

Swings and roundabouts:
a social and environmental history of the
children's playground in Britain, 1840 to 1980

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Abstract

Children's playgrounds are a ubiquitous feature of British towns and cities. And yet the politics and values that have informed their creation, purpose and form have rarely been historicised by scholars, professionals or the wider public. To address this, *Swings and Roundabouts* answers two broad questions. Firstly, why do children's playgrounds exist and, secondly, why do they look the way they do? Focusing on dedicated public spaces for play, the study examines the individuals and organisations that promoted and created such places, explores the changing social, political and environmental assumptions that informed such work, and reveals how play spaces and the wider urban environment changed as a result. Grounded in the fields of environmental history and critical geography, the thesis uncovers the changing eco-cultural values that helped to establish the principle of the playground and in turn shaped its material form. To do so, it draws on the archival materials of social reformers and parks superintendents, equipment manufacturers and architects, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It finds that the ideal playground has long represented a site where changing conceptions of nature, health, childhood, commerce and technology have all been played out, with a corresponding impact on the built form of towns and cities across Britain. As such, *Swings and Roundabouts* plots the erratic evolution of the playground in public parks, housing estates and other spaces in the urban environment, charting its journey from marginal obscurity to popular ubiquity and the subsequent challenges to its status as a site of health, nature and safety. In doing so, this study sheds light on a previously unacknowledged influence on the urban environment and points to the enduring power of historical values in shaping the public places where we live and play. As a result, it provides vital contextual information for scholars and policymakers seeking to imagine and create more equitable opportunities for the child in the city.

Covid-19 Impact Statement

Beyond the widespread constraints imposed on academic research by Covid, travel restrictions and institutional closures disrupted planned research activities by making it impossible to consult primary materials in a number of archives. Most notably, it was not possible to examine documents held by the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick and the National Fairground and Circus Archive at the University of Sheffield. The cancellation of a placement at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver made international comparison less straightforward. To overcome these issues, the project has adapted by drawing on published sources and digitised materials where available. Collaboration with local researchers has provided access to individual records from the Centre for Research Collections at the University of Edinburgh and Salford Local History Library. Together, these measures have helped to mitigate the impact of Covid on both research activities and the subsequent thesis narrative.

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1 Introduction

Children's playgrounds are an everyday feature of British towns and cities. Such spaces, with their swings and roundabouts, are seen as the obvious place for children to play; safe, natural and out-of-the-way. But these assumptions hide a convoluted and previously overlooked history of children's place in public space. And yet despite its present-day social and political significance, the children's playground has seldom featured in historical scholarship. To address this gap in our knowledge, this study charts the development of the playground ideal and its material form over the course of two centuries. Grounded in environmental history and critical geography, it draws on scattered archival materials to plot the erratic evolution of the playground as a response to the social and environmental problems of the industrialised city. The project identifies the main actors involved in promoting playgrounds and considers the shifting values and assumptions that shaped their work. It examines the fluctuating status of the playground, plotting its journey from marginal to ubiquitous and largely back again in response to changing notions of childhood, nature, health and technology.

Organised around a chronological structure, this study examines how the creation of dedicated public spaces for children featured in the rhetoric and actions of nineteenth-century park advocates, housing reformers, ardent imperialists and proponents of energetic exercise. It goes on to analyse how the principle of the children's playground became more firmly embedded in imagined and material urban landscapes in the early twentieth century. At the same time, however, there was much less consensus around the ideal playground form. Philanthropic industrialists and town planners, psychologists and sociologists, anarchists and architects all sought to influence the way that playgrounds were designed and laid out,

invariably reflecting their political and social values. In charting the impact of these competing influences on the urban landscape, this thesis makes a distinct contribution to our historical understanding of public parks, housing landscapes and children's wider place in the city. More broadly, in providing a first comprehensive account of the children's playground in Britain, from its roots in the nineteenth century through to its tribulations in the late twentieth century, the study provides vital contextual information to inform the work of scholars and practitioners seeking to create more equitable urban environments.

Before exploring this story in more detail, the rest of this introductory chapter sets out the significance of this research project and highlights its original contribution to scholarly and popular understandings of the urban landscape. It reviews the existing literature in a number of fields, outlines the chronological and spatial scope of the project, discusses the problems and possibilities of the archive materials, and establishes some etymological boundaries. The final section defines the key questions that the project will address as it seeks to make sense of the swaying fortunes of the playground and its constituent swings and roundabouts.

While a trip to the playground might be a fun and seemingly playful venture, behind the scenes children's play spaces have been an important site of social and political contest in Britain, generating considerable scholarly and public discourse about children's place in both social and physical worlds. Today, there has been much anxiety about the apparent disconnect between twenty-first century childhood and the 'natural' environment. From socio-medical afflictions such as nature-deficit disorder to attempts to 're-wild' childhood, this sense of severance has gained significant popular traction and prompted scholarly debate

over the merits of such assumptions.¹ Equally, there has been considerable international interest in the place of the child in the urban environment. Given the increasing number of children living in urban settings, the United Nations has led a campaign to promote child-friendly cities, prompting responses by municipal authorities, scholars and urban design practitioners around the world.²

The playground has also been an intermittent feature of political struggles for equitable access to the city in Britain. There has been high profile coverage of the impact of austerity on play space provision and consternation at the physical segregation of playgrounds according to housing tenure and social class.³ The Playing Out movement has sought to reclaim the street as a site for children's play rather than automotive movement, while critics have labelled the playground a form of childhood incarceration.⁴ During the Covid-induced lockdowns of 2021, which saw the closure of many public spaces, uncertainty about the playground's purpose and target audience elicited a confused response from government. With regulations that limited access to public spaces, officials initially banned children from playing in the playground, unless they did not have a garden, but subsequently relented on the questionable premise that children exercised but did not socialise in such spaces.⁵ These complex and often contradictory responses to the playground highlight both the hidden and highly politicised assumptions that shape the use of ostensibly public

¹ Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005); David Bond, *Project Wild Thing* (The Wild Network, 2013); Elizabeth Dickinson, 'The Misdiagnosis: Rethinking "Nature-Deficit Disorder"', *Environmental Communication*, 7.3 (2013), 315–35; Neil Midgley, 'The Explosion of Countryside TV Helping to Treat Our Nature Deficit Disorder', *The Guardian*, 27 March 2016.

² Eliana Riggio, 'Child Friendly Cities: Good Governance in the Best Interests of the Child', *Environment and Urbanization*, 14.2 (2002), 45–58; Anahita Shadkam and Markus Moos, 'Keeping Young Families in the Centre: A Pathways Approach to Child-Friendly Urban Design', *Journal of Urban Design*, 26.6 (2021), 699–724.

³ Richard Adams, 'Hundreds of Children's Playgrounds in England Close Due to Cuts', *The Guardian*, 13 April 2017; 'Developers Accused of Segregating Children at London Playground', *BBC News*, 26 March 2019.

⁴ Alice Ferguson, 'Playing out: A Grassroots Street Play Revolution', *Cities & Health*, 3.1–2 (2019), 20–28; Oliver Wainwright, 'Set Children Free: Are Playgrounds a Form of Incarceration?', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2021.

⁵ 'Lockdown: Government Says Children Can Go to the Park to Play', *BBC Newsround*, 12 February 2021.

environments and the lack of historical narratives to usefully contextualise today's discussions.

This uncertainty about the relationship between place, play and childhood regularly featured in creative expression, as artists sought to make sense of the present-day playground. Recent exhibitions, including at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (2012), the Architecture Gallery at the Royal Institute of British Architects (2015), the Kunsthalle in Zurich (2016) and the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead (2021), have all sought to understand and problematise established ideas about the place of children's play in the city.⁶ Conversely, more nostalgic responses to the playground can be found in contemporary photo-essays that document historic playground equipment and urban play spaces, prompting a rather wistful sense of inevitable decline from the innocence and excitement of childhood.⁷ Together, this complex response to the present-day playground points to the need for an empirically-grounded historical study, one that will help to make sense of the shifting values and assumptions that have shaped the enduring provision and contested form of dedicated places for play.

Of course, this interest in the social purpose of children's play is hardly a new phenomenon. Children have always played and as adults we have long sought to direct such playfulness, asserting that youthful recreation might perform a useful function, often prescribing where it should take place. Evidence that play has long been an important feature of childhood can be seen in museums around the world, from four thousand year-old Egyptian

⁶ Juliet Kinchin and Aidan O'Connor, *Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900-2000* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012); RIBA, Simon Terrill and Assemble, *The Brutalist Playground*, 2015; *The Playground Project*, ed. by Gabriela Burkhalter (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2016); BALTIC, Albert Potrony, *Equal Play*, 2021.

⁷ Brenda Biondo, *Once upon a Playground: A Celebration of Classic American Playgrounds, 1920-1975* (Lebanon, New Hampshire: ForeEdge, 2014); Mary Evans Picture Library and Lucinda Gosling, *Paradise Street: The Lost Art of Playing Outside* (London: Hoxton Mini Press, 2019).

and Indus Valley toys to ancient Greek ornaments depicting children playing games with friends.⁸ The captivating early modern oil painting *Children's Games* (1560) by Pieter Bruegel depicts in encyclopaedic detail over two hundred children playing in an imagined Dutch townscape.⁹ Over eighty playful activities are shown taking place in outdoor spaces, encompassing the urban street and town square, rural fields and nearby stream, reflecting the contemporary attitudes of the Dutch mercantile classes towards play and education.¹⁰

Beyond the museum, historians have found considerable evidence of child-specific toys, games and equipment in medieval England, including a dictionary entry for a 'merrytotter', an undefined structure seemingly intended to encourage children's play outside, perhaps comparable to a swing or seesaw.¹¹ In addition to toys, games and structures for play, the quality of spaces for children's recreation have also long been important. According to Sir Thomas Elyot, writing in 1531, the Romans set aside a large open space, the *Campus Martius*, next to the River Tiber so that children could exercise and play in the water.¹² For Elizabethan pedagogue Richard Mulcaster firm ground, shelter from the 'byting winde' and fresh air that was free from a 'noisome stench' were essential features of a ground for the physical education of children.¹³ These associations between notions of childhood and environment would continue well into the nineteenth century. James Kay-Shuttleworth, the noted Victorian educationalist and Poor Law Commissioner, felt that an appropriately laid-out playground provided a 'means of teaching the children to play without

⁸ National Museum, New Delhi, HR 13974/222, *Harappan Toy Cart*, 25th century BCE; Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, H1956, *Rag Ball from Grave 518, Tarkhan, Egypt*, 23rd century BCE; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 07.286.4, *Terracotta Group of Two Girls Playing a Game Known as Ephedrismos*, late 4th–early 3rd century BCE.

⁹ Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, GG 1017, Pieter Bruegel, *Children's Games*, 1560.

¹⁰ Amy Orrock, 'Homo Ludens: Pieter Bruegel's Children's Games and the Humanist Educators', *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, 4.2 (2012), 1–21.

¹¹ Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

¹² Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named the Governor* (London: Dent, 1965), p. 62.

¹³ Richard Mulcaster, *Positions* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1888), pp. 114–15.

discord.¹⁴ By the early twentieth century, the author P.G. Wodehouse associated the uncertain profits of the travelling showman with the motion of his fairground rides, so that any income lost on the swings might be made up on the roundabouts.¹⁵ In doing so, Wodehouse also inadvertently connected the fluctuating fortunes of the playground ideal and circuitous themes in play space discourse with structures that would later come to symbolise its presence in public space.

This longstanding interest in the spaces and social function of children's play might suggest a similarly enduring attention from the scholarly community. However, as the literature review in the next section will show, the playground has seldom been a feature of academic research, perhaps in part because the study of such spaces does not track neatly on to established academic disciplines. Partly as a result, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that draws on a number of subfields broadly located within history and geography. However, this interdisciplinary perspective also reflects the academic and professional experience of the author. Sensitive to calls for reflexivity and the inherently subjective nature of historical and geographical enquiry, this study responds to Clare Cooper Marcus' call to acknowledge and articulate our own 'environmental autobiography' as landscape researchers, while also endorsing Susan Crane's more recent assertion that 'we must start from the premise that all historians are quirky individuals first, readers second, and writers third'.¹⁶

With this in mind, one of the subjective quirks that frames this project is a decade spent working in local authority parks departments, including managing projects to 'improve'

¹⁴ James Kay, *The Training of Pauper Children* (London: Poor Law Commissioners, 1838), p. 27.

¹⁵ P.G. Wodehouse, *Love among the Chickens* (New York: Circle, 1909), p. 238.

¹⁶ Clare Cooper Marcus, 'How to Solve Problems without Really Trying', *JAE*, 32.4 (1979), 12–14 (p. 14); Susan A. Crane, 'Historical Subjectivity: A Review Essay', *The Journal of Modern History*, 78.2 (2006), 434–56 (p. 435).

a number of children's playgrounds, often set within wider historic landscapes. However, over time I experienced increasing uncertainty about who playgrounds were for and what purpose they served. Were such spaces for children, for their parents and carers, for politicians' pre-election publicity? Or were playgrounds sites where children could exercise power and influence over their play experiences, maybe even shape the urban landscape? If playgrounds were the right approach to meeting the needs of children, what social and environmental problems were they seeking to address? Unfortunately, neither scholarly research nor popular accounts provided satisfactory answers to these questions. A brief foray into the writing of playground advocate Marjory Allen and urban commentator Jane Jacobs provided some critical and compelling leads, but also highlighted the need for a dedicated historical study. As such, the next section emphasises the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach in seeking to address these questions, before moving on to locate the children's playground within wider scholarship.

The present-day playground has generated significant scholarly interest. Geographers, sociologists and advocates for children's play have all engaged in conversations about social and spatial justice for children and found that modern childhood has become increasingly moralised, politicised and contentious.¹⁷ Furthermore, studies that consider both the principle and practical design of children's playgrounds can be found in a broad range of interconnected academic fields. From Auckland and Athens to Singapore and Seattle, scholars have debated the present-day problems and possibilities of the playground. Such researchers have contrastingly asserted that on the one hand such bounded spaces are a symbol of

¹⁷ Stuart Aitken, *Geographies of Young People: The Morally Contested Spaces of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2001); Aileen Shackell and others, *Design for Play: A Guide to Creating Successful Play Spaces* (The Department for Children, Schools and Families and The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2008); Ellie Lee and others, *Parenting Culture Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Barbara Hendricks, *Designing for Play*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2017).

children's inequitable access to the city, while on the other finding that they represent sites for the powerful expression of playful child agency, or even a spatial predictor of adolescent drug use.¹⁸ However, these conversations have rarely been historicised.

Instead, the playground has largely been missing from the scholarly spaces where we might expect its history to be found. In histories of parks, housing estates and the wider city, the playground has generally only been mentioned in passing. Studies of broader historical processes that have shaped notions of childhood, health, welfare or leisure have also largely overlooked how these developments in turn were expressed in the built form of the urban environment. As a result, there are significant gaps both in our knowledge of the playground and in our understanding of the way that social and environmental values have been played out on the ground.

Rooted in environmental history and critical urban geography, this study seeks to address this oversight by exploring the complex and interconnected relationships between people and places over time, as well as the wider cultural politics associated with tackling underrepresentation in historical accounts. Inspired in this way, it attempts to further the work of historians of childhood and children's geographers in giving increased prominence to children in academic narratives. Turning initially to the field of environmental history, this study blends the approaches of pioneering scholars such as Carolyn Merchant, Donald Worster and William Cronon to explore the complexities of human-environment relationships. It seeks to question seemingly inherent but in fact highly complex connections

¹⁸ Marijana M. Kotlaja, Emily M. Wright, and Abigail A. Fagan, 'Neighborhood Parks and Playgrounds: Risky or Protective Contexts for Youth Substance Use?', *Journal of Drug Issues*, 48.4 (2018), 657–75; Penelope Carroll and others, 'A Prefigurative Politics of Play in Public Places: Children Claim Their Democratic Right to the City Through Play', *Space and Culture*, 22.3 (2019), 294–307; A. Pitsikali and R. Parnell, 'Fences of Childhood: Challenging the Meaning of Playground Boundaries in Design', *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, 9.3 (2020), 656–69; Raffaella Sini, 'The Social, Cultural, and Political Value of Play: Singapore's Postcolonial Playground System', *Journal of Urban History*, 2020, 1–30.

between our ideas of nature and the material spaces we inhabit, recognising that ostensibly natural spaces and apparently biological assumptions about humans are profoundly social constructions with often long and complex histories.¹⁹ But, unlike early environmental historians who often focused on 'wild' landscapes, this study examines the place of nature within conceptions of the city and subsequent attempts to make the urban environment a more liveable place. In doing so, it builds on the increasing interest among environmental historians in urban and park landscapes.²⁰ It also responds directly to calls to consider the place of children in environmental histories.²¹ In particular, Simo Laakkonen has argued that the everyday experiences of ordinary city dwellers have been excluded from such histories, resulting in a distorted picture of the human-environment relationship whereby 'city children seem to be academic orphans,' something that this study seeks to redress.²²

This sensitivity to the complex interaction of people and place is also grounded in the spatial turn of the 1990s that brought an increased awareness of spatial analysis to much of the humanities, and the concurrent cultural turn in human geography. Built upon Lefebvre's interest in the social processes that shape everyday life and historical memory, this study follows in the footsteps of radical geographers in questioning the power relations that shape material and imagined landscapes, while avoiding the totalising tendencies that have

¹⁹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (London: Wildwood House, 1982); *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History*, ed. by Donald Worster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. by William Cronon (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996).

²⁰ Martin V. Melosi, 'The Place of the City in Environmental History', *Environmental History Review*, 17.1 (1993), 1–23; Christine Rosen and Joel Tarr, 'The Importance of an Urban Perspective in Environmental History', *Journal of Urban History*, 20 (1994), 299–310; Karen R. Jones, *Wolf Mountains: A History of Wolves along the Great Divide* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002); *The Nature of Cities*, ed. by Andrew C. Isenberg (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006); *A Mighty Capital Under Threat: The Environmental History of London, 1800-2000*, ed. by Bill Luckin and Peter Thorsheim (London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).

²¹ Bernard Mergen, 'Children and Nature in History', *Environmental History*, 8 (2003), 643–69.

²² Simo Laakkonen, 'Asphalt Kids and the Matrix City: Reminiscences of Children's Urban Environmental History', *Urban History*, 38 (2011), 301–23.

sometimes characterised work in this field.²³ In particular, the geographer Doreen Massey has made an influential case for an alternative conceptualisation of space, one that recognises that places are inevitably more complex than they appear. In doing so, she argues for three propositions that can help in making sense of seemingly obvious characteristics. Firstly, space is always constituted through interactions at a variety of scales; secondly, it embodies multiple identities and meanings; and thirdly, it is always under construction and contestation, and as such, creating places is always a political act.²⁴ Exploring these entangled influences on the history of the playground ideal and the ‘patterned ground’ that results from the relationship between them is a key intention of this study.²⁵

As well as recognising the inherently entangled relationships between nature and culture, this study takes inspiration from the work of scholars in sociology and children’s geography. Just as environmental historians and critical geographers have seen nature and place as socially constructed and complex ideals, so too have sociologists and geographers of childhood. A burgeoning field that includes scholars such as Allison James, Alan Prout and Peter Kraftl has sought to highlight the socially, materially and spatially constructed nature of childhood.²⁶ While the physical immaturity of children may be a biological fact of life, the way that childhood is understood and experienced is dependent on an interconnected set of social, cultural, environmental and historical factors.²⁷ Gill Valentine and Sarah Holloway have

²³ *The Iconography of Landscape*, ed. by Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); *Place/Culture/Representation*, ed. by James Duncan and David Ley (London: Routledge, 1993); Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁴ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 9.

²⁵ *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture*, ed. by Stephan Harrison, Steve Pile, and Thrift Nigel (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).

²⁶ Alan Prout, *The Future of Childhood* (London: Routledge, 2005); *Space, Place and Environment. Geographies of Children and Young People*, ed. by Karen Nairn, Peter Kraftl, and Tracey Skelton (Singapore: Springer, 2016), iii; For a detailed review of the field, see Kevin Ryan, ‘The New Wave of Childhood Studies: Breaking the Grip of Bio-Social Dualism?’, *Childhood*, 19 (2012), 439–52.

²⁷ *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Children*, ed. by Allison James and Alan Prout (London: Routledge, 2015).

led the way in exploring present-day children's geographies, emphasising the complexities associated with the way such spatial constructs are created, used, perceived and contested by a variety of actors, including children, adults, the state and others.²⁸ They have challenged notions that public spaces naturally or normally belong to adults and have explored the ways in which children and young people disrupt and challenge attempts at spatial control.²⁹ In exploring the processes involved in shaping the social production of public spaces in the past, this study responds to Peter Clark and Jussi Jauhiainen's 2006 call for historians to 'pay attention to the colloquial, mundane and everyday aspects' of green spaces in cities, to ensure that both adult and child perspectives of urban spaces are brought into view.³⁰

With this in mind, both historians and sociologists have helped to highlight important distinctions in the conceptual relationships between children and landscapes.³¹ On the one hand, children can be seen as targets for adult interventions, resulting in spaces where adult perception, ambition, policy and designation lead to places created *for* children. On the other hand, children can be viewed as active agents in shaping and ascribing meaning to spaces, so that a distinct children's spatial culture develops which adapts or subverts adults' expectations, resulting in the creation of places *by* children. This study follows the lead of historian Mathew Thomson and his influential book *Lost Freedom* by focusing on the ambition, design and policy that shaped the children's playground. Like Thomson, it considers how a range of administrators, professionals, academics and philanthropists developed a

²⁸ *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*, ed. by Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 2000); Sarah Holloway, 'Changing Children's Geographies', *Children's Geographies*, 12 (2014), 377–92.

²⁹ Gill Valentine, 'Children Should Be Seen And Not Heard: The Production and Transgression of Adults' Public Space', *Urban Geography*, 17 (1996), 205–20.

³⁰ Peter Clark and Jussi Jauhiainen, 'Introduction', in *The European City and Green Space: London, Stockholm, Helsinki and St. Petersburg, 1850-2000*, ed. by Peter Clark (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1–29 (p. 7).

³¹ Kim Rasmussen, 'Places for Children – Children's Places', *Childhood*, 11 (2004), 155–73.

particular understanding of childhood and children's place in the world, rather than necessarily the direct experiences of children.³² However, while *Lost Freedom* sets the stage for this study, here the focus shifts from an emphasis on the child to an interest in how ideas about childhood had material consequences for the provision, design and management of public spaces set aside for children. In doing so, *Swings and Roundabouts* also extends the chronology to incorporate earlier playground thought and advocacy. Furthermore, where source materials have allowed, this study has also sought to bring to the fore the way that children adapted and contested adult expectations of the playground.

1.1 Literature review

Having laid out a conceptual framework for this study, the chapter now positions both the children's playground and this project within the wider literature. Several academic fields present constructive terrain in this regard. Histories of childhood and play could help to explain when and why playground spaces were created, while historical studies of health, exercise and welfare perhaps provide a justification for their form. At the same time, research into the development of formal education or children's leisure activities outside of school hours could be instructive in pointing to the purposeful nature of the playground. Given the strong association today with the public park, historical accounts of urban green space seem like a sensible place to start.

For much of the twentieth century, the study of urban parks and green spaces generally has lacked both academic interest and legitimacy in Britain. When public parks have received a mention in accounts of the nineteenth-century city, they have often been understood as part of wider attempts to encourage rational recreation and to establish class-

³² Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

based social control.³³ In contrast, garden historians and landscape architects have tended to emphasise the pervasive influence of indomitable designers and the exceptionalism of English landscape design.³⁴ However, since the 1990s there has been a more enduring and widespread interest in historical accounts of public parks, from the *Folkets Parker* movement in Sweden to the struggle for racial desegregation in green spaces in the USA.³⁵

In Britain, Hazel Conway's seminal work, *People's Parks*, explored the formative years of the Victorian park movement. She emphasised the complex interaction of politics, legislation, philanthropy, entrepreneurship, municipal enterprise and reforming individuals in the creation of public parks, suggesting that 'gated and railed, they were literally and symbolically a world apart, providing oases of green in areas of brick and stone, contact with nature and the job of walking on grass and under the trees.'³⁶ Since then, Victorian public parks have regularly featured in fields as diverse as garden history, geography, town planning, environmental history and criminology.³⁷ The notion that public parks represented efforts to impose social control continues to inform historical accounts, most obviously in Peter

³³ Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968); Peter Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885* (London: Routledge, 1978); Dorceta Taylor, 'Central Park as a Model for Social Control: Urban Parks, Social Class and Leisure Behavior in Nineteenth-Century America', *Journal of Leisure Research*, 31.4 (1999), 420–77.

³⁴ George Chadwick, *The Park and The Town* (London: The Architectural Press, 1966); Susan Lasdun, *The English Park: Royal, Private and Public* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1991); Alan Tate, *Great City Parks*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2015).

³⁵ Don Mitchell, Erik Jönsson, and Johan Pries, 'Making the People's Landscape: Landscape Ideals, Collective Labour, and the People's Parks (Folkets Parker) Movement in Sweden, 1891-Present', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 72 (2021), 23–39; Rebecca Retzlaff, 'Desegregation of City Parks and the Civil Rights Movement: The Case of Oak Park in Montgomery, Alabama', *Journal of Urban History*, 47.4 (2021), 715–52.

³⁶ Hazel Conway, *People's Parks: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 223.

³⁷ Harriet Jordan, 'Public Parks 1885-1914', *Garden History*, 22 (1994), 85–113; Pauline Marne, 'Whose Public Space Was It Anyway? Class, Gender and Ethnicity in the Creation of Sefton and Stanley Parks, Liverpool 1858-1872', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 2 (2001), 421–43; Peter Thorsheim, 'The Corpse in the Garden: Burial, Health, and the Environment in Nineteenth-Century London', *Environmental History*, 16 (2011), 38–68; Katy Layton-Jones, 'A Commanding View: Public Parks and the Liverpool Prospect, 1722–1870', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), 47–67; David Churchill, Adam Crawford, and Anna Barker, 'Thinking Forward Through the Past: Prospecting for Urban Order in (Victorian) Public Parks', *Theoretical Criminology*, 22 (2018), 523–44; Nathan Booth and others, 'Spaces Apart: Public Parks and the Differentiation of Space in Leeds, 1850–1914', *Urban History*, 2020, 1–20.

Thorsheim's connection of parks and prisons. In a 2006 account of imperial London, Thorsheim argued that parks were central to late nineteenth-century debates about property, propriety and pathology, concluding that, much like prisons, parks were places where the powerful used regulation and surveillance to prevent disorder and strengthen society.³⁸

However, the idea of parks as a form of social control has long been questioned by other scholars.³⁹ Writing in 1997, Nan Dreher argued that although park users could be differentiated by class, politics, gender, age and religion, there was often considerable consensus among the park community, particularly around notions of respectability and good citizenship, especially as an example to children.⁴⁰ In contrast, David Lambert argued in 2007 that while there may have been a degree of consensus in relation to the regulation of park behaviour, for example through imposing bylaws and employing park keepers, these measures rarely went uncontested. He finds that earlier folk- and carnivalesque-inspired behaviour often continued in Victorian parks and notions of appropriate conduct were invariably challenged.⁴¹ Similarly, Carole O'Reilly has found little evidence that Edwardian parks in Leeds, Manchester and elsewhere acted purely as sites of social control, but rather that their creation, management and use was a far more complex process.⁴²

³⁸ Peter Thorsheim, 'Green Space and Class in Imperial London', in *The Nature of Cities*, ed. by Andrew C. Isenberg (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), pp. 24–37.

³⁹ Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Class Expression versus Social Control? A Critique of Recent Trends in the Social History of "Leisure"', *History Workshop*, 4, 1977, 162–70.

⁴⁰ Nan Dreher, 'The Virtuous and Verminous: Turn of the Century Moral Panics in London's Public Parks', *Albion*, 29 (1997), 246–67.

⁴¹ David Lambert, 'Rituals of Transgression in Public Parks in Britain, 1846 to the Present', in *Performance and Appropriation: Profane Rituals in Gardens and Landscapes*, ed. by Michel Conan (Dumbarton Oaks: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 195–210.

⁴² Carole O'Reilly, 'From "The People" to "The Citizen": The Emergence of the Edwardian Municipal Park in Manchester, 1902-1912', *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 136–55; Carole O'Reilly, "'We Have Gone Recreation Mad": The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Public Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain', *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8 (2013), 112–28; Carole O'Reilly, *The Greening of the City: Urban Parks and Public Leisure, 1840-1939* (London: Routledge, 2019).

More recently, a number of scholars have explored the enduring connections between green space and health. The environmental and cultural historian Karen Jones has analysed the processes of urban emparkment across global sites, emphasising the intricate connections between bodily metaphor and the public park, most notably the recurring representation of urban green spaces as ‘lungs for the city.’⁴³ Similarly, Clare Hickman has plotted the role of individual health professionals and wider medico-moral discourse in shaping the provision of parks and gardens in late nineteenth-century London.⁴⁴ Together these studies point to the long association between notions of public health and the idea of green space as an environmental and social tonic, a cure for the ills of the city and its inhabitants. This sensitivity to the complex motivations of park advocates and the enduring connection between ideas about urban nature and health has been particularly influential in shaping this study.

In contrast to the interest in Victorian and Edwardian parks, there has been very little published work on the twentieth-century history of green spaces, although the recent statutory listing of twenty notable landscapes suggests an expanding interest in this story.⁴⁵ Again, Hazel Conway can be credited with making an early attempt to address this omission.⁴⁶ In providing a broad overview of some of the key factors in the planning and development of parks between 1930 and 2000, she found enduring rhetorics of nature and health and an increasing provision of leisure amenities, findings which have been echoed in subsequent studies that have focused on parks in London, Liverpool and Salford.⁴⁷ But rather than

⁴³ Karen R. Jones, ‘“The Lungs of the City”: Green Space, Public Health and Bodily Metaphor in the Landscape of Urban Park History’, *Environment and History*, 24 (2018), 39–58.

⁴⁴ Clare Hickman, ‘To Brighten the Aspect of Our Streets and Increase the Health and Enjoyment of Our City’, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 118 (2013), 112–19.

⁴⁵ Historic England, *Post-War Landscapes: Introduction to Heritage Assets* (Swindon: Historic England, 2020).

⁴⁶ Hazel Conway, ‘Everyday Landscapes: Public Parks from 1930 to 2000’, *Garden History*, 28 (2000), 117–34.

⁴⁷ Patricia L. Garside, ‘Politics, Ideology and the Issue of Open Space in London, 1939–2000’, in *The European City and Green Space: London, Stockholm, Helsinki and St. Petersburg, 1850–2000*, ed. by Peter Clark (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 68–98; Katy Layton-Jones and Robert Lee, *Places of Health and Amusement:*

examine a short period in the history of the playground, this study takes inspiration from accounts that plot the longer history of park spaces.

The approach adopted by Karen Jones and John Wills in *The Invention of the Park* has been particularly instructive in terms of exploring how shifting ideas about nature, the city, society and culture operated in a variety of landscapes.⁴⁸ Making sense of the playground ideal and its material form will require a similarly expansive approach to chronology and sensitivity to terminology. A comparable approach can be found in Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar's comprehensive account of New York's Central Park. In *The Park and the People*, they explore the changing meanings that the city's park communities have given to the term 'public park', using a single site to highlight wider debates about what it meant for a space to be public, what a park should be, and how it should be governed.⁴⁹ As such, they usefully move beyond a preoccupation with designers to highlight a wider range of stories, including those associated with the former inhabitants of the park land, migrant gardeners who built the park landscape and a subsequent generation of park users. In doing so, they conclude that Central Park became a social institution and cultural stage, where wider political questions were played out, and as such a valuable topic for historical analysis.

However, common to most accounts of the public park is the glaring omission of children from the historical narrative and there is often only an occasional reference to amenities provided for them. Where children are mentioned in park histories, it tends to be in passing and assumes that the place of play within the park is an obvious and natural one.

Liverpool's Historic Parks and Gardens (Swindon: English Heritage, 2008); Matti O. Hannikainen, *The Greening of London 1920-2000* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016); Samuel J Hayes and Bertie Dockerill, 'A Park for the People: Examining the Creation and Refurbishment of a Public Park', *Landscape Research*, 2020, 1–14.

⁴⁸ Karen R. Jones and John Wills, *The Invention of the Park* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

⁴⁹ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

However, as will become clear in later chapters, this has not always been the case. Children were seldom a primary constituent for early park advocates. Furthermore, the aesthetics and scale of the aristocratic park landscape, which informed the design of early public parks, would need to be adapted before green spaces could accommodate children's perceived needs. In the next chapter, the validity of cursory references in the historiography to the 'first' children's playground is considered, but in the meantime the search for the scholarly home of the playground continues.

With children largely missing from historical scholarship on public parks, perhaps they can be found in historical accounts of the wider city. The accoutrements of urban childhood, including toys and prams, have been an enduring topic for scholarly and popular histories, but children have largely been missing from historical and geographical accounts of the urban environment until relatively recently.⁵⁰ As a result, while children are invariably ubiquitous in cities, often with a highly visible and energetic presence, they have tended to be relatively absent from research that seeks to decipher and explain urban places.⁵¹ Critical approaches to researching children and childhood have expanded significantly since the 1970s, particularly with the establishment of the field of children's studies, but also across the humanities and social sciences more generally. Sociologists and historians have increasingly emphasised that notions of childhood are historically specific and impossible to separate from their social and cultural setting, while recognising that it is often less problematic to study

⁵⁰ Samuel J. Sewell, 'The History of Children's and Invalids' Carriages', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 71 (1923), 716–28; Antonia Fraser, *A History of Toys* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966).

⁵¹ Tracey Skelton and Katherine Gough, 'Young People's Im/Mobile Urban Geographies', *Urban Studies*, 50 (2013), 455–66.

notions of childhood, as represented in areas such as social policy and law, than it is to capture children's past experiences.⁵²

Having said that, two notable and much cited accounts of urban childhood do stand out. Firstly, the extensive research conducted from the 1950s to the 1990s by Iona and Peter Opie, who interviewed and observed thousands of children to collect and record the folklore of contemporary childhood. While predominantly concerned with the rituals and rules of children's games, they do briefly touch on the urban spaces in which children play, arguing that 'nothing extinguishes self-organized play more effectively than does action to promote it'.⁵³ A degree of disdain for adult action is a key feature of another notable study of urban childhood, *The Child in the City* (1978) by Colin Ward. Here Ward explored the everyday urban landscapes of children's lives and emphasised the extent to which children were able to adapt the spaces created for them. His assertion that playgrounds demonstrated the failure of the wider urban environment for children is a debate that has continued to the present.⁵⁴ The emphasis that both accounts placed on children's agency and their ability to shape the material and imagined city continues to inform contemporary thinking in the fields of children's studies and children's geographies. The historical significance of the Opies and Ward will be explored in more detail in later chapters, but their work also shapes a central question for this study. In light of the evidence that children can organise their own playful activities and adapt to a range of environments, why provide special places where play is meant to take place?

⁵² Ludmilla Jordanova, 'Children in History: Concepts of Nature and Society', in *Children, Parents and Politics*, ed. by Geoffrey Scarre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 3–24.

⁵³ Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 16.

⁵⁴ Colin Ward, *The Child in the City* (London: Architectural Association, 1978); Chris Cunningham and Margaret Jones, 'The Playground: A Confession of Failure?', *Built Environment*, 25 (1999), 11–17.

Turning to the work of historians of childhood helps to make sense of the wider processes that created the conditions for the provision of such spaces. There has been much debate within the field about the relative importance of work and play in the lives of both children and adults, particularly in relation to the early modern period. For some, most notably Philippe Ariès, children did not lead distinct lives that were markedly different from adults, a view repudiated by many scholars since then who have tended to emphasize the distinct experience and culture of childhood.⁵⁵ There is certainly broad consensus that notions of childhood underwent significant change during the nineteenth century, so that it was increasingly imagined and constructed as a distinct life phase that contrasted with adulthood. For historians such as Harry Hendrick, writing in the 1990s, and Hugh Cunningham more recently, these processes could be seen in a focus on children's minds, bodies, relationships within the family, and increasingly with philanthropic and state sponsored welfare.⁵⁶ Cunningham has argued that of all these 'there is little doubt that the introduction of compulsory schooling...did more than any other factor in these last five centuries to transform the experience and meanings attached to childhood.'⁵⁷ As education gradually replaced labouring over the course of the nineteenth century, children were increasingly envisaged as economically worthless but emotionally priceless.⁵⁸ As a result, childhood gradually became an idealised life stage and the physical, moral and emotional health of children became the intense focus of social and environmental reformers, politicians, architects, psychologists and

⁵⁵ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (London: Penguin, 1973); For a summary of those who disputed Ariès account, see Nicholas Orme, 'The Culture of Children in Medieval England', *Past & Present*, 148 (1995), 48–88.

⁵⁶ Harry Hendrick, *Child Welfare, England 1872-1989* (London: Routledge, 1994); Harry Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (London: Routledge, 2005); Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006).

⁵⁷ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

parks managers. Children were increasingly seen as an investment for the future. As such, the work of historians of childhood provides vital contextual information for this study, pointing to the broader processes that help to explain when and why dedicated public spaces for play became both politically desirable and socially viable.

More recently, there have been calls for historical studies of children's responses to such measures, especially narratives which critically engage with archival sources in their attempt to access childhood experiences.⁵⁹ For more than a decade, scholars including Leslie Paris, Simon Sleight, Ruth Colton and Kristine Alexander have explored the interaction between adult attempts to structure children's lives, from the regulation of city spaces to organised forms of recreation, and the way that young people have responded.⁶⁰ Collectively they point to the difficulties faced in accessing archive material that directly records children's ideas and activities, what Alexander describes as the 'uneven archival landscapes' that confront historians.⁶¹ At the same time, their work also highlights the possibilities associated with researching histories of childhood. Children leave few records of their own, while adults rarely prioritise the archiving of such seemingly mundane experience. However, archives can point to moments of divergence between adults and children, what historian Michael Hines has recently called 'moments of fissure', when gaps between adult expectations and children's behaviour are exposed.⁶² Sources such as historical photographs, newspaper

⁵⁹ Kate Darian-Smith and Simon Sleight, 'Histories of Play', *International Journal of Play*, 5 (2016), 227–29; Mary Clare Martin, 'The State of Play: Historical Perspectives', *International Journal of Play*, 5 (2016), 329–39.

⁶⁰ Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Simon Sleight, *Young People and the Shaping of Public Space in Melbourne, 1870-1914* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Ruth Colton, 'Savage Instincts, Civilising Spaces: The Child, the Empire and the Public Park, c.1880-1914', in *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World*, ed. by Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 255–70; Kristine Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls: Girlhood, Empire, and Internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017).

⁶¹ Alexander, *Guiding Modern Girls*, p. 16.

⁶² Michael Hines, "'They Do Not Know How To Play': Reformers' Expectations and Children's Realities on the First Progressive Playgrounds of Chicago', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 10 (2017), 206–27 (p. 210).

articles and records which mention youthful misdemeanours can all be used to provide an insight into how children developed their own social and spatial cultures and often challenged adult expectations. But, significantly, recent histories of childhood have often provided revisionist accounts which are more sensitive to children's experiences of organisations, spaces and processes that have already been studied, and as such benefit from considerable extant literature. In the case of the playground in Britain, however, there has been little scholarly research on the topic. As a result, this study seeks to balance on the one hand providing an original account of the adult anxieties, assumptions and practical action that led to the creation of playgrounds, while also being sensitive to moments of fissure in the archival materials that point to examples of negotiation and contestation by children.

Given that playground advocates sought to provide structure to the location and form of children's play, improving it in some way, the history of the playground might be found in historical accounts of other attempts to shape childhood wellbeing, such as welfare provision or formal education. Turning initially to histories of welfare, Thomson's key ambition in *Lost Freedom* was to contribute to revisionist accounts of the mid-century, post-war welfare settlement by scholars such as Jose Harris and Geoffrey Finlayson.⁶³ They have argued for an understanding of welfare provision as a long evolutionary process, with its roots in earlier voluntarism, rather than the sudden and complete involvement of the state in welfare from 1945. Like Thomson, Siân Pooley and Jonathan Taylor's 2021 edited collection similarly seeks to situate the child within such narratives.⁶⁴ However, in the detail of Thomson's analysis, he suggests that the provision of children's playgrounds was first prioritised in the 1940s,

⁶³ Geoffrey Finlayson, 'A Moving Frontier: Voluntarism and the State in British Social Welfare 1911–1949', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1.2 (1990), 183–206; Jose Harris, 'Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870-1940: An Intellectual Framework for British Social Policy', *Past & Present*, 135 (1992), 116–41.

⁶⁴ *Children's Experiences of Welfare in Modern Britain*, ed. by Siân Pooley and Jonathan Taylor (London: University of London Press, 2021).

following sustained inter-war concern about child road safety, a claim that appears to overlook earlier attempts to promote the provision of dedicated public spaces for children.⁶⁵ To address this apparent oversight, this study will explore adult anxiety about children's outdoor worlds from the mid-nineteenth century and the gradual shaping of the playground as a potential solution to a wide range of concerns and perceived dangers from that time. As such, it will provide important historical context for *Lost Freedom*, suggesting that the perceived need to protect children from both the street and inappropriate adult behaviour, and the associated provision of special places for play, had much earlier roots than has generally been acknowledged. By lengthening the chronology and focusing on the provision of dedicated outdoor space for play, this study contributes to efforts to highlight the historical complexity of public policy directed at the welfare of children, particularly beyond the formal institutions of the welfare state such as the NHS or social services.⁶⁶

However, while central government has rarely endorsed, let alone insisted on the provision of playgrounds, such spaces have nevertheless been closely associated with childhood health and wellbeing. As such, histories that link health and place remain productive in understanding the playground story. Historians of public health in particular have explored perceptions of the causal connections between environment and health, from the Hippocratic tradition that linked 'airs, waters and places' to nineteenth-century epidemiologists who sought to prevent the spread of diseases by destroying the environments which were understood to propagate them.⁶⁷ Scholars interested in the spatial

⁶⁵ Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p. 144.

⁶⁶ *Architecture and the Welfare State*, ed. by Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete, and Dirk van den Heuvel (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁷ Andrew Wear, 'Place, Health, and Disease: The Airs, Waters, Places Tradition in Early Modern England and North America', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 38.3 (2008), 443–65; Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (London: Routledge, 1999).

consequences of these processes have plotted the moral geographies that accompanied the work of nineteenth-century social scientists and the subsequent attempts at reforming both children at home and entire communities overseas.⁶⁸ However, despite a sense that the playground provided a site for healthy and playful exercise, it has been largely missing from these narratives. Switching attention from a focus on diseased environments to imagined and material landscapes of health could help to address this apparent omission.

There has been considerable scholarly interest in enduring ideas about the healing power of landscape, where views of natural beauty and participation in outdoor work and recreation could contribute to physical and mental wellbeing.⁶⁹ In *Therapeutic Landscapes*, Clare Hickman uncovered two centuries of continuity in the provision of garden spaces within institutions such as hospitals and asylums.⁷⁰ Such healing gardens combined notions of medical and moral health, practical rehabilitation and interaction with a curated form of nature. However, such therapeutic spaces were not confined to health institutions for adults. As Steve Taylor has recently shown, outdoor pursuits such as gardening and farming were seen as wholesome, educational activities that could contribute to the healthy development of children's minds and bodies too.⁷¹ Another institutional setting concerned with the health and wellbeing of children was the school. In addition to broad histories of education, the development of physical education in particular is relevant here. From the 'manufactured

⁶⁸ Felix Driver, 'Moral Geographies: Social Science and the Urban Environment in Mid-Nineteenth Century England', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 13 (1988), 275–87; Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 193–94.

⁶⁹ Stef Eastoe, "'Relieving Gloomy and Objectless Lives": The Landscape of Caterham Imbecile Asylum', *Landscape Research*, 41.6 (2016), 652–63; Clare Hickman, 'Cheerful Prospects and Tranquil Restoration: The Visual Experience of Landscape as Part of the Therapeutic Regime of the British Asylum, 1800–60', *History of Psychiatry*, 20.4 (2009), 425–41.

⁷⁰ Clare Hickman, *Therapeutic Landscapes: A History of English Hospital Gardens since 1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

⁷¹ Steven J. Taylor, 'Planning for the Future; Special Education and the Creation of "Healthy Minds"', in *Healthy Minds in the Twentieth Century: In and beyond the Asylum*, ed. by Steven J. Taylor and Alice Brumby (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 73–94.

masculinities' assembled by a cult of games in nineteenth-century public schools and its enduring influence on notions of nation and empire, to the perceived benefits of different types of gymnastic exercise for working-class children, scholars have explored the shifting class, gender and racialised assumptions that have underpinned physical education in the school playground.⁷² However, with their emphasis on spaces of formal education, these studies have seldom crossed over into the public realm. As a result, exploring the influence of ideas about school-based physical education on the provision of public spaces for play is an important objective for this study.

At the same time, as formal schooling introduced spatial and temporal boundaries around childhood in the nineteenth century, studies of children's time outside of school, particularly the work of historians of leisure, is also instructive. Much like other fields of research covered here, since the 1970s debates surrounding the history of leisure have increasingly recognised the complexities of historical situations, rather than emphasising class and social control as a universal explanatory framework.⁷³ This complexity has been emphasised by historian Peter Borsay, notably in his 2006 study, *A History of Leisure*. He argues that leisure practices have acted as a key arena in which concepts of identity, place and time have been negotiated, including notions of nature and the city, nationhood and community.⁷⁴ Particularly pertinent for this study is his assertion that there is considerable consensus among historians that a new phase in the history of leisure opened up in the mid-

⁷² J.A. Mangan, *'Manufactured' Masculinity: Making Imperial Manliness, Morality and Militarism* (London: Routledge, 2012); Colm Hickey, 'Athleticism, Elementary Education and the Great War', in *Manufacturing Masculinity: The Mangan Oeuvre*, ed. by Peter Horton (Berlin: Verlag, 2017), pp. 275–304; Gertrud Pfister, 'Cultural Confrontations: German Turnen, Swedish Gymnastics and English Sport - European Diversity in Physical Activities from a Historical Perspective', *Culture, Sport, Society*, 6 (2003), 61–91.

⁷³ Bailey, *Leisure and Class*; Jeffrey Hill, "'What Shall We Do With Them When They Are Not Working?': Leisure and Historians in Britain', in *Leisure and Cultural Conflict in Twentieth-Century Britain*, ed. by Brett Bebbler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 11–40.

⁷⁴ Peter Borsay, *A History of Leisure: The British Experience since 1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

nineteenth century and continued until the mid-twentieth century, defined primarily by processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, personal consumption and increased state involvement in leisure provision.

The inter-war period has been a particular focus for historians of leisure and recreation, generating a number of studies exploring the role of leisure in, for example, changing assumptions about gender and the construction of personal identity, as well as debates around citizenship and the role of the state.⁷⁵ Particularly relevant here is Matti Hannikainen's recent assertion that it was only in the 1930s, with the opening of play spaces and lidos, that facilities for children were prioritised by local authority parks departments.⁷⁶ The research on inter-war leisure points to a significant expansion of state, commercial and voluntary involvement in the provision of recreational amenities. The extent to which similar actors influenced the ideas and practices of children's leisure is a key question for this study to explore, particularly the role of commercial play equipment manufacturers in shaping landscapes for play.

Given the playground's consistent presence in towns and cities, we might expect to find historical accounts of spaces for children in urban and architectural histories. However, despite the increasing interest in the politics and practices of everyday urban landscapes, including crossing the road and the 1970s leisure centre for instance, the location and design

⁷⁵ Stephen Jones, *Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure 1918-39* (London: Routledge, 1986); Selina Todd, 'Young Women, Work, and Leisure in Interwar England', *The Historical Journal*, 48 (2005), 789–809; Robert Snape and Helen Pussard, 'Theorisations of Leisure in Inter-War Britain', *Leisure Studies*, 32 (2013), 1–18; Robert Snape, 'The New Leisure, Voluntarism and Social Reconstruction in Inter-War Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 29 (2015), 51–83.

⁷⁶ Matti O. Hannikainen, 'Sport in London's Public Green Spaces in the Inter-War Years', *Sport in History*, 38 (2018), 331–64. In particular he mentions Tabard Garden and Tanner Street in Southwark, Parliament Hill and Waterloo Park in Camden and the lido at Harmsworth Park.

of the children's playground has largely escaped scrutiny.⁷⁷ Broader studies which have considered the role of cities in attempts to remake society, whether in shaping inter-war notions of citizenship or the development of council housing, highlight significant processes that would be played out in debates about the provision of play space for children.⁷⁸ In particular, the fate of the playground would be closely tied to the rise of both pragmatic and utopian responses to the problems of the city and their subsequent decline in the later twentieth century.

Despite seemingly being shaped by notions of health, education, welfare and leisure, and being created as a space for urban recreation, the children's playground has rarely been a feature of the historiography that covers these fields. Furthermore, attempts to construct playground narratives from beyond the discipline of history have either failed to justify their claims with historical evidence, and as a result have tended to overly romanticise the past, or have in turn relied on such unsubstantiated accounts to make their case.⁷⁹ Such accounts also fail to fully historicise the assumptions and values that shaped playground processes, resulting in the jarring juxtaposition of contemporary attitudes and historical actions. Moreover, there has been a tendency in popular accounts to present the history of the playground in the USA as a universal story that can be applied elsewhere. However, while there was undoubtedly an international exchange of ideas, the creation of dedicated spaces for children's public recreation was also reliant on local attitudes to childhood, public space,

⁷⁷ Joe Moran, 'Crossing the Road in Britain, 1931-1976', *The Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), 477–96; Joe Moran, "'Subtopias of Good Intentions': Everyday Landscapes in Postwar Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 4.3 (2007), 401–21; Otto Saumarez Smith, 'The Lost World of the British Leisure Centre', *History Workshop Journal*, 88 (2019), 180–203.

⁷⁸ Tom Hulme, *After the Shock City: Urban Culture and the Making of Modern Citizenship* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2019); Sam Wetherell, *Foundations: How the Built Environment Made Twentieth-Century Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁷⁹ Joe Frost, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Towards a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

health and a host of other factors, something clearly evidenced in historical scholarship on playground spaces in Dublin, Budapest and Toronto.⁸⁰

However, that does not diminish the considerable historiography that deals with the story of the playground in the USA, with historical accounts published as early as 1922.⁸¹ Subsequent studies have focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on the campaigning of the Playground Association of America (1906) and the practical action in cities such as Cambridge, Massachusetts, and San Francisco. Within these spatial and chronological boundaries, scholars have debated the role of the playground as a tool of social control and a cure for urban maladies, a space where notions of gender, race and citizenship were negotiated and urban land politics were played out.⁸² A notable development in the field in the USA has been research into the microhistories of individual playground sites, including the Hull House playground in Chicago, to better understand children's experiences of using them and contesting their boundaries.⁸³ That this research is possible points to a key

⁸⁰ Luca Csepely-Knorr and Mária Klagyvivik, 'From Social Spaces to Training Fields: Evolution of Design Theory of the Children's Public Sphere in Hungary in the First Half of the Twentieth Century', *Childhood in the Past*, 13.2 (2020), 93–108; Vanessa Rutherford, 'Muscles and Morals: Children's Playground Culture in Ireland, 1836–1918', in *Leisure and the Irish in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Leeann Lane and William Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp. 61–79; Ann Marie Murnaghan, 'Exploring Race and Nation in Playground Propaganda in Early Twentieth Century Toronto', *International Journal of Play*, 2 (2013), 134–46.

⁸¹ Clarence E. Rainwater, *The Play Movement in the United States: A Study of Community Recreation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922); Carroll Pursell, *From Playgrounds to Playstation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015).

⁸² Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880–1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Elizabeth Gagen, 'An Example to Us All: Child Development and Identity Construction in Early 20th-Century Playgrounds', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 32.4 (2000), 599–616; Elizabeth Gagen, 'Playing the Part: Performing Gender in America's Playgrounds', in *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*, ed. by Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 213–29; Elizabeth Gagen, 'Landscapes of Childhood and Youth', in *A Companion to Cultural Geography*, ed. by James Duncan, Nuala Johnson, and Richard Schein (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 404–19; Ocean Howell, 'Play Pays: Urban Land Politics and Playgrounds in the United States, 1900–1930', *Journal of Urban History*, 34 (2008), 961–94; Suzanne Spencer-Wood and Renee Blackburn, 'The Creation of the American Playground Movement by Reform Women, 1885–1930', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 21 (2017), 937–77; Kevin G. McQueeney, 'More than Recreation: Black Parks and Playgrounds in Jim Crow New Orleans', *Louisiana History*, 60.4 (2019), 437–78.

⁸³ Elizabeth Gagen, 'Too Good to Be True: Representing Children's Agency in the Archives of Playground Reform', *Historical Geography*, 29 (2001), 53–64 (p. 55); Hines, 'They Do Not Know How To Play'.

difference between the development of playgrounds in Britain and the USA. In the latter, playgrounds were invariably highly organised spaces that involved significant adult supervision and, as a result, administrative records have been retained and archived. In contrast, the promotion and management of playgrounds in Britain has involved a wide range of organisations whose remit often extended beyond spaces for play. As a result, the playground archive in Britain is significantly more fragmentary and dispersed.

Partly as a result, the limited historiography on developments in Britain has largely focused on radical playground experiments in the mid-twentieth century and often utilised published accounts of the activists involved. Valerie Wright's 2021 account of children's play on Glasgow council estates in the 1960s is a useful addition to historical scholarship which has otherwise mainly concentrated on the iconic mid-century adventure playground in bomb-damaged cities such as London, Liverpool and Bristol.⁸⁴ Historians, including Krista Cowman and Roy Kozlovsky, have explored the assumptions, social values and practical action that shaped the adventure playground movement and its role in post-war reconstruction.⁸⁵ Cultural historians, including Ben Highmore and Lucie Glasheen, have also analysed post-war representations of children at play in the city and their wider cultural significance.⁸⁶ Drawing

⁸⁴ Valerie Wright, 'Making Their Own Fun: Children's Play in High-Rise Estates in Glasgow in the 1960s and 1970s', in *Children's Experiences of Welfare in Modern Britain*, ed. by Siân Pooley and Jonathan Taylor (London: University of London Press, 2021), pp. 221–46.

⁸⁵ Krista Cowman, 'Open Spaces Didn't Pay Rates: Appropriating Urban Space for Children in England after WW2', in *Städtische Öffentliche Räume: Planungen, Aneignungen, Aufstände 1945-2015 (Urban Public Spaces: Planning, Appropriation, Rebellions 1945-2015)*, ed. by Christoph Bernhardt (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016), pp. 119–40; Krista Cowman, "'The Atmosphere Is Permissive and Free': The Gendering of Activism in the British Adventure Playgrounds Movement, ca. 1948–70', *Journal of Social History*, 53.1 (2019), 218–41; Roy Kozlovsky, 'Adventure Playgrounds and Postwar Reconstruction', in *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space, and the Material Culture of Children; An International Reader*, ed. by Marta Gutman and Ning de Coninck-Smith (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 171–90; Roy Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood: Children, Modern Architecture and Reconstruction in Postwar England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

⁸⁶ Ben Highmore, 'Playgrounds and Bombsites: Postwar Britain's Ruined Landscapes', *Cultural Politics*, 9 (2013), 323–36; Lucie Glasheen, 'Bombsites, Adventure Playgrounds and the Reconstruction of London: Playing with Urban Space in Hue and Cry', *The London Journal*, 44.1 (2019), 54–74; Ian Grosvenor and Kevin Myers, "'Dirt and the Child": A Textual and Visual Exploration of Children's Physical Engagement with the Urban and the Natural World', *History of Education*, 49.4 (2020), 517–35.

on both similar sources and new ones, later chapters in this thesis will provide a re-reading of the archive material to assess the significance of ideas about nature and education, as well as the wider impact of adventure playground thinking on the provision of public places for play. Beyond the adventure playground, studies of nineteenth-century efforts to shape children's play have concentrated on attempts to occupy children's leisure time, rather than the creation of spaces for play.⁸⁷ Similarly, biographical accounts of green space campaigners have largely overlooked their role in promoting and creating children's playgrounds, and instead focus on their contribution to the public park movement more generally.⁸⁸ An initial introduction to the inter-war playground was published recently, but this thesis provides a more comprehensive account of the processes involved and extends the chronology significantly.⁸⁹

This review of the extant literature has shown that despite the playground's ubiquity it has seldom featured in historical scholarship. In popular accounts, its history has often been assumed, with imprecise terminology and international exemplars complicating the story, while scholarly research in Britain has largely focused on the mid-century adventure playground. Katy Layton-Jones' 2014 review of park research priorities concluded that a study focusing on landscapes designed for children between 1914 and 1960 would substantially enhance our understanding of the function and value of historic green spaces.⁹⁰ However, as we have seen, a critical engagement with the wider processes that have shaped urban

⁸⁷ Keith Cranwell, 'Street Play and Organised Space for Children and Young People in London 1860-1920', in *Essays in the History of Community and Youth Work*, ed. by Ruth Gilchrist, Tony Jeffs, and Jean Spence (Leicester: National Youth Agency, 2001); Kevin Brehony, 'A "Socially Civilising Influence"? Play and the Urban "Degenerate"', *Paedagogica Historica*, 39 (2003), 87–106.

⁸⁸ J.O. Springhall, 'Lord Meath, Youth, and Empire', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5 (1970), 97–111; F.H.A. Aalen, 'Lord Meath, City Improvement and Social Imperialism', *Planning Perspectives*, 4 (1989), 127–52.

⁸⁹ Jon Winder, 'Revisiting the Playground: Charles Wicksteed, Play Equipment and Public Spaces for Children in Early Twentieth-Century Britain', *Urban History*, (2021), 1-18, <doi:10.1017/S0963926821000687>.

⁹⁰ Katy Layton-Jones, *National Review of Research Priorities for Urban Parks, Designed Landscapes, and Open Spaces: Final Report*, Research Report Series, 4 (London: English Heritage, 2014).

childhood, particularly laws relating to formal schooling, suggest that a longer chronology will be even more productive.

1.2 Project scope

Before turning to the project's chronological and legislative parameters, it is important to consider how the term playground has been used and the type of places it has described. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as either 'a piece of ground used for playing on' or in extended use 'any place of recreation.'⁹¹ When imagining the playground today, we tend to think of it as a place for children to play, most likely equipped with swings and roundabouts. However, the term has not always been used to describe spaces specifically set aside for children. In 1768, the physician Francis de Valangin used the term 'play-ground' to describe a green open area for curative recreation, complaining that those who built streets on Moorfields, just beyond London's city wall, 'have perhaps not maturely considered the advantages which accrue to the health of the immense number of people who resort there every day.'⁹² In the 1830s, the residents of Hathern, Leicestershire, used the term to describe a place for playing sport, while for the noted mountaineer and author Leslie Stephen, the European Alps were the 'playground of Europe.'⁹³ In 1858, the successful Liverpool merchant Charles Melly used the term playground to describe a space specifically for energetic exercise. He defined his free outdoor gymnasium as a playground for the healthful enjoyment of the city's working-class residents, but still not specifically for children.⁹⁴

⁹¹ 'Playground, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁹² Francis de Valangin, *A Treatise on Diet, or the Management of Human Life* (London: Pearch, 1768), pp. 213–14.

⁹³ 'The Hathern Playground', *Leicester Chronicle*, 14 January 1837, p. 4; Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1871).

⁹⁴ 'Latest News - Mr Charles Melly', *John Bull*, 5 June 1858, 368.

In other contexts, the playground represented a space of education and rest for children but excluded a wider public. In the late eighteenth century, the travel writer Arthur Young described visiting an attractive school with a 'spacious playground walled in,' while a boarding school for young gentleman in Ilford similarly included 'a very large playground and an extensive garden' which were also 'walled round.'⁹⁵ However, the exclusion of the public from the school playground was sometimes problematic. In nineteenth-century Hackney, the prohibition of commoners from the grounds of a new school caused considerable anxiety. As part of efforts to establish a school at Hackney Downs, the Grocer's Company erected a high boundary wall around the playground, presumably to keep children in and the public out. However, this 'forcible enclosure' of common land and the infringement of Lammas rights resulted in a long-running dispute between the Company and the community.⁹⁶ As such, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term 'playground' was broadly conceived, variously used to represent spaces for education, exercise, sporting competition or adventurous recreation. It also operated at a variety of scales and crossed the boundaries of public and private, childhood and adulthood.

When the term was used to describe a specific place, perhaps in a school or a site for adult recreation, the defining physical characteristic was that the land should be levelled and then surfaced with gravel. In the 1840s and 1850s, adapting the environment in this way provided space for both adults and children to play games and take a break from education or work. Letters between health boards, vestries, schools and central government referred to

⁹⁵ Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland, 1776-1779*, 2nd edn (London: Cassell, 1897), p. 48; 'Boarding School for Young Gentleman at Ilford in Essex', *Morning Chronicle*, 1 August 1795, p. 5.

⁹⁶ 'Open Spaces in Parliament', *The Times*, 23 February 1885, p. 4; 'Open Spaces in Hackney', *Daily News*, 18 April 1890, p. 5.

works to level and gravel an area to make it suitable for recreation.⁹⁷ In Birmingham, the later Burbury Street Recreation Ground (1877) was covered with gravel by the borough surveyor to make it suitable for use as a playground, an approach that would endure well into the twentieth century.⁹⁸ As a result, tracing the journey of the playground from a 'levelled and gravelled' space to its present-day incarnation requires a sensitivity to these evolving meanings. Given these etymological shifts, it is important to emphasise that the central focus of this study is the provision of dedicated public spaces for children's recreation. In adopting such a stance, however, the research remains sensitive to the wider meaning that the term playground could represent, particularly its associations with education, health, exercise and adventure. A similarly flexible and sensitive approach is adopted to the age-related boundaries of childhood. For much of the period in question, definitions shifted as legislation and social norms sought to shape the age at which sexual consent, education and work could take place. Playground advocates adopted similarly flexible and shifting definitions of childhood, rather than an absolute age range for the spaces they sought to create. As a result, this study is sensitive to the attitudes and assumptions of historical actors, rather than imposing an age-specific definition that could exclude certain sites or case studies. Broadly speaking, advocates imagined that playgrounds would be used by children from toddlerhood, perhaps with older siblings, up to their early teenage years and a similar approach is adopted here.

At the same time, national legislation has in many ways proved unhelpful in defining the spatial and chronological boundaries of the project. The provision of children's

⁹⁷ See, for example, National Archives, MH 12/11000/243, fo.449-450, Thomas Firmin to Poor Law Board, Letter, 22 August 1854; National Archives, MH 12/5967/153, fo.300, Charles Hart to Poor Law Commission, Letter, 14 November 1845.

⁹⁸ 'Opening of Burbury Street Recreation Ground', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 3 December 1877, p. 8.

playgrounds has never been required by law and has instead largely been left to the discretion of local authorities and the enthusiasm of philanthropic and charitable organisations. As such, statutes relating to public health, welfare, education and highways created an atmosphere in which the provision of play space was both legally possible and socially desirable, but not compulsory. Significant laws are mentioned where appropriate in subsequent chapters, but it is also useful to highlight several here. The 1835 Highway Act made street play illegal if it disrupted other traffic, while the 1859 Recreation Ground Act specifically permitted the creation of playgrounds, although evidence suggests that this did not herald the widespread provision of such spaces specifically for children's recreation.⁹⁹

Instead, from the mid-nineteenth century an increasing volume of legislation relating to education and welfare helped to shape a more clearly defined notion of modern childhood, which in turn increased the likely success of attempts to create dedicated public space for children.¹⁰⁰ While there were differences between legislation that applied to Scotland on the one hand and England and Wales on the other, the non-statutory nature of playground provision and the importance of local politicians, philanthropists and park managers suggests that a distinction along such lines is unnecessary. As a result, the study primarily adopts Britain as its spatial focus, although Belfast's parks department is mentioned occasionally, as are international influences on British playground discourse. At the same time, while examples are cited from across England, Scotland and Wales, there is at times an emphasis on ideas and events in London. In part this reflects the extent to which playground advocates focused their efforts on the capital, but also because the organisations that managed London's parks

⁹⁹ *Highway Act, 1835*, <www.legislation.gov.uk> [Accessed 10 July 2020]; *Recreation Grounds Act, 1859*, <www.legislation.gov.uk> [accessed 9 September 2021].

¹⁰⁰ For a comprehensive chronology of legislation relating to children, see The British Academy, *Reframing Childhood Past and Present - Chronologies* (London: The British Academy, 2019).

provide good examples of both progressive and conservative attitudes to the provision of facilities for children. At the same time, events in Kettering, Northamptonshire, proved to be highly significant in shaping national playground discourse and as such provide material for a detailed case study in chapter three.

Given the lack of specific legislation, the chronological boundaries of the project have been partially shaped by the extant literature, but also revised in response to material uncovered during the study. Originally conceived as a direct response to Layton-Jones' call for coverage from 1914 to 1960 and an attempt to bridge the gap between accounts of Victorian parks and modern adventure playgrounds, attention now stretches from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. During the course of the research, it proved impossible to make sense of the children's playgrounds created after 1914 without examining the context of earlier campaigning and practical action as far back as 1840. Similarly, understanding the influence of adventure playground ideals on broader play space provision demands an end date beyond the peak of their influence in the 1960s and early 1970s. As such, coverage ends in 1980 with the publication of *Towards a Safer Playground* by the National Playing Fields Association, which signalled the end of a critical moment in the playground story. The assumptions and anxieties that shape present-day playground provision largely recycle attitudes that were in place by 1980, particularly a disproportionate preoccupation with safety, further reinforcing this date as the project's chronological limit.

Plotting the long history of the playground, particularly during a global pandemic, has required adaptability in terms of the archive materials used to inform this study. Unlike the Playground Association of America in the USA, there has been no single organisation dedicated to promoting playgrounds in Britain and as such the archive is a fragmented one. This is further complicated by the dispersed nature of materials relating to those

organisations that have promoted play spaces for children. So, for example, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (1882) has no single repository for its historical records and although members are working to list the location of materials, evidence of its activities remains scattered across repositories in Britain and the USA. Large municipal authorities often have comprehensive records, as in the case of the London County Council, but play space provision invariably involved numerous departments and so even within one organisation records can be widely dispersed. Elsewhere in local government, records relating to playgrounds have often not been retained at all. The search for source material has therefore taken in the Landscape Archive at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading, Wicksteed Park Archive in Kettering, the National Archives at Kew and the London Metropolitan Archives in Clerkenwell. For published sources, the British Library, University of Kent, RHS Lindley and LSE libraries have all been invaluable. Digital archives have also been important in providing access to historical newspapers, magazines and journals, as well as the work of photographers, architects and landscape designers.

In response to the themes and gaps identified in the literature, an interrogation of the source material and a wider intellectual scrutiny, the following questions provide the critical framework for exploring the previously overlooked history of the children's playground in Britain. Sensitive to shifting etymologies, changing social values and diverse international influences, the key questions for this study include:

- Who were the main actors advocating for and creating children's playgrounds and what values, motivations, assumptions and expectations were involved?
- How did the principle and material form of the ideal playground evolve and adapt in response to changing social, environmental, political and cultural trends?

- To what extent were playground spaces shaped by notions of nature, health, education, welfare, technology and adventure?
- How were advocates' expectations, assumptions and designs subverted by both child and adult visitors to the playground?

To address these questions, the thesis provides a chronological account of the erratic evolution of the playground from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Following this first introductory chapter, the second focuses on the nineteenth century and the ameliorative potential of green space and exercise. It shows how dedicated spaces for children were seen by some as a way to mitigate the social and environmental consequences of the industrial city, but that efforts to create such spaces would be largely unsuccessful until conceptions of childhood also included time for leisure later in the century.

The third chapter examines the competing visions for the playground that were in circulation in the early twentieth century and the influence of commercial equipment manufacturers, particularly Charles Wicksteed & Co., in defining what would become the orthodox playground of swings, slides and roundabouts. After this specific case study, chapter four considers how this ideal type spread to cities across Britain in the inter-war period, particularly as one solution to the dangers facing children when playing in the street. It shows how swings in particular came to dominate playground spaces, while advocates initiated debates about the role of adults in children's play. Chapter five investigates how this orthodoxy, centred on manufactured playground equipment, was challenged in the mid-twentieth century, as campaigners inspired by international exemplars and adventure playgrounds sought to promote greater freedom and creativity in children's play. Chapter six focuses on the later twentieth century, plotting a battle for ideas in playground discourse and highlighting a number of challenges to perceptions of the playground as a safe and healthy

space for children. In addition to summarising the project and its findings, the conclusion highlights several areas for additional research that would further illuminate our understanding of the playground. Together, the thesis chapters draw on dispersed archival materials to chart a first social and environmental history of the public spaces set aside for children's playful recreation. In doing so, *Swings and Roundabouts* provides an original account of the changing status of the playground and examines how notions of childhood, nature, health and commerce combined to shape children's place in the city.

2 Finding Places for Play: education, exercise and urban anxieties

The children's playground has its roots in responses to industrialisation and urban expansion in the nineteenth century. But as the creation of dedicated places for children to play also relied upon conceptions of childhood, particularly the idea that children might have opportunities for play, there was not a simple, parallel relationship between the rate of urbanisation and the provision of spaces for children's recreation. Nor was the increasing provision of public green spaces necessarily a good indicator of expanding playground provision. Recent scholarship on the history of public parks has tended to position the children's playground as a product of the early twentieth century, part of a wider expansion of leisure amenities such as lidos and sports facilities.¹ However, such assumptions fail to acknowledge enduring conversations about the relationship between the interconnected ideas of public space, education and health. To address this omission, this chapter explores the 19th century experience, a crucial period that forms the background to this longer study. It represents a period when ideas about the need for dedicated public spaces for children's recreation were defined, largely as an antidote to the perceived problems of urban life and the environmental consequences of industrialism, but only intermittently implemented. To make sense of these processes, the first part of this chapter will focus on the mid-nineteenth century and explore early, piecemeal attempts to create public amenities for children in Salford, Manchester and London. In the second section, the chapter will highlight how the creation of dedicated spaces for children became more widespread from the 1880s, as a remedy for the ills of the metropolitan environment and a prescription for improving the health of the city's inhabitants.

¹ Hannikainen, 'Sport in London'.

