



Exploring childhood territories

The near landscape is valuable and lovable because of its nearness, not something to be disregarded and shrugged off; it is where children are reared and what they take away in their minds to their long future. What ground could be more hallowed?

—Frank Fraser Darling

We have, from the beginning, a kind of freedom, not to do what we like, but to work on the materials—stones, plants, secretions, languages, cultures—which come our way. This freedom is sometimes recognizable as play.

—R.A. Hodgkin

The flowing terrain

On a number of the field trips I was struck by the continuity and diversity of interaction between children and their surroundings. The content of these trips was much too rich and subtle to have been clearly expressed in the drawings and interviews alone; besides, I had only asked for "favourite places," rather than asking for "pathways" as well. As a result, it seemed probable that children's answers had emphasized spaces with well-defined boundaries.

Two aspects of children's continuity of behaviour impressed me in the field. The first was what one pair of children called "gymnast." This was an apt description for the way in which they hopped, climbed, balanced, skipped, rolled, swivelled and squeezed through, on, over, around and inside their surroundings—using ledges, posts, walls, curbs, banks, bollards, doorways, steps and paving stones—their movement choreographed by the landscape, as their bodies responded to its every opportunity.

The second aspect of continuity was a less visible reflection of the merging of pathway and place. It applied to a number of children, who, like *Zazie dans le Metro*, made so many digressions from their original goal that it became lost in a wealth of substituted activity. Some of the trips were rather like starting out driving down a motorway and then allowing oneself to be progressively diverted by

narrower and narrower country lanes, stopping at every point of interest along the way, until the original purpose and destination of the trip become completely forgotten.

WANDERING

Although we tend to think of children as always being "on the go," the truth is that at all ages they engage in quiet social interaction, introspection, and sensuous contemplation of their surroundings. Such a state cannot be classified (as recreation specialists might) as "passive," since it implies being "done to" rather than "doing." Many field trips indicated a great deal going on—not highly energetic, nor clearly observable, but developmentally significant. For it is at such times that children make their most intimate and prolonged contact with the social and physical phenomena around them. Research has shown that in some residential areas, pathways are the most heavily used spaces.¹ Given the opportunity, children spend more time wandering around outdoors than most adults, and their patterns of interactions are more intimate, fluid and intense. For this reason, it is important that they have spaces where they can wander at their own pace and not have to keep up with adults or be chastised for dawdling.

To wander through a diverse terrain is to feel the surroundings pass through one's body as the body passes through the surroundings—at one with each other. Like the Rambler, one experiences a floating state of mind, drugged by a wealth of sounds, of smells, of sights and textures. Indeed, opportunities to 'ramble' should be built into every urban neighbourhood.

A prime characteristic of wandering, strolling or rambling is solitude. *Solivagant* is the closest term I have found, meaning "to wander alone." However, in conducting field trips I discovered that the most common social group was the 'best friends duet,' embodying social relationships different from an individual alone or a group of friends. Sharing the world outdoors with a best friend carries special significance. When children are engaged in primary exploration, they get to know themselves and their surroundings more thoroughly when sharing experiences with a trusted friend. Such relationships can develop more fully outdoors because of the greater indeterminacy of unfolding experience. Everchanging constellations

of interactions stimulate a higher level of communication—both verbal and nonverbal—which is much harder, if not impossible, to replicate inside buildings.

PEDESTRIAN NETWORKS

To facilitate the child's right to wander, pedestrian networks must be extensive and continuous so that access to diversity can be maintained with each extension of territory.

In Notting Dale, traffic dominated the streets and overshadowed the possibility of extensive wandering. Movement around the neighbourhood was severely limited for many children by the frequent occurrence of busy streets. Hence local parks and playgrounds were heavily used.

Whereas Notting Dale streets were so dominated by traffic that their play potential was severely restricted, Bedwell streets seemed almost too free of traffic—to the point where the stimulation provided by modest comings and goings of vehicles (and their passengers)

A Bedwell pedestrian path running past Brian's house.



was removed. Mill Hill streets represented a happy medium, with enough local traffic to generate human interest, but not so much that the impact of vehicles dominated the scene.

Tunstall was permeated by a network of residential alleyways and dirt paths that crisscrossed unused industrial land. Intimate close-to-home networks occurred wherever pedestrian routes were connected to sections of the adjacent street system. Carole, for example, took me to the cul-de-sac in front of her house, where many games were played, then down a narrow path alongside the house (the last one on the terrace) to a junction of paths at the back (Figure 17). To the right was a straight asphalt route to the main road, used by people travelling to and from work. The path we were on carried us to the next cul-de-sac serving the "new houses" that had been recently completed behind Carole's terrace. To the left, the path broadened out into a larger red shale¹ area that Carole called "the backs." She went to school that way she said, "There's a gap between the garages you can get through...then you can get on the Greenway and go under the bridge...and the school is straight ahead."

Bedwell, like Stevenage as a whole, had been laid out deliberately to serve the needs of pedestrians; as a result, several examples of close-to-home networks were documented. Undoubtedly they provided excellent access; yet, on the other hand, they lacked the surprise of Mill Hill's ad hoc pathways and the sensory interest of the graceful curves, bulbous cul-de-sacs and thickly vegetated traffic islands of its 1940s housing layout.

