

Beyond the Playground



**New approaches to children's play
In historic gardens**

THE GARDEN
HISTORY SOCIETY

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An Issue Needing to be Dealt With,
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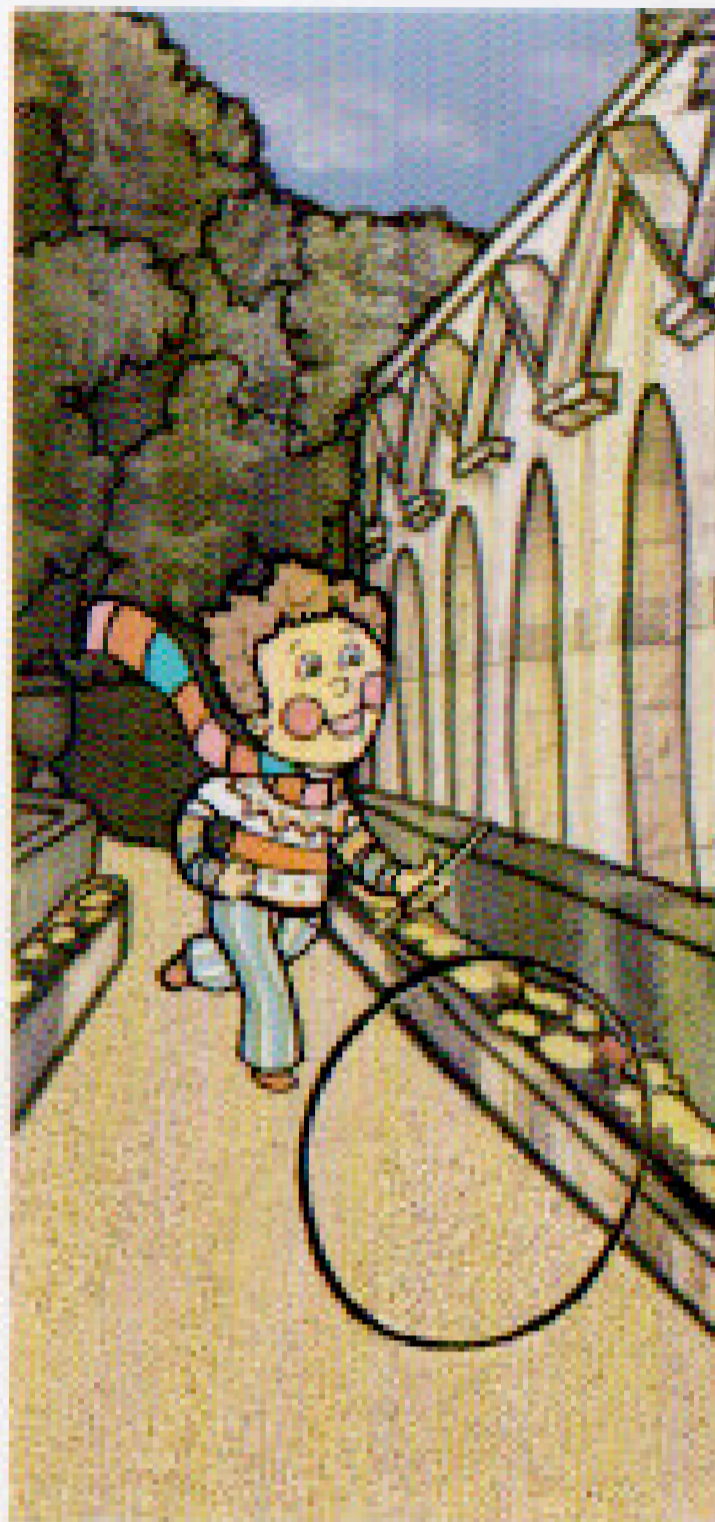
New approaches to children's play
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www.gardenhistorysociety.org

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**“Why don’t we
open our gates
wide to this young
audience and greet
them with a big
smile?”**

A Call to Arms (Potato Guns at the Ready!)

The younger generation needs to be persuaded of the precious delights of our historic parks and gardens.

