

House & Home

FTWeekend

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The much-loved, messy, inner-city play areas of postwar Britain, called adventure playgrounds, owe their existence to a maverick peer of the realm. Marjory Allen, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a landscape architect educated at Bedales boarding school, pioneered a British outdoor play movement after visiting Copenhagen in 1945 and seeing secure spaces locals had created in the war-torn city centre for children to play freely – even under Nazi occupation.

The way these children invented fun and games from the debris of war convinced Allen that the Danes had hit on the key to developing young minds, bodies and souls: adventurous play. And she used her society clout in the UK establishment to lobby landlords and the government to offer their vacant land in London, Birmingham and other urban centres to create similar enterprises. Unlike traditional playgrounds,

‘We look for the stories hidden in the history, flora and fauna of the place, to deeply root it to that site’

these encourage unstructured play, problem solving and elements of risk taking.

A new generation of British adventure playgrounds is now under construction, and again peers of the realm – with royalty – are involved. But this time they are building on their own heritage estates rather than housing estates.

Those leading the charge include the custodians of world-famous country mansions such as the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire (and the future duke and his family) at Chatsworth in Derbyshire; and the Windsors, at their much-loved Norfolk estate, Sandringham. King Charles has also helped establish an adventure playground at the 18th-century Dumfries House in Ayrshire, overseen by The King’s Foundation.

Typically the sites of this new breed of adventure playground operators are spread over a couple of acres, much larger than old-school playgrounds, and cost several million pounds to design and build. But they are able to recoup these costs through visitor tickets. Simon Egan, head of project development at Cap.co, the company behind many of these new enterprises, says: “We haven’t had one that hasn’t paid itself back within three years.”

Chatsworth, set in the heart of the Derbyshire Peak District, boasts a 1,000-acre park on the banks of the River Derwent that was chiefly designed by Lancelot “Capability” Brown in the 1760s. It opened an upgraded adventure playground site a year ago for families with children aged up to 12, sparking an immediate and significant increase in footfall among families, according to Gill Hart, head of learning and engagement at Chatsworth. There were also 403 school and educational group visits last year, up from 325 in 2023.

The Grade I-listed house itself, home to 17 generations of the Devonshire family over nearly five centuries, can be intimidating for some, says Hart. “It is the fear of children making noise, touching things or even breaking things.” But playgrounds can help to break down barriers to connection, seeding feelings of fun and enjoyment that can then be built



Swing seats

Britain’s historic homes are picking up the adventure playground baton, engaging a new generation with epic areas for risk-taking outdoor fun. It’s a bittersweet evolution for the pioneering postwar movement. *By Jonathan Moules*

upon – into something more lasting with the house and its history. “We see families visibly relax when outside.”

Cap.co, which built Dumfries’ and Sandringham’s adventure playgrounds, has designed and constructed similar adventurous play facilities in the grounds of 24 stately homes and castles around the UK since 2015.

It is a bittersweet moment for many of those seeking to continue Allen’s legacy, however, as this new generation of adventure playgrounds – though often engaging in outreach programmes with the local community – don’t all offer the free access to everyone that was a mark of the original sites.

For the past eight years I have chaired the board of trustees for one of these inner-city sites in the east London neighbourhood of Shadwell. Glamis Adventure Playground sits on the footprint of a children’s hospital, demolished during the “slum clearance” era of postwar Britain, in a local authority

ward with one of the highest levels of child deprivation in not only the capital but the whole of the UK.

The adventure playground is known either as “Glamis” or “Glamiss”, depending on whether you know your *Macbeth* (it’s named after Shakespeare’s castle in his Scottish play) or you follow the cockney vernacular that pronounces things phonetically. This can be a gauge of whether visitors have come from one of Shadwell’s cramped housing estates or from next-door Wapping, a riverside community now home to film stars such as Dame Helen Mirren and the families of Canary Wharf lawyers and bankers.

On a typical after-school play session at Glamis you’ll find children from both these addresses making games together, whether that be haring down the zip wire, pretending to be a pirate in the discarded boat or chopping wood at the fire pit. It all takes place under the watchful eye of the adult play workers, who are essential to enabling

the free-flowing risk-taking games to be safe. Children are also offered a free hot meal each session, cooked at the kitchens on site.

Such legacy adventure playgrounds are an endangered species, however. England lost more than half its sites between 1980 and 2021, according to research commissioned by the not-for-profit body Play England – leaving just 28. Recent research by the University of Sheffield found stark inequalities in playground provision across England.

“Adventure playgrounds are one of the few remaining models that actively challenge inequality,” says Eugene Minogue, executive director of Play England. “They provide inclusive, accessible, trusted spaces where children can take risks, build confidence and experience freedom – and they’re needed now more than ever. These aren’t just play spaces – they’re community anchors, helping tackle hunger,

From top: the adventure playground at Dumfries House, in Ayrshire, Scotland; since the 2023 opening of its adventure playground, Blenheim Palace has seen an almost 60 per cent rise in sales of family tickets

Lindsay Mackenzie Parker @Black Studio; Paul Williams/Alamy

isolation and inequality, while giving children the freedom to grow.”

Urban adventure playgrounds have been hit by cuts to local authority funding and insurance companies going cold on coverage for places that actively encourage risk among young people (though companies such as Zurich have reversed this policy).

Glamis has made itself less reliant on funding from the local authority, Tower Hamlets, by winning bids from big charitable funders such as BBC Children in Need, Canary Wharf Group and Wakefield Tetley Trust, as well as building a network of small donors signed up to direct debits. But the charity has been hit by Tower Hamlets attempting to cut the long lease to five years and switching from a peppercorn rent to a levy of several thousand pounds a year. This not only drains funds but has a material impact on fundraising efforts because major donors generally require a minimum five years left on a charity’s lease to agree multiyear support.

Such challenges to free access to inner-city play are galling. In many ways, if local authorities aren’t willing or able to support adventure playgrounds, heritage estates can be seen to be stepping into the breach. Some, such as those at Dumfries House and Sandringham, are indeed free to access. Yet it also appears to bring us to a crossroads: where adventurous play may help save historic homes but not be saved for those in inner-city homes.

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