

# A broad broken bow of a bridge: using classic literature and outdoor sites to inspire poetry

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## ABSTRACT

Account of a project using an ancient poem to inspire a new engagement with landscape in young people resulting of collaboration between two schools and three artists. The experience of both poem and place provide inspiration for children's own writing and encourage cooperative story-building and performance to create a final narrative poem.

**Key-words:** children's poetry, classic literature, outdoor literacy, environmental inspiration

## Um vasto arco quebrado de uma ponte: usando literatura clássica e locais ao ar livre para inspirar poesia

## RESUMO

Relata um projeto usando um antigo poema para inspirar um novo compromisso dos jovens com a paisagem resultante da colaboração entre duas escolas e três artistas. A experiência com ambos poema e local serve de inspiração para a escrita das crianças e para incentivar a construção colaborativa de uma história e sua encenação para criar um poema narrativo final.

**Palavras-chave:** poesia infantil, literatura clássica, alfabetização ao ar livre, inspiração ambiental

## ONCE UPON A TIME...

This story began some 700 years ago when a scribe in a monastery started writing - or recording - the narrative poem that was to become known as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Armitage, 2009). Mixing Pagan imagery with Christian morality tale and straightforward heroic adventure, *Gawain* has survived the centuries since then and stands now as a classic text of early English literature

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We picked the story up again in the 21st century when a new poetic translation by Simon Armitage and a prose version by Michael Morpurgo (2005) offered the opportunity to explore both the story and its poetic forms with children. This paper visits that project. I was the lead artist on the project and as an artist and a storyteller the best way for me to describe the process is creatively. So, please read, relax and listen for our various voices coming through.

"We" were two schools, 3 artists and the community arts organisation Mid-Pennine Arts and together we set out to use *Gawain* and a local country park to:

- widen children's experience of reading and understanding of alliterative verse; offer development of vocabulary and language in their writing and speaking and listening skills;
- stimulate children's creative imagination by working in exciting outdoor settings;
- support teachers by introducing new ideas for approaching poetry and literature;
- establish a model of good practice for teaching and learning in school.

The schools brought very different sets of young people to the mix: Roughlee Primary School is a small rural school with 30 children from Year 1 to Year 6, largely drawing on a white, English community. Whitefield Infant and Nursery School, on the other hand, is an urban school with some 250 children on the role, with most children of a south Asian heritage. For our *Gawain* project in 2013, one Year 2 class from Whitefield was involved, whose 27 children matched the whole of the Roughlee contingent. Our writing team ended as 54 children, 3 teachers and 5 classroom assistants.

On the team of creative practitioners, I added years of experience of involving young people through art and story work with their immediate environment. Our musician, Hannah Kidd, set out to capture the original story in song form and to chart developments in our own work through soundscapes and improvisations with the children. Ruth Evans joined the team as a textile

artist, capturing our ideas as they evolved in a long printed and applied textile giving us a visual record of the evolving Whatever.

We did not know what would happen.

We started the project with a rich set of elements: enthusiastic children, keen teachers, a wonderful outdoor site to work on, and a vivid starting point in Simon Armitage's translation. We had ideas to build on, directions to travel in, activities to work with but we were not - could not be - sure about what would appear. That was going to be up to the children themselves.

We started with that new translation of *Gawain*. *Gawain* isn't the most obvious text to work with: the story is exciting but the imagery can be a bit graphic "*the cleanness of the strike cleaved the spinal cord/ and parted the fat and the flesh...*" (Armitage, 2009, p. 424) but then the sense of place the poetry invokes is intense. There is a great sense of rhythm in the spoken words of the original: "*rogh knockled knarres with knorned stones*" (*op. cit.*). It doesn't rhyme but the alliteration builds a sense of movement and atmosphere that is very powerful and that Armitage captures beautifully in his translation. We wanted to use that as inspiration for our young poets, hopefully bringing them to an understanding that effective poetry is about enjoying words and seeing what we can do with them, enjoying rhythm, relishing to sounds of the words we use.

## **FIRST IDEAS**

We told the story again: mixing readings from Armitage with instant dramatic action, creating tableaux, having our own adventures. We sat down and drew pictures. We used line drawings taken from medieval manuscripts to give us a period style and started thinking about who we might put in a similar adventure. Each child had their own journal: a hardback, ringbound notebook to use as they chose.

## **OUTSIDE**

We went exploring. Wycoller Country Park is a wooded valley tucked into the edge of the Pennine Moors of Lancashire. The ruins of Wycoller Hall are cradled in the heart of the valley: wonderful worn stone remains on the banks of Wycoller Beck where a selection of old bridges span the water and old trees lean over dark pools. Wycoller set everything in motion. We went rummaging. We looked for "something useful to take on an adventure" (sticks for campfires, stones to throw at monsters, feathers to tickle the noses of trolls,

mud for who knows what emergency). We found secret places and special places and magical places.

*Steep stairs,  
Climbing those slow stairs,  
Squashing slugs as they go.  
Half-way up is a stone seat  
Where queens and goblins rest<sup>2</sup>*

As they explored, children were invited to add to their notebooks: they could draw, or write, or scribble, or rub (leaves, bark, stone) try painting with leaf-juice, printing with mud and ash. We chose different elements of the environment and cascaded descriptions - looking for repeating sounds and the images they evoked in listeners. A delightful exercise for developing both language, imagery and fun with children reciting their own ideas to each other, to groups and editing their own ideas to present the juiciest selections to the company as whole.