The nearest Notting Dale equivalent to the close-to-home pathway networks of Bedwell and Mill Hill, were the asphalt paths of housing estates. Located between fenced-off lawns, they usually didn't lead anywhere worthwhile, and in anycase were controlled by the personnel of an apparently oppressive housing authority (discussed later).

When asked where they went to be alone, several Bedwell children mentioned "going for a walk" or "walking the dog." Such responses were unheard of among Notting Dale children and were not often mentioned in Mill Hill. Stevenage residents seemed conscious and proud that they lived in a town where a successful balance had been achieved between the needs of pedestrians and cars. The town was truly walkable from end to end. The town centre was a relaxed and bustling pedestrian paradise—a joy to experience. A walking tradition clearly had evolved among the inhabitants, who used the neighbourhood pedestrian networks and the major paths

and cycleways to provide safe passage between neighbourhoods and the town centre (Figure 18).

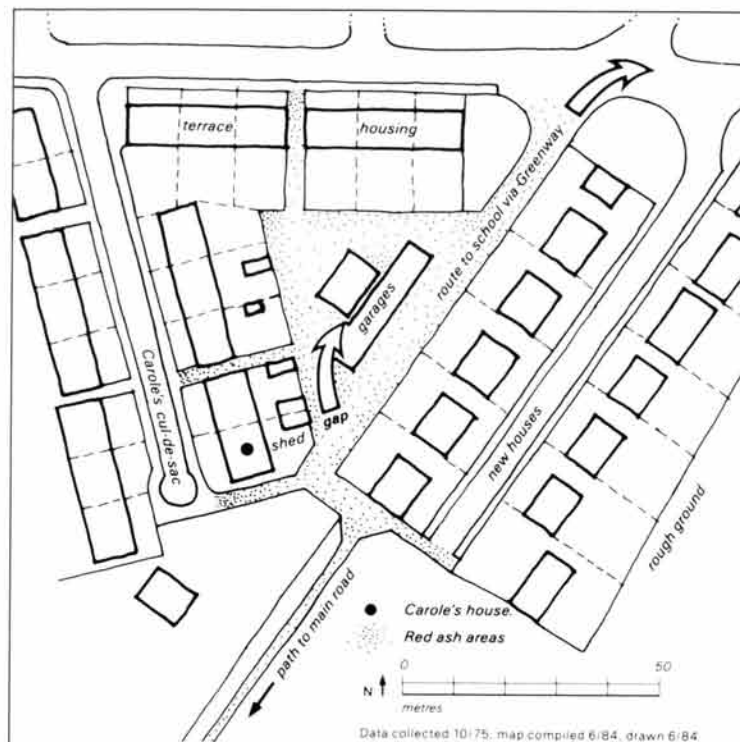
Tunstall's Greenways (Figure 18) had not been planned comprehensively like the Stevenage system, but had been reclaimed from old railway rights-of-way that had formerly connected mineheads and town centres. Although the Greenways tended to run alongside rather than through the residential areas, they offered considerable potential as crosstown, traffic-separated, routes connecting principal open spaces.

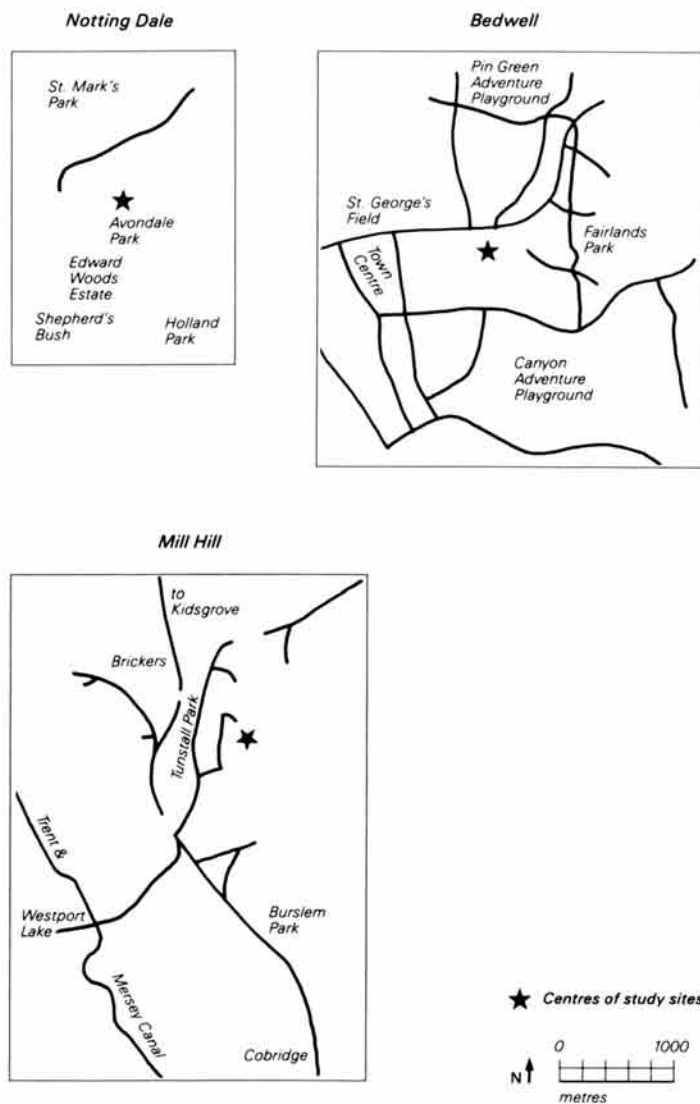
The major pathways in both Stevenage and Tunstall were not exploited by most children as a means of extending their territorial range. The distances seemed too large for most nine-to-twelve-year-olds, who preferred to travel on the more intimate network of neighbourhood paths, back alleys and side streets. Also, the major path-

"There's a gap between the garages you can get through..."



