

Children and the Countryside

by Marion Shoard

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'We could never have loved the earth so well if we had no childhood in it...These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows - such things are the mother tongue of our imagination.' (George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 1860.)

The contemporary fad for public participation in the world of town and country planning has yet to embrace children. Adults think they know what children want. After all, they were children themselves once. But of course children delight in confounding their elders. Planners working on the creation of an adventure playground at Loughborough Park, Lambeth, in 1974 did not consult the children who were to use it. And within 18 months, the elaborate, purpose-built facilities they had installed - an aerial runway, giant wooden wigwams and a tall, roofed climbing frame - had been burned or kicked to the ground. The children of the area are now erecting on the ashes a giant rope swing and skateboard track.

Play remains a mystery to those who shape our environment - even if they do not wish to admit it. And adults always err in the same way. They underestimate children's preference for the wilderness as a playground. And to a child, any scrap of untamed ground is wilder than the most elaborate obstacle course artifice can create. So, given the choice, those children who have had the chance have made their playground the countryside. What is it they seek there? How important is it to them?

To try and find out I talked to children at the village primary school of Minster in East Kent. Minster is a busy-looking, large, attractive but not picturesque village of about 3,000 inhabitants, six miles inland from Ramsgate. Its main street contains shops which reflect the wide social spectrum of the people who live in Minster's council house estate and in the jumble of Victorian cottages and modern bungalows of the village centre; there is a working men's cafe and a high-class restaurant, a betting shop, an antique shop, a gardening shop and a gunshop. A network of dykes to the south of the village is the remains of the Wantsum Channel, which separated the Isle of Thanet from the mainland in Roman times. On its other three sides, Minster is bounded by intensively cultivated farm land given over mainly to wheat and potatoes. But on the marshes side there are many scraps of uncultivated, often rough land - odd meadows, clumps of trees, spinneys, dykes and marshes. These are of no

special note to wildlife enthusiasts or landscape admirers, but they are the favourite haunt of Minster's children. The answers to my question, 'Why do you like to go into the country to play?'; reveal that Minster children see the village environment quite differently from their parents.

A Refuge

'I like the country because it's quiet and it's beautiful, and you can get away from the noise of towns and cities. Sometimes I want to get away from my mum because she keeps telling me to do things that I don't want to do', said Jay, who is eight. The children I talked to tended to be quite content with village life. But they needed to get away much of the time from what they saw as noise and danger in Minster's streets, boredom and cramped surroundings in their homes, and dictatorship by grown-ups. The freedom and space of the fields and woods outside provided a refuge. 'It's boring at home', complained one boy, 'it's hot and sticky and there's not much room to run around'. His friend explained: 'In the woods it's so quiet - except for the birds. It's peaceful and there's lots of space'.

Paradoxically, when the children I talked to do escape they often retreat to dens or little houses outside - but houses that differ from their homes in two crucial respects: they are constructed by the children themselves (not of course from bricks and mortar but out of anything from bales of straw to a hollow tree trunk); and second, and even more important, their location is ideally unknown to their parents. Georgina, who is eight, has one such hideaway: 'Up our road there's a small type of spinney full of trees where we go and climb. We made a camp in the hedge out there and brought in lots of things like kettles and a broken electric fire. We liked to go there because it was all kind of secretive'.

Hideaways or camps like this may be elaborately decorated. Inside, children do everything from reading books to playing at cooks.

Animals

Minster children revel in the freedom, space, peace and solitude of the countryside. Another major advantage they feel they enjoy over their counterparts who live in big towns and cities is close contact with other living things. The presence of wild animals distinguishes the country from the town more than any other single thing for many of the children I talked to. 'I like the country because it's quiet and you can see the animals more than you can in the town - birds and foxes and butterflies', explained one seven-year-old. Georgina, eight: 'I like wild animals in the country because they make the country better. I don't know why they make the country better, but they do'.

Catching tadpoles, newts, eels and sticklebacks is popular with all the age-groups I talked with. Tadpoles are fun just to look at - 'I like tadpoles because they're all slimy and funny' or 'because they've got very long tails and when you put them in the water they waggle their tails like dogs do' - but it is even more fun to take them home, put them in an old sink with stones in it and watch them turning into frogs. Amphibians and reptiles have the added attraction of being strange to touch: 'I like frogs because if you catch them and put them in your hand sometimes they tickle and they bounce a lot', declared one little girl; another child told me: 'In Minster woods you see grass snakes. I've held a snake. They're dry, and they tickle when they crawl across your hand because of all the bones'.