2.1 Education and Exercise in the mid-nineteenth century

Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation in the early nineteenth century generated significant wealth and technological innovation, but also caused significant problems of pollution, disease and social conflict. There was an increasing sense that urban systems were failing as existing methods for managing air circulation, industrial by-products, human and animal waste had not kept pace with the growth of towns and cities. In particular, the places where the urban poor lived were increasingly seen and experienced as crowded, disorientating, dangerous and unhealthy, understood by ruling elites as ‘hotbeds of the dangerous classes, the foci of cholera, crime and Chartism’.² Thomas Beames’ *Rookeries of London* (1850), Henry Mayhew’s verbatim interviews in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) and George Godwin’s *Town Swamps and Social Bridges* (1859) all depicted a highly problematic urban environment and highlighted the dangers of overcrowded and poor-quality housing on the working-classes in general, but also specifically the impact on children’s physical and moral health.³ As a result, there was increasing debate about the merits of town and country, concern about the provision of spaces for leisure and recreation and the instigation of greater municipal and philanthropic efforts to tackle these problems.⁴ The playground would gradually become embroiled in these processes, but this required a shift in attitudes towards childhood and working-class childhood in particular.

For many children from poor urban families, daily life was spent working and playing in the street. The street had many advantages as a site for play, including proximity, easy

² Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between the Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 167.

³ Thomas Beames, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present and Prospective* (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1850); Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London, 1851), 1; George Godwin, *Town Swamps and Social Bridges* (London: Routledge, Warnes and Routledge, 1859).

⁴ *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain: Volume 3: 1840–1950*, ed. by Martin Daunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

sociability and more space than inside the home. At the same time, however, the street was increasingly imbued with negative connotations by writers such as John Ruskin and other urban commentators, understood as a space that was both literally and symbolically dirty, diseased and dangerous.⁵ In addition, the romantic ideals of Rousseau, Wordsworth and others were increasingly influential in creating an idealised, mythical figure of the child of nature.⁶ As a result, the lived experience of poor urban children was increasingly at odds with upper- and middle-class ambitions for childhood and attitudes towards the city. Governments and philanthropists had long developed and implemented policies towards children, but this emerging romantic ideology began to influence public action from the middle of the nineteenth century. Initially focused on addressing child exploitation at work, the efforts of reformers gradually shifted towards creating ‘a childhood for all children everywhere which was in harmony with nature, and in which manual labour had no part.’⁷ Legislation initially sought to limit the hours and improve the conditions in which children worked, but gradually this emphasis on a ‘natural’ childhood coincided with evolving ideas about education, particularly the education of young children.

The influence of progressive educational thinking on the origins of the playground can be seen in the interaction between pedagogical theory, playful practice, commerce and campaigning. In 1826, the influential German educator Friedrich Froebel had urged that ‘every town should have its own common playground for the boys’ so that they could learn civil and moral virtues through playing games.⁸ He developed an approach to children’s education that emphasised playful activities, made use of tools to support self-directed

⁵ Sabine Schulting, *Dirt in Victorian Literature and Culture: Writing Materiality* (London: Routledge, 2016).

⁶ Linda M. Austin, ‘Children of Childhood: Nostalgia and the Romantic Legacy’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 42.1 (2003), 75–98.

⁷ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, p. 145.

⁸ Friedrich Froebel, *The Education of Man*, trans. by W.N. Hailmann (Norderstedt: Vero Verlag, 2015).

learning and included the use of materials such as bricks, sand and sawdust in the classroom. From the 1820s, British educators including Robert Owen and Samuel Wilderspin also promoted the place of play in children's education, as part of a wider infant education movement that positioned schooling as a solution to criminality.⁹ An engraving of the playground at the Home and Colonial infant school in London shows a generously equipped, enclosed outdoor space with a variety of apparatus including seesaws, climbing ropes and bars (Figure 2.1). As such, the playground was a key component of an outdoor, physically energetic education for young children. In addition, and significantly for the subsequent story of the public playground, both Wilderspin and Froebel combined their pedagogical theory and teaching practice with a commercial side-line supplying educational equipment, underlining the enduring connection between commerce and play.

[REDACTED]

Figure 2.1 Home and Colonial Infant School playground (Wellcome Collection, 24350j, c.1840)

⁹ Samuel Wilderspin, *A System of Education for the Young* (London: Hodson, 1840); A. F. B. Roberts, 'A New View of the Infant School Movement', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 20.2 (1972), 154–64; P. McCann, *Samuel Wilderspin and the Infant School Movement* (London: Croom Helm, 1982).

For many in the infant education movement, including Wilderspin, it was the plight of children from poor families in particular that most needed the corrective influence of infant education. However, while the school day helped to remove some poor children from the workplace, it did little to tackle the perceived problems of playing in the city street.¹⁰ For Wilderspin's friend Charles Dickens it was the unsavoury streets that were particularly problematic. Writing in *Household Words* in 1850, Dickens described how poor children were 'generally born in dark alleys and back courts, their playground has been the streets, where the wits of many have been prematurely sharpened at the expense of any morals they might have.'¹¹ But he did more than write about these problems and although overlooked in otherwise comprehensive biographies of his life, Dickens also sought to provide more salubrious places for poor children to play. In January 1858, Dickens and the reforming politician Lord Shaftesbury launched the Playground and Recreation Society in an effort to create 'playgrounds for poor children in populous places,' away from the 'variety of temptations' and 'bodily evils' to be found in the street.¹² Later that year, a deputation from the Society that included Dickens and park-advocate Robert Slaney MP met with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and representatives from the City of London to promote the cause.¹³ No doubt partly as a result of Dickens' reputation, the Society received considerable publicity, including support from Henry Mayhew's satirical magazine *Punch*. It suggested that 'ragged playgrounds' would remove the annoyance of children playing on the street, providing relief for the pedestrian 'who can hardly walk ten yards without hobbling from a

¹⁰ Jane Read, 'Gutter to Garden: Historical Discourses of Risk in Interventions in Working Class Children's Street Play', *Children and Society*, 25 (2011), 421–34.

¹¹ Charles Dickens, 'London Pauper Children', *Household Words*, 1850, p. 551.

¹² 'A Want of the Age', *Bell's Life in London*, 17 January 1858, p. 7.

¹³ 'Playground and Recreation Society', *Lloyd's Illustrated*, 22 May 1859, p. 7.

hoop or being blinded by a tip-cat.¹⁴ Similarly, at a Society event, Dickens emphasised the wider benefits that dedicated spaces for children would afford:

*...the surgeon and the recruiting sergeant would say with great emphasis that the children's play is of importance to the community in the development of bodies; and the clergyman, the schoolmaster, and the moral philosopher of all degrees, would hold with no less emphasis that the child's recreation was of great importance to the community in the development of mind.*¹⁵

Dickens saw the playground as a space that would promote both children's physical health, with beneficial consequences for the strength of the nation, and their mental and moral wellbeing. However, despite Dickens' involvement and the associated publicity, the Playground Society was short-lived. By May 1860, the *Times* reported that it had 'lately died a natural death, obviously from the impossibility of creating spaces, or providing funds adequate to the enormous cost of purchasing ground in the metropolis.'¹⁶ While the high price of land and lack of funding undoubtedly presented problems for Dickens, these were issues which later campaigners were able to overcome. In mid-century London, it seems likely that society was not yet ready to embrace the children's playground as a solution to the problems of the city. Neither celebrity endorsement, the nuisance and danger of street play, nor the future potential of a healthier working-class childhood were convincing enough to attract state support, philanthropic funding, nor the allocation of dedicated public spaces for children. Instead, the earliest spaces set aside specifically for children were seen in another response to the problems of the nineteenth-century city, the campaign to create public parks. Even here, however, the playground did not initially feature prominently.

¹⁴ Henry Silver, 'Ragged Playgrounds', *Punch*, 1 May 1858, 181; 'The Advantage of Taking a Short Cut through a Court', *Punch*, 4 June 1859, 233.

¹⁵ 'Playground and General Recreation Society', *Daily News*, 3 June 1858, p. 3.

¹⁶ 'The Gardens of Lincoln's Inn Fields', *The Times*, 22 May 1860, p. 12.

The city park had long been understood as a space of health and recreation. But while there is a strong association today between the park and the children's playground, they were not intimately connected from the outset. As a response to the problems of the industrial city, green space advocates envisaged the public park as a way to provide fresh air, a dose of nature, gentle recreation and cultural enrichment.¹⁷ Parks were imagined as green lungs, part of an urban respiratory system which supported the healthy functioning of the wider city. In adopting such bodily metaphor, park advocates imagined that green spaces would help to ventilate overcrowded streets, circulate clean air and disperse noxious odours.¹⁸ In addition to this ostensibly biological function, the park could also provide a cure for the social and moral problems of the city. The 1833 Select Committee on Public Walks endorsed green spaces as a solution to the ill-health, poor hygiene and intemperance of working-class city dwellers. Also motivated by civic pride and philanthropic charity, later proponents also saw them as a vehicle for educating and enriching the lives of the urban poor. By imagining the city as a living organism, whose physical and moral ills could be cured through medico-environmental interventions, early park advocates provided an important conceptual framework for later proponents of the children's playground. Adapting the urban environment in this way would help to reshape the physical and moral health and behaviour of its working-class population.¹⁹

However, while the common refrain of 'parks for the people' may have implied a democratic purpose, green spaces were often shaped by gender and class-based values which

¹⁷ Jones and Wills, *Invention of the Park*.

¹⁸ Jones, 'Lungs of the City', p. 56.

¹⁹ Tim Brown, 'The Making of Urban "Healtheries": The Transformation of Cemeteries and Burial Grounds in Late-Victorian East London', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 42 (2013), 12–23 (p. 17); Driver, 'Moral Geographies', p. 284; Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State*, pp. 118–22.

invariably stressed purposeful and segregated forms of 'rational recreation.'²⁰ At People's Park in Halifax early bylaws prohibited dancing and games, while at Longton Park in Stoke-on-Trent bicycles, tricycles and dogs were banned and the park superintendent advised against installing facilities for children or sport.²¹ Instead, gentle perambulation would allow visitors to interact with and learn from an ordered version of nature, where careful displays of plants and animals, geology and art could instil an appreciation of the natural world, while the bandstand or tea room provided an appropriately salubrious break from daily routines.²² Significantly for this story, parks were also shaped by assumptions about age and children were largely expected to imitate adult behaviours, strolling on the paths or admiring fauna and flora from a distance. In a minority of green spaces, including Saltaire Park in Bradford and the Brewer's Garden in Stepney, young people were barred from entering altogether.²³ As such, children were not a distinct constituency in the mid-nineteenth century park community and dedicated facilities for children were uncommon.

In 1840, for example, Derby Arboretum opened as a public space for gentle recreation and education. Local newspapers reported a 'valuable collection of trees and shrubs, so arranged and described, as to offer the means of instruction to visitors' but the entrance fee most likely made it an unlikely venue for the playful activities of children from poor families.²⁴ Elsewhere, newly created parks improved the city through adherence to landscape and garden design conventions, rather than necessarily improving access to vernacular landscapes

²⁰ Bailey, *Leisure and Class*; Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c.1780 - c.1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

²¹ Lambert, 'Rituals of Transgression', pp. 197–98.

²² Hilary A. Taylor, 'Urban Public Parks, 1840-1900: Design and Meaning', *Garden History*, 23.2 (1995), 201–21.

²³ Lambert, 'Rituals of Transgression', p. 204; Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report* (London, 1900), p. 53.

²⁴ 'Opening of Derby Arboretum', *Derby Mercury*, 23 September 1840, p. 4.

or working countryside.²⁵ Designers took their cues from English landscape parks, with picturesque lakes, groups of trees, expanses of grassland and serpentine walks, underpinned by a belief in the health benefits of spending time in a controlled version of nature.²⁶ Many early public parks were created in this vision; the plans for Victoria Park (1845) and Birkenhead Park (1847) were both an expression of these values and aesthetics, as was an unrealised plan from 1851 for an Albert Park in north London.²⁷

These plans represented ideal landscapes, where advocates' understanding of the city and nature came into sharp contrast with the day-to-day lived experience of many urban inhabitants. For park campaigners and others inspired by romantic ideals, the poor were disconnected from nature because they lived in overcrowded, polluted and unwholesome conditions. However, in reality many city dwellers had daily contact with a wide range of animals and plants as part of their working lives, while the vagaries of the weather would be experienced in outdoor working environments and often inside the home.²⁸ Furthermore, while advocates imagined the park as a remedial space of natural beauty and healthy recreation, in practice there was considerable continuity in earlier patterns of behaviour. Regulation and supervision sought to manage the way that visitors used parks, but older 'carnavalesque ways of engaging with place and community' saw activities such as picking

²⁵ James Winter, *Secure from the Rash Assault: Sustaining the Victorian Environment* (London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 192.

²⁶ Jones and Wills, *Invention of the Park*, p. 27.

²⁷ British Library, Maps.Crace XIX 43a, Thomas Chawner and James Pennethorne, 'Plan for Laying out the Proposed Eastern Park to Be Called Victoria Park', 1841; National Archives, WORKS/32/424, 'Albert Park', 1851.

²⁸ Elizabeth Baigent, 'Octavia Hill, Nature and Open Space: Crowning Success or Campaigning "Utterly Without Result"', in *'Nobler Imaginings and Mightier Struggles': Octavia Hill, Social Activism and The Remaking of British Society*, ed. by Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2016), pp. 141–61; Winter, *Secure from the Rash Assault*.

flowers, intimacy between couples and most likely children's play all challenge attempts to impose alternative, park-appropriate values and uses.²⁹

The creation of Victoria Park on the eastern boundary of London in 1845 is a good example of some of these processes in action. Created between the villages of Hackney, Homerton and Old Ford, the park was laid out on land used for a range of commercial and residential activities. Market gardening, grazing, gravel pits and a tea garden coexisted with groups of cottages and the temporary settlements of itinerant brick-makers.³⁰ A visitor to the area during the park landscaping works noted that it had been 'a beautiful spot, rather wild, varied, and luxuriant; it is now comparatively dreary, tame, and of course insipid.'³¹ Victoria Park was certainly not unique in this sense and the marginalisation of existing communities and land uses were features of park creation from Norwich to New York.³² Often missing, however, is the impact of park creation on children's play, an unsurprising omission perhaps given the further marginalisation that occurs in the process of archiving materials and the relative insignificance attributed to children's play. In this instance, our visitor to the Victoria Park construction site did not comment specifically on children's ability to play in the existing or new landscape, but the social norms that governed park use most likely made the newly engineered green space a more precarious and inflexible place to play than the previously wild and diverse vernacular landscape. With evidence that there was considerable consensus within the park community around what constituted 'respectable' behaviour, it is doubtful that the park keeper would be the only adult attempting to moderate children's instinctive

²⁹ Lambert, 'Rituals of Transgression', p. 210.

³⁰ Charles Poulsen, *Victoria Park: A Study in the History of East London* (London: Stepney Books and The Journeyman Press, 1976), p. 27.

³¹ *The Builder* 5 (1847) pp. 533, 545, 565 quoted in Winter, *Secure from the Rash Assault*, p. 204.

³² Neil MacMaster, 'The Battle for Mousehold Heath 1857-1884: "Popular Politics" and the Victorian Public Park', *Past & Present*, 127 (1990), 117-54; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *Park and the People*.

playfulness.³³ At the same time, however, the early appropriation of the ornamental lakes in Victoria Park as a site for bathing, often by large numbers of children, does highlight how the creation of norms relating to the use of such spaces was a negotiated process, one where designers' intentions and administrators expectations were modified in practice by park users.

In one part of the country there was an apparent exception to the marginalisation of children in park landscapes. Manchester was an archetypal 'shock city' of the nineteenth century, where industrialisation created economic growth, but also resulted in social and environmental problems, particularly working-class poverty and ill-health.³⁴ For a local curate, William Marriott, children in particular suffered 'the pain, the sickness, the filth, the disease, and the thousand gross immoralities, and brutish vices and degrading crimes' that resulted from such conditions.³⁵ For local reformers, the creation of new public parks was central to efforts to mitigate the physical and moral consequences. Largely paid for by local subscription, Peel Park in Salford and Queen's and Philips Parks in Manchester were opened to the public on the same day in 1846. Like contemporary parks elsewhere, they were designed in the landscape style, reinforced normative gender values and provided open space for the working-class to take part in moderate exercise and interact with nature. Unusually, however, the parks also included specific facilities for children.

³³ Dreher, 'The Virtuous and Verminous: Turn of the Century Moral Panics in London's Public Parks'.

³⁴ Hulme, *After the Shock City*.

³⁵ Wellcome Collection, W.T. Marriott, *The Necessity of Open Spaces and Public Playgrounds in Large Towns* (Manchester: Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association, 1862), p. 4.

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Figure 2.2 Giant stride (Wicksteed Park Archive, PHO-1614/3, n.d.)

A plan of Peel Park from 1850 shows that designated space for children was provided in addition to an archery ground, skittles ground and gymnasium.³⁶ A rectangular 'Girls Play Ground' and an additional circular clearing for a girl's swing were tucked away in the shrubbery on the eastern park boundary, while a boy's swing was positioned close to the quoits ground, again hidden among the planting. In Philips Park, the 'play grounds' were laid out with a gravel surface and bordered by an earth bank planted with privet hedging.³⁷ Contemporary accounts of the three parks described how the girls' playgrounds provided space for skipping and shuttlecock, while the gymnasium provided boys and men with equipment for energetic exercise. Laid out with advice from the local Athenaeum Gymnastics Club, apparatus included a 7m tall frame which supported climbing ladders, poles, bars and ropes, a vaulting horse and a giant stride.³⁸ The giant stride, also known as flying steps, was a

³⁶ Hayes and Dockerill, 'A Park for the People: Examining the Creation and Refurbishment of a Public Park'.

³⁷ Allan Ruff, *The Biography of Philips Park, Manchester 1846-1996*, School of Planning and Landscape Occasional Paper 56 (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 2000).

³⁸ 'Official Inspection of the Manchester Public Parks', *The Manchester Guardian*, 19 August 1846, p. 6; *A Few Pages about Manchester* (Manchester: Love and Barton, 1850).

tall, upright pole with a revolving top on which ropes were attached that allowed users to take giant steps around a circle (see Figure 2.2 for a later example). For its advocates, it provided 'a most useful article in the muscular education' and made the gymnast appear to be 'endowed with wings.'³⁹ However, in common with the wider provision of recreational facilities in parks, these were not facilities for instinctive play and instead represented an attempt to provide for rational exercise by children.

The new parks sought to civilise the natural world and children's play within it, but this was not an unproblematic task. The inclusion of engineered gymnastic structures, for example, might seem at odds with the typical approach to park design that was grounded in a pastoral landscape aesthetic. However, engineering had long been a feature of green spaces, perhaps most notably in the automata that featured in the parks and gardens of the European aristocracy, but also in the operation of fountains and construction of follies.⁴⁰ More problematic, however, was the attempt to combine bucolic landscapes with recreational opportunities for children. Joshua Major, the designer of the Salford and Manchester parks, resolved this issue by prioritising the former, recommending considerable caution in providing facilities for recreation and particular care in siting them. He emphasised that aesthetics should take priority over practical amenities such as playgrounds, arguing that such features should never 'interfere with the composition and beauty of the general landscape.'⁴¹ Playgrounds that had initially been positioned in the centre of Philips Park were removed and consolidated on the boundary, so that the 'unrestrained merriment of the

³⁹ George Forrest, 'The Giant Stride, or Flying Steps, and Its Capabilities', *Every Boy's Magazine*, 1 March 1862, pp. 122–27 (p. 122).

⁴⁰ Jessica Riskin, 'Machines in the Garden', *Republics of Letters*, 1.2 (2010), 16–43.

⁴¹ Joshua Major, *The Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1852), p. 196.

factory girls who used the swings' would no longer impinge on the view.⁴² As well as being secondary to aesthetic concerns, the provision of space for recreation could be trumped by economic considerations too. In 1850, Peel Park administrators suggested closing the playgrounds for part of the year to preserve the quality of the grass.⁴³ Protecting the turf in this way would enable more grass to be harvested for hay and then sold, raising around £25,000 in today's money (£30 in 1850) to help offset park maintenance costs.⁴⁴

Despite provisions in the 1859 Recreation Ground Act which specifically enabled local authorities to create 'playgrounds for children' few did so.⁴⁵ Joshua Major's other notable landscape designs seem to have included no dedicated facilities for children.⁴⁶ Plans for Sefton Park (1867) in Liverpool, Finsbury Park (1869) in London and Roundhay Park (1872) in Leeds did not initially include child-specific amenities. Stamford Park (1880) in Altrincham was unusual in providing a boys' playground and girls' playground, but again they were hidden from view on the park boundary, enclosed by trees and shrubs.⁴⁷ At the opening of Victoria Park in Portsmouth in 1878, one commentator felt that the otherwise undesirable railway line which divided the new space in two did perform a useful function, separating spaces for recreation and the giant stride from the rest of the ornamental park landscape.⁴⁸ As such,

⁴² *A Few Pages about Manchester*, pp. 31–32.

⁴³ 'Salford Town Council Park', *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 13 November 1850, p. 6.

⁴⁴ In presenting financial amounts, this study adopts the same approach as Roderick Floud's *Economic History of the English Garden*. Based on a methodology developed by an international team of economic historians, Floud uses an index of average earnings, given the significance of labour in landscape projects, to translate historical financial values into present-day amounts. Using the *Measuring Worth* online calculator and assuming that creating a playground similarly represents a labour-intensive construction project, here financial costs and income are quoted at 2020 values (the latest year for which data is available) followed by the historical amount in brackets, enabling a more straightforward comparison across time. Roderick Floud, *An Economic History of the English Garden* (London: Allen Lane, 2019); *Measuring Worth*, 'Five Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.K. Pound Amount, 1270 to Present', 2021, <www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare> [accessed 13 October 2021].

⁴⁵ *Recreation Grounds Act*.

⁴⁶ David Baldwin, 'Major, Joshua (1786-1866), Landscape Gardener and Designer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ 'Opening of Stamford Park, Altrincham', *Manchester Times*, 30 October 1880, p. 7.

⁴⁸ 'Opening of the Portsmouth Public Park', *Hampshire Telegraph*, 29 May 1878, p. 3.

children were rarely a primary constituency in the mid-century park community and dedicated spaces for children were not common. When amenities for children were provided, they were invariably located on the marginal boundaries of the park, hidden from view and subservient to the wider landscape aesthetic, economic considerations and expectations of appropriate park behaviour. The children's playground was not yet a defining characteristic of the public park.

However, just as tentative steps were being taken to provide spaces for children in some towns and cities, there were also attempts to promote more energetic forms of activity in parks. For landscape historians, these interconnected processes have resulted in some uncertainty about whether amenities were intended for children or adults, particularly the provision of gymnasiums in public spaces. The garden historian Susan Lasdun has contended that the gymnasium installed in 1848 at Primrose Hill in London was the first children's playground.⁴⁹ Although the evidence from Manchester and Salford suggests this is an unsound assertion, it is a claim worth exploring in more detail as it points to an important influence on the form of spaces for children, one which focused less on the perceived health and education benefits associated specifically with green space and instead emphasised physical exertion itself. There had been attempts to provide space for open air athletic exercises in London earlier in the century. In 1825 the German 'professor of gymnastics' Karl Voelker began offering gymnastics lessons for military gentlemen close to Regent's Park.⁵⁰ An image of his gymnasium published in the *Examiner* in December 1825 showed a range of apparatus including bars, ladders and poles, all positioned in an outdoor area enclosed by a high brick wall.⁵¹ By 1827, a cartoon published in *Lady's Magazine* parodied the gymnasium

⁴⁹ Lasdun, *The English Park: Royal, Private and Public*.

⁵⁰ 'Newspaper Chat', *Examiner*, 12 June 1825, p. 745; 'Advertisements', *La Belle Assemblée*, 1 July 1825.

⁵¹ 'Voelker's Gymnastics', *Examiner*, 11 December 1825, p. 787.

with its high and giddy mast, risky javelin throwing and other exercises that seemed to provide as much amusement to onlookers as they did health to participants (Figure 2.3).⁵² Perhaps partially as a result, attempts to increase participation in gymnastics were not wholly successful and an offshoot of Voelker's private gymnasium, the London Gymnastic Institution, was wound up in 1827 due to lack of income.⁵³

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*Figure 2.3 Professor Voelker's school for the instruction of Gentlemen, 1825
(City of Westminster Archives, Ash.131Acc2119)*

Despite the cynicism and setback, the perceived benefits of gymnastic exercise did become more widely acknowledged. Around the same time that Voelker was working in London, a Swiss Professor of Gymnastics, Peter Clias, organised gymnastic courses at military and naval colleges across Britain and published a general introduction to athletic exercise.⁵⁴ Donald Walker's *British Manly Exercises* promoted a similar approach and ran to ten editions

⁵² 'Prof. Voelker Pentonville Gymnasium', *The Lady's Magazine*, 31 July 1827, 392.

⁵³ 'The London Gymnastic Institution', *The Times*, 5 January 1827, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Peter Henry Clias, *An Elementary Course of Gymnastic Exercises* (London: Sherwood, Jones & Co., 1823), p. v.

between 1834 and 1860.⁵⁵ As part of this mid-century enthusiasm for energetic exercise, an outdoor gymnasium was installed by the Commissioners of Woods and Forests at Primrose Hill. Much like Voelker's earlier enterprise, it included gymnastic apparatus such as ropes for swinging on, poles for climbing up, horizontal and parallel bars. Newspaper accounts suggested that exercising on the equipment would provide new vigour in the circulation, improved general health and a strengthening of the mind, while also making clear that this was not a space specifically for children. An engraving in the *Illustrated London News* provides an insight into the way the gymnasium was both perceived and represented to the public (Figure 2.4).⁵⁶ Adults are seen exercising and spectating, many dressed as might be expected of the gentlemen that Voelker had earlier hoped to attract to his gymnastic lessons. Older boys are shown climbing, another playing with a hoop, but the size of the apparatus would have made it difficult for many younger children to use the gymnasium, while women and girls seem to be relegated to the side-lines as spectators. The most notable child, in the foreground of the image, conforms to contemporary representations of working-class children, portrayed as a costermonger or street-seller straight from the pages of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*. For working-class children at least, the gymnasium seems to have been a site of work rather than play.

⁵⁵ Donald Walker, *British Manly Exercises* (London: Hurst, 1834).

⁵⁶ 'Government Gymnasium', *Illustrated London News*, 29 April 1848, p. 283.

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Figure 2.4 Government Gymnasium (Illustrated London News, 29 April 1848)

However, providing public amenities for active recreation was far from straightforward. In 1863, regulations were introduced to manage demand for the equipment at Primrose Hill, limiting the length of time each piece could be used and noting that abusive language or wilful damage would result in exclusion or prosecution.⁵⁷ At the same time, there was nothing inherently respectable about those responsible for supervising the gymnasium. *The Standard* reported that it ‘had now become a very disorderly place, there being much quarrelling about the ropes’ and a site of unscrupulous administration, with Park Constables demanding bribes before people could use the equipment.⁵⁸ As such, this was not a space for playing freely as an end in itself. Neither the regulations nor newspaper accounts specifically mention children or play, and it seems highly unlikely that park staff, gymnasts or the wider public would have seen this as a space exclusively for children. But in creating a public, open-

⁵⁷ ‘The Gymnasium, Primrose Hill’, *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 2 May 1863, p. 4.

⁵⁸ ‘The Regent’s Park Gymnasium’, *The Standard*, 21 August 1878, p. 2.

air facility for energetic exercise, the example at Primrose Hill serves as a useful reference for the justification and design of later spaces that were set aside for children in particular.

Between the 1840s and 1880 there were only sporadic and largely localised attempts to create dedicated public spaces for children's recreation. However, many of the factors that would influence later advocacy had their roots in this period. Mid-century investigations had highlighted the deleterious effects of the urban environment on its poor inhabitants generally and children especially, while education, restorative exercise and interaction with nature offered potential solutions. The vision of a universal, natural childhood contrasted sharply with the perceived reality of the poor urban child, in an overcrowded home and with nowhere to play except the street. However, attempts to provide playground spaces as a solution were either unsuccessful or at odds with the dominant landscape aesthetic of the public park movement. This would change in the 1880s as shifting conceptions of childhood stabilised and heightened anxiety about the consequences of urbanisation demanded pragmatic solutions.

2.2 Children and urban anxieties in the late nineteenth century

If attempts to create play spaces for children between the 1840s and 1870s had achieved decidedly mixed results, by the 1880s heightened concern about the problematic urban environment and changing conceptions of childhood meant that conditions were more conducive to the creation of dedicated public spaces for children. London in particular became a focus of concern and the playground was increasingly promoted as a solution to at least some of the problems facing the capital. Utopian visions of a healthy city, pragmatic attempts to improve the housing of the poor and the work of open space advocates all promoted dedicated spaces for children. At the same time, a series of legislative interventions created 'spare time' for children beyond the school day. The 1880 Education Act made school

attendance compulsory between the ages of five and ten, increasing to twelve in 1899, while the 1891 Elementary Education Act effectively made schooling free.⁵⁹ At the same time, earlier park rhetoric, particularly ideas about the benefits of fresh air and interaction with nature, and the possibilities of gymnastic exercise were brought together in the playground for significant political and social purposes.

The depiction of working-class lives by sensationalist journalism and more sober social science, along with the threat of working-class insurrection, provided a particularly persuasive impetus to late nineteenth-century urban reform.⁶⁰ A combination of economic depression, civil unrest and the graphic exposure of conditions in the poorest parts of the city 'provoked a panic-stricken reaction among politicians, press and church dignitaries alike.'⁶¹ The tone was set by *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883), a penny pamphlet written by the Congregational minister Andrew Mearns on the housing conditions of the poor in south London. Although there had been accounts of the slums published before, Mearns' pamphlet generated comprehensive and long-running coverage in the popular press and scientific journals and brought the problems of the city into sharp focus.⁶² The plight of children and the environments they lived in were an essential part of the narrative. Mearns reported that 'the child-misery that one beholds is the most heart-rending and appalling element in the discoveries,' a tragedy made worse because 'many of them have never seen a green field.'⁶³

⁵⁹ The British Academy, *Reframing Childhood Past and Present - Chronologies*.

⁶⁰ Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 25.

⁶¹ Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between the Classes in Victorian Society*, p. 222.

⁶² Anthony Wohl, *The Eternal Slum: Housing and Social Policy in Victorian London* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 201.

⁶³ Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor (1883)* (London: Frank Cass, 1970), p. 16.

In addition to Mearns' account, there were also attempts to use statistics and surveys to understand and expose the problems of inequality. In 1887 the Fabian Society found that the life expectancy of a working-class Lambeth resident was only 29, while the infant mortality rate in east London was double that of west London.⁶⁴ Charles Booth's surveys and mapping also contributed to a new imaginary geography of the city, with some areas home to the wealthy and well-to-do while others were inhabited by the 'vicious, semi-criminal' lowest classes.⁶⁵ William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, went on to describe parts of London's east end as 'darkest England,' building on a powerful imaginative and moral geography that distinguished East and West London and mapped civilisation and barbarism, progress and degradation, light and dark onto the city.⁶⁶ Booth visualised millions of poor urban children enduring a 'miserable subsistence,' their 'amusement curtailed to the running gutter' while parks and playgrounds, along with other improvements, could enhance the 'comfort and enjoyment' of their lives.⁶⁷ These dramatic accounts of the city and the experience of poverty that underpinned them ensured a ready reception for the ameliorative potential of public green spaces among London's influential interest groups and philanthropic networks.⁶⁸

Just as the urban environment became increasingly associated symbolically with darkness and degradation, childhood was increasingly imagined as a time of natural progress and hope for the future. The boundaries and characteristics of childhood had increasingly been defined by a number of interventions including legislation relating to working hours and

⁶⁴ Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, pp. 29–31.

⁶⁵ *Labour and Life of the People*, ed. by Charles Booth, 2nd edn (London: Williams & Norgate, 1889); Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow*, pp. 29–31.

⁶⁶ Driver, *Geography Militant*, pp. 181–83.

⁶⁷ William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London: Salvation Army, 1890), pp. xxi and 295.

⁶⁸ David A. Reeder, 'The Social Construction of Green Space in London Prior to the Second World War', in *The European City and Green Space: London, Stockholm, Helsinki and St. Petersburg, 1850-2000*, ed. by Peter Clark (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 41–67.

conditions, the expansion of compulsory and fee-free schooling, the investigations of social science and the development of socio-medical knowledge based on school medical inspections.⁶⁹ When combined with the romantic ideal of childhood as protected, dependent and separate from adulthood, an increasingly standardised vision of childhood was created. However, this idealised childhood was a long way from the perceived reality of most urban working-class children, providing an important motivation for many reformers and philanthropists. There was a considerable disconnect between the romantic, idealised figure of the child in nature and the lived experience of poor children in the city, seemingly failed by their parents and physically and morally distorted by their lives on the street. As such, the plight of poor city children formed an essential part of the rhetoric used by metropolitan reformers in the 1880s.

For some, occupying children's newly created leisure time with appropriate activities was the priority. The driving force behind such efforts was the novelist and social worker Mrs Humphrey (Mary) Ward. Built upon accounts of the slums and descriptions of poverty, but mainly concerned with the behaviour of poor children, the organisers of the Children's Happy Evening Association (1888), various Guilds of Play and other evening and vacation play schemes all attempted to divert children from the physical and moral dangers of the street and occupy their leisure time. Supervised activities included drill and dancing, lantern talks and basketwork and generally took place inside.⁷⁰ The Happy Evening Association, for example, made use of school premises to provide constructive, supervised play opportunities for young children outside of school hours, while the Guilds of Play focused particularly on

⁶⁹ Hendrick, *Children*; Harry Hendrick, 'Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood: An Interpretative Survey, 1800 to the Present', in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, ed. by Allison James and Alan Prout (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 29–53.

⁷⁰ Brehony, 'A "Socially Civilising Influence"'.

dancing for girls.⁷¹ However, the schemes were only available one or two nights a week, often for an hour or two at most, or during the school holidays.⁷² Despite the limited time available, advocates such as Grace Kimmins, author and Guild of Play organiser, imagined that appropriate activities would ‘fire the feelings of the town child, making him go whistling on his way, as the country boy does when off to the woods’.⁷³ While the notion of a natural childhood was important to such campaigners, these schemes were primarily concerned with occupying children’s leisure time, rather than adapting the city fabric to mitigate the impacts of the urban environment on children’s health and wellbeing.

In contrast, there were campaign groups that were more concerned about the spaces where public play and recreation should take place. A number of philanthropic individuals and groups had been working to protect and promote open spaces in and around the city, including the Commons Preservation Society (1865), the Kyrle Society (1875) and housing reformer Octavia Hill. As its name suggests, the former was mainly concerned with protecting areas of common land for general recreation, while Hill and the Kyrle Society combined an interest in beauty, nature and better housing with occasional provision of spaces for children. In 1866 Hill described clearing some old stables to create a playground for poor girls at one of her model housing schemes at Freshwater Place, Marylebone. Fenced, gravelled, planted with small trees and equipped with swings, by 1869 she felt that ‘the playground never looked so pretty.’⁷⁴ The Kyrle Society, formed by Hill’s sister Miranda, combined this belief in the ameliorative potential of aesthetics, nature and open space and Hill was the leading member

⁷¹ Robert Henderson, ‘Things Made by Children’, *Strand Magazine*, 1897, 752–62.

⁷² Anthea Holme and Peter Massie, *Children’s Play: A Study of Needs and Opportunities* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), p. 43.

⁷³ Brehony, ‘A “Socially Civilising Influence”’.

⁷⁴ Octavia Hill, *Letters to Fellow-Workers 1864 to 1911*, ed. by Elinor Southwood Ouvry (London: Adelphi, 1933), p. 5.

of its Open Spaces Branch.⁷⁵ It had a number of practical successes, including the preservation of Vauxhall Park in London, but was also constrained by a lack of funding. Hill also promoted the principle of the playground, stating in 1883 that ‘children want playgrounds’ and that when provided they ‘would not be obliged to play in alleys and in the street, learning their lessons of evil, in great danger of accident.’⁷⁶ Beyond Freshwater Place and Hill’s advocacy, the playground also appeared in more radical visions of the future. In 1876, the noted sanitarian Benjamin Ward Richardson reimagined the city as a space of health, hygiene and cleanliness. In his highly detailed description of *Hygeia: A City of Health*, garden squares at the back of working-class housing would be ‘ornamented with flowers and trees and furnished with playgrounds for children young and old.’⁷⁷ Richardson’s writing and Hill’s advocacy both helped to ensure that the playground was firmly planted within both practical action and utopian visions for a more humane urban environment.

However, the creation of children’s playgrounds as a solution to the social, environmental and health problems of the city was far from the only palliative option open to campaigners. For some, removing children from the city altogether was the best solution. Retreating to a country estate or taking a holiday in the mountains, moorland or coast provided a natural respite from the city for those with the necessary wealth. However, for children from poor families there were fewer opportunities to escape. In the minds of reformers, a few weeks hop picking in the Kent countryside did not represent a lasting solution. There had been earlier emigration schemes for poor children, but it was the late

⁷⁵ Robert Whelan, ‘The Poor, as Well as the Rich, Need Something More than Meat and Drink’: The Vision and Work of the Kyrle Society’, in *‘Nobler Imaginings and Mightier Struggles’: Octavia Hill, Social Activism and The Remaking of British Society*, ed. by Elizabeth Baigent and Ben Cowell (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2016), pp. 91–117.

⁷⁶ Octavia Hill, *Homes of the London Poor* (London: Macmillan, 1883), pp. 90–92.

⁷⁷ Benjamin Ward Richardson, *Hygeia: A City of Health* (London: Macmillan, 1876), p. 27.

nineteenth century when this approach reached its peak. Within a broader movement that encouraged migration to the empire, Thomas Barnardo and others sent over eighty thousand children to rural farms in Canada between 1869 and 1914. This self-styled 'philanthropic abduction' removed children from apparently inadequate parents and problematic city streets, sending them to a seemingly wholesome life, closer to an idealised natural childhood as imagined by reformers, although in practice highly problematic for the children involved.⁷⁸

At the same time, free-to-use public play spaces were not the inevitable nor only response to the problem either. An 1873 sketch of Victoria Park in the *Illustrated London News* included expected park features such as the pagoda, cascade, lake and boat house, as well as a small detail showing the 'swings and roundabouts.'⁷⁹ But rather than a children's gymnasium, the detail appears to show a covered carousel and swing boats, both more commonly associated with the fairground rather than contemporary ideas of the playground. A later London County Council (LCC) publication confirms that these playful features were most likely only available on payment of a fee. Alongside regulations relating to the use of gymnasiums and other park amenities, the 1894 park bylaws included a separate prescription that 'the charge for the use of swings erected by private persons in parks or on open spaces is to be one penny per person for five minutes and notice of this must be kept posted up when swings are in use.'⁸⁰ The provision of private swings was presumably common enough to warrant a bylaw being created and significant enough that the council sought to control the cost. However, ten years later the LCC bylaws included no mention of privately operated

⁷⁸ Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Roy Parker, *Uprooted: The Shipment of Poor Children to Canada, 1867-1917* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010).

⁷⁹ W.H. Prior, 'The Queen in Victoria Park', *Illustrated London News*, 12 April 1873, p. 349.

⁸⁰ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/104, London County Council, 'Parks and Open Spaces, Descriptions, By-Laws, Acts of Parliament, Regulations', 1894, p. 152.

swings. The influence of the fairground and amusement park on the form and function of the children's playground are explored in more detail in the next chapter, but one reason for the shift from private to public swings was the advocacy of philanthropic organisations who promoted free-to-access and publicly maintained spaces for children's recreation.

In the early 1880s Dickens' unsuccessful Playground Society received some nostalgic publicity, but it was the formation of the Metropolitan Public Gardens, Boulevard and Playground Association in 1882 which marked the beginning of more determined efforts to provide poor children with dedicated space for recreation.⁸¹ Despite shortening its name to the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) in 1885, it remained concerned with the provision of spaces for children and 'quickly became the most important and representative organization...of the nineteenth-century urban amenities movement.'⁸² The Association was founded by the aristocratic philanthropist and ardent imperialist Reginald Brabazon (Earl of Meath, Lord Chaworth, 1841-1929) and the surgeon and journalist Ernest Hart (1835-1898).⁸³ Brabazon had been a member of the Kyrle Society but became increasingly keen to focus more specifically on the practical creation of public spaces in poor neighbourhoods, in contrast to the somewhat abstract aesthetic ambitions of the Society. Ernest Hart was Chair of the National Health Society, editor of the *British Medical Journal*, and his involvement in the MPGA was part of his wider interest in social, medical and environmental issues. This combination proved to be particularly significant in the story of the playground in that it

⁸¹ 'The Trifler', *Sunday Times*, 11 April 1880, p. 7; Sophia Elizabeth De Morgan, *Memoir of Augustus De Morgan* (London: Longmans Green, 1882).

⁸² H.L. Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, 29 (1985), 97–124 (p. 109).

⁸³ John Springhall, 'Brabazon, Reginald, Twelfth Earl of Meath (1841-1929), Politician and Philanthropist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); P.W.J. Bartrip, 'Hart, Ernest Abraham (1835-1898), Medical Journalist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

brought together anxieties about the environmental problems of the city, medico-moral understandings of working-class poverty, public park rhetoric and concern about the status of empire and presented the public garden and gymnasium as a pragmatic solution to all of these concerns.⁸⁴ However, unlike Benjamin Ward Richardson's imagined city of health, the MPGA did not pursue utopian visions and instead proposed more modest responses to the problems of the city.⁸⁵ In doing so, the MPGA's cause resonated with the politics and anxieties of the capital's upper- and middle-classes, particularly widely held concerns about social, biological, environmental and national degeneration.

Degenerationist theories grafted Darwinian ideas about evolution onto the city and its population, asserting that urban environmental maladies were leading directly to hereditary health problems and the social and biological regression of the nation. For Brabazon the 'smoky and grimy city' led directly to 'pale faces, stunted figures, debilitated forms, narrow chests, and all the outward signs of a low vital power' among the working-class population.⁸⁶ However, he was less interested in the consequences for individuals and more concerned that a weak and unhealthy working-class would threaten the nation's place in the world. Brabazon's 'quasi-religious attachment to Empire' saw him play a leading role in nearly every campaign to promote the imperial cause to children, most especially in the 'invented tradition' of Empire Day (1904).⁸⁷ Open spaces in particular were significant 'if England was to have a vigorous and reasonably contented working class, weaned from crime and revolutionary ideas, and able to make some useful contribution to the nation's imperial,

⁸⁴ Hickman, 'To Brighten the Aspect of Our Streets'.

⁸⁵ Brown, 'Making of Urban Healtheries'.

⁸⁶ Reginald Brabazon, *Social Arrows*, 2nd edn (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1887), pp. 13–14.

⁸⁷ Springhall, 'Lord Meath, Youth, and Empire', p. 100; Jim English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958', *The Historical Journal*, 49 (2006), 247–76 (p. 248).

military and commercial enterprises.⁸⁸ This association between the urban environment, working-class health and the status of the empire held widespread appeal. For example, the president of the Manchester Medical Society, William Coates, emphasised the role of the medical profession in tackling national degeneration, alongside wider efforts to promote physical exercise as a foundation for health. Echoing Froebel's assertion from a century earlier, he argued that 'public gymnasiums should be provided by the municipality in all large towns.'⁸⁹ Furthermore, as historian Bill Luckin has argued, for many inspired by degenerationist theory, children were increasingly imagined as the 'next generation' who could sustain the nation and empire or conversely precipitate its decline. As a result, the wellbeing of working-class children became a significant feature of medical and environmental debate.⁹⁰ For one commentator, living in overcrowded conditions and playing in close proximity to the 'injurious effects of the streets' was seemingly resulting in the evolution of 'strange creatures called the children of the town.'⁹¹ For the MPGA, such children could be 'healthy neither mentally, morally, nor physically.'⁹²

In speaking to such widespread concerns, the MPGA was able to attract members, donations and influence. Supporters included royalty, landed gentry, politicians, writers, physicians, scientists and clergy and the organisation swiftly developed significant political leverage and accumulated considerable financial resources.⁹³ The MPGA's rapid prominence has attracted historical analysis but the scholarship has mainly focused on the association's

⁸⁸ Aalen, 'Lord Meath', p. 141; Thorsheim, 'Green Space and Class in Imperial London'.

⁸⁹ William Coates, 'The Duty of the Medical Profession in the Prevention of National Deterioration', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1909), 1045–50.

⁹⁰ Bill Luckin, 'Revisiting the Idea of Degeneration in Urban Britain, 1830-1900', *Urban History*, 33.2 (2006), 234–52.

⁹¹ Reginald Bray, 'The Children of the Town', in *The Heart of Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England, with an Essay on Imperialism*, ed. by Charles Masterman (London: Fisher Unwin, 1902), pp. 111–64 (p. 126).

⁹² Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, p. 31.

⁹³ Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London', pp. 109–14.

efforts to create urban gardens for the working-classes in general. However, from the outset the Association's objectives included the provision of spaces specifically for children. Its second annual report (1884) made it clear that they were seeking to create three types of open space: gardens, playgrounds and gardens with playgrounds. Gardens would provide spaces of respite from the city, principally adult resting places with benches, grass and flowers, shrubs and trees. In contrast, playgrounds were intended for the exclusive use of children, with 'some intelligent man in charge of the ground, possibly some army pensioner, who during certain hours, would be able to instruct the children in simple gymnastics.' When garden and playground were combined, they would be laid out with 'broad stretches of concrete pavement, interspersed with shrubs, and trees, and grass, and seats.'⁹⁴

In promoting public gardens as a response to the problems of urban childhood, the MPGA's rhetoric demonstrated considerable continuity with the ideas of earlier park advocates and their attempts to bring nature into the city. Urban green space was still understood as a restorative, educational and refining tonic. Ernest Hart wrote of the 'alchemy of nature' and its ability to tackle the evils of the urban environment.⁹⁵ For Brabazon, green space would help to civilise the city, providing 'bright, fresh spots, where the rush and swirl of city life may for a space be forgotten' and the sight of green trees and flowers, the sound of falling water and the relaxation afforded by a comfortable seat would help to prevent working-class degeneration.⁹⁶ The MPGA also continued to associate open space with the biological wellbeing of the wider city organism, with new public gardens improving not just the local area but also providing the whole metropolis with 'much more general lung

⁹⁴ US National Library of Medicine, 101200449, Metropolitan Public Garden, Boulevard, and Playground Association, *Second Annual Report* (London, 1884), p. 9, <archive.org> [accessed 15 December 2021].

⁹⁵ Ernest Hart, 'Graveyards as Recreation Grounds', *The Times*, 20 August 1885, p. 8.

⁹⁶ Brabazon, *Social Arrows*, pp. 14, 52–54.

power.⁹⁷ In common with parks elsewhere, nature also needed a degree of protection and images of gardens created by the MPGA show railings encircling lawns and flower beds, presumably an effort to protect tender aspects of nature from the threat of destruction posed by both children and adults.⁹⁸

However, in a modification to earlier park values, the MPGA argued that proximity and scale were key issues in open space provision and that earlier public parks had not delivered their anticipated benefits widely enough. Although large parks may have received thousands of visitors each day (a Whit Monday census in Victoria Park counted over three hundred thousand), these numbers seemed inconsequential when compared to the many more who lived in overcrowded neighbourhoods, unable to afford transport around the city.⁹⁹ Such criticism was not new in the 1880s. As early as 1861 the lawyer and later MP William Marriot asserted that public parks were ‘too far apart to supply the lungs which a town like Manchester requires’ and too far away from children’s homes to provide a useful place for play.¹⁰⁰ However, such assertions were repeated more consistently from the 1880s. Walter Besant, author and MPGA member, felt that for ‘the children and the old people...of that vast region which lies north of the old London wall – a densely populated district inhabited almost entirely by the working classes – London might almost as well be without any parks at all.’¹⁰¹ For local councillor Reginald Bray, such far off parks ‘containing soot-stained grass and a few dishevelled sparrows’ and lawns ‘on which no one must tread’ were no longer fit for

⁹⁷ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, p. 32.

⁹⁸ The Guildhall Library, ST 317, Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Twenty Second Annual Report* (London, 1904).

⁹⁹ W.J. Gordon, ‘The London County Council and the Recreation of the People’, *The Leisure Hour*, 1894, pp. 112–15.

¹⁰⁰ Marriott, *The Necessity of Open Spaces and Public Playgrounds in Large Towns*, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Walter Besant, ‘The Social Wants of London: IV Gardens and Playgrounds’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 March 1884, pp. 1–2 (p. 1).

purpose.¹⁰² For the MPGA and its supporters, the large, mid-century public parks that had been located on the edge of expanding cities had not delivered the benefits that had been expected.

As a result, rather than expect people to travel to large landscape parks, the MPGA sought to create smaller spaces within working-class neighbourhoods. Writing in 1887, Brabazon stated that ‘however important it may be to provide a few large and expensive parks for the people, it is of still greater importance to create small gardens and resting places within easy distance of their homes,’ echoing Dickens’ earlier ambition to provide a daily source of healthy recreation.¹⁰³ By 1893, Brabazon had refined this idea further, emphasising the need for smaller, equipped and segregated spaces. He called for the creation of ‘a children’s playground divided into two portions, one for boys and one for girls, both supplied with gymnastic apparatus...under the care and supervision of special attendants’ within a quarter of a mile of every working-class and middle-class home.¹⁰⁴ This adaptation in the scale and siting of public green spaces was accompanied by a shift in attitudes about the type of exercise that was best suited to tackling the problems of urban degeneration. Brabazon and the MPGA emphasised the importance of energetic physical activity rather than more genteel forms of park-based recreation, while also placing the provision of specific facilities for children more firmly within the park boundary. This emphasis on vigorous exercise had its roots in interconnected fields of thought and practical action, including the introduction of physical education in schools, high-profile debate about the merits of different systems of exercise and the perceived shortcomings of military recruits.

¹⁰² Bray, ‘Children of the Town’, pp. 116–18.

¹⁰³ Brabazon, *Social Arrows*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁴ Earl of Meath, ‘Public Playgrounds for Children’, *The Nineteenth Century*, 34 (1893), 267–71 (pp. 268–69).

The inadequacy of British troops in the South African War (1899-1902) is often cited as the main impetus for the provision of physical training facilities for adults in outdoor public spaces. But, while military setbacks may have contributed to turn-of-the-century anxiety about the status of the empire, there had long been concern about the physical strength of both military personnel and children, as well as competing theories about how to best address such concerns.¹⁰⁵ Voelker and Clias' apparatus-based gymnastics gradually gained greater currency, so that by the late 1860s such exercise was a regular part of military recruits' training.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, a competing system based on the theories of Pehr Henrik Ling from Sweden promoted 'medical gymnastics' performed largely without apparatus. Promoted energetically in Britain by the physician Mathias Roth, Ling-inspired gymnastics could seemingly provide both muscular strength and more general health benefits including better posture, improved deportment and even relief from chronic disease.¹⁰⁷ The simple exercises and negligible equipment costs made it a favourable choice for the physical education of working-class children in state-funded elementary schools.

These two approaches to gymnastic exercise were played out in the rhetoric and practical work of the MPGA, which incorporated aspects of both. By the 1890s Brabazon was increasingly convinced that physical training for working-class children in particular was of vital importance.¹⁰⁸ He had previously worked in Germany at a time when advocates of apparatus-based gymnastics were publicly and enthusiastically promoting their ideas, including the use of the wooden vaulting horse and balance beams, along with structures

¹⁰⁵ Peter C. McIntosh, *Physical Education in England since 1800*, 2nd edn (London: Bell, 1968), pp. 83–104; Peter Donaldson, "'We Are Having a Very Enjoyable Game': Britain, Sport and the South African War, 1899–1902", *War in History*, 25 (2018), 4–25.

¹⁰⁶ Archibald Maclaren, *A Military System of Gymnastic Exercises* (London: HMSO, 1868).

¹⁰⁷ Mathias Roth, *Gymnastic Exercises without Apparatus According to Ling's System*, 7th edn (London: A.N. Myers & Co., 1887).

¹⁰⁸ Aalen, 'Lord Meath', p. 131.

made from scaffolding, ladders, poles and ropes.¹⁰⁹ At the same time, the MPGA invested gymnastic exercise with advantages that went well beyond muscular development, subscribing to the wider socio-medical benefits that were associated with Ling, even paying for an instructor in Swedish gymnastics for the London School Board.¹¹⁰ Both systems remained influential in Britain well into the twentieth century and were ultimately amalgamated in the British Association for Physical Training.¹¹¹ Within the MPGA, the loosely defined association between gymnastic exercise and wider physical, medical and moral health echoed the correlation between parks as lungs and the wider healthy functioning of the city. When combined with the provision of amenities for children in particular, they created a similarly evocative and malleable concept that would unite a broad range of constituents behind the principle of playgrounds for children.¹¹²

Although its design ambitions were strongly shaped by leading members, the MPGA also employed landscape designers to apply and adapt these principles to individual sites and circumstances. At a time when the landscape sector was a male-dominated profession, the MPGA was unusual in employing female designers to lead its practical work. Fanny Wilkinson (1855-1951) had taken the unusual step of studying at the male-dominated Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening and Practical Horticulture, before starting work for the MPGA. Between 1884 and 1904 she designed and supervised the creation of over 75 open spaces for them, as well as planning the layout of Vauxhall Park for the Kyrle Society.¹¹³ Wilkinson resigned in 1904 to become the first female principal of the Swanley Horticultural College and

¹⁰⁹ Gertrud Pfister, 'Cultural Confrontations: German Turnen, Swedish Gymnastics and English Sport - European Diversity in Physical Activities from a Historical Perspective', *Culture, Sport, Society*, 6 (2003), 61–91.

¹¹⁰ Metropolitan Public Garden, Boulevard, and Playground Association, *Second Annual Report*, p. 23.

¹¹¹ Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State*, p. 305.

¹¹² Jones, 'Lungs of the City'.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Crawford, 'Wilkinson, Fanny Rollo (1855-1951), Landscape Gardener', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Madeline Agar replaced her as the MPGA's designer. Agar would go on to work for the MPGA for almost 25 years and published work on the design of domestic gardens.¹¹⁴

In appointing female designers, the MPGA might seem like a progressive organisation. However, in reality the appointment of Wilkinson and Agar highlights the conservative values that shaped the place of women in society and their apparent suitability for certain tasks and roles. In a House of Lords debate, Brabazon asserted that a ban on women being elected to the LCC should be lifted, not because equality was important, but rather because he felt women were better suited than men to dealing with aspects of the institution's work. He stated that women's natural 'aptitude for details' made them best placed to oversee the Council's care of children and 'the housing of the working-classes, matters relating to the well-being of the poorer classes, and social reforms generally.'¹¹⁵ Hardly a radical suffragist, Brabazon expounded conservative social norms that linked women's apparently inherent biological qualities with spheres of social, economic and environmental work. Alongside responsibility for raising children, domestic gardening in particular was widely seen as an appropriate activity for middle-class women.¹¹⁶ This presumably made the design of gardens for children a particularly suitable task, especially as playgrounds were understood in part as a remedy for the inadequacy of working-class homes. At the same time, however, Wilkinson and Agar forged highly influential careers, working on the design and construction of high-profile public spaces at a time when there were few women in the landscape profession. There is little published work on the career or portfolio of either designer, an area that would undoubtedly benefit from further scholarly research. Nevertheless, it seems likely that both

¹¹⁴ Madeline Agar, *Garden Design in Theory and Practice*, 2nd edn (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1913), p. 200.

¹¹⁵ Earl of Meath, *House of Lords Debate*, 9 June 1890, Vol.345, Col.264-267.

¹¹⁶ Susan Groag Bell, 'Women Create Gardens in Male Landscapes: A Revisionist Approach to Eighteenth-Century English Garden History', *Feminist Studies*, 16.3 (1990), 471–91.

Wilkinson and Agar played an important role in shaping the form of spaces set aside for children's recreation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Despite this considerable continuity in designers and rhetoric, there was not a single dominant vision for the ideal form of a children's playground, and three approaches were in circulation around the turn of the century. Firstly, the 'levelled and gravelled' ground for play remained an influential conception. Secondly, the outdoor gymnasium was increasingly associated with children's public recreation as a result of the MPGA's high profile advocacy. Thirdly, the comprehensive playgrounds that typified provision in the USA achieved considerable publicity in Britain at this time. The next section explores these competing visions in more detail.

Despite the emphasis on gardens and greenery, in some ways the MPGA continued to create rather sombre playground spaces that resembled those from the 1850s. The act of levelling and gravelling an area to create a playground was often a key feature of the MPGA's approach. Spa Fields in Clerkenwell had previously been a tea house and pleasure garden (1770) and then a burial ground (1777), notorious in the 1840s for its 'pestilential condition' and illicit exhumations.¹¹⁷ In 1885 the Association drained the site and imported a large amount of shingle to specifically create a ground for children's recreation. It seems that in this instance the playground was primarily an open area for recreation, much like a parade ground provided an obstacle-free space for marching. Spa Fields in particular performed this dual role; once levelled and gravelled it provided a space for the 21st Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corp to drill and only at other times was it somewhere that children could use.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Warwick Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1896), pp. 25–28.

¹¹⁸ John James Sexby, *The Municipal Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces of London: Their History and Associations* (London: Elliot Stock, 1898).

Elsewhere, the official pamphlet that accompanied the opening of Little Dorrit's Playground (1902) similarly described a levelled and tar-paved area intended for use by children, created as part of the wider Falcon Court Housing Scheme.¹¹⁹ Named because of its proximity to the Marshalsea debtors' prison which had inspired Dickens' novel of the same name, rather than in reference to his unsuccessful Playground Society, it cost £2.3m (£5,600) to purchase the land and £185,000 (£450) to level, gravel and drain it.¹²⁰

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Figure 2.5 Little Dorrit's Playground (Illustrated London News, 8 February 1902)

The *Illustrated London News* shared a sketch of the newly opened space (Figure 2.5).¹²¹ The image provides an insight into the way that the levelled and gravelled playground, its aesthetics and its use were presented to the wider public. It was shown as a space to play active games, use outdoor toys and socialise, all activities that would have previously taken place in the street. It also represents gender- and age-specific ideas about the way that

¹¹⁹ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/CER/03, London County Council, 'Ceremony of Opening Little Dorrit's Playground, Southwark', 1902.

¹²⁰ London County Council, 'Ceremony of Opening Little Dorrit's Playground, Southwark', p. 4.

¹²¹ 'Little Dorrit's Playground', *Illustrated London News*, 8 February 1902, p. 208.

children and adults would behave in such a space. Girls are shown talking in pairs, carrying a small baby and playing with toys. Boys are shown pretending to be harnessed horses and a driver, galloping around the playground, while adults are seen mainly in the background, close to the surrounding blocks of flats. Similar spaces and behavioural expectations were created beyond London too. In Cardiff, Loudoun Square was partially converted into a playground by levelling the site and creating a gravel surface, using over £100,000 (£257) or eighty per cent of the total project budget.¹²² Such levelled and gravelled sites seem to have been primarily designed as substitutes for the street, spaces where children could continue with existing play habits, but away from dirt, danger and deprivation.

At the same time, the MPGA used the term playground to describe a very different spatial form. In 1884, it leased half of the old Horsemonger Lane Gaol site and converted it into a children's playground, at a cost of £188,000 (£365). But rather than simply an open area set aside for children, the new Newington Recreation Ground also included apparatus. The playground was divided into two by low fencing, one part for girls with swings and see-saws, one for boys with gymnastic apparatus and giant-strides. In addition, both were supervised by caretakers, including one who was a skilled gymnast.¹²³ This example typifies the MPGA's approach to the acquisition, design and maintenance of public spaces. They secured access to the site, in this instance by leasing it from the landowner, designed the new playground and arranged for it to be laid out and then placed responsibility for maintenance on the local vestry. It followed a similar process in Islington, north London, when it helped to

¹²² Cardiff Council Parks Service, uncatalogued, W.W. Pettigrew, 'Park Superintendent's Report Book', 1908, p. 7, <www.cardiffparks.org.uk/images/superintendents-reports.pdf> [accessed 5 September 2021].

¹²³ 'Children's Playground in South London', *Illustrated London News*, 10 May 1884, p. 443; Metropolitan Public Garden, Boulevard, and Playground Association, *Second Annual Report*, p. 19.

create Norfolk Square Playground, describing it as a gymnasium for children.¹²⁴ This approach saw the provision of children's gymnasiums expand considerably. In 1889, the LCC was responsible for a number of public parks that included children's gyms. Myatt's Fields, laid out by Wilkinson and the MPGA, included two children's gymnasiums, one for boys and one for girls. Finsbury Park included gymnasiums for both children and adults and a carpenter's workshop to undertake repairs, while in Battersea Park a children's gymnasium was planned to compliment the adult equivalent.¹²⁵ The records from 1889 describe Victoria Park without specific facilities for children, but by 1892 an update from the superintendent reported that the new children's gymnasium was in use. It also noted that 'a novel mode of enjoyment has been provided for the little children of the East End of London in the form of a sea-sand pit which is apparently much appreciated.'¹²⁶

An alternative vision for the playground, which invariably included sand for play, asserted influence from across the Atlantic. But rather than a levelled and gravelled substitute for the street or an equipped children's gymnasium, in the USA it was the 'organised playground' that increasingly dominated conceptions of recreational provision for poor city children.¹²⁷ There had been links between US and British park advocates and designers since at least the 1840s, epitomised most notably although by no means exclusively in Frederick Law Olmsted's visit to Birkenhead Park and its influence on the creation of Central Park (1858) in New York.¹²⁸ Voelker's system of gymnastic exercise had been introduced to Boston in 1826

¹²⁴ London Metropolitan Archive, CLC/011/MS22290, Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Annual Report* (London, 1932).

¹²⁵ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/104, London County Council, 'Return of the Names and Wages of and Work Performed by All Persons Employed in the Council's Parks and Also of the Respective Areas Devoted to Gardens, Lawns, Fields and Playgrounds and the Extent of Conservatories in Such Parks', 1889.

¹²⁶ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/104, London County Council, 'Report of the Parks and Open Spaces Committee, 16 May', 1893, p. 5.

¹²⁷ Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals*.

¹²⁸ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *Park and the People*.

and by the 1870s there was an increasing exchange of ideas across the Atlantic about social action in general and playground provision in particular.¹²⁹ In 1880 Olmsted argued that smaller parks, located at regular intervals in a town or city, would achieve similar results to larger green spaces but ‘at less cost and greater value,’ an approach that Brabazon would promote through the MPGA from 1882 and cite in a report to the LCC parks committee in 1890.¹³⁰ In 1889, Brabazon travelled to the USA to speak about gymnastics at the Boston Conference on Physical Training and an account of his trip and the parks he visited was shared with his fellow LCC parks committee colleagues on his return.¹³¹ There were also close links between the MPGA and the Small Parks Association of Philadelphia who shared similar objectives.¹³² By 1900, the MPGA had been liaising with the City of Chicago Special Parks Commission, American Park and Outdoor Art Association, as well as correspondents in New York and Boston.¹³³ Henry S. Curtis, founding member of the Playground Association of America, reported in his 1915 book, *Education Through Play*, on the ideas and actions of Brabazon and the MPGA.¹³⁴ There was also an exchange of information and ideas at a governmental level too. In 1917, the British Ministry of Reconstruction asked their ambassador in Washington to find out more about the playground movement in the USA, although it is not clear from the records what motivated the request. The State Department’s

¹²⁹ ‘We Find from the Boston Papers’, *Daily National Journal* (Washington DC, 21 June 1826), p. 3; Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹³⁰ Frederick Law Olmsted, *Public Parks* (Brookline, Mass., 1902), p. 107; London Metropolitan Archives, London County Council, LCC/PUB/02/01/066, Earl of Meath, *Public Parks of America*, Report to the Parks and Open Space Committee (London: London County Council, 1890).

¹³¹ John Lucas, ‘A Centennial Retrospective - the 1889 Boston Conference on Physical Training’, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 60.9 (1989), 30–33.

¹³² Rainwater, *Play Movement in the United States*, p. 81.

¹³³ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*.

¹³⁴ Henry S. Curtis, *Education Through Play* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), p. 85.

comprehensive response provided both a detailed bibliography and a range of pamphlets describing playgrounds across the country.¹³⁵

The communique highlighted the extent to which the playground movement in the USA had relatively quickly shifted from a primary concern with ameliorating the physical conditions of children in the urban environment, to a wider notion of reforming the child, through appropriate physical, moral, spiritual and nationalistic instruction. Sand gardens and small parks were replaced in the early twentieth century by a comprehensive community service that included structured educational activities, ranging from gardening and debating to industrial work and sewing for war relief.¹³⁶ As such, the US playground increasingly resembled a formal educational establishment rather than necessarily a public space.¹³⁷ Writing from the School of Education at Harvard in 1908, Everett B. Mero was strident in his opinion that the purpose of the playground was to teach both young and old about progressive civic hygiene.¹³⁸ This improving educational focus meant playgrounds invariably included trained supervisors, organised games and activities that included dancing and crafts, as well as toys, sandpit and apparatus for exercise. Olmsted's design for the Charlestown Playground in Boston included a large open area for organised activities, avenues of trees on the perimeter and gymnastic equipment located on the southern boundary.¹³⁹ The playground in the USA incorporated the levelled and gravelled space for games, with the apparatus of the children's gymnasium and the structured activities promoted in Britain by

¹³⁵ National Archives, RECO 1/694, Rowland Hayes to Paul C. Wilson, 'Papers from New York Committee on Recreation to the New York City Mayor's Office', 29 October 1917.

¹³⁶ Rainwater, *Play Movement in the United States*, p. 271.

¹³⁷ Gagen, 'Playing the Part'.

¹³⁸ *American Playgrounds: Their Construction, Equipment, Maintenance and Utility*, ed. by Everett B. Mero (Boston: School of Education, Harvard University, 1908), p. 23.

¹³⁹ Artstor/University of California, San Diego, Frederick Law Olmsted, 'Boston: Charlestown Playground: General Plan', 1891.

the Children's Happy Evening Association, Guilds of Play and others. The resulting 'organised playground' received some publicity in the UK, largely due to the work of play scheme advocate Mary Ward.¹⁴⁰ However, while the playground-as-community-centre did not become common in Britain the early twentieth century, the idea that children needed guidance in their play did resonate with some.

Contemporary theories about play conceptualised it as an activity where children either spent surplus energy or recuperated lost vigour, practiced inherent survival skills or took steps in a journey from individual savagery to civilization.¹⁴¹ There seems to be little explicit reference to these notions of play in the rhetoric of the MPGA, concerned as it was with the redemptive possibility of nature and exercise rather than necessarily with children's instinctively playful behaviour. However, in the eyes of some observers, many poor urban children did not know how to properly make use of playgrounds. For one commentator, 'the poor little creatures sit or stand listlessly about, idle and bewildered, not knowing what to do, not knowing how to play.'¹⁴² While this points most significantly to the disconnect between the reformers' ideas about childhood recreation and children's instinctive, playful preferences, for some playground advocates it meant that children needed to be taught how to play if they were to become model citizens of the future.

As historian Tom Hulme has argued, despite increasingly centralised markers of national community, including voting rights and nationwide events such as Empire Day, cities retained a powerful influence on notions of citizenship into the early twentieth century.¹⁴³ Furthermore, Carole O'Reilly has shown how parks in particular helped to promote an active

¹⁴⁰ 'An Organized Playground', *The Times*, 8 July 1909, p. 9.

¹⁴¹ Walter Wood, *Children's Play and Its Place in Education* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1913).

¹⁴² B Holland, 'London Playgrounds', *Macmillan's Magazine* (London, 1882), XLVI edition, pp. 321–24 (p. 322).

¹⁴³ Hulme, *After the Shock City*.

urban citizenship and sense of communal responsibility. In spaces such as Heaton Park in Manchester, Victorian moralism was gradually replaced by Edwardian pragmatism, with parks increasingly imagined as spaces of shared social responsibility for health, where individual exercise could contribute to a collective, colonial future.¹⁴⁴ As a result, the playground might seem like an obvious site for teaching future generations the codes of normative citizenship. However, beyond the provision of apparatus for strengthening, healthy exercise, there was rarely any instruction or guidance for children using such spaces. Whereas the US model required adults to organise and administer the playground and to teach children how to play, this was generally not the approach adopted in Britain.¹⁴⁵ While some advocates emphasised that a playground worker of the right background and temperament could help children to play properly, there is little evidence that adult play workers were a regular feature of British public playgrounds in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. As we will see in later chapters, it was only after 1945 that such involvement became more commonplace. Instead, delivering the geopolitical ambitions of playground advocates like Brabazon would instead rely on something like osmosis. The ‘supervision of a judicious caretaker’ would prevent ‘tyranny and misconduct’ but achieving broader objectives would not rely on the direct intervention of trained play workers, instead it would be achieved largely through self-directed exercise and a suitably green environment.¹⁴⁶

As a short-term solution, Brabazon argued that vacant building plots could be turned into temporary spaces for children, equipped by the MPGA with simple gymnastic equipment until such time as the land was sold for development.¹⁴⁷ Despite raising the issue in Parliament

¹⁴⁴ O’Reilly, ‘From “The People” to “The Citizen”’: The Emergence of the Edwardian Municipal Park in Manchester, 1902-1912’.

¹⁴⁵ Hines, ‘They Do Not Know How To Play’; Gagen, ‘Playing the Part’.

¹⁴⁶ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, p. 31.

¹⁴⁷ Brabazon, *Social Arrows*, p. 40.

and organising well-attended local public meetings, the MPGA were largely unsuccessful in securing such short-term spaces for play. In contrast, efforts to create more permanent sites for children's recreation were considerably more successful, in part due to Brabazon's direct political influence. He was appointed as an Alderman of the LCC for a period of eight years in the 1890s and was also the first Chair of its parks committee.¹⁴⁸ This helped to ensure not only a cooperative working relationship between the MPGA and local government officials, but also the continued influence of Brabazon's vision for the playground.¹⁴⁹ By 1892, the MPGA had made a direct financial contribution of over £13m (£27,991) towards the protection, acquisition or laying out of over fifty open spaces (in comparison, the figure for the Kyrle Society was eight).¹⁵⁰ Over the next decade the MPGA had made significant further progress. By 1900 it had been involved in over one hundred sites and more than twenty included dedicated space for children. For example, the Association contributed nearly £1.4m (£3,000) towards the creation of Meath Gardens in Bethnal Green, which opened in 1894 and included two large playgrounds and a sandpit. Bartholomew Square (1895), near Old Street, had been 'asphalted for children especially' by the MPGA, who contributed £82,980 (£182) towards the cost.¹⁵¹ In 1889 only two LCC parks, Myatt's Field and Finsbury Park, included specific facilities for children, but by 1915 thirty parks included children's gymnasiums.¹⁵² Beyond London, municipalities and philanthropic organisations were creating dedicated

¹⁴⁸ 'London County Council', *The Times*, 6 February 1889, p. 11; 'London County Council', *The Times*, 30 March 1898, p. 15; 'Opening of Clissold Park', *The Standard*, 25 July 1889, p. 3; 'Lord Meath's Memories', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 May 1923, p. 317.

