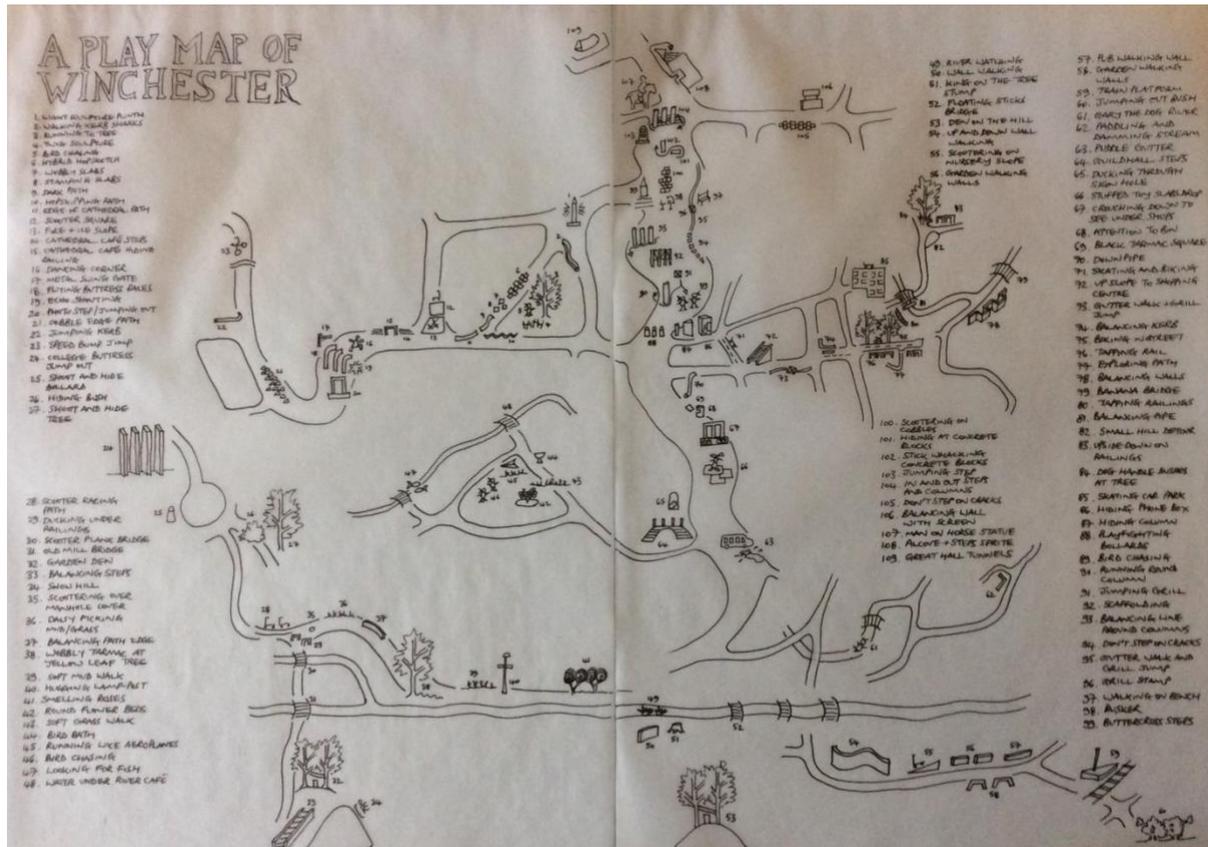


A Play Map of Winchester

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Access the [play map of Winchester](#).

Where figures appear in the text [e.g. (60)], refer to the legend on A Play Map of Winchester for location of this play observation.

Introduction

Children's play is often considered as frivolous and, at best, secondary to future-focused learning, but play has its own vitality, with the purpose of generating more play, engaged in for its own sake. The in-between areas of cityscapes are a perfect canvas for play. The locations of children's interactions with the built and natural environment can become significant places, potentially overlaid with experience.

