in practicalities"⁶ and the practitioners of both approaches were becoming more organised and were working on developing their own identity. The **Adventure Playground Workers Association** formed in 1970 (later the **London Adventure Playground Association** (LAPA) and more recently **PLAYLINK**⁷), was openly critical of the Play Leadership approach, and stated from an early point, "If we hope to influence adventure playground committees and who comes into the movement we must take ourselves seriously."⁸ Despite being focussed on developing adventure playgrounds this 'movement' referred to was the broader movement of playwork.

These early emerging networks were all effectively playworker initiated, 'bottom-up' structures if you like. They shared a lack of significant central resources and little in the way of staffing, relying heavily on volunteer support. In 1974 the **National Playing Fields Association** (NPFA, first formed in 1925 and now called Fields in Trust⁹) brought a more organised structure to the movement nationally through the establishment of a number of regional officers tasked with supporting play, which in reality often meant adventure playgrounds. Although not necessarily representing the broad field that playwork was struggling to establish, this was the first truly national structure that benefited from central resourcing. More significantly, it was this regional structure that led directly to the formation of **PlayBoard**, also referred to as **The Association for Children's Play and Recreation** in 1983 which was, "... charged with coordinating work in children's play – something that had never been achieved in the history of play organisations."¹⁰ It had a budget of over £800,000 – an unprecedented amount for playwork at that time. The NPFA regional structure was dismantled and the newly formed PlayBoard aimed to coordinate 'playwork' in its broadest sense which included an attempt to create a definition of play that encompassed all. By 1987 however PlayBoard was gone.¹¹ It had failed to achieve the support of the sector it was tasked with 'coordinating'. One current key figure in playwork described the establishment of PlayBoard as "a sell out" and another said "[at the time] As a playworker on the ground I could not see any influence it was having on the way I worked."¹² When eventually threatened with closure the lack of support from the playwork sector was noted in a government debate on its future.¹³ The regional structure of PlayBoard was dissolved and the centralised functions were gathered into a new unit with a greatly reduced budget. This was the **National Children's Play and Recreation Unit** (NCPRU) which was structured as part of the Sports Council.

In some respects this structure was received as suspiciously as its predecessor as a significant element in the playwork sector viewed it as another top-down structure imposed on the field. One of the senior figures quoted above said "The word 'recreation' in the title seemed to be defining playwork in a way I was not happy with, and as soon as I saw it was to be part of the Sports Council I said 'this is not for me'".¹⁴ In spite of their unpopularity with playworkers, both PlayBoard and the NCPRU have left a legacy in the

⁶ Raymond Willis (1988) *Freedom to Play: an history of the child at play* (unpublished MS) in Children's Play Information Service [CPIS].

⁷ <http://www.playlink.org.uk>

⁸ Minutes of the Adventure Playground Workers Association, Monday 13th April 1970, p.2. [CPIS].

⁹ <http://www.fieldsintrust.org>

¹⁰ Keith Cranwell, *History of Play Organisations* (part 2), in IPA Play Words.

¹¹ With the exception of PlayBoard in Belfast which reconstituted as the national organisation for play in Northern Ireland. <http://www.playboard.org>

¹² Personal correspondence.

¹³ 26th December 1986 HANSARD (Commons, Environment) 264L

¹⁴ Personal correspondence.

form of engagement with central government on the issue of playwork which included research and publications in support of the field.

Although playworkers had been influenced by works such as Colin Ward's *Child in the City* (1978) and Robin Moore's *Childhood's Domain* (1986)¹⁵ there was at this point, in the words of one key figure, "Nothing about playwork to read"¹⁶ and little in the way of rigorous research material that was 'playwork friendly'. What material was available also faced a significant credibility problem. For example, The 1973 Department of the Environment research report, *Children at Play* was, and still is, amongst the most comprehensive pieces of research about children's play habits to be completed. The research focussed on what children were actually playing and where, and made recommendations on the future design and development of parks, playgrounds and neighbourhoods based on these findings. When commenting on children's play close to home the report found that, "It seems clear that any feature of the site that offers children the opportunity to climb ... will be put to use. For example, where garages had flat roofs children climbed on them. It is probably not possible to prevent this, so such roofs should be strong enough to cope with it ..." ¹⁷ Despite being based on sound research this finding was rejected by government simply on the grounds that children *should not* climb on garage roofs and therefore no revision of the then building regulations was necessary.