¹⁴⁹ Malchow, 'Public Gardens and Social Action in Late Victorian London', p. 118.

¹⁵⁰ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/104, London County Council, 'County of London Parks, Open Spaces and Commons', 1892.

¹⁵¹ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, pp. 39, 57 see appendices for a full list of sites and the MPGA's contribution.

¹⁵² London County Council, 'Return of the Names and Wages, Etc'; LSE Library, 421 (129D), London County Council, 'Parks and Open Spaces: Regulations Relating to Games, Together with Particulars of the Facilities Afforded for General Recreation', 1915.

spaces for children in increasing numbers. In Manchester, the Prussia Street Recreation Ground opened in 1884 with see-saws and swings, and by the early twentieth century the provision of children's playgrounds in 'congested areas' such as Ancoats and Angel Meadow had become municipal policy.¹⁵³ In 1914, the Superintendent of Parks and Gardens in Edinburgh reported that fifteen children's gymnasiums had been provided in the city, including in The Meadows, Inverleith Park and Montgomery Street Park, while in Dublin four garden playgrounds equipped with apparatus had been established.¹⁵⁴

However, the practical process of creating playgrounds was far from straightforward, often involving setbacks and adaptation. St Paul's Churchyard and Playground on Rotherhithe Street in London was 'asphalted, provided with gymnastic apparatus, and reserved for children.'¹⁵⁵ It was opened by the MPGA in 1885, but then closed in 1888 only to be reopened in 1890 by the LCC. At St Leonard's Churchyard in Shoreditch 'the conduct of children was very bad' while in Dublin and London authorities established comprehensive regulations in an attempt to govern the use of playground spaces.¹⁵⁶ However, even if they could be regulated, such play spaces did not always live up to campaigners' expectations, particularly those who were most interested in the benefits of nature and aesthetics. MPGA member Isabella Holmes felt that the new play space at Spa Fields provided a pale imitation of the pastoral version of nature that was most needed in the city. Even after the considerable money and effort, the playground was:

about as different from an ordinary village green, where country boys and girls romp and shout, as two things with the same purpose can well be. For

¹⁵³ Conway, *People's Parks*; W.W. Pettigrew, *Handbook of Manchester Parks and Recreation Grounds* (Manchester: Manchester City Council, 1929), p. 8.

¹⁵⁴ RHS Lindley, 999 4C EDI, John W. McHattie, *Report on Public Parks, Gardens and Open Spaces* (Edinburgh: City of Edinburgh, 1914); Rutherford, 'Muscles and Morals'.

¹⁵⁵ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁶ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*; Rutherford, 'Muscles and Morals'; London County Council, 'Parks and Open Spaces, Descriptions, By-Laws, Acts of Parliament, Regulations'.

*the soft, green grass, you have gritty gravel; for the cackling geese who waddle into the pond, you have a few stray cats walking on the walls; for the picturesque cottages overgrown with roses and honeysuckle, you have the backs of little houses, monotonous in structure, in colour and in dirt.*¹⁵⁷

Holmes' impression of the reworked Spa Fields demonstrates how bucolic landscape ideals were often more difficult to implement in the smaller spaces created by the MPGA. Reformers may have clung onto the potential of nature in the city, but those creating playgrounds were increasingly focused on the provision of natural features at a more manageable scale. Trees and shrubs in particular were promoted by the MPGA as a pragmatic response and it provided lists of specimens suitable for urban environments 'laden with smoke.'¹⁵⁸ Consequently, small city playgrounds provided the maximum space for playful exercise (Figure 2.6). Park authorities in Manchester went further in maximising room for play and 'very little attempt' was made to plant greenery in playgrounds located in the poor central districts of the city.¹⁵⁹ This tension between space for play and space for nature would be evident in playground discourse throughout the twentieth century. Despite the apparent disconnect between the imagined ideal and the reality on the ground, playgrounds were invariably popular and busy. After school hours and at the weekends, Spa Fields was full of children 'running about all over the open part of the ground' while further east the children's gymnasium and sea-sand pit in Victoria Park were described as popular, greatly used and often very crowded.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Isabella M. Holmes, *The London Burial Grounds: Notes on Their History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1896), p. 277.

¹⁵⁸ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Eighteenth Annual Report*, pp. 93–95.

¹⁵⁹ Pettigrew, *Handbook of Manchester Parks*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ Holmes, *London Burial Grounds*, p. 276; London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/104, London County Council, 'Report as to the Condition of Victoria Park', 1893.

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Figure 2.6 Spa Fields Playground (Isabella Holmes, London Burial Grounds, 1896)

2.3 Conclusion

In the mid-nineteenth century, dedicated spaces for children's recreation appeared in a small number of places intended to improve the lives of the urban poor. In Manchester and Salford some of the earliest public parks included amenities for children, although they were hardly central to their design or function. Grounds for children's recreation were occasionally a feature of attempts to improve working-class housing, including Freshwater Place in London, but Dickens' attempt to create more dedicated spaces for children met with little success. Furthermore, children's place in the playground was far from certain as the term was still widely used to represent a range of spaces intended for adult recreation. By the 1880s, changing attitudes to childhood, particularly the impact of compulsory education in conversely shaping time for recreation, created a wider social milieu that was receptive to the provision of dedicated spaces for children. Within this context, the MPGA combined heightened anxiety about the urban environment, an ongoing commitment to the naturalistic

public park and concern about the future of the empire with a belief in the positive potential of healthy and strong working-class children. Achieving this promise required a modification to earlier park ideals, particularly in relation to the location and size of green spaces and the activities that would take place in them. The public spaces it created for children often required significant work to provide a suitably level and hardwearing surface and the installation of gymnastic equipment to promote regenerative energetic exercise. Although sometimes supervised, adult involvement was largely limited to caretaking, in contrast to US playgrounds and despite considerable trans-Atlantic exchange. But while the provision of dedicated recreational spaces for children gained credibility, the influence, financial resources and effectiveness of the MPGA gradually declined. In part this was because Brabazon withdrew from public activities during the inter-war period, but it might also be a product of the Association's apparent success in putting green space provision on the municipal map. Indeed, the principle of the children's playground was widely adopted by progressive local authorities after the First World War. But, as we shall see in the next chapter, while the 'idea' of the playground became more firmly embedded in the minds of park superintendents and urban reformers, its particular form in public parks and on housing estates was far from settled.

3 Competing Visions for Play: from exercise to excitement

By the early twentieth century, the creation of dedicated public spaces for children's recreation became more widely accepted by those attempting to reform the urban environment. However, there remained competing and often overlapping visions for the spaces where children were supposed to play. Firstly, there was the levelled and gravelled play ground, which provided space to play away from the street. Secondly, gymnasiums, sometimes specifically for children and invariably segregated by gender, focused on facilitating physical exercise and, particularly when accompanied by a garden, a dose of nature as an antidote to the physical degeneration associated with life in the city. Thirdly, the transatlantic idea of the playground as an educational facility set out to occupy children's leisure time, with both indoor and outdoor activities. This chapter explores the changing fortunes of these visions in the early decades of the twentieth century. In particular, it considers the unusual place of the playground within wider assumptions about the commercialisation of leisure in this period, along with the significant influence of manufacturing companies and amusement park rides on the playground form. After exploring these wider trends, the second part of the chapter provides an original case study of Charles Wicksteed, his manufacturing company and the park he created in Kettering, Northamptonshire, and their combined influence on playground ideals in Britain and beyond.

3.1 'Properly equipped playgrounds' in the early twentieth century

In the first decade of the twentieth century, advocates of the transatlantic playground in particular felt that providing apparatus simply for entertainment was the least important element in a playground. Henry Curtis, prominent member of the Playground Association of America, argued that 'the thing of first importance is organization; next in importance is

equipment for games; next comes provision for athletics; and last such apparatus as swings and slide.¹ Curtis also harboured specific grievances with individual items of apparatus. He felt the seesaw was ‘much used...but not much can be said in its favour...it is the frequent source of accidents and disputes’ while swings were ‘one of the most dangerous and unsightly’ items of apparatus. The threat they posed was not limited to physical danger either; they also presented a moral risk if inappropriately used. He stated that ‘girls should not be allowed to stand up in swings, as their dresses tend to fly up. Boys should not be allowed to swing girls for still more obvious reasons.’²

In contrast, however, British commentators increasingly imagined the playground as a space where equipment was a central feature. The pioneering garden historian Alicia Amherst argued in 1907 that a fully equipped public park needed to include not just high-quality horticulture but also swings and other gymnastic equipment for children.³ For the author and journalist Annesley Kenealy, also writing in 1907, the ‘pitilessly meagre surroundings’ of the gravelled children’s playground in St James’s Park did little to save children from the ‘unwholesome sights and sounds of a sordid, huckstering, fetid slum street.’ Instead, a ‘properly equipped playground’ was needed in every park, including amenities such as seating, a water fountain, sandpit, low swings and seesaws, Lilliputian horizontal bars and a giant stride.⁴ In 1909, an anonymous letter writer to the *Times* concurred, suggesting that Kensington Gardens needed at least another dozen swings and a shallow pond for paddling, plus an end to Sunday closing of playgrounds more generally.⁵

¹ Curtis, *Education Through Play*, p. 138.

² Curtis, *Education Through Play*, p. 143.

³ Alicia Amherst, *London Parks and Gardens* (London: Archibald Constable & Co., 1907), p. 123; Jason Tomes, ‘Amherst, Alicia Margaret, Lady Rockley (1865–1941), Garden Historian’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ Annesley Kenealy, ‘Playgrounds in the Parks: A Plea for the Children’, *Daily Mail*, 14 March 1907, p. 6.

⁵ ‘Children in Kensington Gardens’, *The Times*, 7 August 1909, p. 6.

This emphasis on the equipped playground was a result of the continuing significance of assumptions about the health of working-class children and the problems of the urban environment. As a result, energetic physical exercise remained a powerful and widespread justification for playground provision. For the youth worker Charles Russell, speaking at a meeting of the Manchester and Salford Playing Fields Society, dedicated space for children was vital to ‘check the degeneration which any overcrowded area in the kingdom could show.’⁶ The Liberal politician and author Charles Masterman may have disagreed with Brabazon’s imperial politics but writing in 1902 he also emphasised the problematic association between the unhealthy urban environment and the ‘incalculable possibilities’ of childhood.⁷ The twice-breathed urban air and disconnect from nature resulted in ‘the production of a characteristic *physical* type of town dweller: stunted, narrow chested, easily wearied; yet voluble, excitable, with little ballast, stamina or endurance.’⁸ An appropriately sited playground could help to tackle many of these physical and moral issues.

In practice, however, inserting dedicated spaces for children into the urban environment was far from straightforward and advocates needed to negotiate a route through competing expectations of public space that were shaped by notions of age, class and gender. The way that park administrators responded to these calls for playground improvements provides an insight into the factors that informed the way that spaces changed on the ground. In 1909 and in response to newspaper articles, Kensington Gardens’ administrators attempted to provide facilities and shape regulations that balanced the needs

⁶ ‘Physical Recreation, Manchester and Playing Fields’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 7 November 1913, p. 16.

⁷ Charles Masterman, ‘Realities at Home’, in *The Heart of Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England, with an Essay on Imperialism*, ed. by Charles Masterman (London: Fisher Unwin, 1902), pp. 1–52 (p. 79); H.C.G. Matthew, ‘Masterman, Charles Frederick Gurney (1873-1927), Politician and Author’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁸ Masterman, ‘Realities at Home’, p. 3.

and expectations of a wide variety of groups. In establishing Sunday opening times, administrators needed to find a balance between public pressure and the views of influential religious groups. In assessing the need for more paddling pools, they set out to find a balance between providing an appropriately equipped place for children to play with the risk that they would be 'continually receiving complaints from irate parents' when children fell into the water. The provision of a new sandpit would put a strain on finances, but parks staff demonstrated their willingness to use the media to their advantage, suggesting that an anonymous letter to newspapers might solicit a private donor to pay for new facilities. They apparently had much less trouble in fixing gender- and age-related boundaries; park keepers were warned to 'prevent grown women using the present swings.'⁹

But just as calls were being made to improve playgrounds by adding appropriate equipment and facilities, the principle of providing space for outdoor, energetic exercise was being questioned. By 1909, the Primrose Hill gymnasium was seen as obsolete and improperly equipped and acted as a focus for debates about what was considered to be legitimate use of equipped public space. The gymnasium caused practical as well as moral problems for park managers, who had to navigate a path between the differing expectations of wealthy neighbours and the users of the gymnasium. The drinking fountain was 'a source of constant annoyance' as children splashed passers-by and the entire gymnasium was closed at the urgent request of the police as a result of unseemly language, rowdyism, and the misuse of the space as 'a training ground for prostitutes.' While a subsequent petition called for the gymnasium to be re-opened, petitioners also complained that a proper gymnasium should be indoors and accompanied by changing facilities and appropriate instruction.¹⁰

⁹ National Archives, WORKS/16/391, Royal Parks, 'Kensington Gardens Children's Playground', 1909.

¹⁰ National Archives, WORKS/16/1670, Royal Parks, 'Primrose Hill Children's Playground, Gymnasium and Lavatories', 1938.

Such anxieties over the appropriate use of public space, particularly by children, and wider concern about the health of the population were exacerbated by the First World War and its impact on the home front. Large numbers of working-class conscripts were exempted from military service as a result of physical unfitness, with over a million rejected on medical grounds in the last year of the war.¹¹ Furthermore, absent fathers, children working in munitions factories far from home and even the cinema were blamed for a perceived rise in juvenile delinquency.¹² The contribution of such misbehaviour to a shell shortage in 1915 prompted the government to establish Juvenile Organizations Committees that would channel the work of existing philanthropic and voluntary organisations towards the wartime military objectives of the state. Although primarily established to structure the leisure time of adolescents and young adults, the committees symbolised the beginnings of a shift towards promoting welfare rather than criminalising young people.¹³ For Lord Lytton, Chair of the State Children's Association, a system of 'reclamation through friendship' rather than resorting to the courts was the solution to the problems of youth.¹⁴

The provision of playgrounds for younger children seems to have proceeded in this vein too, as play provision became associated with the broader welfare of children and their families. During the war, the philanthropic Carnegie UK Trust appointed the noted physician and medical officer Janet M. Campbell to undertake a comprehensive investigation into the health and wellbeing of mothers and young children.¹⁵ Campbell's influential report,

¹¹ Ian Beckett, 'The Nation in Arms, 1914-1918', in *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War*, ed. by Ian Beckett and Keith Simpson (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2004), pp. 1-36.

¹² 'Juvenile Crime', *The Times*, 13 May 1916, p. 3.

¹³ Robert Snape, 'Juvenile Organizations Committees and the State Regulation of Youth Leisure in Britain, 1916-1939', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 13.2 (2020), 247-67.

¹⁴ 'Young Offenders In War Time', *The Times*, 13 March 1916, p. 5.

¹⁵ Margaret Hogarth, 'Campbell, Dame Janet Mary (1877-1954), Medical Officer', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

published in 1917, examined in detail the provision of midwifery services, nurseries and play schemes, as well as the playgrounds' role in improving the welfare of children and their parents. Echoing Masterman's view from fifteen years earlier, Campbell argued that the lack of opportunities for 'healthy, spontaneous play activities may be responsible for much defective bodily development, and perhaps still more for the production of warped natures and impulses, morbid desires and even vicious cravings.'¹⁶

In contrast, the provision of appropriate play activities and spaces had the potential to overcome these unhealthy physical, mental and moral disorders. As simply an allotted ground for play, an equipped space with gymnastic apparatus or with the supervision of a volunteer helper, playgrounds could deliver two key objectives. Firstly, the proper physical and mental development of children, and secondly the prevention of juvenile delinquency through the provision of alternatives to the street for children's recreation.¹⁷ Furthermore, a similar study in Scotland by the noted public health administrator Sir Leslie Mackenzie found that time on the playground seemed to have direct medical benefits.¹⁸ For one medical observer, playgrounds helped to tackle runny noses and improved nutrition, in addition to the more commonly ascribed physical benefits of toning muscles and other tissues.¹⁹ The Scottish study in particular noted the importance of providing both better working-class housing and better places to play, concluding that 'the toddler's playground is fundamentally essential to the health of the children that occupy the crowded quarters of every city. The

¹⁶ Janet M. Campbell, *The Physical Welfare of Mothers and Children* (Dunfermline: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1917), p. 164.

¹⁷ Campbell, *Physical Welfare of Mothers and Children*, p. 149.

¹⁸ Ian Levitt, 'Mackenzie, Sir (William) Leslie (1862–1935), Health Administrator', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ W. Leslie Mackenzie, *Scottish Mothers and Children* (Dunfermline: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1917), p. 335.

open-air playground is the counteractive to the poisonous house.'²⁰ Dedicated outdoor space would help to create healthier children and a more salubrious urban environment.

The notion that leisure time should be spent constructively, as park advocates had imagined in the nineteenth century, had not been superseded entirely. The 1919 National Conference on the Leisure of People demonstrated increasing concern with the 'possibilities for good or evil' associated with increasing time for leisure among the working-class: 'if rightly used it will be in these hours the growing boy or girl will receive that wider education which is going to build character, make him an intelligent workman and a useful citizen.'²¹ At the same time, the increasing influence of new technologies and the commercialisation and democratisation of leisure opportunities also meant that leisure could be idly rather than constructively spent.²² However, using these processes as a way of understanding the changing nature of children's playgrounds is not straightforward. Leisure was largely constructed in opposition to work, and as social constructions of childhood no longer included work this meant that ideas about new forms of leisure were invariably adult-centric. Democratisation implies that people had an increased say in how and where they participated in leisure activities, but neither the principle of the playground nor the way that it was designed meant that this was the case for children. There is no evidence to suggest that children were given a say in where play spaces were located and how they were designed, nor whether they were the spaces where children preferred to play. While it is difficult to see playgrounds as spaces of democratisation for children, they were nonetheless affected by

²⁰ Mackenzie, *Scottish Mothers and Children*, p. 337.

²¹ *The Leisure of the People. A Handbook, Being the Report of the National Conference Held at Manchester, November 17th-20th, 1919.* (Manchester: Conference Committee, 1919), p. 45.

²² Snape and Pussard, 'Theorisations of Leisure in Inter-War Britain'.

processes of commercialisation, although in different ways to other aspects of post-war leisure provision.

The historian Peter Borsay has concluded that there have been commercial aspects to leisure since early modern times, but that more recent commercialisation has generally been associated with increased demand driven by rising disposable incomes.²³ This generally assumes that individual participants are purchasing leisure opportunities. However, in the case of a seemingly non-commercial space such as a playground, demand has arguably been driven by social and cultural factors, while supply has been driven by commercial ones. The economic wealth of potential playground users did not create demand for playgrounds; from a commercialisation of leisure perspective, playgrounds are unusual in that they have largely been free to visitors at the point of use. Instead, demand for playgrounds was generally the result of evolving social ideas about childhood and public space and the associated targeting of philanthropic and municipal funding. Urban municipalities, for example, increased spending on parks and open spaces from £11,000 (£93) per thousand of population in 1920 to £23,000 (£131) by 1929.²⁴ Commercialisation in this case was mediated through philanthropists, park superintendents and municipal administrators who purchased and created leisure spaces for children. As in other aspects of leisure provision, the creation of play spaces and the supply of appropriate apparatus had been shaped by technology, entrepreneurialism and professionalisation. For playgrounds in particular, a diverse range of manufacturing companies, including gymnastic outfitters, fencing companies and engineers,

²³ Borsay, *History of Leisure*.

²⁴ Jones, *Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure 1918-39*, p. 93. The proportional difference between historical and present-day amounts here is due to the impact of economic deflation in the intervening years.

were entrepreneurial in applying and adapting their existing technologies and production lines to meet the requirements of an increasingly organised and specialised parks profession.

The historian Thomas Richards has argued that the increased availability of manufactured goods in the nineteenth century, along with new forms of marketing, fostered a national culture of consumerism.²⁵ While this saw a significant expansion in the use of retail catalogues to sell goods to the public, including plants and other gardening equipment, it was commercial catalogues that shaped the creation of playground spaces in the early twentieth century. Claire Jones has shown how commercial catalogues helped to shape both knowledge and practice among medical professionals, mediating between the seemingly incompatible spheres of commerce and professionalism.²⁶ Although play equipment catalogues, and their professional and commercial context, were very different to medical ones, manufacturers and their marketing materials nonetheless made a significant contribution to the evolution of the playground ideal and shaped professional approaches to the design and creation of dedicated spaces for children's leisure.

In 1923, a philanthropic member of the public, Mr H. E. Seligman of 17 Kensington Palace Gardens, took the rather unusual step of contacting the Bailiff of the Royal Parks offering to purchase seesaws for installation in St James's Park.²⁷ In response, the park superintendent sought prices for seesaws from a number of manufacturers and received quotes and catalogues in response. Mr Seligman bought two seesaws, at a cost of £4,944 (£24 5s), and would go on to regularly offer specific items of play equipment for a number of

²⁵ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (London: Verso, 1991).

²⁶ Claire L Jones, *The Medical Trade Catalogue in Britain, 1870-1914* (London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

²⁷ National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, Royal Parks, 'Children's Playgrounds: Gifts of Equipment Offers and Acceptances', 1923.

different London parks over the next ten years. This was an unusual example and playground provision was rarely driven by direct public demand in this way, but the story does provide a useful insight into the processes, people and objects involved in the production of playground spaces in the early twentieth century.

Approaching commercial suppliers suggests that park superintendents could not call on in-house skills or experiences to design and build their own gymnastic or playground apparatus. While the creation of new horticultural schemes each year meant that a plant nursery and the associated staff were a worthwhile investment, the infrequent need for new playground equipment meant there was little value in investing in in-house manufacturing technology or infrastructure. With their professional background in horticulture, landscape design or public administration, park superintendents perhaps felt they lacked an understanding of the needs of children, let alone an awareness of contemporary educational or theoretical thinking about childhood and play.

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Figure 3.1 Gymnasia for Parks and Recreation Grounds (National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, 1912)

In response, manufacturing companies attempted to present their catalogues as informative and educational documents, a source of expertise on children's playgrounds. Spencer, Heath and George of London promoted the fact that they could send an 'expert representative, free of charge' to view a potential play space and would prepare a specific playground scheme for customers. The implication was that they knew what a playground should be, what children needed and also that their version of the playground was the norm. By using the adjective *regulation* when asserting that they supplied 'regulation playground outfits,' they were presumably attempting to show that their products met with long-established ideas about the playground.²⁸ Their catalogue included images of their apparatus installed in Newtongrange Public Park in Midlothian and listed the LCC parks where their products had been installed. In a similar way, the catalogue supplied by Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss of Wolverhampton included photos of their equipment in a City of Birmingham open space, as well as a list of apparatus that would create an ideal playground (Figure 3.1).²⁹ By including images of their equipment in existing open spaces, both companies were attempting to legitimise and extend their particular version of the children's playground.

However, the production of playground equipment seems to have been a by-product for these companies. Manufacturers drew upon their existing technological knowledge, adapting existing products and production lines to take advantage of the new business opportunities. Their playground creations seem to have been reconfigured versions of their other products, making use of materials and manufacturing processes that they were familiar with. Spencer, Heath and George described themselves as 'gymnastic outfitters' and also

²⁸ National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, Spencer, Heath and George Ltd, 'Playground Catalogue', 1927.

²⁹ National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss Ltd., 'Gymnasia for Parks and Recreation Grounds, School Playgrounds, Etc.', 1912.

manufactured ‘calisthenic gear’, ‘cheap gymnasium buildings’ and ‘boxing rings.’³⁰ While creating versions of their products for outdoor use was likely to be a logical and relatively straightforward step, it was also something that to an extent they made up as they went along; responding to a letter from the Regent’s Park superintendent in 1924, they were unable to provide a drawing or photo of their see-saw and instead sent a roughly drawn, freehand sketch with somewhat clumsy annotations.³¹

In a later, more professional-looking catalogue, Spencer, Heath and George also emphasised the technological superiority of their products – their plank swing included ‘self-aligning roller bearing fitments’ which meant they felt able to claim it was ‘mechanically perfect.’³² Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss’ catalogue, *Gymnasia for Parks and Recreation Grounds*, clearly showed where the focus on their manufacturing business lay – nearly half of their catalogue is dedicated to the variety of fencing, guard rail and entrance gates they produced, while their sketch of the ideal playground includes significant lengths of fencing on all sides.³³ Even individual items of equipment appear to make use of the materials and forms of fencing components.

When manufacturers claimed to have ‘expert representatives’ it seems most likely that they were experts in the products that the companies sold, rather than anything else. Although this expertise was unlikely to be grounded in the emerging professional and academic ideas about child development of the time, it was able to deliver a particular version of the playground with its roots in contemporary attitudes towards age, gender and exercise. Fencing manufacturers could provide products to enclose dedicated spaces for children to

³⁰ Spencer, Heath and George Ltd, ‘Playground Catalogue’.

³¹ National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, Spencer, Heath and George Ltd to D. Campbell, ‘Sketch for Regent’s Park Superintendent’, 1 May 1924.

³² Spencer, Heath and George Ltd, ‘Playground Catalogue’.

³³ Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss Ltd., ‘Gymnasia for Parks’.

play. Gymnastic outfitters could provide apparatus that could direct children to take part in particular forms of physical exercise that would have beneficial consequences for both individuals and society.

As well as building on manufacturers' existing technological knowledge, the catalogues also emphasised the benefits that their products could offer to their customers (although rarely the benefits they might offer to children). As a result, they provide an insight into manufacturers' perceptions of Park Superintendents' concerns, values and assumptions, as well as wider social values about children and their use of public space. As well as emphasising the technological innovation of products, play equipment catalogues consistently played upon narratives – firstly, the risk of deliberate damage by children to the playground; secondly, the need for playgrounds to be safe for the children using them; and thirdly, the segregation of play spaces by age and gender.

The perceived threat of hooliganism and the associated nuisance, danger and moral consequences reflected an anxious mood in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, something that play equipment manufacturers made much of when advertising their products.³⁴ Catalogues presented a sanitised and choreographed version of children's play, where text and images emphasised the robustness of equipment in the face of potential damage, as well as the beneficial effects of a properly equipped playground in maintaining order and respectable behaviour. The strength and durability of apparatus was emphasised, and in some cases explicitly guaranteed as hooligan-proof, while tree guards, strong seats and unclimbable railings would limit the opportunities for children to damage other features. The photos in Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss' catalogue show clean, respectably dressed children,

³⁴ Geoffrey Pearson, "A Jekyll in the Classroom, a Hyde in the Street": Queen Victoria's Hooligans', in *Crime and the City*, ed. by David Downes (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 10–35.

posing on stationary equipment or awaiting their turn in an orderly queue. A policeman is present in the background of all wider photos of the playground, providing added reassurance to potential customers that a Bayliss-equipped playground would be an orderly place, but also hinting at the disorder that was possible.³⁵

A second, interrelated rhetoric employed by manufacturers emphasised safety, primarily in relation to the way that children used playground equipment. For example, the term seesaw seems to have been applied to a physical structure, rather than just the associated up-and-down motion, as early as the 1820s.³⁶ However, by the late nineteenth century, there was increasing anxiety that the sudden bump of a seesaw onto the ground could hurt not only children's feet but also damage their spines, leading several commentators to describe them as one of the most dangerous and accident-prone items on the playground.³⁷ This focus on the risk of spinal injury in particular echoed evolving ideas about the spine as a conduit for physical and mental health. In particular, the increasing number of people suffering from a condition known as railway spine, which saw some passengers involved in railways accidents suffering no physical injuries but subsequently developing debilitating nervous shock, and the high-profile coverage of associated court cases perhaps made spinal injuries particularly worrisome.³⁸ Whether the manufacturers' emphasis on safety was born of anxiety for children's physical and mental health or as a result of the financial compensation paid by the railway companies to injured passengers is not clear, but they did stress the safety of their equipment nonetheless. Each company emphasised the

³⁵ Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss Ltd., 'Gymnasia for Parks', p. 16.

³⁶ 'See-Saw, n. and adj.', *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁷ Curtis, *Education Through Play*, p. 143; Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment, Tennis Posts, Fencing and Park Seats', 1926.

³⁸ Ralph Harrington, 'On the Tracks of Trauma: Railway Spine Reconsidered', *Social History of Medicine*, 16.2 (2003), 209–23.

adaptations to their products that would help to ensure children's safety, from air cylinders that dampened seesaw impacts to safety tails on slides that prevented a sudden fall to the ground at the bottom. However, despite manufacturers' claims, park superintendents had to purchase and install equipment in playgrounds before they could assess for themselves its safety in use. For example, Royal Parks staff annotated Spencer, Heath and George's promotional drawings, noting that both their version of the seesaw and the giant stride were still 'found to be dangerous in practice.'³⁹

It was not only equipment that posed a risk to children in the playground and the inappropriate behaviour of adults was an issue that manufacturers also sought to address. In 1913, the Metropolitan Radical Federation highlighted the 'frequent indecent offences towards children' in the parks of London and called for more park keepers who could detect and prevent such offences.⁴⁰ A year later, the LCC Education Committee also emphasised 'the evils which appear to arise owing to the lack of adequate supervision.'⁴¹ Royal Parks administrators empathised with the malevolence of the offences, but felt that the relatively small number of reported incidents – on average 9 per year across all the Royal Parks in London – meant that they could not justify increasing the number of plain clothes staff on duty to detect such offences, and in any case doubted the effectiveness of such an action.⁴² Commercial playground manufacturers attempted to provide a solution to the problem by

³⁹ National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, Spencer, Heath and George Ltd, 'Sketches of Regulation Swing Frame, Patent Safety Giant Stride & See-Saw', n.d.

⁴⁰ National Archives, WORKS/16/532, E. Garrity, 'Letter to Chief Commissioner of Works Regarding Indecent Offences towards Children Metropolitan Radical Federation', 22 July 1913.

⁴¹ National Archives, WORKS/16/532, Deputy Education Officer to Board of Works, 'Inadequate Supervision of Open Spaces', 17 June 1914.

⁴² National Archives, WORKS/16/532, Royal Parks, 'Prevention of Offences against Children (Various Minutes and Notes)', 1913.

supplying gates and fencing that could 'exclude undesirable persons' from the playground, although the efficacy of such an approach was likely to be questionable.⁴³

In addition to attempts to separate children and adults, there were also efforts to segregate girls and boys when using the playground. Elizabeth Gagen has shown how early twentieth-century play spaces helped to reproduce conservative gender politics in the USA, a process that can be seen in the actions of both park authorities and equipment manufacturers in Britain too.⁴⁴ In 1904 the LCC provided separate gymnasiums for girls and boys in thirteen of the open spaces it managed, including Spa Fields and Meath Gardens, while Victoria Park, Battersea Park and a further eight green spaces included gymnasiums for exclusive use by girls.⁴⁵ This physical segregation of play spaces was something that manufacturers were easily able to support. For example, Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss could provide fencing to divide playgrounds for boys and girls, while a number of catalogues also included gender-specific products (Figure 3.2). However, closer inspection shows marginal differences between such items. Bayliss' swings for girls were 13 feet high, cost £12,400 (£31 7s 6d), included seats and had a sign on top which said *For Girls Only*. Swings for boys were the same height, cost the same and also included seats. The main differences were that swings for boys could also be fitted with trapeze bars and rings and the sign on top which said *For Boys Only*. Similarly, Bayliss' list of equipment for the ideal playground for girls was remarkably similar to that for boys, with the exception that a boys' playground needed one of everything from the catalogue, at a cost of £43,000 (£108 17s 6d), while in an ideal girls' playground the vaulting horse was replaced by three seesaws. Just in case the swing signage or loitering police officer

⁴³ Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss Ltd., 'Gymnasia for Parks'.

⁴⁴ Gagen, 'Playing the Part'; Gagen, 'An Example to Us All: Child Development and Identity Construction in Early 20th-Century Playgrounds'.

⁴⁵ LSE Library, 421 (129A), London County Council, 'Regulations Relating to the Playing of Games at Parks and Open Spaces Under the Control of the Council', 1904, p. 12.

proved ineffective, Bayliss were also able to supply 5-foot-high 'wrought iron unclimbable railings' for £131 (6s 8d) per yard to keep children apart.⁴⁶ Just surrounding the swings, let alone the whole playground space, would add half again on top of the cost of the equipment; the perceived need to segregate girls and boys at play had direct economic, as well as political and personal consequences.

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.2 Bayliss, Jones & Bayliss' Playground Fencing (National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, 1912)

While early playground equipment manufacturers may have echoed wider social attitudes relating to the use of public space, they also seem to have been inspired, in part at least, by other types of amenity landscape which emphasised enjoyment and delight and incorporated technological innovation. As early as 1835, the noted garden designer John Claudius Loudon described in his *Encyclopedia of Gardening* a number of European aristocratic estates that included temporary or permanent swings and roundabouts.⁴⁷ The great exhibitions and world fairs of the nineteenth century, while ostensibly educational, were often more commonly experienced by visitors as spaces of entertainment.⁴⁸ There had

⁴⁶ Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss Ltd., 'Gymnasia for Parks', p. 16.

⁴⁷ J.C. Loudon, *An Encyclopædia of Gardening* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1835), pp. 40, 109, 158, 229.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 105.

also long been an association between green space and commercial leisure provision, most notably in the eighteenth-century commercial pleasure gardens such as Vauxhall.⁴⁹ However, the spectacular performances, nocturnal illuminations, entry fees and most significantly the prohibition of children suggest significant differences between such spaces and the emerging children's playground.⁵⁰

In contrast, there were more direct connections between the Edwardian amusement park landscape and the form of dedicated spaces for children. Alongside circus acts and novelties, swings were a regular feature of travelling and seasonal fairs and as we saw in the previous chapter privately-operated fairground-style swings were located for a time in London's Victoria Park.⁵¹ Merry-go-rounds also seem to have been a regular feature of travelling fairs, in Turkey from the seventeenth century and in Britain from the eighteenth century, and by the late nineteenth century they were often steam powered and elaborately decorated.⁵² But it would be the amusement park, rather than the public park, where such temporary fixtures would become permanent installations, inspired by a transatlantic exchange of ideas.⁵³

The architectural historian Josephine Kane has described how an assortment of rides at Blackpool South Shore became an American-style amusement park in 1903 and prompted a surge of schemes elsewhere, particularly in seaside resorts such as Margate, Southend and

⁴⁹ Jonathan Conlin, 'Vauxhall Revisited: The Afterlife of a London Pleasure Garden, 1770–1859', *Journal of British Studies*, 45 (2006), 718–43; Jonathan Conlin, 'Vauxhall on the Boulevard: Pleasure Gardens in London and Paris, 1764–1784', *Urban History*, 35 (2008), 24–47.

⁵⁰ Peter Borsay, 'Pleasure Gardens and Urban Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century', in *The Pleasure Garden, from Vauxhall To Coney Island*, ed. by Jonathan Conlin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 49–77.

⁵¹ 'The Showman World', *The Era*, 6 May 1899, p. 18.

⁵² Thomas Murphy, 'The Evolution of Amusement Machines', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 99.4855 (1951), 791–806.

⁵³ Gary Cross and John K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Great Yarmouth. The characteristic combination of noise, bright colours and frenetic movement, plus modern architecture and technologically produced sensations, made the early twentieth century amusement park landscape a unique whirl of wonders.⁵⁴ And while such spaces legitimised child-like behaviour by adults, they also influenced the form of playground spaces too. The idealised bucolic city park was not transformed into the whirling landscape of the amusement park, but the technological innovation and sense of freedom that characterised the latter were influential in shaping a particular approach to play provision. As the next sections shows, individual rides would be scaled down, simplified and introduced into the park playground, as would more accommodating attitudes towards the behaviour of both children and adults. One play equipment manufacturer in particular was at the forefront of these changing attitudes to public spaces for children and from the 1920s onwards promoted a particular vision for the children's playground that was at odds with earlier attempts at regulation and segregation.

3.2 Charles Wicksteed, philanthropy and commerce

Following Mr Seligman's offer to purchase a seesaw for St James's Park, one other manufacturer responded to the Royal Parks' request to supply information. Charles Wicksteed & Co., an engineering firm based in Kettering, sent a covering letter with information about the seesaw they could supply, along with a somewhat rudimentary catalogue. Like the other catalogues submitted, it included images of apparatus, prices and descriptions. In contrast, however, it also included a two-page preface, where Charles Wicksteed set out his personal vision for the ideal children's playground. He stated that his vision was based on his own experiences of creating and managing a public park and

⁵⁴ Josephine Kane, *The Architecture of Pleasure: British Amusement Parks 1900-1939* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

playground in Kettering. While this could be seen as – and perhaps was to some extent – a refined sales pitch, it is useful to understand his motives and the impact they had on the playground ideal because elements of this vision soon spread across the UK and around the world.

The commercialisation of leisure has been well documented, but much less has been done to explore the role of voluntary action in inter-war leisure provision.⁵⁵ Although often associated primarily with nineteenth-century public parks, philanthropic involvement in the creation of civic green spaces remained important in the inter-war period. For example, chocolatier Joseph Rowntree gifted a riverside park to the city of York in 1921 and as we have already seen Mr Seligman was donating individual playground structures throughout the 1920s.⁵⁶ However, the ideas and actions of Charles Wicksteed provide an interesting case study because they combine the processes of commercialisation and philanthropy within the public park. The creation of Wicksteed Park and its playground were characteristic of the voluntary action that sought to foster good citizenship through leisure, but at the same time the manufacture and sale of play equipment by Wicksteed & Co. was a commercial venture. Making sense of the philanthropic motives and political assumptions that underpinned Wicksteed's actions, as well as the role of his manufacturing company, helps to shed light on the processes involved in shaping popular and professional notions of what constituted an appropriate play space for children in the inter-war years and beyond.

Charles Wicksteed (1847-1931) was not a landscape designer, pedagogue or public health campaigner. He spent much of his life running his own businesses; initially steam ploughing in Suffolk and then a manufacturing company in Kettering. He married in 1877 and

⁵⁵ Snape, 'The New Leisure, Voluntarism and Social Reconstruction in Inter-War Britain'.

⁵⁶ Rhodri Davies, *Public Good by Private Means* (London: Alliance Publishing Trust, 2015), p. 134; National Archives, CB 4/1, National Playing Fields Association, *Second Annual Report* (1928), p. 13.

appears to have been a devoted parent to his three children.⁵⁷ He was active in the Kettering and Northamptonshire Liberal Party, but even his daughter Hilda, who penned an otherwise ardent and diplomatic biography, felt that ‘his service on local bodies was not outstandingly successful.’⁵⁸ This was perhaps epitomised by his endorsement of attempts to create a Royal Jubilee People’s Park in Kettering in the 1880s that were unsuccessful.⁵⁹

The success of Wicksteed’s manufacturing business fluctuated in line with wider economic circumstances, as well as the success or otherwise of his products and inventions. His Stamford Road Works in Kettering was established in 1876 and manufactured a variety of goods at different times, from machine-tools and bicycles to motorcar gearboxes.⁶⁰ A small shed at the Works that had been making ‘strong and durable’ wooden children’s toys was converted to munitions production during the First World War.⁶¹ On the back of a period of business success in the early 1900s, Wicksteed sought to purchase some land on the edge of Kettering. In January 1914, he completed the purchase of the country estate that had previously been associated with Barton Seagrave Hall. As the public park and playground that he subsequently created have been the most obvious and accessible features since then, it is perhaps unsurprising that both contemporary and historical accounts have tended to focus on examining his motivations for creating a public open space.⁶² However, it seems likely that the creation of a park was, at least initially, only a small part of a wider scheme.

There was much local speculation about Wicksteed’s motives for purchasing the Barton Seagrave land, with opinions split over whether he was being foolish, eccentric or

⁵⁷ Hilda M. Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1933), p. 66.

⁵⁸ Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed*, pp. 70, 85–87.

⁵⁹ Ian Addis, *Out to Play in Kettering* (Kettering: Bowden Publications, 2013), p. 5.

⁶⁰ The Wicksteed Park Archive holds a number of uncatalogued papers including patent drawings, advertisements, instruction booklets.

⁶¹ Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed*, p. 96.

⁶² Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed*, p. 101.

calculating.⁶³ Charitable donations had long provided a form of tax relief and putting the Barton Seagrave land into the charitable Wicksteed Village Trust would have avoided payment of income tax on the money involved, particularly at a time of significant wartime tax increases.⁶⁴ However, his religious and political values, as well as familial experiences seem to have been important motivating factors too. He had a strong sense of moral responsibility, inspired in part by his Unitarian religious beliefs. In his book *A Plea for Cooperation between Labour, Brains and Capital*, Wicksteed expressed the view that ‘the whole edifice of modern civilization would fall to the ground without a foundation of sound moral principle... all scientific inventions may come to nought, or even bring about evil, without moral guidance and inspiration.’⁶⁵ As a long-time Liberal, he firmly believed in capitalism, but also felt that the freedom of a laissez-faire economy and the technology it generated needed to be underpinned by rigorous moral standards. He had secured reasonable financial resources through his business and had a strong sense of obligation to those less fortunate, something that was common to many philanthropists who had created rather than inherited their wealth.⁶⁶ In addition, seeing his own children benefit from access to more open space may partly have motivated him too. He felt that his second son in particular benefitted significantly when they moved to a house with a garden for the first time and as a result had much more space to run about.⁶⁷

⁶³ ‘Wicksteed Park: Kettering Clubmen’s Appreciation of the Founder’, *The Kettering Leader*, 15 July 1921, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Davies, *Public Good by Private Means*, p. 109; M. J. Daunton, ‘How to Pay for the War: State, Society and Taxation in Britain, 1917–24’, *The English Historical Review*, CXI (1996), 882–919.

⁶⁵ Charles Wicksteed, *Bygone Days and Now: A Plea for Co-Operation between Labour, Brains and Capital* (London: Williams & Northgate, 1929), p. 150.

⁶⁶ Davies, *Public Good by Private Means*.

⁶⁷ Charles Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children’s Recreation after School Hours and after School Age* (Kettering, 1928; repr. Kettering: Wicksteed Charitable Trust, 2016), p. 10.

Not long after the land purchase, Wicksteed commissioned John Gotch, prominent architect and fellow Kettering Liberal Club member, to prepare a plan for the site.⁶⁸ The design was completed by June 1914 and showed a number of new roads, paths and, at the centre of the scheme, The Park. It included playing grounds for cricket, football and hockey, tennis courts, a large lake, tea pavilion and sunken garden. The plan set aside space for nurturing plants in hothouses, but at this stage there were no dedicated places to specifically cultivate children's health and wellbeing. Work soon started on the creation of the park and the clearance of existing landscape features. A copse of trees was felled and 'over 3,000 roots and stumps of one sort and another were uprooted by the aid of steam-engines and dynamite.'⁶⁹ As was typical of the time, the playing grounds were created by levelling the landscape.

The plan that Gotch prepared for Wicksteed also included 150 building plots which bordered the park on three sides. At first glance this plan could be seen as a direct descendent of nineteenth century urban park projects, where property development and the establishment of green space went hand in hand. In the 1820s, John Nash had set out to create an appropriately salubrious and green environment for the wealthy residents of the large villas and terraces that were an integral part of the Regent's Park scheme in west London. Twenty years later, James Pennethorne had hoped to replicate this approach further east at Victoria Park, using income from the sale of large houses on the park boundary to offset the cost of creating a public green space. However, the title of Gotch's drawing perhaps provides a more salient clue as to the underlying assumptions and values that were to shape

⁶⁸ Gotch also designed Charles Wicksteed's home, Bryn Hafod, in 1898 and would later become President of the Royal Institute of British Architects from 1923 to 1925. Ian MacAlister and John Elliott, 'Gotch, John Alfred (1852–1942)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶⁹ Wicksteed Park Archive, BRC-1906, Wicksteed Village Trust, 'An Account of the Wicksteed Park and Trust', 1936, p. 7.

the estate for the next twenty years; Wicksteed was setting out to create the Barton Seagrave Garden Suburb Estate.⁷⁰

In the 1880s, Wicksteed had been inspired by the influential American economist Henry George and his book *Progress and Poverty* (1879). As a result, he became an active campaigner on the issue of land nationalisation and explored ways to make the economic benefits of land ownership more socially equitable. Wicksteed was a prominent member of the Land Nationalisation Society (LNS, 1882) and in 1885 had written *The Land for the People*, a detailed assessment and promotion of the economic measures necessary to make land nationalisation financially, and therefore politically, viable.⁷¹ In 1892 he followed this with *Our Mother Earth*, a more mainstream appeal for land nationalisation, which apparently achieved a circulation of 100,000.⁷² By the late 1890s, there were close links between the LNS and the fledgling Garden Cities Association (1899) which had been formed around a core of LNS members and made use of its office space and staff. Ebenezer Howard had established the Association as a way to bring about radical social reform, but the involvement of influential philanthropists such as George Cadbury and William Lever meant that it soon focused more narrowly on ameliorating the living conditions of the working poor by improving their housing. Despite Howard's view that garden suburbs were antithetical to garden city ideals, the Garden City Association increasingly embraced green suburbs and town planning more generally.⁷³ Similarly, Wicksteed engaged with emerging ideas about town planning and was

⁷⁰ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, Gotch & Saunders, 'Barton Seagrave Garden Suburb Estate', 1914.

⁷¹ Charles Wicksteed, *The Land for the People: How to Obtain It and How to Manage It* (London: William Reeves, 1885); Land Nationalisation Society, *Report 1885-6* (London: Land Nationalisation Society, 1886).

⁷² Charles Wicksteed, *Our Mother Earth: A Short Statement of the Case for Land Nationalisation* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1892); Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed*, p. 68; Charles later withdrew from the movement as it increasingly advocated industrial nationalisation too, something he opposed - see Wicksteed Park Archive, MGA-3006, Charles Wicksteed, 'National Coal: The Farce of Nationalisation Exposed.', n.d.

⁷³ Robert Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 37, 71, 133.

one of the opening speakers, along with noted planner Patrick Abercrombie, at the 1918 Leeds Civic Society *House and Town Planning Exhibition*, although the archives do not reveal the content of his address.⁷⁴

There were a number of similarities between Howard and Wicksteed. Both were from nonconformist backgrounds, opposed contemporary military conflicts and were radical Liberals for much of their lives.⁷⁵ Howard had been able to put his garden city ideals into practice in 1903 at Letchworth and purchasing the Barton Seagrave estate gave Wicksteed an opportunity to do something similar. It is possible that Wicksteed visited Letchworth as he travelled extensively to visit business customers and other open spaces around the country.⁷⁶ More compellingly, Joseph Hartley Wicksteed, Charles' nephew and co-trustee of the Wicksteed Village Trust, lived in Letchworth and was an active member of the local community there on the eve of the First World War.⁷⁷

Robert Fishman's description of Ebenezer Howard and the garden city could apply equally to Charles Wicksteed and the playground: 'with the ingenuity and patience of an inventor putting together a useful new machine out of parts forged for other purposes, [he] created a coherent design for a new environment.'⁷⁸ Wicksteed used staff, technology and skills ostensibly associated with his manufacturing business to shape the park environment and in time the playground too. In the post-war economic slump, Wicksteed put his under-

⁷⁴ Wicksteed Park Archive, PRG-3004, Leeds Civic Society, 'House and Town Planning Exhibition Programme', 1918.

⁷⁵ Robert Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1982); Beevers, *The Garden City Utopia: A Critical Biography of Ebenezer Howard*.

⁷⁶ Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children's Recreation*.

⁷⁷ Garden City Collection, LBM2988, National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, 'Letchworth and District Society', 1912; Garden City Collection, LBM4007.18, Letchworth Dramatic Society, 'A Variety Entertainment', 1914; W.H.G. Armytage, *Heavens below: Utopian Experiments in England 1560-1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 398.

⁷⁸ Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier*, p. 28.

employed staff to work excavating the park's lake. Tube-bending machines and machine-tools were put to use manufacturing an increasingly wide range of playground equipment. He used his own inventiveness to design a bread-and-butter machine and a jet-injected hot water supply system that could deliver four thousand cups of tea a day, so that the increasing number of park visitors could be served refreshments in a timely manner.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Wicksteed adopted aspects of the garden city ideal in a number of ways, attempting to combine the benefits of Town and Country that Howard had illustrated in *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*.⁸⁰ In practice this meant combining the beauty of nature, in an appropriately curated form, with the social opportunities and technologies of modern life. At Barton Seagrave there would be modern housing with private gardens and space for motorcars.⁸¹ The Park would combine a picturesque landscape, large lake and mature trees, with modern recreational facilities and state of the art canteen technology.

In terms of governance and ownership, the Barton Seagrave estate land was entrusted to the Wicksteed Village Trust in 1916, just as Howard had advocated and others had implemented, including the Cadbury family and the Bournville Village Trust (1900). Wicksteed also set out to pay higher wages to his employees and charged lower rents for the innovative prefabricated 'concrete cottages' he designed for local workers.⁸² He disposed of building plots on 999-year leases as Howard had suggested, even though pressure from commercial investors meant that this had not been possible at Letchworth.⁸³ Adherence to the garden

⁷⁹ Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed*; Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment'; Wicksteed Village Trust, 'An Account of the Wicksteed Park and Trust', p. 15.

⁸⁰ Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1902).

⁸¹ Gotch & Saunders, 'Barton Seagrave Garden Suburb Estate'.

⁸² Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, Charles Wicksteed, 'Concrete Cottages', *The Machine Tool Review*, (1920).

⁸³ Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier*, p. 66; 'The Housing Question', *The Times*, 23 September 1901, p. 9.

city ideals was not simply a short term impulse and did not end when the park became the increasing focus of Wicksteed's attention. The minutes of Wicksteed Village Trust meetings suggest that the sale of land to facilitate the creation of the garden suburb continued well into the 1930s; between 1920 and 1935, almost every Trustee meeting involved the approval of land sales to individuals and local builders.⁸⁴

In other ways, however, the Wicksteed Village Trust took a different path to Howard's Garden City model. Unlike at Letchworth, there was no overarching architectural vision for the suburb. In addition, it would be hard to see the Wicksteed Village Trust as a model of the cooperative values that were a key element of Howard's early thinking. At one of the first trustee meetings, a resolution was passed which stated that future meetings were only necessary once per year as Wicksteed had 'full control' of the Trust.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the Trustees comprised family members and company employees, while meeting minutes show that money and land moved back and forth between the Trust, the company and individual trustees. The Objects of the Trust also hinted at Wicksteed's broader interests. While partly established to ameliorate the living conditions of the working-classes, the Trust was also tasked with preventing both cruelty to animals and 'practices which trustees consider to be inhumane to man or beast', neither surprising given his longstanding opposition to vaccination and vivisection.⁸⁶

In *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, Howard had considered how schools and wider recreational facilities would be created and managed, but children's recreation in particular was not explicitly mentioned. The term playground is used a number of times, but generally

⁸⁴ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, Wicksteed Village Trust, 'Minute Book, 1920-1935'.

⁸⁵ Wicksteed Village Trust, 'Minute Book, 1920-1935'.

⁸⁶ Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed*, p. 87; Wicksteed Village Trust, 'An Account of the Wicksteed Park and Trust', p. 5.

refers to a space for recreation – as in ‘cricket fields, lawn-tennis courts, and other playgrounds’ – rather than somewhere specifically for children.⁸⁷ Similarly, the Barton Seagrave Garden Suburb plan clearly showed large areas of parkland at the centre of the scheme and included ‘playing grounds’ for cricket, football, hockey and lawn tennis, but no dedicated space for children.

3.3 Excitement and freedom in Wicksteed Park

While the creation of the garden suburb continued well into the 1930s, the public profile of the park grew in prominence once the lake was completed in 1920. Local community organisations came together the following year to offer a tribute to Wicksteed, as a sign of public appreciation for the time and money he had invested in creating the park and lake. He explained in his acceptance speech that the initial impulse for the creation of play opportunities for children was accidental, rather than deliberate. ‘Primitive’ swings had been put up to coincide with a Sunday School outing to the park, made of larch poles and chains. They proved so popular that he felt compelled to make them permanent and to provide more.⁸⁸ By 1923, a whole hockey pitch had been repurposed as a space to accommodate a remarkable number of ‘play things,’ including 62 swings, 14 seesaws and eight slides (Figure 3.3).⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Howard, *Garden Cities*, p. 63.

⁸⁸ ‘Mr. Chas. Wicksteed’s Generosity: Kettering Club’s Appreciation, Mr Wicksteed Silences His Critics.’, *The Kettering Guardian*, 15 July 1921, p. 6; ‘Wicksteed Park: Kettering Clubmen’s Appreciation of the Founder’.

⁸⁹ National Archives, WORKS/16/1705, Charles Wicksteed & Co., ‘Play Things As Used In The Wicksteed Park’, 1923.

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.3 Large swings (Wicksteed Park Archive, PHO-1614-5, 1920)

This interest in children's leisure and wellbeing was not entirely new. In addition to his earlier production of children's toys, Wicksteed's wider family were also active in campaigns to improve the lives of poor urban children and to provide more progressive educational opportunities. Wicksteed's older brother, Philip Henry Wicksteed, was a Unitarian minister, leading member of the Labour Church movement and a noted economist who produced one of the first critiques of Marx's theories in English.⁹⁰ However, it was Philip's role in the University Hall settlement where he encountered and sought to improve urban childhood.⁹¹ The wider settlement movement had started in the 1880s and brought university graduates to poor urban areas to take part in voluntary social work, often with an emphasis on observing

⁹⁰ Ian Steedman, 'Wicksteed, Philip Henry (1844–1927), Unitarian Minister and Economist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Krista Cowman, "'A Peculiarly English Institution': Work, Rest, and Play in the Labour Church', *Studies in Church History*, 37 (2002), 357–67.

⁹¹ LSE Library, FOLIO FHV/G60, University Hall Settlement, 'Memorandum and Articles of Association' (London, 1895), p. 11.

and organising children's leisure activities.⁹² Furthermore, by the 1920s, Joseph Hartley Wicksteed had moved from Letchworth to London and was headteacher at the progressive King Alfred's School in Hampstead Garden Suburb, where considerable emphasis was placed on outdoor learning and individual freedom for pupils.⁹³ The wider impact of such progressive approaches to education on the children's playground will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, but it seems likely that Charles Wicksteed would have been exposed to some of these ideas through his family connections. In practice, he certainly embodied some of the values associated with child study that had emerged from the settlement movement, even if there is no surviving evidence of direct links with the British Child Study Association or its key international proponents, such as G. Stanley Hall or Maria Montessori. However, Wicksteed does seem to have been one of the 'enthusiastic amateurs' who rallied to the Association's cause to better understand the nature of childhood through observation.⁹⁴ He watched children playing in Wicksteed Park and noted how they liked to play.⁹⁵ He visited other parks to see how children used them, but invariably found little of interest, except for old-fashioned swings, dangerous giant strides, and clumsy seesaws.⁹⁶ No records remain that show where he went on his travels, but it seems likely that Wicksteed was visiting levelled and gravelled play grounds and noting the type of gymnastic apparatus that had earlier been promoted by the MPGA and others.

⁹² Kate Bradley, 'Creating Local Elites: The University Settlement Movement, National Elites and Citizenship in London, 1884-1940', in *In Control of the City: Local Elites and the Dynamics of Urban Politics, 1800-1960*, ed. by Stefan Couperus, Christianne Smit, and Dirk Jan Wolffram, Groningen Studies in Cultural Change, 28 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 81-92.

⁹³ W.A.C. Stewart, *Progressives and Radicals in English Education 1750-1970* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 165-68.

⁹⁴ Kevin Brehony, 'Transforming Theories of Childhood and Early Childhood Education: Child Study and the Empirical Assault on Froebelian Rationalism', *Paedagogica Historica*, 45 (2009), 585-604 (p. 595).

⁹⁵ Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment'; Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children's Recreation*; Wicksteed, *Bygone Days and Now*.

⁹⁶ Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children's Recreation*, pp. 6, 8.

Wicksteed's disappointment at the spaces that he visited led him to propose an alternative vision for the playground. Writing in a number of pamphlets and catalogues during the late 1920s, Wicksteed set out his own version of the playground ideal. His firm belief in personal freedom seems to have strongly influenced his attitudes toward children and the play space and equipment he created. Perhaps the reason he found little of interest when visiting other spaces was because the prescriptive nature of gymnastic equipment would have been at odds with his emerging notion of a play space as somewhere that should promote individual autonomy and enjoyment. He reflected that: 'the poor little gutter-children with all their hardships, playing with mud in freedom, are far happier than many well-to-do children under the perfect control and sad dullness and weariness of a too-much-ordered life.'⁹⁷ Freedom for children, rather than regulation, would be a consistent feature of his playground rhetoric and action.

At the same time, Wicksteed embraced established ideas about the creation and management of public parks and playgrounds. Just like other campaigners, he felt strongly that the street was an inappropriate place for play, that green space could have a refining influence and that as the next generation investment in children would reap future benefits for society. He also emphasised the threat from hooligans and the importance of safety. Wicksteed & Co. were able to state that all of their products had been tested and refined in the Wicksteed Park playground before being put on the market, although this was not promoted to the unsuspecting visitors to Wicksteed Park (Figure 3.4).⁹⁸ The latest technology would avoid entanglement, deter over-swinging and prevent bumps and collisions, providing

⁹⁷ Wicksteed, *Bygone Days and Now*, p. 55.

⁹⁸ Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment'; Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, Charles Wicksteed & Co. to City of Lincoln Surveyor, 'Children's Playground Equipment', 21 November 1933; Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, 'Swedish-Inspired Play Equipment Experiment', *Evening Telegraph*, 29 July 1964, p. 6.

a safer playground experience. Wicksteed concluded that ‘it has been my policy if anything is not safe and unbreakable to make it so, or cease to use it,’ encapsulating in one sentence the possibility that children could break play equipment and that play equipment could break children.⁹⁹

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.4 Wicksteed Park Playground (Wicksteed Park Archive, PHO-1614-6, 1920)

It seems that contemporary play theories also informed Wicksteed’s thinking, to an extent at least. In particular, his writing suggests that he understood play as a way for children to expend surplus energy and direct their physical development. A playground would fulfil children’s natural urges to run, jump and play, as well as helping them to develop healthy bodies. In addition, play would develop healthy tastes and a good temper, contributing to the appropriate development of their minds too. In some ways he would have agreed with the author Walter Wood’s claim in *Children’s Play* (1913) that municipal playgrounds could provide a healthy antidote to the unnatural urban environment.¹⁰⁰ However, he would have

⁹⁹ Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children’s Recreation*, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Wood, *Children’s Play and Its Place in Education*, p. 179.

disagreed strongly with Wood's assertion that play spaces needed expert supervision and that girls and boys needed segregated play space due to inherent biological differences.

Instead, Wicksteed created a playground that was not physically segregated by gender and all children were instead encouraged to play together. While this was undoubtedly a progressive approach to play provision, Wicksteed was unlikely to be the first to have promoted or created shared play spaces. As early as 1915, the LCC's park regulations listed thirty-one open spaces with facilities for children, but unlike earlier editions of the rules this version did not specify that facilities were segregated by gender.¹⁰¹ While the revised regulations do not necessarily reflect changes to play spaces on the ground in London, they do suggest that attitudes towards prescribing specific areas for girls and boys had started to change, something that Wicksteed put into practice in Kettering. In addition, Wicksteed's view that supervision was unnecessary was based on the idea that children needed more activities, fewer regulations and a more prominent location for the playground in the park. He felt that people in general, and children in particular, 'want something doing' and not just spaces for genteel strolls or bucolic vistas. He argued that if play spaces were 'sufficient', in other words they provided enough things to do, then children would invariably get on better without an official attendant. Supervision was also unnecessary if play spaces were located in prominent locations. He argued that 'the Play Ground should not be put in a corner behind railings, but in a conspicuous and beautiful part of a Park, free to all, where people can enjoy the play and charming scenery at the same time; where mothers can sit, while they are looking on and caring for their children.'¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ London County Council, 'Parks and Open Spaces: Regulations Relating to Games, Together with Particulars of the Facilities Afforded for General Recreation'.

¹⁰² Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment', p. 6.

The idea of a separate domestic sphere for women, which included responsibility for raising children, would have seemed entirely natural for many Victorians, most likely including Wicksteed too. While he soon dispensed with the idea that girls and boys needed separate spaces to play, his attitude to women's place in the park and playground was more ambiguous.¹⁰³ In his earlier writing, Wicksteed focused on the benefits that a playground could offer mothers, presumably reflecting his personal experiences as well as contemporary ideas about the division of labour within families. Tea in the park canteen needed to be affordable so that housewives and their children could spend the day in the park for the least possible expense. Seating for mothers was 'very useful and A NECESSARY ADJUNCT TO A PLAY GROUND' (original emphasis).¹⁰⁴ However, even here his views changed over time. By 1928 he felt it important that everyone should be admitted to his playground and he pondered 'why should you not let the father and mother come with the children of any age and enjoy the afternoon?'¹⁰⁵ There is evidence that Wicksteed created opportunities for women to participate in leisure activities, through a war-time Wicksteed & Co. women's football team and indirectly through the provision of a wide range of leisure facilities in Wicksteed Park.¹⁰⁶ In addition, the lack of regulations meant that in theory women could make use of all the facilities that had been provided. However, his significance in this regard should not be overemphasised and wider social norms continued to limit leisure opportunities for many women.

Claire Langhamer has argued that age was a significant factor in women's access to leisure opportunities during the inter-war period and evidence from Wicksteed Park and

¹⁰³ Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children's Recreation*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment', p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children's Recreation*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, 'Photo of Wicksteed's Munition Girls F.C. Team', n.d.

playground lends weight to this argument.¹⁰⁷ Generally, Wicksteed reinforced the notion that women who had children should primarily occupy the domestic sphere.¹⁰⁸ He emphasised women's domestic responsibilities as mothers, promoted the need for seating in the playground so that they could supervise their children, and provided affordable refreshments to make catering for their family easier. In a way, the Wicksteed playground could be seen as an extension of domestic life, a place where women were expected to continue fulfilling their domestic duties, supervising children and providing sustenance. However, the playground also potentially disrupted patterns of domesticity. Where children had traditionally played in the street within calling distance of home, supervising children at play had invariably been an informal, sociable and collective endeavour for working-class women.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, if the children of Kettering were encouraged to play in the Wicksteed Park playground, then mothers were expected to come too, interrupting established patterns of social support and community life. Wicksteed imagined that a trip to the park provided a holiday for mothers and their children, but at the same time it created an expectation that mothers were responsible for transporting their children to a place where they could play, as well as directly supervising them while there.

The provision of affordable refreshments may have made a family visit to the playground easier, but it was also part of a wider attempt to make the park financially sustainable. Unlike municipal open spaces, Wicksteed Park did not have access to state funding. Wicksteed had considered the longer-term financial viability of the Wicksteed Village Trust from early on, but the difficulties it faced are evident from its annual accounts. One

¹⁰⁷ Claire Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ Adrian Bingham, "'An Era of Domesticity'?" *Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain*, *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), 225–33.

¹⁰⁹ Krista Cowman, 'Play Streets: Women, Children and the Problem of Urban Traffic, 1930-1970', *Social History*, 42 (2017), 233–56 (p. 237).

thousand two hundred Wicksteed & Co. shares were given to the Trust in 1920 to provide an ongoing source of income. However, dividends were relatively small and from 1916 to the early 1930s rental income and farm sales (including potatoes, wheat, oats and turf) far exceeded income from investments and park-related activities including boat hire and the sale of refreshments. Despite a diverse range of income sources, the Trust spent far more than it earned and by 1931 had total debts of £4.5m (£23,452).¹¹⁰ The sale of souvenir booklets was one of the ways in which the Trust attempted to generate income to reinvest in the park, but they also provide an insight into the way that the park and its landscape were presented to visitors.

The geographer David Matless has argued that both tradition and modernity were key characteristics of inter-war conceptions of the rural landscape and the moral geographies imprinted on it.¹¹¹ Matless finds that these values were significant in organisations such as the Ramblers, the Youth Hostel Association and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, but they also influenced the way that Wicksteed Park and children's place in it were presented to visitors. In a souvenir booklet from the 1920s, an image of the strikingly modern park pavilion is combined with classical statues and urns. The sandpit in particular and the playground more generally are presented as bustling places where girls and boys play together, while more bucolic images of the wider park landscape bear similarities with the picturesque grounds of the country estate (Figure 3.5).¹¹² In a 1936 souvenir, aerial photography showcased park features from a novel, modern perspective, while at the same

¹¹⁰ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Director Minute Book, 1920-1956'; Wicksteed Village Trust, 'Minute Book, 1920-1935'; Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, Wicksteed Village Trust, 'Annual Accounts 1916-48'.

¹¹¹ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998).

¹¹² London Metropolitan Archive, CLC/011/MS22290, Wicksteed Village Trust, 'The Wicksteed Park Souvenir', n.d.

time emphasising the park's rural surroundings.¹¹³ This combination of modern urbanity and traditional rurality were even incorporated into the headed paper of the Trust; in the foreground the sandpit, playground, pavilion and people, while in the background there are fields, hedgerows and trees all the way to the horizon.¹¹⁴

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.5 The Wicksteed Park Souvenir (London Metropolitan Archives, CLC/011/MS22290, c.1930)

As such, the park was not presented primarily as a retreat from the modern world as it had been in the earlier rhetoric of park advocates. Instead, Wicksteed Park was presented as a place to engage with the benefits of modernity, including the use of industrial technology that promoted exciting leisure activities for both children and adults, but at the same time was framed by a rural backdrop, with the rolling landscape and mature trees providing a health-inducing dose of nature. In particular, the technological modernity of the amusement park landscape was increasingly influential on the form of Wicksteed Park. Perhaps the most notable example was the water chute, designed and installed by Wicksteed in 1926 and now

¹¹³ Wicksteed Village Trust, 'An Account of the Wicksteed Park and Trust'.

¹¹⁴ Wicksteed Park Archive, LET-1044, Wicksteed Village Trust to J. Brandon-Jones, Letter, 4 October 1946.

Grade-II listed, but the installation of a miniature railway in the 1930s also reflected the influence of commercial amusement rides on the park landscape.¹¹⁵ In the playground specifically, Wicksteed's Joy Wheel seems to have been directly inspired by the similarly named mechanical roundabouts that were used at Great Yarmouth and Blackpool from around 1913.¹¹⁶ But while the fairground version was mechanised and attempted to displace its riders using high speed and centrifugal force for the amusement of onlookers, Wicksteed's £7,000 (£40) version was self-propelled, smaller and included plenty of places to grip on (Figure 3.6).

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.6 Joy Wheel (Wicksteed Park Archive, Playground Equipment Brochure, 1926)

The Ocean Wave, which cost £5,300 (£30), also appears to have been inspired by a circus ride (Figure 3.7). According to the *Times*, Hengler's Circus in London installed an Ocean Wave for the first time in Britain in 1890. Inspired by a similar ride seen in Paris, it could

¹¹⁵ Historic England, *Water Chute at Wicksteed Park, National Heritage List for England, 1437706*, 2016.

¹¹⁶ Kane, *Architecture of Pleasure*, p. 55.

accommodate over one hundred passengers and mimicked the motion of a sailing boat.¹¹⁷ But where the circus version had a circumference of 55m (180ft) and included six small yachts, the playground version was less than half the size at 22m (75ft) and children stood or sat directly on the metal framework.¹¹⁸ Although reduced in scale, such equipment and the souvenir booklets in which it was represented embodied notions of excitement and adrenaline, as well as the health benefits of a bucolic parkland setting. This combination of amusement-style rides and green landscape further highlights the complexities of early twentieth century rural modernism that have been a feature of scholarship on inter-war film, architecture and infrastructure.¹¹⁹ But Wicksteed also challenged the traditional conceptions of the playground, as excitement replaced structured forms of exercise as the rationale for play space form.

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.7 Ocean Wave (Wicksteed Park Archive, Playground Equipment Brochure, 1926)

¹¹⁷ 'The Ocean Wave', *The Times*, 3 January 1890, p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment'.

¹¹⁹ *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*, ed. by Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Wicksteed also challenged established notions of appropriate park behaviour. In sharp contrast to the earlier attempts at regulation, the Wicksteed Park souvenirs emphasised an alternative attitude to park users and their conduct. One booklet enthused that:

*'one of the charms of the place is perhaps the freedom that is everywhere. There are no notices to keep off the grass, or not to do anything else. All go into the park to do what they like and to go where they like. It has had a distinctly civilizing influence and gives much health and happiness. The freedom granted is seldom abused.'*¹²⁰

Facilities were provided in the park to support children's autonomy in exploring both the park environment and their individual abilities. Children and adults were not only welcome to paddle in the lake but also to fall in and get soaked. A nurse attendant would help anyone that fell in by providing a temporary change of clothes, while their wet garments were quickly dried in a specially designed hot air cabinet (Figure 3.8).¹²¹ Children's playful activities were not frowned upon, nor constrained by regulations and railings. Instead Wicksteed set out to help mitigate the consequences of playfulness, rather than attempting to regulate and control it. In a similar way, Wicksteed set out to design and build play equipment that was strong enough to withstand the myriad ways that both children and adults would use it, rather than attempting to adjust users' behaviour to accommodate the technical constraints of the equipment. Wicksteed repeatedly emphasised his sentiment that it was 'easier for me, as an engineer, to make a swing strong enough to hold all who come than to keep park-keepers bawling at the youths all day long.'¹²² In naming his new products, he also tended to focus on

¹²⁰ Wicksteed Village Trust, 'The Wicksteed Park Souvenir', p. 1.

¹²¹ Wicksteed Park Archive, BRC-1199, Wicksteed Village Trust, 'The Wicksteed Park, Kettering', n.d.

¹²² Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children's Recreation*, p. 15; Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment', p. 7.

monikers that emphasised the playful nature of the playground – the Joy Wheel and Jazz Swing being early examples.¹²³

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.8 Drying and changing rooms (Wicksteed Park Archive, BRC-1199, no date)

In practice, however, freedom was not absolute and Wicksteed was quick to express his displeasure at what he felt was inappropriate behaviour. Just as Matless has shown for the inter-war countryside, objections to littering were an important component of the moral geography of Wicksteed Park. According to Wicksteed, littering disfigured the landscape and offended his idea of good citizenship. In a letter to the local paper, he emphasised the personal distress caused to him by both the littering and the potential need to increase the cost of a jug of tea to cover the wages of an additional attendant to pick up the litter.¹²⁴ Freedom came with individual responsibility, mirroring wider social processes that linked

¹²³ Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Play Things As Used In The Wicksteed Park', p. 5; Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment', pp. 8, 10.