I was initially interested in making a comparative study of play observations in White City, London and Winchester.¹ However, the demographics and cultures of the two locations are markedly different, and it soon became clear that direct comparisons could not be made because the London project context was not replicated in Hampshire. The timeframes were

different and the methodology, though outwardly similar, did not directly correlate the two different locations. Therefore, what transpired was a stand-alone voluntary observation and analysis project, which would relate to, but not directly compare with, the previous studies of play in London. Drawing on my interest in phenomenological study, on the lived experience and observation of play, the project's aims were to ask:

- how is it that play is in *this* city?
- where do children favour playing?
- where are there favourable urban conditions in Winchester for spontaneous play?

Over a period of seven weeks between mid-January and mid-March 2018, nine play observations were undertaken. They took place on different days of the week, at different start times and for varying lengths of time. In addition, my reflection on places previously played by family children who I had accompanied were noted, as were memories of play that had happened when out and about in the city.

For the observations, a form of psychogeographic exploration (in Debord's sense) of the 'in-betweens' of the city took place (i.e. not the destination places of designated parks for play). The exploration took place largely within the bounds of the old Roman and Saxon walls, extending from the river and the nearby first point of play interest on the edges of a housing estate in the east, to the city's Westgate in the west, to Winchester College in the south, and to the recreation ground in the north.

Recognising that the observer should not unduly alter the play by adult presence, observation proceeded in a manner of passing by, at a distance. Routes away from the play needed to be taken. No personal information was gathered, other than estimations of age and recognition of gender. As such, no children are identifiable, and no children are recognisable to the researcher. The prime focus was the play and where the play happened.

Any interaction between children, between children and adults or between children and the built or natural environment which conformed to an in-the-moment observation assessment of *being play* was mentally noted and reflected on. For the purposes of this study, play was perceived as such if it met the descriptive requirements of at least one of Bob Hughes' sixteen play types as currently recognised (for example, locomotor play, exploratory play)², or if it matched the first four of Catherine Garvey's five characteristics of play (its pleasurable nature, that it has no extrinsic goals, that it is spontaneous, and that there is an involvement of active engagement).³ Ultimately, to be the play of a child, observation of interaction or action needed to take reflective note of the idea that the content and intent of play belongs to the child.⁴

In addition to the texts referenced above, a link to the play observations in London was made in consideration of Quentin Stevens' writing on five urban settings where most play activities seem to occur: paths, intersections, boundaries, thresholds and props.⁵ Bruce Chatwin's writing on the importance of place, in *singing the land* into existence, informs the on-going observation of how children can often create meaning in the recalled location of play, as do Arthur Battram's (2007) interpretations.⁶

The play layer

Winchester is located in mid-Hampshire, thirteen miles north of Southampton. It was historically important as a fortified settlement of King Alfred the Great and the capital of Anglo-Saxon Wessex. Alfred's *burh* was built on the remains of the Roman town of Venta Belgarum, itself a successor to the Iron Age settlement of the Belgae tribe. Later, William the Conqueror symbolised the imposition of Norman rule by building the cathedral. Winchester

was a scene of the 12th century civil war of Matilda and Stephen, suffered from the Black Death in the 14th century, succumbed to Cromwell's army during the English Civil War and saw King Charles II initiate a grand palace on the site of the old castle. Winchester is now a small city with a population in the 2011 census of 39,000. It lies within a wider council district with a minority ethnic population of 4.4%.⁷

We can add to these historical strata the contemporary layers that are *the* forming layers of children's play. My conviction that a place is comprised of many layers motivates this outlining of the city's history.

A nod to songlines

Bruce Chatwin explores the *songlines* of aboriginal culture, showing how specific places have spiritual significance in a knowledge of and connection to the land. Arthur Battram links to this in a comprehension of children's cultures. He writes briefly of a tracing of *songlines* on a playground in Hull, making reference to the play significance of 'the black pipe' going back to 1916. An element of such songlines thinking plays through the observations for, and reflection on, the Winchester map. Whilst the play significance that may be infused into any given place by unknown children can only really be speculated on, that of known and accompanied family children can be more firmly understood. This seven year old and this nine year old live in another place entirely, but they know Winchester by way of play. We traverse its streets and other playable places regularly, so much so that, now, certain places within the city have accumulated depths akin to folklore.