17 *Carole's close-to-home territory in Mill Hill.*





Data collected and map compiled 10/75, drawn 6/84

ways in both Stevenage and Tunstall were 'grade-separated,' which meant that they were either sunk in a series of cuttings and underpasses, or lifted up on embankments and overpasses. This had the advantage of making them traffic-free, but it also made them impractical for short trips because the routes were physically cut off from their immediate surroundings. Chris told me he preferred to travel along the street, rather than use the Greenway behind the houses, so that he could "knock up" his friends on the way.

For longer distances, use of the Greenways was limited by the fact that many bridges and viaducts, that once carried the rail lines across the roads, had been demolished. Presumably they had been removed for reasons of liability, or to avoid maintenance expense, or to satisfy some other bureaucratic requirement. At regular intervals, pathway continuity was broken when routes had to drop down to busy intersections, to shake users of all ages out of their solitude and force them to confront the realities of urban traffic. In Stevenage, pedestrians and cyclists remained happily segregated from traffic.

Notting Dale had no major pedestrian routes equivalent to Bedwell or Mill Hill, except for a mile-long strip of space under Westway (the elevated Great West Road extension into central London (Figure 18), that was being developed for community purposes. Unfortunately, no records of use were recorded with Notting Dale children.

BICYCLES

For some children, bikes were an important means of getting around and a primary means of extending territory beyond the limits of foot travel—especially on occasional weekend trips or during the summer when more time was available.

In spite of breaks in continuity, the main Tunstall Greenway allowed bike riders to make territorial extensions to places far beyond the built-up limits of the city. Chris told me that he and his friends sometimes cycled through the countryside as far as Kidsgrove (about three miles away).

The Stevenage cycleways did not have the same potential. They did not follow old railway routes and therefore did not extend beyond the developed fringe of the town. However, the Stevenage system was much better for crosstown travel than the Tunstall Greenways because it had been planned as an evenly spaced network of continuous routes. One day I ran into a group of fourteen-to-fifteen-

year-old boys in the Bedwell shopping precinct who told me about a fascinating range of places they went to by bike:

...to the Canyon to play commandoes—it's 'smart' down there...down the Dell...on the streets...here at the Bedwell shops... up the lakes...at the bike canyon on the wall of death—it's good on a fine day when you can do wheelies without sliding around. We go out to the duck pond and ride bikes in the bushes...we go to Marks Wood and St. George's Field. We go to places where it's all bumpy...we go down the multistory car park and have lift races. We go to the Little College Dip [in the industrial area] and the Six Hills Burial Ground—there's six Romans buried there—and around the Scout Hut and the garages...we go up the Wild West kind of park and to Knobworth House, where the best adventure playground is. Sometimes we go bike scrambling and play hide-and-seek on the building sites.... We do dares and runouts and....

The places mentioned were located all over town. The boys may have been an especially mobile group; even so, their itinerary clearly implies the importance of two necessary criteria for accessibility: townwide coverage and pathway continuity. It would be interesting to study the bicycle behavior of this age group more thoroughly.

Bicycle ownership was by no means universal. Only about half the children interviewed said they owned bikes and used them on a regular basis (Table 7, Appendix C). Several mentioned that they were "saving up for one" or were getting one for their birthday or for Christmas, or were getting their sister's or brother's old bike. Of those who did have use of a bicycle, one-in-seven said it was broken. Young children cannot normally repair their own machines, and it is a considerable reflection on the lack of parental responsibility that so many bikes were out of commission—for periods of several months in some cases.

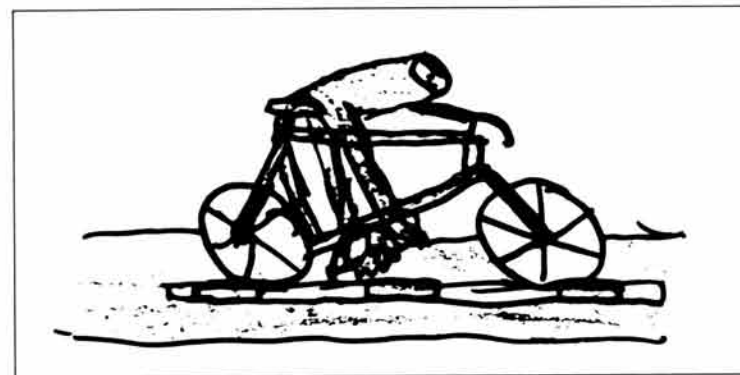
On top of this, bike-owning kids who lived in multistory housing faced the additional frustrations of an interior environment not designed for bicycles. Lawrence, who lived in one of the Notting Dale tower blocks, had to keep his bike in the entrance hallway of the flat, which, as his parents explained, not only blocked the way in, but made dirty marks on the floor and wall and looked untidy. But this was nothing compared to the problems Lawrence encountered in going for a ride. We first waited over five minutes for the lift, which eventually arrived crowded with passengers. Lawrence had to shuffle uncomfortably around them and negotiate space for himself and his machine while enduring the disapproving mutterings of two

elderly women all the way down. They thought it was shocking that a child should have a bike in the crowded lift (rather than complaining about the inadequate size of the lift or the infrequency of service).³