By the time of its demise PlayBoard had been able to release a number of research based publications that aimed to influence local and central government in design and policy, using arguments drawn from playwork. These documents were also providing evidence for arguments that the field had been making for some time but had no direct evidence for, such as the popularity of local streets as play places as opposed to expensive public playgrounds.¹⁸ The NCPRU continued in this vein and produced a number of comprehensive research review publications that are still relevant to date.¹⁹

It was not long before the first mainstream publications written by playworkers for playworkers appeared. Annie Davy's book *Playwork* was published in 1995 and was followed swiftly by *Good Practice in Playwork* (1996) by Paul Bonel and Jennie Lindon.²⁰ The latter has been revised and republished many times since. Other mainstream text book material followed, notably by Fraser Brown,²¹ and in 2001 the first serious attempt at an academic interpretation of playwork was made in the publication of *Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytical Practice* by Bob Hughes.²²

By the time the NCPRU was disbanded by government in 1993 national structures had been established in Wales, Scotland and in Northern Ireland which had all, to varying degrees, replaced a UK wide National focus for play. In Northern Ireland what was the regional PlayBoard office had reconstituted as the national body for play using the same

¹⁵ Colin Ward (1978) *The Child in the City*, Pantheon Books; and Robin Moore (1986) *Children's Domain: play and place in child development*. London: Croom Helm. PlayBoard gets a mention in the Robin Moore book.

¹⁶ Personal communication.

¹⁷ Department of the Environment (1973) *Bulletin 27: Children at Play*. London: HMSO. p.28.

¹⁸ PlayBoard (1987) *Where children play: an analysis of interviews of children aged 5-14*. London: Sports Council/PlayBoard.

¹⁹ See for example, Gill Coffin with Morris Williams (1989) *Children's outdoor play in the built environment: a handbook for all who design, plan or manage residential neighbourhoods*. London: NCPRU; and Peter Heseltine (1994) *A review of playground and related studies*. London: NCPRU.

²⁰ Annie Davy (1995) *Playwork*. London: Macmillan Press; and Paul Bonel and Jennie Lindon (1996) *Good Practice in Playwork*. Cheltenham: Stanley Thomas.

²¹ See for example, Fraser Brown (ed) (2003) *Playwork: Theory and Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

²² Bob Hughes (2001) *Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytical Practice*. London: Routledge.

title; and by the end of the 1990s Play Scotland and Play Wales²³ had been formed but in both these cases they were developments of existing national networks that had been largely playworker initiated. With the folding of NCPRU it was playwork in England that suffered most. Peter Kemp, writing in *The Times*, concluded that children's play in England was a mess. He wrote, "Whether one looks at [children's play] from the point of view of parents or children, the practitioners in the field or the social theorist in an office, play is an essential part of a growing child's environment. Where, then, has play stood within government! The answer is 'all over the place'".²⁴ He went on to list six government departments that had responsibility for some aspect of children's play arguing that there should be a single point of responsibility. However, it took until 2006 to see the establishment of Play England.²⁵

Each of the four nations now has, or is in the preparation of having, some form of national play policy and implementation plan largely campaigned for by the national play organisations. Wales was the first to achieve this in 2002 and Northern Ireland and Scotland have begun the process. Similarly, the future of a play policy for England has taken longer and is less certain. The best efforts of Play England to promote such an idea were seemingly dashed when one of the first moves of the newly elected coalition government of 2010 was to suspend development of the play strategy for England.

Play England itself has its origins in another voluntary sector body of the 1980s, **The National Voluntary Council for Children's Play (NVCCP)**. Initially a representative body for playwork the NVCCP had taken on the role of representing playwork in its broadest sense by drawing its council membership from the regional play associations and national bodies such as FPfC. By the turn of the millennium the NVCCP had become the **Children's Play Council (CPC)** and was receiving funding through central government which included resources to continue the research and publication work previously carried out by the NCPRU. Although funded through government it did not have the same relationship as had the NCPRU. It was very much an independent body in the voluntary sector but one which gradually earned the ear of government through lobbying and persuasive argument. Despite this there were still some in the playwork field who saw the change from NVCCP to CPC as a less representative, 'top-down' initiative and sought to establish alternative structures that never really materialised.²⁶

Continuing the tradition of research and publication the NVCCP and the CPC began a persuasive campaign to win the confidence of government. Amongst the most significant of these were the publication of the *Charter for Children's Play* (1992)²⁷ and later, *Best Play: what play provision should do for children* (2000) aimed squarely at local government setting out a rationale and an explanation of play in a playwork context and raising the idea of 'play deprivation' stating that, "... this publication shows that a body of knowledge has accumulated which allows the fundamental need for children's play to be asserted..."²⁸ In 2001 Play Wales contributed further by publishing the *First Claim – a framework for playwork quality assessment*²⁹ drawing theoretical understanding together with practice. This document significantly informed the development of the *Playwork Principles* (2005)³⁰, a professional and ethical framework for playwork returning once again to the issue of a broad agreement about what playwork is.

