

The Woodcraft Folk, here in Gloucestershire...

Some of you reading this may have already heard of us, others may even be former members, who enjoyed fantastic adventures with us as children – after all, we have been in existence since 1925!

The Woodcraft Folk was formed back then, by a young man called Leslie Paul. Leslie had been a Scout, but had problems with aspects of the Scout movement – put simply, he was concerned about the lack of democracy and the propensity for militarism in the organisation. Many new groups were formed from the Scouts at that time, with The Woodcraft Folk (the Folk) being the biggest and most successful.

Based on the notion of co-operation, the Folk has a guiding principle in the phrase '*Education for Social Change*'. We are a voluntary youth organisation for children of any age, race, religion, class and gender.



We aim to encourage the participation of our young members in the running of the groups; raising and exploring issues important to the young people and the adult leaders. Issues such as peace; the environment; ecology; internationalism; cultural diversity – in fact almost any *right-on* cause. It will be those of you from so called 'progressive' families that are more likely to have come across us.



empowering young people

We have no political allegiance, although we are left-of-centre in our approach to politics; and we are supported by the Co-operative Societies.

A look back at last year would give a good indication of the sort of things we have been getting up to. The year started with real concern about the forthcoming invasion of Iraq, and the older young members (13 to 16 year olds, known as "Venturers", and the 16 to 24 year olds, known as "District Fellows"), became very active in the many protests & demonstrations against the war, both in Gloucestershire and nationally. We held debates, organised our own protests (sending parcels of rice to TB – it is a long story...) and joined in with the protests of others; always legally, constructively and safely.

Later in the year the same young members argued with local politicians about the rights and wrongs of the Criminal Justice Amendment legislation and how it affects young people. The younger groups, (Elfins - 6 to 9 years and Pioneers - 10 to 12 years), also dealt with some important issues: for instance, trying to become carbon-neutral during Folk activities caused some very interesting debates.



But if this all sounds a bit heavy, let me assure you there is a lighter side to the Folk. Camping is a fantastic way of enjoying the great outdoors and the season starts in May with a big Camp at Upcote Farm, near Withington.

A truly stunning site in the very heart of the Cotswolds. The camp involves young members from Cheltenham and Gloucester. It is a "back-to-basics" camp, packed with games, drama, music and even dance; designed to bring the young people together, living co-operatively in the truest sense. Boys and girls, young and old, all mucking in together. Last year the theme was 'Native American Culture' – a subject close to the heart of the Folk.

The camp has been running for twelve years and has been described, by at least one young person, as being better than Christmas! I think he meant it. For me it provides an opportunity for young people to play, in much the same way as we adults did as children – before parental paranoia and heavy traffic – outdoors from dawn to dusk. Remember how good that was?

There is always at least one other camp during the summer, with other shorter trips during the year. A weekend in a bunkhouse in the Black mountains, for example. These shorter trips are for smaller groups of similar age children.



In the last few years our camps have become more adventurous - The National Folk organise large International camps every five years and at the last we invited delegations from Finland and Portugal to join us. As a result we have forged close links with the Finns and two years ago 30 young members went to Lapland for a winter camp (in very warm huts, not tents!) This summer we joined with Stroud Woodcraft and took 45 young people back to Finland, for an international camp in a gorgeous setting - in a forest, next to a lake.

No less than 15 nations were represented on the camp and our young people played hard with most of them. This year, a group are travelling to Hungary for yet another International Camp.

It would take too long to list everything our young members get up to. Groups run in Stroud, Gloucester and Cheltenham on week-nights, where we engage in a variety of activities, from trips out to cooking; from craft to games (co-operative of course – and don't run away with the idea that they're less fun when they're non-competitive, I can assure you they're not!) Generally, we will do anything the leaders are able to organise!

Elfins visiting an animal sanctuary.



There is a big demand for places in the groups, but we are limited by the number of volunteer adults willing to give up time and energy to run events and activities. So, if this article has interested you and you feel you could offer something to the organisation, however small, you can contact us and come along to see how things are done. We are able to provide training (of a very high standard).

We are police checked and guided by child protection policies. Local groups are part of the national organisation, which is a registered charity and we are able to offer a wealth of comradeship for adults who are sympathetic.

Duncan Siret

Contact Details:

For Cheltenham: Duncan Siret - 01242 263017

For Gloucester: Lou Spira - 01452 307384

For Stroud: Helen White - 01453 753637

Check out the web page:

www.woodcraft.org.uk