Once outside, all bike-riding kids faced conflict with pedestrians, although it seemed to be more a problem of adult minds than anything else. Certainly there will always be foolhardy bike riders who disregard the possible consequences of their actions, but most children seemed well-aware of potential pedestrian-cycle conflict. In Holland Park, Ricky showed me a long straight path that he called a "bike path." He raced down it with his friends, he said, and added that it was good because it wasn't used by "people" (meaning adult pedestrians). He went on to complain that there were too many people on the other paths that they liked to ride on, and suggested that "they should have people on one path and bikes on another."

In both Stevenage and Tunstall, parallel-but-separate pathways were, in truth, provided for both cyclists and pedestrians. But the segregation rules were often not followed by the users, sometimes for good reasons. In Bedwell, Brian said he always walked on the cycleways with his friends because the group was always too large to fit the narrower footpaths. In Tunstall, where the Greenway cycle and pedestrian pathways were of equal width, users still did not follow the rules. Jill and Lesley said they liked to ride on the "most

"My dad used to go to all kinds of places on his bike.... I like to go to 'big' places like Endon [more than four miles from Tunstall], to the carnival, and to Rudyard Lake [a reservoir almost ten miles away] to go fishing."



interesting parts" of the Greenway regardless of whether they were meant for pedestrians or cyclists. They mentioned a "special circuit" around Pitts Hill (which in fact was a pedestrian path), where they could come "speeding down." Lesley even noted that one path was meant for people and one for bikes and commented, "no one takes any notice of that.... People walk and bike on both paths." So much for rational planning!

Most cycling took place near the children's homes. Those who had roadworthy bikes used them primarily as part of their everyday routine—for moving more quickly around their foot-defined territory. More extensive trips were rare, even though time was available. The most obvious reason was the extreme hazard presented to bike riders of all ages when using major roads. The dangers encountered beyond quiet neighbourhood streets was apparent to most parents, who therefore tended to rigidly control bike riding.

I had a hunch that developmental factors also constrained many of the children. For example, although Mandy was given "free range" over the Stevenage cycleways by her mother, she rarely took advantage of her freedom, but limited herself to riding around in front of the house—with an occasional trip to the park to feed the ducks. She did not feel competent enough for longer trips.

Bike riding was clearly a sensory stimulant. This made topography and differentiation of the terrain significant—to cyclists and pedestrians alike. Andrew showed me how he went "scrambling" on the banks of the Little Park in Mill Hill. Chris told me about doing the same thing on the grassy slopes of Mill Hill's Clanway Stadium. Carole described the circular "race routes" she followed around the red shale paths at the back of her house.

Children on bikes love what adults might perceive as aimless round-and-round riding. The Bedwell shopping plaza presented such an opportunity. One early-closing afternoon I saw a whole gaggle of bike riders gliding in and out among themselves and the fixed features of the space, weaving intricate patterns around concrete planting tubs and a free-standing letterbox. The permutation of circuits added sensory delight to what was an otherwise deserted space.

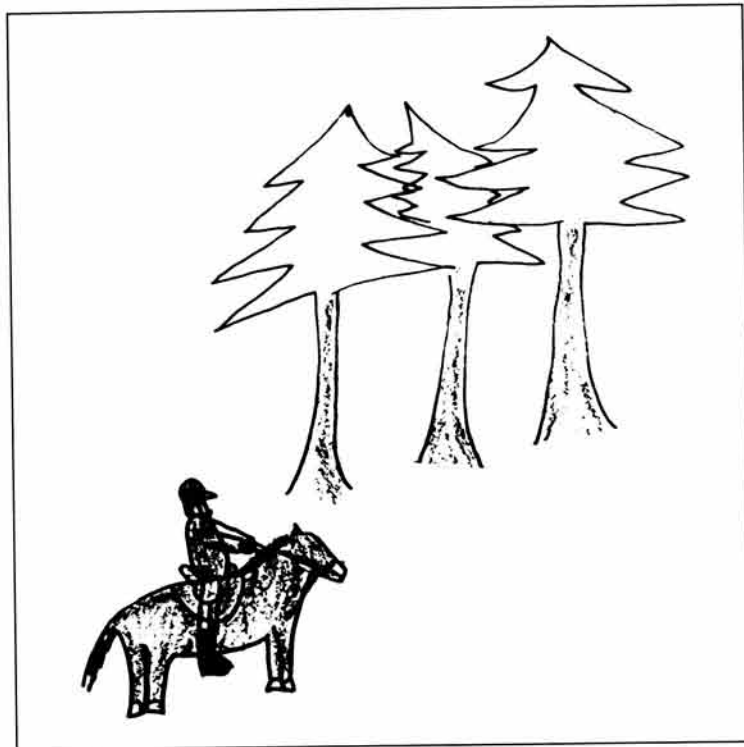
The most dramatically sensuous bike trip I experienced was with Lawrence in Notting Dale, in the gloomy pedestrian subways under the Shepherd's Bush roundabout. The moment we arrived, Lawrence took-off on the first of several swoops down into the subterranean depths; he on his bike, I tagging behind, trying to look

nonchalant, hoping he wasn't going to knock someone down. After one or two near-misses, we reemerged at the point where we had started, having come full circle. These were the subways that some parents would not let their children use, and I understood why. They were dingy and lonely. I was struck by the fact that the road engineers had put the people underground and the cars on the surface. Nonetheless, it was an exciting bike-riding setting—though hazardous to any pedestrians who ventured there.

