

Play & Engagement with Gardens

Organised with English Heritage's Walmer Castle Gardens team on 9th October 2019, this event explored the latest thinking on how play should be encouraged in gardens and looked at ways of exciting children and adults about nature and horticulture through playful interventions in gardens.

Introduction to play in gardens

Christopher Weddell, Senior Gardens Advisor at English Heritage, introduced the concept of play and its importance in children's development, even helping to define the future direction of a child, before describing the background to the Walmer Castle project. Walmer faced two issues: an historic garden (the Glen) created by William Pitt that needed extensive work and a desire to engage different communities and families more in the garden. Early discussion considered approaching Go Ape!, adopting a National Trust approach and many other ideas. None of these really worked for the small, intimate site that is Walmer which doesn't have space for a designated play area. The Conservation Management Plan indicated that work was intended for the Glen and so was borne the idea of a play trail, taking some of the activity focused on the castle building into the furthest reaches of the garden. A key early step was consultation with school pupils – what would they and their families be interested in? Wine tasting was suggested by the pupils for their parents! Consultation continued with families and other specialists leading to the play trail launched earlier this year.

[The play trail was later explored with Mark Brent and the garden team – see later].

Playgrounds in Historic Gardens: Fabulous or Fob-Off?

Linden Groves, a landscape historian interested in engaging children with historic landscapes, said that there is often a fear of engaging with children but children have always engaged in the landscape: Linden showed a number of paintings and photographs found at National Trust, English Heritage and other heritage properties that showed children playing in a variety of outdoor spaces including an amazing sand pit! There is a common assumption that children find gardens boring but this is far from the case – gardens are great places to explore, play hide and seek, get lost, use their imagination. Boredom or lack of engagement can simply arise due to their size – steps are too big, walls too high to look over, rules that don't make sense (why can't you walk on the grass?): there is a need to see the landscape from a child's perspective and to provide explanations why certain actions should be avoided.

Playgrounds further complicate interaction: they are often seen as designated areas for children (so children not welcome elsewhere?), can be detrimental to the setting and if located near the car park, dislocated from the garden. They might get visitors onto the site

but they are not engaging with it. This is beginning to change with many new sites linking to the heritage of the site e.g. Hatfield House has a separate play area but might confuse children who don't enter the full property (is Hatfield House really that small?), and the Magic Garden at Hampton Court. Wrest Park also encourages play in keeping with the heritage of the site. Even site-specific play areas still suffer from issues of setting impact and removal from the main garden/site so there is now a movement towards natural play which does not detract from the garden and encourages movement/interaction with and through the garden – but is the heritage link then lost? It is possible to do both play integration and link to heritage (or other vision for the space): the Wrest Park plinth demonstrating how something simple can easily be used by people and children.

Collaboration across the teams at a site e.g. event staff engaging with curatorial, can lead to novel, distinctive and popular play interventions being developed. Involving specialist further aids this e.g. historians at Battle Abbey helped to place simple play equipment across the site such as tree carvings of archers, arrows in trees, wooden horses providing interactive opportunities for children and selfie opportunities for families. Such interventions encourage play but are not obtrusive.

Simple methodology for a site: distribute play features across the site to reduce overall impact across the site (footfall spread and not concentrated); encourage simple interactions with natural materials and/or horticultural features (slopes, mazes etc.); use of unexpected media such as period music in play castles; dressing up opportunities; careful use of technology such as interactive screens (but not tech for the sake of it). Bear in mind that the aim is to encourage people to appreciate the landscape and get involved in its care – and it is not what you do to do this but how (level of thought and consultation).

Play and family interpretation at English Heritage

Sarah Shaw, English Heritage's Family Interpretation Manager, spoke about her first experience at a 'family-friendly' site – being met by a 'keep off the grass' sign. Due largely to the National Trust's very successful '50 things..' engagement activity, most people arrive at sites expecting a certain level of engagement and play opportunities for families – this has raised the game for all organisations. Visitors generally think that what can be done at one site can be done at another – they don't necessarily differentiate between a garden of high horticultural value and more natural sites. This confusion is also true for staff and hence a vision for play is needed at an organisational level and at an individual site level. There are lots of complicated issues to consider – different family dynamics, the different play needs of 2 year olds compared to 12 year olds, and the tension between play and learning (are they really separate?). There are many methodologies that look at how people 'play' and 'engage' and so it can be difficult to meet all needs. Strategies looking at text, planning and other aspects of engagement can be developed to guide teams across organisations. The key is to

create a variety of different spaces for different age groups and 'play' types including quiet spaces. Playgrounds aren't necessary – games can be integrated across the site and linked to the story of the site e.g. Whitby Abbey with snakes and ammonite-themed games, many of which being app-driven but not intrusive.

Practical measures should also be considered like baby changing facilities for med, bottle warming, accessible toilets etc. This also requires staff to be trained accordingly, especially dealing with complaints. Family focus are very useful in helping to identify problems or even help find solutions. Reversing the concept can be useful too: instead of installing items in the landscape, can play packs be given out so each person/child has their own mobile resources? The 'Kids in Museums' manifesto is well worth looking at as is the considerable research taking place across the sector.

