

The History of Forest School

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Although Forest School is often viewed as a relatively modern educational approach, the philosophy behind outdoor learning has a much older and richer heritage. Its roots reach back to the nineteenth century, when European philosophers, naturalists, and early educational thinkers began to emphasise the importance of nature, exploration, and experiential learning for children. Figures such as William Wordsworth, Robert Baden-Powell, and Kurt Hahn—founder of Gordonstoun School—played influential roles in shaping ideas about character development, resilience, and learning through engagement with the natural world. Their work laid essential foundations for what we recognise as Forest School today.

One of the earliest formal examples of a school with the name ‘Forest School’ was established in the New Forest in 1929. Although this institution was quite different from the modern movement, it reflected similar values. The school drew on the work of Ernest Westlake, who also founded the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, an organisation that still survives today and champions outdoor skills, community, and respect for nature. This early Forest School operated until the beginning of the Second World War and offered a distinctly alternative approach to education. Its prospectus proudly stated that it did not aim to prepare children for academic examinations, but instead provided a flexible, “broad and elastic” curriculum that balanced routine with freedom. Pupils were encouraged to ask questions, explore, and follow their natural curiosity—principles that remain central to modern Forest School practice.

During the 1970s and 1980s, however, education in the United Kingdom moved in a very different direction. Driven by concerns about literacy and numeracy levels, teaching became increasingly structured and teacher-led, culminating in the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988. As the system became more standardised, many practitioners and parents began to seek approaches that offered more creativity, freedom, and opportunities for personal development. By the 1990s, interest in alternative education models had grown significantly, creating fertile ground for the emergence of Forest School as we know it today. In many ways, Forest School can be viewed as a social movement—one arising from dissatisfaction with formal, test-driven educational systems and inspired by successful models abroad, particularly those in Scandinavian countries.

The modern Forest School movement in the UK began in 1993, when a group of nursery staff from Somerset travelled to Denmark to observe their preschool system. In Scandinavian countries, outdoor learning is deeply embedded in everyday life, supported by cultural values such as *friluftsliv*, the belief in the physical and emotional benefits of spending time outdoors. The visiting practitioners were struck not only by the positive impact of outdoor learning on the young children they observed, but also by its potential

benefits for older pupils and adults. They noticed that outdoor environments supported a wide range of learning styles, including visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic, and offered opportunities that could not easily be replicated in a conventional classroom setting.

On returning to the UK, staff from Bridgwater College introduced a Forest School programme in their own nursery settings. The initiative proved highly successful, and in 1995 the college launched a BTEC qualification in Forest School for early years practitioners—one of the first formal training pathways of its kind in Britain. Interest in Forest School grew steadily from this point onward. By the early 2000s, a wide range of Forest School programmes had appeared across the UK. The Forestry Commission in Wales supported this growth by developing the Open College Network qualification in 2003, which helped expand access to structured training.

However, as Forest School expanded, so too did the need for a clear definition and consistent professional standards. With practitioners delivering Forest School in a variety of ways, many felt it was essential to establish a shared understanding of what the approach involved. In 2002, a conference of Forest School professionals agreed upon an official UK definition: “An inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve, develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a local woodland environment.” This marked an important step toward unifying practice. A further milestone came in 2011 with the formation of the Forest School Association (FSA), which established core principles and training criteria that remain in place today.

In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Forest School Association (NIFSA), established in 2008, has played a key role in delivering high-quality training and promoting best practice. NIFSA developed its own Forest School Leader qualification to ensure that practitioners are trained to a consistent and robust standard. Through collaboration with local government, NIFSA has enabled schools across Northern Ireland to access free Forest School training, allowing tens of thousands of children to experience outdoor learning. Today, more than 200 schools in Northern Ireland are recognised as official NIFSA Forest Schools, with numbers continuing to rise.

Looking to the future, there is growing hope that outdoor learning will continue to receive recognition for its educational and social value. As environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss become increasingly urgent, it is vital that children are taught about the natural world and understand their role in protecting it. Forest School offers an ideal platform for fostering environmental awareness and equipping children with the knowledge needed to care for their surroundings.

Across the UK, the Forest School movement has developed a strong and influential voice. Many advocates hope that Forest School will eventually become embedded within the primary curriculum. As awareness grows and more educators recognise the profound benefits of outdoor, child-led learning, there is every reason to believe that Forest School will continue to expand and shape the future of education.

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