Almost any small creature of the meadows, dykes and woods is caught. Most are fun merely to watch - like grasshoppers. 'We catch grasshoppers and put them in grass in a box that's got a top so we can see them', said one little girl, 'I like grasshoppers because they bound about and it makes me laugh. We let them go at the end and see where they go'.

Other animals lend themselves to much more active use. One nine-year-old girl told me: 'Me and my sister race snails. We put them on this plank of wood or rock and we line them up and see which one wins'. Her playmate went on: 'I collect spiders because I like putting them in jam-jars and you wait until you get home and then I frighten my mum with them'. Rabbits and mice are chased.

But of all the creatures of the countryside, birds are the most popular. Bird-song is the dominant feature of the countryside for many of the children I talked to: 'It's quiet in the country, and you can hear the birds singing: they're talking to each other', explained an eight-year-old girl. Injured blackbirds are brought home and nursed back to health. But the appeal of birds lies mainly in their colours - of the birds themselves and of their eggs. 'I like kingfishers', one little girl told me, 'you see them by the water or the pond. I like them because they've got pretty colours on them. When they're sitting down, I creep up on them'. By the age of eleven, some children are already keen bird-spotters, like Diana. 'I like watching the water birds and the sparrows and finches up in the trees, all the nests and the rooks and gradually see all the babies come up. I go out on my own because it's better on your own because it's peaceful'. I asked her what she liked about birds: 'Their colours, their movements, and the gracefulness of them'. Jay who is eight, also admires birds 'because of their colours and because of how they fly. Some of them fly swiftly, some of them fly different ways. Sometimes when I go down the woods I take my birdbook and I'm quiet and I try to look for birds and once I've spotted one that I've never seen before I look it up in my bird book and see what it is'.

A playground

The vast majority of the children I talked to were adamant that the country was a much better place to play than the street, the playground, the seaside or the recreation ground with its grass, swings and slides. Though they have varying degrees of experience of these other recreation environments, their arguments are convincing.

It is not only the greater variety of plants and animals in the country that lend it its excitement. There are more things to play with there. The satisfaction of destruction can be enjoyed harmlessly but fully: little houses can be built out of sticks and grass and then stamped on, or sticks can be thrown in a dyke and bombed with stones, to take two examples given to me by one eleven-year-old boy. Similarly, the countryside is a store of things that can be turned into toys (like conkers), weapons (like bullrushes), decoration (like daisy chains), sound (like the screech made by blowing between two blades of grass), and food (like blackberries).

The second major advantage the countryside enjoys over other playgrounds is that it provides for greater freedom of movement. Children like to be free to tumble to the ground while they are playing. And they like to feel that should they fall down while playing or while performing some feat like a handstand or leapfrog they will not hurt themselves. The main disadvantage of the school playground, the street and the back-yard is that 'it hasn't got grass, and in grass you can roll about. There might be a plank or glass in the playground or the rec., you might roll over that and have to be taken to hospital'. In the country, on the other hand, 'you can lie down and fall down, you don't hurt yourself'. Some children's games involve simply falling down like 'jumping off haystacks on top of each other'.

Then there is a whole range of mainly boys' games which requires stalking through long grass and diving down into it at a moment's notice. Christopher, who is eleven, described a favourite of his to me: 'We pretend there's a load of soldiers behind us and we start shooting them down. Where there's long grass we just dive in it and then jump over and dive in it again'.

Games like 'chase' 'hide-and-peek' and 'tag' ('you've got to touch people and then they're on') are more fun in the fields around Minster with their innumerable places to hide than in tamer, more organised environments. Minster children live only a five-minute train ride from Ramsgate with its long, wide, sandy beach and rock-pools - thought by adults to be a children's paradise. Yet nearly all the children I talked with prefer the country to the seaside. Why? Because 'there aren't so many people and it's quieter in the country', said one boy. His friend added: 'At the seaside all there is to do is swim and walk along the beach and make sandcastles'. The countryside, in contrast, is seen to offer endless opportunities for play. Trees, for example, can be climbed, turned into dens, or used as swings. Woods are ideal for hiding, chasing animals or, for one seven-year-old boy, 'playing stunts on my brother's bike: I go up the woods and I make a slope and I go speeding up and straight off the edge. I like it because I go several feet longwards and it feels like I'm flying'. And because of the countryside's endless variety of opportunity, children can skip from one pursuit to another in it - compared to the seaside, where the opportunities are considered as limited.