We need to show children that there is more to gardens and gardening than planting a sunflower seed and measuring its progress, more to the landscape than catching bugs, and more to history than castles and the Cutty Sark.

We all know that what we so carefully save ‘for future generations’ will only continue to be preserved after our own lifetimes if those generations have learned to love and value their inheritance. If we can do this, if we can really truly engage children with our garden heritage, then we are halfway to ensuring its safety when we are gone.

Along the way we will have enriched young minds and bodies, raised family ticket sales, and negated the need for heritage-insensitive play equipment.

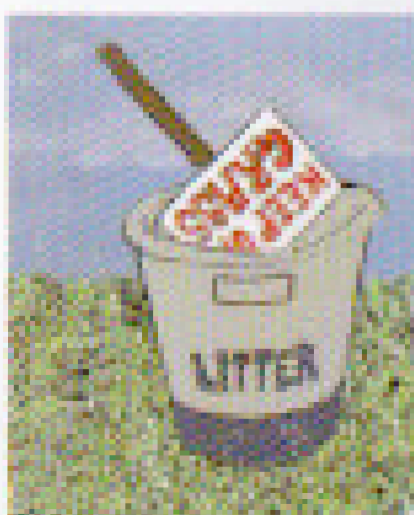
Conservation and children’s play

As statutory consultees in the planning system, The Garden History Society’s team of professional conservation officers has long been accustomed to considering the impact of new play facilities within historic landscapes. In some instances, such as in urban public parks, playgrounds are perfectly valid and chime well with the site’s historic *raison d’être*. In others, such as in gardens with a history of being private homes, the proposals can sit uncomfortably with the site, its history, and its aim to have a relevance in today’s society.

In producing this leaflet, the GHS aims to demonstrate that ‘formal’ play facilities do not necessarily aid either historic gardens or their child visitors. We hope to instead generate fresh energy, inspiration and imagination in thinking about children’s play.

Child garden visits at the moment

To an extent, our sector has already begun to wake up to the need to engage children with their heritage. During the holiday season many of the slicker properties arrange enactments or discovery trails, whilst websites are packed with teaching plans and worksheets. This worthy educational approach is commendable. But it sits uncomfortably alongside a widespread ethos whereby it is more common for the child visitor to be treated simply as an unfortunate appendage to their adult, one who needs to be bribed with treats in order to facilitate the grown-up’s enjoyment. The child spends an unhappy afternoon fighting the urge to roll down banks, dabble in the fountain, clamber in the shrubbery, balance on walls and run across the lawn. If they manage their task then they are rewarded with an ice-cream, half an hour on the ugly climbing frame by the car park, and a souvenir pencil sharpener as an affirmation that they enjoyed their day out in a historic garden. What a waste.



How a child's garden visit could be very different, and how this could benefit the landscape too

But please, don't panic. There is no need to let children rampage, trampling bulb meadows, chipping venerable statuary, picking rare plants and shattering serenity. There is certainly no need to plaster every inch of your garden with earnest child-friendly interpretation boards. And there is absolutely no need to frighten the men in suits, with their eyes on budgets and marketing.

What is needed is just a really hard think about the individual sites. Look at them through a child's eye and see our landscapes as children do today, but also as they would have done historically. If we do that, we may notice a fountain that would be perfect for sailing boats in, if only a little stash of them was left ready on the edge; a Broad Walk that is calling to have a hoop rolled along it; a pond perfect for fishing were there a row of ready nets; a hill on which a kite could be flown; a hermitage that would be a thousand times more entertaining were there a hermit in it; a park where perhaps the mowing regime could allow for a temporary grass maze; bales of hay that could be left a little longer in the meadow for young climbers to conquer; or perhaps even a shrubbery robust enough to take a little rummaging.

And the gain will not only be to the children. Suddenly it may no longer seem so necessary to spend those thousands of pounds on some new brightly-coloured play equipment – ugly, expensive and always to a degree detrimental to the historic designed landscape. There is certainly a place for such things in our society, but there is no reason why historic parks and gardens should be that place.