¹²⁴ Charles Wicksteed, 'The Pity of It: Thoughtless Picnic Parties in the Wicksteed Park', *The Kettering Leader*, 29 July 1921, p. 5.

public parks and other green spaces with the construction of appropriate forms of citizenship.¹²⁵

However, the form of citizenship promoted at Wicksteed Park had much less to do with creating colonial identities than was the case in other parks, where architecture and pageants sought to instil the values of empire.¹²⁶ Perhaps Wicksteed shared with his Liberal colleague Charles Masterman a sense that the empire represented a force for national self-indulgence rather than greatness, while Wicksteed certainly deplored the failures of statecraft that he felt resulted in the First World War.¹²⁷ Moreover, he imagined the playground as a space of enjoyment and freedom for individual children and their families, inspired by the healthiness of green space and the benefits of entertaining physical movement, rather than the prescriptions of the children's gymnasium and its geopolitical assumptions. But at the same time Wicksteed was not averse to taking advantage of the business opportunities that both the First World War and empire created. During the war his Stanford Road factory was converted to munitions production and in the 1920s and 1930s Wicksteed & Co. were able to take advantage of the commercial opportunities provided by imperial networks. Soon after Wicksteed Park opened, politicians from the parishes around Kettering saw the playground and requested similar facilities for their local communities.¹²⁸ However, over time Wicksteed & Co. went on to equip thousands of playgrounds across the UK and beyond. In a 1936 advert the company claimed to have supplied over three thousand playgrounds with their equipment, a figure that had increased to four thousand only a year

¹²⁵ Conway, 'Everyday Landscapes'.

¹²⁶ Colton, 'Savage Instincts'; Joanna Brück, 'Landscapes of Desire: Parks, Colonialism, and Identity in Victorian and Edwardian Ireland', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 17 (2013), 196–223.

¹²⁷ Matthew, 'Masterman, Charles Frederick Gurney (1873-1927), Politician and Author'; Wicksteed, *Charles Wicksteed*, p. 96.

¹²⁸ Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Play Things As Used In The Wicksteed Park', p. 3.

later.¹²⁹ In the mid-1920s Wicksteed & Co. had exported playground equipment to South Africa and by the 1950s they had provided equipment for play spaces in Canada, New Zealand, India, Hong Kong, Malta, the West Indies, North Borneo, Southern Rhodesia and St Helena, as well as the Belgian Congo, Venezuela and the USA.¹³⁰

In exporting products to create children's playgrounds, Wicksteed & Co. contributed towards the increasing standardisation of the playground form. For example, the equipment sold to city authorities in South Africa was identical to that sold in Britain. The Joy Wheel pictured in Joubert Park, Johannesburg, is the same model displayed in Wicksteed's brochures from the 1920s (Figure 3.9). However, while the playground form may have become increasingly standardised as a result, Wicksteed's vision of the playground as a space where all children had freedom to play did not become the guiding principle of playground management. Instead, local cultural values shaped the way that children experienced playground spaces. For example, the provision of playgrounds in Johannesburg was likely part of the city's long-standing connection with the developments and cultural styles of other international cities, including London and New York, and Johannesburg Council's concerted attempts at modernisation in the 1920s.¹³¹ Along with other imported trends, including modernist high-rise buildings, new retail stores and swimming pools, the playground was one expression of the enduring connection between the city's white, middle-class councillors and British ideas and values in particular. However, the creation of playground spaces also reinforced racial, cultural and class segregation. Few facilities were built in black

¹²⁹ 'Advert for Wicksteed & Co. Playground Equipment', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 1.1 (1936), 1; W.W. Pettigrew, *Municipal Parks: Layout, Management and Administration* (London: Journal of Park Administration, 1937), p. xiv.

¹³⁰ 'The Children of St Helena', *Machinery Lloyd*, 29 (1957), 1–2.

¹³¹ Louis Grundlingh, 'Municipal Modernity: The Politics of Leisure and Johannesburg's Swimming Baths, 1920s to 1930s', *Urban History*, (2021), 1–20, <doi:10.1017/S096392682100047X>.

neighbourhoods and black children were allowed to use the playground in Joubert Park just once a year.¹³² This tentative exposure of the connections between Kettering and Johannesburg and the racial politics of the playground undoubtedly demands further research and there is evidence that archive material exists elsewhere to inform a broader study, including in Cape Town.¹³³

[REDACTED]

Figure 3.9 Joubert Park (Charles Wicksteed, A Plea for Children's Recreation, 1928)

3.4 Conclusion

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the social, political and environmental problems of the urban environment remained a powerful justification in the minds of advocates for greater playground provision. However, the ideal form was far from settled, with levelled playgrounds, children's gymnasiums and the US-inspired organised playground all in circulation. The First World War increased anxiety about children's place in society and there were renewed calls for the provision of amenities for children, partly to promote positive behaviour

¹³² Wicksteed, *A Plea for Children's Recreation*, p. 23.

¹³³ Cape Town Archives Repository, 3/CT 4/1/4/71 B410/4, 'Playground Equipment (Charles Wicksteed)', 1927.

but also to enhance children's physical and mental wellbeing, especially close to home. An increasing number of commercial suppliers offered products that reinforced normative assumptions about age, gender and exercise for children. But these values were increasingly challenged by Charles Wicksteed in the park he created in Kettering and through the products that his company manufactured and sold. Rather than a bolster for wider imperial ambitions, Wicksteed imagined the playground as a space of excitement and freedom, with the equipment he created inspired by the fairground and amusement park, rather than solely the gymnasium. He also reacted against the segregation of play spaces by age and gender and instead created a space in Wicksteed Park that children and adults were welcome to use together. The quantity of land available to Wicksteed at Barton Seagrave meant that playground technology could be situated within extensive green landscapes, combining aspects of traditional park rhetoric with the modernity of the amusement park, providing the benefits of both town and country. With Wicksteed Park as a testing ground, Wicksteed & Co. were able to sell their products in increasing numbers, along with a persuasive vision for the children's playground. However, only some of the values that shaped the management of Wicksteed Park travelled with these products. In Britain the segregation of spaces for children by gender became increasingly uncommon, but elsewhere local social and cultural values shaped access to the playground. However, just as others were adopting the standard Wicksteed version of the playground, with its swings, slides and roundabouts, the trustees of Wicksteed Park had to identify new sources of income, initiating a shift away from the free-to-use playground and towards income-generating theme park rides.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Wicksteed Village Trust, 'An Account of the Wicksteed Park and Trust', p. 11.

4 Playgrounds for the People: standardisation and ubiquity

The National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) might seem like an unlikely advocate for children's playgrounds. However, while its name suggested a preoccupation with spaces for sports, it quickly became an important advocate, funder and source of expertise on playgrounds during the inter-war period. It brought together existing campaigners and organisations to promote - and unintentionally standardise - the provision of playgrounds and playing fields in both urban and rural areas. The entry of the NPFA into matters of children's recreation in public amenity spaces took place at a time of significant and complex social change after the First World War. In particular, the 'problems' of leisure, citizenship, gender and class concerned many contemporaries. The NPFA response was equally complex and combined both nineteenth century ideas about childhood, class and gender, with twentieth-century attempts to provide suitable recreational spaces for the modern world. Its rhetoric often drew upon pre-war notions of imperial masculinity and for a time continued to emphasise the physical degeneration of the urban working-classes and the moral dangers of the street. However, it also stressed the modernising potential of properly equipped playgrounds for existing and new communities in both rural and urban areas. It also promoted the playground as a space of health, education and safety for children, at least in theory if not always in practice, while also reinforcing the idea that children should largely be seen and not heard. Edward Prentice Mawson, the prominent landscape architect, suggested that prior to the First World War the intrusion of 'a children's playground into the parks was regarded as vandalism and was frequently the subject of bitter controversy.'¹ However, by the 1930s children's playgrounds had become an increasingly common feature of public parks and the

¹ Edward Prentice Mawson, 'Public Parks and Playgrounds: A New Conception', *Parks, Golf Courses and Sports Grounds*, 1 (1935), 7–8 (p. 7).

design of these play spaces was dominated by manufactured equipment. Writing in 1937, the respected park superintendent and broadcaster W.W. Pettigrew summed up the state of play, so to speak, in pointing out that the broad principle of providing fully equipped playgrounds had been fully recognised.² This chapter plots the evolution of the NPFA and its endeavours in the field of children's play to explore the increasingly common provision of playgrounds and the development of an amenity standard in the first half of the twentieth century.

4.1 Playing Fields and playgrounds in inter-war Britain

There had been local calls for the protection of existing playing fields and campaigns for the creation of new ones since the late nineteenth century. Organisations such as the London Playing Fields Committee (1890) and the Manchester and Salford Playing Fields Society (1907) had emphasised the ways in which playing fields could help to tackle physical degeneration and improve the character and morals of urban youths.³ One campaigner was particularly critical of established ideas about the design and purpose of existing public spaces, chastising the 'idiotic practice of planting hideous shrubs, which only get grimy from the atmosphere, are not a delight to the eye, and are no use to any human being' and presumably got in the way of playing games.⁴ In stark contrast, other campaigners attempted to promote both beauty and recreation, and saw a close connection between health, education, planting and play. In inter-war Bermondsey the Labour-run council, its Beautification Committee, and Ada and Alfred Salter in particular, directed a long-running and wide-ranging greening campaign

² Pettigrew, *Municipal Parks*; Pettigrew presented a number of regional radio programmes including 'The Manchester and Salford Gardens Guild', *Radio Times*, 14 October 1927, p. 78; 'The Northern Garden', *Radio Times*, 24 April 1931, p. 243.

³ The London Playing Fields committee was renamed the London Playing Fields Society in 1899, 'London Playing Fields Society', *The Times*, 3 June 1899, p. 14; 'Play Fields for Youths: New Manchester Movement', *Manchester Courier*, 9 July 1907, p. 9; 'The Playing Fields Society', *The Manchester Guardian*, 19 October 1908, p. 10; E Chandos Leigh, 'The London Playing Fields Society', *The Times*, 20 January 1911, p. 19; Basil Holmes, 'More Playing Fields', *The Times*, 12 March 1920, p. 12.

⁴ 'Physical Recreation, Manchester and Playing Fields'.

that saw horticultural shows, extensive tree planting and window boxes supplied to local residents.⁵ The campaign also included the creation of new play spaces and the installation of grandiose play equipment, including the pagoda-style, oak-roofed Joy-Slide installed in St James' Churchyard in 1921.⁶ In Nottingham, a 'janus-faced modern urban health movement' combined strong anti-urban sentiments with a significant desire to save the city and its young inhabitants.⁷ Professionals, politicians and volunteers attempted to extricate children from the urban environment through day trips and rural camps, while also reintroducing spaces of nature into the city.

However, by 1924 there was a growing sense that these local efforts needed to be coordinated and expanded. Recalling nineteenth-century demands for parks for the people, a number of prominent politicians signed an open letter to the national press in April 1925 calling for 'playing fields for the people,' spaces that were distinct from public parks, gardens and commons.⁸ Signatories came from across the political spectrum and included government ministers such as the Duke of Sutherland and Sir Thomas Inskip, other high-profile politicians including David Lloyd George, Nancy Astor, James Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson, as well as social reformers and campaigners such as Sidney Webb, Arthur Crosfield, Robert Baden-Powell and Margaret Bondfield. The letter argued that space for active recreation would contribute both to improved individual health and national efficiency and was therefore of significant domestic and imperial importance. It went on to argue that new

⁵ Elizabeth Lebas, 'The Making of a Socialist Arcadia: Arboriculture and Horticulture in the London Borough of Bermondsey after the Great War', *Garden History*, 27 (1999), 219–37.

⁶ 'Joy Slide in a Churchyard', *The Manchester Guardian*, 31 October 1921, p. 12; 'Bermondsey's Joy Slide', *Daily Mirror*, 21 September 1921, p. 9.

⁷ David Pomfret, 'The City of Evil and the Great Outdoors: The Modern Health Movement and the Urban Young, 1918-40', *Urban History*, 28 (2001), 405–27 (p. 406).

⁸ 'Playing Fields for the People', *The Manchester Guardian*, 4 April 1925, p. 7; 'Playing-Grounds for Young People', *The Times*, 4 April 1925, p. 17.

playing spaces were needed in cities, towns and villages and that they would benefit boys and girls, young men and young women. Implicitly, their scheme suggested that participation in active recreation was a civic responsibility that needed to be performed across the nation by all sections of the community.⁹

Despite the clear significance of the issue, the authors of the letter did not call for the direct involvement of the state, declaring that ‘we do not for an instance suggest a Ministry of Sport.’¹⁰ Instead, a voluntary committee issued a draft constitution for a new national organisation and circulated it to sport governing bodies, central and local government and existing open space societies. The draft objectives for the new organisation initially had a narrow typological focus and a broad social remit. Organisers envisaged that it would focus on the protection and provision of playing fields in particular and that these spaces would enable participation in games and recreation by all parts of the community, whatever their age, gender or social class.¹¹ However, by the time the new organisation was formally launched as the National Playing Fields Association in July 1925, both children and playgrounds had become fundamental to its stated objectives. The first edition of its quarterly journal, *Playing Fields*, was clear about the new organisation’s priorities:

*The movement has for its two main objectives, first, keeping the very small children off the streets by providing for them in congested areas small playgrounds, where there is no risk of injury by motor or other wheeled traffic; and secondly, the provision of adequate playing fields for the masses of young people who, having no room themselves to play, rush in thousands to look on at others playing, or perhaps indulge in less desirable pursuits.*¹²

⁹ O’Reilly, ‘From “The People” to “The Citizen”’: The Emergence of the Edwardian Municipal Park in Manchester, 1902-1912’.

¹⁰ ‘Playing Fields for the People’.

¹¹ London Metropolitan Archive, LCC/CL/PK/01/042, National Playing Fields Association, ‘Draft Constitution’, n.d.

¹² National Archives, CB 4/1, National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report* (London, 1927), p. 12.

There is little remaining evidence of the planning that went into the creation of the new organisation, but it would appear that advocates of children's playgrounds had a significant impact on its objectives, strategies and actions. As such, the NPFA became to some extent an umbrella organisation for a diverse range of individuals and groups with varied motivations. The children's playground became further embroiled in wider social discourse relating to the impact of modern life on notions of health and education, town and country, nation and empire.

There was considerable continuity in the values and rhetoric used by earlier open space campaigners and the NPFA. The long-established Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA) and Commons and Footpaths Preservation Society were both represented on the NPFA Council. Cllr William Melland, Manchester councillor and secretary of the Manchester and Salford Playing Fields Society, took on a key role in the NPFA, particularly in relation to children's playgrounds and play leadership.¹³ The environmental campaigner Lawrence W. Chubb became General Secretary of the NPFA in 1928, having previously been a prominent member of the Coal Abatement Society (1898), the National Trust (1895) and the Commons Preservation Society (1865).¹⁴ From 1929, both the NPFA and Commons Preservation Society were run from the same offices at 71 Eccleston Square in London.¹⁵ Despite this institutional and individual continuity, however, the 'playing fields for the people' letter did not receive an entirely welcome response among all existing open space campaigners. A few days after its publication, the Secretary of the London Playing Fields Society felt compelled to write to the *Times* to express his feeling that the efforts of existing

¹³ 'Physical Recreation, Manchester and Playing Fields'; National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Baigent, 'Chubb, Sir Lawrence Wensley (1873–1948), Environmental Campaigner', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ National Archives, CB 4/1, National Playing Fields Association, *Third Annual Report* (1929), p. 25.

campaigners had been 'damn'd with faint praise' and to voice his disappointment at the lack of coordination with existing groups, including his own.¹⁶ This was the start of a long running point of conflict between the national association, based in London, and the London playing fields campaign.

Despite this public disquiet, on 8 July 1925 the new national organisation was formally launched at the Royal Albert Hall, in the presence of senior politicians, royalty and sporting celebrities. Speakers from across the political spectrum were united in their support for the new organisation and its ambitions. The *Times'* Special Correspondent had high hopes too, suggesting that it might better be called 'a Movement for the Regeneration of the People of Great Britain, or a Movement to secure Health and Happiness to the Mass of the Population.'¹⁷ Conservative cabinet minister the Duke of Sutherland chaired the meeting and used his opening address to emphasise the lack of space available for both children and adults to take part in games, the threat posed by playing in the street, and the need for coordination in the planning of housing, transport and recreation. He explicitly refuted links with militarism, but also stated that 'the health of the people is just as essential for the whole nation at peace as for a nation at war.'¹⁸ He also argued that the work of the new organisation would help to sustain Britain's imperial status, a narrative that was common to other inter-war voluntary organisations including Save the Children Fund and the organisers of Empire Day.¹⁹ As President of the NPFA, the Duke of York (future King George VI) emphasised that children needed pure air away from the streets, while key organiser Sir Arthur Crosfield, a former

¹⁶ F. R. Bush, 'To the Editor of The Times', *The Times*, 7 April 1925, p. 15.

¹⁷ 'Playing Fields: The Cause of Youth: A Popular Crusade', *The Times*, 8 July 1925, p. 17.

¹⁸ National Archives, CB 1/1, National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of Proceedings at Inaugural Meeting of the National Playing Fields Association', 1925, p. 4.

¹⁹ Emily Baughan, "'Every Citizen of Empire Implored to Save the Children!'" Empire, Internationalism and the Save the Children Fund in Inter-War Britain', *Historical Research*, 86 (2013), 116–37.

Liberal MP, concluded that earlier work in this vein had been too 'spasmodic, sporadic, intermittent and uncertain in its results.'²⁰ For Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald playing fields would help to shape the mind, body and character of the population, helping them to bear 'national responsibilities', while Liberal leader David Lloyd George famously declared that 'the right to play is a child's first claim on the community'.²¹ More than ever, the hopes for a new world of social, environmental and political relations rested on a regenerated working-class childhood, revived by fresh air, physical exercise and a more liveable urban environment.²²

Given the widespread political support, it is perhaps surprising that the state did not lead attempts to provide recreational facilities, in the same way that it provided facilities for education and other social work. However, as we have already seen, the provision of public parks and the promotion of rational recreation in the nineteenth century had rarely been driven by central government and was instead promoted by social reformers and municipal authorities. Furthermore, historians of leisure have shown that the non-governmental development and organisation of leisure provision has often operated as an informal extension of the state in Britain, thus circumventing the need for formal state involvement.²³ The NPFA certainly seems to fit with this conclusion. Its Council included two nominees of central government, but more significantly its governance and leadership structures included a long list of aristocratic elites, government ministers, cross-party representation of MPs, and

²⁰ National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of Proceedings at Inaugural Meeting of the National Playing Fields Association', p. 8.

²¹ National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of Proceedings at Inaugural Meeting of the National Playing Fields Association', p. 10; National Playing Fields Association, *Second Annual Report*, p. 20.

²² Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860-1931* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 99.

²³ Borsay, *History of Leisure*.

local politicians from across the country.²⁴ From the outset it had a comprehensive and considered organisational structure, with a central committee and administrative system organised from Westminster and 'county' branches that largely mirrored local authorities across the country (Scotland being a notable exception, with one branch covering the entire nation).

At the same time, the NPFA sought to extend the campaign for play provision to incorporate both urban and rural areas. The NPFA Council included representatives from seventeen large cities, as well as organisations with an interest in town and country planning, and both the Rural and Urban District Councils Associations. Its Organisation Sub-Committee worked from the NPFA's London office to create a nationwide network of county branches that would deliver the campaign in cities, towns and villages. In practice this was meant to involve a survey of existing facilities and sites threatened by development, as well as developing an interest in the movement among 'men and women of influence and standing in the County.'²⁵ However, in practical terms and despite its 'national' moniker, the campaign was slow to get going beyond large cities and southern English counties. The industrious Brigadier-General Kentish, Chair of the Organisation Sub-Committee, visited over 300 local authorities to discuss the new organisation, but did not leave England.²⁶ In organisational terms, the NPFA treated Scotland and Northern Ireland as if they were English counties, while there seems to have been no distinction between England and Wales at all. Attempts to create branches in Scotland and Northern Ireland did not happen for a number of years and even once established they struggled to gain momentum.²⁷ In contrast, in London there was

²⁴ National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*, pp. 3–8; 'The Playing Fields Association', *The Manchester Guardian*, 25 July 1925, p. 7.

²⁵ National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*, p. 11.

²⁶ National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*, p. 14.

²⁷ National Playing Fields Association, *Third Annual Report*, pp. 20–21.

a surfeit of campaigning, as both the national organisation and the London & Greater London Playing Fields Association attempted to raise funds, attract members, promote schemes and provide advice.²⁸

However, as a consequence, significant progress was made in the capital. The NPFA's first annual report highlighted donations of over £4m (£23,000), liaison with the LCC, a survey of existing open spaces and negotiations with the London Underground for reduced fares to playing fields.²⁹ In Sutton and East Ham the London branch was involved in planning schemes to ensure play provision was included in the layout of new estates. However, the work of the NPFA was not confined to the metropolis. Beyond London, the Birmingham Playing Fields Association helped to create a playground at Keeley Street, channelling £820,000 (£4,500) to help secure land in 'one of the most congested areas of the city.'³⁰ Schemes were initiated in other congested districts including Accrington, Wigan and Rochester. Although many of these schemes fell under the umbrella of the national association, there was nonetheless a strong sense of municipal civic pride, local voluntary support and small-scale philanthropy involved in making them happen. As such, the example of the NPFA and its local projects lend weight to Tom Hulme's argument that the urban remained a significant driver of citizenship in the early twentieth century and had not been entirely replaced by the national as is often assumed.³¹

Although the NPFA made much of the shortage of play space in densely populated urban areas, the countryside also featured prominently in its rhetoric and work from the

²⁸ National Archives, CB 1/63, National Playing Fields Association, 'Memorandum with Regard to a Conference Held between Representatives of the NPFA and the London & Greater London Playing Fields Association to Consider the Relations between the Two Organisations.', 1930.

²⁹ National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*, p. 35.

³⁰ National Playing Fields Association, *Second Annual Report*, p. 16.

³¹ Hulme, *After the Shock City*.

outset. At the inaugural meeting, the Duke of Sutherland stated that ‘the Great War was won on the heaths and the commons of the countryside.’³² More significantly, many early NPFA schemes were in rural areas. In its first year of operation, the NPFA were given land and money by private donors to create thirteen playing fields, of which five were in rural communities.³³ By the end of its second year in operation, the county branch in Cornwall alone had been involved in ten schemes to provide village play spaces. However, the NPFA had not been the first organisation to call for such spaces in rural areas. The first notable example came in 1919 when a government-backed Women’s Housing Sub-Committee reported on the quality of new homes. It emphasised that both urban and rural children needed dedicated spaces to play as ‘provision for recreation is no less needed in rural districts. There are many villages in England where there is nowhere but the roads for children to play.’³⁴ This call was underpinned by an assumption that the street was not an appropriate or safe place to play, a notion explored in more detail later in this chapter, along with a sense that dedicated play space would provide benefits for both parents and communities. This emphasis on the recreational needs of rural districts would be a consistent feature of NPFA campaigning in the inter-war period.

The NPFA played a part in a wider process which saw rural communities negotiating the impacts of modern life during the inter-war years. Indeed, the creation of the NPFA coincided with the emergence of a separate and distinctive movement that focused on the rural landscape and prioritised pastoral aesthetics.³⁵ The Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) and a similar organisation in Scotland were formed in 1926, while Ymgyrch

³² ‘National Playing Fields’, *The Times*, 8 July 1925, p. 21.

³³ National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*, pp. 15–16.

³⁴ National Archives, RECO 1/629, Ministry of Reconstruction Advisory Council, *Women’s Housing Sub-Committee Final Report* (London: HMSO, 1919), para. 64.

³⁵ Bluemel and McCluskey, *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*.

Diogelu Cymru Wledig (the Council for the Preservation of Rural Wales) was formed two years later in 1928. Although often couched in terms that suggested a nostalgia for traditional rural life, the campaigning work of these organisations nonetheless combined notions of preservation and tradition with an attention to progress, technical solutions, and modernity. Significantly, while their concern with rural life and landscapes was not new (organisations such as the Commons Preservation Society and the National Trust had long been interested in the countryside), what was distinctive by the 1920s was the nationwide coverage of the rural landscape and an approach that emphasised the role of rational, expert-led planning in combining traditional and modern values in the countryside.

The NPFA was one component in this campaigning infrastructure, which David Matless has described as a ‘planner-preservationist’ movement, alongside organisations including the CPRE and individuals such as the architect Clough William-Ellis.³⁶ William-Ellis is perhaps most well known as the architect of the Italianate village of Portmeirion in Wales and author of *England and the Octopus* (1928), in which he fiercely opposed uncontrolled development in the countryside. At the same time, however, he was more than simply a preservationist and as a modernising figure introduced several examples of modern architecture into rural areas.³⁷ The NPFA and individual playground campaigners can also be seen in this light; on the one hand attempting to preserve traditional social spaces such as the village green, but at the same time advocating for the creation of well-planned, properly designed and technologically modern spaces for rural play and recreation.

³⁶ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*.

³⁷ Nigel Harrison and Iain Robertson, ‘Beyond Portmeirion: The Architecture, Planning and Protests of Clough Williams-Ellis’, in *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*, ed. by Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 187–206.

That the NPFA embodied tensions between tradition and modernity is not surprising, as it included a diverse range of organisations within its governing structure. On the one hand, the NPFA Council included organisations that were firmly rooted in the traditions of rural areas and sought to protect established economic and social structures, such as the Central Landowners' Association.³⁸ However, they were far outnumbered by organisations that adopted a planner-preservationist outlook, including the CPRE, the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association (1899), the Town Planning Institute (1914), and the National Housing and Town Planning Council (1906).³⁹ The composition of the NPFA Council also gives a sense of the interconnected nature of environmental networks at the time, where even organisations with a firmly urban focus, such as the MPGA, were allied with the work of those with a rural emphasis.⁴⁰ These organisations co-operated at a practical level too. For example, in the early 1940s the NPFA and CPRE worked closely together to submit evidence to the prominent Scott Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas, the first wide-ranging review of rural issues in England and Wales.⁴¹

This tension was further expressed in the types of rural spaces endorsed by the NPFA. Green space campaigners had long drawn upon romantic visions of pastoral landscapes to inform the design and use of urban public parks. However, in its campaigning the NPFA drew upon a specific aspect of rural life, focusing on the village green as a space of social cohesion and physical health, rather than the supposed natural beauty of aristocratic landscape parks. This was expressed in a nostalgia for village green cricket in particular. For example, a few

³⁸ Museum of English Rural Life, SR CLA, Central Landowners' Association, 'Assorted Records'.

³⁹ National Playing Fields Association, *Second Annual Report*, pp. 6–7.

⁴⁰ Museum of English Rural Life, SR CPRE C/1/54/7A, Basil Holmes to Patrick Abercrombie, Letter, 1926.

⁴¹ Museum of English Rural Life, SR CPRE C/1/73/1, National Playing Fields Association, 'Memorandum on the Recent Work of the Association', 1942, p. 1; John Sheail, 'Scott Revisited: Post-War Agriculture, Planning and the British Countryside', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 13 (1997), 387–98.

months before the formal inauguration of the NPFA, Sir Arthur Crosfield, Chair of the NPFA Provisional Committee, wrote a letter to the *Times* in which he emphasised the need for ‘an adequate public playing field in every village.’⁴² However, the significance of this rural idyll in the campaign for play spaces is perhaps best demonstrated by a national radio broadcast given by the Prince of Wales on behalf of the NPFA.⁴³ He made much of the benefits of a specifically English rural arcadia: ‘I don’t know of any side of English life that yields a truer, more characteristically English picture than that of an English playing field.’⁴⁴ In both his speech and the subsequent work of the NPFA, an imagined English countryside became conflated with British national identity, to the exclusion of local, regional and national complexities within the UK, and the English village green came to represent an ideal place to play.

While it valued seemingly traditional rural landscapes and social structures, the NPFA also emphasised its role as a ‘movement of modern times.’⁴⁵ Like the planner-preservationist movement more generally, the NPFA set out to achieve complete coverage of the country through its London-based headquarters and nationwide county branch network. It also sought to increase its sense of authority by providing expertise and guidance, initially through its Layout Committee and later through *Playing Fields* and other design-focused publications. The organisation commissioned striking artwork from noted illustrators such as Lilian Hocknell, Austin Cooper, Septimus Scott and William Barribal (Figure 4.1).⁴⁶ From the outset, the NPFA also made use of modern technology to promote its cause, particularly through regular national and regional radio broadcasts that covered both urban and rural areas. The

⁴² A.H. Crosfield, ‘More Playing Fields’, *The Times*, 25 April 1925, p. 8.

⁴³ ‘Playing Fields: Wireless Appeal by the Prince of Wales’, *The Times*, 2 June 1927, p. 11.

⁴⁴ National Playing Fields Association, *Second Annual Report*, pp. 49–50.

⁴⁵ National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*, p. 9.

⁴⁶ National Playing Fields Association, *Third Annual Report*, p. 20.

inaugural meeting of the NPFA was relayed from the Royal Albert Hall on BBC national radio.⁴⁷ Playing field associations from London and Glasgow to Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire regularly made appeals for funds on *The Week's Good Cause* radio programme, while the official opening of a playground was sometimes recorded on film.⁴⁸ NPFA members and supporters also presented one-off programmes which explored the achievements of the movement across the country, promoted the need for rural play spaces, and introduced international case studies.⁴⁹

[REDACTED]

Figure 4.1 Crowded Out (Austin Cooper, Playing Fields, July 1933)

⁴⁷ 'Speeches from the Meeting Held by the National Playing Fields Association', *Radio Times*, 3 July 1925, p. 57.

⁴⁸ Raphael Jackson, 'The Week's Good Cause: Appeal on Behalf of the National Playing Fields Association', *Radio Times*, 5 June 1936, p. 18; M.W. Montgomery, 'The Week's Good Cause: Appeal on Behalf of the Glasgow and District Playing-Fields Association', *Radio Times*, 24 May 1929, p. 403; T.H. Vile, 'The Week's Good Cause: Appeal on Behalf of the Monmouthshire Branch of the National Playing Fields Association', *Radio Times*, 8 July 1938, p. 25; Tom Voyce, 'The Week's Good Cause: Appeal on Behalf of the Gloucestershire Playing Fields Association', *Radio Times*, 12 February 1937, p. 22.

⁴⁹ Noel Curtis-Bennett, 'Our Playing Fields', *Radio Times*, 25 July 1930, p. 191; R.J. Kentish, 'The Playing Fields of Germany', *Radio Times*, 15 August 1930, p. 339; Lady Sybil Eden, 'The Playing Fields Movement in the North (from Newcastle)', *Radio Times*, 17 April 1931, p. 177; Kenneth Shennan, 'What Does Your Village Do About This? Village Playing Fields', *Radio Times*, 27 December 1935, p. 34.

A 1934 article in *Playing Fields* provides a useful insight into the way that these seemingly contradictory values of tradition and modernity were played out in practice. The article explored the need for traditional village play spaces, but at the same time did not lament the loss of large country estates and associated ways of life. Instead, it focused on the consequences for play and recreation as new landowners no longer permitted the use of a meadow or field for villagers to play games. As estates were sold off and broken up, as happened at Eastchurch on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, the children of the village were apparently left with ‘absolutely nowhere but the roads on which to play.’⁵⁰ The unnamed author did not call for the retention of the country estate or oppose its subsequent redevelopment, but rather suggested that proper planning would enable land to be purchased at agricultural land values so that access to recreational facilities could continue. The implicit suggestion was that the idyllic vision of village cricket could be sustained through efficient planning and proper organisation. At the same time, it reiterated the well-established rhetoric that the street was a place of danger and the playground a place of safety. The landscape architect Marjory Allen, who features significantly in chapter five, also felt the village green represented an ideal place to play. Writing in 1937, she emphasised that where the village green had been lost to development, a sensitively designed playground could provide an entirely appropriate space for children’s play.⁵¹

Perhaps the most significant feature of the NPFA’s attempt to develop a nationwide campaign was a tendency to identify the same problems and same solutions in cities, towns and villages. The threat to existing open spaces and the dangers of the street were seen as problems facing both urban and rural communities, while dedicated places to play were seen

⁵⁰ ‘Need for Village Playing Fields’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 2.7 (1934), 312.

⁵¹ Marjory Allen, ‘The Coronation and the Village’, *The Spectator*, 12 March 1937, p. 467.

as the solution in both places too. However, while it was possible to create playing fields for cricket and other games on the edge of towns and in the expanding metropolitan suburbs, an alternative type of space was needed for young children living in the central areas of cities, where age or adversity limited access to distant sports pitches. Instead, the children's playground close to home was a pragmatic response to the processes of urbanisation and diminishing access to local common land. However, while the NPFA's guidance and model designs varied according to the size of the area available for play, they seldom varied according to its surroundings. Consequently, an inner-city local authority intending to create a playground received much the same advice as a rural parish council. Detailed design advice invariably focused on the provision of manufactured playground equipment, such as swings and slides, and might also suggest a sandpit or perhaps a paddling pool.⁵² However, by not differentiating between urban and rural play spaces and promoting the inclusion of manufactured equipment, the NPFA contributed to the standardisation of play space across Britain. This version of the playground would come to dominate both professional and public expectations of children's play spaces for at least the next 50 years.

Within this tendency towards standardisation and the more efficient provision of playgrounds was a complicated gender dynamic. On the one hand, gender-segregated play spaces had largely disappeared by the 1930s. The need for separate playgrounds for girls and boys had been a regular feature of late nineteenth-century rhetoric and the existence of such segregation is evident in park regulations and photographs.⁵³ However, by the 1930s only one

⁵² P. Maud, 'Recreation in Public Parks and Open Spaces', *Playing Fields Journal*, 1.2 (1930), 7–13; B.T. Coote, 'Children's Playgrounds - Their Equipment and Use', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 1.2 (1936), 102–5.

⁵³ Meath, 'Public Playgrounds for Children'; London County Council, 'Regulations Relating to the Playing of Games at Parks and Open Spaces Under the Control of the Council'; Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss Ltd., 'Gymnasia for Parks'.

of the LCC's forty-nine playgrounds included separate play facilities for girls and boys, while the Wicksteed Park playground and many others were also not segregated by gender.⁵⁴ The rhetoric used by NPFA campaigners seemed to treat girls and boys equally too. At the inaugural meeting, many of those who addressed the gathering spoke of the need to provide facilities and opportunities that would enable all children to participate. For Brigadier-General Kentish there was 'a terrible responsibility' to 'see in future that the time and leisure of our boys and girls and men and women is well spent.'⁵⁵

At the same time, however, campaigners continued to emphasise pre-war gender norms in their work to promote play spaces. In both conceptual and practical terms, the NPFA's approach was highly gendered and inequitable. The NPFA's fundamental assumption that leisure was the binary opposite of work or school failed to recognise the complexities of lived experience for many older girls and women. For some, the park or playground may have provided a legitimate way to escape from the confines of home and for mothers, time spent with their children could be a source of pleasure. But, as Claire Langhamer argues, 'child-centred forms of leisure, such as...a visit to the park, should be viewed as a complex synthesis of both duty and pleasure for adult women.'⁵⁶ Meanwhile, in practical terms, the potential for older girls and young women to play was considerably undermined by the NPFA's emphasis on facilities for team sports, and in particular football. In 1921 the Football Association effectively banned women's football, despite a successful thirty-year history, and in doing so did much to establish a long-running social taboo surrounding women's participation in sport.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/PK/GEN/02/003, London County Council, 'Recreational Facilities', 1935.

⁵⁵ National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of Proceedings at Inaugural Meeting of the National Playing Fields Association', p. 26.

⁵⁶ Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England 1920-60*, p. 142.

⁵⁷ Jean Williams, *A Game for Rough Girls? A History of Women's Football in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2003).

The NPFA did little to challenge this taboo and instead focused on providing facilities for male-dominated sports. Dominant social norms most likely shaped this approach, but so too did the preponderance of public school- and military-educated men among the organisation's officers and committee members. In 1934 the patron of the NPFA was the King, its President the Duke of York, and its Officers included three Earls, a Field Marshal, an Admiral of the Fleet and two MPs, who had all been educated in public or military schools.⁵⁸ Team games had been central to the culture of public schools and the military from the mid-nineteenth century, helping to explain the particular importance attached to sport among elites educated in these institutions.⁵⁹ Participation in games had started as a tool for managing pupil behaviour, but was soon understood as vital for the development of appropriately masculine character traits in school boys and cadets who would grow up to operate and administer the nation and empire.⁶⁰

These idealised character traits were often embodied in the figure of the imperial soldier hero, a character often assumed by scholars to have disappeared as an ideal type during the First World War.⁶¹ However, there is increasing doubt among cultural historians over whether this is indeed the case.⁶² An examination of the rhetoric used by the NPFA certainly supports this revisionist view. Much like the contemporary Boys Club Movement, the NPFA continued to promote pre-war notions of masculinity well into the 1930s.⁶³ This

⁵⁸ 'Patron, President, Officers and Objects of the National Playing Fields Association', *Playing Fields Journal*, 2.6 (1934), n.p. and relevant entries in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

⁵⁹ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Mike Huggins and Jack Williams, *Sport and the English 1918-1939* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶⁰ Mangan, 'Manufactured' Masculinity: Making Imperial Manliness, Morality and Militarism.

⁶¹ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁶² Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity', *The Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 637–52 (p. 643).

⁶³ Melanie Tebbutt, *Being Boys: Youth, Leisure and Identity in the Inter-War Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

idealisation of a muscular, duty-bound, stoic and adventurous masculinity was often accompanied by a lampooning of the suburban, domesticated man and the NPFA was explicitly disparaging throughout the inter-war period of this apparently feminised male character. These notions of gender were also combined with conceptions of class and working-class masculinity in particular was characterised as deficient. The most notable examples are from the illustrations used on the cover of the NPFA's journal, where the physical degeneration associated with urban working-class life is visibly contrasted with the fitness and stature of a heroic, middle-class sportsman. The front cover of *Playing Fields Journal* from 1934 showed a stooped working-class man, coming from the polluted air of the city, being welcomed by an upright, muscular footballer to the clear skies and tree lined playing field (Figure 4.2). Much like the rhetoric of the MPGA in the 1890s, the NPFA continued to associate the problematic urban environment with notions of working-class degeneration, while also drawing on conservative gender ideals.

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Figure 4.2 Come and Join Us (Playing Fields, April 1934, front cover).

Furthermore, just as late nineteenth-century campaigners had been partially motivated by the apparent inadequacy of potential military recruits, so too were open space campaigners in the inter-war years. Despite reservations about the quality of medical statistics, the idea that wartime conscription was constrained by the poor physical health of potential recruits remained a powerful rhetoric into the 1930s among playground advocates.⁶⁴ Both the military classification system (where those classed A1 were fit for overseas service, B1 for garrison duties, C3 for sedentary duties and so on) and the association between stature and physical fitness remained powerful markers of health. Writing in 1935, Edward Prentice Mawson felt that Britain could never again ‘be caught with a predominantly C3 population’ and that better designed public play spaces would help to address this shortcoming.⁶⁵ However, beyond play space advocates, these anxieties about physical fitness resulted in a focus on the bodily health of adults rather than children. Within the evolution of a wider physical culture movement, the 1937 Physical Training and Recreation Act provided grants to develop recreational amenities for adults, but specifically excluded facilities for children.⁶⁶ Instead, the somewhat ambiguous connections between physical health, class, gender and the urban environment would be replaced in the rhetoric of play space campaigners by a more direct and obvious threat to children’s lives.

4.2 Safety and supervision

While earlier notions of masculinity and assumptions about city life endured during the inter-war period, there was also a gradual change in the way that the NPFA perceived and explained

⁶⁴ Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman, and Mark Connelly, *The British Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 121.

⁶⁵ Prentice Mawson, ‘Public Parks and Playgrounds: A New Conception’, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, ‘Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (2006), 595–610.

the threats that children faced in the modern world. The somewhat hazy connection between city life and individual physical stature was increasingly superseded by the use of compelling statistics which revealed the direct threat to children's lives from the increased number of motor vehicles on both urban and rural roads. Contemporary responses to the dangers of the street were diverse, but the increasing dominance of motor vehicles was rarely questioned. Instead, responsibility was implicitly placed on children to adapt their behaviour to this changing public environment. Road safety training, the creation of 'play streets' and even arrests were all part of this wider response, but the NPFA emphasised that the best solution was to remove children from the streets altogether.

Street play was still a frequent activity for children in the inter-war period. The playgrounds which had been created by this point could not meet the recreational needs of all neighbourhoods, with dedicated play spaces too distant and other open spaces too formal. From personal accounts of growing up in London we know that the streets outside children's homes invariably offered opportunities for sociability, play, spectacle, financial reward, and for older girls in particular, the responsibility of childcare.⁶⁷ On a brief summer stroll in 1928, the Bishop of Southwark counted 'twelve games of cricket, six games of rounders, several mysterious games which consisted of hopping from square to square' all taking place in the streets of Kennington.⁶⁸ The use of the street as a de facto playground had long been a feature of urban life, but what changed in this period was a data set of newly available statistics that highlighted to campaigners a stark indication of the dangers of the street.

⁶⁷ Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996), p. 64.

⁶⁸ Bishop of Southwark, *House of Lords Debate, 14 February 1928, Vol.70, Col.92.*

In 1919 there were around three hundred thousand motor vehicles using the roads, a figure that increased to over three million by 1939.⁶⁹ This increase in the number of motorised vehicles also resulted in an increasing number of collisions with children. In 1931, *Playing Fields* reported on the work of the London and Home Counties Traffic Advisory Committee and its report *Street Accidents to Children in Greater London*. It found that playing in the street was the second most prolific source of motor accidents and that children between the ages of 5 and 9 were most likely to be the victims of collisions.⁷⁰ A year later, *Playing Fields* reported on a deputation involving the NPFA to the Minister of Transport to discuss the 181,486 street accidents and over six thousand fatalities that had occurred in 1931, including many child victims.⁷¹ By October 1932, the journal was emotively describing ‘The Cry of the Children’, as hundreds of child deaths and ten thousand injuries on the roads each year resulted in ‘a pitiful tragedy of family bereavement or crippled life.’⁷²

The 1936 report of the Interdepartmental Committee on Road Safety Among School Children refined the data and statistics even further. It found that child road deaths had increased from 857 in 1920 to 1,433 in 1930, while the percentage of child fatalities which occurred on the road had increased from 7% in 1903 to 40% in 1933.⁷³ *Playing Fields* followed this up with a piece which showed how the data could support the play space cause. In an article which promoted ‘the case for playing fields from a new angle’, LCC Education Officer Mr Lowndes emphasised the financial costs of child injuries and deaths on the road and the

⁶⁹ Keith Laybourn and David Taylor, ‘Traffic Accidents and Road Safety: The Education of the Pedestrian and the Child, 1900–1970’, in *The Battle for the Roads of Britain: Police, Motorists and the Law, c.1890s to 1970s*, ed. by Keith Laybourn and David Taylor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 149–85.

⁷⁰ ‘Street Accidents to Children’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 1.3 (1931), 19–20.

⁷¹ ‘Street Accidents’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 1.8 (1932), 12.

⁷² ‘The Cry of the Children’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 2.1 (1932), 4–5.

⁷³ Board of Education and Ministry of Transport, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee (England & Wales) on Road Safety Among School Children* (London: HMSO, 1936), p. 9.

spatial relationships that could help explain them.⁷⁴ At a time when many of the consequences of traffic accidents, such as hospital treatment or an early pension due to ill health, were not paid for from public funds, this was a call for playgrounds as a more efficient way to organise society, rather than necessarily a way to save public money specifically. At the same time, statistics from the Interdepartmental Committee showed that a case could be made for a close correlation between access to open space and child casualties; London Boroughs that were covered by more open space had a lower proportion of child road victims. The creation of new playgrounds assumed a renewed importance in this context: not only healthy and character building, but life saving too. For Dr Mabel Jane Reaney, child psychologist and active member of the NPFA, it was ‘often the adventure-loving child with initiative and enterprise who is the victim, so that the nation is deprived of another potential leader. Scarcely a day passes without a coroner pointing out that the life of a child might have been spared if it had not been playing in the street.’⁷⁵ The Interdepartmental Committee concurred with this view, stressing the need to balance the protection of children from harm while not inhibiting the ‘spirit of adventure’ that was both inherent in many children and a valuable national characteristic.⁷⁶

However, while there was growing concern about the rising number of child road deaths and the consequences for both families and the nation, there was also growing acceptance of the role of motor vehicles in modern society. Child behaviour and not the internal combustion engine, it seemed, was the essence of the problem. Accordingly, during

⁷⁴ G. Lowndes, ‘The Cost of Traffic Accidents, the Case for Playing Fields from a New Angle’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 4.1 (1936), 19–22.

⁷⁵ National Archives, CB 1/54, Mabel Jane Reaney, ‘The Urgent Need for Trained Play Leaders, a Paper given at the Conference on Play Leadership at the Institute of Education, London, 21 July’, 1933, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Board of Education and Ministry of Transport, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee (England & Wales) on Road Safety Among School Children*, p. 21.

the 1920s and 1930s both public and press opinion gradually shifted from generally siding with pedestrians to seeing them as increasingly unpredictable and erratic.⁷⁷ In an inquest into the death of three children under the age of three who had been run over by motor vehicles, the coroner focused on how 'it was not fair to drivers that parents should allow their children to play in the street.'⁷⁸ In 1928, a newspaper columnist emphasised the 'unbearable strain' placed on motorists by children's street play, emphatically stating that 'there is no factor which plays so devastating a part in the wrecking of a motorist's nerves as does the heedless child.'⁷⁹ Attempts were made to manage the use of roads and streets by motor vehicles. For example, the 1934 Road Traffic Act re-introduced a 30mph speed limit in built up areas, but on the whole it was children and their behaviour that was problematised. As a result, attempts to solve the problem of 'traffic accidents' were invariably focused on marshalling children and their play, rather than challenging motorists' use of public space. Most significantly for this study, the children's playground came to feature in several, although not all, responses to the problem.

The most uncompromising response to the problem of child road deaths was to forcibly prevent children from playing in the street. Section 72 of the 1835 Highways Act had long made it an offence to play on a public highway.⁸⁰ In the inter-war period, this section of the Act was still used to discourage children's street play and, in some cases, to remove children from the street altogether. Admittedly, the usual Police practice, in London at least, was for an Inspector to caution the child in front of their parents, apparently with 'good moral

⁷⁷ Moran, 'Crossing the Road in Britain, 1931-1976'.

⁷⁸ 'Street and Driving Accidents: The Coroner and Children's Playgrounds', *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 June 1907, p. 14.

⁷⁹ 'The Heedless Child: What He Means to the Motorist', *The Manchester Guardian*, 9 October 1928, p. 8.

⁸⁰ *Highway Act*.

effect' on the child and great appreciation from the adults.⁸¹ Even so, of 1,828 cases that were heard in the eight Metropolitan Juvenile Courts in 1930, over a third related to playing in the street, while in the subsequent five years over one thousand cases relating to street play were heard in court.⁸² This practice was not without its critics however. For Nancy Astor MP, speaking in the House of Commons, there was 'no more pitiable sight in life than a child which has been arrested for playing in the street. Of all the pitiable sights that I have seen, that is the most pitiable. Though these children may be fined, we stand convicted.'⁸³

A second response involved attempting to educate children to cope with life on the streets, by bringing the road into the playground. From the 1930s the British government promoted road safety education through school crossing patrols, children's clubs and public education films.⁸⁴ At a local scale, parents also campaigned to improve road safety in their neighbourhoods. In north London, the Seven Sisters Safety Committee fought for safety improvements in Tottenham following the death of two five-year-old girls within a fortnight, both killed on the road by lorries.⁸⁵ A year later, a repurposed version of the playground became a novel attempt to educate the children of north London in road safety.

The first 'model traffic playground' was opened in Lordship Lane Park in Tottenham in 1938. Designed by G.E. Paris, the Borough's Parks Superintendent, it was officially opened by the Minister of Transport and received widespread media publicity.⁸⁶ As a training ground for an automotive society, the traffic playground included nearly a mile of roadway and miniature

⁸¹ National Archives, HO 45/15746, Metropolitan Police, 'Memorandum from "M" Division, Tower Bridge Station Regarding Juvenile Courts, 4 August', 1932, p. 2.

⁸² National Archives, HO 45/15746, Home Office, 'Metropolitan Juvenile Courts Statistics for the Year 1930', 1930.

⁸³ Nancy Astor, *House of Commons Debate, 28 April 1926, Vol.194, Col.2155*.

⁸⁴ Moran, 'Crossing the Road in Britain, 1931-1976'.

⁸⁵ 'Mothers Want Safer Streets', *Daily Mail*, 12 October 1937, p. 11.

⁸⁶ 'Teaching Children Road Safety', *The Times*, 28 July 1938, p. 11; British Pathé Archive, PT440, *Model Traffic Area No. 1* (Pathetones, 1938) <www.britishpathe.com> [accessed 9 July 2020]; H Thornton Rutter, 'The Chronicle of the Car', *Illustrated London News*, 6 August 1938, p. 256.

highway features, including traffic lights, police callbox, road signs and pedestrian crossings, so that it would resemble the conditions children could meet on real roads (Figure 4.3). Children were able to hire model cars or bring their own bicycles to use on the roadways, while playground equipment was located so that other children had to cross the road to get to it.⁸⁷ While the traffic playground was ostensibly designed to educate children in road safety, Superintendent Paris later acknowledged that it was also in part a response to the problem of children annoying adults by riding their bikes around parks.⁸⁸ The model traffic playground was hugely popular with local children and was open until the outbreak of World War Two, when it closed for nearly ten years.⁸⁹ Several other traffic playgrounds were created after the war, including in Dundee, Salford and Scunthorpe, but the adoption of the playground as a tool in road safety education did not become widespread.⁹⁰

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Figure 4.3 Tottenham Model Traffic Area (Journal of Park Administration, 1947)

⁸⁷ 'Tottenham's Contribution to Road Safety', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 3.2 (1938), 95–96.

⁸⁸ G.E. Paris, 'A Children's Playground and Model Traffic Area', *Playing Fields Journal*, 5.2 (1939), 89–96.

⁸⁹ 'Training While They Play: Tottenham's Model Traffic Area', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 12.3 (1947), 85–88.

⁹⁰ 'Dunfermline Trains Bairns in Road Sense', *Dundee Courier*, 28 June 1950, p. 2; 'Road Safety for Children', *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 May 1956, p. 14; 'Royal 12-Day Tour Begins', *The Times*, 28 June 1958, p. 4.

A third response to the problem of child road deaths reversed the assumptions that underpinned the model traffic area and instead brought the playground into the road. Although popular opinion may have been increasingly sympathetic to motorists, a small minority felt that expecting children to take responsibility for their safety on the streets was both unreasonable and unlikely, challenging the prevailing attitude that 'if children are killed, it is their own fault.'⁹¹ Instead, a more radical response involved excluding motor traffic from the streets where children played. The earliest attempts to create safer streets for children's play in Britain has been associated with Salford's Police Chief Constable, Major C.V. Godfrey. He too felt it was impossible to train younger children to keep themselves safe on the roads and the only rational solution was to prevent motor vehicles from using streets when children were most likely to be playing out. As a result, by 1929 over 100 streets in Salford were closed to through traffic after school.⁹² During the 1930s the idea gathered momentum. In 1930, the London and Greater London Playing Fields Association contacted the Metropolitan Police to explore the possibilities of emulating a successful New York street play scheme in the congested areas of London.⁹³ City authorities in New York had first experimented with closing Eldridge Street to motor traffic to create a space for play in 1914 and by 1929 one hundred and sixty five play streets had been created in thirty six cities across the USA.⁹⁴ By 1934, the London Society and the London Safety First Council were calling for street playgrounds to receive greater consideration in the capital.⁹⁵ In 1936, the Interdepartmental Committee on

⁹¹ M.R.M., 'Traffic and Children: Expecting Too Much Wisdom', *The Manchester Guardian*, 2 October 1936, p. 8.

⁹² Cowman, 'Play Streets'.

⁹³ National Archives, MEPO 2/7803, F. R. Bush to Chief Commissioner of Police, letter, 13 February 1930.

⁹⁴ 'Children Revel in Street Playground', *New York Times*, 26 July 1914, p. 11; Will R. Reeves, 'Report of Committee on Street Play', *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, 4.10 (1931), 607–18.

⁹⁵ National Archives, MEPO 2/7803, Metropolitan Boroughs' Standing Joint Committee, 'Proposed Closing of Streets to Traffic for Use of Children', 1934.

Road Safety Among School Children recommended that legislation was needed to enable local authorities to create play streets, particularly for congested neighbourhoods without access to adequate play spaces, eventually resulting in the Street Playgrounds Act of 1938.⁹⁶ By 1950, seventeen local authorities had closed streets for play, with a further eight closures under consideration by the Minister of Transport.⁹⁷

However, for the NPFA, street playgrounds were never an ideal solution to the problems of urban childhood. Playing on the street was seen as unhygienic and a threat to nearby property, while officially sanctioning such activities could even disincentivise local authorities from providing 'proper' play spaces. Moreover, roads represented the economic and circulatory drivers of city prosperity and were increasingly accepted as adult, automotive spaces. However, for a while at least, the problem of providing play space in congested inner cities outweighed these objections and the NPFA lobbied privately in favour of play streets. In 1932, the NPFA produced a draft Private Members Bill for discussion in Parliament and pressured the Home Office, Police and Ministry of Transport to act.⁹⁸ By the mid-1930s, however, the NPFA felt compelled to publicly distance itself from the play street campaign. An editorial in *Playing Fields* in January 1935 firmly stated that closing streets for play was both contrary to organisational policy and inappropriate: 'it is obvious that it is not desirable to create in the mind of any child the impression that a street is a natural or proper place for play.'⁹⁹ In this instance, it seems that the NPFA eschewed pragmatism in favour of an apparently 'natural' principle. But while this self-belief and call to natural principles may have

⁹⁶ Board of Education and Ministry of Transport, *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee (England & Wales) on Road Safety Among School Children*.

⁹⁷ Alfred Barnes, *House of Commons Debate*, 28 March 1950, Vol.473, Col.33.

⁹⁸ National Archives, MEPO 2/7803, Lawrence Chubb to Ernest Holderness, 'Street Closures for Children's Play', 17 October 1932; See NPFA documents in National Archives, MEPO 2/7803, Metropolitan Police, 'Play Streets for Children: General File', 1932.

⁹⁹ 'The Use of Closed Streets as Playgrounds', *Playing Fields Journal*, 3.2 (1935), 35–36.

limited the uptake of play streets in a few instances, it also contributed to the NPFA's subsequent commitment to the creation of 'proper' places to play.

For the NPFA, the only proper response to the problem of child road deaths was to create dedicated spaces that would encourage children to play away from the dangers of the street. Furthermore, such spaces needed to adhere to campaigners' expectations of an appropriate space for play, increasingly a vision dominated by playground technology. As such, it was the presence of manufactured playground equipment, appropriately arranged and safely installed, that determined whether spaces would fulfil their function as a site of safety. This approach chimed with wider expectations about children's place in society. Only a few years after its official inauguration, the NPFA secured considerable financial resources to help deliver this vision and at the same time it increasingly assumed a position of authority in the field of children's play. Within a year of its first national appeal in June 1927, the NPFA secured over £60m (£330,000) and gifts of 157 hectares (388 acres) of land.¹⁰⁰ The most substantial financial support came from the Carnegie UK Trust, which contributed £36.5m (£200,000) as part of its wider efforts to 'give a lead to important new movements of a national character...which at any given moment appear to be of prime importance.'¹⁰¹ The Trust was established by the Scottish-American industrialist Andrew Carnegie in 1913 and had previously supported the creation of public libraries, child welfare schemes and other educational and cultural activities. With widespread political support for the appeal, earlier donations from the King and Queen, and the close match between the objectives of the Carnegie Trust and the perceived value of playgrounds, the donation was understandable, even if the cash amount was substantial.

¹⁰⁰ National Playing Fields Association, *Second Annual Report*, p. 12.

¹⁰¹ Lord Elgin, 'Letter to Sir Arthur Crosfield, Chairman of the NPFA', *NPFA Second Annual Report*, 1927, 12–13.

The Carnegie donation was to be distributed as one-off grants that could only form part of the funding for any given scheme, helping to establish a role for the NPFA in allocating financial support that would continue until the 1960s (the NPFA allocated grants around the world on behalf of the King George's Field Foundation from 1935 to 1965 and administered the National Fitness Fund that was created by the 1937 Physical Training and Recreation Act).¹⁰² Because Carnegie and the NPFA only part-funded schemes, local authorities also needed to raise money from elsewhere, often in the form of loans from central government; one estimate suggests that between 1920 and 1935 the Ministry of Health sanctioned loans for the purchase and construction of parks and playgrounds worth over £4bn (£22m).¹⁰³ Following the success of its national appeals and its administrative role in distributing grants, the Chair of the NPFA, Sir Noel Curtis-Bennett, was able to assert that it had supported the creation of 782 children's playgrounds and over a thousand other recreational facilities in the inter-war years.¹⁰⁴

As well as its involvement in financing play spaces, the NPFA issued advice and guidance on the design and layout of playgrounds to ensure they attracted children away from the street and fulfilled their wider functions. From the outset, the NPFA had established a Grounds and Layout Sub-Committee to provide expert advice and guidance to 'Local Authorities and others who wish to be advised in the matter.'¹⁰⁵ In addition, most inter-war issues of *Playing Field* included articles or commentary specifically on children's playgrounds, along with advice on their arrangement, equipment and supervision. Advice ranged widely in

¹⁰² National Archives, CB 2/24, National Playing Fields Association, 'King George's Fields County Register 1931-1965', 1965; National Archives, CB 1/83, National Playing Fields Association, 'Register of Grants Given under the Physical Training and Recreation Act 1937', 1942.

¹⁰³ Prentice Mawson, 'Public Parks and Playgrounds: A New Conception', p. 7.

¹⁰⁴ Noel Curtis-Bennett, 'Playing Fields in the Post-War Period', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 10.3 (1945), 47-63.

¹⁰⁵ National Playing Fields Association, *First Annual Report*, p. 12.

scope, from advocating ‘the demolition of one or two small houses’ to provide playgrounds in congested areas to the repurposing of churchyards as spaces for play, and generally reinforced the view that playgrounds were ideally situated in ‘some odd corner or other’ to keep children out of the way.¹⁰⁶

In a 1930 article, Brigadier-General Maud, Chair of the NPFA Grounds and Layout Committee and Chief Officer of the LCC Parks Department, argued for the greater provision of equipped playgrounds specifically in parks. He felt that it was not enough to simply provide grassed areas for children to play and instead argued that ‘the best way to keep them out of mischief and amused is to provide gymnasia...well equipped with swings, giant strides and the various forms of modern apparatus now on the market, not forgetting a sand pit...tucked away so that those who do not seek it out will be unconscious of its existence.’¹⁰⁷ At the same time, *Playing Fields* included an increasing number of adverts for play equipment manufacturers from across the UK.¹⁰⁸ This combination of commentary, guidance and advertising meant that the NPFA both contributed to and reflected changing ideas about the way that play spaces were imagined.

Manchester Parks Superintendent W.W. Pettigrew asserted that ‘heavy iron chain swings’ had long been the most popular piece of playground equipment and until 1914 were ‘practically the first equipment provided in every town playground as soon as it was acquired.’¹⁰⁹ From the 1920s, the increasing number of suppliers and diversity of products meant that playgrounds included a wider range of equipment, although the swing had become a key feature in the signification of dedicated places for children to play and in some

¹⁰⁶ ‘Street Accidents to Children’, p. 20; ‘Children’s Corner’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 1.8 (1931), 29.

¹⁰⁷ Maud, ‘Recreation in Public Parks and Open Spaces’, p. 13.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, ‘Adverts for T.M. Gardiner, Spencer Heath and George, B Hirst and Sons, H Hunt and Son, Stewarts and Lloyd, Charles Wicksteed and Co.’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 2.7 (1934).

¹⁰⁹ Pettigrew, *Handbook of Manchester Parks*, p. 14.

cases dominated entire open spaces. LCC parks department records from the late 1930s show that of the ninety open spaces they managed with recreational facilities, forty-nine had dedicated spaces for children to play. These playgrounds included a wide range of manufactured equipment, from giant strides, seesaws and rocking horses to merry-go-rounds, maypoles and ocean waves. Forty-three included a sandpit and twenty-six had a paddling pool. However, the sheer number of swings is perhaps the most remarkable feature of many of these play spaces. Most included an individual pendulum swing or plank swing, but regular swings were still by far the most numerous, with over one thousand provided in total. Large parks, such as Victoria Park (87ha) or Southwark Park (25ha), had over fifty swings each, but even smaller spaces were abundantly equipped. The 1-hectare Newington Recreation Ground in Southwark included 45 swings, leaving little room for other playful activity.¹¹⁰

Aside from this proliferation of swings and play equipment, the question arose as to who was best placed to exercise leadership over these newly engineered play spaces. For nineteenth century campaigners, adult supervision was a must: the MPGA argued insistently that the 'supervision of a judicious caretaker' was needed to 'prevent tyranny and misconduct' in children's playgrounds.¹¹¹ However, by the 1920s, this approach was being challenged by ideas from the developing fields of child psychology and progressive education, which emphasised a supportive rather than supervisory role for adults in the playground. However, this challenge was far from homogenous, particularly among progressive educationalists, and there was considerable debate about the extent to which adults should intervene in children's playful activities. Indeed, the activities of the NPFA in these years

¹¹⁰ London County Council, 'Recreational Facilities'.

¹¹¹ Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, *Twenty Second Annual Report*, p. 35.

highlight the extent to which campaigners sought to rework earlier notions of the playground as a space of physical exercise, adult supervision and order, on the basis of emerging ideas which emphasised play experiences, adult facilitation and varying notions of freedom.

The inter-war period saw a significant growth in psychologically informed approaches to caring for children, including child guidance clinics, progressive nursery education and play groups.¹¹² Although rarely explicitly acknowledged by play space campaigners, the evolution of ideas about child development and the emerging field of psychology helped to shape a more nuanced understanding of children at play, even if the impact on play spaces was less immediately discernible. As early as 1908, the Board of Education Consultative Committee recognised that children under 5 needed specific educational spaces which encouraged movement, play, variety and rest, ideas that were implemented in practice by the nursery school movement.¹¹³ The assumption that children had specific requirements from education and play at different stages of their lives remained central to the work of advocates such as Susan Isaacs, the hugely influential educational psychologist, and the socialist journalist and nursery education campaigner Margaret McMillan.¹¹⁴ Neither Isaacs nor McMillan seem to have been directly involved in the NPFA or wider attempts to promote public play spaces, but play and nature were important themes in their work and it seems likely that they had some influence on ideas about how and where children should play.

McMillan is perhaps best known as a leading campaigner for the provision of nursery schools, but she was also an active member of the Independent Labour Party and Bradford School Board, a socialist journalist, and founder of the Deptford Clinic in south London. While

¹¹² Gordon Lynch, 'Pathways to the 1946 Curtis Report and the Post-War Reconstruction of Children's out-of-Home Care', *Contemporary British History*, 34 (2020), 22–43.

¹¹³ Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England, c.1860-c.1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 113.

¹¹⁴ Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*.

working in Bradford, McMillan introduced child-size furniture and sand trays into school classrooms and after moving to London, she shared social circles with members of the university settlement movement, including Philip Wicksteed, Charles Wicksteed's brother. In 1911 she established the Deptford Clinic, where children were treated for a variety of conditions and initially slept outside in the garden of the clinic to recuperate.¹¹⁵ For McMillan the clinic garden soon became much more than simply somewhere to recover, providing clean air, brightness and movement, as well as protection from the corrupting influence of society and the dangers of nature. For a time, the garden included apparatus to climb on, a lawn to run about on, a sandpit and a rubbish heap, with stones, old iron, assorted pots, and no rules, where children could play freely.¹¹⁶ During the 1920s the role of the garden diminished both in the work of the Clinic and in significance for McMillan, but despite this it seems to have mirrored evolving ideas about the function and design of public play spaces for children, especially the combination of health and education, physical apparatus and sand play. In contrast, playing with junk, in spaces such as adventure playgrounds, would not feature more prominently in either the ideas or practices of play space campaigners until after the Second World War.

The influence of inter-war educational psychologists on playgrounds was in some ways less obvious, but nonetheless significant. By the early twentieth century, educational psychology was a customary feature of most teacher training courses.¹¹⁷ With foundations in the theories and practices of Freud, Froebel, Dewey and Montessori, individuals such as Susan Isaacs and A.S. Neill were promoting and experimenting with alternative approaches to childhood health and education. Isaacs was particularly associated with the nursery

¹¹⁵ Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan, 1860-1931*, p. 101.

¹¹⁶ McMillan Margaret, *The Nursery School* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1921), p. 47.

¹¹⁷ Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*.

movement and shared assumptions with McMillan about the role of infant schools as spaces of education, health and social reform. Her practical experiment in progressive education, the Malting House School (1924-1929), included a large garden, sandpit, tree house and tools for children to use.¹¹⁸ A.S. Neill's Summerhill (1921) took child-centred education to its most extreme, with no formal lessons and an emphasis instead on unstructured play, voluntary participation in activities and an emphasis on individual freedom within a community setting.¹¹⁹ For a time Neill taught at King Alfred's School in London, describing it as the freest school in England at the time, while subsequently arguing that 'the evils of civilisation are due to the fact that no child has ever had enough play.'¹²⁰ Joseph Wicksteed, later headmaster at the same school, combined this focus on play and self-determination with an emphasis on the outdoors, suggesting that the 'garden, field, or woodland' were the ideal places for children's education.¹²¹ These shifts in educational thinking and experiments in progressive education signalled the beginnings of a move away from rote learning, formal teaching and restraint, towards freedom, discovery and a more permissive approach to discipline.¹²²

But while these values may have had little direct influence on the form of playgrounds, they did shape wider attitudes to childhood, particularly an increased awareness of the emotional lives of children and the role of play in child development. The New Education Fellowship promoted these progressive notions of childhood, while the wide-ranging careers of advocates such as Isaacs and the noted psychologist Cyril Burt also helped to popularise aspects of progressive education. Their work in academia, teaching practice, teacher training,

¹¹⁸ Philip Graham, *Susan Isaacs: A Life Freeing the Minds of Children* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹¹⁹ Richard Bailey, *A.S. Neill* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

¹²⁰ A.S. Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child-Rearing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 68.

¹²¹ Joseph H. Wicksteed, *The Challenge of Childhood: An Essay on Nature and Education* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1936), p. 116.

¹²² Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p. 230.

policy development and popular communication, along with their appeal to a wide range of constituencies, including teachers, politicians, scientists and the public, meant they had a ‘powerful and enduring influence’ in education.¹²³ The psychologist, writer and active NPFA member, Mabel Jane Reaney, also promoted these values more broadly, emphasising the place of play in the public realm. In 1919 she argued that there should be a director of play within government to ensure that towns and cities provided spaces for children to partake in ‘free play.’¹²⁴ In her 1927 publication, *The Place of Play in Education*, Reaney stressed the significance of free, ‘natural’ play in children’s mental and physical development, while later articles and conference presentations promoted these values to both popular and specialist audiences.¹²⁵

For playground campaigners, the arena where these emerging ideas had the greatest influence was in discussions about play leadership, an issue that was particularly problematic for the NPFA. Adult involvement in the use of playing fields was relatively straight forward – the rules, regulations and norms of adult team games were well established and could easily be applied to the games of older children and young people, with adults as referees. However, the rules of the playground and the way that adults could or should be involved in children’s informal play had not yet been settled. In an attempt to make sense of the issues and to recommend a way forward, the NPFA established a Sub-Committee on Play Leadership in December 1928.¹²⁶ The committee was chaired by William Melland, Manchester City Councillor, member of the city’s parks committee and leading figure in the Manchester and

¹²³ Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind*, p. 220; Jenny Willan, ‘Revisiting Susan Isaacs – a Modern Educator for the Twenty-First Century’, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 17 (2009), 151–65.

¹²⁴ Mabel Jane Reaney, ‘A Director of Play’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 March 1919, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Mabel Jane Reaney, *The Place of Play in Education* (London: Methuen & Co., 1927).

¹²⁶ National Archives, CB 1/54, National Playing Fields Association, ‘Minutes of the Sub-Committee on Play Leadership 14 December’, 1928.

Salford Playing Fields Society. Other progressive members of the Sub-committee included Miss Spafford from the Ling Association, which had promoted Swedish-inspired gymnastics and physical education since 1899, and Mabel Jane Reaney. The committee also included the apparently authoritarian and insensitive Commander B.T. Coote, Welfare Advisor to the Miners' Welfare Fund (an endowment created from colliery company subscriptions to provide welfare facilities for mining communities including, for example, children's playgrounds in the village of Llanbradach in Glamorgan and Newtongrange in Midlothian).¹²⁷

From the outset, the committee worked to emphasise the urgent need for a system of play leadership, the type of people who would make appropriate leaders, the training they needed and how it could be organised, as well as the need for coordination with both the Board of Education and Local Education Authorities. However, in many ways the committee was clearer about the actions that were needed to develop and promote a system of play leadership than they were about fundamental questions relating to adults' role in children's play or wider uncertainties about the relative importance of nature and nurture, environment and society in children's development.

In July 1933, the committee organised a conference on play leadership to explore some of these issues. Over 100 delegates from across the country attended, but neither the Earl of Derby nor the Earl of Cavan (NPFA Chair and Vice-chair respectively) accepted the invitation to attend.¹²⁸ In a letter read out to conference attendees, the Earl of Derby demonstrated his understanding of adult involvement in play as primarily that of arranging

¹²⁷ W. John Morgan, 'The Miners' Welfare Fund in Britain 1920-1952', *Social Policy and Administration*, 24 (1990), 199–211; 'Miners' Welfare: A Model Playground in Wales', *The Times*, 2 June 1930, p. 11; British Pathé Archive, 634.18, *Lord Chelmsford Opens First Children's Playground to Be Erected under Miners' Welfare Fund in Colliery Districts*, 1926 <www.britishpathe.com> [accessed 3 October 2021].