50 things to do before you're 11 ¾ : encouraging play and engagement

Anita Stevens of the National Trust was involved in the development of '50 things..' which significantly changed how visitors interacted with all landscapes, not just National Trust sites. '50 things..' emerged from discussion of what the National Trust offers to families and whether high cost play facilities were what was needed on sites. Bringing in focus groups and external consultants (such as [Tim Gill](#)), the framework was created in 2007, leading to the leaflet '[If a Play Area is the Answer, What is the Question?](#)' and ending the National Trust practice of building play areas near car parks. It takes Michael Follett and OPAL's 4 ingredients for play: social spaces (places for adults and children wishing to sit/not engage), journey (does not restrict play – it can be under, over or through as well as beyond), invitations (does not restrict but opens play to all) and loose parts (to fire the imagination).

Initially, '50 things..' was presented as a check list set of activities and hence with a finite shelf life before something new was needed to engage families. With help from Miles Richardson at the University of Derby, it has become more about being connected to and engaging with nature. Instead of 'climb a tree', it is now 'get to know a tree' - the message has been re-evaluated and is certainly more garden friendly as a result! Plus, play does not need to be noisy or chaotic, so more mindful activities are now encouraged.

Spirit of Place is important for the National Trust and its sites: '50 things..' allows individual properties to adopt or focus on different elements that best reflect the heritage, setting, landscape and environment of the site. Properties are free to develop different engagement techniques – nothing is prescribed. One example is Beningbrough's 'apprenticeships' approach which encourages children and family to engage with gardening.

Emma McNamara who is National Trust Advisor to London, South East and Northern Ireland, spoke about the need to refresh the framework due to damage to heritage gardens. Activities

need to be moved around and made seasonal to take into account the seasonality of the garden. They must also allow children to get dirty/wet if they wish but allow other visitors to stay clean and dry. Simple steps could be replenishing a pile of sticks for Pooh sticks or more complicated like sculpture trials. Careful consideration should be given to the maintenance and care of play offers – who has responsibility for what and how are high standards of safety maintained. Staff need to be consulted and engage with play offers – and different skills and experience brought in from across the National Trust network to share good practice and, crucially, mistakes.

The Walmer Castle Play Trail

Mark Brent, Head Gardener at Walmer, and Hannah West, Community Engagement Officer, spoke about key elements of the project at Walmer Castle, including a tour of the play trail. The tour included a discussion of the role of the trail as a useful mechanism for distributing visitors over a wide area to allow all to appreciate the intimate nature of the garden/landscape; use of vertical elements and only low level horizontal structures in the woodland to reflect the tree-scape; and, use of nettles and other natural barriers to reduce access to sensitive areas rather than fence off.

Hannah introduced the community engagement aspects of the project at Walmer, identifying a number of key partners such as refugees, adult day centres and children's centres – all groups not usually represented in the audience profile of the garden. Different techniques were used to engage, including art and horticulture, and ultimately has led to the development of a group of Community Engagement Volunteers. Discussion and consultation with the community groups identified a number of factors usually preventing visiting – from logistics to interpretation for different abilities (e.g. visually impaired) and seating as well as testing provision such as accessibility of paths. All these factors might not be considered by developers and architects.

Evaluations of engagement programmes and interventions focused on sustaining or changing behaviours

Dr Liz O'Brien of Forest Research stressed that adults often forget to play as adults and that play should be self-chosen and self-directed rather than structured. Adult play might be good for certain diseases such as dementia. From a Forestry England perspective, play is seen as an entry point into natural or designed landscapes. This tends to be through activities such as running, Nordic walking, yoga and a range of pop-up activities that might be self-led or guided by an instructor. Forestry England works with partners such as the Royal Parks (Mission: Invertebrate) and Kew Gardens (Grow Wild) to encourage engagement with nature and landscapes. Forest schools are an important activity for many different groups, including vulnerable adults.

Five principles have been identified for the role of play and outdoor engagement: connect; active; take notice; keep learning; and, give/share. But how do you measure and evaluate engagement programmes and interventions? It can be difficult to obtain a baseline. Also, how much guidance is needed to encourage people to engage? What are the barriers to engagement (information access, cultural issues, feeling welcome, safe spaces/security etc.). Do we need to stay away from electronic devices or can we utilise to encourage engagement? There is still work to do but there are a number of organisations and networks operating in this area and helping to exchange information. Some of the best activities are the simplest such as leaving bags out for visitors to collect leaves, apples, help care for site.

References

National Trust (2009). If a Play Area is the Answer, What is the Question? Available online: <https://timrgill.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/4539-play-space-landscape-spreadv2-2.pdf> (as at October 2019)

The Garden History Society (2010). Beyond the Playground: New Approach to Children in Gardens. Available from the Garden History Society: <https://www.outdoorchildren.co.uk/beyond-the-playground/>

Forest Research – various: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/>

Kids in Museums Manifesto: <https://kidsinmuseums.org.uk/what-we-do/manifesto/> (as at October 2019)

Outdoor Children by Linden Groves: <https://www.outdoorchildren.co.uk>

Prepared by PlantNetwork, October 2019.

PlantNetwork acknowledges that the information contained herein might not be accurate: please do check / carry out further research before taking action based on this information.