**“Look at our landscapes through
a child's eye”**



But what if the children aren't interested?

Many property managers will emit a groan when reading these suggestions (intended as food for thought rather than as a definitive tick list). At one end of the spectrum they will argue that if you give kids an inch they will take a mile, and at the other end they will insist that children already are permitted to indulge in many such activities, it's just that they tend not to take up the offer.

These problems are easily solved.

First, the children's lack of interest in the play potential of a garden may well be caused by their preoccupation with the identikit play equipment that they spotted by the car park. Remove that, and watch their blinkers fall away.

Secondly, the answer lies with the staff or volunteers. An enthusiastic team member will catch a child's eye as they walk past and show them the tree stump that could be jumped on, or mention their counterpart who played there 200 years ago. They can point out the statues whose faces can be laughed at but not climbed on, and the mysterious path that is so much more interesting than the main route.

Yes, staff are busy and preoccupied, but it only requires a passing comment with the right attitude as they carry out their normal duties. Or surely this is exactly the kind of role that would appeal to a volunteer? Better still, save the money that would have been spent on play equipment and its maintenance and use it instead for a children's officer or play leader who can wander the grounds giving kids the gentle steer that they need.

**“Remove the identikit play equipment
by the car park and watch the
children's blinkers fall away”**

Play provision doesn't need to be complicated

Such a shift in provision does not need to be a big or traumatic one. It simply requires heritage professionals to stop thinking of children as An Issue Needing to be Dealt With.

Rather, we need to open the box, throw away our catalogues, shrug off adult pressure to have something big and shiny as proof of our offer for children, and instead simply think. We just need to start thinking about younger visitors as real people with a bubbling enthusiasm and a genuine stake in our heritage; and of the gardens as inspiring places that can each have an individual and exciting connection with the children who explore them, just as many of them would have done for hundreds of years. The relationship between the two can be fun, fruitful and easy.





Ideas for children's play requiring minimal intervention in the landscape

- A row of fishing nets next to a lake or stream
- A pile of small boats for sailing in a fountain
- Actors/performance artists to populate hermitages or other follies
- Do away with petting zoos if historically irrelevant but consider chickens and other limited livestock near to a kitchen garden
- Peacocks strutting on lawns always catch a child's eye
- Do you really need to Keep off the Grass?
- Hay bales in meadows for little climbers
- Mowing regimes to encourage exploration
- Produce planting and picking (limited and supervised!)
- Fallen trees for clambering
- Ask staff or volunteers to smile at kids and not just their parents
- Hoops, kites and penny farthings (for hire?)
- A dedicated play leader to wander the site
- Tree swings, dispersed not grouped in a designated playground
- Mazes (but take care when introducing new landscape features)
- Can some parterres be used as though mazes? Would the results necessarily be disastrous?
- Kids' versions of the guidebook
- Maps for children, showing where you can and can't play (eg "you can roll down this bank but you can't climb on that wall")
- If there was once a model farm then repopulate it

But take care:

parks and gardens each have their own stories and sensitivities, so not all ideas are appropriate for every site!

Why the formal 'playground' is kind to neither child nor landscape

- Visually intrusive – colour, structure
- Physically damaging – where do you site it?
- No historic precedent at these kind of sites (i.e. private gardens)
- Associated with public open spaces so at odds with the historic character of privately-owned properties
- Expensive
- Groups children together in a noisy and active distracting mass
- Requires maintenance
- May bring children to the site but doesn't actually engage them or necessarily even bring them past the playground
- Physical wear and tear on the surrounding area

By providing for children more holistically (see list on p 11), you can avoid the need for a formal playground with its associated downsides.

If formal play provision is still considered necessary, then consider carefully locating bespoke equipment with a relevance to the site rather than off-the-peg items.

For guidance please refer to The Garden History Society's Planning Conservation Advice Note 15 on Play Facilities, which can be downloaded free from the Conservation pages of www.gardenhistorysociety.org

A point for consideration: some historic sites are ideally suited for child engagement, some simply are not. Perhaps there is no point in trying to squeeze a square peg into a round hole.





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