Rich store of surprises

To a child, the countryside provides a rich store of possible surprises and scrapes. And because there is so much to discover there, many of the children I spoke to were happy to spend time simply looking around in the country, finding new places, stumbling across exciting, unusual things - 'Once, I found a dead rat down by the haystacks; boasted one little boy, 'I nearly jumped out of my skin' The children I talked to never tired of recounting to me - and to their friends - their rural escapades. For example: 'I took my dog Benjamin for a walk down the woods, and he pulled me into the little stream. My daddy said: "Mind he doesn't pull you in", but I was already in the stream. I enjoyed that because my doggy pulled me out again'.

One nine-year-old girl felt that getting into difficulties in the country rather than in more crowded playgrounds did children good by fostering a sense of independence. 'I was riding my bike down the marshes once and I was on my own', she told me. 'I slipped and my foot was caught in my bike. Down there you have to make your own way out of it, you haven't got other people to pull you out: it's better'.

Of course the countryside is not the only environment that can foster a sense of independence. And not all children love the woods and fields. Some find them very boring. A nine-year-old boy I came across cycling around the streets of the tiny West Oxfordshire village of Kelmscott last August, his face and hair covered with wet grass from mowing the lawn, thought there was little to do in the countryside and yearned to live in a town or city. Teenage boys I talked to at a comprehensive school in Wandsworth in July told me they could think of nothing to do in the countryside except play football; they had no interest in countryside conservation whatsoever.¹

And of course the countryside has its dangers. Twenty-five children were killed on farms in Great Britain in 1977. Of these twenty-five, ten were playing on farm machinery; a further six drowned - in anything from an unprotected well to pig slurry and a sheep dip.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of the children I talked to in Minster - all of whom knew what the rural scene had to offer them - were convinced that the countryside was vital to their well-being.

Young conservationists

Many of the children I talked to had a clear grasp of the idea of countryside conservation and had already become enthusiasts. Diana (who is eleven) spelled out clearly the arguments for preserving the country as a refuge for wildlife and as a haven of peace and spiritual refreshment for human beings. To my question, 'How would you feel if the whole of the countryside were built over?' she replied: 'Awful. Because there wouldn't be anywhere to go. There wouldn't be any birds because the

trees would be knocked down and there wouldn't be any nests, so the number of birds would slowly die down, so causing people unhappiness. I think the countryside is important to everyone to go to because it's peaceful and you've got freedom and the wind blowing. Freedom from traffic and the noise, and sometimes from grown-ups'.

Christopher, also eleven, was certain that if all the countryside were built over 'all you'd get are chocolates, sweets and you wouldn't get any good down you. So you'd slowly get smaller and fatter and lazier. You wouldn't be able to play football because it would all be concrete. You wouldn't be able to do all the lots of things you can do in the country. And all the animals would slowly be dying away'.

A sense of loss

The views of these children are reinforced at least partly by the changes to the countryside even they have seen. Christopher feels the countryside around Minster is being ruined by chalk quarrying, 'covering over more grass to build houses' and the restriction of public access by farmers so that people are forced more and more to walk on main roads.

But agricultural change was the most common reason the children cited for the alteration or destruction of favourite play areas. It is also the main reason why farmers restrict access to potential playgrounds.

Although the children I talked to enjoy fishing in the dykes, the number of dykes in which children can fish has declined dramatically. Twenty years ago, children happily cycled the six miles from Ramsgate to picnic on the grassy meadows then grazed by cows and to catch a jam-jar full of the teeming life of the dykes: frog and toad spawn, tadpoles, newts, sticklebacks, caddis-flies, water beetles. Then there was de facto access to most of the Minster marshes.

Thanet used to be a dairy farming area supplying milk to London and the coastal resorts. And up to 15 years ago, Minster marshes were used only as summer grazing for cattle, since the land was waterlogged for much of the winter. In the mid-1960s, however, several Minster farmers started trying to drain their land, installing pumps and tile drains. Then in 1969 the Kent River Board installed an arterial drainage system to pump drain the whole of the Minster and Monkton levels - 2,300 acres in all. The farmers were quick to follow this with underdrainage schemes of their own: by 1971 tile drains had been installed over 75 per cent of the area covered by the arterial drainage scheme.