“I felt amazed when we went to Wycoller because we were able to go in the ruins, up to the forest, over a "one slab of stone" bridge and walked under the willow arch. Working with Toad I've learnt to make better characters for my stories.” Francesca<sup>3</sup>

It sounds simple and straightforward and it was. But that does not diminish the power of the experience. As workshop leaders and teachers, we helped, but ideas came from our children. We peered into pools, watched reflections, felt the rough warmth of old sandstone, stared up at the tall trees

*Tall trees grow in these woods,  
Towering, toppling, tumbling trees,  
A tangle of leaves and branches and bark,  
Old, old trees and new saplings  
A world of green and brown*

We had a washing line where ideas were pinned so that we could all see what was growing - and change sequences easily. And into the richness of the place we hoped to insert Gawain again. But our groups were not having that. "He has already had an adventure" was the comment that met general

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes without reference are taken from the project's final poem "Five Children"

<sup>3</sup> Notes credited to individuals are children's comments from final review sessions. Gordon MacLellan is generally known simply as Toad after his company Creeping Toad.

approval. "We want a children's adventure". So we did and 5 young heroes were there almost before we finished speaking.

*But on this day that hopes for rainbows,  
And five children are walking to the village*

*Cheeky children who love chips and chicken and cheese.  
Helpful and chatty,  
They are bold, brave beggars,  
Orphans looking for friends and family.*

## INSIDE

"I learnt lots of interesting things from the Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Project - about musical instruments that sounded like creatures, instruments I hadn't heard before. I'm more confident now I have done all the things we did together." George.

Back at school, we started trading adventures: one class would start an idea, build up an incident, add characters and then pass it on to the next group who would resolve the situation and move the story on...we told stories. We scribbled. We drew big pictures. We acted out the difficult bits - children directing action and freeze-framing moments to see if suggested actions would work. We added artefacts to the mix.

*Knucklehead knights  
Strong and brave with sword and spear and shield,  
Mighty, magnificent men-at-arms  
With mace and mail and morning star,  
With monkeys or mammoths on their shields,  
Quiet as moths and mice and  
Mean as midges,  
They serve the King and Queen of the Woods,  
And are not very bright.*

We threw the adventure back and forth until even I, doing the editing, was only remembering the individual incidents. It was only towards the end, making sure that one section did run smoothly into the next that I stepped back and saw the whole piece and realised that this was truly a children's piece. Not "children having seen too many horror movies" but just children reacting as children. Our heroes met all sorts of perils, problems and horrible dangers, and their answers to these were genuine children's responses: run away, run away

very fast, run away screaming, smile your sweetest smile and try to squirm out of trouble, bargain. No real violence. No swords and chopping off of heads.

*"Look, we have this wonderful apple.  
One nibble, one slice will take you  
Like a flying carpet to  
Anywhere you want to go..."*

*(They don't know if it will do this!  
But our cheerful children are cheats, too  
And will spin a story out of spiderwebs  
And silver moonbeams!)*

The poem grew. It drew our young poets into the woods and streams and ruins of the Valley. Back at school, they could see the place and talk about it. They knew it as somewhere special to them, a place that had shared its secret stories with them. For us as teachers and leaders, we could hear the richness of language growing in our pupils, and hear their confidence in speaking - both in performance and just in knowing that their ideas would be heard.

## **AT THE END**

"The Sir Gawain and the Green Knight Project has made me read aloud more. The next time when I do a project I'll be really confident at reading to other people." Luke

The 5,000 words of *The Five Children* has only been performed once: on a sunny afternoon before the ruins of Wycoller Hall with all our writers and some friends, family and slightly surprised visitors to the country park as audience. Hannah's Gawain song echoed off the ruins, as we performed in front of our Five Children fabric story. Different children read, playing with voices: narrations, in rounds, in chorus, soft as grass and wild as storms

The project belonged so deeply to the groups involved we have almost been halted in working with the text again. We could print it and circulate it but we could not be sure if it would make sense out of its original context<sup>4</sup>. Then the seasons move on and Wycoller is wrapped in snow and ice, children leave one school for another, the momentum is lost. But like a dream, for me, when I go back to Wycoller (I work there regularly with various groups), I can still hear the powerful words of "my" young poets

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<sup>4</sup> Sections of the final *The Five Children* poem have been published on my blog: <http://creepingtoad.blogspot.co.uk/>. Look at entries in July and August 2013

But the children run  
Down to the river  
That races and rushes and ripples,  
Rolling over stones and sand,  
Running over the ford and  
Under the bridges  
Full of fish,  
And fishermen

A broad broken bow of a bridge  
Over the babbling water  
A path to the forest  
But guarded

and later

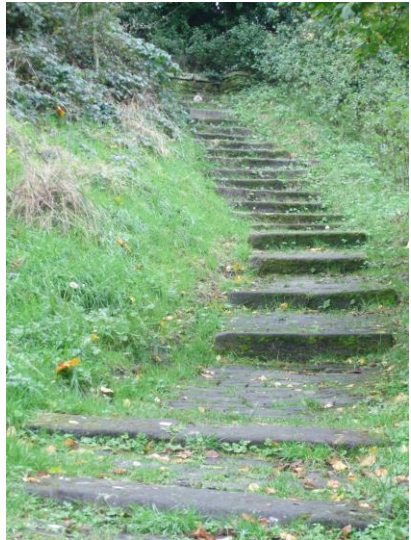
...and he stumbles  
Into a ruined room where black rooks rustle  
and a witch watches silently

















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## **Participants were from**

Roughlee Primary School, Nelson, Lancashire, UK

Whitefield Infant and Nursery School, Nelson, Lancashire, UK

## **Project management by:**

Mid-Pennine Arts

## **Artists:**

Ruth Evans

Hannah Kidd

Gordon MacLellan, (Creeping Toad)

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MORPURGO, Michael. **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**. Walker Books: London 2005.

Blogs:

<http://creepingtoad.blogspot.co.uk/>