

CHANNELS

THE WOODCRAFT FOLK

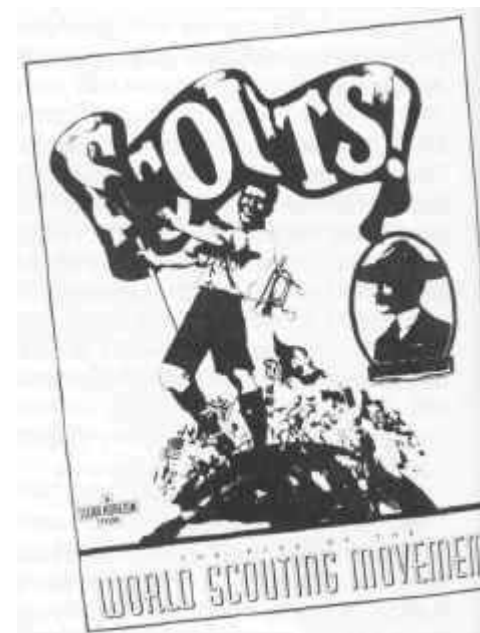
Martin Stott

Last month marked the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the Woodcraft Folk, a progressive movement for children and young people. 24 February 1925 saw the first meeting of the Wayfarers Woodcraft Fellowship, at Holbeach Road School, Catford. Between the wars the Folk grew and became an established progressive youth movement, spreading from its South London base throughout the country and becoming particularly strong in the Sheffield area.

The Woodcraft Folk's foundation stemmed from dissatisfaction with the militaristic and extreme patriotic tone of Baden-Powell's scouts, and because some in the scouts felt that social responsibility and 'Woodcraft' (ie an understanding of and sympathy with the natural environment and the outdoor life) were being neglected. Although its 'left' critics at the time were sceptical of hiking and camping having anything to do with social change, the folk was in fact quite active in putting forward demands relating to current problems, including calls for more nurseries, parks and playing fields, town and country planning, the protection of children against exploitation and bad living conditions, and the creation of a National Health Service.

A quintessentially 'English' phenomenon with its emphasis on the joys of the outdoors, the vision of a simpler more 'natural' life, strongly influenced by the writings of people like William Morris and Edward Carpenter, the Folk was accused of 'crankiness' in the 1930s. That 'Englishness' remains in some of the archaic language used in the traditions and rituals of the Folk, and sometimes sits uneasily with its commitments to internationalism, and anti-racism.

There is a tendency too for many Folk activities and rituals to project an essentially 'anti-industrialist' perspective, with great emphasis in the past on getting working class children out of the smoke-filled cities into the countryside. This anti- (or post-) industrial strand is still very



strong; though as the work of people like William Morris is being reassessed in a more positive light, so too is the Folk's approach being recognised as one which is in the business of creating a better world in the *future*, rather than being a romantic backward glance at the past.

The Folk's formation at a time when memories of the First World War were very fresh meant that the pacifist tendency was very strong, and the lengthening shadow of fascism in the 1930s presented a difficult choice for Folk members, with the organisation continuing to take a pacifist position up to 1939. The war itself caused major disruption to its activities with the evacuation of children, the calling up of leaders, and the closure of schools, but nevertheless the organisation survived and true to its internationalist principles organised an international camp as early as 1946.

Since the war the Folk has gradually grown and developed so that now it has about 20,000 members in 500 or so groups throughout the country. The new phase of growth over the past five years or so has produced considerable stresses and strains in the organisation. For many years the Folk's small size (its membership is about 5% of the combined membership of the scouts and guides), enabled everyone to



know everyone else - for it to be 'one happy family', with very little self-criticism and considerable resistance to change. As the influx of new faces and new ideas has occurred internal conflicts have grown, and erupted earlier this year in the first Extraordinary Delegate Meeting in the Folk's history. Essentially the divisions have been between a more traditionalist grouping who like the small 'family atmosphere' of the Folk and want to keep it that way, and those who see its educational role as being too important to remain confined to a 'left ghetto', and want to break out and engage in creative dialogue with the much broader progressive currents developing in society, particularly the women's movement, the peace movement and the greens. In the event the meeting, which revolved around a particular internal dispute in the Folk, sided in all the motions and votes with those who want the Folk to grow and engage with those wider currents of change.

In terms of the Folk's activities with children, this has involved the development of new badgework projects, such as the newly introduced peace badge for the older age groups, pioneers, adventurers; and its close links with development education organisations, such as War on Want and Oxfam. The camp community is perhaps the most important form of Woodcraft Folk activity in developing a child's sense of personal and global responsibility. Camps which can be held just for a weekend, or for two weeks in the summer, are an important synthesis of Folk ideals and practice. They enable children to come closer to nature, to explore the links between themselves and the natural environment, to learn to work co-operatively whether it be erecting tents, gathering fuel, or cooking for the camp. It enables them to understand, on a small scale, the interdependence of human beings on each other. And it is an ideal context in which to put into practice another of the Folk's touchstones, the development of a democratic process amongst children - encouraging them to exercise their rights and



to participate responsibly to enable the smooth operation of the camp community - in a way which they frequently do not get the opportunity to practise in the home or school environment.

The Woodcraft Folk's commitment to transforming our present society makes it an important cultural institution. Not party political, the Folk is nevertheless *political*, in the sense of advocating a philosophy of life. That philosophy of life is essentially 'inclusive', encouraging children to take responsibility for their lives and action as much as they are able to, and to develop into responsible and caring citizens. It is sometimes said that the British public school system is a constant fountain of new recruits for the ruling class. I certainly like to feel that the Folk offers in a very different way, the opportunity for children to grow up with an understanding that will enable *them* to become a significant leavening in the progressive forces of the future. The tragedy is that so few people on the Left recognise the importance of this kind of work with children.

Sixty years of experience of working with children does not mean that the Woodcraft Folk has the answer to everything, and contradictions in its outlook remain, but it celebrates its anniversary in a mood of optimism.