The changes to the landscape brought about by this fundamental change in farming can be illustrated by the history of a 372-acre block of land to the south and south-east of the village. Once the arterial drainage system had been installed, the farmer - a newcomer to the area from Lincolnshire - filled in 5.5 miles of the dykes from which the children only a few years before had filled their nets. Now only six miles of dyke remain on this stretch of land. Within this same 372-acre stretch of land, three blocks of woodland covering 8 acres were felled to provide more ploughland and to remove vegetation thought to harbour pests. One of these woods - known as The Rough, and which consisted of a swamp with ash, elm and sycamore trees - was a favourite playground for local children. Now the only bits of uncultivated land that remain support those few remaining dykes considered essential for drainage - and the rich alluvial soil supports huge fields of wheat, onions, green beans, grass and sprouts.

It isn't just that landscape features once important for recreation have been removed. The farmer also prohibits access to the dykes that remain. He tolerates tadpoling only on dykes alongside a boundary road.

Most tadpoling now goes on only in a few dykes on the south-west side of the village where another farmer (whose family have farmed in Minster for a long time) tolerates villagers on his land more readily. Nonetheless, on this side too, many dykes have been filled in, and here there has been one unexpected by-product of the installation of the arterial scheme: two duck ponds - once an attractive feature of the village - have dried up.

Planning for play

Clearly, the standard countryside recreation facilities provided by county councils such as country parks, picnic sites and recreation grounds offer no replacement for the great outdoors - although they do of course meet other real enough needs. The Countryside Commission congratulate themselves on the creation of 146 country parks and 188 picnic sites in England and Wales within the last nine years. Yet during the same

period, thousands of play areas up and down the country of the sort I have described for Minster must have been swept aside to make way for new development and for more intensive, high technology agriculture.

If the lives of our children and our grandchildren are to be anything like as colourful as those of Minster children today, then planners will have to radically alter their approach towards countryside recreation. They will have to turn their undivided attention away from the provision of country parks, picnic sites and other facilities geared in the main to Sunday afternoon family motoring. Instead they should be thinking of ways of preserving the scraps of rough land that have survived around our towns and villages.

Unfortunately, there are few signs that planners are seriously trying even to find out what children's needs actually are. A three-man research team at University College, London, for example, which is looking at the ways in which people use recreation land in parts of Surrey and south London, is deliberately excluding from interview anybody under the age of sixteen, even though children are among the main users of the areas concerned. The team say children would not be able to understand the language used on the questionnaire.

But even if planners do try to preserve the countryside's role as a playground, they will not find their task easy. The main threat to marginal land is agricultural 'improvement' and farmers are free to make enormous changes to the landscape (and, as we have seen, to people's lives) by ripping out hedgerows, felling trees, undergrounding streams and dykes, draining marshes and ploughing up rough down and heath without reference to the town and country planning system.

Fifty years ago, the bluebell, the cowslip, the common frog and the common toad were ubiquitous and plentiful in the English countryside. A hundred years ago, cowslips were so abundant that children used to play ball with handfuls of them, the stalks tied tightly together and the blooms pulled down to cover the stems. But playing ball with cowslips, or gathering armfuls of bluebells are joys the children I talked to do not know. Today, the cowslip and the bluebell are rare plants in East Kent. The country play-times of Minster children are richly colourful - but less so than those of their parents and grandparents. They can still find tadpoles in the dykes, but frog- and toad-spawn are harder to come by than they were five years ago. Frog populations have declined relentlessly over central, southern and eastern England from an average density of five adult frogs per acre of land in Great Britain in the 1930s and 1940s to a current density of 0.01 frogs per acre in Huntingdonshire - one county for which figures happen to be available. The main cause of this decline and of the similar collapse of the common toad population is loss of breeding sites - through the 'reclamation' of ponds, dykes, marshes and streams to improve agricultural productivity.

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The Government could curb the wholesale removal of the last fragments of uncultivated, marginal land that remain in lowland England by stopping Ministry of Agriculture grants to farmers who drain wetland, underground streams and dykes, plough up old grassland and so on, or by bringing farming operations which can damage the landscape under planning control. Sadly, they show no signs of doing this.

There are of course tools which could help planners preserve tracts of rough land in the absence of planning control - like the access agreement, the tree preservation order and the management agreement. Or odd scraps of land could be bought and developed as a single-use playground. But although the task is difficult it's well worth trying. If we do nothing, Minister children's children may never know what it is to go tadpoling, to fashion little houses out of the hedgerows, to creep up on a kingfisher, or to frolic in fields of buttercups.

Reference

1 I describe their attitudes to the countryside in more detail in Metropolitan Escape Routes, The London Journal, May 1979.

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