¹²⁸ National Archives, CB 1/54, National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of the Play Leadership Sub-Committee, 20 October', 1933.

sporting activities: ‘unless games are properly organised they are of very little value to anybody.’¹²⁹ Another conference attendee concurred with Derby’s opinion that games were key, but felt that the inherent characteristics of the British people meant little formal organisation was necessary: ‘...this country which had always been able to “Play the game” could continue to do so without such elaborate organizing.’¹³⁰

In his address to the conference, William Melland attempted to bridge the gap between notions of supervision and leadership. From his experience as a member of the Parks Committee and local playing fields association he felt able to distinguish between the day-to-day management of play spaces and play leadership; park keepers could ensure law and order were maintained but specialist staff were needed for the latter. He felt that the problem had evolved since the 1890s, when slum streets and gangs of hooligans were seen as the most pressing issues, because commercial leisure opportunities such as the cinema had already made considerable progress in attracting children away from playing in the streets. The important issue now was to ensure the playground helped to instil appropriate character traits in children and young people.¹³¹

Miss Spafford, too, emphasised that adult guidance would ensure that the full benefits of the playground were realised. She had initiated the debate about play leadership within the NPFA, sending a memorandum on play leadership to the NPFA Executive Committee that prompted the creation of the Play Leadership Sub-committee. She also presented at the 1933 conference and argued that ‘much good money is being wasted on apparatus such as slides and swings, supplied because empty grounds have not attracted the children’ and that a play

¹²⁹ National Archives, CB 1/54, National Playing Fields Association, ‘Report of Conference on Play Leadership’, 1933, p. 1.

¹³⁰ National Playing Fields Association, ‘Report of Conference on Play Leadership’, p. 19. The reference to ‘Play the game’ perhaps refers to Sir Henry Newbolt’s 1892 poem *Vitai Lampada*.

¹³¹ National Playing Fields Association, ‘Report of Conference on Play Leadership’, p. 14.

leader was far more important.¹³² She stated that ‘the provision of a trained and rightly chosen playleader is the finest equipment a playground can have,’ echoing assertions coming from the USA two decades earlier that organisation rather than equipment was the most important feature of a successful playground.¹³³ She explicitly emphasised the need to learn from the approach adopted in the USA where, by 1925, seventeen thousand paid play leaders were working in 8,608 play areas.¹³⁴ However, her conference paper also revealed the complexities around adult involvement in children’s play. She felt that children’s play should be ‘free’ and ‘guided’ rather than over-organised, but at the same time expected a play leader to ‘prevent roughness and noise and make for order and discipline’ through highly structured activities such as basketmaking and folk dancing.¹³⁵

Mabel Jane Reaney also addressed the conference. She also warned against over-enthusiasm on the part of adults in organising children’s games, particularly for younger children. Through her own teaching experience, she found that children could only be expected to participate in organised games once old enough, stating that ‘cricket is unutterably boring to most boys under eleven or twelve.’¹³⁶ Her conference presentation on ‘The Urgent Need for Trained Play Leaders’ combined concern about the impacts of the modern world on children and the nation, highlighted the problem with existing playgrounds, and proposed solutions inspired by the latest ideas in psychology and child development. In her critique of existing play provision, Reaney argued that playgrounds would be not used or abused unless they were properly supervised and organised.¹³⁷

¹³² National Playing Fields Association, ‘Report of Conference on Play Leadership’, p. 7.

¹³³ National Playing Fields Association, ‘Report of Conference on Play Leadership’, p. 7; Curtis, *Education Through Play*, p. 138.

¹³⁴ National Archives, CB 1/54, National Playing Fields Association, ‘Play Leadership in the United States’, 1933.

¹³⁵ National Playing Fields Association, ‘Report of Conference on Play Leadership’, p. 8.

¹³⁶ Mabel Jane Reaney, ‘Give Youthful Energy Its Outlet’, *Daily Mail*, 23 March 1928, p. 18.

¹³⁷ Reaney, ‘The Urgent Need for Trained Play Leaders’.

In contrast to the somewhat crude adulation of games that other NPFA members drew upon, Reaney argued that childhood recreation was becoming ever more complex, which in turn demanded a more nuanced approach to children's play. In particular, a more scientific understanding of biology, psychology and child development could help to provide better play opportunities and could guide the work of play leaders. First and foremost, she argued that children of different ages engaged in different types of play, an argument rooted in the idea that children gradually developed instinctive play tendencies. Seemingly based on the work of earlier child psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall, she categorised children's play into distinct 'play periods' and identified the activities and leadership that were necessary for each. Children from birth to seven years of age played individually and sand provided a good medium for their expressive play. From seven to nine years old, they became more active but still played individually. From the age of nine to twelve, children became more cooperative and it was here that the play leader could make all the difference between 'a quarrelling herd and a self-respecting team.'¹³⁸ However, despite her claim that these traits were an innate part of every child, she also argued that play leaders needed to 'know the needs of the children and how to satisfy these needs – for the children do not know themselves.'¹³⁹ Reaney argued that a true play leader was 'born, not made' but also that many young women and men, eager for social service, could perform the role if they had a knowledge and love of children.

Overall, the NPFA Play Leadership Sub-Committee argued that the instinct to play was biologically inherent in children, but at the same time found that children did not have the knowledge about how best to play, echoing earlier suggestions that 'we have to teach a nation

¹³⁸ Reaney, 'The Urgent Need for Trained Play Leaders', p. 6.

¹³⁹ Reaney, 'The Urgent Need for Trained Play Leaders', p. 5.

unused and unapt to play.¹⁴⁰ As a result, play leaders were necessary to ensure that children's play achieved everything that campaigners hoped it could. In some ways, the work of the committee was given greater emphasis as the economic crisis of the early 1930s led the NPFA to cut staff and reduce spending. While funding was not available for creating new playgrounds, the NPFA could promote the importance of existing facilities and emphasise the role that play leaders could have in maximising their usefulness.¹⁴¹ At the same time, however, local authorities faced even harsher economic conditions and could rarely justify recruiting play leaders, prompting a debate within the NPFA about the merits and shortcomings of volunteer play leaders.¹⁴² By 1936, the committee reported that six play leadership courses were taking place, while a London course had just finished with over sixty students graduating.¹⁴³ Demonstrations in play leadership continued, including events in Leamington, Leicester and Folkestone, the latter in conjunction with the annual conference of the Institute of Park Administration. However, play leadership remained largely an urban phenomenon. Organisations such as the Kent Rural Community Council did run lectures in play leadership, but more comprehensive training schemes were mainly confined to larger cities, including Birmingham, Glasgow and London.¹⁴⁴ Although ideas about play leadership did not achieve the same prominence as the principle of providing play spaces, the inter-war meeting of progressive educationalists and playground campaigners set the conceptual foundations for the mid-century adventure playground movement and the play worker profession. Just as debates were taking place about the role of adults in children's play, the

¹⁴⁰ 'The Need for Play', *Hospital*, 66 (1919), 52.

¹⁴¹ National Archives, CB 4/1, National Playing Fields Association, *Sixth Annual Report* (1932), p. 11.

¹⁴² National Playing Fields Association, *Sixth Annual Report*, p. 19.

¹⁴³ National Archives, CB 1/54, National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of Play Leadership Committee 23 April', 1936.

¹⁴⁴ National Playing Fields Association, *Sixth Annual Report*, p. 19.

physical form of the playground and the notion that it was a healthy and safe space were being challenged too.

4.3 Problems in the playground

As earlier chapters have shown, the creation of playgrounds could be controversial and invariably echoed wider debates over the use of public space. In the inter-war period too, playgrounds were not always a welcome addition to public spaces and were sometimes perceived as a threat to traditional visions of the way that urban parks should be designed and used. In late 1929, for instance, the NPFA became embroiled in a public dispute between park traditionalists and George Lansbury, an east London MP and recently appointed First Commissioner of Works in the second Labour government. As Commissioner, Lansbury was responsible for the crown estate and soon ‘amazed civil servants with a radical programme of recreational improvements for the public in the royal parks.’¹⁴⁵ His programme, styled Brighter London Parks, focused on providing sporting and cultural facilities and dedicated play spaces for children. By October 1929 he was able to declare that ‘work would be begun almost at once on providing sandpits, swings, ponds, and shelters.’¹⁴⁶ The NPFA were keen to support the initiative and offered over £900,000 (£5,000) to help convert the former exhibition grounds in Hyde Park into playing fields, augmenting three existing sports pitches used by soldiers from the adjacent Kensington Barracks with a further three, and highlighting the enduring connections between representations of sport and military conflict.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ John Shepherd, ‘Lansbury, George (1859-1940), Leader of the Labour Party’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁶ ‘Brighter London Parks: Mr. Lansbury Continues His Tour’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 9 October 1929, p. 17.

¹⁴⁷ ‘Hyde Park Playing Field: £5,000 Offer to Mr. Lansbury’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1929, p. 12; Peter Donaldson, *Sport, War and the British* (London: Routledge, 2020).

However, in response to the plans an editorial in the *Times* expressed in thinly veiled class terms unease about ‘ill-considered innovations’ and ‘mysterious operations’ that would convert ‘one of the most beautiful green stretches of Hyde Park’ into a ‘monstrous imitation of Coney Island or the beach at Blackpool.’¹⁴⁸ Lansbury’s proposals challenged traditional assumptions that emphasised the place of wholesome and genteel recreation within the park boundary, rather than playful amusement. Questions were asked and debates took place in the House of Commons about the plans, and while some felt Lansbury was humanising the office of the First Commissioner of Works, others were concerned about his proposals and their impact on park aesthetics.¹⁴⁹ Anxious correspondents wrote to the *Times* of their horror at the intrusion of football goals and the threat that the wider proposals posed to the principles of ‘peace and beauty and freedom’ which they felt defined the parks.¹⁵⁰ Lansbury felt strongly that a wider public needed facilities in the royal parks and that he ‘could not desecrate them by having too much for the children.’¹⁵¹ NPFA supporters endorsed his plans both in the press and in parliament, stressing that ‘the poor boys and girls of dismal Camden Town’ deserved places to play close to their homes and that a paddling pool, sandpit and seesaw would take up very little room.¹⁵²

The playground had become embroiled in fraught negotiations about the fundamental principles and purposes of public parks and the place of children in such spaces. It seems that

¹⁴⁸ ‘Hyde Park or Coney Island?’, *The Times*, 7 February 1930, p. 15.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Questions in the Commons: The Royal Parks: Mr. Lansbury’s Plans Challenged’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 February 1930, p. 6; John Pybus, *Royal Parks and Pleasure Gardens, House of Commons Debate, 24 February 1930 Vol.235 Col.1909*; ‘Mr. Lansbury and the Royal Parks: Criticism and Defence in Commons’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 25 February 1930, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Mr Lansbury and the Parks: The New Technique: Correspondents’ Protests’, *The Times*, 8 February 1930, p. 13.

¹⁵¹ ‘Mr. Lansbury and the Parks: Hyde Park or Coney Island? Reply to Critics’, *The Observer*, 9 February 1930, p. 17; ‘Mr Lansbury and the London Parks’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 11 February 1930, p. 6.

¹⁵² ‘Mr Lansbury and the Parks: Peace or Playground: The Serpentine Pavilion’, *The Times*, 12 February 1930, p. 15; ‘Mr. Lansbury and the Royal Parks: Criticism and Defence in Commons’.

Lansbury was committed to providing better public facilities for Londoners, but the programme of works also provided an opportunity for him to challenge traditional, elitist visions of the royal parks as bucolic, socially exclusive, natural landscapes in the heart of the city. Both Lansbury and the NPFA emphasised that children had a legitimate claim on public space, contributing to ongoing conversations about parks for the people and what that means. They implicitly argued that parks and playgrounds were about making the city more liveable for everyone and that the provision of dedicated places to play represented an important way for society to recognise and facilitate that claim.

While the introduction of playgrounds may have challenged traditional ideas about what public parks were for and how they should be used, once installed and in use they could also challenge campaigners' rhetoric too. In principle, the playground promised health, education and safety for children, but in practice it could be a space of accidents, incidents and potentially a vector of ill-health. Playground campaigners invariably emphasised a simple binary between dangerous streets and safe playgrounds, but in reality, dedicated play spaces had long represented spaces of risk to children. Early twentieth century newspaper reports show that a falling bell, an explosion and a runaway horse all injured and killed children in purportedly safe play spaces.¹⁵³ The public playground, too, could be a space where children were exposed to life-changing and sometimes fatal events.

Play equipment in particular had long balanced a fine line between providing exhilaration and ensuring safety. Manufacturers often emphasised the modern technological features of their products, including Wicksteed's 'hydraulic non-bumper see-saw' and 'patent safety arrangement' that prevented over-swinging on the Ocean Wave, as well as Spencer,

¹⁵³ 'Fall of a School Bell: Child Killed in the Playground', *The Manchester Guardian*, 29 November 1906, p. 7; 'Explosion in a City Schoolyard: Eight Boys Injured, Accident during Repair of Cable', *The Manchester Guardian*, 29 May 1924, p. 9; 'Runaway Horse Kills Kid', *The Manchester Guardian*, 4 December 1924, p. 9.

Heath and George's 'safety coaster slide' with safety rails and wire cage underneath.¹⁵⁴ But despite these claims to technological advancement, children were still injured and sometimes even killed while playing in the playground. Before the First World War, local newspapers occasionally reported on accidents in the playground, most commonly in accounts of court proceedings and victims' claims for compensation. For example, ten-year-old James Prosser sustained injuries after he fell from a swing in McLeod Street Playground, Edinburgh; a six-year-old girl was injured after being hit by a swing seat in Manchester's Queens Park; and Albert Davage, aged nine, was killed in Charlton Kings Playground in Gloucester when a giant stride collapsed.¹⁵⁵ The outcome of these cases was by no means certain as the legal system attempted to establish principles about who was liable for accidents, the parameters against which these cases could be judged, and the damages that might reasonably be awarded.

However, within a wider landscape of post-war concern for safety, the problem of playground accidents became more pressing. During the First World War, heightened anxiety about the human and financial costs of industrial and road accidents resulted in the creation of a number of organisations that campaigned to improve safety, including the London 'Safety First' Council (1916) which in time became the National 'Safety First' Association and ultimately the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA).¹⁵⁶ However, it was during the inter-war period that playground accidents in particular received greater publicity, particularly in relation to the issue of legal liability and associated financial compensation for

¹⁵⁴ Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Playground Equipment', p. 10; Spencer, Heath and George Ltd, 'Playground Apparatus, 1932 Improved Models', *Playing Fields Journal*, 1.8 (1932), xiii.

¹⁵⁵ 'The Swing Accident in an Edinburgh Playground', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 26 January 1905, p. 4; 'Corporations and Public Playgrounds: A Question of Liability', *The Manchester Guardian*, 10 January 1905, p. 12; 'Fatal Accident in Charlton Kings Playground', *Gloucester Citizen*, 19 December 1912, p. 5.

¹⁵⁶ 'Success of "safety First" Campaign', *The Times*, 29 March 1924, p. 15; C. G. Ingall, 'Industrial Accident Prevention', *The Journal of State Medicine*, 35.6 (1927), 360–65; Laybourn and Taylor, 'Traffic Accidents and Road Safety'.

victims (the harm caused to children by such accidents did not generate wider concern, nor the interest of RoSPA and others, until the 1960s). It is difficult to conclude whether injuries and fatalities in playgrounds became more numerous, but concern and coverage both seem to have increased. In 1931 the NPFA had felt compelled to include a commentary in *Playing Fields* on the problem of legal liability for accidents and highlighted that the Miners' Welfare Committee had already secured insurance for its play spaces.¹⁵⁷ As a result, the NPFA worked with insurance brokers to organise a specialist policy that other open space managers could purchase to help mitigate the financial consequences of legal proceedings linked to playground injuries.

Despite this attempt to provide reassurance, reports of court cases where damages were awarded to injured children and their families continued to 'occasion a good deal of alarm' among park managers throughout the 1930s (and beyond).¹⁵⁸ Presumably this alarm was in part caused by the level of damages sometimes awarded by the courts when playground providers were found to be at fault. When four-year-old Peter Coates was paralysed after being injured on a slide in Rawtenstall Recreation Ground in Lancashire, a judge initially awarded £280,000 (£1,500) in damages, which was subsequently doubled on appeal.¹⁵⁹ However, even in the face of seemingly sizeable awards of damages, some park managers felt that it was probably more cost effective to accept the risk of a claim than to go to the expense of modifying equipment or increasing the number of playground attendants.¹⁶⁰ In general, cases seem to have been judged against the principle that

¹⁵⁷ 'Insuring against Third Party Risks: Playground Accidents', *Playing Fields Journal*, 1.3 (1931), 13.

¹⁵⁸ 'A Recreation Ground Swing Accident', *Playing Fields Journal*, 2.6 (1934), 266.

¹⁵⁹ 'Crown Court: £1,500 Damages for Boy, Playground Accident', *The Manchester Guardian*, 22 December 1936, p. 5; 'Child's Injury in Playground: Damages Doubled, Corporation Loses Appeal', *The Manchester Guardian*, 14 July 1937, p. 15.

¹⁶⁰ National Archives, WORKS/16/846, Royal Parks, 'Memoranda in Response to an Article in the Times, Dated 18 November 1933, on a Recreation Ground Swing Accident in Walthamstow', 1933.

authorities were not liable for the consequences of dangers that were reasonably obvious to children.¹⁶¹ But even though authorities were seldom found liable for playground accidents – and the NPFA keenly promoted such ‘successes’ – nervousness among park managers has been an enduring feature of public playground provision.¹⁶²

Another threat to both individual children and the idea of the playground as a safe and healthy space was the ‘indecent’ behaviour of a small number of adults, resonating with enduring anxieties about the unhealthy aspects of public space use. In 1913 the Metropolitan Radical Federation attempted to raise awareness of the ‘frequent indecent offences towards children in the Parks and Open Spaces of London’ and called for an increase in the number of park keepers to prevent such offences.¹⁶³ A year later, the LCC Education Committee did much the same (perhaps in part explained by James Jeffery’s role as both Progressive Party LCC Councillor and Chair of the Metropolitan Radical Federation).¹⁶⁴ After consulting their records, park administrators found that there were on average just nine reported cases each year across all of London’s royal parks and they concluded that the existing contingent of park constables were as effective as was reasonably possible.¹⁶⁵

While the number of reported cases was low, for those children who were victims of sexual assault the issue was understandably distressing and often mentally and physically harmful. The written reports produced by park keepers provide troubling accounts of children’s experiences, often recording perpetrators attempts to entice children away from

¹⁶¹ ‘Court of Appeal’, *The Times*, 15 March 1934, p. 4.

¹⁶² ‘Playground Risks’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 3.1 (1934), 3–4; Play Safety Forum, *Managing Risk in Play Provision: A Position Statement* (London: Children’s Play Council, 2002); David Ball, Tim Gill, and Bernard Spiegall, *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide* (London: National Children’s Bureau, 2012).

¹⁶³ Garrity, ‘Letter to Chief Commissioner of Works Regarding Indecent Offences towards Children Metropolitan Radical Federation’.

¹⁶⁴ National Archives, WORKS/16/532, Deputy Education Officer to Board of Works, ‘Inadequate Supervision of Open Spaces’, 17 June 1914.

¹⁶⁵ Royal Parks, ‘Prevention of Offences against Children (Various Minutes and Notes)’.

the playground, but also documenting the details of sexual assault.¹⁶⁶ The reports almost exclusively record male perpetrators and female victims, although the extent to which contemporary gender norms may have shaped attitudes towards and reporting of sexual assault against children is unclear. Either way, male strangers were widely seen as the main threat to children. In Manchester, the parks department recognised the need to take action to prevent men from ‘interfering with or molesting children’ and so, somewhat clumsily, banned children’s fathers from entering playgrounds with the rest of their family.¹⁶⁷ In London, the LCC Education Officer began coordinating the response of park authorities and the police to cases of sexual assault and also attempted to support victims in the aftermath of such crimes.¹⁶⁸ Although the number of cases appears to have been very low, their social significance ensured that the connection between the playground and fear of strangers would be a recurring one.

Just as dangerous adults and defective equipment could make the playground a hazardous place, so too could less visible perils. These threats were often associated with the fabric of the playground and in particular the materials that formed the surfaces where children played. Gravel-surfaced areas for games, also known as dry playgrounds, were installed in a number of London parks in the early 1920s, including Clissold Park and London Fields. Soon concerns were raised by the Medical Officer of Health about children inadvertently inhaling dust while using them, leading the parks department to carry out a number of experiments in an attempt to tackle the problem.¹⁶⁹ Much more troubling than dust, however, was sand.

¹⁶⁶ National Archives, WORKS/16/532, Royal Parks, ‘Park Keepers’ Reports of Offences against Children’, 1932.

¹⁶⁷ Pettigrew, *Handbook of Manchester Parks*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁸ National Archives, WORKS/16/532, London County Council Education Department to Bailiff of the Royal Parks, ‘Child Molestation Cases’, 27 January 1932.

¹⁶⁹ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/038, London County Council, ‘Playgrounds - Dry’, 1927.

Although seaside resorts, particularly those with extensive sandy beaches, were often characterised as spaces of restorative health, when transported to the city the relationship between sand and health was far less straightforward, particularly for park managers.¹⁷⁰ The propensity for sandpits to harbour dirt, debris and disease-carrying pests meant that for some park staff they were seen as a ‘menace to health.’¹⁷¹ Inspired by anthropologist Mary Douglas’ conception of dirt as matter out of place, Canadian geographers, Ann Marie Murnaghan and Laura Shillington have recently argued that our conception of urban sand has shifted over the course of a century, from purposeful to problematic.¹⁷² They have suggested that in the late nineteenth century sand had a rightful place in the city as a symbol of education and health, whereas by the late twentieth century urban sand was increasingly understood as unhealthy, dirty and out of place. However, sand’s journey from pure to pathogenic has not been a straightforward, gradual, linear transformation. Instead, almost from the outset public sandpits have been seen as troublesome spaces where insects and infestations could lurk, as well as hopeful sites of learning, interaction with nature and occasionally even entertainment.

The idea that sand could be educational had its origins in Friedrich Froebel’s kindergarten and child-centred educational theories of the early nineteenth century. In his kindergarten, originally a metaphorical rather than a physical space, a shallow box of sand inside the classroom provided a practical tool for helping young children to develop physical skills.¹⁷³ Early accounts of the US playground movement suggest that piles of sand in German

¹⁷⁰ John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

¹⁷¹ F. A. Boddy, ‘Playgrounds for Children’, *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 3.11 (1939), 345.

¹⁷² Ann Marie Murnaghan and Laura Shillington, ‘Digging Outside the Sandbox: Ecological Politics of Sand and Urban Children’, in *Children, Nature, Cities*, ed. by Ann Marie Murnaghan and Laura Shillington (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹⁷³ Friedrich Froebel, *Froebel Letters: Edited with Explanatory Notes and Additional Matter by A. H. Heinemann*. (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1893).

public parks inspired a visitor from Boston to create 'sand gardens' in her home city in 1885.¹⁷⁴

Joseph Lee, the President of the Playground Association of America, would mystically claim that playing with sand connected children with their primeval ancestors, reflecting contemporary ideas about the evolutionary role of play in child development:

*Sand is the magic material at this age. They seem to remember the long amphibious ages when our sea-born ancestors first made good their footing on the beach and to recognize their ancient playmate. Sand is the silent comrade who understands, to whom children confide their notions of how the universe should be arranged.*¹⁷⁵

In Britain, the organisation that promoted Froebel's pedagogy, the Froebel Society, had endorsed the value of sand as an educational tool since its formation in 1874, but the first mention of sand in a public park seems to be in May 1893, when it was seen as something that was primarily enjoyable rather than necessarily instructive. The Superintendent of Victoria Park reported to the LCC Parks Committee that 'during the year a novel mode of enjoyment has been provided for the little children of the East End of London in the form of a sea-sand pit which is apparently much appreciated by the little ones.'¹⁷⁶ This imagined connection between the urban sandpit and the seaside endured and seems to have reflected wider ideas about both the role of parks in bringing nature into the city and the recreational value of public spaces. In 1898, J.J. Sexby, Parks Superintendent of the LCC, remarked that 'nothing can be pleasanter than to stroll round from point to point and watch the happy little crowds disporting themselves on swings and see-saws, sailing their boats on the waters of the lake, of digging in the sand-pit, apparently quite as happy as though they were within sight and sound of the sea-waves.'¹⁷⁷ However, the image he shared of the sandpit in Victoria Park,

¹⁷⁴ Rainwater, *Play Movement in the United States*.

¹⁷⁵ Joseph Lee, 'Play for Home', *The Playground*, 6.5 (1912), 146–58 (p. 152).

¹⁷⁶ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/104, London County Council, 'Report of the Parks and Open Space Committee', 1893, p. 5.

¹⁷⁷ Sexby, *Municipal Parks*, p. 556.

with well-dressed adults and orderly rows of well-behaved children, suggests a structured form of recreation that reflected traditional ideas about rational park behaviour (Figure 4.4).

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Figure 4.4 The Children's Sandpit, Victoria Park (J.J. Sexby, Municipal Parks, 1898)

As these values were gradually replaced in the playground by an emphasis on enjoyment and excitement in the early twentieth century, the sandpit might have become redundant. However, although expectations around the value and use of sand shifted, sandpits became increasingly common in both the rhetoric of campaigners and play spaces themselves. Writing in 1907, the journalist Annesley Kenealy felt that a heap of sand was an essential feature of a properly equipped playground, while twenty years later Evelyn Sharp stated in her account of London childhoods that of all the thrills supplied in a modern playground, 'the greatest of them all is undoubtedly the sand-pit.'¹⁷⁸ In 1915, fourteen of the thirty-one play spaces managed by the LCC included a sandpit, while by the 1930s there was sand in forty-three of their forty-nine playgrounds.¹⁷⁹ Sandpits even featured in debates in

¹⁷⁸ Kenealy, 'Playgrounds in the Parks: A Plea for the Children'; Evelyn Sharp, *The London Child* (London: John Lane, 1927), p. 95.

¹⁷⁹ London County Council, 'Parks and Open Spaces: Regulations Relating to Games, Together with Particulars of the Facilities Afforded for General Recreation'; London County Council, 'Recreational Facilities'.

the House of Commons, with First Commissioner of Works, George Lansbury, stating that ‘anyone who has seen children from the slum areas enjoying themselves in the sandpits will agree that the provision of these playgrounds has been a very good thing indeed.’¹⁸⁰

At the same time, however, the place of sand in the playground was not straightforward. The popularity of sandpits among park users, and most likely a degree of class prejudice, meant that sand was often seen as problematic by park authorities. By 1909, parks staff were disinfecting the Kensington Gardens sandpit with permanganate of potash once a week, turning the sand over once a month and replacing it entirely once a year.¹⁸¹ Commercial versions of permanganate of potash, such as Condyl’s Fluid, were promoted for their ability to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and purify crowded places, hinting at the concerns that park staff had about the potentially pathogenic nature of sand. The sandpit also challenged established expectations about park aesthetics and the forms of nature that were welcome there. In 1930, the St James’ Park sandpit appeared ‘very trodden down and untidy’ and park managers felt that more frequent upkeep was needed.¹⁸² The improved maintenance regime would make the park appear more respectable, while also apparently helping to deter fleas. It is not clear what type of fleas the authorities were concerned about (sand fleas, for example, live in the tropical and subtropical areas of America and Africa) nor whether fleas were actually a problem, but increased maintenance would deter this undesirable fauna none the less. Park Superintendent Pettigrew went even further, suggesting that proper maintenance was only one part of ensuring a sandpit was safe. He argued that they also needed to be ‘fenced in and only open to children when a play leader

¹⁸⁰ George Lansbury, *House of Commons Debate*, 24 February 1930, Vol.235, Col.1894.

¹⁸¹ Royal Parks, ‘Kensington Gardens Children’s Playground’.

¹⁸² National Archives, WORKS/16/1504, Royal Parks, ‘St. James’s Park. Children’s Playground and Paddling Facilities’, 1930.

(preferably a young woman) is present to look after them' and that without these additional arrangements, the sandpit 'might easily become a menace to their health.'¹⁸³

4.4 Designing the perfect play experience

While the hazards hidden in the playground underlined the contested meanings of healthy spaces, debates also continued about the form and function of the playground. The sandpit may have become an essential feature, but wider approaches to the design and layout of playgrounds were being challenged too. As we have seen, advocates of play leadership tended to emphasise adult involvement rather than provision of equipment as the key feature of a successful play space. In addition, some campaigners, town planners and noted designers were also beginning to question the predominance of manufactured play equipment in playgrounds, and the associated lack of beauty and exclusion of nature.

During the 1920s, nature and exercise had appeared together less frequently in campaigners' rhetoric, as organisations increasingly focused on promoting one or the other. As a notable advocate of children's physical exercise, the NPFA's rhetoric rarely promoted the benefits of closer interaction with the natural environment, beyond a general sense that fresh air was important to children's health.¹⁸⁴ In contrast, organisations such as the London Children's Garden Fund went beyond the benefits of fresh air by providing opportunities for children to interact closely with nature, in some ways taking on the mantle of helping poor children to experience curated forms of the natural world in the city. However, this separation of nature and play was short-lived and playground campaigners and landscape architects

¹⁸³ Pettigrew, *Municipal Parks*, p. 16.

¹⁸⁴ David Niven, 'The Parks and Open Spaces of London', in *London of the Future*, ed. by Aston Webb (London: The London Society, 1921), pp. 235–50 (p. 235).

once more emphasised the need to include space for both exercise and interaction with nature in parks and play spaces.

As someone involved in advising on the details of play space creation, NPFA committee member Commander Coote embodied many of these ideas and demonstrated how they influenced the practice of providing for children's play. He was critical of earlier versions of the playground, both in its 'levelled and gravelled' and 'equipped' forms. He felt that 'there have been too many unattractive asphalt areas, congested with apparatus' and instead argued that the 'children's playground should be no less beautiful to look at than a well-kept bowling green.'¹⁸⁵ For Coote, equipment and the wider playground should be attractive as well as functional. However, he was not calling for the removal of apparatus from the ideal playground, something that would have been incongruous, given that he had seemingly worked with play equipment manufacturers Spencer, Heath and George to design the 'Commander B. T. Coote Model Combination Climbing Frame.'¹⁸⁶ Instead, he called for 'natural beauty' to be incorporated into play spaces as well. In many ways this echoed the work of the MPGA in the 1880s and 1890s, when they attempted to provide gardens where children could experience physical activity and interaction with natural features, but with adaptations for the modern world. In his vision of the playground, the limitations of equipment and in particular the apparent monotony of swings and slides would be supplemented by nature. Playground equipment would be combined with grass, flowers, shrubs and trees, ponds, sandpits and fountains. At the same time, a play leader would 'make the playground a magnetic force to draw the children away from the dangers and excitements of the streets.'¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Coote, 'Children's Playgrounds - Their Equipment and Use', p. 103.

¹⁸⁶ Spencer, Heath and George Ltd, 'Playground Apparatus, 1932 Improved Models'.

¹⁸⁷ Coote, 'Children's Playgrounds - Their Equipment and Use', p. 105.

This vision of the playground received a further boost - and a specific moniker - with the publication of *PlayParks* by the Coronation Planting Committee in 1937. The committee had been established to promote horticultural and arboricultural celebrations for George VI's coronation and a guide to the design of play spaces might therefore seem incongruous. However, the committee was chaired by landscape architect Marjory Allen and included representatives from a wide range of organisations that also supported the play space cause, including the NPFA, Institute of Park Administration, Town Planning Institute and the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association. Although it undoubtedly focused on commemorative planting schemes, committee members also made use of this high-profile period of celebration to promote a revised vision for children's play spaces.¹⁸⁸

PlayParks was written by Thomas Adams, the Chair of the technical sub-committee of the Coronation Planting Committee. However, he was also President of the Institute of Landscape Architects and an influential town planner who had worked on Letchworth Garden City, planned the rebuilding of Halifax in Nova Scotia, initiated a planning system for Canada and planned the reconstruction and expansion of New York City.¹⁸⁹ In the foreword to *PlayParks*, the industrialist and philanthropist Lord Wakefield emphasised young children's 'right to play in the fresh air in perfect safety' and Adams went on to show how this could be achieved in practice, at the same time as emphasising the importance of nature and staking a claim for the role of skilled designers in the creation of children's play spaces. If 'the street of tethered children,' where parents secured young family members to posts with a length of

¹⁸⁸ Coronation Planting Committee, *The Royal Record of Tree Planting, the Provision of Open Spaces, Recreation Grounds & Other Schemes Undertaken in the British Empire and Elsewhere, Especially in the United States of America, in Honour of the Coronation of His Majesty King George VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939).

¹⁸⁹ Michael Simpson, 'Adams, Thomas (1871–1940), Town and Country Planner', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

rope, represented the problem for Adams, then the verdant lawns, trees and shrubs of a village green represented something of an imagined ideal (Figure 4.5). In contrast to the street and existing playgrounds which were often ‘hard, bleak, and uninteresting,’ a well-equipped and well-organised playpark would provide ‘a sense of liberty,’ helping to develop ‘proper habits of play’ and promoting an appreciation of natural beauty.¹⁹⁰ In contrast to earlier conceptions of the playground, Adams emphasised that play spaces needed to foster gentle, imaginative and quiet play, as he felt there had been a tendency in the past to overemphasise the benefits of energetic physical activity.

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Figure 4.5 The street of tethered children (Thomas Adams, PlayParks, 1937)

For Adams, playparks were as important as schools in the education of children, but they also offered wider benefits to society. As well as ensuring the proper physical and mental development of children, playparks would help to reduce crime, lessen noise nuisance,

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Adams, *PlayParks with Suggestions for Their Design, Equipment and Planting* (London: Coronation Planting Committee, 1937), pp. 10–11.

increase property values, contribute to the development of a civilised community, provide indirect economic value through a physically fit and happy workforce, and contribute towards the modernisation of rural areas.¹⁹¹ Adams felt that to realise this range of social benefits, a well-designed and properly supervised playpark would combine the best elements of the playground, park and garden. It needed natural features such as trees, rocks and pools to enable imaginary games like camping and hunting, attractive planting that would foster an appreciation of nature, as well as some playground equipment, which occupied the minimum space necessary. A playground most definitely did not need ‘repulsive-looking fences’ which Adams felt were a waste of money.¹⁹² In many ways, *PlayParks* represented a synthesis of advocates’ thinking on dedicated play spaces, why society needed them, how they would benefit and nurture children, along with detailed considerations for their design.

While the influence of the NPFA and other play space campaigners involved in the Coronation Planting Committee is evident, the publication of *PlayParks* can also be seen as a call for the greater involvement of skilled designers, notably landscape architects, in the design and layout of children’s play spaces. In the 1920s and 1930s individual landscape architects had been involved in the design and development of public parks. Perhaps most notably, the renowned landscape architect Thomas Mawson prepared designs for numerous public spaces around the world and his proposals often included large areas set aside for active recreation. Despite this, the wider landscape design profession seems to have rarely engaged with public park design, let alone spaces for children’s play.¹⁹³ Mawson’s son, Edward Prentice Mawson, seems to have been a solitary, and hardly prolific, exception. He

¹⁹¹ Adams, *PlayParks*, pp. 15–20.

¹⁹² Adams, *PlayParks*, p. 26.

¹⁹³ Ian C. Laurie, ‘Public Parks and Spaces’, in *Fifty Years of Landscape Design 1934-84*, ed. by Sheila Harvey and Stephen Rettig (London: The Landscape Press, 1985), pp. 63–78.

had worked with Thomas Adams on *PlayParks*, preparing representative designs for large and small, urban and rural playparks, complete with planting, enhanced natural features and playground equipment. In 1935, Prentice Mawson also contributed an article to the trade journal *Parks, Golf Courses and Sports Grounds* where he emphasised the importance of parks and children's playgrounds for promoting public health, physical fitness and national prestige.¹⁹⁴

Despite the efforts of the Mawson family, parks and playgrounds were of little interest to the wider landscape profession, perhaps reflecting an antipathy among designers towards landscapes for the masses and public spaces for children in particular. The Institute of Landscape Architects (ILA) was formed in 1929 and it was only after the publication of *PlayParks* in 1937 that children's play spaces were mentioned in its quarterly journal, *Landscape and Garden*. Even then, it was generally in a begrudging tone and sought to minimise their impact on the landscape. The first mention came in the summer of 1938 in the text of a lecture that a Captain J. D. O'Kelly gave to the ILA.¹⁹⁵ O'Kelly briefly mentioned children's play spaces alongside a commentary on recreational facilities more generally, noting that space for children's activities should be properly planned, well-planted, attractive to the child, but also isolated within the park to limit noise nuisance to other park users.

A second mention came in spring 1939 when a W. R. Pertwee contributed an article entitled *Designing Children's Gymnasia*. While recognising the apparently irrefutable arguments in favour of the need for dedicated spaces for children to play, Pertwee felt that their appearance left much to be desired: 'from an aesthetic point of view, children's gymnasia are one of the least satisfactory features in public parks...this is not only the fault of

¹⁹⁴ Prentice Mawson, 'Public Parks and Playgrounds: A New Conception'.

¹⁹⁵ J. D. O'Kelly, 'Parks and Playgrounds', *Landscape and Garden*, 5 (1938), 94–95.

the apparatus...but also choice of site, surroundings, and [the lack of] a properly considered plan.¹⁹⁶ Pertwee's use of the older term 'gymnasia' perhaps reflected a last glance back to the nineteenth-century conception of the playground as somewhere associated predominantly with physical exercise, or it may have been a product of contemporary concerns with the physical fitness of the nation and a widespread interest in physical culture during the 1930s.¹⁹⁷ Either way, Pertwee's design advice was certainly not child-centric. It included suggestions to plant horse chestnuts to dampen the noise made by children and the use of thorny berberis in place of fencing because 'its natural protective armament [is] quite effective against children.'¹⁹⁸ The amount of unsightly playground equipment was to be limited, particularly those items with superfluous knobs on, but as a consequence 'plenty of space should be allowed for children to queue up...and await their turn.'¹⁹⁹ If any inter-war landscape architects were thinking about the provision of play spaces, they did not imagine that these spaces would take centre stage. Rather, an air of architectural elitism meant playgrounds should be hidden, protected from destructive children, and the visual and aural disturbance they created needed to be minimised.

While few landscape designers may have engaged with the issue of play space design, other professions were much more willing to discuss the purpose and form of playgrounds (and keen to host adverts from commercial playground equipment suppliers too). If Prentice Mawson had been right to suggest that the role of a nineteenth-century Parks Superintendent had largely been a reward for loyal service in the parks department, by the 1930s this certainly did not seem to be the case and a well organised and vocal parks profession had developed.

¹⁹⁶ W. R. Pertwee, 'Designing Children's Gymnasia', *Landscape and Garden*, 6 (1939), 28–31 (p. 28).

¹⁹⁷ Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain'.

¹⁹⁸ Pertwee, 'Designing Children's Gymnasia', p. 29.

¹⁹⁹ Pertwee, 'Designing Children's Gymnasia', p. 30.

The Institute for Park Administration was formed in 1926 and its monthly magazine, the *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, was involved in promoting play spaces from its very first edition in June 1936. The first page of this first edition was a full-page advert for the playground equipment of Charles Wicksteed & Co., including a photo of three spectacular-looking slides.²⁰⁰ The following month's edition included several articles which offered advice on playground layout and another which espoused the benefits of play leadership. After that, every edition included adverts for playground equipment manufacturers. From April 1937 until well after the Second World War, the entire front cover was devoted to a Wicksteed advert, while regular articles considered the role of the playground in relation to a range of topics including public health, slum clearance, town planning, war-time child evacuation from cities, and juvenile delinquency.

These articles emphasised the role of the playground in remedying the failures of the past, tackling the problems of modern life, as well as offering hope for the future. However, it also seems likely that the commercial viability of journals such as *Park Administration* was at least in part dependent on advertising income. Editors most likely had to balance the opinions expressed in the journal with the expectations of advertisers and as a result criticism of the playground was invariably limited to a call for more planting or a greater sensitivity to their location. By 1936, the editor felt that the problem of providing appropriate playgrounds 'which will really please children and at the same time prevent them from breaking their precious young necks' had been solved 'as far as humanly possible' by 'those two kindly wizards, Charles Wicksteed & Co. and B. Hirst & Sons.'²⁰¹ Despite the efforts of landscape architects to reintroduce nature into the playground, the parks trade press played a

²⁰⁰ 'Advert for Wicksteed & Co. Playground Equipment', p. 1.

²⁰¹ 'Seen at the Public Health Exhibition', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 1 (1936), 247 (p. 247).

significant role in promoting and reinforcing a vision for the playground centred on manufactured playground equipment.

4.5 Conclusion

The National Playing Fields Association became an important advocate in promoting dedicated places for children to play in the 1920s and 1930s. Through its lobbying, funding, publicity and guidance it helped to shape contemporary ideas about what a playground was for, how it should be designed and how adults should be involved in its use. At times it endorsed conservative social values, but it also highlighted the importance of commercial technologies and rational planning in shaping a better future for both children and the nation. Its national coverage and sense of authority contributed to the standardisation of playground spaces across the country. At the same time, as society increasingly claimed that the streets belonged to motorists, the NPFA successfully promoted the playground as a key tool in protecting children from life-threatening aspects of the modern world. As a result, the number of children's playgrounds increased significantly and a new orthodoxy, centred on manufactured swings in particular, became more firmly established in the minds of administrators. By the 1930s, the LCC managed nearly fifty equipped playgrounds, authorities in Manchester administered twenty-six, with many more provided by municipalities elsewhere.²⁰² However, the conviction that the playground was a space of health, education and safety obscured the threat to children from accidents, incidents and other maladies. The NPFA continued to operate during the Second World War, campaigning for play spaces for evacuees and lobbying for measures to protect children playing on the street during blackouts. The debates that it facilitated in the inter-war years around play leadership, in

²⁰² J Richardson, 'A Century of Playing Fields Progress', *Playing Fields*, 6.4 (1946), 155–60.

conjunction with wartime damage to urban areas, would create an atmosphere that was conducive to the formation of post-war adventure playgrounds and a greater engagement by design professionals in the spaces where children should play.

5 Orthodoxy and adventure: shifting playground utopias

In the previous chapter we saw how playgrounds were created in increasing numbers during the inter-war period, while the work of advocates and manufacturers resulted in an increasingly standardised playground ideal. Children's playgrounds were imagined as exciting and healthy spaces of leisure, as well as a space of safety from the life-threatening dangers of the street. Whether in green spaces or on housing estates, the parks profession was largely responsible for providing and laying out play spaces. Used to purchasing specialist technical equipment like mowers or greenhouses, they quickly adopted a similar approach with the playground, procuring manufactured equipment from commercial suppliers. As a result, the equipped playground with its swings, slides and roundabouts became the orthodox image of the place where children should play. As we shall see, children's playgrounds like public spaces in general were affected by the Second World War, but the fundamental assumption that playgrounds were necessary remained powerful. The creation of the post-war welfare state set the context for developments in mid-century playground thinking and helped to embed the playground more firmly into visions of both urban childhood and the urban environment. In considering these issues, this chapter addresses the general omission of the playground from otherwise comprehensive accounts of child welfare and the evolution of the welfare state.¹ However, if the principle of the playground became more firmly established, the orthodox form was seen as increasingly problematic. For its critics, the asphalt surface and metal equipment meant there was little room for nature, while the provision of apparatus that solely facilitated physical activity was seen as inadequate in meeting the holistic developmental needs of children.

¹ Hendrick, *Child Welfare*; Swenarton, Avermaete, and van den Heuvel, *Architecture and the Welfare State*; Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

In some ways, post-war campaigners displayed considerable continuity with the rhetoric of earlier playground advocates. They emphasised the detrimental social consequences of street play, particularly the perceived relationship between the street and delinquency, and the educational and health benefits that interaction with appropriate forms of nature offered for urban children. In other ways, their campaign rhetoric differed significantly and amplified the conceptions of childhood and playground critiques that had first appeared in the 1930s. The playground was still a space of childhood health, but rather than simply focus on the promotion of physical exercise, campaigners expected the playground to support children's cognitive and emotional development too. In addition, campaigners sought a far wider range of ways for children to interact with nature. Greenery and planting remained one aspect of the natural world that they sought to recreate, but opportunities to interact with mud and sand, water and wood also became increasingly significant. The fun and excitement that Charles Wicksteed felt his playground equipment represented was replaced among post-war campaigners by an emphasis on the need for the playground to facilitate children's freedom, creativity and self-expression.

This chapter shows how the NPFA continued to play an important role in coordinating playground advocacy and sharing knowledge. But at the same time, it highlights the increasing influence of a wider range of individuals and professions on play space design and provision. In particular, the chapter shows how town planners routinely allocated specific sites for play in their visions for a modern urban environment and the playground became an essential and everyday feature of both imagined and realised new urban communities. At the same time, child welfare campaigners and sociologists increasingly emphasised the need for a greater sensitivity to the diverse play interests of children and their perceived developmental needs. Campaigners, architects and artists imagined new playground forms which promoted

children's cognitive, emotional, physical and social development. Marjory Allen (Lady Allen of Hurtwood, 1897-1976) in particular became a figurehead for alternative visions of the playground. In considering these wider influences on the playground form and function, this chapter seeks to expand the spatial and temporal scope of existing historiography on the post-war adventure playground movement by a diverse range of scholars including Roy Kozlovsky, Ben Highmore and Krista Cowman.²

5.1 Orthodoxy consolidated: post-war planners and the playground

During the Second World War, the themes and practices that had dominated inter-war playground discourse continued to be important. The NPFA continued to maintain a close working relationship with the government, loaning money to the war effort and promoting the playground as a way to address child fatalities on the roads.³ On a practical level, it continued to acquire or partially fund a small number of new play spaces, including in Ferryhill in County Durham and King's Somborne in Hampshire.⁴ It responded to several government committees which explored post-war planning and reconstruction, including the Scott Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas (1942), where its recommendations were adopted almost completely in the Committee's findings (even if the Scott report ultimately had little impact on policy).⁵

At the same time, the fear of substantial casualties as a result of aerial bombing combined with romantic notions of the vulnerable child prompted far-reaching responses.

² Kozlovsky, *Architectures of Childhood*; Highmore, 'Playgrounds and Bombsites'; Cowman, 'Open Spaces Didn't Pay Rates'; Cowman, "'The Atmosphere Is Permissive and Free": The Gendering of Activism in the British Adventure Playgrounds Movement, ca. 1948-70'.

³ National Archives, CB 1/76, Sir John Anderson to Lawrence Chubb, Letter, 25 April 1944.

⁴ National Playing Fields Association, 'Memorandum on the Recent Work of the Association'.

⁵ Museum of English Rural Life, SR CPRE C/1/73/1, National Playing Fields Association, 'Memorandum on the Provision of Rural Playing Fields Prepared for the Information of the Members of Lord Justice Scott's Committee', n.d.; Sheail, 'Scott Revisited: Post-War Agriculture, Planning and the British Countryside'.

After child deaths caused by bombing raids during the First World War and the high-profile coverage of aerial bombardments in the Spanish civil war, plans had been developed in the 1930s, particularly by the LCC in London, to remove children from large cities in the event of Britain's involvement in a looming conflict.⁶ In the event, over a million children moved intermittently back and forth between urban centres and rural evacuation areas during the course of the war, apparently leaving city swings idle and play streets empty.⁷ But, at the same time, children that remained in the city often made use of damaged buildings and bomb sites as informal places for play. Often remembered fondly by adults who spent their childhood playing in the war-torn city, such activities also inadvertently created a powerful contrast of childhood innocence and wartime devastation, one that would have a lasting impact on both the national psyche and the built form of cities.⁸ A number of scholars have charted the simultaneously unsettling and inspiring terrain of the bombsite and its influence on contemporary writers, filmmakers, artists and architects, a significance that is explored later in this chapter.

But, more immediately, anxiety about play on bomb damaged sites further fuelled calls to remove children from the city and provide better places to play. Commentators complained of children's use of bomb-damaged buildings and looting of empty homes, while Ministry of Health propaganda posters urged children away from bombsites and encouraged their families to leave the city altogether.⁹ Save the Children Fund created air-raid shelter play

⁶ 'Bomb on East End School', *The Times*, 14 June 1917, p. 8; Niko Gärtner, 'Administering "Operation Pied Piper" – How the London County Council Prepared for the Evacuation of Its Schoolchildren 1938–1939', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 42.1 (2010), 17–32.

⁷ 'The Childless City', *The Observer*, 10 September 1939, p. 11.

⁸ Imperial War Museum, Sound 18748, Peter Bruce Saunders, 'Oral History Interview, Reference to Playing in Damaged Buildings at 00:08:00', 1999; Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹ Imperial War Museum, Art.IWM PST 15093, Dudley S. Cowes, 'Leave This to Us, Sonny - You Ought to Be out of London', n.d.; 'Children in Towns', *The Times*, 11 March 1944, p. 5.

centres in large cities, while playground advocates promoted the need for appropriate play facilities in evacuation areas, where relationships between evacuees and host communities were often strained.¹⁰ Some disgruntled rural residents drew on earlier notions of degeneration to complain of the ‘stunted, misshapen creatures’ being sent from poor urban neighbourhoods to clean homes in the country, the city children seemingly beyond redemption even when relocated to more bucolic surroundings.¹¹ Others were slightly more sympathetic and felt that providing playgrounds in the green spaces of reception areas would help to tackle the inappropriate behaviour of evacuee children, as well as contributing to the future health and fitness of the nation.¹²

In February 1940, a contributor to the *Journal of Park Administration* felt that the ‘beauties of Nature leave [evacuee children] stone cold’ resulting in mischief and damage in the green spaces of reception areas and that playgrounds would provide a distraction that would help to prevent such hooliganism.¹³ However, only a few months later manufacturers such as Wicksteed & Co. had to adapt their production lines to war work and could no longer supply new equipment.¹⁴ Parks were turned over to military installations and food growing, while children’s playgrounds were impacted by the war too.¹⁵ In 1940, the Salford parks committee decided to remove iron railings and playground swings for war purposes, while the playground in Ardwick Green Park in Manchester was summarily requisitioned by the

¹⁰ ‘Shelter Play-Centres’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 October 1941, p. 8.

¹¹ F. Tennyson Jesse, ‘Evacuation’, *The Times*, 22 September 1939, p. 6.

¹² ‘Recreation for Evacuees’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 18 December 1939, p. 10; ‘Evacuated Children’s Holidays’, *The Times*, 27 July 1940, p. 7.

¹³ ‘Are Our Child Exiles Happy? A Plea for Play in Reception Areas’, *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 4.9 (1940), 213–15.

¹⁴ ‘Wicksteed: Our Works Are Now Fully Occupied on 100% War Work’, *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 5.11 (1941), front cover.

¹⁵ Conway, ‘Everyday Landscapes’, pp. 123–24.

military to the consternation of local open space advocates.¹⁶ In London, Paddington Recreation Ground was repurposed as a municipal piggery, with pens made from bombed timber and food waste used as feed. In two years, the recreation ground supplied over 700,000lb of pig meat and generated an annual net profit of over £300,000 (£2,250).¹⁷

The recreation ground was re-opened in May 1948 by Field Marshal Montgomery as a children's playground with manufactured equipment, paddling pool and sandpit.¹⁸ In recreating a playground in this form, Paddington Borough Council's parks department drew upon a vision of the ideal playground that had been largely settled in the minds and practices of park administrators since the 1930s. Writing in 1946, the Director of the Institute of Park Administration demonstrated the ongoing influence of this ideal type, suggesting that 'a children's paradise' should include manufactured equipment, unclimbable fencing and asphalt surfacing.¹⁹ The images that he used to support his article demonstrate a rather sombre and sanitised vision of a childhood utopia, devoid of the garden planting seen in nineteenth century children's gymnasiums or the apparent excitement of the Wicksteed Park playground (Figure 5.1). This certainty among park managers about the ideal form of the playground continued for at least the next ten years. During the late 1940s and early 1950s contributors to parks trade journals rarely mentioned children's playgrounds, other than to note their existence in accounts of public parks in cities such as Cardiff and Portsmouth. Post-war shortages of raw materials and skilled labour, as well as high inflation and a 33% purchase

¹⁶ 'In Brief', *The Manchester Guardian*, 15 June 1940, p. 8; 'An Open Space', *The Manchester Guardian*, 26 April 1940, p. 4.

¹⁷ J. Lovatt and others, 'The Fattening of Pigs on Swill Alone: A Municipal Enterprise', *Empire Journal of Experimental Agriculture*, 11 (1943), 182–90; 'Paddington's Municipal Piggery: Two Years of Remarkable Progress', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 8.3 (1943), 35.

¹⁸ 'A Great Day for Paddington: Montgomery of Alamein Opens Rebuilt Recreation Ground', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 13.1 (1948), 29–30.

¹⁹ Alf T Harrison, 'A Children's Paradise: The Children's Playground', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 11.7 (1946), 167–71.

tax, made the supply of playground equipment more problematic, but it did not dent the stability of the equipped playground ideal type.²⁰ Nor did it seem to dent the provision of play spaces on the ground. The NPFA provided funding for 1,313 playground projects in the ten years after the war, compared to the 1,017 in the fifteen years before the war.²¹ The 'orthodox' playground had become a well-established and familiar part of the park superintendent's responsibilities, alongside nursing plants and mowing lawns.

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Figure 5.1 A Children's Paradise (Alf Harrison, Journal of Park Administration, 1946)

With childhood wellbeing as a central tenet of the post-war welfare state, the place of the playground in wider social policy perhaps seemed even more secure. However, while the health and wellbeing of children and their families were an important feature of the post-war welfare consensus, the playground was not an explicit component of national welfare policies.²² Even though the playground ideal had long been premised on notions of health and education, playgrounds did not feature in legislation that created a national health service,

²⁰ National Archives, WORKS/16/391, B. Hirst & Sons to W.J. Hepburn, 'Ne Plus Ultra Playground Equipment Catalogue to Hyde Park Superintendent', 23 September 1949; London Metropolitan Archive, GLC/RA/D2G/04/091, Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'Price List for Playground Equipment', 1949.

²¹ 'Facilities Provided as a Result of Financial Assistance from the NPFA', *Playing Fields Journal*, 17.1 (1957), 12.

²² Cunningham, *Invention of Childhood*.

provided financial support for the family or sought to maintain full employment.²³ The 1944 Education Act imposed a duty on Local Education Authorities to provide adequate facilities for children's recreation, but it did not make the creation of public play spaces compulsory.²⁴ Instead, post-war playground provision took place within a wider collectivist and universalist atmosphere in which there was a broad political consensus about the role of government in delivering social democratic policies.²⁵ Within this context, the egalitarian potential of the park and the social possibilities of the playground meant that spaces for play were given a boost by the values and objectives of the wider welfare state. At the same time, children's playgrounds remained the discretionary responsibility of local authorities and municipal parks departments continued to provide playgrounds much as they had done since the 1920s, with emphasis remaining on the provision of manufactured play equipment.

The creation of new spaces for play was meanwhile taken up by the planning profession, representing a major intervention in the story of the playground. In exploring the position of the children's playground in the post-war planning landscape, this section offers an important new account of town planners' role in consistently championing play space provision when imagining and creating new urban environments. However, planners' involvement in advocating for and designating space for play was not new in 1945 and it represented an expansion of earlier efforts to solve the problem of playing in the city. Attempts to rationally plan the urban environment had their roots in nineteenth-century efforts to tackle the chaotic and unhealthy consequences of industrialisation and urbanisation. Interested in the distribution of green space within towns and cities, planners

²³ Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*.

²⁴ Lynn Cook, 'The 1944 Education Act and Outdoor Education: From Policy to Practice', *History of Education*, 28.2 (1999), 157–72.

²⁵ Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*.

and play space advocates had long sought to develop a more rational approach to the location of parks generally and playgrounds in particular.²⁶ Since the 1890s, when Reginald Brabazon had called for children's playgrounds every half a mile in London's working-class neighbourhoods, prescribing the right amount and frequency of play space had been a consistent concern. The eminent town planner, Sir George Pepler (1882-1959), similarly stressed the need for town planning to include the rational provision of dedicated spaces for children. In 1923 he proposed a standard requirement of one third of an acre of play space per thousand residents (he would later become an influential member of the NPFA, serving on its Council and several committees).²⁷ Later attempts to develop a standard for playground provision would emphasize an amount of play space per child, for example 25 square feet per young child, 80 square feet per older child.²⁸ However, despite the attempts to establish standards for provision, a nation-wide investigation overseen by Pepler in 1951 found that many local authorities provided less than 0.05 acres of dedicated play space per thousand residents, well short of the 0.3 acres Pepler had called for in 1923. At the same time, 74 per cent had no plans to increase play space provision, although the investigation did not establish why so many had no intention to provide more playgrounds, but post-war austerity perhaps was a significant factor.²⁹

The provision of public spaces, including playgrounds, had also been associated with attempts to address poor quality housing. Nineteenth-century campaigners, such as Octavia

²⁶ Tom Turner, 'Open Space Planning in London: From Standards per 1000 to Green Strategy', *The Town Planning Review*, 63.4 (1992), 365–86.

²⁷ F.J. Osborn, 'Pepler, Sir George Lionel (1882-1959)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); George L. Pepler, 'Open Spaces', *The Town Planning Review*, 10.1 (1923), 11–24; National Playing Fields Association, *Third Annual Report*.

²⁸ G.T. Eagleton, 'Wanted - a Standard for Small Playgrounds', *Playing Fields Journal*, 13.2 (1953), 48–50.

²⁹ National Playing Fields Association, *Survey of Urban Playing Facilities* (London, 1951); 'Urban Areas Need More Games Facilities', *Playing Fields Journal*, 11.2 (1951), 32–35.

Hill, had included space for play in experimental housing schemes, while one of the earliest council housing projects in London, the Boundary Estate (1900) in Bethnal Green, included a raised ornamental garden at the centre of its radiating streets.³⁰ By the 1920s, several government committees had endorsed the need for play spaces close to new council houses.³¹ Over time the state gradually assumed a greater role in the provision of housing, first in the 1930s and then again from the 1950s on a far larger scale following wartime damage.³² In the 1930s there was considerable and highly politicised debate about what form such council housing should take.³³ Garden city advocates promoted low-rise, low density housing with public and private gardens on the edge or beyond the city boundary, as we saw with Charles Wicksteed and his garden suburb. Others, often inspired by European modernism, promoted multi-storey blocks of flats as a direct in-situ replacement for slum clearance areas within towns and cities. Most authorities and the public came down on the side of low-rise houses with gardens, but in practice that did not solve the problem of providing space for play.

Between the wars, over four million new suburban homes were built by local authorities as council housing and by private developers for sale.³⁴ However, the associated increase in the provision of private gardens did not eliminate the need for public play spaces. For many middle-class families, the popular gardening press promoted order, taste and decorum in the back garden with few concessions to children's play, other than the suitably

³⁰ Hill, *Letters to Fellow-Workers 1864 to 1911*; R. Vladimir Steffel, 'The Boundary Street Estate: An Example of Urban Redevelopment by the London County Council, 1889-1914', *The Town Planning Review*, 47.2 (1976), 161–73.

³¹ Local Government Board for Scotland, *Report of the Women's House-Planning Committee* (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1918); Ministry of Reconstruction Advisory Council, *Women's Housing Sub-Committee Final Report*.

³² John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2019).

³³ Simon Pepper and Peter Richmond, 'Upward or Outward? Politics, Planning and Council Flats, 1919–1939', *The Journal of Architecture*, 13.1 (2008), 53–90.

³⁴ Mark Swenarton, 'Tudor Walters and Tudorbethan: Reassessing Britain's Inter-War Suburbs', *Planning Perspectives*, 17.3 (2002), 267–86.

cautious use of the lawn.³⁵ For many working-class families moving into new suburban council estates, the garden often provided a practical space where food could be grown, rather than somewhere for children to play.³⁶ As a result, even though the domestic garden was sometimes seen as the ideal place for play, in practice there was still a need to dedicate public spaces for children's recreation.

Although the suburban house and garden may have been the preferred solution for many, multistorey blocks of flats were also built in the centre of some cities. With little private open space, these developments often included communal play provision. At Kensal House (1937) in west London, the housing specialist Elizabeth Denby and architect Maxwell Fry designed a modern block of flats for the Gas Light and Coke Company and included a children's playground as a central feature of the wider 'urban village' amenities.³⁷ At White City (1939) the LCC housed 11,000 residents in five storey blocks and the plans included two 'fitted playgrounds' but this time squeezed in on the periphery of the estate.³⁸ Elsewhere in London, playgrounds also featured in slum clearance schemes in Poplar and Deptford.³⁹

³⁵ Judith Roberts, 'The Gardens of Dunroamin: History and Cultural Values with Specific Reference to the Gardens of the Inter-war Semi', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 1.4 (1996), 229–37; Sophie Seifalian, 'Gardens of Metro-Land', *Garden History*, 39.2 (2011), 218–38.

³⁶ Matthew Hollow, 'Suburban Ideals on England's Interwar Council Estates', *Garden History*, 39.2 (2011), 203–17.

³⁷ Elizabeth Darling, "'The Star in the Profession She Invented for Herself": A Brief Biography of Elizabeth Denby, Housing Consultant', *Planning Perspectives*, 20.3 (2005), 271–300.

³⁸ White City Estate Plan, LCC, London Housing (1937), p.111 in Pepper and Richmond, 'Upward or Outward? Politics, Planning and Council Flats, 1919–1939'.

³⁹ 'Slum Clearance at Poplar', *The Times*, 30 August 1934, p. 6; 'Slum Clearance in London', *The Times*, 8 March 1938, p. 21.

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Figure 5.2 Kitson House Playground, Quarry Hill (Leeds Central Library, D LIE Quarry 12, 1939)

The layout of play spaces on housing estates repeated that seen in public parks at the time, closely fitting the orthodox playground ideal. In 1939, Manchester's Director of Parks felt that the ideal play space for clearance schemes should comprise 'modern playground apparatus' and 'whenever circumstances permit, a border of trees, shrubs, and flowers.'⁴⁰ Contemporary photos suggest that the former appeared more regularly than the latter. In Leeds, the Quarry Hill estate (1938) included a playground in the central courtyards created by the blocks of flats. Surrounded by fencing, the slide and other items of play equipment represented a good example of the inter-war orthodox playground, while the substitution of grass lawns with asphalt further enhanced the modernist aesthetic (Figure 5.2). In Liverpool, the Caryl Gardens tenement scheme (1937), built under the auspices of the city's Director of Housing Lancelot Keay, provided another good example. Keay was a distinguished municipal

⁴⁰ J Richardson, 'The Provision of Open Spaces in Slum Clearance Areas and Congested Districts', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 4.5 (1939), 125–29 (p. 126).

architect and later president of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) and member of the Ministry of Health's housing advisory committee.⁴¹ Strongly influenced by the ideas and aesthetic of European architectural modernism, he was a firm advocate of multi-storey housing and the children's playground formed a central feature of several of his schemes. At Caryl Gardens, the central play space matched the orthodox ideal, with plenty of swings installed on an asphalt surface, surrounded by fencing (Figure 5.3). Elsewhere in Liverpool, the St Andrew's Gardens scheme also included a courtyard playground, with manufactured equipment and seating made from ship's timbers.⁴² The division of responsibility seen in these examples, with architect-planners designating space for play and park managers directing its form, would be a consistent feature of subsequent town planning too.

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Figure 5.3 Caryl Garden Flats (J.E. Marsh, RIBA Collections, CEMA 728.1/2:712/23, 1940)

⁴¹ Matthew Whitfield, 'Keay, Sir Lancelot Herman (1883-1974)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴² 'New Flats in Liverpool', *The Times*, 21 June 1935, p. 13.

From inclusion in a handful of inter-war housing schemes, the playground became a regular feature of more comprehensive planning that took place during the war. In 1941, the *Picture Post* ran a special edition entitled 'A Plan for Britain', promoting alternative ideas for post-war social welfare, housing, education and health. The children's playground could have featured in any of these spheres of public life, but it was in an article by architect Maxwell Fry that the potential of the playground was stressed. Fry asserted that post-war Britain 'must be planned' and that one of the many urban evils that proper planning could tackle was the lack of children's playgrounds.⁴³ Fry's emphasis on playspace provision can perhaps be ascribed in part to his earlier experience of working with Elizabeth Denby at Kensal House, as well as his business partner, Thomas Adams, who had written *PlayParks* in 1937. Just two years later, play space provision was a specific requirement set out in several official and unofficial planning documents which considered post-war reconstruction. In London, the Royal Academy's advisory plan mentioned a general need for children's play spaces, while the official *County of London Plan* (1943) set standards for the ideal distribution of green space and included Pepler's pre-war recommendation of one-third-of-an-acre of play space for children.⁴⁴ The prominent town planner Patrick Abercrombie, who had shared the stage with Charles Wicksteed at the Leeds town planning conference in 1918, prepared the *County of London Plan*, along with J.H. Forshaw, architect to the LCC and formerly of the Miner's Welfare Committee.⁴⁵

Abercrombie would also include play space in planning proposals for other cities too. *A Plan for Plymouth* (1943), prepared with City Engineer James Paton Watson, 'intended to

⁴³ Maxwell Fry, 'The New Britain Must Be Planned', *Picture Post*, 4 January 1941, 15–18 (p. 18).

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Marmaras and Anthony Sutcliffe, 'Planning for Post-war London: The Three Independent Plans, 1942–3', *Planning Perspectives*, 9.4 (1994), 431–53; Patrick Abercrombie and J.H. Forshaw, *County of London Plan* (London: Macmillan, 1943).

⁴⁵ See J.H. Forshaw, University of Liverpool Special Collections and Archives, ULA/GRD/D113

cover the whole of its existence from the comfort and convenience of the smallest house and children's playground to the magnificence of its civic centre.⁴⁶ The plan called for a system of playgrounds every quarter of a mile, located in the corner of public parks or on the sites of demolished housing, and suggested that an additional eighty-seven play spaces were needed on top of the existing eighteen sites.⁴⁷ Paton Watson was largely responsible for the implementation of the plan and a commentator would later conclude that he 'had succeeded in producing children's playgrounds on a scale which had not been equalled by any other city in the country.'⁴⁸ The implementation of the London plan also increased the amount of space allocated for play. For example, at Spa Fields playground in Finsbury a combination of wartime bomb damage, compulsory purchase of poor-quality buildings and the appropriation of road space allowed the play area to be doubled in size and the setting of the earlier Finsbury Health Centre (1938) improved (Figure 5.4).⁴⁹ These planning schemes would help to impose a modern order on the seemingly chaotic and war-torn city. Narrow streets and overcrowded homes would be replaced with modern commerce and housing, while purpose-built playgrounds would provide cleaner, safer and more salubrious alternatives to the informal play spaces of the street and bombsite.

After the war, although the playground had become well established in planning practice, there was far from widespread support for multi-storey housing. However, with its earlier experience, London became something of a leader in post-war high-rise flat construction; between 1945 and 1951 the LCC built over thirteen thousand flats and only

⁴⁶ J. Paton Watson and Patrick Abercrombie, *A Plan for Plymouth* (Plymouth: Underhill, 1943), p. 2.

⁴⁷ Paton Watson and Abercrombie, *A Plan for Plymouth*, p. 88.

⁴⁸ National Archives, CB 1/64, National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of the Ad Hoc Committee to Enquire into the Provision of Play Space on New Housing Estates, 17 May', 1960, p. 3.

⁴⁹ London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/RA/D2G/04/091, London County Council, 'Spa Fields Extension', 1951; 'Breathing Space in London', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 24.12 (1960), 667–69.

eighty-one houses in their area in an effort to avoid the perceived failings of inter-war suburbs.⁵⁰ Increasingly, the provision of flats, located within mixed developments that comprised homes for households of different sizes, and located with neighbourhood facilities were seen to provide both better housing and a sense of community.⁵¹

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Figure 5.4 Spa Fields Playground (Dell & Wainwright, RIBA Collections, DWN7431, 1938)

This sense that playgrounds had become an essential part of modern town planning and modern communities was perhaps best demonstrated by the place of the playground in the 1951 Festival of Britain. As both a tonic for the nation after the war and an expression of what it meant to be modern and British, the Festival is perhaps best known for the iconic attractions on London's South Bank, including the Skylon Tower and Royal Festival Hall, the graphic design of the 'Festival Style' and the Pleasure Gardens at Battersea.⁵² George Pepler

⁵⁰ Simon Pepper, 'The Beginnings of High-Rise Social Housing in the Long 1940s: The Case of the LCC and the Woodberry Down Estate', in *Architecture and the Welfare State*, ed. by Mark Swenarton, Tom Avermaete, and Dirk van den Heuvel (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁵¹ Nicholas Bullock, 'Plans for Post-war Housing in the UK: The Case for Mixed Development and the Flat', *Planning Perspectives*, 2.1 (1987), 71–98.

⁵² Harriet Atkinson, *The Festival of Britain A Land and Its People* (London: Tauris, 2012).

was a member of the Festival's Council for Architecture, Town Planning and Building Research, one of two advisory councils established to guide festival planning (the other dealt with science).⁵³ And while the NPFA had hoped that its work might 'form a conspicuous feature of the Festival,' the 1951 exhibitions did more to show that the playground had become a standard and, in many ways, unremarkable part of visions of the modern urban environment.⁵⁴

Children were well catered for, particularly in the Pleasure Gardens which included the Nestlé-sponsored crèche, Peter Pan railway and Punch and Judy shows. However, it was at the 'Live Architecture Exhibition' in east London that the children's playground would be most conspicuously on display. Identified as an area for comprehensive redevelopment in the *County of London Plan*, the Architecture Exhibition encompassed the newly built Lansbury Estate (named after George Lansbury, former local MP and Royal Parks Commissioner who had promoted playgrounds in the 1930s). The Exhibition was intended as a demonstration of the transformative potential of building science and town planning and, alongside the modern low-rise housing, several children's playgrounds were created on the estate.⁵⁵

However, while Pepler's involvement in the planning of the Festival may have ensured the presence of estate playgrounds, they were hardly central to the design showcase. In the exhibition visitor guide, the key for the site map listed over thirty other features including demonstration homes, shopping precincts, churches, schools and an old people's home before mentioning the children's playgrounds, just before the lavatories and main exit.⁵⁶ The playground was presented as an uncontroversial, everyday necessity in a vision of the city

⁵³ 'Forward to Festival of Britain', *The Architectural Review*, 110 (1951), 73–79.

⁵⁴ Lord Luke, 'Festival of Britain 1951 NPFA to Play Important Part', *Playing Fields Journal*, 9.4 (1949), 202.