OTHER WAYS OF TRAVELLING

Tunstall's Greenways had one advantage that major routes in Stevenage lacked. They had been designed for use by horse riders—something that was particularly attractive to children older than the group I was studying. I had the good fortune to run into a group of twelve-

Horseriding on the Tunstall Greenways.



to-fourteen-year-olds who were riding horseback on a Greenway near the centre of Tunstall. It was a wonderful sight. They told me they often rode through the town to Cobridge (a couple of miles away). Before departing, two of the riders made a circuit around the widest part of the Greenway and jumped over one of the park benches, while the others applauded (suggesting the need for more appropriate facilities).

As with the Stevenage cyclists, additional study of the Tunstall horse riders would have been valuable. For instance, how much did horse riding cost? Could horses be hired by the hour? Where could kids learn to ride? Maybe it offered girls an opportunity to even up the score for townwide travel.

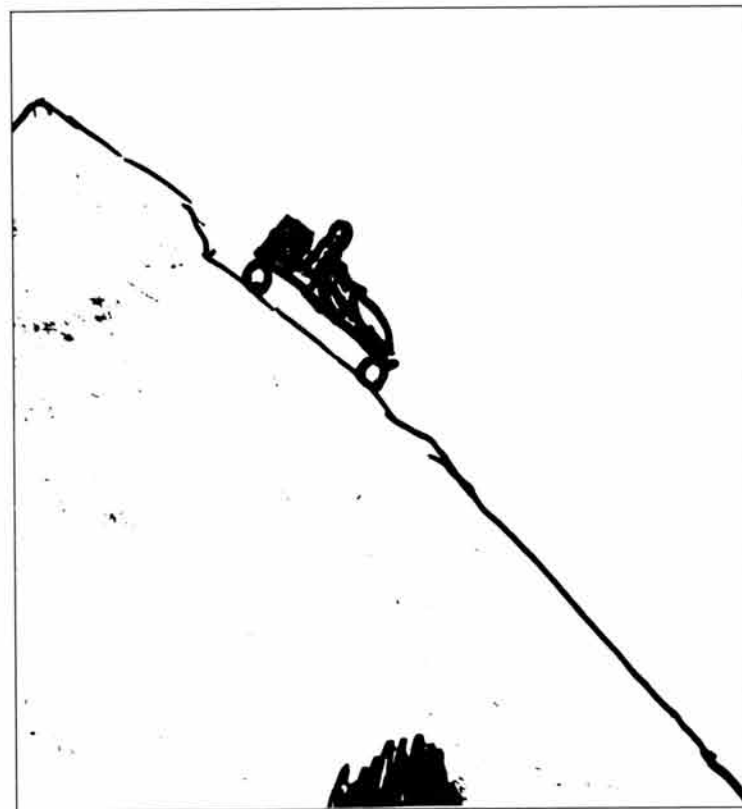
Besides walking, horse riding and cycling, two other means of nonmotorised movement were documented: roller-skating and go-carting. Roller-skating was rarely observed, but was several times mentioned. The main problem was the lack of smooth pavements. In Mill Hill, Dawne took me to a sloping asphalt path running across the 'backs' behind her house, where she usually roller-skated. But she complained that the surface was not very good. She wished that someone would fill in the potholes to make it better. It seemed a pity that more opportunities were not available for pursuing such a healthy, energetic activity. Traffic barred it from streets; cracks between paving stones kept it off pavements; park rules banned it in parks.

The traditional childhood craft of go-cart-making was encountered only in Mill Hill (and there quite frequently) because it offered three essential requirements: hilly topography, space at home for construction, and a ready supply of free scrap materials. Mill Hill topography was unsurpassed for its variety of slopes. A large proportion of the housing—even the traditional back-to-backs—had private outdoor areas that could be used for working on small construction projects. Garages were sometimes used, too. Then, of course, widespread industrial sites provided a fertile supply of scrap materials for construction.

Because surface requirements for go-cart racing are less stringent than for roller-skating, go-carts on street pavements were observed several times. The Greenway entrance paths, dropping steeply down the sides of cuttings, seemed to present particularly attractive racing alignments. The crushed red shale provided an ex-

cellent riding surface. Chris, an expert, took me to what he had labelled the "roller coaster place" on his drawing. It was an eight-foot-wide path, curving downhill to meet the main Greenway route. He explained that they had races there and that "you try to knock each other on the grass, so you're disqualified." Chris pointed to a low mound rising up on one side of the path and said that it was the best place for "testing-out our trollies." At the bottom of the path he pointed to a curve they had to "swerve around without tipping over" (there were lots of wheel marks there). He mentioned putting bricks on the path to create an obstacle course—"The first one down without touching the bricks is the winner."

