



THE ORIGINS OF FOREST SCHOOL

The value of connecting with nature is not a new one, but one that has been praised by educators since the 1800s. The birth of industrialisation pulled pastoral people indoors, to machinery and synthetics - causing an instantaneous disconnect with the natural world. As technology advances, this disconnect widens, with most modern lifestyles requiring little or no time outdoors and our busy lives reserve little recreational time for nature's simple pleasures.

While adults often reluctantly accept this detachment, seminal educators continue to fight for the vital role it plays in children's development, with a plethora of brilliant initiatives taking children outdoors to experience nature's offerings. Pestalozzi, Froebel and Rudolf Steiner are some of its earliest advocates, with Gosta Frohm's **Forest Mulle** a more modern, driving force.

Their influence in mainstream education in parts of continental Europe and in Scandinavia was extensive, and the notion of **frulitsliv** or 'free, open-air life' was born. Here time spent outdoors is revered, and many schools up to the age of seven are based on a predominately outdoors model. More than 10% of Danish pre-schools are entirely outdoors, and a quarter of Swedish children take part in **Skogsmulle** forest activities.

But the UK is catching on... The early 1900s saw an emergence of planned outdoor children's experiences, ones that are distinct from the forest school ethos, but still held in high regard today. Margaret McMillan's first outdoor nursery in London's slums, Baden Powells's Scouts and Leslie Paul's Woodcraft Folk to name a few.

In 1993 students from Bridgwater College in Somerset embarked on an educational exchange with nursery staff in Denmark. They were inspired by the emphasis on natural learning and on the amount of time spent outdoors in these schools nestled amongst woodlands and forests. The students brought their findings back to the UK, bubbling with ways to implement their ideas for **Forest Schools**.

Bridgwater set up the first on-site forest school crèche, learning and observing along the way. In 1995 it began offering a BTEC in Forest School, predominately for early years practitioners. It took time to build momentum, but by the turn of the millennium local authorities had begun to adopt a forest school practice, other training providers were offering alternative forest school qualifications and a growing network of forest school practitioners was uniting through the Forest Education Initiative (FEI) and the Forest School Association (FSA).

Today outdoor learning is integrated into many UK nurseries and schools, some of which have adopted the clear Forest School Principles as a guiding force. Bristol Forest School provides local schools the opportunity to embed a genuine Forest School experience into their curriculum, as well as offering introductory, exploratory Forest School sessions for babies and pre-schoolers.