⁵⁵ Becky Conekin, *The Autobiography of a Nation' the 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁵⁶ Plan of Lansbury 'Live Architecture' Exhibition in Atkinson, *Festival of Britain*.

that was both idealistic and pragmatic.⁵⁷ Optimistically, the Lansbury playgrounds demonstrated that a rationally planned version of the city could provide a better place for children to play. Pragmatically, they assumed an orthodox form based on that found in many public parks. The playground had become one component of what urban historian Simon Gunn has described as a 'banal urban modernism, based on functionalism rather than the iconic.'⁵⁸ This functionalism saw planners attempt to organise the city into areas for industry, transport, living and at a micro-scale playing, while also making use of conventional assumptions about play space form.

This approach was replicated in the planning and layout of many post-war new towns, where the children's playground was an essential but largely unremarkable feature, much like roads, homes and shopping precincts. In proposals for Crawley in Sussex, each neighbourhood was planned to have a children's playground alongside other community facilities such as allotments and public gardens, day nurseries and maternity clinics.⁵⁹ The children's playgrounds proposed for Knutsford in Cheshire were to be located on a footpath system that was physically separated from roads and motor vehicles, while the plans for the creation of a new town at Rainhill in Merseyside included among its 'community equipment' a playground at the centre of each new housing area.⁶⁰ In 1951, Harlow New Town saw the completion of The Lawn, at ten storeys it was Britain's first residential tower block, and as the height of new housing increased elsewhere, so did concern among campaigners and the government about the provision of playgrounds around blocks of flats.

⁵⁷ Matthew Hollow, "'Utopian Urges: Visions for Reconstruction in Britain, 1940–1950'", *Planning Perspectives*, 27.4 (2012), 569–85.

⁵⁸ Simon Gunn, 'The Rise and Fall of British Urban Modernism', *Journal of British Studies*, 49.4 (2010), 849–69 (p. 851).

⁵⁹ Anthony Minoprio, 'Crawley New Town', *Town and Country Planning*, 16.64 (1949), 215–21.

⁶⁰ Watson Garbutt, 'A Village Becomes a New Town', *Town and Country Planning*, 12.45 (1944), 22–25 (p. 25).

In the late 1940s, central government acknowledged the value of dedicated play spaces but hardly in emphatic terms. Its 1949 *Housing Manual* recognised that redevelopment provided an opportunity to improve play space provision, but simply suggested that ‘reasonably accessible playgrounds’ might be provided.⁶¹ A few years later it sought evidence to support a standardised approach in new social housing developments. In 1952, the Ministry of Housing contacted the NPFA to request information on the issue of play provision for multistorey housing, with a view to establishing a national play space standard specifically for high rise residential buildings.⁶² In response, Pepler chaired a newly formed Children’s Playground Technical Subcommittee, which quizzed the city architects of Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool and the LCC and studied some of the existing playgrounds provided for flats in London. The subcommittee’s research led the NPFA to publish *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* in 1953.⁶³ It reiterated earlier rhetoric about the dangers of the streets and presented children-without-a-playground as a threat to ornamental lawns, a menace to motorists and susceptible to ‘bored street-corner mentalities’ which would in turn lead to juvenile delinquency.⁶⁴ It found that a considerable number of blocks had no playground provision and where space had been set aside it was ‘mostly inadequate, unimaginative, lacking in design and poorly maintained.’⁶⁵ The report’s researchers found that of the 96 spaces observed, 73 were surfaced with asphalt, 89 were enclosed by fencing, 50 had equipment and only nine had any plants or trees. This was an explicit critique of the playgrounds that had been provided at Quarry Hill, Caryl Gardens and elsewhere.

⁶¹ Ministry of Health, *Housing Manual* (London: HMSO, 1949), p. 17.

⁶² National Archives, CB 1/68, National Playing Fields Association, ‘Minutes of the First Meeting of the Children’s Playground Technical Subcommittee on 4 November’, 1952.

⁶³ Museum of English Rural Life, P 2870 Box 5/12, National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* (London, 1953).

⁶⁴ National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*, p. 6.

⁶⁵ National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*, p. 4.

This did not mean the principle of the playground needed to be revisited, but rather that the playground form needed a new approach. In many ways *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* demonstrated a considerable degree of continuity in the criticisms of the orthodox, equipped playground first levelled in 1937 by Thomas Adams' *PlayParks*.⁶⁶ Both encouraged the involvement of specialists with knowledge of children and garden design. Both called for more nature, in curated forms at least, in the shape of hills and valleys, trees and shrubs. The most significant difference that had occurred in the time between the two publications was that by the 1950s, Marjory Allen was leading an increasingly high-profile public campaign to improve play space provision, something explored in more detail later in this chapter.

However, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* also laid bare the class, age and gender assumptions of the playground movement of the time. While blocks of flats were primarily being built as working-class social housing, the publication suggested that, along with other amenities, courts should be provided for the game 'fives' (a racquet game played almost exclusively at fee-paying public schools).⁶⁷ It also demonstrated particular expectations of the mothers who lived on estates, both in terms of assigning responsibility for the safety of children to them and the expectation that their work would be primarily based in the home. Play spaces for the youngest children, aged between two and five, were to be 'within sight of mothers in the flats' and enclosed with a self-closing gate, so that 'toddlers can be left on their own for short periods while their mothers get on with their work.'⁶⁸ Once children were older than five, their playgrounds no longer needed to be within sight of mothers in the flats and by the time children were nine or older it suggested that playgrounds should be well away

⁶⁶ Adams, *PlayParks*.

⁶⁷ Malcolm Tozer, 'A History of Eton Fives', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 30.2 (2013), 187–89.

⁶⁸ National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*, p. 8.

from dwellings. First published in 1953, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* presciently pre-empted the rapid increase in the construction of tall blocks facilitated by the 1956 Housing Act. High-rise construction boomed in the late 1950s and 1960s, so that schemes of ten or more floors were increasingly common across Britain.⁶⁹ However, the publication's recommendations were dismissed as too costly in central government's 1957 *Housing Handbook* and subsequently ignored in the design and development of many high-rise housing schemes.⁷⁰ As a result, the provision of play spaces for children living specifically in flats remained an ongoing issue for campaigners well into the 1970s.⁷¹

During the 1940s and early 1950s, both the principle and ideal form of the playground were consolidated in planning documents and subsequent redevelopment schemes. Planners emphasised the place of the playground in creating modern, functional and humane communities, while the orthodox, equipped playground was well established among parks professionals as the ideal form for both public parks and new housing estates. In addition, the wider, child-centred welfare consensus prioritised the health, education and general wellbeing of children. However, it was these changing conceptions of childhood and new urban environments that would fuel increasingly high-profile criticism of the orthodox playground. Popular acceptance of the creative and emotional needs of children contrasted sharply with playgrounds that were still designed and laid out largely to promote physical exercise and were regularly devoid of any 'natural' features. This orthodoxy would be increasingly challenged during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁶⁹ Pepper, 'The Beginnings of High-Rise Social Housing'.

⁷⁰ National Archives, HLG 31/11, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 'Housing Handbook', 1957, p. 62.

⁷¹ National Archives, CB 1/64, National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of the Ad Hoc Committee to Enquire into the Provision of Play Space on New Housing Estates, 17 May', 1960, p. 2; National Archives, CB 4/76, National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*, 6th edn (London, 1974).

5.2 Marjory Allen and the challenge of adventure

From the mid-1950s, the purpose and form of the playground were being questioned with increasing urgency. On the one hand, campaigners emphasised the need to support greater creativity and self-expression among children, promoting less rigid and more adventurous play opportunities, where adults designated space for play but children were able to shape the detailed form. On the other hand, a number of professional designers were increasingly interested in creating play spaces for children, bringing adult creativity and imagination to bear on the playground. This section considers the centrality of Marjory Allen to these processes, her widely credited association with the junk playground movement and the seldom-acknowledged significance of her environmental consciousness. It goes on to explore the contribution made by professional designers to both the imagined and physical form of dedicated play spaces for children.

From the late 1940s through to the late 1960s, Marjory Allen was perhaps the most high-profile figure associated with attempts to reinvigorate the playground. As this section examines, she is popularly associated with the introduction of 'junk playgrounds' to the UK in 1946, while scholarly accounts have rightly emphasised the effectiveness of her campaigning and her role in shaping post-war attitudes to childhood. Here, however, Allen is situated within the longer history and geography of playground thought and her largely unacknowledged environmental biography is considered.

Allen spent much of her early childhood on her family's rural smallholding. She attended the progressive Bedales school, worked as a gardener, studied horticulture and later married Clifford Allen, the Independent Labour Party politician, peace campaigner and from

1932 Lord Allen of Hurtwood.⁷² Their daughter Polly attended a progressive nursery school, prompting Allen's interest in infant education and membership of the Nursery School Association.⁷³ She later became Chair and then President of the Association, emulating Margaret McMillan who was the organisation's first president.⁷⁴ Allen felt that nursery education provided children with 'free space, fresh air, sunlight, companionship, and engrossing occupation,' all formative features of her own rural childhood.⁷⁵ Allen was also profoundly influenced by the thinking of her close friend Elizabeth Denby.⁷⁶ In 1938, Denby had concluded that when playgrounds were 'merely an expanse of tarmac or concrete the damage to the children is almost criminal. All sensibility must be stifled in the ugly atmosphere of such barrack yards.'⁷⁷ This sentiment would be repeated by Allen in a later letter to the *Times* when she stated that 'municipal playgrounds are often as bleak as barrack squares and just as boring.'⁷⁸ However, Allen's first high profile intervention in public discourse was not related to the playground and instead focused on the plight of children in care.

In the early 1940s she was the figurehead for a campaign seeking better standards for children living in residential care homes. In her letter to the *Times* that brought this issue vividly into the public imagination, she described how 'children are being brought up under repressive conditions that are generations out of date' and argued that the needs of individual children were being ignored.⁷⁹ Allen's profile and contacts with politicians and the media

⁷² Marjory Allen and Mary Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady: Lady Allen of Hurtwood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975).

⁷³ Bob Holman, *Champions for Children: The Lives of Modern Child Care Pioneers* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2001).

⁷⁴ Hal Moggridge, 'Allen, Marjory, Lady Allen of Hurtwood (1897–1976), Landscape Architect and Promoter of Child Welfare', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷⁵ Marjory Allen, 'Juvenile Delinquency', *The Times*, 6 December 1948, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 116.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Denby, *Europe Re-Housed* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), p. 269.

⁷⁸ Marjory Allen, 'Letter to the Editor: Children's Playgrounds', *The Times*, 12 December 1952, p. 9.

⁷⁹ Marjory Allen, 'Children in "Homes"', *The Times*, 15 July 1944, p. 5; Marjory Allen, *Whose Children?* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1945).

meant that the campaign was highly effective and influential in shaping the 1948 Children's Act. She became a 'public placeholder' for critiques of the care system, a high-profile embodiment of ideas that had largely been previously developed and publicly expressed by others.⁸⁰ Allen's approach to campaigning and her unintentional position as a public placeholder would be repeated in her subsequent playground advocacy work. Several scholars have argued that it was this public and persistent campaigning, political and social contacts, organisational skills and strong sense of purpose - rather than detailed technical knowledge - that was most significant in explaining her profile within the post-war playground movement.⁸¹ In her memoirs Allen recalled that her 'mania for keeping things moving' had been highly effective.⁸² However, none of these accounts consider the importance of Allen's assumptions about nature and the way they interacted with her ideas about childhood, nor how this in turn shaped her approach to play provision.

Allen's interest in nature preceded her involvement in child welfare campaigns. After leaving school, Allen worked as a gardener and then studied horticulture at the University of Reading, at a time when only twenty per cent of university students were women and there was considerable opposition to greater equality at Reading in particular.⁸³ In time, Allen became a founding Fellow of the Institute of Landscape Architects (1929), along with the noted designers Thomas Mawson, Brenda Colvin and Richard Sudell.⁸⁴ Although she initially worked mainly on private commissions, she also had a wider interest in public green spaces

⁸⁰ Lynch, 'Pathways to the 1946 Curtis Report and the Post-War Reconstruction of Children's out-of-Home Care', p. 28.

⁸¹ Holman, *Champions for Children*; Kozlovsky, 'Adventure Playgrounds'.

⁸² Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 230.

⁸³ Carol Dyhouse, 'The British Federation of University Women and the Status of Women in Universities, 1907-1939', *Women's History Review*, 4.4 (1995), 465-85.

⁸⁴ 'ASLA Notes', *Landscape Architecture*, 21.2 (1931), 139-45; Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 98; Harriet Jordan, 'Mawson, Thomas Hayton (1861-1933), Landscape Architect', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

and from 1937 to 1939 she chaired the Coronation Planting Committee (which among its other activities published Thomas Adam's *PlayParks*). In addition to her professional influences, Allen would later recall her own childhood interactions with nature and contrast them with the lives of city children. Just like earlier campaigners, her commitment to recreating a version of her own bucolic childhood and her perception of the problems of the city are clear from her writing. In her autobiography, written in 1975, she recalled a romantic vision of her rural upbringing, close to nature and with freedom to be creative and imaginative:

The wonderful and simple life of hay-making, milking cows, growing flowers and vegetables and learning the craft of making butter and cheese, and all the lovely sights and scents of the country, remain for me the most enduring memories of my life. When, later, I worked among children condemned to live in barbaric and sub-human city surroundings, my thoughts always returned to my early good fortune. The remembrance has made me more determined than ever to restore to these children some part of their lost childhood: gardens where they can keep their pets and enjoy their hobbies and perhaps watch their fathers working with real tools; secret places where they can create their own worlds; the shadow and mystery that lend enchantment to play... Our active life in the Kentish countryside gave us these moments of wonder and awe.⁸⁵

This emphasis on restoring nature to the city initially extended beyond childhood and Allen sought to provide 'moments of wonder' for adults too. Her early landscape design work focused on greening city buildings, including roof-top gardens for Selfridges department store and a block of flats for the St Pancras Housing Improvement Society, while as author of the *Manchester Guardian's* Country Diary column she brought accounts of the country into the homes of urban readers.⁸⁶ In addition, she promoted physical forms of nature close to the homes of working-class city dwellers. Flowerboxes incorporated into 'cheerful outside

⁸⁵ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, pp. 30–31.

⁸⁶ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 119.

balconies' on new blocks of flats would provide space 'where the young baby can sleep...the small child may rest in the air and the sun' and bring brightness and cheer to adult residents and the wider community.⁸⁷ In some ways, Allen's work echoed earlier efforts to bring aspects of nature into the city, where fresh air and interaction with curated forms of flora and fauna would provide an uplifting physical and moral influence on city dwellers.

However, despite Allen's commitment to recreating an urban version of the nature she experienced in the countryside of southern England, her environmental consciousness has rarely featured in popular or scholarly accounts of her work. This is probably due to the timing of her first and most high-profile intervention into playground discourse – shortly after her successful campaigning for the Children's Act – and because the form of her intervention – a photo essay in the *Picture Post* – displayed little evidence of the natural world. Instead, it took advantage of the opportunity offered by bomb damaged sites to provide spaces for play and spoke more to changing conceptions of childhood than to ideas about the country in the city. And rather than emphasise the need for greener places to play, Allen focused on the features that she felt comprised a 'natural' childhood – self-expression, freedom, creativity, shadow and mystery – in contrast to 'unnatural' urban childhoods. Allen emphasised the qualities that she had experienced in her rural upbringing - independence and imagination - rather than necessarily interaction with the sights and sounds of the country. However, while these have seldom been emphasised in recent accounts of her campaigning work, they did have a significant influence on her conception of the playground and her subsequent activism. Making sense of this requires an examination of her *Picture Post* essay and its position within the longer and wider history of playground thought.

⁸⁷ Marjory Allen, *New Houses, New Schools, New Citizens* (London: Nursery School Association of Great Britain, 1934), p. 5.

Allen's most public contribution to playground discourse came in 1946. On a trip to Norway, Allen's flight stopped to refuel in Copenhagen, and she briefly visited a junk playground that had been created during the war on the Emdrup housing estate.⁸⁸ Later that year, she published her much celebrated photo essay in the *Picture Post*, including striking photos and a vivid description of the Emdrup playground, titled 'Why Not Use Our Bombsites Like This?' The compelling images showed children building with scrap wood, digging in the mud, tending handmade structures and nursing a fire (Figure 5.5). The playground did not include manufactured equipment, but instead had a variety of loose materials, including bricks, timber, earth and water, and a skilled adult play leader who could support children in their play.⁸⁹ Allen described what she saw at Emdrup as 'something quite new and full of possibilities.'⁹⁰ For Allen, it seemed to represent a radical new form of play space provision, a profound break from the asphalt and equipment of the orthodox playgrounds found in British parks and housing estates. However, while the photos that accompanied Allen's article presented a strikingly different approach to play space provision, the idea of playing with junk and the need for adult involvement in children's play had been circulating for many years, both in Britain and beyond.

In Denmark, the Emdrup playground represented a long standing intellectual and practical collaboration between landscape architects and pedagogues. In fact, rather than using an area of waste ground as Allen suggested in her essay, the site had been specifically designated as a playground in line with local building regulations and at least in part designed and laid out by a landscape architect. Allen (and, based on her assertion, many others since then) credited the Danish landscape architect Carl Theodore Sørensen (1893-1979) with the

⁸⁸ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 195.

⁸⁹ Marjory Allen, 'Why Not Use Our Bomb Sites like This?', *Picture Post*, 16 November 1946, 26–29.

⁹⁰ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 196.

invention of the junk playground. Through his writing, teaching and practice, Sørensen had a profound impact on landscape design in Denmark, although his work remains virtually unknown elsewhere.⁹¹ As a result, it is useful to explore in more depth the background to Sørensen's junk playground idea and the cultural context that produced this apparently revolutionary design.

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Figure 5.5 Why Not Use Our Bomb Sites like This? (Marjory Allen, Picture Post, 16 November 1946)

As its largest city, Copenhagen was a focus for early playground advocacy in Denmark. The first children's playground was created in 1881, the city's Playground Association was formed in 1891, and early play space tended to be 'rectangular and surrounded by shady trees' with gymnastic apparatus and sandboxes introduced from London and Berlin in 1908.⁹² Sand became an essential and regular feature of public play space and was particularly associated with the pedagogue Hans Dragehjem. He founded the Froebel Society in Denmark

⁹¹ Jan Woudstra, 'Danish Landscape Design in the Modern Era (1920-1970)', *Garden History*, 23.2 (1995), 222–41.

⁹² Ning de Coninck-Smith, 'Where Should Children Play? City Planning Seen From Knee-Height: Copenhagen 1870 to 1920', *Children's Environments Quarterly*, 7.4 (1990), 54–61.

(1902) and amongst other work published a 'scientific study' on Children's Play in Sand in 1909, emphasising its value in the physical, emotional and imaginative development of children.⁹³

By the 1930s, the average Copenhagen playground was an enclosed asphalt or gravel space with a sandbox, water tap, a few swings and seating for mothers. Sørensen and Dragehjelm cooperated on a number of play space designs in this period and reacted against this apparently austere play environment. Their writing emphasised the need for more nature in the playground, particularly in the form of adapted features of the Danish cultural landscape such as fields and meadows, forests and beaches, and they designed spaces with a greater emphasis on the needs and interests of individual children.⁹⁴ In many ways this echoed the earlier writing of the US playspace advocate G. Stanley Hall, who felt that the field, forest, hill, shore and water were important spaces for play and along with the family home constituted the fundamental sites of education.⁹⁵ It also chimes with Allen's idealisation of the aesthetic and cultural values associated with the English countryside and the benefits it could provide for urban children.

More broadly, the children's playground was a significant feature of Danish city planning discourse, culminating in the 1939 Copenhagen Building Act which made playgrounds mandatory for new housing schemes in the capital, a requirement extended to other parts of the country in 1961.⁹⁶ Sørensen had previously asserted that 'children's

⁹³ A.K. Winship, 'Editorial - Playing in Sand', *The Journal of Education*, 70.16 (1909), 436.

⁹⁴ Ning de Coninck-Smith, *Natural Play in Natural Surroundings: Urban Childhood and Playground Planning in Denmark, c.1930-1950*, Working Papers in Child and Youth Culture, 6 (Odense: University of Southern Denmark, 1999).

⁹⁵ G. Stanley Hall, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene* (New York: Appleton, 1906).

⁹⁶ Asbjørn Jessen and Anne Tietjen, 'Assembling Welfare Landscapes of Social Housing: Lessons from Denmark', *Landscape Research*, 2020, 1–21; Holme and Massie, *Children's Play*, p. 47.

playgrounds are the city's most important form of public plantation.⁹⁷ But rather than list the equipment needed to furnish such a space, he emphasised the importance of its location close to the homes of children and its function as a site for independent play and self-education. He went on to ask whether 'we could try to design a kind of junk playground in suitable and fairly large areas, where the children would be allowed to use old cars, cardboard boxes, branches and such.'⁹⁸ In 1943, Sørensen and Dragehjelm were given an opportunity to do just that, being commissioned to create such a space on the new workers housing estate at Emdrup. The design for Emdrup partially resembled earlier versions of the Danish playground, rectangular in shape and surrounded by dense hedging on top of an earth embankment, with fencing hidden in the planting. However, rather than gymnastic equipment or a defined sandbox, the central space is shown with few permanent installations. Instead of fixed equipment the design shows log piles and fallen trees, a replica sailing boat, caves dug into the perimeter embankment and stylised figures digging and camping (Figure 5.6). The designers assumed that such a space might not need adult supervision, but once opened the Emdrup housing association that managed the playground employed a play worker to supervise its use. The collaboration between Dragehjelm and Sørensen meant that the Froebel-inspired outdoor classroom had been transported into the public realm.

⁹⁷ Carl Theodore Sørensen, *Parkpolitik i Sogn Og Købstad* (Copenhagen: Christian Ejlers Forlag, 1931); quoted in Sven-Ingvar Andersson and Steen Høyer, *C. Th. Sørensen, Landscape Modernist*, trans. by Anne Whiston Spirn (Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press, 2001).

⁹⁸ Sørensen, *Parkpolitik i Sogn Og Købstad*, p. 54; quoted in Peter Bosselmann, 'Landscape Architecture as Art: C. Th. Sørensen. A Humanist', *Landscape Journal*, 17.1 (1998), 62–69 (p. 65).

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Figure 5.6 Emdrupvej Skrammellegeplads (C.T. Sørensen, Royal Danish Library, 799 54604 a-e c, 1940)

Another notable feature of the sketch design is the tipi, stockade and games of Cowboys and Indians, a somewhat incongruous presence in the suburbs of the Danish capital. However, from the late eighteenth century both representations of native Americans and indigenous people themselves had invoked a mix of both fear and fascination among British, European and North American fairground audiences.⁹⁹ In 1899, the pioneering cinematographers Mitchell and Kenyon of Blackburn dramatized playing at Indians in a short film.¹⁰⁰ By the early twentieth century, social discourse in the USA increasingly associated native Americans with wilderness, natural purity and authenticity, particularly for Ernest Seaton and the Boy Scout movement. Seaton's *Handbook of Woodcraft Scouting* (1910), written with Robert Baden-Powell, founder of the Scouts in Britain, popularised the long-standing associations between social constructs of native Americans and children, with both

⁹⁹ Deborah Philips, *Fairground Attractions: A Genealogy of the Pleasure Ground* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

¹⁰⁰ Robin Whalley and Peter Worden, 'Forgotten Firm: A Short Chronological Account of Mitchell and Kenyon, Cinematographers', *Film History*, 10.1 (1998), 35–51.

often characterised as more closely connected to the natural world than modern adults.¹⁰¹ The shift within the Scouting movement from inward looking militarism to an international liberalism, and specifically the staging of the Second World Scout Jamboree in Denmark in 1924, perhaps helped to inspire the work of Sørensen and Dragehjem at Emdrup.¹⁰²

However, there were also much earlier examples of similar approaches to children's play provision elsewhere in the world and even Sørensen rejected the idea that he invented the junk playground, instead suggesting it was simply a 'loosely formulated concept.'¹⁰³ Over twenty years earlier, an experimental playspace in the USA had made use of junk and waste materials in children's play. In 1918, the Bureau of Educational Experiments in New York sought to recreate in the city the play opportunities that were understood to be available to country children (the Bureau had been established by the educator Lucy Sprague Mitchell, after a visit to innovative schools in London in 1912).¹⁰⁴ Bringing rural play opportunities into the city would help to ensure both the 'muscle development of little people' and provide for their creative and dramatic play, progressive ideas for the time. The resulting outdoor laboratory created by the Bureau included bricks, lumber, tools and a packing-box village, in addition to a sandbox and rudimentary gymnastic equipment (Figure 5.7). Unlike Emdrup, this was a private, educational setting rather than a public, park-like environment.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁰² Scott Johnston, 'Courting Public Favour: The Boy Scout Movement and the Accident of Internationalism, 1907–29', *Historical Research*, 88.241 (2015), 508–29.

¹⁰³ Andersson and Høyer, *C. Th. Sørensen, Landscape Modernist*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Joyce Antler, 'Mitchell, Lucy Sprague (1878-1967), Educator', *American National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁵ Project Gutenberg Archive, 28466, Jean Lee Hunt, *A Catalogue of Play Equipment* (New York: Bureau of Educational Experiments, 1918) <www.gutenberg.org> [accessed 6 March 2021].

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Figure 5.7 Box Village, New York (J.L. Hunt, A Catalogue of Play Equipment, 1918)

Similar suggestions for children's play existed in Britain too. A few years earlier, the sociologist and town planner Patrick Geddes had expressed the view that wigwam-building, cave-digging and stream damming were the natural activities of boys (girls were more naturally inclined to sit on the grass in Geddes' view).¹⁰⁶ A few years later, Raymond Unwin, the prominent architect and town planner, suggested that the design of play spaces could make more of existing landscape features and loose materials: 'any bit of unevenness in the ground, a hole or a mound, an old fallen tree, a few bricks, or such accessories are very helpful for little children's play'.¹⁰⁷ And the progressive educationalist Margaret McMillan suggested in 1921 that a wild corner of the garden, including stones, scrap metal and old pots, was an important feature of spaces for children, giving them freedom to play as they wished.¹⁰⁸ Even Allen had previously made use of junk. She coordinated a wartime project in which conscientious objectors made over three million toys and items of furniture from salvaged

¹⁰⁶ Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction to the Town Planning Movement and to the Study of Civics* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1915), p. 97.

¹⁰⁷ Ministry of Reconstruction Advisory Council, *Women's Housing Sub-Committee Final Report*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Margaret, *The Nursery School*.

timber for children's nurseries.¹⁰⁹ The need for more flexible spaces that supported imaginative and creative play with loose materials had been circulating for nearly thirty years before the Emdrup junk playground was created.

The appointment of an adult to support children's play was not a revolutionary suggestion in 1946 either. In 1919, Mabel Reaney had called for a director of play and since 1928 the NPFA had been coordinating the campaign work of play leadership advocates.¹¹⁰ Throughout the 1930s, the NPFA publicised the need for play leadership in *Playing Fields*, organised conferences, training courses and held practical demonstrations.¹¹¹ In April 1946, eight months before Allen's *Picture Post* essay, Stockport had introduced adult games wardens to help organise children's play in its parks.¹¹² Not only was the idea of play leadership not new, but far from being revolutionary, its practical implementation often reinforced conservative social values. The historian Krista Cowman has shown how the post war junk playground movement - and the appointment of heroic male playleaders in particular - did much to maintain traditional gender assumptions about both children's play and the role that adults had in supervising it.¹¹³

In emphasising the revolutionary nature of what she saw, it might seem that Allen either failed to acknowledge or was not aware of earlier alternative visions of the playground. The equipped and asphalted playground had been criticised in the 1930s, campaigners had been calling for the involvement of play leaders in children's play for over twenty years and

¹⁰⁹ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, pp. 157–59.

¹¹⁰ Reaney, 'A Director of Play'; National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of the Sub-Committee on Play Leadership 14 December'.

¹¹¹ National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of Conference on Play Leadership'; National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of Play Leadership Committee 23 April'.

¹¹² 'The Job of the Games Warden', *Playing Fields Journal*, 12.1 (1952), 25–26.

¹¹³ Cowman, "'The Atmosphere Is Permissive and Free": The Gendering of Activism in the British Adventure Playgrounds Movement, ca. 1948–70'.

ideas about playing with junk had been circulating for even longer. Two years before Allen's *Picture Post* essay, the Conservative MP Edward Keeling had suggested in the House of Commons that bombed sites could be repurposed and designated as playgrounds while public parks remained commandeered for military purposes.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Save the Children Fund had successfully operated a number of play centres during the war, including in and around the former Camel pub in Bethnal Green, where children were given considerable autonomy in organising their activities and sympathetic adults were largely in the background.¹¹⁵

Although Allen's 1946 essay may not have presented entirely new ideas, it did resonate with wider public debate about the impact of the war on childhood and the involvement of children in urban reconstruction.¹¹⁶ The images of children in a seemingly ruined landscape chimed with iconic representations of the poor urban child playing in the war-damaged city that had a compelling (and complex) place in the British post-war imagination.¹¹⁷ In some ways, the images represented society's hopes for the future and emphasised the child's role as an agent in the spatial and cultural reconstruction of post-war cities.¹¹⁸ Children could figuratively and literally help to rebuild the city. At the same time, play had assumed a therapeutic function. Based on the theories of psychologists such as Anna Freud and the practical, wartime experience of Marie Paneth at the Branch Street play centre, play could operate as an antidote to children's experiences of violence and destruction.¹¹⁹ The junk playground signalled a psychological approach to urban reconstruction, where play

¹¹⁴ Edward Keeling, *House of Commons Debate*, 30 March 1944, Vol.398, Col.1542.

¹¹⁵ '1d. a Week Clubs for Children', *The Times*, 11 March 1944, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Kozlovsky, 'Adventure Playgrounds'.

¹¹⁷ Highmore, 'Playgrounds and Bombsites'; Cowman, 'Open Spaces Didn't Pay Rates'.

¹¹⁸ Glasheen, 'Bombsites, Adventure Playgrounds and the Reconstruction of London: Playing with Urban Space in Hue and Cry'.

¹¹⁹ Kozlovsky, 'Adventure Playgrounds'.

leaders observed and guided the children at play.¹²⁰ In the junk playground, the city could help to rebuild a childhood affected by war. At the same time, such spaces could represent dystopian visions of destruction and chaos, or even the realisation of these visions for those living nearby. Marcus Lipton, MP for Brixton, received a 'constant stream of letters coming in from people who unfortunately live very near these small bombed sites, complaining of the filthy garbage, rotting mattresses, dead cats and all sorts of other things.'¹²¹ In York, Alderman Buckton, Chair of the Housing Committee, stated that 'tenants on our estates do not want these types of playgrounds.'¹²² The borough council in Bethnal Green went further and reversed its decision to establish a junk playground and instead applied to the NPFA for funding to surface and lay out an orthodox play space.¹²³

Despite the dystopian connotations, Allen's *Picture Post* essay and the approach to play space that it represented was influential. The essay brought together the benefits of playing with junk, the potential of play leadership and critiques of orthodox play spaces, linked them to the opportunities presented by bombed sites and presented them in a highly visible and accessible form. Before Allen's essay was published, these ideas had not challenged the dominance of the unsupervised, orthodox playground ideal. Afterwards a number of organisations were inspired to formalise children's use of bombed sites for play, most notably in London. The International Voluntary Service for Peace, University Settlement movement, Save the Children Fund and local community groups were all involved in early efforts to create junk playgrounds. The first opened in Morden in London in 1948 and the idea

¹²⁰ Kozlovsky, *Architectures of Childhood*.

¹²¹ Marcus Lipton, *House of Commons Debate, 13 March 1953 Vol.512 Col.1735*.

¹²² Museum of English Rural Life, P 2870 Box 5/39, Institute of Park Administration, *Report of the 1955 Annual Conference* (London: Journal of Park Administration Ltd, 1955), p. 19.

¹²³ National Archives, CB 1/59, National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of the Children's Playground Committee on 17 March', 1954.

spread to other towns and cities, including Liverpool, Crawley, Bristol and Grimsby.¹²⁴ Thanks to Allen's advocacy, in time the NPFA provided a degree of national coordination and the sharing of knowledge and experience through conferences, publications and committees.¹²⁵ Junk playgrounds gradually received more widespread attention, but as Kozlovsky has suggested 'their visibility was in inverse proportion to their quantity.'¹²⁶ The thousands of orthodox playgrounds in cities, towns and villages across Britain far outnumbered the 17 junk playgrounds that were opened between 1948 and 1960.¹²⁷ Many of the initial experimental spaces were only open for a few years, reclaimed by landowners as temporary leases expired, including the Camberwell (1948-51), Clydesdale Road (1952-1955, Figure 5.8) and Lollard Street (1955-1959) playgrounds.¹²⁸

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Figure 5.8 Clydesdale Road adventure playground (H. Grant, Museum of London, HG1539/5, 1954).

¹²⁴ Cowman, 'Open Spaces Didn't Pay Rates'.

¹²⁵ Marjory Allen, *Adventure Playgrounds* (London: National Playing Fields Association, 1953); National Archives, CB 1/53, National Playing Fields Association, 'Steering Committee on Adventure Playgrounds', 1953; National Archives, CB 1/67, National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of Adventure Playground Conference', 1956.

¹²⁶ Kozlovsky, 'Adventure Playgrounds', p. 178.

¹²⁷ Cowman, 'Open Spaces Didn't Pay Rates', p. 140.

¹²⁸ Kozlovsky, *Architectures of Childhood*.

The apparent chaos and destruction of the junk playground contrasted sharply with the ideal vision of the public park and goes some way in explaining why the junk playground did not become more widespread. Despite Allen's high profile *Picture Post* article, the junk playground received little coverage in the parks trade press for instance. After a single image of a tree house in 1948, which was labelled as a junk playground, it would be another five years before experimental play spaces received greater publicity among green space professionals.¹²⁹ In addition, Allen had transported the junk playground idea from a particular social and cultural context and dropped it into post-war Britain. In Denmark, playgrounds were a mandatory part of new urban landscapes, designers and pedagogues had long worked together, and child-centred notions of play, particularly in the form of the sandpit as a tool for children's self-expression, had long been seen in public play spaces. In contrast, there was no legislative compulsion to provide playgrounds in Britain, the orthodox image of the playground was one dominated by manufactured equipment, and there tended to be little communication, let alone active collaboration, between local authority parks and education committees or professional practitioners.¹³⁰

The British and Danish spaces were noticeably different in their implementation too. The Emdrup site had been specifically designated for play, deliberately designed with its earth embankment, planting and a purpose-built building with toilets and other facilities. In Britain, early junk playgrounds opened on bomb damaged sites that were temporarily available, they had little infrastructure beyond a boundary fence, rarely had planting or other natural features and usually managed with scavenged huts or sheds. Even the term 'junk' was problematic - Allen and George Pepler apparently decided over a lunch that 'adventure' was

¹²⁹ 'Frontispiece: The Junk Playground', *Recreational Review Incorporating Playing Fields*, 8.1 (1948), 202.

¹³⁰ 'Editorial', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 21.1 (1956), 19.

a better term to use, and it first appeared in her pamphlet 'Adventure Playgrounds' published by the NPFA in 1953.¹³¹ In addition to short leases, funding was also a practical problem for British junk playgrounds. Lollard Street was managed by a diverse supervisory committee, including Allen, the LCC, NPFA and Lambeth Borough Council. However, in insisting on 'the utmost economy in capital expenditure' the committee made it very difficult to replicate the Emdrup playground with its purpose-built building, sturdy boundary and planting.¹³²

In addition, the absence of an agreed-upon definition for junk or adventure playgrounds meant that coverage could include a wide range of play spaces. For Allen, this was not entirely positive, as largely conventional play spaces were inappropriately labelled adventure playgrounds.¹³³ A 1960 account of two new adventure playgrounds in Liverpool, one at Whitley Gardens and another at Kirkdale Recreation Ground, seemed to justify Allen's concerns. The features listed included conventional play equipment, putting green, ornamental planting and a play lawn for babies.¹³⁴ This was a far cry from both the experimental spaces created on bombsites in the years after the war and Allen's hopes for more naturalistic play opportunities.

Given Allen's earlier landscape work, her focus on bombsites and junk at the expense of nature might seem out of character. However, it seems likely that Allen temporarily put nature to one side to take advantage of the opportunity presented by bomb damaged sites and evolving notions of childhood. But in doing so, Allen did not abandon nature altogether and instead she expressed reservations about the lack of natural features on many junk

¹³¹ Allen, *Adventure Playgrounds*.

¹³² National Archives, CB 1/59, National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of the Children's Playground Committee on 18 November', 1954, p. 2.

¹³³ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 242.

¹³⁴ 'Liverpool's Adventure Playgrounds', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 24.10 (1960), 515–17.

playgrounds. In a later, highly veiled criticism, she was ‘delighted to see trees and a stream’ at the Southmead adventure playground in Bristol, as natural features were largely missing from similar spaces elsewhere.¹³⁵ In acknowledging such a presence, however, Allen seems to have overlooked other bombsite plants and animals. From accounts in the 1950s, as well as more recent scholarship, we get a sense that bombsites were often rapidly colonised once the dust had settled.¹³⁶ In a 1953 ‘note on new ruins’ the writer Rose Macaulay poetically described how bombsites soon had trees sprouting through empty window sockets, while rose-bay and fennel blossomed in broken walls.¹³⁷ More recently, the archaeologist Gabriel Moshenska has shown how the ecology of post-war bombsites was a consistent feature of first-hand accounts of war time childhood. Within a few weeks of an air raid there was invariably a healthy crop of weeds, including the rose-bay willowherb, while ponds provided habitat for dragonflies and other aquatic insects. The director of Kew Gardens even gave a public lecture on wildflowers on bombed sites, identifying over 150 different species.¹³⁸ Just as Elizabeth Baigent has shown for undeveloped land in Victorian cities, nature was present but perhaps not in the form that Allen valued or appreciated.¹³⁹

Much of Allen’s later writing on children’s playgrounds would emphasise the disconnect between children and nature evident in the orthodox playground. The assault on the natural environment triggered by playground creation meant that ‘streams are hidden in the sewers, the hills and mounds are levelled out, the good earth is buried under concrete

¹³⁵ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 237.

¹³⁶ Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* ch.5.

¹³⁷ Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953).

¹³⁸ Gabriel Moshenska, ‘Children in Ruins’, in *Ruin Memories: Materiality, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*, ed. by Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 230–49.

¹³⁹ Baigent, ‘Octavia Hill’.

and the trees are certainly not for climbing.’¹⁴⁰ In creating orthodox playgrounds, the ruthless bulldozer, unrelenting asphalt machine and the expensive ironmonger destroyed all the natural landscape features, creating a sense of imprisonment and doom. Without opportunities to interact with the fundamental elements of nature, including water, earth and fire, Allen felt it was unsurprising that children would express their primitive instincts in ways that were problematic for individuals and wider society. Allen would go on to position more naturalistic play spaces as the best solution to this problem in a number of subsequent publications.

Following a trip to Sweden in 1954, Allen published articles and a booklet entitled *Play Parks* as a way to promote alternative visions of the playground.¹⁴¹ She praised various aspects of Swedish play space design, but the presence of nature is the most notable feature of the booklet. Alongside play leaders and a variety of moveable materials, she found hedges of flowering shrubs, undulating grass meadow areas, roughly constructed wooden animals, birch wood building blocks and generous sandpits where the sun, rain and air helped to keep the sand clean and wholesome. Echoing Adam’s *PlayParks* from 1937, she concluded that ‘every playground should have some of the characteristics of a park or garden. Planting is not a mere decoration, it is a part of the necessary equipment of a modern playground.’¹⁴² Some features of the Emdrup playground were present in Allen’s *Play Parks*, including a supportive adult and facilities to support children’s self-expression. However, her description of the ‘natural’ elements of the play park contrasted starkly with early accounts and images of

¹⁴⁰ Marjory Allen, ‘Children’s Playgrounds’, in *Report of the First International Congress in Public Park Administration* (London: Journal of Park Administration, 1957), pp. 66–68 (p. 67).

¹⁴¹ Marjory Allen, ‘Why the Stockholm Playgrounds Are so Successful’, *The Architect and Building News*, 30 December 1954, pp. 812–14.

¹⁴² Marjory Allen, *Play Parks*, 3rd edn (London: Housing Centre, 1964), p. 10.

bombsite playgrounds, with piles of debris, little greenery and the only infrastructure a tall wire fence.

5.3 Beyond the bombsite

While some adventure playgrounds were short-lived and they were never commonplace, both Allen and her values came to influence wider playground thought. This impact is often underemphasised in accounts of her work and in narratives associated with the adventure playground movement, perhaps because it is less iconic than images of children playing in rubble and because it took a little longer to have an effect. Allen later recalled that ‘in the public mind, I was identified with adventure playgrounds. In fact, my interests had always been broader.’¹⁴³

Perhaps as a result of her long-standing professional relationship with the landscape architect Richard Sudell, Allen became increasingly involved in the NPFA and its playground campaigning work. Like Allen, Richard Sudell (1892-1968) was a founding member of the Institute of Landscape Architects and for three years in the 1930s Allen and Sudell worked together, most notably on the roof garden at Selfridges.¹⁴⁴ In 1937, Sudell promoted Wicksteed Park as an exemplar children’s playground, but by the 1950s he had moved away from providing manufactured equipment in the spaces he designed.¹⁴⁵ In the early 1950s, he prepared designs for St Chads Park and Central Park in Dagenham and included felled trees as climbing structures in place of a steel climbing frame.¹⁴⁶ As gardening editor for *Ideal Home*

¹⁴³ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 245.

¹⁴⁴ Annabel Downs, ‘Sudell, Richard (1892–1968), Landscape Architect and Author’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴⁵ Richard Sudell, ‘How Can We Make Our Parks Brighter?’, *Municipal Journal and Public Works Engineer*, 46.2300 (1937), 397–98.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Sudell, ‘Park Design for Modern Needs’, *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 14.10 (1950), 343–46; Richard Sudell, ‘Wanted - More Play Leaders’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 12.1 (1952), 20–24.

magazine he promoted modernist and child-friendly domestic garden design.¹⁴⁷ Sudell became involved in the NPFA in 1950, and from 1952 was a member of both its Children's Playground Committee and Technical Sub-committee, which coordinated the publication of *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*.¹⁴⁸ By 1954, Allen was also a member of the Children's Playground Committee. However, its March 1954 meeting was dominated by discussions about pin badges, Harrods sports week and a gala dinner fundraiser – the only mention of adventure playgrounds was to note that Bethnal Green Borough Council had decided not to open one.¹⁴⁹ Allen found such meetings highly conservative, with an atmosphere that was hierarchical and deferential, rather than experimental or dynamic, but the NPFA's organisational structures and resources did help Allen to raise awareness of alternative playground ideas.¹⁵⁰

The initial conservatism of the NPFA also extended to the park profession. Junk playgrounds were rarely mentioned in trade journals in the late 1940s or early 1950s. Even in an account of Copenhagen's open spaces, written by the city's Director of Parks in 1948, the Emdrup playground did not receive a mention.¹⁵¹ A 1955 editorial in the *Journal of Park Administration* seemingly idealised a nineteenth-century conception of the children's playground, where spaces were 'fenced, levelled and drained, with a semi-permanent dry surface and restricted to the use of infants.'¹⁵² Adverts in the same issue hint at the enduring sensibilities of park administrators at this time. A metalwork company based in Thetford, IRS

¹⁴⁷ Seifalian, 'Gardens of Metro-Land'.

¹⁴⁸ National Archives, CB 1/76, National Children's Playground Association, 'The Five Million Club, Minutes of Executive Committee, 17 October', 1950; National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of the First Meeting of the Children's Playground Technical Subcommittee on 4 November'.

¹⁴⁹ National Playing Fields Association, 'Minutes of the Children's Playground Committee on 17 March'.

¹⁵⁰ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*, p. 235.

¹⁵¹ J. Bergmann, 'The Parks of Copenhagen', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 13.1 (1948), 18–21.

¹⁵² 'Editorial', *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 20.7 (1955), 283.

Ltd, promoted its finest enamel 'keep off the grass' and 'no cycling' signs, while Wicksteed & Co. and its equipment remained on the front cover. In a letter to the *Times* in 1957, Manchester's Director of Parks and Cemeteries felt that 'old-fashioned swings are still the most popular type of playthings for children,' while sandpits and adventure playgrounds were both apparently unpopular and dangerous.¹⁵³

Allen's aspiration to introduce unkempt and creative spaces for play was often at odds with park superintendents' simultaneous efforts to keep both children and 'nature' under control. Reginald Wesley, Director of Parks and Cemeteries in Belfast, was indicative of wider values when he emphasised the significant benefits associated with new chemical weedkillers, fungicides and pesticides, while at the same time complaining about the behaviour of children.¹⁵⁴ For A. Dodds, Fellow of the Institute of Park Administration, the appearance of the adventure playground and its 'deplorable collection of rubbish' was a major obstacle to its wider uptake. Dodds suggested that a new title – the 'unorthodox play area' – combined with new building materials, rather than debris, and more hygienic surroundings would appeal more to the wider parks profession and the politicians who governed their work.¹⁵⁵ However, for park administrators, the orthodox children's playground remained an item of equipment that could be purchased from commercial suppliers. In trade journals during the 1950s and 1960s, adverts for play equipment were positioned next to those for other day-to-day necessities of the parks department, including mowers,

¹⁵³ R.C. McMillan, 'Changes in the Playground', *The Times*, 12 July 1957, p. 11.

¹⁵⁴ Reginald Wesley, 'Play Leadership in the City of Belfast', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 24.8 (1960), 378–80.

¹⁵⁵ A. Dodds, 'Play and Our Young People', *Park Administration*, 28.5 (1963), 36–43.

glasshouses, wirework litter bins, Burma teak seats, seeds and chemical pesticides. A similar pattern could be found at trade events and exhibitions.¹⁵⁶

However, some in the profession – and beyond – were starting to feel that parks administrators were not moving with the times. There were repeated calls in the trade press to give up on nineteenth-century conceptions of the park, focused on lavish horticultural displays, and to instead adopt new approaches to leisure.¹⁵⁷ Even the government's 1960 Albemarle inquiry into the provision of services for young people felt that 'park committees often work jointly with cemetery committees, and they become dedicated only too easily to the task of keeping people off or under the grass.'¹⁵⁸ However, despite the apparent impenetrability of the profession to new ideas about the playground, Allen was influencing play space thinking in Britain and beyond.

The conservative tendencies of the park profession were at odds with increasing evidence that children were not using the playgrounds that had been provided for them. A sociological study of the Lansbury Estate in 1954 found that while early residents felt it was a good place to live, 'most children played in the streets' rather than the playgrounds.¹⁵⁹ Research for *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* echoed these findings – during 104 visits to 96 playgrounds they were only being used by children on 44 occasions.¹⁶⁰ For Allen, this meant that playgrounds needed to provide a greater variety of play opportunities, something that

¹⁵⁶ 'Ninth Exhibition of Park Equipment, Machinery and Materials', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 26.11 (1961), 46–48.

¹⁵⁷ H.F. Clark, 'A New Type of Park Administrator', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 23.11 (1959), 439–41; 'Editorial', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 24.5 (1959), 199; 'Editorial', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 27.11 (1962), 21.

¹⁵⁸ Ministry of Education, *The Youth Service in England and Wales* (London: HMSO, 1960), p. 68.

¹⁵⁹ John Westergaard and Ruth Glass, 'A Profile of Lansbury', *The Town Planning Review*, 25.1 (1954), 33–58 (p. 40).

¹⁶⁰ National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*.

could be achieved through the provision of play leaders and features that were more flexible and creative.

As we have already seen, play leadership was being discussed and promoted before Allen became involved in playground advocacy. However, the emphasis she placed on the role of the play leader in junk playgrounds helped to legitimise wider efforts to promote adult involvement in children's play. In 1956, the NPFA produced a film on play leadership and from the late 1950s there were play leadership schemes operating in many towns and cities, including Ramsgate, Belfast and London.¹⁶¹ By 1965 there were 60 schemes operating across the country, the NPFA provided grants to cover play leader salaries and worked with the Institute of Park Administration to offer an annual play leadership summer school.¹⁶² However, just as Krista Cowman has recently argued for the adventure playground movement, park-based play leadership activities were often socially conservative in the activities they offered. Folk dancing for girls and sport for boys echoed nineteenth-century efforts to promote rational recreation, rather than Allen's notion of child-centred play supported by inconspicuous adults. By 1970, a separate Institute of Playleadership was established and included Allen and other notable play workers and advocates, including W.D. Abernethy, Joe Benjamin and Donne Buck.¹⁶³ Despite these efforts, most playgrounds remained unsupervised.

Allen's calls for greater flexibility and creativity in playground provision, as well as her emphasis on providing more 'natural' play opportunities, were increasingly evident in

¹⁶¹ 'Play Leadership Film', *Playing Fields Journal*, 16.4 (1956), 25; J.H. Hingston, 'Play Leadership in the Borough of Ramsgate, Kent', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 24.9 (1960), 438–40; Wesley, 'Play Leadership in the City of Belfast'; 'Come out to Play in Battersea Park', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 27.5 (1962), 65.

¹⁶² W.D. Abernethy, 'What Play Leadership Implies', *Park Administration*, 30.3 (1965), 55.

¹⁶³ National Archives, CB 1/64, National Playing Fields Association, 'Institute of Playleadership Minutes, 9 February', 1970.

contemporary playground events and publications. A public conference and exhibition on children's playgrounds in 1954 and the publication of guidance on playground design in 1956 both demonstrate a shift towards more diversity in playground thought and form. In 1954 the London branch of the NPFA organised a week-long Children's Playground Conference and Exhibition to promote the urgent need for dedicated spaces for children 'on the grounds of health as well as keeping them out of danger and mischief.'¹⁶⁴ In doing so, it combined traditional ideas about the role of the playground as a site of safety, health and social good, with modern communication technology, international networks and a greater emphasis on public engagement. Opened by the Duke of Edinburgh, the conference was free to enter, welcomed the public and included exhibits from over thirty local authorities, landscape architects and equipment manufacturers.¹⁶⁵ The event introduced the general public to existing and new notions of the playground and highlighted the wider range of professionals interested in the design and layout of play spaces for children.

A specially commissioned film, *Come out to Play*, sought to showcase the development of new ideas in play space design.¹⁶⁶ The film provides an insight into the ongoing problem of children's place in public space, as well as the increasing diversity in playground thinking. The film's opening sequence shows a police officer discouraging a group of children from playing in a park, hinting at the ongoing tension between public parks as communal spaces of health and recreation and the perceived problems of unsupervised children and their behaviour. Evicted from the park, the children are shown playing in the street, at risk from motor traffic and a threat to nearby private property, while the narrator emphasises the need for proper

¹⁶⁴ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/CL/PK/01/038, London and Greater London Playing Fields Association, 'Children's Playgrounds Exhibition and Conference Press Release', 1954, p. 1.

¹⁶⁵ 'Planning Children's Playgrounds', *The Times*, 12 June 1954, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ British Pathé Archive, DOCS 1359.01, *Come out to Play*, 1954, <www.britishpathe.com> [accessed 13 February 2021].

playgrounds close to every home, to keep children ‘away from the juvenile courts and out of the cemeteries.’ Having set the scene, the film moves on to tentatively highlight new ideas in playground design. It does not reject the orthodox playground out of hand and includes extensive footage of the US film star Betty Hutton opening a new orthodox playground on Bermondsey Council’s Arnold housing estate.¹⁶⁷ According to the film’s narrator, at £550,000 (£7,250) it was more than usually expensive, while the images showed conventional playground equipment, including swings, slides and rocking horses. In contrast, the film also included footage from Clydesdale Road adventure playground, showing children around a fire, using makeshift swings, playing war games and being organised by a play leader. Unlike Emdrup, with its purpose-built boundary, building and planting, the Clydesdale site seems to have been little adapted since it was cleared of bomb debris. A chain link fence and small wooden shed seem to be the main adaptations. The segment of the film that perhaps aligns most closely with Allen’s wider vision for children’s play is set in Holland Park in London. Parts of the ‘wild and overgrown wood’ were designated as a space where children could climb, dig and make dens.¹⁶⁸ A group of children are shown working collaboratively to move heavy logs, building a camp and exploring in the woods.

In addition to the film, the accompanying conference papers and exhibition speak to the increasingly diverse interest in the form and function of children’s play spaces. Nottingham’s Director of Parks, W.G. Ayres, felt the need for playgrounds was primarily a road safety matter and he expressed doubt about experimental ideas in playground design.¹⁶⁹ Along with plans from local authorities and marketing materials from equipment

¹⁶⁷ ‘Bermondsey Children’s “Variety” Playground’, *Playing Fields Journal*, 12.1 (1952), 35–37.

¹⁶⁸ British Pathé Archive, DOCS 1359.01, *Come out to Play*, 1954 <www.britishpathe.com> [accessed 13 February 2021]; Allen, *Play Parks*, p. 2.

¹⁶⁹ W.G. Ayres, ‘The Provision of Children’s Playgrounds by a Local Authority’, *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 19.4 (1954), 151–60.

manufacturers, including Hirst, Hunt, Spencer Heath and George, and Wicksteed, Ayres represented the orthodox state of play. The traditional justifications for playgrounds were discussed in more depth by the magistrate and youth club advocate, Basil Henriques, in his paper on playgrounds and juvenile delinquency, while the Director General of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, Major-General B.K. Young, emphasised the ongoing dangers of the street.¹⁷⁰ In contrast, a number of speakers and exhibits emphasised alternative approaches to the playground and its form. Richard Sudell spoke on 'Children's Playgrounds in the Modern Landscape' while Marjory Allen discussed 'Adventure Playgrounds.' The accompanying exhibition was designed by the LCC's architects under the supervision of chief architect Leslie Martin, noted designer of London's Royal Festival Hall.¹⁷¹ The exhibition included plans and photographs from the landscape architect Sylvia Crowe on her play-related work for Harlow New Town Development Corporation and photos of Emdrup from the Danish Embassy. The increasing role of professional designers in play space creation will be explored later, but here it is interesting to note the variety of play spaces on display.

To make sense of both existing and emerging ideas, the exhibition designers established and presented a playground typology, and in doing so attempted to make sense of contemporary playground discourse. The first category in their typology was equipped playgrounds. This type was further subdivided into 'orthodox' spaces with swings and slides to promote physical movement; 'feature' play spaces with sandpits, concrete boats and decommissioned steam rollers to inspire fantasy and make believe; and 'commando'

¹⁷⁰ 'New Playfield Ideas from All over the World: Fascinating Facts in Report on Children's Playground Exhibition', *Playing Fields Journal*, 15.1 (1955), 53; Sarah McCabe, 'Henriques, Sir Basil Lucas Quixano (1890–1961), Founder of Youth Clubs and Magistrate', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁷¹ Peter Carolin, 'Martin, Sir (John) Leslie (1908–2000), Architect', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

playgrounds incorporating tree trunks, suspended tyres and concrete pipes to provide ‘not only a free and varied outlet for energy but a spur to imagination and invention.’ A second category was unequipped playgrounds, comprising a flat area for ball games. The third category was natural playgrounds with undulations, banks, trees and bushes as an environment for creative play. Adventure playgrounds were the fourth typology, a space where ‘destruction and vandalism are transmuted into creative effort, team spirit is fostered and leaders emerge.’ The fifth and final category was the traffic playground, which would simultaneously ‘provide amusement and teach road safety.’¹⁷²

The typologies and their descriptions show how the playground was now expected to provide a wider range of benefits to children and society. Playgrounds would provide space for both physical exercise and cerebral creativity, an outlet for excess energy and site for semi-structured games, a space to both interact with nature and learn to cope with the hazards of the modern world. In providing these benefits the antisocial child could be transformed into a well-rounded leader and team player. Playgrounds were not to be segregated by age or gender and in fact greater freedom in play was meant to be a feature of such spaces.

However, assumptions about who these spaces were for was implicit in the descriptions used in the exhibition and in the vision for how spaces would be used for play. Normative assumptions about how girls and boys should play were clear in the way spaces were described and despite the rhetoric around freedom, girls were largely missing from these accounts of the ideal playground. Cowboys, supermen and other male heroes were the ideal characters who would be embodied in imaginary play, while ball games areas provided space to play male-dominated sports such as football and cricket. Girls were not explicitly

¹⁷² London and Greater London Playing Fields Association, ‘Children’s Playgrounds Exhibition and Conference Press Release’ Appendix A.

excluded from these spaces, but the terminology used to frame them was heavily dependent on forms of play most closely associated with boys, echoing the wider provision of outdoor recreational facilities, which largely provided for sports that were mainly played by and seen as appropriate for men. If implemented and used in the way imagined by the exhibition curators, the playground would reinforce and perpetuate an inequitable presence in public space for girls and boys.

The 1954 exhibition was not the first time that these ideas were expressed, but it was the first time that they were brought together in one place. It is not clear how many people attended the exhibition, nor how widely *Come out to Play* was distributed. However, with the publications of the prosaically titled *Selection and Layout of Land for Playing Fields and Playgrounds* (1956), the NPFA brought these discussions to a wider audience.¹⁷³ Prepared by R.B. Gooch, the NPFA's technical advisor, it was reprinted several times over the next decade. Gooch welcomed the move away from the 'monotony' of playgrounds dominated by orthodox tubular steel equipment, something presumably made possible in part because the booklet did not include nor rely on adverts from play equipment manufacturers. Instead, he echoed Allen's call for greater diversity in play provision, a sensitivity to children's expectations and opportunities to interact with nature.

Perhaps the most notable break with earlier NPFA guidance was an apparent recognition that children should be given 'the opportunity of doing what they want to, rather than what grown-ups think they ought to do.'¹⁷⁴ However, this was still meant to take place in the playground, rather than in the wider urban environment. As a result, *Selection and Layout* proposed the ideal comprehensive playground as one which still provided space for

¹⁷³ National Archives, CB 4/59, R.B. Gooch, *Selection and Layout of Land for Playing Fields and Playgrounds* (London: National Playing Fields Association, 1956).

¹⁷⁴ Gooch, *Selection and Layout of Land for Playing Fields and Playgrounds*, p. 66.

physical movements such as swinging, sliding, jumping and climbing, but also room for creative activities, making things, imaginary games, playing with sand and water, and even less energetic pursuits such as reading or playing dominoes. It acknowledged that children had diverse personalities and interests, that child development relied on more than just steel swings and slides, and that the playground should help to meet children's creative and cognitive growth. It also marked a renewal of efforts to reintroduce nature into the playground and encouraged improvisation on the part of adult playground designers. A small, single page sketch included in *Selection and Layout* was reproduced and distributed by the NPFA as a large-scale drawing. *Sketch Suggestions of Improvised Equipment for Children's Play* showed how more naturalistic materials such as trees, logs, grass mounds, sand and rocks could all help to make good places to play, while other materials and forms, such as concrete tunnels, brick walls and replica trains and boats could all promote imaginary play (Figure 5.9).¹⁷⁵ An added benefit was that this type of play space could potentially be created for little cost, using local materials and voluntary labour.

This ideal type would be restated in many of Marjory Allen's later publications, including *Design for Play*, *Play Parks* and *Planning for Play*, and in her evidence to the Parker Morris inquiry into housing standards.¹⁷⁶ Although best remembered for establishing domestic space requirements, the latter also made recommendations for play provision. In calling for sand, water, rough ground and tools, along with an emphasis on imaginative and creative play, it was clearly influenced by Allen's ideas. However, in acknowledging that estate landscapes needed to accommodate both space for play and space for car parking, it

¹⁷⁵ London Metropolitan Archive, CLC/011/MS22287, R.B. Gooch, *Sketch Suggestions of Improvised Equipment for Children's Play* (London: National Playing Fields Association, 1956).

¹⁷⁶ Marjory Allen, *Design for Play: The Youngest Children* (London: Housing Centre, 1962); Allen, *Play Parks*; Marjory Allen, *Planning for Play* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968); Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Homes for Today and Tomorrow* (London: HMSO, 1961).

highlighted wider tensions about how public space should be allocated and used. The problem of securing space for play in the face of urban redevelopment, increased car ownership and anxiety about juvenile delinquency was not confined to Britain, and an increasingly connected international network of play space campaigners, including Allen, shared ideas and experiences during the 1950s and beyond.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.9 Improvised equipment (R.B. Gooch, London Metropolitan Archives, CLC/011/MS22287, 1956)

Allen's promotion of alternative visions for the playground in Britain coincided with her advocacy role with UNICEF in Europe and a wider renewed enthusiasm for international play networks. There had long been an exchange of ideas about dedicated public spaces for play, including links between British and US playground advocates from the 1890s, while the international diplomatic community had adopted the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1924.¹⁷⁷ But after 1945 there was a significant increase in international cooperation.

¹⁷⁷ Wouter Vandenhoe, Gamze Erdem Türkelli, and Sara Lembrechts, *Children's Rights* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).

Landscape historian Jan Woudstra has suggested that Scandinavian countries in particular led a move away from equipment-dominated playgrounds towards a greater emphasis on nature, fantasy and personal creativity.¹⁷⁸ However, while Sweden and Denmark were often held up as exemplars in play space provision and design, the exchange of ideas and information took place far beyond northern Europe.

British trade journals included international case studies, exploring play spaces in Europe and the US, and park departments hosted overseas visitors.¹⁷⁹ The First International Conference in Park Administration took place in London in 1957 and included, alongside exhibition materials from Colwyn Bay, Copenhagen and China, a presentation on children's playgrounds by Allen and a trade exhibition that included Hunt and Wicksteed.¹⁸⁰ The conference led to the formation of the International Federation of Park Administrators (1957) and was followed by a United Nations seminar on playgrounds in 1958, a second world congress in 1962, attended by over a thousand delegates from twenty-six countries, and a third world congress in 1967.¹⁸¹ One commentator concluded that 'when so much attractively designed playground equipment is being produced – especially on the Continent – it is somewhat melancholy to see new playgrounds in Britain fitted out with equipment that was probably designed around the turn of the century.'¹⁸² However, even in other countries

¹⁷⁸ Jan Woudstra, 'Detailing and Materials of Outdoor Space: The Scandinavian Example', in *Relating Architecture to Landscape*, ed. by Jan Birksted (London: E & FN Spon, 1999), pp. 53–68 (p. 66).

¹⁷⁹ Bergmann, 'Parks of Copenhagen'; A.H. Garnsey, 'Playgrounds in Europe and America', *Playing Fields Journal*, 12.3 (1952), 33–35.

¹⁸⁰ RHS Lindley, 969.2 Ins, Institute of Park Administration, *Report of the First International Congress in Public Park Administration* (London: Journal of Park Administration, 1957).

¹⁸¹ Museum of English Rural Life, SR CPRE C/1/130/2, International Federation of Park Administrators, 'Bulletin', 1967; National Archives, National Playing Fields Association CB 1/70, W.D. Abernethy, 'Report on United Nations Playground Seminar', 1958; RHS Lindley, 969.2 Ins, Institute of Park Administration, *Report of the Second World Congress in Public Park Administration* (London: Journal of Park Administration, 1962); Museum of English Rural Life, SR CPRE C/1/130/2, Institute of Park Administration, 'Third World Congress in Public Park and Recreation Administration Bulletin No.2', 1967.

¹⁸² 'How Austria Equips Its Children's Playgrounds', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 22.9 (1958), 448–49 (p. 448).

playground equipment was not meeting the expectations of some. Arvid Bengtsson, the director of parks in Helsingborg, Sweden, felt that 'playground equipment which is on sale in this country is somewhat unimaginative and conservative. We in the Parks Office try therefore to design and construct the equipment which is needed.'¹⁸³

In moving away from standardised manufactured equipment, Bengtsson was one example of a wider shift in international thought, perhaps best demonstrated by the publication of *Spielplatz und Gemeinschaftszentrum (Playgrounds and Recreation Spaces, 1959)* in Stuttgart and London.¹⁸⁴ In addition to examples from Britain and Germany, it included creative play space designs from the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, France and Italy, India and Japan, Brazil and the USA. In his introduction, the Swiss play space advocate Alfred Ledermann directly linked the need for dedicated children's play spaces to the problems of the modern city, including its impact on the nerves and health of urban inhabitants and the lack of wild space for children to play. Inspired by the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga's book *Homo Ludens* (1938) and its emphasis on the central place of play in human culture, Ledermann argued that urban life needed more opportunities for playfulness, from the design of homes and gardens to open space on housing estates and in the 'mental and intellectual filling stations' and health giving 'lungs' of public parks.¹⁸⁵ Examples of progressive play space designs from around the world demonstrated how town planners, designers and educationalists could work together to reclaim spaces for play in the city. Although Allen seems not to have been involved in preparing *Playgrounds and Recreation*

¹⁸³ Arvid Bengtsson, 'Children's Playground in a Swedish Town', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 22.10 (1958), 478–79 (p. 479).

¹⁸⁴ Alfred Ledermann and Alfred Trachsel, *Playgrounds and Recreation Spaces*, trans. by Ernst Priefert (London: The Architectural Press, 1959).

¹⁸⁵ Ledermann and Trachsel, *Playgrounds and Recreation Spaces*, p. 13.

Spaces, she would use some of the examples in her later publications and many of the case studies undoubtedly matched Allen's idea of the ideal play space.

In summary, from the late 1940s, Allen sought to rejuvenate the imagined playground so that it corresponded more closely to contemporary notions of childhood and provided opportunities for more naturalistic play. Although popularly associated with adventure playgrounds, she had a far wider influence on play space thinking. The rhetoric that emphasised the need for playgrounds endured and the critiques she expressed had largely been initiated and developed by others, often in the inter-war years. However, in bringing them together and making them more widely and publicly accessible, she had a significant impact on visions of the ideal playground. She exposed the tension between orthodox playground design and evolving ideas about the developmental needs of children. Although often overlooked, providing more 'natural' play opportunities was also an important motivation for Allen. But just like other attempts to introduce elements of nature into the city, her ideas about a natural childhood and naturalistic play spaces were a product of her particular experiences and values, rooted in a rural nostalgia, horticultural training and practical work experience. Operating at a variety of scales, she contributed to local playground committees, campaigned nationally on play space provision and was connected with and contributed to international discourse through multinational conferences and networks. Through her campaigning, Allen challenged conventional playground thinking and encouraged experimentation in play space design, something that professional designers would progressively replicate in urban reconstruction schemes and on new housing estates.

5.4 Reimagining the playground: artists and architects

If post-war planners routinely designated space for children's play in modern urban environments, those tasked with imagining and designing the buildings and landscapes that gave form to such settings increasingly engaged with the detailed form of the playground and its contents. This was not new in 1945 and artists and designers had been increasingly involved in shaping modern versions of childhood during the first half of the twentieth century. From Charles Rennie Macintosh's role in Glasgow's turn-of-the-century school building programme, through Bauhaus toys in Germany, to Tecton's Finsbury Health Centre, designers were addressing children's education, entertainment and health.¹⁸⁶ The playground did not escape this attention either. In 1934, the sculptor Isamu Noguchi imagined a radical play space for Central Park in New York, but *Play Mountain* was never realised.¹⁸⁷ Instead, as Kozlovsky has argued, it was not until after the Second World War that this engagement, particularly among the architectural profession, reached unprecedented levels and the playground became even more firmly embedded in to creative responses to the city. In this late 1940s to early 1960s period, influenced by utopian ideas, social planning and modernist aesthetics, designers created functional and inspirational infrastructures for the welfare state, including schools, hospitals and play spaces.¹⁸⁸ In 1954, the Museum of Modern Art in New York ran a Playground Sculpture exhibition, which one critic described as a 'strange and wonderful world of colour and shapes.'¹⁸⁹ However, this did not mean that the principle of architectural experiment in the realms of play space design was widely accepted across the Atlantic in Britain. A 1957 article in *The Architect*, for instance, promoted the ideal play space

¹⁸⁶ Kinchin and O'Connor, *Century of the Child: Growing by Design 1900-2000*.

¹⁸⁷ Shaina D. Larrivee, 'Playscapes: Isamu Noguchi's Designs for Play', *Public Art Dialogue*, 1.1 (2011), 53–80.

¹⁸⁸ Kozlovsky, *Architectures of Childhood*.

¹⁸⁹ Aline B. Saarinen, 'Playground: Function and Art', *New York Times*, 4 July 1954, p. 4.

as one that closely resembled the orthodox playground, where swings, slides and other apparatus predominated.¹⁹⁰ Another architectural commentator concurred, suggesting that ‘British finances and the British temperament are vaguely against the planned playground, except in its most conventional form as a collection of swings and see-saws.’¹⁹¹

Despite mainstream support for conventional play equipment, however, there was increasing criticism of the orthodox playground from within the design profession. In an idiosyncratic conference paper in 1947, Clough Williams-Ellis welcomed the gradually improving provision of public spaces for children, but reacted against the use of ‘frightful’ railings which invariably surrounded them (he also found the ‘shrubby-pokery’ of many parks ‘distressing’ and most garden decoration ‘debased and repulsive’).¹⁹² The architect Archie McNab found that play equipment manufacturers produced ‘a range of products which on the whole is pretty dismal and unimaginative...often more suited to a gymnasium than to helping small children to enjoy themselves.’¹⁹³ As well as summing up the previous 70 years of playground thought, he provided numerous examples of what he felt were more imaginative and creative but still industrially produced play equipment. In contrast, a small number of designers moved away from commercial play equipment to redefine play space forms in far more creative ways.

The historian Elain Harwood has argued that ‘many of the most interesting landscape schemes of the post-war period, particularly for individual public housing schemes, were the work of the architects who designed the buildings.’¹⁹⁴ The large-scale redevelopment

¹⁹⁰ ‘Planning’, *The Architect and Building News*, 1957, 477–81.

¹⁹¹ ‘The Library Shelf’, *Official Architecture and Planning*, 23.3 (1960), 135.

¹⁹² Clough Williams-Ellis, ‘Biased Opinions’, *Journal of Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 12.1 (1947), 15–17.

¹⁹³ Archie McNab, ‘Equipping Children’s Playgrounds’, *Design*, 159 (1962), 64–68.

¹⁹⁴ Elain Harwood, ‘Post-War Landscape and Public Housing’, *Garden History*, 28.1 (2000), 102–16 (p. 102).

schemes made possible by comprehensive planning and wartime bomb damage meant that some architects were presented with an almost blank canvas when designing new housing estates. Existing streets and buildings were often cleared entirely, and designers were tasked with creating new urban environments, within the site boundary at least, where homes, open spaces and playgrounds could be carefully integrated. One of the earliest and most notable post-war examples was the Churchill Gardens estate in Pimlico, Westminster. The estate was designed and laid out by Philip Powell (1921-2003) and John Hidalgo Moya (1920-1994), advocates of a pragmatic modernism and ‘perhaps the key British architectural practice at the time.’¹⁹⁵ The Churchill Gardens estate provided a high density mix of homes in blocks of different heights and was one of the first large scale housing schemes after the war.¹⁹⁶ In addition to the buildings and road layout, Powell and Moya also carefully planned the landscaping in between, including the provision of open spaces and the design of structures for play. However, this was not part of their initial commission. Instead, it was a personal decision to consider play provision in this way and Powell’s particular sense of childlike fun is evident from his letters to the building contractor, seeking an old steamroller for one of the play spaces.¹⁹⁷ The associated play structures made use of materials that were similar to those used for the estate buildings, including brick and concrete, as well as more irreverent forms, such as a flying saucer, and some items of conventional play equipment (Figure 5.10).