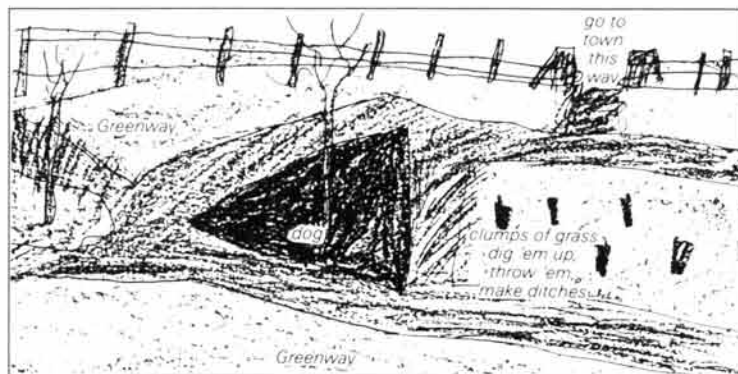
Go-cart racing on the Mill Hill topography.



Children often followed unofficial hidden paths, like rabbits or deer making 'runs' through the urban undergrowth, connecting parts of their territories via routes that most adults would not think of using. In Mill Hill, Chris took me on a "quick way," along a path beside a tall brickyard retaining wall to the Clanway Stadium. He showed me how to "get through" a hole in the brickyard fence and cut across Clanway to get home.

"Squeeze through" gaps were made the same size as children's own bodies (most kids can squeeze through nine or ten inches). Simon led me through a gap in the railings in the corner of Tunstall Park, where, as he put it, "the bars have been widened a bit." At the other end of the park, Dawne showed me a similar gap to reach the playground (otherwise inaccessible from the adjacent Greenway).

In places like Tunstall, where large-scale changes were being rapidly made to the landscape, children's pathway privileges were becoming precariously balanced. Carole told me about the "special way we used to go to Westport Lake, to play on the beach." Then she added, "they've built a factory in the way and you can't get through anymore. We went on a wild goose chase last time and found it was blocked." A similar blockage occurred in Bedwell that expressed an unfortunate lack of planning for children's access. Jenny told me she sometimes played in the "field" (park) behind her house, but the way through had been blocked by a high fence at the end of the pedestrian path running past her front gate. "Now I have to walk all the way round in the opposite direction [on the street] to get in," she said.



(Lower left) Timothy's drawing of his favourite Mill Hill greenway.
(Below) Heather squeezing under railings to get to the "blackberry place" beside the elevated Metropolitan Line in Notting Dale.



One of the clearest expressions of the benefits of continuity in the urban landscape was the way in which children used it as an outdoor gymnasium. As I walked along a Mill Hill street with Paul he continually went darting ahead, leapfrogging over concrete bollards, hopping between paving slabs, balancing along the curbside.

In each study area, certain kids seemed to dance through their surroundings on the look out for microfeatures with which to test their bodies. In Notting Dale, David provided the best sequence. Not only did he, like Paul, jump over gaps between things, go "tightrope walking" along the tops of walls, leapfrog objects on sight, but at one point he went "mountain climbing" up a roughly-built, nine-foot wall that had many serendipitously placed toe and handholds (see photo: p.31). It was as good as any simulated rock-climbing wall in a gymnasium.

David's mother told me her son was "accident prone," meaning that he was not well-coordinated. The reason seemed to be that he had a much more extended motoric relationship with his surroundings than most kids. David was an explorer. He took greater risks, more frequently; this, in turn, led to the increased likelihood of an accident. In fact, the accidents he reported had all occurred in non-routine situations in the course of new explorations and related skill acquisitions.

Mill Hill provided many fine examples of creative interaction with the landscape. Perhaps it was a function of the older, brick-built, small scale domestic architecture. Dawne and best friend Lisa balanced on walls, hopped over cracks between paving slabs, climbed walls and trees, slid down and twirled around railings, leapfrogged dustbins, jumped over streams, did handstands and somersaults on every available patch of grass, and shuffled through leaves. It was an almost continuous gymnastic performance, beautifully meshing the needs of their personalities with the opportunities in their surroundings.

On a small bridge across the Tunstall Greenway, Paul and his friend showed me how they could swing from the supporting rafters, climb up the outside of the bridge, hang on the railings, edge their way along the outside to the centre, and finally drop down to the path below. The bridge served as an effective piece of 'found' play equipment.

David demonstrating the gymnastic, 'motoric' landscape of a Notting Dale street.



The motoric activities described above can equally well be accommodated by conventional playgrounds—supposing that they are located at regular intervals throughout every neighbourhood inhabited by children. But this was rarely the case. Even when provided, the limited choice of equipment on most designated playgrounds fell far short of satisfying appetites for bodily action. To compensate for this, many residential areas need more built-in play opportunities. Climbable trees are an obvious requirement. Tactile and acoustic dimensions should also be considered—as when children run sticks along railings. On one trip, Lawrence put his ear to a Notting Dale lamppost and said it was like “listening to a timebomb ticking” (the sound of the timing mechanism). The design possibilities are endless.

TOPOGRAPHY

Slopes, changes in level, flights of steps, hills and holes all provided differentiations that had highly expressive effects on children's behaviour. Small grassy slopes offered more opportunities still. Dawne and Lisa took me to what they called the “fields”: several sloping lawns rising up around the cul-de-sac at the end of their Mill Hill street. They said they did “dances down the hills,” which they demonstrated in a graceful sequence of flowing balletic movement.

