



Guest Editorial

Celebrating the Centenary of the Woodcraft Folk

2025 is the centenary of Woodcraft Folk, the co-operative movement's children's and young people's organisation. Throughout its history, the Woodcraft Folk has had a strong relationship with the consumer co-operative movement. This special issue celebrates the past and the present in the organisation, from the contribution of some of its leading figures, its contribution to gender equality, and putting co-operation into practice. Woodcraft Folk principles such as concern for the environment, gender equality and challenging discrimination, and promoting a world of peace have been part of its philosophy since its earliest days. For much of its history, its educational approach has been counter to dominant societal views. It was the first youth organisation in the UK to be co-educational. It has always been non-religious and its philosophy has been rooted in progressive educational values that encourage social justice, democracy, and an internationalist outlook. Its motto of *Span the World with Friendship* has meant developing partnerships with organisations elsewhere in the world where other youth groups would not tread.

Through its groups, outdoor activities, and camping, Woodcraft Folk has put co-operation into practice through the games that are played, the ways in which educational activities are organised, and the running of its camps. All of these themes are reflected in the articles in this special issue.

Deborah McCahon, the current chief executive, provides an introductory overview to Woodcraft Folk, its history, and current activities. She emphasises the importance the organisation has given to co-operation, how this has involved communities and ensured young people's connections with both local and global issues. She notes the significant role that international camps have played within the organisation and how environmentalism has been a major feature of its activities since its formation in 1925.

One of the key members of the Woodcraft Folk between the 1930s and 1970s was Basil Rawson, and in this issue there is the first major article about Rawson, by Chris Olewicz, which discusses his contribution and importance to the organisation, his visionary approach to outdoor life, and his educational philosophy articulated in *The Woodcraft Way*. The article begins by summarising Basil Rawson's early life, outlining how the experiences of the First World War, love of the outdoors, interest in politics, and experience of various youth groups led him to join the Woodcraft Folk as an adult in Sheffield. From the 1930s to his death in the 1970s, he

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was a leading figure in the development of Sheffield Woodcraft Folk. He became Headman of the Woodcraft Folk in 1934 and was instrumental in the revival of the International Falcon Movement in the post-war period.

Richard Palser, in his article, addresses an issue that has rarely been discussed within Woodcraft Folk publications in the past and that is gender equality. Palser notes that the first leading figure in the organisation, Leslie Paul, had in the 1930s outlined the importance of understanding what co-education meant. The article then notes that until the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis had been on a formal approach to equality, with camping being seen as the main example of equality in practice. By the 1970s, with the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement, new tensions emerged in the organisation and it took some time for a more educational approach to equality to become incorporated within Woodcraft Folk practices.

Douglas Bourn's article reviews how the use of the term co-operation has been applied. It notes that for the organisation's first thirty years the emphasis was on learning about the consumer co-operative movement and ensuring camps were run as co-operative communities. By the 1970s, with the rise in interest in new co-operatives and the new games movement, co-operation began to take on a more direct educational meaning through its resource packs, approaches towards games, and a closer relationship within the consumer co-operative movement. Co-operative learning began to become a feature of mainstream educational thinking. The increased emphasis on co-operation within Woodcraft Folk culminated in its 2011 international Co Camp which was organised on the lines of a co-operative.

Saheli Nath outlines through Woodcraft Folk's Peer Action project how the organisation has not only put co-operation into practice, but developed critical thinking skills, and a sense of social responsibility. It emphasises the value of youth led initiatives in seeking personal transformation and social change.

Thomas Boxall reviews Woodcraft Folk's 2023 Camp for Venturers, thirteen- to fifteen-year-olds, in terms of putting co-operative values into practice. It demonstrates both the successes and challenges that emerged during the camp in terms of youth engagement, addressing differing approaches, and skills required to put co-operation into practice.

There are two pieces based on interviews with Woodcraft Folk members. The first, edited by Grace Dobbie, looks at the impact of Woodcraft Folk on the lives of past members. The case studies reveal the extent to which the organisation has influenced not only their career choices but also their value systems, including the development of an internationalist outlook and co-operative skills. The second, compiled by Laura Karstadt, looks at younger current members of Woodcraft Folk and through a series of questions and answers, the evidence reveals a group of people who have found the organisation not only fun, but also good at developing friendships, particularly international ones, helping to develop skills for living outdoors, and respecting the environment.

There are also two short articles that demonstrate Woodcraft Folk's practices. Anna Blewett shows what co-operation means through the organisation of its camps and the ways in which members of all ages work together to achieve common tasks such as peeling potatoes for meals. Abigail Cole and colleagues explore the use of play-based learning to introduce concepts of wellbeing to younger children in the Woodcraft Folk. Through the running of a Teddy Bear Hospital, children engage with abstract health topics by caring for their teddy bears, fostering early understanding of health, emotions, and self-care.

All of these articles demonstrate not only the relevance of Woodcraft Folk to the co-operative movement and the principles of co-operation, they show how a dynamic progressive youth movement can enthuse and engage many thousands of young people who wish to see a better, more just, and sustainable world. They also show that co-operative approaches to learning can

and do engage young people. The articles show that for co-operative principles to be effective, they need to be seen alongside broader themes such as empathy, compassion, and caring for others.

Douglas Bourn and Deborah McCahon
Guest Editors

The Guest Editors

Douglas Bourn is Professor of Development Education at University College London. He is the joint editor of *Span the World with Friendship* (Bourn & Palser, 2025) and was National Secretary of Woodcraft Folk from 1983 to 1990. Deborah McCahon is Chief Executive at Woodcraft Folk. Her role involves supporting a young Board of Directors, fundraising, and developing opportunities for young people to make the transition from participant to leader.

Reference

Bourn, D., & Palser, R. (Eds.). (2025). *Span the world with friendship: Progressive education, internationalism and the Woodcraft Folk*. UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800088498>