¹⁹⁵ Kenneth Powell, ‘Powell, Sir Philip (1921–2003), Architect’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁹⁶ Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*.

¹⁹⁷ Elain Harwood, ‘Review: The New Brutalist Image 1949–55, The Brutalist Playground’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 75.1 (2016), 117–19 (p. 118).

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Figure 5.10 Churchill Gardens playground (J. Maltby, RIBA Collections, MAL55277, 1963)

This emphasis on the play value of architectural details and building materials was echoed within the LCC's Architects Department, considered one of the foremost architectural practices in the world at the time (and subsequently ascribed a collective entry in the Dictionary of National Biography).¹⁹⁸ Finding that children were more interested in the steps, slopes, seats and bollards of estate landscapes than the unsatisfactory and often actively dangerous specialist playground equipment, the Department set out to design its own play structures.¹⁹⁹ Architects produced sketches of play houses, dodge walls, bollard seats and wooden tents that could be created by the same building contractors who would build the new homes (Figure 5.11). The drawings were inserted into the Department's design guidance in 1959 and several of these structures, along with a water tray and sandpit, were installed in

¹⁹⁸ Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, p. 105; Elain Harwood, 'London County Council Architects (Act. c.1940-1965)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁹⁹ London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, London County Council, 'Unsupervised Play Space on Housing Estates', 1959.

four experimental play spaces, including on the Barnsbury Estate in Islington and Woodberry Down Estate in Hackney.²⁰⁰

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Figure 5.11 Experimental play equipment (LCC Architects Department, London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, 1959)

Having produced bespoke play structures, architects turned to the wider estate landscape. Future phases of the Churchill Gardens scheme attempted to create an urban environment where ‘children charge straight from indoors to play on the grass between the maisonettes, and their parents sit out in deck-chairs in the summer.’²⁰¹ This romantic image of the council estate, with children playing and parents freed from work and childcare responsibilities, might say more about the expectations of the author than the realities of life on the estate, but it did represent a significant shift in thinking. Rather than enclose

²⁰⁰ London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, London County Council, ‘Experimental Play Equipment: Sketch Layouts’, 1959.

²⁰¹ Philip Aldis, ‘Churchill Gardens’, *New Left Review*, 10, 1961, 55–59 (p. 58).

equipment within a designated playground, the whole estate environment needed to be considered when providing spaces for children to play.

One response was a logical extension of earlier attempts to segregate children and motor vehicles. But rather than encourage children into specific playgrounds, cars would be restricted to roads, while children had greater freedom within the estate. At around the same time that Powell and Moya were working on Churchill Gardens, but in the very different setting of low-rise, low-density Stevenage new town, the sociologist and founding member of Mass Observation Charles Madge argued for new urban environments where children could play more freely. By segregating motor traffic from other uses, footpaths could become the ‘natural patrolling ground for tricycles and other children’s wheeled vehicles’ while ‘garden commons’ provided space for sandpits and games.²⁰² Eleanor Mitchell, the designer of the Notting Hill Adventure Playground, also argued for play opportunities ‘widely distributed in small quantities’ throughout the urban landscape, to create spaces for children to play or talk to friends while parents did their shopping.²⁰³ There were practical experiments with this approach to play provision. In the new town of Basildon, sculptural play equipment was scattered in car-free streets and squares, but when set in hard paved areas they seemed a long way from Madge’s vision of a green garden common (Figure 5.12).

²⁰² Charles Madge, ‘Planning for People’, *The Town Planning Review*, 21.2 (1950), 131–44 (p. 140).

²⁰³ Eleanor Mitchell, ‘Planning for Children’s Play’, *Town and Country Planning*, 34.8–9 (1966), 418–21.

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Figure 5.12 Open space with play area, Basildon (S. Lambert, RIBA Collections, AP BOX 752, 1967)

An alternative response came from the Netherlands, where architect Aldo van Eyck sought to create a more playful urban environment by reintegrating rather than segregating children from the city.²⁰⁴ Between 1947 and the 1970s, van Eyck created over 700 playable spaces in Amsterdam, mostly using bespoke sculptural installations that encouraged children to be creative and stimulated community life.²⁰⁵ Invariably located close to homes but within the street setting, they tended to have little or no physical segregation from motor traffic (Figure 5.13).²⁰⁶ Several of van Eyck's designs appeared in the 1959 English translation of *Playgrounds and Recreation Spaces*, but there seems to have been little wider acknowledgment of his radical approach among British play space advocates. The proximity

²⁰⁴ Alexander Tzonis, 'Eyck, Aldo van (1918-99)', ed. by Patrick Goode, *The Oxford Companion to Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁰⁵ Rob Withagen and Simone R. Caljouw, 'Aldo van Eyck's Playgrounds: Aesthetics, Affordances, and Creativity', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8.1130 (2017).

²⁰⁶ *Aldo van Eyck: The Playgrounds and the City*, ed. by Liane Lefavre and Ingeborg de Roode (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 2002).

of play to the perils of the street in van Eyck's schemes was perhaps too close for campaigners who had long emphasised that the street was not a place for play.

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Figure 5.13 Van Beuningenstraat, Amsterdam (Amsterdam Stadsarchief, 10009A000576, 1965)

Instead, the involvement of architects in British play space design was most often associated with Brutalist housing estates in this period. In Sheffield, the city architect's department included concrete play structures on the Park Hill estate, while Erno Goldfinger produced sketches of alternative play forms and included Brutalist play spaces at the Balfron tower in Poplar, east London.²⁰⁷ However, this form of experimentation - and in particular, the emphasis on architectural aesthetics rather than play function - was not welcomed by Marjory Allen. In fact, she was extremely critical of architectural involvement in play space provision. She argued that the orthodox playground, 'with fixed equipment chosen from an ironmonger's catalogue,' represented one end of a dark spectrum and that at the other

²⁰⁷ RIBA Collections, AP Box 212 Sheffield, Sam Lambert, 'Children Playing on the Climbing Frames in the Playground, Park Hill Estate, Sheffield', 1963; RIBA Collections, PA646/4(6), Erno Goldfinger, 'Design for an Unidentified Playground', 1965.

extreme were 'over-elaborate, over-clever, too slick' spaces designed by architects.²⁰⁸ Neither swings and slides nor painted steamrollers and unalterable sculptural forms provided children with the freedom to play as they wished. In contrast, a few landscape designers were creating spaces that provided for the free, creative and naturalistic play that Allen idealised.

A review of the contents of the Institute of Landscape Architects' journal from the 1930s to the 1970s found few contributions relating to the design of children's play space.²⁰⁹ However, despite this lack of coverage in the journal, there were landscape designers interested in play provision. As early as 1936, Thomas Adams had called for experts to be involved in shaping the modern city and specifically that landscape architects should be responsible for the creation of parks, playgrounds and promenades.²¹⁰ After the war, it was the landscape architect Brenda Colvin (1897-1981) who most clearly elucidated a vision for children's play that combined Allen's explicit promotion of the potential of bombsites and her implicit appreciation of the natural environment and its benefits for children.²¹¹ In *Land and Landscapes* (1948), Colvin argued that designers should be promoting properly interconnected urban park systems, to bring fresh air and natural beauty within easy reach of all urban inhabitants. She shared Allen's assumptions about the playful needs of children, the playfulness of the rural landscape and the opportunities presented by the consequences of war. Colvin felt that children needed imaginative and adventurous play and that 'a good bomb crater, a tank trap, or a Home Guard dug-out' all provided useful places where urban children could play.²¹² However, she also suggested that these features represented an urban

²⁰⁸ Allen, *Planning for Play*, p. 18.

²⁰⁹ Laurie, 'Public Parks and Spaces', p. 73.

²¹⁰ Thomas Adams, *Outline of Town and City Planning: A Review of Past Efforts and Modern Aims* (London: J & A Churchill, 1936), p. 334.

²¹¹ Hal Moggridge, 'Colvin, Brenda (1897-1981), Landscape Architect', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²¹² Brenda Colvin, *Land and Landscape* (London: John Murray, 1948), p. 206.

imitation of the play opportunities that were consistently available to children in the countryside. In an example from the open downs near Luton, she found children gathering to play on a steep chalk escarpment, with its gnarled tree roots, ropes and swings, mud slides, shrubs and trees. For Colvin, this environment provided freedom from the grown-up world and a haven for children's imagination. She suggested that when attempting to recreate similar play opportunities in the city, designers needed to provide irregularity, steep slopes, uneven ground, trees for climbing and swings, rough grass, water and surroundings that evoked a forest setting. In sum, such spaces should recreate 'wild country...a sort of spinney or common, with sandy tracks and open glades in "bosky" surroundings,' all to encourage more naturalistic play.²¹³ Colvin worked on hundreds of schemes, from small gardens to industrial and institutional landscapes, but did not become known for creating children's play spaces.²¹⁴ Instead, one of the most notable exponents of the naturalistic play spaces that Colvin and Allen promoted was Mary Mitchell.

Mary Mitchell (1923-1988) qualified as a landscape architect in 1955 and briefly worked in Richard Sudell's practice and for the Stevenage New Town Development Corporation. However, it was in her work for Birmingham Corporation and subsequently in private practice that she 'made her name as a pioneering designer of children's playgrounds.'²¹⁵ Her work featured in a number of influential publications in Britain and overseas, including Marjory Allen's *Planning for Play* (1968) and Arvid Bengtsson's *Environmental Planning for Children's Play* (1970). Mitchell's designs were in stark contrast to the orthodox playground, with its levelled asphalt, metal fencing and standardised

²¹³ Colvin, *Land and Landscape*, p. 213.

²¹⁴ Moggridge, 'Colvin, Brenda (1897–1981), Landscape Architect'.

²¹⁵ Jane Brown, 'Mitchell, Mary Frances (1923-1988)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

equipment, and instead were developed specifically for each site, making use of existing and new landscape features and responding to the character of the surrounding urban environment.²¹⁶ She felt that play areas needed to be ‘imaginative, functional (both active and social), creative, intimate, sheltered, free of traffic noise, dust and fumes... something of lasting value for frequent daily use.’²¹⁷

In Birmingham, her designs for the Kingshurst Hall Estate, Pool Farm Estate and Chamberlain Gardens play spaces incorporated mature and new trees to create a woodland-like setting, while undulating landforms included bespoke slides and climbing structures, and there were open, grassy areas for both active and imaginative play.²¹⁸ On the Lyndhurst Estate, a single row of granite setts embedded into the grass provided only a nominal boundary between the play area and the wider estate landscape.²¹⁹ In Nuneaton and Blackburn, Mitchell created spaces with similar characteristics, even if the individual designs were unique to each location. They included steep sided slopes, water, trees, slides integrated into small hills and other bespoke play structures in a naturalistic setting (Figure 5.14).²²⁰ In the Lee Valley Regional Park in London, Mitchell combined the reclamation of an industrial landscape with new play opportunities, adapting a disused sewage works to create the Markfield Action Playground.²²¹

²¹⁶ Mary Mitchell, ‘Birmingham Parks’, *Park Administration*, 28.5 (1963), 47.

²¹⁷ Mary Mitchell, ‘Landscaping of Housing Areas’, *Official Architecture and Planning*, 25.4 (1962), 193–96.

²¹⁸ Mary Mitchell, ‘Birmingham Playgrounds’, *Playing Fields*, 21.4 (1961), 40–41; Mary Mitchell, ‘Birmingham Playgrounds’, *Playing Fields*, 24.2 (1964), 29–30; Arvid Bengtsson, *Environmental Planning for Children’s Play* (London: Lockwood, 1970), p. 104.

²¹⁹ Mitchell, ‘Landscaping of Housing Areas’, p. 193.

²²⁰ ‘An Imaginative Approach to Playground Provision’, *Park Administration*, 28.12 (1963), 42; Allen, *Planning for Play*, pp. 96–97; Bengtsson, *Environmental Planning for Children’s Play*, p. 148; ‘Children’s Playgrounds’, *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, 165 (1973), xxxv.

²²¹ Tom Turner and Simon Rendel, *London Landscape Guide* (Dartford: Landscape Institute, 1983).

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Figure 5.14 Children's playground, Blackburn (Mary Mitchell, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, 1973)

As well as adapting the landscape to make it more playful, from 1959 Mitchell introduced sculpture to the playgrounds she designed. In particular, she worked with the artist John Bridgeman to create abstract, often animalistic forms in a number of Birmingham open spaces, including the Nechells Green Redevelopment Area and Hawkesley Farm Moat estate.²²² Few of the sculptures now survive, although the installation at Curtis Gardens in Birmingham is now Grade II listed.²²³ It is interesting to note that even when experimental and creative approaches to the playground were implemented there was still a tendency towards standardisation and repetition, even if only on a small scale. The formwork for Bridgeman's concrete and brass slide sculpture at Nechells Green was designed to be re-used at least four times.²²⁴ However, that Allen and others showcased Mitchell's play space designs in their books and publications is not surprising. With their organic aesthetic, landscaping and

²²² 'Playgrounds in Birmingham', *The Architect and Building News*, 218.24 (1960), 767–68.

²²³ Historic England, *Play Sculpture, Curtis Gardens, National Heritage List for England*, 1423375, 2015.

²²⁴ 'Playgrounds in Birmingham'.

planting, diverse play opportunities and site-specific layouts, in many ways they represented the ideal play spaces that Allen had long called for.

Another landscape architect who created play spaces that would receive wider acclaim at the time was Michael Brown (1923-1996). From the mid-1960s, he designed a number of play areas in London, High Wycombe and Redditch, mainly on social housing estates.²²⁵ Although often less naturalistic than Mitchell's playspace designs, Brown used a simple palette of hard materials, often brick, to create incidental and durable opportunities for play. Brown felt that 'simple changes of level, steps, railings, walls and benches may often be preferable to formal play equipment' and that opportunities for creative and imaginative play should be a feature of all outside space.²²⁶ At the Brunel Estate in Paddington, Brown created a 'monumental slide structure' out of brick as part of his wider landscape scheme, a feature that was Grade-II listed by Historic England in 2020 (Figure 5.15).²²⁷ However, for Marjory Allen it was not the individual play structures that were his most notable achievement, but rather the approach to the wider estate grounds. Allen commended Brown's design for the Winstanley estate in Battersea because 'the entire landscape scheme has been conceived in terms of children's play activities,' so that the 'total environment' was available for play.²²⁸

²²⁵ Museum of English Rural Life, AR BRO DO, Michael Brown, 'Drawings and Plans in the Michael Brown Collection', 1966.

²²⁶ Michael Brown, 'Landscape and Housing', *Official Architecture and Planning*, 30.6 (1967), 791–99 (p. 795).

²²⁷ Historic England, *Slide Structure in Children's Playground, Brunel Estate, National Heritage List for England, 1468979*, 2020.

²²⁸ Allen, *Planning for Play*, p. 26; Bengtsson, *Environmental Planning for Children's Play*, p. 52. Initial archival research by Luca Csepely-Knorr and Amber Roberts has connected Brown with the theories of the Scottish-American landscape architect Ian McHarg and his ideas for ecological city planning, expressed most notably in *Design with Nature* (1969) but further research is needed to explore the influence of these ideas on play space thinking and provision in more detail. Luca Csepely-Knorr and Amber Roberts, 'Towards a "Total Environment" for Children: Michael Brown's Landscapes for Play', in *Landscape and Children* (presented at the FOLAR Annual Symposium, Museum of English Rural Life, 2019).

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Figure 5.15 Brunel Estate playground in the 1970s (Colin Moore, private photo).

This approach to providing for children's play was not new in 1962 when Brown designed the Winstanley estate. In his wide-ranging review of public housing schemes in 1958, the noted architect A.W. Cleeve Barr concluded that 'inadequate facilities for children's play have constituted one of the most miserable features of British post-war housing schemes.'²²⁹ And while he repeated many of the recommendations in other publications about the details of play provision, perhaps his most radical assertion was that the designers of a new housing estate needed to consider the 'total design of its environment.'²³⁰ In many ways this was the antithesis of the playground. Rather than accept that the urban landscape was a hostile place for children and respond by providing dedicated places to play, these calls for total design represented a new way of thinking about the child in the city. Children had long experienced the wider city as a place to play, but now play advocates and designers were starting to appreciate that too. In 1965, the landscape architect Bill Gillespie concluded that 'we need to

²²⁹ A.W. Cleeve Barr, *Public Authority Housing* (London: Batsford, 1958), p. 46; Andrew Saint, 'Barr, Albert William Cleeve (1910-2000)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²³⁰ Cleeve Barr, *Public Authority Housing*, p. 50.

get away from this isolated idea of the parks towards an open space system fully integrated with the other elements of the city.²³¹ Anarchists and urbanists, such as Colin Ward and Jane Jacobs, would develop this notion further in the late 1960s and 1970s, arguing that the functional segregation of the city, including the creation of dedicated places to play, not only failed to recognise the lived reality of urban life, but also contributed to the increasing hostility of the wider environment for children and adults alike. This shift from criticism of the playground form to condemnation of the entire playground principle will be explored further in the next chapter.

5.5 Conclusion

From the 1940s to the 1960s, the children's playground provided a public space where social and environmental assumptions about childhood, child development, nature and the city could be played out and challenged. Long standing rhetoric that was used to justify the need for playgrounds, including road danger, a lack of urban nature and protection against delinquency, remained central to continued efforts by town planners and play space campaigners to promote the need for dedicated play spaces for children. In contrast, there was far greater experimentation in the playground form in response to new ideas about children's developmental needs, new forms of housing and the centrality of childhood to the new welfare state. Marjory Allen's promotion of the Emdrup junk playground did not represent a radical break with earlier thinking, even if it appeared very different to the traditional orthodox playground. Instead, Allen fused earlier critiques of the playground with changing constructions of childhood and her own conceptions of nature to spur high-profile and public discussion about the ideal playground. This in turn provided the critical space for

²³¹ William Gillespie, 'Landscaping Our Urban Areas', *Park Administration*, 30.11 (1965), 40–43 (p. 43).

advocates, designers and in a relatively small number of cases children to experiment with play space form. However, this period of experimentation would be relatively short-lived as commercial suppliers adapted their products and there were new concerns about playground safety. When combined with reductions in local authority funding and changing leisure habits, some increasingly questioned whether playgrounds were the natural place for children to play.

6 Playground scuffles: anarchy, community and politics, 1965 to 1980

Almost as soon as they were over, the 1970s were characterised by politicians and the media as a period of crisis, beset by pessimism, gloom and despair.¹ Seventies Britain is often remembered and portrayed as a decade defined by profound economic, political and social crises and individual hardship associated with high inflation, energy rationing, social and racial conflict. The optimism, political ambition and power of architect-planners peaked in the mid-1960s and saw many cities transformed, but also soon vilified for their ‘tacky pedestrian precincts, grim underpasses, budget megastructures, and gargantuan car parks.’² Revisionist accounts of the 1970s have contended that while Britain undoubtedly experienced a convulsive moment, the talk of crisis is significantly overstated and instead the decade is best characterised by a ‘battle of ideas’ in the media, publishing, higher education and politics.³ The notion of a battle of ideas is also a useful characterisation of playground discourse and practice from the late 1960s through to the 1980s. As such this chapter seeks to extend revisionist accounts of the era, pointing to an ongoing ferment of thought, which started in earnest in the late 1940s and continued into the 1970s and beyond. It highlights the continuing place of the playground in visions of a modern, planned and healthy urban environment, before moving on to explore in more depth the contested place of the playground in local politics, national policy, sociological research and anarchic thought. It charts the increasingly polarised attitudes to play provision, identifying areas of conflict between radical play work and more traditional notions of the playground, as well as a

¹ Phillip Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies* (London: Michael Joseph, 1985).

² Otto Saumarez Smith, *Boom Cities: Architect-Planners and the Politics of Radical Urban Renewal in 1960s Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 2.

³ Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton, ‘The Benighted Decade? Reassessing the 1970s’, in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, ed. by Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton, and Pat Thane (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 14.

subsequent widespread preoccupation with safety that significantly affected both approaches. Campaigners' concern about the danger of motor vehicles was largely superseded by a much wider public and political anxiety about the threat seemingly posed to children by paedophiles, pets and, increasingly, playgrounds themselves.

In his influential book, *Lost Freedom*, historian Mathew Thomson has sought to make sense of efforts in the 1970s to promote greater freedom in urban childhood.⁴ Compared to the present, the 1970s seem a time of considerable freedom for children, particularly their ability to experience the outside world and play in the city without parental supervision. At the same time, the decade was marked by calls for greater freedoms for the urban child, particularly from radical progressives. In attempting to make sense of this apparent paradox, Thomson argues that anxiety about the impact of the Second World War on children, combined with post-war concern about the danger from traffic, resulted in efforts to protect young people from the dangers of the city, including the creation of playgrounds. As we have already seen in earlier chapters, there is a much longer history to the creation of dedicated play spaces as a route to safety, health and happiness, particularly as a response to the dangers of traffic. The extended chronology examined in this thesis does not discredit Thomson's argument, but rather lends weight to his assertion that by the early 1970s the foundations for a reaction against the over-protection of children were well established.

This might seem at odds with the emphasis on childhood freedom explored in earlier chapters, particularly among those inspired by Marjory Allen's campaigning from the 1940s. Making sense of this requires some thought about how the term 'freedom' is being used. For Thomson and radical campaigners in the 1970s, it represented ideas about children's ability

⁴ Thomson, *Lost Freedom*.

to play in and move through the urban environment, the distance they could travel from home, and a lack of direct adult supervision. However, for adventure playground advocates of the late 1940s and 1950s, the concept of freedom had largely related to an individual child's ability to play in an instinctive and unstructured way, without the constraints imposed by standardised manufactured play equipment, asphalt and fencing. For advocates such as Allen, the need for dedicated places to play remained convincing and the form of the playground and the type of play that it facilitated were central to their ideas and actions. They imagined that childhood independence operated within the boundaries of the playground, while later radicals promoted autonomy for children at a city-wide scale. In Thomson's analysis, calls for greater childhood freedom in the 1970s were partially inspired by the limits on childhood play and mobility that the principle of the playground imposed, but also the anarchic possibilities that childhood independence and self-determination invoked.

This chapter will utilise a broad range of archive materials and both scholarly and popular publications in order to explore how the principle of the children's playground was positioned in these debates about childhood freedom from the late 1960s, how a post-war focus on the play of the individual child expanded to incorporate a wider political mission to reclaim the city for children, how those responsible for promoting and managing playgrounds reacted and the extent to which play spaces changed on the ground. Such an analysis contributes to our understanding of a critical period in the history of the children's playground and provides vital historical context for present day debates about children's place in the city.

6.1 The state of play

The 1970s saw a renewed and widespread general interest in both childhood and play. Progressive educationalists, rooted in inter-war ideas about psychology and child development, reached a wider audience by the 1970s. For example, A.S. Neill's hugely

influential *Summerhill* achieved both considerable sales and widespread publicity in Britain and internationally for its promotion of childhood freedom and the role of play in education.⁵ As we shall see later in this section, central government departments commissioned research into children's play and issued guidance on play space provision in a belief that play could help to achieve wider policy ambitions. At the same time, psychology was joined by sociology in trying to make sense of human nature and the place of children in society and the environment.⁶ By the 1970s, play could seemingly provide evidence to explain a wide range of biological, behavioural and social phenomenon, from its evolutionary role in animals and humans, through physical and social development, to its significance in the progress of western civilisation.⁷

In addition to its analytic potential, play was increasingly seen not just as healthy but also a medically therapeutic activity. The gardens and grounds of asylums and other medical institutions had long performed a therapeutic function, providing space for open air convalescence and interaction with nature and horticulture.⁸ From the 1970s, childhood play was nurtured in such spaces too. Hospitals began to encourage in-patient children to play, while nurses were trained to support playful activities.⁹ The Department of Health set up an expert group and issued a circular to encourage, although not fund, play in hospitals.¹⁰ In 1972, an outdoor play space that included climbing structures, a pond and a grazing goat was

⁵ Neill, *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child-Rearing*.

⁶ Mathew Thomson, *Psychological Subjects: Identity, Culture, and Health in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷ For an overview of the place of play in wider thinking see, for example, *Play: Its Role in Development and Evolution*, ed. by J.S. Bruner, A. Jolly, and K. Sylva (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

⁸ Hickman, *Therapeutic Landscapes: A History of English Hospital Gardens since 1800*.

⁹ Susan Harvey, 'Play in Hospital', *Mental Health*, 24.3 (1965), 121–23; National Archives, MH 152/134, Chiswick Polytechnic, 'Hospital Play Specialist Course', 1973; National Archives, DY 1/77, Joint Board of Clinical Nursing Studies, 'Children's Play Panel', 1977.

¹⁰ Department of Health and Social Security, *Play for Children in Hospital*, Circular HC(76)5 (London: HMSO, 1976); National Archives, MH 152/134, 'Report of the Expert Group on Play for Children in Hospital', 1976.

designed and created for Stoke Lyne Hospital by students from Exeter College of Art.¹¹ At Farleigh Hospital, near Bristol, an adventure playground was created for its mentally ill residents, although it could hardly compensate for brutal failings in care at the institution.¹² In 1970, Marjory Allen was involved in setting up an adventure playground in Chelsea, where disabled children and their siblings and friends could play together, followed by a wider association to support similar sites elsewhere.¹³

Despite the spread of these semi-public facilities for children's play in various medicalised environments, the lack of public play space was still seen as a problem, particularly in relation to new forms of housing. A study into family life on housing estates in Leeds, London and Liverpool found that the problem of high rise living, combined with inadequate playground provision 'may well amount to a process likely to impair the normal personality development of the children affected.'¹⁴ Play and the playground continued to be seen, for the time being at least, as important vectors for healthy child development. Such trends were evident in planning policy, where town planners continued to promote the principle of the playground as a device of childhood wellbeing. In 1961, the Parker Morris report, most well-known for establishing internal space standards for council housing, also made recommendations relating to the provision of play spaces.¹⁵ A 1968 double edition of the journal *Town and Country Planning* showed how planners could improve children's lives

¹¹ Museum of English Rural Life, Pamphlet 2870 Box 1/08, Jane Bentley and Laura Freeman, 'Play Space: The Design, Research and Development of a Play Area for Courtenay Special School, Stoke Lyne Hospital, Exmouth', 1972.

¹² National Archives, CB 1/63, National Playing Fields Association, 'Adventure Playgrounds at Farleigh Hospital', 1971; 'Farleigh Hospital', *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1970), 58–59.

¹³ 'Adventure for the Handicapped', *The Times*, 8 April 1970, p. 9; Wellcome Collection, Robina Addis Archives PP/ADD/K/2/2, 'Adventure Playground for Handicapped Children', 1970; Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*.

¹⁴ Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Families Living at High Density: A Study of Estates in Leeds, Liverpool and London*, Design Bulletin, 21 (London: HMSO, 1970), p. 35.

¹⁵ Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Homes for Today and Tomorrow*.

at home, at school and at play, and emphasised the potential benefits of children's participation in planning for the future.¹⁶

The policy aspirations for planned play provision were implemented most notably and comprehensively in the new towns, where local authorities were replaced by semi-autonomous development corporations charged with making the purpose-built settlements a reality. Planners working on the development of Milton Keynes in 1973, adopted a particularly optimistic tone. They emphasised the importance of family life and sought to provide a wide range of public leisure spaces, with many specifically for children. Toddlers play spaces close to home, communal playgrounds in 'sheltered leafy open spaces' for older children, along with adventure play centres and a children's play officer, would all help to ensure 'a programme of play to suit everyone's requirements and stimulate the imagination.'¹⁷ In Basildon, car-free public spaces were dotted with sculptural play equipment, while the provision of playspace within residential areas was a strategic objective from the outset for planners in Harlow too.¹⁸ Even where housing schemes were less extensive and involved a smaller extension to an existing community, children's play could still be central to their design and layout. New estates provided a significant improvement in housing conditions and often afforded more space and greater freedom for play. For example, photographs of the Middlefield Lane estate in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire, show how children regularly used communal areas, so that while they 'were not quite places *for* children, they were child-centred in the hope of fostering children's wellbeing.'¹⁹ Play space provision

¹⁶ 'Children and Planning', *Town and Country Planning*, 36.10–11 (1968), 430–512.

¹⁷ Milton Keynes Development Corporation, 'Play in a New City', *Playing Fields*, 34.1 (1973), 26–31.

¹⁸ Frederick Gibberd, *Harlow: The Story of a New Town* (Stevenage: Harlow Development Corporation, 1980).

¹⁹ Ian Waites, "'One Big Playground for Kids": A Contextual Appraisal of Some 1970s Photographs of Children Hanging out on a Post-Second-World-War British Council Estate', *Childhood in the Past*, 11.2 (2018), 114–28 (p. 126).

remained important in established urban areas too. In Waltham Forest in east London, the council's 1977 Corporate Plan placed a high priority on creating additional playgrounds, with eighteen new play spaces planned for parks, housing estates and education sites.²⁰ The playground was still an integral part of visions for a better urban environment and the provision of dedicated space for play remained an important aspect of an optimistic approach to planning new communities during the 1970s. However, while new estates may have been positive spaces for some children, there were also increasing critiques of planning orthodoxy and its emphasis on creating planned spaces for play.

By the 1970s, planning had not made the urban world anew as its early advocates had often hoped. Many people still lived in dilapidated housing, in neighbourhoods that had either not been rebuilt after the war or were in the middle of slow rebuilding programmes. Over two hundred and forty local civic societies came together to describe a resulting 'urban wasteland' in many parts of the country, including Surrey Docks in London, Glasgow's east end and St Radigund's in Canterbury.²¹ The documentary photographer Nick Hedges made this strikingly clear in his work for the homelessness charity Shelter (1968-72) and in a subsequent exhibition commissioned by the Royal Town Planning Institute at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.²² His evocative images highlighted the enduring resourcefulness and adaptability of children at play, even as their surroundings decayed. A child playing on a small, enclosed balcony at the top of a monumental tower block or children

²⁰ M. Hart, 'Dual Use Education Playgrounds', *Parks and Recreation*, 43.8 (1978), 40–41.

²¹ Timothy Cantell, *Urban Wasteland: A Report on Land Lying Dormant in Cities, Towns and Villages in Britain* (London: Civic Trust, 1977).

²² Alison Hall, 'The Shelter Photographs 1968-1972: Nick Hedges, the Representation of the Homeless Child and a Photographic Archive' (unpublished thesis, University of Birmingham, 2016); Nick Hedges, Larry Herman, and Ron McCormick, 'Problems in the City' (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1975).

playing on broken swings among crumbling buildings were a far cry from planners' utopian hopes for redevelopment schemes and the playgrounds that accompanied them (Figure 6.1).

[REDACTED]

Figure 6.1 Swinging in a derelict playground, Newcastle (Nick Hedges, www.nickhedgesphotography.co.uk, 1971)

Hedges' creative response to the problems came on the back of growing criticism among academics and journalists about modern planning and its consequences. Perhaps the most influential critique of planning and the places it was creating was *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by the journalist Jane Jacobs, which offered a damning attack on the principles of 'modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding.'²³ Jacobs argued that planners had long been fixated by the ideas of Howard, Corbusier and others about how cities *ought* to work, rather than seeking to understand how they actually worked in practice through the everyday lives of ordinary people. Rather than the planners' aerial perspective, Jacobs favoured a view of the city from the sidewalk. She argued that the street did not represent the problematic space so often ascribed by planners, nor were dedicated spaces for play

²³ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities: The Failure of Town Planning* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 13.

inherently any better: 'how nonsensical is the fantasy that playgrounds and parks are automatically OK places for children, and streets are automatically not OK places for children.'²⁴ She mocked the 'grass fetishes' of park advocates and the 'science fiction nonsense' that green spaces somehow represented the lungs of the city.²⁵ Instead, she argued that city streets had long possessed an important social function as sites of neighbourliness and community interaction. For children in particular, the street offered collective adult supervision, a variety of ways to play, space for imagination and creativity and opportunities to learn about adult society through imitation. She felt that children needed an 'unspecialized outdoor home base from which to play, to hang around in, and to help form their notions of the world' and the street was the best place for that to happen.²⁶ In contrast, downgrading the street and removing children was the 'most mischievous and destructive idea in orthodox city planning.'²⁷

Although initially published in the USA and drawing considerably on her experience of living in New York, *Death and Life of Great American Cities* became hugely influential. It inspired others to question long-held assumptions about planning and contributed to a degree of introspection within the planning profession in Britain. Writing in *New Society* in 1969, a group of British academics, architects and critics considered what would happen if there was no planning at all, calling instead for experiments in 'non-planning.'²⁸ In addition, as wider political and public consensus about the authority of the planner dissolved in the

²⁴ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, p. 91.

²⁵ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, p. 101.

²⁶ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, p. 91.

²⁷ Jacobs, *Death and Life*, p. 98.

²⁸ Reyner Banham and others, 'Non-Plan: An Experiment in Freedom', *New Society*, 20 March 1969, pp. 435–43.

1970s, there was considerable debate within the planning profession about its future.²⁹ Nathaniel Lichfield, noted academic and planning consultant, felt that the system needed to be overhauled to ensure it met 'the needs of our children rather than our parents.'³⁰ Others from within the profession questioned planners' ability to mediate between society and the environment, casting doubt on the adequacy of the system, its philosophical foundations and relationship with society at large, leading to considerable defensiveness and resistance to change.³¹ The conviction among planners, architects and politicians that modern approaches to the reconstruction of the city, including the provision of playgrounds, heralded a bright new future for society was increasingly being renounced by the same people that had endorsed it a decade earlier.³²

This existential challenge to town planning was exacerbated by an increasing awareness and sensitivity to the lived experience of city dwellers, as the social sciences became increasingly influential in both academia and more widely.³³ Like Jacobs' work, Kevin Lynch's influential book *The Image of the City* had sought to shift approaches to the city from the bird's eye view of the planner to that of the person on the street.³⁴ Psychologists, sociologists, geographers, and others were subsequently inspired to study the everyday lived experience of the city and the impact of the environment on behaviour, including among children.³⁵ The concept of territorial 'home range', borrowed from animal ecology, was of

²⁹ G Cameron and others, 'Planning and the Future: A Review Symposium', *The Town Planning Review*, 48.3 (1977), 233–46.

³⁰ 'Planning Standards Criticised', *The Guardian*, 17 March 1966, p. 2.

³¹ Sylvia Law, 'Planning and the Future: A Commentary on the Debate', *The Town Planning Review*, 48.4 (1977), 365–72.

³² Otto Saumarez Smith, 'The Inner City Crisis and the End of Urban Modernism in 1970s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 578–98.

³³ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*.

³⁴ Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960).

³⁵ See, for example, the 13-volume series *Human Behaviour and Environment: Advances in Theory and Research* (New York: Plenum Press), edited from 1976 to 1994 by the social psychologist Irwin Altman, and the journal *Children's Environment Quarterly*, 1984 to 1995.

particular interest as scholars sought to understand the ways in which children made use of the urban environment.³⁶ Most significantly, however, sociologists were increasingly attempting to understand the changing place of children in the city. Play, the playground and its relation to new forms of housing proved to be an important testing ground for new sociological research methods.

This focus on urban social change had its roots in earlier interest in day-to-day lived experience and attempts at more participatory forms of urban planning. As early as 1936 Elizabeth Denby, the housing consultant and friend of Marjory Allen, had demonstrated an interest in the views of residents in new housing schemes, even if her subsequent designs did not necessarily live up to future occupants' expectations.³⁷ The creation and development of Mass Observation in the late 1930s helped to foster a greater awareness of the everyday experiences of working-class city dwellers in particular.³⁸ After the war, the Building Research Station continued to study user satisfaction with new forms of social housing, while sociologists investigated the social consequences of rehousing schemes, particularly the impact on residents' sense of community.³⁹ However, children's play only occasionally featured in these initial assessments. A 1954 study of the Lansbury estate found children largely playing in the street, while the NPFA's *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* (1953) assessed the quality of new play provision mainly by questioning those responsible for creating it.⁴⁰

³⁶ Howard F. Andrews, 'Home Range and Urban Knowledge of School-Age Children', *Environment and Behavior*, 5.1 (1973), 73–86; Amos Rapoport, 'The Home Range of the Child', *Ekistics*, 45.272 (1978), 378.

³⁷ Elizabeth Denby, 'Rehousing from the Slum Dweller's Point of View', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 44 (1936), 61–80; Elizabeth Darling, 'What the Tenants Think of Kensal House: Experts' Assumptions versus Inhabitants' Realities in the Modern Home', *Journal of Architectural Education*, 53.3 (2000), 167–77.

³⁸ Tom Jeffrey, *Mass-Observation: A Short History* (Brighton: University of Sussex, 1999).

³⁹ Vere Hole, 'Social Effects of Planned Rehousing', *The Town Planning Review*, 30.2 (1959), 161–73; Michael Young, 'Kinship and Family in East London', *Man*, 54.210 (1954), 137–39.

⁴⁰ National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*; Westergaard and Glass, 'A Profile of Lansbury'.

One of the earliest attempts to adopt new sociological methods and position children more centrally was by Margaret Willis, a pioneering researcher employed from the early 1950s by the LCC Architects Department. In *High Blocks of Flats*, a study of nine council estates, Willis surveyed families to understand their experience of living in high-rise homes, including the impact on children's play.⁴¹ She found that younger children living on higher floors were often kept inside rather than being allowed out to play and that where play spaces were provided they were often inadequate. Willis concluded that families with younger children should be housed on the lower floors of high blocks, so that it was easier for younger residents to play outside, a call that would be repeated in subsequent reports in other cities.⁴² In a follow-up study of young children's play on four estates, Willis found that 'only a relatively few children used the playground frequently' with many preferring to play on the service roads, grass areas and in the entrances to buildings.⁴³ When children did play in the playground, the sandpit was by far the most popular amenity among children. In a specific study of seven sandpits, Willis concluded that such amenities were an important playground feature on high density estates, but that many parents expressed anxiety about the unhygienic and unhealthy nature of sand.⁴⁴ In the two decades after Willis' pioneering work, which remained unpublished due to departmental hierarchies and bureaucratic protocols, there were regular sociological studies of the relationship between children and the urban environment; three in particular stand out for their focus on children and play provision.⁴⁵

⁴¹ London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, Margaret Willis, 'High Blocks of Flats: A Social Survey', 1955.

⁴² John P. Macey, 'Problems of Flat Life', *Official Architecture and Planning*, 22.1 (1959), 35–38.

⁴³ London Metropolitan Archive, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, Margaret Willis, 'Toddlers' Playgrounds: An Enquiry into the Reactions of Mothers to the Experimental Play Equipment for Pre-School Aged Children', 1959, p. 9.

⁴⁴ University of Edinburgh, PJM/LCC/D/6, Margaret Willis, 'Sandpits: A Social Survey', 1951.

⁴⁵ Ruth Lang, 'The Sociologist within: Margaret Willis and the London County Council Architect's Department' (presented at *Architecture and Bureaucracy: Entangled Sites of Knowledge Production and Exchange*, Brussels, 2019).

The first, *Two to Five in High Flats*, was published in 1961. Written and researched by the sociologist Joan Maizels (and supervised by a committee that included Marjory Allen and Margaret Thatcher MP), it found that plenty of advice existed about children living in flats but that 'official practice had lamentably failed to keep pace with precept.'⁴⁶ However, in addition to its account of playgrounds for high blocks of flats, it examined the thoughts and experiences of 200 resident families and playground users, promoting the notion that children should have a greater influence in the places they were expected to play, even if this was mediated through their parents. Its findings also demonstrate how wider debates about childhood, play and public space were being worked through by individual families. It showed how new flats in high rise blocks created better living conditions, but also disrupted earlier patterns of play that had centred on the street outside the home. With only 'occasional visits to parks and playgrounds' for most of the families surveyed by the researchers, the physical, visual and psychological disconnect between a high flat and ground level estate playground was problematic for both parents and campaigners.⁴⁷

Five years later, the Building Research Station published a second notable study, *Children's Play on Housing Estates* (1966) by the sociologist Vere Hole. She utilised a range of techniques, including observation, time-lapse cameras and film, to better understand how children played on new housing developments and what use they made of playgrounds and other landscape features. The study sought to uncover the 'play habits and preferences' of children so that the adequacy of existing playgrounds could be assessed against their lived experience and needs, using scientific techniques.⁴⁸ If children's play could be properly

⁴⁶ Joan Maizels, *Two to Five in High Flats* (London: Housing Centre, 1961), p. 1.

⁴⁷ Maizels, *Two to Five*, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Vere Hole, *Children's Play on Housing Estates*, National Building Studies Research Paper, 39 (London: HMSO, 1966).

understood, then perhaps designated play provision could be adapted to engage more children for more of the time.

Hole's findings showed that children played in different ways and in different places to those previously imagined by play space campaigners. Of the 5,494 children observed, most spent their time participating in sedentary but highly sociable play, including sitting, standing, watching and talking, leading Hole to suggest that the playground functioned as a site for children's behaviour patterns that were not dissimilar to those of adults and the local pub. The playground and equipment often acted as a focal point for social gathering, where children would join friends or seek companions, and fifty percent of children had soon left the playground to play elsewhere on the estate. Left to their own devices, many children sought out sociable encounters rather than physical excitement or exercise, with little observable difference between girls and boys. Hole eloquently described a picture of play 'which is restless, changing, where groups coalesce and dissolve but where there is an underlying element of more continuous activity or repose.'⁴⁹

The research also highlighted the differences between children's preferences and adult expectations. While in the playground, the sandpit, paddling pool and swings were the facilities of choice for children, while sculpture and architectural features afforded 'more pleasure to the adults' than to younger place space users.⁵⁰ Despite their children's demonstrated preferences, most parents' criticism of estate play space focused on the lack of orthodox, manufactured playground equipment and Hole found that they displayed little awareness of 'modern theories of play and the newer types of provision'.⁵¹ Most tellingly, Hole found that play space was just about holding out against increasing demands for car

⁴⁹ Hole, *Children's Play on Housing Estates*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ Hole, *Children's Play on Housing Estates*, p. 17.

⁵¹ Hole, *Children's Play on Housing Estates*, p. 37.

parking and that the start of children's television at 5pm saw most children disappear from public spaces altogether to watch programmes such as *Blue Peter*, *Jackanory* and *The Magic Roundabout*.⁵²

A third key study into the ways children responded to the urban environment was carried out by Anthea Holme and Peter Massie and published as *Children's Play* in 1970. Whereas Maizels and Hole had concentrated on new housing estates, Holme and Massie focused specifically on playgrounds, motivated by the sense that not enough was known about children and their play. To remedy this, they sought to provide documented evidence for planners and play providers, local authorities and designers. They contrasted play provision in an old neighbourhood in Southwark and in the new town of Stevenage, surveyed 467 playgrounds across nineteen local authority areas, interviewed parents and recorded the play activities of 1,800 children. Their research provides a useful snapshot of play provision in 1970 and the numerical significance of different typologies. In the nineteen study areas, 54 per cent of playgrounds were on housing estates, 38 per cent were in parks, with 8 per cent in other locations. Over seventy per cent of park playgrounds provided traditional manufactured equipment, while play spaces on housing estates were more likely to include a combination of traditional equipment and architectural, sculptural or improvised play features. Over eighty per cent of playgrounds had neither sand and water nor adult supervision.

Their research supported Marjory Allen's earlier complaint that the provision of play space was only rarely coordinated between departments within local authorities, with playgrounds variously the responsibility of parks staff, engineers, surveyors, housing officers,

⁵² 'Programme Listings for BBC One', *Radio Times*, 20 January 1966, pp. 26–28.

education officials, town clerks and development corporations. In Stevenage, responsibility was spread across five different departments, while in Swansea all playgrounds were the responsibility of just the parks department.⁵³ However, even when provision was coordinated, the ongoing influence of conservative values in relation to public parks continued to shape opportunities for play. The study found that ‘for the most part, parks and recreation grounds are orderly and comparatively formal; children must ‘keep off the grass’ and are forbidden to climb trees or ride bicycles.’⁵⁴ In addition, while most of the playgrounds studied were poorly designed and lacked stimuli for play, they were generally well maintained and clean. However, where playgrounds were not well cared for, conditions were very bad. With no statutory responsibility to provide playgrounds, good quality provision that was well maintained relied upon the enthusiasm of individual officials, councillors and outside pressure groups, something the authors found to be ‘too haphazard to be satisfactory.’⁵⁵

Beyond these three studies, interest in the consequences of urban childhood grew. The NPFA’s *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* had been reprinted six times by 1974.⁵⁶ In addition, medical researchers were finding that flat dwellers suffered from a greater incidence of respiratory illnesses, while further sociological studies highlighted the difficulties facing urban children, including John and Elizabeth Newsom’s longitudinal research in Nottingham, *Four Years Old in an Urban Community* (1968) and Pearl Jephcott’s study of tall blocks in Glasgow, *Homes in High Flats* (1971).⁵⁷ Further research showed that high-rise living did not have an exclusive hold on poor quality play provision and that low-rise council estates experienced

⁵³ Holme and Massie, *Children’s Play*, pp. 225–45.

⁵⁴ Holme and Massie, *Children’s Play*, p. 59.

⁵⁵ Holme and Massie, *Children’s Play*, p. 67.

⁵⁶ National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*.

⁵⁷ D M Fanning, ‘Families in Flats’, *British Medical Journal*, 4 (1967), 382–86; Pearl Jephcott, *Homes in High Flats* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1971); John Newson and Elizabeth Newson, *Four Years Old in an Urban Community* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968).

problems too.⁵⁸ Evidence was building to support Holme and Massie's conclusion that a national policy for play was needed to ensure high-quality, special places for play were provided, with minimal restrictions and maximum play opportunities.

The publication of *Children at Play* in 1973 by the Department of the Environment perhaps seemed like the first step towards a national policy for play.⁵⁹ It raised the stakes in terms of the number of children studied, from the 200 families in *Two to Five in High Flats* and the five thousand children observed for *Children's Play on Housing Estates*, to over 10,000 detailed observations of play in new and old housing areas. The report included a review of literature relating to children's play in the urban environment from the previous decade and interviews were conducted with children, parents and other adults in low, medium and high-rise housing in cities across the country. The study explored doorstep play, playgrounds, adventure playgrounds, wild areas, and children's 'unorthodox' play on garage roofs and elsewhere. It repeated earlier suggestions that families with children should be accommodated in houses or ground floor flats with gardens, rather than on the upper floors of tall buildings. It also acknowledged that children did not solely play in playgrounds and so the wider housing environment needed to be able to withstand this playful use. It highlighted the work of the landscape architect Mary Mitchell in designing successful play spaces in Blackburn and provided images of well-planted playgrounds incorporating trees and shrubs. Mia Kellmer Pringle, psychologist and Director of the National Children's Bureau, contributed as a consultant advisor to the study team, helping to ensure its child-focused approach to play.⁶⁰ As a result, the report appears to be a comprehensive study of children's playful

⁵⁸ A. T. Blowers, 'Council Housing: The Social Implications of Layout and Design in an Urban Fringe Estate', *The Town Planning Review*, 41.1 (1970), 80–92.

⁵⁹ Department of the Environment, *Children at Play*, Design Bulletin, 27 (London: HMSO, 1973).

⁶⁰ Barbara Tizard, 'Pringle, Mia Kellmer (1920-1983) Psychologist and First Director of the National Children's Bureau', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

activity and an effective digest of the latest thinking on children and their play in the urban environment, in many ways a model of best practice.

However, the tone of the document, its detailed suggestions and the images it used are completely at odds with its final design recommendations, which cover just one out of one hundred pages. Transposed word for word from Circular 79/72, a joint directive on play space issued by the Department of the Environment and Welsh Office a year earlier, the recommendations in *Children at Play* were based on a highly conservative understanding of the playground and its form. The Circular stated that play spaces should be equipped with items from a shortlist of traditional manufactured equipment, including the swing, slide, climbing frame, seesaw, merry-go-round and rocking horse. In addition, it required surfacing to be hardwearing and existing trees to be retained only 'where possible.'⁶¹ It applied specifically to local authority housing developments and unlike earlier communiques it set a standard amount of play space, three square meters, and dedicated additional funding, £380 (£18) per child, to cover the cost of play space construction. The Circular did not discuss imaginative, creative or adventurous play provision, the need for additional trees, shrubs, flowers or other landscape features, nor the involvement of play leaders or specialist designers.

How can this apparent mismatch between Circular 79/72 and the wider tone of *Children at Play* be reconciled, particularly given that both were a product of the same government department? On the one hand, the circular followed a long tradition of indifference towards play provision by central government, which had hardly mentioned let alone endorsed the creation of playgrounds over the previous two decades. Where play space

⁶¹ Department of the Environment and Welsh Office, *Children's Playspace*, Circular 79/72 and 165/72 (London: HMSO, 1972).

was mentioned in government documents, it was generally in relation to housing policy. The Ministry of Health's 1944 *Housing Manual* did not mention play provision and the 1949 manual simply suggested playgrounds 'might' be provided.⁶² In the 1950s, Conservative governments primarily sought to reduce the cost of housing provision through economy in the use of land, rather than improving the quality of estate amenities.⁶³ The 1957 *Housing Manual* was highly dismissive of playgrounds, stating that there was a lack of research into the subject and that the approach to play provision advocated by campaigners such as the NPFA was unduly costly and therefore 'not strongly supported.'⁶⁴ In the mid-1960s, play space was once again eligible for central government housing subsidy but as this information was hidden in an appendix to a circular on housing costs it hardly represented a ringing endorsement.⁶⁵ Instead, the government publicly stated that it would not insist on the provision of spaces for play.⁶⁶ An official account of the Ministry of Housing and its work, published in 1969, did not mention children nor play, despite asserting that a key role involved overseeing 'the urban environment and its impact on the citizen.'⁶⁷ For central government, the issue of play provision was a minor component of housing policy, something to be provided alongside clothes drying areas and waste disposal, primarily at the discretion of local authorities.

⁶² National Archives, HLG 110/10, Ministry of Health, 'Housing Manual', 1944; Ministry of Health, *Housing Manual*.

⁶³ Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Houses 1952: Second Supplement to the Housing Manual 1949* (London: HMSO, 1952); Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Houses 1953: Third Supplement to the Housing Manual 1949* (London: HMSO, 1953); Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Houses 1953*, Circular 54/53 (London: HMSO, 1953).

⁶⁴ Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 'Housing Handbook', p. 62.

⁶⁵ Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Housing Standards, Costs and Subsidies*, Circular 36/67 (London: HMSO, 1967).

⁶⁶ *Housing Estates (Children's Play Spaces)*, *House of Commons Debate*, 2 February 1965, Vol.705, Col.873.

⁶⁷ Evelyn A. Sharp, *The Ministry of Housing and Local Government* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

On the other hand, by the late 1960s ministers were ‘increasingly anxious to extend the provision of play spaces’ in response to questions in Parliament and a wider appreciation of the importance of play.⁶⁸ In 1968, Ministry of Housing officials issued a guidance note to local authorities that included a short paper by the NPFA on imaginative playground design, including the noteworthy instruction ‘no old cars, play sculpture or other adult grotesqueries please.’⁶⁹ Even then, however, the covering note was explicitly clear that it solely represented the views and experiences of the authors and was in no way a government endorsement of the recommendations. Furthermore, the civil servants working to develop Circular 79/72 relied directly on a Wicksteed equipment catalogue to shape the instructions in the directive, rather than the NPFA note the department had previously shared with local authorities.⁷⁰ Ultimately, concerns about cost and administrative complexity dominated discussions between officials, rather than necessarily the needs of children when playing.⁷¹ Mia Kellmer Pringle, consultant advisor on *Children at Play*, responded to an initial, confidential version of the circular by stating that ‘I would not wish to be quoted as being in agreement with the provision outlined in your draft. Of course, it is a very reasonable first step and this may be all that can at present be afforded, but this is very different from saying that it is in any way adequate.’⁷² Political pressure meant that civil servants had attempted to promote play provision, but the combined challenges of financial restraint and bureaucratic complexity limited the published standards to the bare minimum in the eyes of campaigners. Ministry

⁶⁸ National Archives, AT 54/24, W.C. Ulrich to P.R.O.s, ‘NPFA Advice on Children’s Playgrounds’, 1968.

⁶⁹ National Archives, AT 54/24, W.D. Abernethy, ‘Children’s Playgrounds’, 1968, p. 3.

⁷⁰ National Archives, AT 54/24, ‘Play Space Standards: List of Equipment Taken from Wicksteed Catalogue’, 1971.

⁷¹ National Archives, AT 54/24, T.M. Heiser, ‘Note for File: Play Space’, 18 November 1971.

⁷² National Archives, AT 54/24, Mia Kellmer Pringle to Judith Littlewood, ‘Standards’, n.d., p. 3.

officials acknowledged the likely opposition to the circular from the NPFA and Marjory Allen, but in the event the circular was far more widely criticised.⁷³

While campaigners welcomed the dedicated funding that accompanied the directive, other aspects including its approach to play space provision were roundly condemned.⁷⁴ The Inner London Education Authority felt that the low standards were totally inadequate and encouraged planners to do much more than the circular suggested in terms of space for play and its design.⁷⁵ For the Deputy Director of Amenity Services in Lambeth, the 'list of playspace equipment is sad, it might have been appropriate ten years ago but it isn't now. Children need to express themselves. It is not enough to provide uncreative activities.'⁷⁶ For one unnamed commentator, the circular lacked a definition of play space, the list of equipment was unimaginative, there was no mention of facilities such as water fountains or toilets and it had a narrow focus on equipment at the expense of other forms of play.⁷⁷ Alongside other criticisms, the NPFA were disgruntled not to have been consulted on the content of the circular and submitted a revised version that more closely resembled campaigners' thinking on play provision, but this was quickly dismissed by officials.⁷⁸

Despite considerable sociological research and the ongoing efforts of campaigners to promote alternatives, the approach to play demonstrated by the Circular was remarkably conservative, particularly given the findings from *Children at Play*, which were available to officials well before it was published. The problem partly stemmed from the differing

⁷³ National Archives, AT 54/24, Judith Littlewood to T.M. Heiser, 'Play Space', 12 November 1971.

⁷⁴ National Archives, CB 1/61, National Playing Fields Association, 'Memo on Circular 79/72 - Children's Playspace', 1972.

⁷⁵ 'Special Report: From Five to Fourteen', *Play Times*, 6 (1978), 8–9.

⁷⁶ Peter Smith, 'Time to Give Play a New Priority', *Municipal Review*, 44.519 (1973), 78–81 (p. 81).

⁷⁷ National Archives, CB 1/61, National Playing Fields Association, 'DoE Circular 79/72 Children's Play Space: Note by the Children's Play Officer', 1972.

⁷⁸ National Archives, HLG 118/1897, J.A. Goodburn to Mr Poore, 'Children's Play Space - NPFA Proposals', 23 November 1972.

expectations of a play space standard. For campaigners, a standard was meant to be aspirational, an ideal that providers should aim for in terms of the quantity and quality of play provision. However, for central government officials the standards in Circular 79/72 were designed to be the bare minimum acceptable to attract subsidy, something that progressive local authorities would want to exceed. For critics, this disconnect in relation to the purpose of a standard meant that the government appeared to be significantly behind the times in terms of their approach to play.

In a review of research and guidance in 1976, Clare Cooper Marcus and Robin Moore concluded that ‘we know a little more than we did two decades ago about children’s use of playgrounds’ but that these findings had rarely been disseminated to those in central and local government, let alone shaped policy or implementation on the ground.⁷⁹ However, even researchers were selective in the findings they endorsed and extolled. Despite increased recognition that children played everywhere, there was still a sense that the playground was the place that children should play and the issue that needed to be solved related to the type of play spaces being provided.⁸⁰ In 1978, Moore asserted that ‘the creation of childhood places cannot be left to chance or the vagaries of pressure groups; they must be deliberately fostered by planning, design, and management to satisfy basic human needs.’⁸¹ In a similar vein, some park advocates in Britain continued to see play as a juvenile version of adult leisure and recreation, an activity that needed spaces and equipment for play in public parks at an

⁷⁹ Clare Cooper Marcus and Robin C. Moore, ‘Children and Their Environments: A Review of Research 1955-1975’, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 29.4 (1976), 22–25 (p. 24).

⁸⁰ Geoffrey Hayward, Marilyn Rothenberg, and Robert R. Beasley, ‘Children’s Play and Urban Playground Environments: A Comparison of Traditional, Contemporary, and Adventure Playground Types’, *Environment and Behavior*, 6.2 (1974), 131–68.

⁸¹ Robin C. Moore and Donald Young, ‘Childhood Outdoors: Toward a Social Ecology of the Landscape’, in *Children and the Environment*, ed. by Irwin Altman and Joachim F. Wohlwill, Human Behaviour and Environment: Advances in Theory and Research (New York: Plenum Press, 1978), III, 83–128 (p. 83).

appropriate frequency.⁸² For others, however, this increased knowledge about the way that children played suggested that it was not the attractiveness or frequency of play provision that was the problem but rather, as Jane Jacobs had argued in the early 1960s, that the principle of the playground was unsound.

This sense that the playground concept was flawed developed further in two very different fields of thought. On the one hand, those who had long observed children at play recognised that play could happen everywhere and anywhere, that children adapted to whatever environment they happened to be in. For others, the conventional playground was a symbol of political oppression, a space that symbolically and often physically denied children the freedom of the city that was as much theirs as it was adults. Turning to the former initially, the work of the folklorists, Iona and Peter Opie best represents this line of thought.

In their 1969 book *Children's Games in Street and Playground* they stated that 'during the past fifty years shelf-loads of books have been written instructing children in the games they ought to play, and some even instructing adults on how to instruct children in games they ought to play, but few attempts have been made to record the games children in fact play.'⁸³ Through observation and discussion with 10,000 children in England, Wales and Scotland, they collated details of children's spontaneous and self-directed outdoor games. They found that similar games were played across the country, but with regional variation in names and local tweaks to the rules. Games of chase that were called 'tig' in Scotland and the north of England, were 'tick' or 'tip' in north Wales and the west Midlands, 'touch' in south Wales, 'tag' around Bristol and 'he' in London and the southeast.⁸⁴ A team game resembling a cross between leapfrog and the long jump that was known as Hi Jimmy Knacker in Croydon,

⁸² Ivor Seeley, *Outdoor Recreation and the Urban Environment* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1973).

⁸³ Opie and Opie, *Children's Games*, p. v.

⁸⁴ Opie and Opie, *Children's Games*, p. 67.

was Bung Billy Barrel in Camberwell, Bumberino in Cardiff and Rum-stick-a-bum in Nottingham.⁸⁵ The Opies felt that children's self-organised play demonstrated excitement, adventure, imagination and ways to opt out of the ordinary world. They concluded that 'where children are is where they play.'⁸⁶ Significantly, this recognition that children played everywhere and anywhere fundamentally undermined the assumption that children required dedicated places to play. Children could adapt to their surroundings and enjoyed secret, wild places best, away from adult supervision, where juvenile community could thrive. As a result, the Opies were dismissive of both the traditional playground and its 'cage-like enclosures filled with junk by a local authority, the corners of recreation grounds stocked with swings and slides' and the adventure playground and its play leaders, 'the equivalent of creating Whipsnades for wild life.'⁸⁷ By focusing on children and their self-directed playful activities, the Opies found that the provision of playground spaces was something of a benign irrelevance to the social lives of children, just one of many spaces where children played and developed their own collective culture.

In contrast, for many left-wing radicals the playground was a highly visible feature of the wider 'control and exploitation of children by adults,' an extension of the power exerted by men over women, the subjugation of the working-class and attempts to enforce particular standards of behaviour in public spaces such as parks.⁸⁸ However, with limited political power children were seen to experience particular difficulties in their ensuing war with adults.⁸⁹ For radicals, the conventional playground was a prime example of the way that adults had sought

⁸⁵ Opie and Opie, *Children's Games*, p. 258.

⁸⁶ Opie and Opie, *Children's Games*, p. 10.

⁸⁷ Opie and Opie, *Children's Games*, p. 16.

⁸⁸ Paul Thompson, 'The War with Adults', *Oral History*, 3.2 (1975), 29–38 (p. 37).

⁸⁹ Ian Taylor and Paul Walton, 'Hey, Mister, This Is What We Really Do...!', in *Vandalism*, ed. by Colin Ward (London: Architectural Press, 1973), pp. 91–95 (p. 93).

to control children, excluding them from the wider urban environment and attempting to limit their behaviour through both designating space and the use of materials such as tarmac, ironmongery and fencing. There were calls of ‘free the children, down with the playground’ in response to efforts to enclose children’s play.⁹⁰ In contrast, the adventure playground was often portrayed as an experimental space of childhood freedom and hope for a better society, a line of argument commonly associated with the anarchist writer Colin Ward.

In relation to Ward and others, the historian Mathew Thomson has argued that the late 1960s and early 1970s appeared to be ‘a rather remarkable period for radical thinking and action in relation to the landscape of the child.’⁹¹ However, there is considerable evidence that points to the earlier development of radical ideas and action in relation to the children’s playground in particular. As we saw in the previous chapter, the conceptions of childhood that were inherent in the adventure playground ideal were grounded in the beliefs of inter-war progressive educationists and were most visibly introduced to a wider British public by Marjory Allen’s *Picture Post* essay in 1946. In addition, Ward had been consistently promoting the adventure playground from the late 1950s. In 1958 he cited the adventure playground as a striking example of ‘living anarchy,’ valuable both as a place in itself and as verification of libertarian rather than authoritarian values, a ‘free society in miniature.’⁹² He would make the case again in 1961, almost word for word, in a special edition of the anarchist journal *Anarchy* which focused on adventure playgrounds.⁹³ The same text was largely re-used for a chapter in Ward’s 1973 book *Anarchy in Action*, this time reaching a wider audience and contributing to wider sociological investigations into urban childhood.⁹⁴ However, in suggesting earlier

⁹⁰ Denis Wood, ‘Free the Children! Down with Playgrounds!’, *McGill Journal of Education*, 12.2 (1977), 227–42.

⁹¹ Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, p. 221.

⁹² Colin Ward, ‘Adventure Playground’, *Freedom*, 6 September 1958, pp. 3–4.

⁹³ Colin Ward, ‘Adventure Playground: A Parable of Anarchy’, *Anarchy*, 7 (1961), 193–201.

⁹⁴ Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973).

roots to radical ideas about children's play, this evidence does not diminish Thomson's suggestion that Ward's *Child in the City*, first published in 1978, represented a high point in radical thinking about urban childhood and the playground.⁹⁵

In *Child in the City* Ward built on the work of earlier sociological research and anarchist thinking to emphasise the extent to which children adapted the adult-imposed environment, where play provision operated on one plane and children on another. He would later write that *Child in the City* was intended as a celebration of children's resourcefulness.⁹⁶ To facilitate such ingenuity and imagination, he felt that city officials who were genuinely concerned for children should make the 'whole environment accessible to them, because whether invited or not, they are going to use the whole environment.'⁹⁷ In making a claim for the entire city for children, Ward differentiated his mission from that of other child advocates. He argued that 'if we seek a shared city, rather than a city where unwanted patches are set aside to contain children and their activities, our priorities are not quite the same as those of the crusaders for the child.'⁹⁸

The artist and educator Simon Nicholson provides a good example of these alternative priorities and the development of a model for implementing them on the ground. Initially in the USA and later from the Open University in the UK, he sought to take children's play beyond the playground to create the shared city that Ward imagined.⁹⁹ His 'theory of loose parts' promoted greater child involvement in the design of both objects and places for play.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Ward, *The Child in the City*.

⁹⁶ Colin Ward, *The Child in the Country* (London: Bedford Square Press, 1990), p. 10.

⁹⁷ Colin Ward, *The Child in the City*, 2nd edn (London: Bedford Square Press, 1990), p. 73.

⁹⁸ Ward, *The Child in the City*, p. 179.

⁹⁹ Simon Nicholson, 'How NOT to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts', *Landscape Architecture*, 62.1 (1971), 30–34; Simon Nicholson, 'The Theory of Loose Parts, an Important Principle for Design Methodology', *Studies in Design Education Craft & Technology*, 4.2 (1972), 5–14.

¹⁰⁰ Timothy Stott, 'Systems in Play: Simon Nicholson's Design 12 Course, University of California, Berkeley, 1966', *Journal of Design History*, 32.3 (2019), 223–39.

In a phrase often quoted since, he stated that ‘in any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.’¹⁰¹ As such, meeting the needs of children required an adaptable and flexible urban environment at a variety of scales. At the smallest, Nicholson felt that individual children needed their day-to-day environment to include loose materials, such as water, fire, living objects and resources for building, seemingly inspired by the ethos of early adventure playgrounds. At a wider scale, the urban environment needed to be flexible enough to accommodate community involvement in shaping it, rather than being fixed by planners, architects and builders in turn. Widely cited by playworkers since, at the time his concept built on the ideas of anarchists and radicals and coincided with the practical and arduous efforts of local communities to reclaim space within the urban environment for play.

6.2 Campaigning and working for play

The difficulties that community activists would face in creating space for play embodied many aspects of the wider battle of ideas outlined in this chapter so far. For many parents, planners, health workers and campaigners, play retained its association with childhood wellbeing and dedicated play spaces were seen as a symbol of a healthy urban environment. At the same time, sociological research, radical thought and the existential challenge to planning unsettled not only traditional conceptions of the playground but also cast doubt on the need for dedicated play spaces at all. Despite mounting evidence that challenged orthodox play provision, central government intervened in the battle for ideas, overtly endorsing traditional conceptions of the playground. However, the playground scuffles were far from settled. During the 1970s and early 1980s they would be played out in struggling local authorities,

¹⁰¹ Nicholson, ‘The Theory of Loose Parts’, p. 6.

radical play work, the expanding market for manufactured equipment and in sensationalist debates about safety. However, before turning to these arenas, the next section explores the place of play in community politics and activism.

Community demand for play provision was not new in the 1970s, but it did achieve a higher profile and became embroiled in wider political struggles that moved beyond campaigns for a healthier urban environment to challenge established notions of democracy, inclusivity and civic responsibility. In 1936, ninety-two people had petitioned the local council for a playground in Okehampton, Devon, while a 1952 survey by the NPFA unsurprisingly showed that parents wanted more places for their children to play.¹⁰² However, by the 1960s vocal demands for more and better play provision increased significantly and often comprised a key demand of community groups attempting to improve the urban environment in the face of apparent inaction by local authorities. Groups of protesting children also made for emotive coverage in local newspapers. In 1963, two hundred children marched on Stockport town hall with a 2,000-signature petition, protesting at the lack of play space on their estate in Edgeley.¹⁰³ A few months later, a further one hundred children marched from Brinnington on the other side of town, to protest at the lack of space for play in their neighbourhood.¹⁰⁴ In Lancaster, there were dramatic reports that hundreds of children had stopped the traffic and 'laid siege' to the council offices in another protest about play provision.¹⁰⁵ By 1970, housing officers in London felt under 'constantly increasing pressure, highlighted by petitions, threats of protest marches, representations from Tenants' Associations, MPs and our own members,

¹⁰² 'Ratepayers Petition Council for Children's Playground', *Western Times*, 24 April 1936, p. 7; 'More Playgrounds, Please, Say Parents', *Playing Fields Journal*, 12.1 (1952), 38.

¹⁰³ '200 Children March on Town Hall', *The Guardian*, 27 August 1963, p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ 'Children's Protest March', *The Guardian*, 13 August 1964, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ '200 Children "lay Siege" to Town Hall', *The Guardian*, 5 September 1968, p. 18.

social groups and the like, to provide bigger, better and more varied play facilities.’¹⁰⁶ Children’s play had become a significant political issue at the local level, echoing the pressure felt in central government.

And just as photographers had recorded iconic images of post-war play on bombsites, film makers in the 1970s were drawn to attempts by children and their parents to secure space for play. A 1972 film, *It’s ours whatever they say*, documented the perseverance of residents living on the Lorraine estate in Islington, north London, to secure a safe playground for their children (Figure 6.2).¹⁰⁷ The news-reel style documentary included footage of children playing on a disused timber yard and the council’s attempts to eject them, so that the site could be redeveloped for the more structured recreation associated with a scout hut and new housing. After threats of arrest, a protest march to the town hall, considerable local newspaper coverage, a renewed occupation of the site by children and finally the revelation of underhand behaviour by council officials, the film ends with residents securing the site as a space for their children to play.¹⁰⁸ Another documentary film, *Do Something!*, included further coverage of the problems of children’s play in Islington and highlighted its intersection with issues of poor housing, racial tension and a problematic relationship between the council and local residents.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ London Metropolitan Archive, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, Greater London Council, ‘Toddlers’ Playgrounds: Play Provision on GLC Housing Estates’, 1970.

¹⁰⁷ British Film Institute, BFI Player, Jenny Barraclough, *It’s Ours Whatever They Say*, 1972 <player.bfi.org.uk> [accessed 1 September 2021].

¹⁰⁸ Subsequently the site became known by the council as Biddestone Road Open Space.

¹⁰⁹ British Film Institute, BFI Player, Ross Devenish, *Do Something!*, 1970 <player.bfi.org.uk> [accessed 1 September 2021].

[REDACTED]

Figure 6.2 It's ours whatever they say (J. Barraclough, British Film Institute, player.bfi.org.uk, 1972)

North London was not the only part of the capital where the playground became embroiled in direct action by local community groups. Residents in Notting Hill, west London had experienced difficulties for many years, including riots in the late 1950s, exploitation and intimidation by private property owners and apparent indifference from the local authority. The social researcher Pearl Jephcott found that 'the local press reflects with dreary monotony the extent and variety of troubles which afflict the district.'¹¹⁰ Serious gaps in the provision of play space for children were a consistent feature of studies into the area's problems and in time became a key demand of local activists and residents.¹¹¹ Marjory Allen had been instrumental in the creation of the Notting Hill Adventure Playground in 1960, but significant gaps still remained and from 1967 until 1970 the Notting Hill People's Association 'fought a battle to force the Council to recognise the need for properly resourced play provision in the

¹¹⁰ Pearl Jephcott, *A Troubled Area: Notes on Notting Hill* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 17.