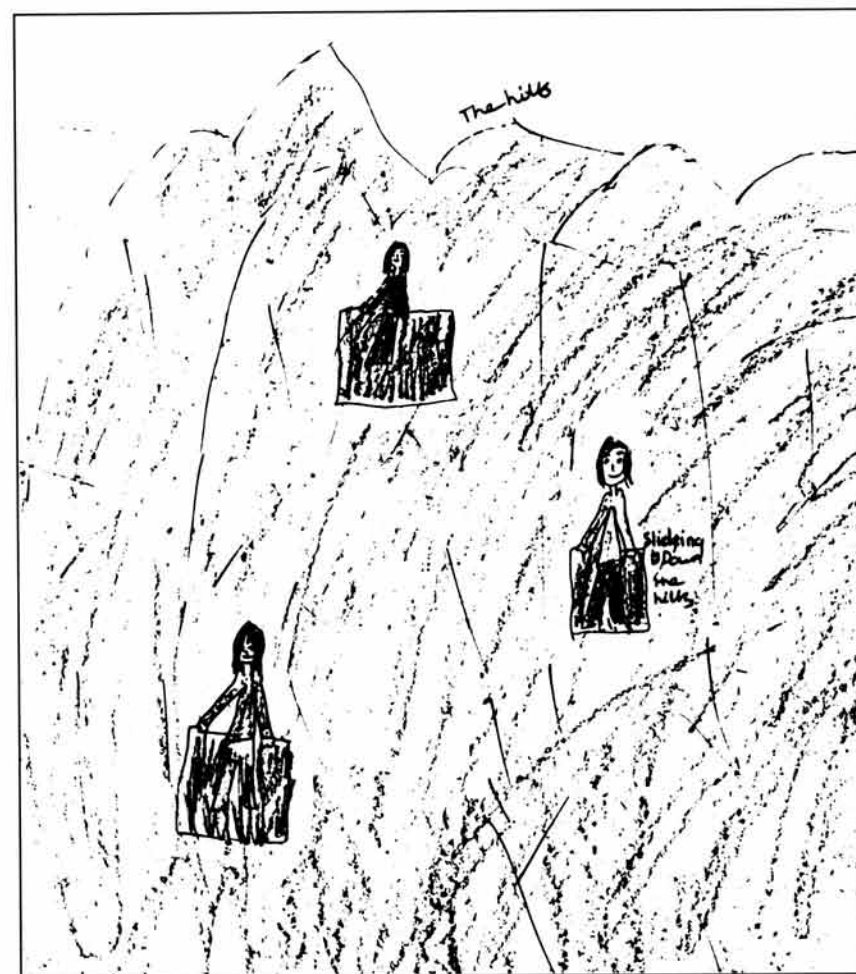
Grassy slopes, depending on their size and steepness, stimulated a variety of behaviours. One of the Mill Hill housing estates, built on the side of a hill, was full of possibilities. Andrew, for instance, demonstrated “best man dead” on the grass bank above the pavement. “Someone chooses a weapon,” he said, “such as a ‘spear’ or a ‘gun,’ and whoever gives the best performance of falling down dead is the next to choose.” Andrew told me how an adjacent flight of steps featured as a place to “sit and talk with yer mates,” and added that it was also a den in games of tick.

In more extensive landscapes, beyond immediate residential areas, topographic differentiations, and consequential actions, increased in size. Chris showed me some big, twelve-foot piles of clay in the abandoned Mill Hill Brickers (brickworks) where he said kids brought their “scrambler bikes” to ride. He pointed out the remains of an old conveyor belt sticking up in the air, which he said they sometimes climbed to use as a lookout.

Later, we visited an area known to many kids as the Bomb Holes. The ‘holes’ varied in size and had grassy sides and bottoms. The

largest was about fifteen feet across and perhaps eight feet deep. Chris explained that most of them were caved-in mine shafts (subsidence), but that the biggest one was made by “an actual bomb during the war” (a myth). He said they played “jumping games and commandoes” there (remains of Guy Fawkes fireworks were much in evidence). They made camps sometimes by roofing the holes over. He took me to a “special one” that not many people knew about, he said, that had a willow tree growing out of the bottom. He showed

“We slide down the hills on old bits of cardboard.”



me how he and his friends climbed down to a little hideaway under the tree, from which they could spy on people walking on the adjacent footpath.

I was also taken to the Bomb Holes by Paul and his friend who said they mostly played “war and hide-and-seek” there. Their favourite hole was a different one from Chris’s. It had a line of three small excavations cut out of the side, which they called a “dinosaur print.” The excavations were toe marks, Paul said.

HIDE-AND-SEEKNESS

When the degree of differentiation between physical elements reached a certain point it became possible for children to incorporate a repertoire of hide-and-seek games into the flow of their activity. Bedwell’s shopping precinct provided a good example. The shops lined two sides of a spacious paved plaza. I was taken there by Brian and met a group of his friends. They said they played “fifty-fifty” around the shops and in between the cars and flower boxes, using the red letterbox as ‘base.’ The group gave a demonstration, using every differentiated element as a hiding place—the advertisement hoarding at the far end, the supports of the canopy in front of the shops, the planters, the letterbox and the shop buildings (by running around the back of them).

