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Rebel youth: how Britain's woodcraft folk tried to change the world

[Anabella Pollen](#)



Children with Kibbo Kift leader, John Hargrave, 1928. Courtesy of Tim Turner

Are the young people you know more likely to identify a Dalek or a magpie? The National Trust [asserts](#) that Daleks come up trumps, [complaining](#) that “nature is being exterminated from children’s lives”.

Concerns about young people’s increasingly sedentary lifestyles and lack of exposure to nature have led to a number of popular outdoor endeavours including schemes to “[rewild the child](#)”. This may seem to be a particularly 21st-century issue, but the urge to counteract the influence of the city on the lives of young people has a long history.

Precisely 100 years ago, in the midst of World War I, a family of Quakers in Cambridge set up a youth organisation designed to offer outdoor coeducational experiences without the militarism and imperialism that they perceived in the Boy Scouts. They called the group the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry. This marked the start of a larger movement, spread across a range of organisations emerging during and after the war years.

Founded on pacifist ideals and informed by a mystical understanding of the natural world, British youth groups based on what were described as “woodcraft” principles sought radical alternatives to so-called civilisation through camping and ceremony, hiking and handicraft. Together, these woodcraft organisations attracted thousands of adult and child members in Britain in the interwar years and the support of impressive high-profile figures in politics, arts and science, from suffragette [Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence](#) to novelist HG Wells and biologist Julian Huxley.



Chieftan's cloak, Order of Woodcraft Chivalry, International Woodcraft Gathering, Czech Republic, 2014. Photograph by Annebella Pollen

Reforming wayward youth

Woodcraft as a system of youth training was first developed by the British-born American resident [Ernest Thompson Seton](#) at the turn of the 20th century. Seton was an enthusiast of all things Native American and believed that the ethos and lifestyle of the “Red Man” offered spiritual models for urban white westerners, who he saw as having lost their way. Seton’s “Indian” was a mythic ideal, more indebted to literary motifs than real people but, despite this, his scheme proved enormously popular.

Seton’s ideas also spread across the Atlantic and were enthusiastically incorporated (without credit) into Baden-Powell’s emerging [Boy Scouts](#). Scouting was hugely popular from the start and thousands of groups were established by the start of World War I. But with many young scouts and scout leaders signing up to serve, those with pacifist leanings frequently came to reappraise the movement they once held dear.



Rainbow woodcraft banner, Woodcraft Folk ‘Back to Beginnings’ camp, 2014. Photograph by Annebella Pollen

This was the case with John Hargrave, a young author and commercial artist of Quaker stock. Hargrave was a keen enthusiast of the camping and woodcraft aspect of the organisation, penning bestselling books on tracking, trailing and campfire ceremony as a young scout leader. But his experiences as a stretcher-bearer in the Royal Army Medical Corps at the disastrous [Dardanelles campaign](#) were to alter his view of the Scouts fundamentally. He returned unable to reconcile what he had seen with an organisation that took military services as its model.

Crafting a new culture

He founded another woodcraft group, the curiously named “Kindred of the Kibbo Kift” (adapted from an archaic Cheshire dialect meaning “proof of strength”). Hargrave was a charismatic leader who moved in influential circles of cultural campaigners and experimental educationalists. Kibbo Kift aimed not only to promote healthy outdoor activities of camping and hiking, but also to cultivate “a new human instrument” from its male and female all-ages membership.



Wedge of Kinsmen (Kibbo Kift hike formation), c.1928. Photograph by Angus McBean.

Courtesy of Tim Turner

Woodcraft was always more than just a means to provide productive leisure activity. In both the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry and Kibbo Kift there were ambitious plans to transform the wider world. Membership of both organisations was composed of radical reformers who believed that all aspects of living needed to be remade after the devastation of war. Kibbo Kift even hiked through the countryside in triangular formation as a visual metaphor for this cultural penetration.

Although woodcraft groups desired a return to nature, their members were also modernists experimenting with new ways of dressing and eating, new spiritual systems and new thinking in psychology. Viewed from a distance, in their colourful robes and sandals, as fruitarians and yoga practitioners composing folk songs and practising handicrafts, woodcraft group members were often dismissed as cranks. From another perspective they could be seen more positively as proto-hippies.



Kibbo Kift modernist tent design, c. 1928. Photograph by Angus McBean. Courtesy of Tim Turner

Rifts and revivals

Some aspects of early woodcraft organisations look very appealing in retrospect. For many young, arty and alternative visitors to my [recent exhibition](#) on Kibbo Kift, for example, the group represented a subculture that they wished to revive. Youths frolicking in the woods in fox masks and bold robotic costumes seemed to predict scenes from present-day pop videos or avant-garde performance art. Tweets from the exhibition revealed a positive envy for the group as an authentic social formation in a world of virtual communities, clicks and upvotes. A [trend forecasting company](#) even used Kibbo Kift as an example of how youth subcultures were going to enjoy a revival in 2016.



John Hargrave in White Fox mask, 1928. Courtesy of Tim Turner

But for others, the hooded cloaks and pagan mysticism of some of these groups offers a whiff of something sinister. Certainly, all was not rosy in this garden of Eden. The 12-year existence of Kibbo Kift as a woodcraft group proved particularly tumultuous. Many members were ejected for disagreeing with the ideas of the founder, and there were frequent rifts. Hargrave believed in a non-democratic form of direct leadership that is uncomfortable to the modern observer – not least when we can see from this end of the

telescope how other grand visionary schemes with charismatic leaders have unfolded historically.

Dispute in the Kibbo Kift ranks about Hargrave's method of organisation led to the formation of a breakaway group, the [Woodcraft Folk](#), in 1925. Here a more democratic approach was taken to building a new world order. The cultural revolution was one in which all members could decide the rules and where children were considered as capable of self-government as adults. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Woodcraft Folk's education for social change is still in the pink of health, with around [15,000](#) adult and child members. The group celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2015. Jeremy Corbyn cut the birthday cake – the socialist principles are still strong.



Woodcraft Folk 'Woody Hoody', 2015. Courtesy of Woodcraft Folk

Woodcraft youth groups that continue today have adapted their founding beliefs and practices for the 21st-century world, but in many ways they were ahead of their time. As camping has become fashionable and an ever-growing range of music festivals offer a temporary escape from the urban grind, sleeping close to the land and living simply has become ever more appealing. Youth culture may have become more commercialised and less explicitly revolutionary, but the urge to go off-grid continues, unabated.