¹¹¹ Roger Mitton and Elizabeth Morrison, *A Community Project in Notting Dale* (London: Allen Lane, 1972).

area.¹¹² After unsuccessful attempts to convince the council to purchase the privately owned and largely unused Powis Square Gardens for play space, local residents took matters into their own hands.¹¹³ Direct action, including the occupation of the gardens and the creation of temporary play spaces in the streets and underneath an elevated motorway, combined with protest marches to the town hall, eventually pressured the local council to begrudgingly compromise.¹¹⁴ As in Islington, the efforts of residents to exert more control of the spaces for play in their neighbourhood were evocatively captured on film. *The Battle for Powis Square*, filmed by Community Action Group in 1974 on portable video recorders, captured the ongoing attempts by the local community to open the garden as a proper space for play and the dismissive and condescending attitude of local Conservative councillors.¹¹⁵ The film documented residents' efforts to retain grass areas for play and to provide play workers, shelter, toys and other activities, at odds with the council's preference for an unadorned asphalt ground. Councillors imagined the playground as a tarmacked space, similar to surrounding streets but safe from traffic, while local residents envisaged a garden play space with supportive adults and appropriate facilities that would nurture the children of the neighbourhood.

These examples from Islington and Notting Hill highlight the extent to which the playground had become symbolic of a humane and liveable urban environment and attentive local government investment, not just among earlier advocates but also for parents and other local activists. The films' portrayal of angry parents and enlisted children demanding action

¹¹² Jan O'Malley, *The Politics of Community Action: A Decade of Struggle in Notting Hill* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977), p. 81.

¹¹³ 'Powis Square: Council Won't Budge', *Kensington Post*, 9 February 1968, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ 'Children March through Melee', *Kensington Post*, 31 May 1968, p. 2; 'Children March to Town Hall', *Kensington Post*, 14 June 1968, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ London Community Video Archive, CVA0019b, *The Battle for Powis Square*, 1975 <the-lcva.co.uk> [accessed 15 December 2021].

from stony officials encapsulates at an individual level many of the wider tensions in the evolving battle of ideas relating to urban play. Further research into the production, distribution, viewing and reception of these films could provide useful insights into the relationships between parental activism, local politics, technology and changing conceptions of urban childhood and the way that these issues were played out in the playground. Residents and community groups certainly saw dedicated spaces for play as one way to improve the quality of their neighbourhood and the lives of their children. However, neither a tarmac ground as imagined by the Kensington councillors, nor orthodox equipped playground were the answer. Instead, local activists sought to provide something closer to a community-focused play centre which incorporated free play, aspects of the natural environment and adult advocates for children's play, an approach which became synonymous with the developing play work profession.

The 1970s saw the expansion of an increasingly organised and professionalised play work sector, championed by the NPFA and grounded in an approach to urban childhood and play space inspired by the post-war adventure playground movement and subsequent community activism. And while the political urgency and associated publicity subsided from the late 1970s, on which more later, the story is important in wider accounts of the playground because the anarchic political values continued well beyond the decade in the culture of play workers and continues to influence present day advocates for children and their play in public space.

From the 1960s, the NPFA had renewed its efforts to promote adult involvement in children's play. It sought to enhance the status of the emerging play leadership profession by organising training courses in play leadership in conjunction with the Institute of Park Administration and with input from many individuals involved in the early post-war

experiments in adventure playgrounds.¹¹⁶ The influential director of the NPFA's Children and Youth Department, Drummond Abernethy (1913-1988), had volunteered at Lollard Street Adventure Playground in the 1950s before spending two decades working for the NPFA, making it a nationally recognised centre for advocacy and advice in relation to progressive notions of play and play leadership.¹¹⁷ After much debate over the name and purpose of the organisation, the Institute of Playleadership was established in 1970 by the NPFA, Institute of Park Administration, Marjory Allen and a number of early play workers.¹¹⁸ Professor Walter James, one of the founding academics at the Open University, became the president of the new institute.¹¹⁹ The inauguration of the Institute was a notable step in the NPFA's shift away from orthodox visions of the playground towards more progressive, liberal notions of play. This reached a logical conclusion in the late 1970s when adverts for manufactured playground equipment were dropped from its journal, a process explored in more detail later in this section. But in associating itself with the values of more radical advocates for children's play, the NPFA's authority and reputation would be challenged by a conservative backlash against wider efforts to promote political and social liberation.

However, even without this negative reaction, the Playleadership cause remained beset by fundamental uncertainty about the precise role of adults in shaping children's play and play environments. The increasingly organised and coordinated nature of the play work profession did not help to alleviate that doubt. In 1973, one Institute member felt the adventure playground and the role of play workers was ambiguous at best: 'for the team of

¹¹⁶ National Archives, CB 1/55, National Playing Fields Association, 'Playground and Play Leadership Committee Minutes', 1963.

¹¹⁷ 'Drummond Retires', *Play Times*, 6 (1978), 3; Nick Balmforth, 'Drummond Abernethy OBE (1913-88)', *Journal of Playwork Practice*, 1 (2014), 101–3.

¹¹⁸ National Playing Fields Association, 'Institute of Playleadership Minutes, 9 February'.

¹¹⁹ National Archives, CB 1/58, National Playing Fields Association, 'Children's Playground and Playleadership Committee Minutes, 22 October', 1971.

six playleaders, most of them inexperienced, the problem was less clear-cut. Was the centre to be educational, recreational, therapeutic or a mixture of these? Each of us part teacher, doctor, counsellor, community worker, builder, cleaner, handyman.¹²⁰ In addition, others felt that the overtly political stance of some workers was problematic.¹²¹ The play worker was unenviably struggling to be everything to everyone, treading a fine line between community worker and political activist, something that more recent advocates have sought to resolve while also attempting to provide the profession with greater theoretical and practical foundations.¹²²

Despite this ambiguity, the number of adventure playgrounds increased from the handful of post-war, short-term, experimental spaces.¹²³ A 1956 NPFA conference had brought together representatives from eight adventure playgrounds in Bristol, Cambridge, Grimsby, Hull, Liverpool and London, while Crawley sent apologies.¹²⁴ By 1962, the capital's four sites had formed the London Adventure Playground Association to coordinate their work.¹²⁵ And by 1974 there were twenty full-time adventure playgrounds in London, three in Liverpool and four in Bristol.¹²⁶ In 1977, the *Sunday Times* claimed there were 'about 100 in London, 150 elsewhere.'¹²⁷ Those with practical experience of the initial experiments shared their knowledge and sought to increase the status of the profession. There had been earlier descriptions of experiments in adventure play, such as John Barron Mayes' account of

¹²⁰ 'Out of the Way: Our Gang', *New Society*, 8 February 1973, pp. 305–6.

¹²¹ 'Politics and Play: Some Comments by a Play Worker', *Play Times*, 6 (1978), 2.

¹²² See, for example, Bob Hughes, *Notes for Adventure Playworkers* (London: Children and Youth Action Group, 1975) and subsequent university courses, academic journals and publications by Hughes, Fraser Brown, Wendy Russell and others.

¹²³ Nils Norman, *An Architecture of Play: A Survey of London's Adventure Playgrounds* (London: Four Corners Books, 2003), p. 22.

¹²⁴ National Playing Fields Association, 'Report of Adventure Playground Conference'.

¹²⁵ Allen and Nicholson, *Memoirs*.

¹²⁶ Joe Benjamin, *Grounds for Play: An Extension of In Search of Adventure* (London: Bedford Square Press, 1974), p. 49.

¹²⁷ 'Treasure Islands', *The Sunday Times*, 7 August 1977, pp. 18–19.

Rathbone Street in Liverpool, but the 1970s saw a far greater number of publications as many play workers promoted their work and vocation.¹²⁸ In the space of a few years, Jack Lambert described his experiences of working at Parkhill Adventure Playground, Arvid Bengtsson provided a visual account of similar spaces around the world, Bob Hughes provided ‘notes for play workers’ and Bernard McGovern advice on play leadership.¹²⁹

Joe Benjamin’s call for industry-sponsored adventure playgrounds might not have been realised, but in *In Search of Adventure* (1966) and *Grounds for Play* (1974) he cemented many of the enduring myths and tropes of subsequent play advocates. He repeated Allen’s assertion that Sørensen invented the adventure playground and reiterated the problems of orthodox equipment. He promoted the apparent freedom of adventurous play, but at the same time failed to acknowledge the highly gendered assumptions about children’s activities in such spaces.¹³⁰ Historian Krista Cowman has shown how the figure of the heroic male playleader, a character evident in many of the accounts mentioned above, significantly limited the potential of the adventure playground to challenge traditional gender norms, despite wider social changes that were altering the position of women in society.¹³¹ In addition, not only did adventure playgrounds embody conservative gender values, but they were also becoming less radical in their approach to play.

In *Grounds for Play*, Benjamin lamented the shifting ethos of adventure playgrounds, as the continual processes of construction and destruction by children were gradually

¹²⁸ John Barron Mays, *Adventure in Play: The Story of the Rathbone Street Adventure Playground* (Liverpool: Liverpool Council of Social Service, 1957).

¹²⁹ Arvid Bengtsson, *Adventure Playgrounds* (London: Crosby Lockwood, 1972); Bernard McGovern, *Playleadership* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973); Jack Lambert and Jenny Pearson, *Adventure Playgrounds: A Personal Account of a Playleader’s Work* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); Hughes, *Notes for Adventure Playworkers*.

¹³⁰ Joe Benjamin, ‘Adventure for Industry’, *New Society*, 13 December 1962, p. 22; Joe Benjamin, *In Search of Adventure* (London: National Council of Social Service, 1966); Benjamin, *Grounds for Play*.

¹³¹ Cowman, ‘“The Atmosphere Is Permissive and Free”: The Gendering of Activism in the British Adventure Playgrounds Movement, ca. 1948–70’.

replaced by the labour of play workers with permanence in mind.¹³² Adult involvement in building improvised play structures was not new in the 1970s; the NPFA had produced and distributed plans for improvised play equipment in 1956, but the idea certainly gained momentum among play workers. By 1970, over four thousand copies of the NPFA plan had been distributed and they continued to promote the idea in their journal.¹³³ Several books on do-it-yourself playgrounds were available, particularly from the USA, although the NPFA advised caution in their wider application in light of inadequate materials and fixings.¹³⁴ Despite Benjamin's observation that the gap between conventional and adventure playground provision was narrowing, radical play workers nonetheless saw themselves at odds with the providers of more orthodox play provision. Hughes would later recall that play workers' 'natural enemy' was the parks department and their 'lazy, adult-oriented and wasteful' approach to play provision.¹³⁵

In some ways this was an unreasonable generalisation. The campaigning and advocacy work of the 1950s and 1960s had influenced the wider approach to play provision, in some local authorities at least. The London County Council, and from 1965 its replacement the Greater London Council (GLC), was lauded for its progressive approach to play. Its parks staff attempted to create bespoke, adventurous play spaces in attractive landscapes, with facilities for adults and children that would be flexible in their use, with layouts that could be properly maintained once opened.¹³⁶ In Battersea Park, a new playground included some traditional equipment such as swings and roundabouts but also provided wooden stockades, a broad

¹³² Benjamin, *Grounds for Play*, pp. 2–3.

¹³³ T.L. Cook, 'Children's Improvised Play Equipment', *Playing Fields Journal*, 30.2 (1970), 33–38.

¹³⁴ Paul Hogan, *Playgrounds for Free* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1974); M. Paul Friedberg, *Do It Yourself Playgrounds* (London: Architectural Press, 1975); David Raphael, 'Grounds for Playful Renaissance', *Landscape Architecture*, 65.3 (1975), 329–30; 'DIY Playground Equipment', *Play Times*, 15 (1979), 15.

¹³⁵ Bob Hughes, *Evolutionary Playwork*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 29.

¹³⁶ J. Kennedy, 'Playground Planning', *Park Administration*, 32.8 (1967), 36–38.

slide with sandpit at the bottom and a miniature theatre, while a sand valley, mature trees and landscaping helped to create a 'natural' setting for the playground.¹³⁷ Its Play Parks scheme, running since 1959, was also praised.¹³⁸ It provided staff and additional creative play opportunities adjacent to more conventional spaces in fourteen public parks by the mid-1960s. Such spaces invariably included adventurous areas for den building, sandpits, a quiet area for imaginative play and equipment that included building blocks, water play, garden tools and toys. Marjory Allen would promote this approach, along with examples from Sweden, in her pamphlet *Play Parks* in 1964.¹³⁹

Some landscape architects also continued to design imaginative and flexible spaces for play. Mary Mitchell won an award from the Civic Trust in recognition of her work on Birley Street Playground in Blackburn and her designs reached international audiences via the French modernist architecture magazine, *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*.¹⁴⁰ However, *Landscape Design*, the journal of the British landscape profession continued to have few contributions relating to children's play during the 1970s.¹⁴¹ This might be attributed to a greater awareness among designers of the need to think beyond the playground to create total environments for play, typified by Michael Brown's approach to housing landscapes. It could equally be the consequence of a plethora of guidance for landscape architects that already dealt with the issue, including Arvid Bengtsson's *Environmental Planning for Children's Play* (1970), or less tangibly Ian McHarg's influential but not unproblematic *Design with Nature* (1969) and a host of other play-specific publications by US landscape

¹³⁷ 'Come out to Play in Battersea Park'.

¹³⁸ London Metropolitan Archives, LCC/PUB/11/01/119, London County Council, 'Play Parks', 1963.

¹³⁹ Allen, *Play Parks*.

¹⁴⁰ 'Civic Trust Award', *Playing Fields Journal*, 30.2 (1970), 46; 'Children's Playgrounds'.

¹⁴¹ Laurie, 'Public Parks and Spaces', p. 73.

architects.¹⁴² However, for Anne Beer, environmental planner at the University of Sheffield, the landscape profession had focused too much on meeting standards, like those set out in the government's *Children at Play* or the checklists promoted by some designers, rather than designing public spaces that responded to their surroundings and would meet the needs of children.¹⁴³

London's Play Parks scheme hints at the problems associated with changing existing play spaces in response to the new ways of thinking that evolved in the 1960s and 1970s. The solidity and inertia of metal playground equipment not only limited opportunities for creative and flexible play in the minds of campaigners, but also made it difficult for designers and playground managers to adapt existing play spaces. Play Parks deflected this problem by providing additional play opportunities beyond the playground railings, whereas attempts to change individual play spaces would invariably take many years to realise.

After critical comments in the press and questions in Parliament in 1963, a subsequent survey of playground facilities by Royal Parks administrators concluded that 'we are lagging a good way behind the LCC in our children's play areas which at present are primarily designed for passive entertainment and do little to encourage spontaneous and creative play, which it is generally agreed is what should be aimed at.'¹⁴⁴ Rather than incrementally replace individual items of equipment, they decided to renew one whole play space and selected the Gloucester Green playground in the northeast corner of Regent's Park, which had originally

¹⁴² Bengtsson, *Environmental Planning for Children's Play*; Ian McHarg, *Design with Nature*, 25th anniversary edition (Chichester: Wiley, 1992); Susan Herrington, 'The Nature of Ian McHarg's Science', *Landscape Journal*, 29.1 (2010), 1–20; Richard Dattner, *Design for Play* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969); M. Paul Friedberg and Ellen Perry Berkeley, *Play and Interplay; a Manifesto for New Design in Urban Recreational Environments* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).

¹⁴³ Anne R. Beer, 'The External Environment of Housing Areas', *Built Environment*, 8.1 (1982), 25–29; Michael Haxeltine, 'A Check List for Play Spaces', *Parks and Recreation*, 38.6 (1973), 25–29; Lance H. Wuellner, 'Forty Guidelines for Playground Design', *Journal of Leisure Research*, 11.1 (1979), 4–14.

¹⁴⁴ 'Deejay to Open Playground', *The Guardian*, 13 August 1963, p. 6; National Archives, WORKS/16/2299, L. Potts, 'Children's Playgrounds', 21 May 1965.

been installed in the 1930s. A sum of £265,500 (£7,000) was nominally set aside and architects were instructed to design a scheme to replace the forty-year-old play space. After two overly expensive designs were rejected, a third, more affordable scheme received approval in 1969, work started onsite in January 1971 and was completed that summer.¹⁴⁵ However, not only had the project taken nine years from inception to completion but it was also hardly a demonstration of cutting-edge playground design. The layout included large areas of hard surfacing and the retention of original equipment and iron railings, with concrete pipes and a fallen tree trunk the most obvious nod to current thinking.¹⁴⁶ Renewed again at a cost of over £1m in 2020, the present-day Gloucester Green playground demonstrates the slow pace at which playground thought has influenced spaces on the ground, while the incorporation of significant areas of naturalistic planting and the presence of donation pay terminals both speak to contemporary concerns about the nature of the urban environment and how we should pay for children's access to it.¹⁴⁷

Away from the relatively prestigious Royal Parks, municipal housing estates, green spaces and their playgrounds faced a number of challenges during the 1970s. Tom Hulme has argued that from the mid-twentieth century there was a shift in power and influence away from urban municipal authorities towards national government, as finances and policy making were increasingly centralised.¹⁴⁸ As we have already seen, the centralisation of policy making meant that traditional ideas about playground provision were given significant weight

¹⁴⁵ National Archives, WORKS/16/2299, R.G. Emberson to Mr Barrow, 'Regent's Park - Gloucester Green Playground', 25 September 1969; National Archives, WORKS/16/2299, J.W. Gorvin to R.G. Emberson, 'Gloucester Green Children's Playground', 30 December 1970.

¹⁴⁶ National Archives, WORKS/16/2299, Royal Parks, 'General Layout Plan for Gloucester Green Children's Playground', 1969.

¹⁴⁷ 'International Landscape Awards - Gloucester Gate Playground by LUC', *Landzine*, 2021, <www.landzine-award.com> [accessed 2 September 2021]; 'Donation Machines next to Playground in Regent's Park', *Camden New Journal*, 26 March 2021.

¹⁴⁸ Hulme, *After the Shock City*, pp. 203–8.

by national government circulars and guidance. At the same time, local government reorganisation in the early 1970s increasingly meant that park and playground provision became the responsibility of more generalised recreation and amenity departments, much to the consternation of many in the parks profession.¹⁴⁹ As a result, the staff responsible for play provision often had little specialist experience or training, coming from backgrounds as diverse as libraries, sports or engineering.¹⁵⁰

However, while reorganisation changed clerical structures it did little to change the day-to-day working of local authorities.¹⁵¹ For campaigners, the provision of play space remained beset by a lack of coordination. Municipal play space provision could still involve a range of officials from departments including the new recreation and amenity sections, as well as health, education, architecture and housing, while in central government nine different departments had some involvement in children's play provision in 1975.¹⁵² The number of requests for copies of a government guide to inter-departmental responsibilities for play highlights the ongoing uncertainty among local authority and voluntary organisations about where responsibility and direction lay. It also demonstrates the extent to which government did not seek to address this problem, with one Department of the Environment official keen to avoid assuming 'the role of co-ordinator, which we have so far managed to avoid.'¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ 'Amalgamations', *Park Administration*, 31.11 (1966), 21; Philip Sayers, 'Whence and Whither? From Parks Superintendents to Leisure Planners', *Park Administration*, 31.12 (1966), 18–19.

¹⁵⁰ Museum of English Rural Life, SR CPRE C/1/73/2, National Playing Fields Association, 'Annual Report and Accounts', 1976.

¹⁵¹ John Stewart, 'An Era of Continuing Change: Reflections on Local Government in England 1974–2014', *Local Government Studies*, 40 (2014), 835–50.

¹⁵² National Archives, AT 60/30, 'A Guide to Inter-Departmental Responsibilities for Children's Play', 1975.

¹⁵³ National Archives, AT 60/30, 'Guide to Inter-Departmental Responsibilities', 1979.

Beyond government policy and organisation, wider patterns and spaces of leisure were also changing, with free, communal provision including parks and playgrounds often side-lined by new spaces for leisure. The 1970s saw the ‘spectacular growth’ of sports and leisure centres; historian Otto Saumarez Smith has argued that these often-short-lived buildings represented both a continuation of municipal provision of facilities for health, but also combined the values of public health and commercial entertainment.¹⁵⁴ Some playgrounds responded by attempting to emulate this combination. At Wicksteed Park, by this point managed separately from the manufacturing company, the free playground and gardens were joined by paid-for attractions including crazy golf, dodgems, a rollercoaster, donkey rides, motorboat trips and a big wheel, all promoted in glossy colour brochures and other marketing materials.¹⁵⁵ Nature had not been completely relegated, although the small black and white pamphlet that highlighted its existence in the park was underwhelming in comparison to other publicity materials.¹⁵⁶ Nor was Wicksteed Park immune from the organisational troubles facing local authorities, with management consultants called in to restructure the operation of the site, complete with a new organogram structure, improved budgetary procedures and portion control in the cafeteria (the latter presumably for financial rather than health reasons).¹⁵⁷

Play equipment manufacturers also attempted to adapt to changing attitudes to play and responded to some of the criticism levelled by more radical advocates. Companies sought to demonstrate how their products could fit into new conceptions of the playground, while a

¹⁵⁴ Saumarez Smith, ‘The Lost World of the British Leisure Centre’.

¹⁵⁵ Wicksteed Park Archive, BRC-1793, Wicksteed Village Trust, ‘Wicksteed Park; 140 Acres of Fun and Freedom’, 1970; Wicksteed Park Archive, BRC-1821, Wicksteed Village Trust, ‘Hi! There’s a Big Smile for Everyone to Wear at Wicksteed Park’, n.d.

¹⁵⁶ Wicksteed Park Archive, PRM-1883, Wicksteed Village Trust, ‘Wicksteed Park Nature Trail’, 1971.

¹⁵⁷ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, P.A. Management Consultants, ‘Organisation and Control’, 1967.

few railed publicly against criticism of their products. Unsurprisingly all continued to promote the principle of the playground. Wicksteed & Co. produced landscape models to display their playground design expertise and ability to create undulating play landscapes that incorporated planting and sculptural features.¹⁵⁸ A concerted sales drive saw them diversify their advertising to include *Caravan, Chalet and Camp Site Operator, Council Equipment and Building News* and *Education Equipment*, as well as advertising supplements in regional newspapers.¹⁵⁹ They trialled ‘Swedish-inspired’ climbing structures and space craft roundabouts in an effort to demonstrate their ability to provide for imaginative play.¹⁶⁰ Their equipment catalogue emphasised the health and happiness that their products could deliver (Figure 6.3).¹⁶¹

[REDACTED]

Figure 6.3 Wicksteed catalogue (Wicksteed Park Archive, BRC-3010, 1970)

¹⁵⁸ Charles Wicksteed & Co., ‘Design for Playing’, *Playing Fields*, 25.4 (1965), 25.

¹⁵⁹ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, ‘Various Cuttings from Trade Journals and Newspapers’, 1966.

¹⁶⁰ ‘Six New Pieces of Playground Equipment’, *Evening Telegraph*, 29 July 1964, p. 8.

¹⁶¹ Wicksteed Park Archive, BRC-3010, Charles Wicksteed & Co., ‘The Gateway to Health and Happiness through Wicksteed Playground Equipment’, 1970.

However, children were also a less regular feature of the text and images used to create manufacturers' advertisements and were sometimes missing altogether. Hunt & Son and Wicksteed & Co. implicitly acknowledged that children were not in reality their customers, but rather the municipal officials responsible for installing and maintaining playgrounds. As a result, their adverts emphasised the dependability and longevity of products, comprehensive aftersales service and included images of factories and maintenance vans rather than children playing.¹⁶² Hunt & Son even took the unusual step of paying for advertising space to issue an open letter that responded to the comments of an unnamed critic. The company protested that government-imposed purchase tax stultified invention in equipment design, argued that popularity among children trumped adults' aesthetic considerations and that if their products were not popular or necessary that they would be out of business.¹⁶³

In fact, the opposite seemed to be the case as the number of companies competing to sell playground equipment increased significantly from the late 1960s.¹⁶⁴ The three well established manufacturers, Wicksteed, Hirst and Hunt, and their traditional equipment faced increasing competition as a wide range of new suppliers promoted alternative playground products that incorporated new materials and technologies. Bowen Associates' 'triadetic playdome' was an early example, a domed climbing frame made from aluminium tubes.¹⁶⁵ Playstyle introduced playcubes, a 'modular play system' comprising 14-sided, interconnected plastic polyhedrons and designed in conjunction with 'leading educationalists, child

¹⁶² Charles Wicksteed & Co., 'When You Buy Wicksteed Equipment, You Receive Wicksteed Service', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 24.8 (1960), 392; H. Hunt & Son, 'Where It All Comes From', *Park Administration*, 28.1 (1963), 1.

¹⁶³ H. Hunt & Son, 'Playground Equipment - the Verdict Is Yours', *Playing Fields*, 22.3 (1962), 9.

¹⁶⁴ 'The Growing Variety in Playground Furniture', *The Municipal and Public Services Journal*, 75 (1967), 1272-73.

¹⁶⁵ 'Triadetic Aluminium Playdome', *Park Administration*, 31.12 (1966), 39.

psychologists, playgroup leaders, playground designers...and of course children' (Figure 6.4).¹⁶⁶

[REDACTED]

Figure 6.4 Playstyle's playcubes (*Playing Fields*, 1973)

Recticel-Sutcliffe patented a new safety seat for swings, made of foam and rubber, to replace traditional wooden types (and even appeared on the TV series *Tomorrow's World* as part of a feature on how children might play in the future).¹⁶⁷ SMP Landscapes won a Design Council Award for their products, the first playground equipment manufacturer to do so, and their 'intensive use' play space in Leyton, east London, included a helicopter-shaped climbing frame and log cabin slide.¹⁶⁸ Other companies attempting to take a share of the playground equipment market included Record, Furnitubes, Massey & Harris, Tyneside Engineering, GLT Products, Kidstuff, Rentaplay, Sportsmark and Gilbert & Gilbert.¹⁶⁹ By 1979, the trustees of

¹⁶⁶ Playstyle Ltd, 'The Complete Playground: Playcubes', *Playing Fields*, 34.1 (1973), 10.

¹⁶⁷ Espacenet Patent Search, GB1535728A, Sutcliffe Engineering, 'Seat for a Swing', 1978.

¹⁶⁸ 'Catering for the Kids', *Parks and Recreation*, 40.6 (1975), 64–83; "'Intensive Use" Play Park', *Playing Fields*, 37.1 (1976), 64–65.

¹⁶⁹ 'Catering for the Kids'; 'Conference Issue', *Parks and Recreation*, 42.6 (1977).

Wicksteed Park had asked SMP to take on an £83,000 (£11,000) project to redesign the original playground, an embarrassing indication of the extent to which Wicksteed & Co. and their products were seen to be increasingly antiquated and out of touch.¹⁷⁰

The trade journals cashed in on the resulting demand for advertising space and in addition to the regular adverts from manufacturers they published long articles promoting equipment companies and their products. Previously, the publications had largely relied on contributions from parks administrators, landscape architects and sometimes playground campaigners to provide content for their pages. However, by the 1970s, these discursive or polemic articles had largely disappeared and were replaced by advertorial content, invariably written by a 'special correspondent' and exclusively based on information and images provided by the commercial equipment manufacturers.¹⁷¹ In doing so, the companies collectively established themselves as the authority on public play provision for the parks profession and any debate about the function and form of the playground largely disappeared from trade journals like *Parks Administration* and *Parks and Recreation*.

For the NPFA and their journal *Playing Fields*, this was increasingly problematic. In the past, *Playing Fields* had included regular adverts from equipment manufacturers, alongside discussion about the provision and design of play spaces. However, by the 1970s, both the organisation and journal were resolutely advocating more progressive approaches to play provision, including adventure playgrounds, play parks, professional leadership and well-designed playgrounds, all of which constituted implicit criticism of more orthodox provision. In addition to the journal, the NPFA information centre was providing over 40 publications on

¹⁷⁰ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, SMP Landscapes, 'Play Area Layout, Scheme B, Wicksteed Park Kettering', 1979.

¹⁷¹ 'Children at Play', *Park Administration*, 34.6 (1969), 18–29; 'Keeping up to Date with Playground Equipment', *Parks and Recreation*, 42.10 (1977), 29–40.

innovative play space design and leadership, including their own pamphlet series, information from the International Playground Association, as well as key texts by Allen, Bengtsson and others.¹⁷² Partly to deal with this contradiction, the NPFA ceased publication of *Playing Fields* in 1976 and replaced it with *Play Times*, a more accessible magazine-style periodical that adopted an unequivocal approach to campaigning and no longer included advertising from equipment manufacturers.¹⁷³ However, just as the NPFA wholeheartedly adopted the ideas and attitudes of the progressive playground movement, there was a corresponding increase in wider concern about child safety, which at times descended into panic.

6.3 Danger and decay

The debates about childhood freedom within and beyond the playground collided with other forces that increasingly characterised urban play provision as a problematic example of wider social and environmental malaise. In an article in the *Municipal Review*, Drummond Abernethy of the NPFA concluded that some parts of the country were providing good places to play, including in Bristol, Stevenage and Islington, but that elsewhere many play providers were failing in their responsibilities. In the same piece, the Bishop of Stepney, Trevor Huddleston, argued that many local authorities had got their priorities badly wrong, suggesting that 'it is not through malice or evil intent I am sure, but they have been overtaken by the motor-car and other matters so that play provision has been left behind.'¹⁷⁴ However, it was no longer the motor car that dominated the rhetoric of those concerned with children's safety as it had done for many playground campaigners from the 1930s to the 1950s. It

¹⁷² 'Publications Available from the NPFA', *Playing Fields*, 37.4 (1976), 49–50.

¹⁷³ 'Welcome to Your First Issue...', *Play Times*, 1 (1977), 3.

¹⁷⁴ Smith, 'Time to Give Play a New Priority', p. 78.

remained a concern, but increasingly significant was the perceived risk to children from the unlikely combination of paedophiles, pets and playgrounds themselves.

As we saw in an earlier chapter, the threat to children from abusive adults had been recorded by park staff for much of the playground's existence, but the issue was often obscured by an unwillingness to talk openly about such incidents. By 1968, the sociologists Elizabeth and John Newson found that parents in Nottingham were increasingly protective of their children in response to fears about the dangers of sexual molestation.¹⁷⁵ Mathew Thomson has argued that this anxiety moved from a background concern to a major public issue from the mid-1970s. There was high profile coverage of sexual crimes in the media and a public and political backlash against a short-lived sympathy, including among some adventure playground advocates, for a conception of the paedophile as a child lover rather than child molester.¹⁷⁶ Attempts at fostering rational public discourse by groups such as the Paedophile Information Exchange, including through conference attendance and book publishing, generated a little sympathy from the social work trade press and some in the gay liberation movement. However, the frenzied response of tabloid newspapers and campaigns by socially conservative activists, such as Mary Whitehouse, meant this fragile sympathy was short-lived.¹⁷⁷ And so, just as greater freedom in play was being promoted by the findings of sociological research, anarchic politics, community activism and play advocates, there was an opposing anxiety about the risks of unacceptable adult behaviour that added to the perceived dangers of the urban environment.

¹⁷⁵ Newson and Newson, *Four Years Old in an Urban Community*.

¹⁷⁶ Thomson, *Lost Freedom*, chapter 6.

¹⁷⁷ Lucy Robinson, 'Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain' (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 129–37.

A further danger to children at play was associated with pets rather than people. As historian Neil Pemberton has shown, there was concern in Burnley and beyond about the threat to children's health posed by dog faeces, in particular the problems associated with infection by *toxocara canis* (also known as dog roundworm).¹⁷⁸ This concern had developed from a number of scientific studies in Britain and the USA which pointed to the potential risks.¹⁷⁹ One in particular, which found that a quarter of soil samples from British public parks included the parasite, proved to be particularly influential.¹⁸⁰ With assertions that this was just the tip of the iceberg, descriptions of the parasite's 'hard, horny jaws which enable it to burrow through human tissue' and loss of sight in children among its consequences, there were urgent calls for action.¹⁸¹ Coinciding with rising concern about rabies, national newspapers portrayed a crazed canine menace that threatened children and their health in places where they were supposed to be safe.¹⁸² This dramatic reporting contributed to the burgeoning anxiety about children playing in public space.

Adding to this angst was an awareness that in addition to hazardous people and pets, playgrounds could be dangerous places too. Up to the 1950s, there was a sense among those advocating for playgrounds that the safety of children at play was primarily the responsibility of mothers. *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats* (1953) repeated a well-established assumption when it stated that 'playgrounds for very small children should be within sight of mothers in

¹⁷⁸ Neil Pemberton, 'The Burnley Dog War: The Politics of Dog-Walking and the Battle over Public Parks in Post-Industrial Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28.2 (2017), 239–67.

¹⁷⁹ J.A. Marron and C.L. Senn, 'Dog Feces: A Public Health and Environmental Problem', *Journal of Environmental Health*, 37 (1974), 239–43; A.W. Woodruff, 'Toxocariasis as a Public Health Problem', *Environmental Health*, 84 (1976), 29–31.

¹⁸⁰ O. A. Borg and A. W. Woodruff, 'Prevalence of Infective Ova of *Toxocara* Species in Public Places', *British Medical Journal*, 4 (1973), 470.

¹⁸¹ Woodruff, 'Toxocariasis as a Public Health Problem', p. 29.

¹⁸² 'Pets Danger to Children Playing in Parks', *The Times*, 23 November 1973, p. 5; 'Why Do We Let Dogs Foul Our Streets?', *British Medical Journal*, 1 (1976), 1486; 'Girl Lost Sight of Eye from Disease Carried by Dogs', *The Times*, 25 June 1976, p. 2; 'Canine Menace', *The Sunday Times*, 3 April 1977, p. 13; 'Sting in the Tail: Man's Best Friend Can Also Be One of Children's Worst Enemies', *The Guardian*, 8 February 1989, p. 27.

the flats.¹⁸³ Inadequate supervision by parents was even prone to scorn from officials. For one parks superintendent, the 'question of unaccompanied toddlers in a playground is quite serious and very difficult to overcome if irresponsible parents permit their small children to roam at will.'¹⁸⁴ Court cases relating to potential local authority negligence in playground provision were reported in the trade press, although they also reinforced the idea that parents had responsibility for children's welfare while using play spaces.¹⁸⁵ However, there was also a growing sense that playground safety needed to be considered by officials, partly in relation to the design of manufactured equipment but also the type of surfaces used, especially concrete.¹⁸⁶

The 1950s saw the first trials of rubber safety surfaces, initially in the USA as an experimental collaboration between the Akron Board of Education and the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, but also subsequently in Britain too. In Akron, the self-proclaimed rubber capital of the world, waste rubber was chopped into small pieces and stuck to the playground surface where it was found to lessen the problem of skinned knees and, unlike grass, dried quickly after rain.¹⁸⁷ In St Pancras in London, the noted architect Frederick Gibberd worked with the British Rubber Development Board to include rubber surfacing in the playgrounds of a redevelopment scheme because it was thought that it would help to minimise injuries and provide a harder wearing surface than grass.¹⁸⁸ However, in both cases the organisations involved suggest that the initial development of safety surfaces in playgrounds was as much

¹⁸³ National Playing Fields Association, *Playgrounds for Blocks of Flats*, p. 8.

¹⁸⁴ Ayres, 'The Provision of Children's Playgrounds by a Local Authority', p. 153.

¹⁸⁵ 'Accidents on Playgrounds: Local Authorities Discuss Liability Questions', *Playing Fields*, 14.3 (1954), 26; 'Play Chute Negligence Case', *Playing Fields*, 17.1 (1957), 48–49.

¹⁸⁶ L.A. Huddart, 'Safety on the Playground', *Playing Fields*, 13.1 (1953), 42–50.

¹⁸⁷ 'Developing the Rubberized Playground Surface', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 18.8 (1954), 342.

¹⁸⁸ G.H. Harris, 'All-Rubber Playgrounds Reduce Accident Risks', *Playing Fields*, 14.4 (1954), 36–38.

about the creation of new commercial products that dealt with industrial waste - and incorporated rather vague notions of safety in their marketing rhetoric - as it was about a direct response to evidence of specific dangers in the playground.

In the 1960s, playground safety remained a concern, although mainly for the professionals managing play spaces rather than the public more widely. For the LCC, it resulted in both anxiety and confusion among officials. In response to playground accidents, including several deaths, the council attempted to limit the use of apparently dangerous equipment. However, by the early 1960s there was considerable uncertainty among officials about which items of equipment could or could not be used, as no formal resolution had been reached. Parks and housing officials had made ad hoc decisions to initially stop installing slides, climbing nets, rocking-horses and giant strides and subsequently all moveable, mechanical equipment. As a result, LCC architects produced bespoke designs for immobile playground features, including play walls, a wooden tent, tubular steel climbing frame and playhouse.¹⁸⁹ However, councillors were unwilling to make this official policy, so that by 1962 officials found that 'no specific list of barred equipment can be traced.'¹⁹⁰ In addition, playground safety was not always a dominant concern for housing officials. The attitudes of residents, Tenant Associations and councillors to playground facilities meant that experimental equipment could appear and disappear very quickly, as happened on the Aboyne estate in Tooting.¹⁹¹

Despite evidence that children were much better at judging their exposure to risk than their parents, by the 1970s the issue of playground safety received widespread and

¹⁸⁹ London County Council, 'Unsupervised Play Space on Housing Estates'.

¹⁹⁰ London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, London County Council, 'Playgrounds - Equipment', 1962.

¹⁹¹ London Metropolitan Archives, GLC/HG/HHM/12/S026A, London Standing Conference of Housing Estate Community Groups, 'Newsletter', 1960.

increasingly sensational publicity, while the design of playground equipment became a topic for discussion in national newspapers.¹⁹² In 1972, the *Guardian* reported on the dangers of moving equipment, including the roundabout, rocking horse, ocean wave and swings, and the gruesome injuries and deaths they could cause.¹⁹³ A year later, the *Times* reported on the dangers for children at play, particularly the danger from hard wooden swing seats. It found that hospital records showed swings caused thirty to forty per cent of playground accidents; in Leicester and Manchester, the summer holidays saw ten children a day being admitted to hospital for head injuries; in the Netherlands, 20 children died each year in playground accidents. The *Times* described these figures as a major problem.¹⁹⁴

These concerns were seen in the local press too. The safety of the playground in Wicksteed Park received considerable publicity in local newspapers, after reports of 700 accidents each year and action by the local authority Public Health committee.¹⁹⁵ In east London, the Wapping Parents' Action Group lobbied the local council and their MP after a child was injured by a rocking horse in a playground near Green Bank.¹⁹⁶ Parks staff and equipment manufacturers were accused of ignorance or indifference to the problem when they asserted that the number and severity of injuries were both insignificant. With no national data on the problem of playground accidents, it was hard to establish the scale of the problem and estimates varied wildly. In 1976, newspapers reported twenty thousand playground accidents each year.¹⁹⁷ Two years later, the newly formed Fair Play for Children

¹⁹² D. A. Routledge, R. Repetto-Wright, and C. I. Howarth, 'The Exposure of Young Children to Accident Risk as Pedestrians', *Ergonomics*, 17.4 (1974), 457–80.

¹⁹³ Richard Carr, 'Playing Safe', *The Guardian*, 6 October 1972, p. 11.

¹⁹⁴ 'Dangers for Children at Play', *The Times*, 6 June 1973, p. 10.

¹⁹⁵ Wicksteed Park Archive, uncatalogued, 'Park Safety Still Causing Concern', *Evening Telegraph*, 26 February 1968.

¹⁹⁶ Richard Carr, 'Games of Chance', *The Guardian*, 23 April 1976, p. 9.

¹⁹⁷ 'Playground Mishaps Injure 20,000', *The Guardian*, 6 May 1976, p. 6.

campaign estimated that '150,000 to 250,000 children are hurt or killed in playground accidents every year' on hard surfaces or play equipment that was often a 'death trap.'¹⁹⁸

These dramatically increasing (and largely unsubstantiated) numbers were accompanied by well publicised problems on the ground too, particularly with aging equipment that had not been adequately monitored. After several items of playground equipment collapsed, the GLC undertook a detailed inspection of its playground apparatus.¹⁹⁹ Rather than relying on visual inspection by park keepers as it had done for many years, technical officers conducted detailed scientific assessments and tests. As a result, half of its playground equipment was condemned, including seventy per cent of its slides, affected by corroding materials and inadequate safety precautions. The assessment of corrosion, particularly decay that was internal or invisible, undoubtedly required expertise, analysis and subsequent remediation. However, in using technical staff to assess questions of safety, the GLC unintentionally instigated a binary approach to playground risk, where equipment and spaces were either safe or unsafe, rather than recognising that assessing risk involved a value judgement, or even that the educational or developmental benefits of a playful activity could outweigh the risks. In addition, there was a sense that not only had older equipment not been properly checked and maintained, but that the design of some items fell short. The British Standard, created in 1959 apparently to ensure the safety of equipment (although also partially to simplify and promote export business), was no longer adequate for ensuring the welfare of children at play.²⁰⁰ The Design Council felt that the existing standard was so

¹⁹⁸ 'Peril of Playground Death Traps', *The Guardian*, 12 June 1978, p. 3.

¹⁹⁹ 'Playground Probe Reveals Dangers in Swings and Slides', *The Sunday Times*, 4 June 1972, p. 3.

²⁰⁰ British Standards Institution, *B.S. 3178: Playground Equipment for Parks* (London: British Standards Institution, 1959); 'A British Standard for Children's Playground Equipment for Parks (Unbound Press Release Inserted into Journal)', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 24.6 (1959), 1–2.

woefully out of date that it promoted its own list of reputable suppliers of safe playground products.²⁰¹

By 1977, the wider pressure to address playground safety was being felt in central government. After the rocking horse accident in his constituency, the Labour MP and Secretary of State for the Environment Peter Shore asked his officials to expedite the revision of the earlier Circular 79/72 and *Children at Play*, and to encourage the British Standard Institute (BSI) to revisit the 1959 standard with an emphasis on safety. However, officials remained reluctant to intervene in the matter, suggesting in a handwritten note that 'this is a good example of an area in which we should not be intervening.'²⁰² Despite this, and with ongoing pressure from the Fair Play campaign and Consumer Association, civil servants did attempt to update the earlier circular and design advice.²⁰³ After a number of difficulties including opposition from equipment manufacturers and problems coordinating the work of the BSI and Department, an interim letter was sent to local authorities in 1978 asking them to focus on the safety of both new and existing play spaces and to establish a more methodical approach to inspection and maintenance.²⁰⁴ Although the Fair Play campaign was 'delighted' at the new advice, more experienced play advocates including the NPFA and local authority staff disagreed with many of its detailed suggestions, which often seemed naïve and disproportionate.²⁰⁵ One respondent felt that the concerns expressed by the Fair Play campaign, which had obviously influenced the content of the interim letter, were extreme,

²⁰¹ Design Council, *Street Scene* (London: Design Council, 1976).

²⁰² National Archives, AT 54/159, R.E.K. Holmes to M. Albu, 'Safety in Children's Playgrounds', 1977.

²⁰³ National Archives, AT 54/159, Judith Littlewood to Mr. Oddy, 'Play Space Standards', 27 January 1978.

²⁰⁴ National Archives, AT 54/159, R.E.K. Holmes to Local Authority Chief Executives, 'The Need for Improved Safety in Children's Playgrounds', 31 October 1978.

²⁰⁵ National Archives, AT 54/159, Fair Play for Children, 'Press Statement', 3 November 1978; National Archives, AT 54/159, Bob Satterthwaite to R.E.K. Holmes, 'The Need for Improved Safety in Children's Playgrounds', 24 November 1978.

lacked evidence and that ‘injuries in children’s playgrounds in most places seem to be quite remarkably light and may well be lower than almost any of the other common situations in which children find themselves.’²⁰⁶ Despite these observations, a preoccupation with safety was further embedded in playground discourse when the British Safety Council (formed in 1957 and usually concerned with industrial accidents) successfully made the case and achieved considerable publicity in relation to the fact that the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act applied to play provision, much to the surprise of government officials.²⁰⁷ This was to prove particularly problematic for adventure playgrounds.

Within the wider battle for ideas that characterised play space discourse in the 1970s, adventure playgrounds had already shifted considerably from their original emphasis on freedom, open access and child-centred play. In 1974, Joe Benjamin acknowledged that such spaces had become significantly less accessible; invariably fenced and locked up unless a play worker was present, children were limited in when they could use them. In Grimsby, the adventure playground even topped its fencing with barbed wire.²⁰⁸ In addition, playful constructions that had previously been built by children on adventure playgrounds were increasingly replaced by large climbing structures, made from scrap materials, and instigated, designed and built by adult play workers.²⁰⁹ The application of health and safety legislation to playgrounds meant that child-led activities were even more constrained.

²⁰⁶ National Archives, AT 54/159, D.F. Hodson to R.E.K. Holmes, ‘Borough of Thamesdown Response to DoE Letter on Children’s Playgrounds’, 4 December 1978, p. 1.

²⁰⁷ National Archives, AT 54/159, R.E. Gamble to Mrs. Watson, ‘Playground Safety’, 7 August 1978; National Archives, AT 54/159, ‘Newspaper Cuttings Including “Dangerous Playgrounds” in the Coventry Evening Telegraph, “Advice on Play Fears” in the Nottingham Evening Post, “Parents Can Act on Danger Play Gear” in the Reading Evening Post’, 1978.

²⁰⁸ Benjamin, *Grounds for Play*, p. 51.

²⁰⁹ Harry Shier, *Adventure Playgrounds: An Introduction* (London: National Playing Fields Association, 1984).

In 1979, the Health and Safety Executive's Factory Inspectors issued a Prohibition Notice to the voluntary management committee of Northumberland Road adventure playground in Southampton, temporarily closing the site until significant dangers were addressed. The features that had previously symbolised freedom and creativity, including scrap materials, self-built structures, ladders and platforms, were now classified by the Inspectors as unreasonably dangerous and a threat to the health and safety of people using the playground.²¹⁰ Before the management committee could appeal or take any remedial action, the local authority repossessed the site and cleared the playground.²¹¹ Similar events took place elsewhere. After safety inspections in Manchester, the local authority instructed the city's Adventure Playground Association to close all of its sites, forty-eight hours before the school holidays started.²¹² In Suffolk, St Edmundsbury borough council dismantled Puddlebrook adventure playground on safety grounds.²¹³ By 1980, when the NPFA published *Towards a Safer Adventure Playground* many play spaces had already been closed or lost their local authority funding.²¹⁴ However, financial problems were not limited to adventure playgrounds and by the late 1970s play spaces more generally were being affected by the consequences of reduced local authority budgets.

²¹⁰ 'Northumberland Road Adventure Playground and the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974', *Play Times*, 14 (1979), 2.

²¹¹ 'Health and Safety Act', *Play Times*, 15 (1979), 2.

²¹² 'Helping with Safety in Manchester', *Play Times*, 16 (1979), 2.

²¹³ Hughes, *Evolutionary Playwork*.

²¹⁴ National Playing Fields Association, *Towards a Safer Adventure Playground* (London, 1980).

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Figure 6.5 Harrison Park, Edinburgh (Robert Blomfield, www.robertblomfield.co.uk, 1960)

Play provision had long been subject to the vagaries of wider economic circumstances and the associated impact on local government finances and priorities.²¹⁵ In the 1960s, the documentary photographer Robert Blomfield captured the vulnerability of the playground to these wider conditions. The swings in Edinburgh's Harrison Park, with their seats removed and other equipment missing, appear desolate in the mist in his photo from 1960 (Figure 6.5). By the late 1970s, however, the playground increasingly became associated with the wider decline of parks and council housing estates. Landscape historians have characterised the 1970s as the start of a gradually intensifying period of decline in public parks, caused in part by reductions in municipal funding and the associated reduction in the quality and quantity of maintenance, but also the low profile of parks within newly reorganised municipal structures and changing leisure patterns.²¹⁶ Park keepers were jettisoned and local authorities

²¹⁵ 'Factors in the Development of the Playing Field Movement', *Playing Fields Journal*, 19.1 (1959), 25–26; 'Reductions in Capital Expenditure from Public Funds', *Playing Fields*, 25.4 (1965), 26.

²¹⁶ Stewart Harding, 'Towards a Renaissance in Urban Parks', *Cultural Trends*, 9.35 (1999), 1–20.

attempted to manage the decline of the Victorian park model.²¹⁷ In large cities, such as Liverpool, these national trends were compounded by local economic decline and persistent social problems, which meant that parks and their amenities dropped even further down the local political agenda.²¹⁸

There was a sense among some commentators that public parks and the playgrounds within them were in crisis, increasingly obsolete, badly managed, expensive and underused.²¹⁹ However, if the term 'crisis' implies a sense of calamity or urgency, it seems more likely that public spaces were experiencing a long, slow decline in response to incremental changes in management and as inspection and maintenance regimes were neglected.²²⁰ In an attempt to shame authorities into taking action to improve matters, *Play Times* instigated a 'brick of the month' award in 1977 which highlighted the poor-quality design and non-existent maintenance of play spaces across the country. Birmingham, once praised for its play space designs, was criticised for an accumulation of notices prohibiting play on its estates.²²¹ A decaying concrete train in Portsmouth and a neglected playground in Neath, with rusting, seat-less swing frames and the remains of a 'dead' concrete giraffe, were lamentable winners.²²² Knowsley Borough Council seemed to achieve the greatest fall from grace, with playgrounds left to decay so that they were 'the worst the editor has seen in a decade of looking at playgrounds all over the country' (Figure 6.6).²²³

²¹⁷ Liz Greenhalgh and Ken Worpole, *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal* (London: Comedia/Demos, 1995); David Lambert, *The Park Keeper* (London: English Heritage, 2005).

²¹⁸ Layton-Jones and Lee, *Places of Health and Amusement: Liverpool's Historic Parks and Gardens*.

²¹⁹ B Clouston, 'Urban Parks in Crisis', *Landscape Design*, 149, 1984, 12–14.

²²⁰ 'Safety on Play Areas', *Play Times*, 1 (1977), 11.

²²¹ 'The X-Certificate Playgrounds', *Play Times*, 2 (1977), 6–7.

²²² 'Brick of the Month Award - Portsmouth', *Play Times*, 14 (1979), 4; 'Brick of the Month - Neath', *Play Times*, 17 (1979), 13.

²²³ 'Brick of the Month - Knowsley', *Play Times*, 16 (1979), 16.

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Figure 6.6 Playground in Knowsley (Play Times, 1979)

Housing areas fared little better as the utopian modernism of the council estate playground was often incrementally chipped away in response to the problems of providing parking space for cars and increasing indifference among politicians and officials. The modernist Quarry Hill flats in Leeds provides a good example of this process. The estate was designed in the 1930s to have five playgrounds, but when construction worked stopped short of completion in 1940 only three had been laid out and equipped. Despite post-war agitation by tenants, the land set aside for the two additional play spaces remained 'deserts of glass-strewn asphalt...destitute of all furnishings.' In the 1960s, twelve per cent of playground space on the estate was reallocated to car parking and most grass areas were enclosed with fencing and children's play there forbidden. Unlike the grass, the three playgrounds were now without fencing and almost all of the equipment had been removed, dismantled by exasperated officials in response to continual hard use and occasions of 'wanton vandalism.' By the early 1970s, the estate's buildings were characterised as obsolete, while the external

environment was labelled 'intolerable', and the decision was made by local councillors to demolish the entire estate.²²⁴

After the 1979 general election, the new Conservative government exacerbated the decline of both park and housing play spaces. The new administration changed the status of Circular 79/72 so that it was no longer mandatory, removed the accompanying funding and distanced itself from play provision altogether, emphasising in Parliament that it was up to local authorities to decide on appropriate play space arrangements.²²⁵ The somewhat perplexing sight of the new prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, opening an adventure playground in London's east end might seem paradoxical, given her government's attitude towards local government and the place of the adventure playground in left-wing, anarchic politics. However, she adroitly used the opportunity to expound her views about the dehumanising effects of state intervention and advanced the possibilities of charitable action, praising the voluntary management committee that had established and funded the play space.²²⁶ Behind the scenes, officials pragmatically concurred, suspicious that local authorities had often taken advantage of the earlier subsidy but had not always used it to provide play spaces on the ground.²²⁷

At the same time, the utopian urban projects of the post-war decades, in which children represented hope for a better society, were recast as dystopian environments where children were a significant cause of the social and physical decline. Whereas playground advocates had long emphasised the deleterious impact of the city, by this time children were

²²⁴ Alison Ravetz, *Model Estate: Planned Housing at Quarry Hill, Leeds*. (London: Croom Helm, 1974), pp. 141–50.

²²⁵ National Archives, HLG 118/1897, Nigel Lawson to Michael Heseltine, 'Housing Subsidy System and Project Control', 7 July 1980; Mr. Stanley, *Play Space, House of Commons Debate, 19 January 1981, Vol.997, Col.66*.

²²⁶ Dennis Barker, 'Self-Help Is Child's Play for Thatcher', *The Guardian*, 12 July 1980, p. 3.

²²⁷ National Archives, HLG 118/1897, Ian Nicol to Mr Moss, 'New Subsidy Arrangements: Playspace Provision', 6 October 1980.

conversely seen to wield significant power over their city surroundings through vandalism, graffiti and other antisocial behaviour. Rather than addressing the root causes of such acts, a Home Office report laid the blame squarely on young people, suggesting that reducing child density on estates by dispersing families with children was a potential solution.²²⁸ In 1985, Alice Coleman and the Design Disadvantage Team at King's College London controversially cast judgement on modern housing landscapes and the children that lived in them. In considering playgrounds and the 'hordes of anonymous children' that they attracted, Coleman argued that dedicated play spaces were closely associated with a deterioration in the quality of lives of all estate residents.²²⁹ Against a number of measures, including the existence of graffiti, litter, damage, urine and faeces, she argued that playground 'absence is better than their presence' and even associated the existence of play spaces on estates with a higher likelihood that children would end up in the care of social services.²³⁰ The answer was to remove playgrounds altogether, dividing the space up into private gardens for ground floor residents. Although rebutted by other scholars, the shift from seeing children as victims of the urban environment to blaming them for its problems was echoed in the popular press too.²³¹ Newspaper reports vilified 'playground monsters' and described the terror of living on council estates.²³²

With no government guidance on play provision, disenchantment with council estate landscapes and the denigration of problematic children, advice on playground standards was

²²⁸ *Tackling Vandalism*, ed. by R.V.G. Clarke, Home Office Research Study, 47 (London: HMSO, 1978).

²²⁹ Alice Coleman, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing* (London: Hilary Shipman, 1985), p. 47.

²³⁰ Coleman, *Utopia on Trial*, p. 78.

²³¹ Peter Dickens, 'Utopia on Trial: A Response to Alice Coleman's Comment', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 11 (1987), 118–20; Paul Spicker, 'Poverty and Depressed Estates: A Critique of Utopia on Trial', *Housing Studies*, 2.4 (1987), 283–92.

²³² Christopher White, 'Rampage of the Tiny Vandals, Aged 10', *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1985, p. 1; Christopher Booker, 'The Chilling Legacy of Utopia', *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1985, p. 6; 'Vandals Leave £1.8bn Bill and a Trail of Fear', *The Sunday Times*, 13 August 1989, p. 5; Geoffrey Levy, 'Playground Monsters', *Daily Mail*, 16 May 1990, p. 6.

increasingly reduced to a technical matter. The revised British Standard, *B.S. 5696 Play Equipment Intended for Permanent Installation Outdoors*, was published in 1979 and received considerable publicity in trade journals.²³³ While part pertained to the construction of manufactured equipment, it also now covered site layout, surfacing, maintenance and inspection regimes and placed particular emphasis on safety.²³⁴ In addition, by focusing on the provision of traditional equipped play spaces it further legitimised that particular vision of the children's playground at the expense of one which emphasised freedom, creativity or interaction with nature as imagined by campaigners. It also came at a time when other aspects of parks management practice were being incorporated into British Standards, including for example in B.S. 3936 covering the provision of fruiting plants.²³⁵

In response, the number of companies supplying playground equipment expanded significantly, as did suppliers for rubber safety surfaces. The two experiments with rubber surfacing in the 1950s evolved so that 'safety surfaces' became a common feature of playground provision from the 1970s and presented a significant business opportunity. In 1977, *Play Times* attempted to promote a measured approach to the use of increasingly expensive surfacing, suggesting that grass, sand and wood chip could all provide a suitable playground surface.²³⁶ In busy areas, asphalt might even be suitable and at around £35 (£3.60) per square meter relatively affordable. At £364 (£37) per square meter, rubber safety surfacing was ten times more expensive, and offered little to children in terms of play

²³³ 'BSI Standards for Playground Equipment', *Parks and Recreation*, 44.3 (1979), 30–31; 'For Safety's Sake: The New British Standard on Playground Equipment', *Play Times*, 13 (1979), 11.

²³⁴ British Standards Institution, *B.S. 5696: Play Equipment Intended for Permanent Installation Outdoors* (London: British Standards Institution, 1979).

²³⁵ 'BSI for Nursery Stock', *Parks and Recreation*, 44.3 (1979), 31.

²³⁶ 'A Surface Guide for Children's Playgrounds and Multi-Purpose Play Areas', *Play Times*, 5 (1977), 11.

opportunities, but nonetheless became an integral feature of subsequent play space provision as vague notions of safety trumped both play value and value for money.

The significance of close relationships between local authority officials and equipment suppliers in reinforcing this approach to play provision is not clear. The bribery and fraud associated with municipal housing contracts uncovered during the Poulson scandal had undoubtedly raised important questions about the ethics of public officials and the aptitude of local authorities, but there was no explicit suggestion that this behaviour extended to other sectors.²³⁷ There were, however, close relationships between playground equipment manufacturers and local authority politicians and officers.²³⁸ It is not clear for instance why such senior politicians and officials, including the Lord Mayor, Chair of the Parks Committee and the Director of Parks, from a small Midlands city all needed to visit the factory of Wicksteed & Co. to develop their plans for a new playground, something normally dealt with by junior officials.²³⁹ Appropriate or not, these close business relationships only strengthened the place of the equipped playground in the practices of local authorities and invariably made manufacturers the first port of call when money was made available to create or enhance dedicated spaces for children's play.

6.4 Conclusion

From the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, the battle of ideas in relation to the playground pitched radical, anarchic notions of childhood freedom against an increasingly widespread but often unsubstantiated preoccupation with safety. Play workers pitted themselves against

²³⁷ Peter Jones, 'Re-Thinking Corruption in Post-1950 Urban Britain: The Poulson Affair, 1972-1976', *Urban History*, 39.3 (2012), 510–28.

²³⁸ L.B. Creasey, 'A Visit to Wicksteed's of Kettering', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 22 (1958), 632.

²³⁹ 'A New Type of Play Area', *Park Administration, Horticulture and Recreation*, 26.1 (1961), 59.

parks departments, while the places in which children were supposed to play made national headlines for all the wrong reasons. The act of playing continued to be seen as a healthy component of childhood, but the playground suffered an acute loss of purpose. The nineteenth-century children's gymnasium and twentieth-century orthodox playground had both been inscribed with an unequivocal mission; to deliver childhood health through physical exercise, excitement and interaction with the natural environment, even if this was not always achieved in practice. In contrast, the post-war debate about the form and function of the playground had unsettled this mission. Planners, and briefly central government, felt that dedicated play spaces were still a worthwhile investment, but as the foundations of the profession were challenged the comprehensive redevelopment schemes that had previously provided space for playground creation fell out of favour. An earlier sense that playgrounds could contribute to the future of society through the health of children was replaced by less grand aims, as public spaces more generally struggled to find a place in the new world of leisure and altered attitudes to local government. In any case, sociologists had shown that children did not really use playgrounds and as a result they were increasingly seen as something of an irrelevance. Despite this, playgrounds in parks and on housing estates endured, increasingly the preserve of equipment manufacturers, and more about commerce than child development, health or happiness. At the same time, adventure playgrounds became less public space for play and more radical community centre, less about digging in the mud and children building with junk and more about the politics of the play worker, scrounging materials, in many ways a DIY version of the orthodox playground, built by adults rather than children as originally intended.

However, an increasingly widespread anxiety about safety meant that all playground typologies were reduced to spaces where risk needed to be managed, a problem to be solved

rather than a space of possibility and potential. Interaction with curated forms of nature, once a key rationale in visions for the playground, disappeared almost entirely from the mid-twentieth century playground debates. The landscape architecture profession, previously advocates for nature in the playground, stepped away from play space design. Less of a priority in the face of organisational change and financial stringency, many existing playgrounds were seemingly abandoned by authorities. Paradoxically, this meant that a wilder version of nature began to reclaim at least some urban play spaces. Just as the principle and form of the playground waned, the NPFA also lost its reputation and function as a source of authority and expertise in relation to play space. At its inauguration in 1926 senior politicians had lined up to support the cause, but by the 1970s ministers and officials felt it was amateurish and doubted its technical advice.²⁴⁰ With central government no longer seeking to guide or fund play provision, the British Standard, with its traditional conception of the playground and corresponding emphasis on safety, became the mainstream source of advice on playground provision. But perhaps this did not matter. One of the primary goals of inter-war playground advocates had been to reduce the number of children being killed on the streets and by the 1970s this had been achieved. But despite campaigners' expectations, it was not the playground that had protected children from the dangers of playing among motor vehicles. Instead, children were increasingly confined to the home, garden or commercial play centre, while the car had replaced the child in public space.²⁴¹ Ironically, by the 1980s critics blamed the playground for this loss of freedom, asserting that such spaces

²⁴⁰ National Archives, HLG 120/1614, 'Future Role of the NPFA', 1970.

²⁴¹ Cowman, 'Play Streets'.

represented an unreasonable attempt to control children's behaviour, irrelevant to children's needs and described by children themselves as boring.²⁴²

²⁴² Robin C. Moore, 'Playgrounds at the Crossroads', in *Public Places and Spaces*, ed. by Irwin Altman and Ervin H. Zube (Boston, MA: Springer, 1989), pp. 83–120.

7 Conclusion

Much like the motion of a swing, the fortunes of the children's playground over the course of nearly two centuries has swung back and forth, from marginal obscurity to popular ubiquity and back again towards a place of somewhat aimless eccentricity. Similarly, many of the wider themes that have shaped playground discourse and practice have varied in importance over time, often coming full circle much like the rotation of a roundabout. In particular, assumptions about the restorative potential of nature have consistently orbited the playground ideal. At times passing close by, it provided a central justification for the children's garden gymnasiums of the 1890s and inspiration for landscape architects in the 1960s. At other times, nature's trajectory took it to the margins of the playground, and it was barely visible in the 1930s orthodox playground or in anxieties about safety in the 1980s. In contrast, conceptions of the playground as a place of health have tracked less obviously onto the cyclical movements of playground equipment. Instead, dedicated public spaces for children were consistently positioned as sites of salubrious safety from the mid-nineteenth century through to the late twentieth century. Initially, energetic exercise was understood as a vector for physical strength and vigour, while progressive education would later help to shape the playground as a site of emotional health and cognitive development. In practice, however, playgrounds long posed risks to children and by the 1970s these threats were increasingly seen to outweigh the benefits that dedicated play spaces could provide. Technology, particularly in the form of manufactured equipment, has provided a lasting influence on the material form of public playgrounds, despite highly critical and enduring condemnation, initially expressed in the 1930s but seen most notably in mid-twentieth century anarchic thought and radical experiments in adventurous play.

In exploring these themes over time and space, the chapters in this thesis have plotted the interaction of these processes in more detail. The first chapter highlighted the extent to which the playground has seldom featured in historical accounts of urban landscapes and public parks, nor in scholarship on the evolving practices of welfare, health, education and leisure. To address this gap in our knowledge, subsequent chapters focused on the children's playground as a site where social and environmental values have been played out and contested. From the sporadic attempts to create dedicated public spaces for children in the mid-nineteenth century to the work of the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association in the 1890s, the second chapter explored the links between conceptions of the city, nature, childhood and health. It examined the material consequences of these assumptions in smaller, more local public parks and in evolving ideas about physical exercise. However, while the principle of creating dedicated places for children's recreation became more firmly established, the form of such spaces was far from settled.

Chapter three examined how one vision for the playground acquired 'orthodox' status, based in part on the ideas, products and playground promoted by Charles Wicksteed. Inspired by amusement park rides and progressive attitudes to childhood, the playground was reimagined as a site of excitement for all, and increasingly featured in visions for modern, planned urban environments. The fourth chapter plotted the rapid and nationwide expansion of playground provision in the inter-war years, a response to the active campaigning of the National Playing Fields Association and involvement of leading town planners. At the same time, manufactured equipment and in particular the swing came to dominate playground spaces, to the exclusion of naturalistic features. Chapter five examined how the principle of the playground indirectly benefited from the wider mid-century welfare consensus and its emphasis on the wellbeing of children and their families. However, this focus also provided

the foundations for an increasingly critical reception for the orthodox playground, as a diverse range of activists and practitioners emphasised self-determination, adventure and creativity in play provision. The ensuing battle for ideas formed the central focus of chapter six which examined the consequences of a wave of sociological research, anarchic thought, community activism and wider attempts to promote child liberation. A backlash against these ideas saw anxieties about pets and paedophiles contribute to an assessment of the playground as a problem to be solved, rather than a place of promise and potential. While a belief in the playground as a space of safety had long concealed possible threats, when wider social discourse created an atmosphere in which these threats seemed increasingly insurmountable, perceptions of the playground shifted among park managers, politicians and the public. From the late 1970s, such spaces were increasingly perceived as spaces of danger and decay, inadvertently supporting radical attempts to undermine the case for playground provision altogether.

By drawing on a diverse range of archive materials, this study has addressed a number of gaps in our historical knowledge. For the first time, it has provided an empirically grounded historical account of the modern playground, the main actors involved, their assumptions and motivations, as well as the wider historical themes that shaped play provision on the ground. It has shown how the term playground has proven sufficiently flexible to accommodate many revisions to its meaning, while largely retaining its core association with spaces of purposeful and healthy recreation. Furthermore, the project has placed children more centrally in our understanding of the nineteenth-century public parks movement, initially making sense of their absence from such spaces, before explaining their greater significance in the justification for and design of smaller city parks closer to the homes of the urban poor from the 1880s onwards. It has re-emphasised the significance of ideas about nature in such processes, but

also provides a detailed example of changing attitudes towards park-based recreation, plotting the shift from genteel perambulation to more energetic exercise. The study has also highlighted how spaces for play reflected wider social norms, including segregation by gender in the late nineteenth century, an emphasis on popular and exciting leisure activities in the inter-war period, and the ongoing place of philanthropy and voluntary action in shaping both public life and public space.

The case study of Charles Wicksteed, his company and the playground he created provides a comprehensive account of this highly significant playground advocate and charts his enduring influence on visions for the playground, expanding significantly on recent coverage in *Urban History*.¹ At the same time, the thesis provides an original account of the playgrounds' place in modern planned visions for housing and wider urban landscapes, connecting Wicksteed's ideas and actions to those of other pioneering and philanthropic garden city advocates. The study has built upon existing scholarship that charts the transatlantic exchange of park ideals, but also goes further to highlight the wider twentieth-century connections with playground thought in Europe too. In doing so, it acknowledges international influences on playground provision, but also examines for the first time the specific social and cultural factors that shaped public play space provision in Britain. As a result, it compliments existing scholarship on the mid-twentieth century adventure playground by moving beyond the boundary fence to assess the influence of such spaces on wider playground provision.

At the same time, the playground has served as a site for exploring wider historical themes and their previously unacknowledged influence on the built form of towns and cities.

¹ Winder, 'Revisiting the Playground'.

Significantly, *Swings and Roundabouts* has shown how the radical visionaries who reimagined and redefined spaces for play in the city were often women. From Fanny Wilkinson and Mabel Jane Reaney to Marjory Allen, Mary Mitchell and Margaret Willis, the thesis draws attention to a succession of pioneering female advocates and designers who challenged established ideas about children's place in the urban environment and shaped alternative spaces for play. Given the enduring influence of their ideas and actions, a detailed and critical engagement with their work could usefully inform present-day calls to create more just and equitable cities.²

In addition, previous studies have examined the interconnected relationships between notions of childhood and school architecture or conceptions of health and institutional landscapes. *Swings and Roundabouts* furthers this work by exploring how ideas about both childhood and health were expressed and contested in the public realm, and uniquely charts the influence of progressive education, commerce and amusement park landscapes on the specific form of public spaces too. In doing so, it has responded to Layton-Jones' call for a study of landscapes designed for children, but also extends the chronology to make sense of the wider social and environmental processes that shaped playground provision. It has similarly extended coverage of one aspect of Thomson's *Lost Freedom*, providing more detailed historical context for playground provision to support revisionist accounts of the later twentieth century.

However, in extending the chronological scope of the project to narrate a longer history of public spaces for children, this study inevitably focuses less on the detailed stories of individual sites and the interaction of playground ideals with other pressing historical

² Leslie Kern, *Feminist City* (London: Verso, 2021).

themes. In particular, research into the global spread of the orthodox playground ideal in the inter-war period would usefully inform discussion about Britain's relationship with its colonial past. We have seen how play spaces in Britain were influenced by international ideas and practice from Europe and North America, while the orthodox playground ideal and items of manufactured equipment were exported to South Africa by Wicksteed & Co. However, archival material in Cape Town and Johannesburg has not yet been examined, nor related to wider discussions of imperial landscapes or racist regimes. In addition, where source materials have allowed, the ways in which children adapted and contested adult expectations of the playground have been emphasised. However, although sensitive to addressing children's position as academic orphans, uncovering their hidden voices has barely been possible in this study and it undoubtedly warrants further exploration. Given the paucity of records relating to children's experiences of playground provision, an emphasis on moments of fissure in the archive materials seems instructive, as do the broader methodologies of children's geographers and historians of childhood. An in-depth analysis of the films that narrated 1970s playground activism could be particularly useful in this regard.

A social and environmental history of the playground has shown how such spaces have long been a site where adult anxieties about public childhoods have been played out. Its form and function have changed over time in response to shifting ideas about the benefits of interaction with nature, energetic exercise, entertainment and adventure. Enthusiasm for the principle of the playground has similarly fluctuated in response to conceptions of childhood, notions of safety and the power of utopian visions for better cities. Present-day playgrounds, along with their advocates and detractors, continue to embody and question the significance of these themes. Calls to re-wild childhood, re-introduce nature into cities and re-energise children through physical exercise are not new concerns and have a long and significant

history. Situating present-day efforts to create more equitable and inclusive urban environments within the historical context outlined in this thesis will lead to more constructive dialogue about children's place in the city.

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