Hideaway games were supported in many ways at different sites. In Mill Hill, Jill said they used to have a camp in “some bushes up on the dump.” She took me up the Greenway to an overgrown rubbish tip at a higher elevation ahead of us. She pointed to a group of hawthorn bushes on the side and told me it was where their camp used to be. “We found an old settee on the dump and used to sit up there and chat,” she said, “but one day we saw some rats so we don’t go anymore.... They were terrible, ugh,” she said, grimacing.

In another part of Mill Hill, Tracy showed me the purest example of a naturally-occurring hideaway setting—again in hawthorn bushes. We were walking through the overgrown fields near her house when she pointed to a line of bushes at the top of a bank overlooking the field and said it was where they had their “club and ate picnics.... You’ve got a lovely view of the golf links from up there,” she added. Hawthorns dotted the field. She called them “tree houses,” and said they were used for meetings and as hiding places. The

Investigating a “dinosaur print” in the Bomb Holes, Mill Hill.



bushes were surrounded by long grass in such a way that a secluded hideout was formed at each base. Together, the bushes and long grass provided a kind of landscape syntax: a pattern of fixed features complex enough to generate a fluid yet predictable structure of behaviour; as if saying, "come play...here's how."

HARVESTING FOUND OBJECTS

Some terrains offered kids a rich source of play materials and 'found objects' that could be freely picked, plucked, gathered-up and collected for a variety of purposes. Remember Heather's posy in Notting Dale?

In Mill Hill, I walked along the Greenway with Paul and his friend and watched them pick and play with rhododendron buds, snowberries and large orange hips from ornamental roses. They squashed some of the hips to see what was inside and aimed them at the windows of adjacent houses. At one point they started pelting each other in a "rose-hip fight." On other occasions, children collected acorns, small cones from alder trees, seed heads from weeds and grasses and, of course, conkers—usually gathered by throwing sticks up at the tree. Since the fieldwork was conducted during the autumn, the collection of fruit, seeds and nuts occurred frequently. On several occasions, children mentioned "scrumping" in back gardens—a time-honoured childhood activity.

'Loose parts'⁴ were the cause of these many fascinating incidents. In the middle of a trip on the Tunstall Greenway, a crowd of kids wandered by with a collection of old car seats balanced on their heads. They set them down on the Greenway bridge, sat and played on them, bouncing up and down and fooling around with great merriment. The purest example of a loose-part/fixed-feature combination took place in the Dip (the Bedwell 'green' described in Chapter 4). On the steepest slope, a deeply-eroded slide had been gouged out. And how did kids travel down it? On plastic milk crates which Philip said they "found" at certain stores in the vicinity.

Special interest was sometimes expressed in "collecting things"—more as a hobby than as a transient play activity. Paul and Simon in Mill Hill provided an outstanding example. They told me they "collected birds [made observations of birds] and rocks," and had "just started collecting toadstools.... One day we were walking along and

A crowd of kids wandered by with a collection of old car seats balanced on their heads...set them down on the Greenway bridge, and produced an instant pantomime...



we found this funny-looking toadstool, so now we collect them.” They also mentioned how they went to a pond near the Bomb Holes “to catch butterflies, fishes, frogs and water rats.”

‘Found objects’ were often recombined to make something else, or were used in conjunction with other landscape features. Simon told me how one day he had carved his name on a lawn in Tunstall Park with a sharp stick. A subtle, low-key example was shown by Dawne and Lisa (also in Tunstall Park). Their favourite thing was playing with leaves in Scotia Brook, “helping them along” with little sticks. Their favourite place to do it was under a large weeping willow tree. We stood for a while, fascinated by the bright yellow crescent-moon leaves as they moved slowly on the mirrored black water in its rock-sided channel.

Another Mill Hill example of interaction with water occurred at a very different scale on a trip with Chris. We were looking down into a vast marlhole, perhaps a hundred feet deep. In the bottom was a large pool of water. Chris explained how he and his friends “rolled all kinds of stuff...car tires, old bike wheels and oil drums down into the water...we love to watch them bounce off the cliff halfway down and see how big a splash they make at the bottom,” he said. (See Appendix D for a full list of “play objects” recorded during the study.)

Notting Dale’s social diversity or Mill Hill’s physical diversity. Did some Bedwell children live in deprived circumstances: equal but different to some of the examples in Notting Dale? It is hard to tell. More study would be needed to answer this kind of question: to assess the negative effects of deprived environments, rather than gauge the positive effects of rich environments—as we are trying to do here.

A REMINDER

It was impressive to discover how expert some children had been at finding access to diversity. However, we should bear in mind that they were chosen as expert users of their surroundings. We must be careful not to let their creative example obscure the problems that a majority of children faced. Busy roads and parental anxiety kept many children away from major neighbourhood resources like Mill Hill’s Tunstall Park and Holland Park in Notting Dale. Mill Hill kids seemed better-off because their immediate residential environment was so rich and accessible. Both Notting Dale and Bedwell were less diverse. Notting Dale children were possibly compensated by the cultural offerings of the metropolitan setting—though supporting evidence was hard to come by. Bedwell children may have been compensated by the added opportunities of the townwide pathway network and lively town centre. But in fact neither facility seemed well-used by the under-twelves. Meanwhile, Bedwell had none of