²³ See www.playscotland.org and www.playwales.org.uk

²⁴ Peter Kemp (1994) 'Small subjects but a big issue', in *The Times* (Thursday 8th September 1994).

²⁵ See <http://www.playengland.org.uk>

²⁶ Personal correspondence.

²⁷ NVCCP (1992) *Charter for Children's Play*. London: NCB

²⁸ NPFA/CPSC/PLAYLINK (2000) *Best Play: what play provision should do for children*. London: DCMS. p.4.

²⁹ Play Wales (2001) *The First Claim: a framework for playwork quality assessment*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

³⁰ Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (2005) *The Playwork Principles*.

In 2004, the CPC administered and published what has been described as the most significant document to have come from the field to date in the form of the *National Review of Children's Play*³¹, commonly referred to as the Dobson Report. Coordinated by Tim Gill, then Director of CPC, and with the involvement of a number of playwork professionals³² the review was carried out by Frank Dobson MP a previous Health Secretary, which "... with the implicit support of Government, laid the foundations for subsequent funding and policy developments, in England at least."³³ The Dobson Report was quoted the most in answer to the question, what do you feel is the most significant development in playwork since 1961 asked of key play figures today. One (non-English key person) said, "It had a strong message about the intrinsic importance of free-play, and about the relevance of play provision to wider public policy", and another said "The play field has at times found it difficult to reach agreement on strategic issues but this brought the whole country together."³⁴

The recommendations of the Dobson Report made a subtle but highly significant recommendation when it came to spending over £200 million being made available through the National Lottery towards children's play. It effectively said, 'no play infrastructure at local government level and no play strategy – no money'. The effect in England and Wales was dramatic. The number of local voluntary sector play associations and networks, first begun in the 1970s, had been slowly increasing to the point where there were over one-hundred such networks. But the Dobson report and the lure of lottery funding meant that local government became more interested in infrastructure development as they now had to establish Local Play Partnerships to be able to prepare their play strategy, apply for, and manage lottery funding. The local play networks were in an ideal position of expertise to support this and took full advantage of it. Quite how lottery money has been used to establish a playwork infrastructure has varied in the four nations but the playwork infrastructure in the UK is at an all time high in the influence it can bring to bear, particularly on local government.

The future

The current financial situation at home and abroad is a serious cause for concern for the future of hard fought for playwork infrastructure; and as significant funding has been important in developing the level of current play provision any loss of finance is going to prove painful. But history seems to suggest a way forward for the future both in the United Kingdom and wider afield. The gradual development of infrastructure has been possibly our most significant development since 1961. This has been a long term goal of the playwork movement, pushed for by structures which have been largely playworker initiated and supported. Top-down, imposed (whether perceived or real) structures have fared less well but collectivisation at a local, regional and national level has enabled playwork to define itself and lobby outside agencies using an increasing body of expertise and argument.

Playwork across all four nations of the United Kingdom has developed and survived since 1961 principally because of the sheer strength of will of groups of playworkers and the networking structures they developed, surviving confusion, infighting and government indifference. This implies that playwork in the UK will survive any current crisis it faces simply because playworkers will not allow it to disappear. It also suggests that where playworkers in other countries wish to see this unique way of working develop then the way to do that is take control: collectivise, network and develop infrastructure.

³¹ Department of Culture, Media and Sport (2004) *The National Review of Children's Play*. London: HMSO.

³² Including the author.

³³ Personal correspondence.

³⁴ Ibid.

Marc Armitage
Independent Playworking Consultant

marc@marc-armitage.eu
www.marc-armitage.eu

This paper was originally written as an article for the 50th anniversary special edition of the International Play Associations' magazine *Play Rights*, published in May 2011. It was reformatted and published on www.thought-crime.eu in August 2011.

Copyright © Marc Armitage 2011. Permission is granted to reproduce and distribute this work for study, reporting, research and teaching under the [thought-crime.eu](http://www.thought-crime.eu) fair use policy on the condition that work is fully credited to the author and to [thought-crime.eu](http://www.thought-crime.eu) (for full conditions see www.thought-crime.eu).