



Views



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Engaging places



Children's play: past, present, future

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The mention of children to those working with historic gardens open to the public tends to raise three questions, generally along the lines of: how can I prevent them from rampaging through the Victorian flower borders; how can I engage them in the delights of the eighteenth-century landscape park; and where shall I put their playground so that it won't detract from the seventeenth-century grotto? All in all, it can be a bit of a noisy, sticky, over-excited minefield!

But why? Not only have children been around for even longer than gardens, but both seem to have co-existed pretty well together for hundreds of years already.

More often than not, we tend to feel that what is needed is Provision for Children, something that will distract them from the sensitive flower-beds and ensure they enjoy their time at a historic garden. Sometimes it

is worksheets or nature trails that form this Provision (it has to have a capital letter, to prove that it is Official, and that children have been taken into Consideration), but most likely it will be a playground.

Playgrounds are great. There were early examples in the first, mid-Victorian public parks, and they gradually captured the nation's heart until by the mid-twentieth century they were very much de rigueur in public open spaces, with park managers being able to choose from a dazzling array of tempting equipment on offer in catalogue after catalogue. They're easy to choose and install, and children love them almost as much as they love chocolate and computer games.

But in historically private gardens, as opposed to municipal urban parks, playgrounds can be rather less successful. Yes, children will still dash to them in a flurry

of excitement, but this comes at a cost to their garden visiting experience. A child will respond enthusiastically to the thought of a garden visit, but once it sees that climbing frame considerably located in a derelict eighteenth-century wilderness, it can be hard to get them to venture into the rest of the garden, let alone to embrace it. It's hardly the joined-up engagement that we are aiming for, and makes a farce of any child visitor numbers we may wave around. And, of course, the garden itself will suffer too as the play equipment is likely to be ugly (often bright), visually intrusive and creates a noisy bustling honeypot of children, to say nothing of the impact its construction may have on any garden structure or archaeology! Even if it is a trendy 'natural' playground, or a bespoke masterpiece based on the garden's history, it cannot entirely avoid these problems.



One vast playground. © NTPL/David Levenson



Above: Making the most of a fallen tree at Trellisick Garden, Cornwall. © NTPL/John Millar
 Right: Ball games allowed at Clandon Park, Surrey. © NTPL/Stuart Cox



When is a garden not a playground?

After years of commenting on planning applications¹ for such playgrounds, in 2010 the Garden History Society published *Beyond the Playground*,² which is a call to arms to encourage more holistic, imaginative approaches to children's play in historic gardens. Eagerly received, it argues that by having the courage to offer the child visitor less, in material terms, whilst at the same time giving a more genuine and understanding welcome, we may find that gardens inherently have enough to entertain – tree climbing, bank rolling, fruit picking and much more. It also suggested encouraging 'traditional' garden pursuits such as kite flying, fishing and sailing model boats. Recently, I have been fortunate to be commissioned³ by Mike Calnan, Head of the National Trust's Gardens and Parks, to research the ways in which children have played, historically, in the Trust's gardens.

Some fabulous gems were uncovered, giving ideas which could truly bring the gardens to life, much in the way the Garden History Society hopes for, and banish the perceived need for entertaining children with playgrounds.

Diaries of ten-year-old Constance Agar-Robartes at Lanhydrock, Cornwall, revealed an inspiring love of outdoor play, showing that her life revolved around the gardens (most entries concentrated on what the weather was like and its implications for whether or not she was allowed outdoors). After a day spent trawling through the diaries and accompanying family photo

albums in an upstairs office at the property, it seemed strange to step outside into the gardens and see modern children only on their 'best behaviour for looking round a stately home'; a century ago little Constance and her siblings would have been joyfully walking their dog, Scamp, grooming their ponies, riding their bikes, racing go-carts, getting in some cricket practice and maintaining their own garden plots. The Agar-Robartes gang would, I think, have got on well with Simon and Philip Yorke at Erddig, Wrexham, where the boys enjoyed their garden with their huge dog, Prince, and tiny ponies, whilst using the formal canal for punting and ice skating, and its lawn as the



Simon Yorke at Erddig, 1909. It is tremendous to see the easy familiarity with which he enjoys the historic gardens, riding a tricycle right through their heart. Not visible in this photograph is that the tricycle is pulling a trolley with a pet dog sitting in it! © National Trust

location for a see-saw! Their father, Philip, wrote of the importance of welcoming children in a poem: 'This is well framed as you may see/ A children's paradise to be/. . . Here may they have their freedom blest/ Trusting they will respect the nest.'

Elsewhere, lucky children enjoyed kites (Petworth), hoops (Kingston Lacy), go-carts (Standen and Glendurgan), foraging (Killerton, Standen), paperchases (Kingston Lacy), make-believe (Vita Sackville-West was a bully whilst re-enacting the Boer War at Knole), traps (often these were pulled by miniature ponies, but at Petworth and Mount Stewart, goats were employed), outdoor swimming (Chartwell, Lanhydrock, Glendurgan), and games such as tag (Glendurgan) and hide-and-seek (Lanhydrock). At Chartwell, they leant perilously over a parapet, at Kingston Lacy they jumped on and off the granite Cleopatra's Needle, and at Sissinghurst, Vita Sackville West's Rose Garden was valued as a bike track by her great-grandson Adam.

Allowing imagination to enter

Reading these nibbles of information, it's impossible not to feel a thrill of excitement at the thought of being able to offer today's children a taste of such fun. It is easy to see how the ideas we need can be found in the past – by opening our minds to the possibility of an encouraging pile of hoops waiting to be rolled down a Broad Walk, a go-cart making and riding workshop, or being allowed to take a dog for a walk round the

garden (can we think of a way to offer this precious experience to even those children without pets?). By daring to think that perhaps it wouldn't matter too much if the odd child jumped off a wall here and there, we may truly engage children with the lives and gardens of their historic counterparts, and banish the need to spend huge sums on ugly, irrelevant playgrounds.

But the most striking detail about the way in which children played in the gardens of the past, when they were still private homes, was the fabulous freedom and sense of confident and familiar ownership with which they were experienced. Rose Londonderry of Mount Stewart responded to news of our project by emphasising the glorious freedom that she enjoyed 'like savages', and it was this rather than any careful provision that she so appreciated. They were never given any special play equipment – no swings, slides or anything;

instead, they had a great time with the estate families, borrowing a swing from the groom's children. They formed gangs, rode ponies and horses, spent lots of time on the shores of Strangford Lough looking for sea anemones, mussels, etc. They made do with what they found, making bows and arrows, climbing trees, foraging, hunting with the dogs and fishing for newts. In particular, there is a large ancient lime tree on the front lawn at Mount Stewart, whose branches used to come down to the ground and they used that as their play space as it was secretive and private. Today's children may arrive grumpy after a long car journey, have to respect the statuary, and leave at dusk to prepare for school the next day, but that's no reason why, whilst they're with the National Trust, we can't transport them to the life of their historic counterparts, allow them a sense of freedom, and allow them a taste of play as it once was for the privileged few.

References

1. *Planning Conservation Advice Note 15: Play Facilities* (Garden History Society, August 2009); advice on incorporating playgrounds into historic landscapes available as a free download at www.gardenhistorysociety.org/conservation/conservation-publications/attachment/ghs-pcan-15-play-facilities/
2. *Beyond the Playground* (Garden History Society, 2010) is available free from Louise Cooper, Garden History Society Administrator, enquiries@gardenhistorysociety.org
3. *Children in the Garden* report (National Trust, December 2010) available at http://intranet/intranet/children_sgardenplay_final.pdf

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