If the children were to tell of the following *songline* nodes, I would know exactly the route they were walking in their minds: go past the jumping out bush (60), to the train platform (59), and along to the everything tree (54), over to the Gary the Dog river (61) and to the paddling stream (62) to the Banana Bridge (79); over to the castle where the princess lives (64), to the train park (48) and back, up to the naked man on a horse (107). Once, at the bottom of the road, one of them accidentally fell into the bush (which now, every time, jumps out at them) and, another day, they used a triangular wedge of raised paving as a train platform (now they stop at the imaginary train tracks every time we pass). A large balloon-like bauble was hung in a tree by the nursery, and is still there, and so this is the Everything Tree, and many years ago (so the true story that I tell them goes), Gary the stuffed toy dog, beloved of a now-grown friend, fell into the water. At the moors there is a small, secluded stream and at the recreation ground a humpback bridge. A long time ago, the massive Guildhall looked like a castle to a toddler, and beyond this, on the site of the estate that King Alfred granted to his wife, there is the train contraption, which the children reference this play park by. At the top of the hill, by the council offices, a statue of a naked man on a horse causes guaranteed amusement every time we pass.

On an information board at the site of Nunnaminster (on the land granted to Alfred's wife, Eahlswith, on his coronation) is quoted the following, from the king, attributed as being included in the Anglo-Saxon Book of Nunnaminster:

The bounds of the estate which Eahlswith has in Winchester run up from the ford on the western side of westernmost mill weir, then east to the old willow . . . then there east along Cheap Street as far as the king's city-hedge, on to the old mill weir . . . until it strikes the ivy-covered ash, then there south over the two-fold ford.

The children, and their songline nodes, are in good company.

Moments of play

Play is a spontaneity. How could adult coercion to engage in any given adult-willed or designed activity truly be felt as play? Play is a matter for the moment, anywhere, and so it is on the streets and other in-betweens of the cityscape. Often, the only coercion that children need to play is the call of the environment to hand. So it is that pigeons are chased (5) (46) (89), as children are wont to do, whether this is in open areas of grass or on the crowded thoroughfares. Children have the flow and focus of play in mind, not the entanglement of pedestrians.

In the cathedral grounds, I passed a younger child with attendant adult, and the child was already entirely into the art of creating a stick and twig sculpture stuck into the mud (4). Something of the scattered natural environment must have called to her, before I had arrived. A little farther on, directly adjacent to the monumental west front entrance to the Norman cathedral, a group of a dozen ten or eleven year-old boys, in school uniform and with teachers, tumbled around in various forms of play. Two of the boys, on the slight slope, enacted a fast and slow-motion choreography - a battle of *fire and ice* (13). This, more or less, is on the grounds where the Danish King Cnut was buried, before the cathedral was built, where King Philip of Spain married Queen Mary in the 16th century, and where the Conqueror's son, William Rufus, was brought when he was killed. The moments of play sit on hefty foundations.

Elsewhere in the city, moments repeat in the cyclings of children's culture. How many individuals of how many generations ever played *don't step on the cracks?* (94) (105). Is there a line on the ground that children will not follow? In the High Street, the paving is arranged so that drainage channels funnel up the hill, narrowing together in the ascent. Children drift towards such environmental calls (95), treading or balancing even just for twenty paces or so. In the observation, it is almost as if they are gravitationally obliged to do this.

Edges

Certain aspects of the city-scape are replete with an *edge condition*. That is, marking the transitional position between different textures, heights and drops, horizontal and vertical, private and public domains. They also mark out lines or narrow zones of possibilities. Play is a *what-if?* and there is so much possibility to explore. Between the top end of the High Street and the old Westgate of the city, up and up, I walked downwards and observed a child of about three years of age pushing a scooter uphill. His attendant adult pushed a pram and baby slowly ahead of him. The boy was like a sprite, keeping to the in-and-out edge of the building alcove line (108). At the recreation ground, where various streams run through, adjacent to the moorland, a girl of about four or five tapped her fingers along the railings on the *wrong side* by the water (80). Of course, it was not the wrong side at all, and her attendant adult, possibly a grandmother, was unexpectedly relaxed when the child went on to balance on the pipe that spanned the stream on the *wrong side* and at the level of the base of the short bridge (81).

Walls will be balanced on, whether they are low and mostly straight (50) (56) (57) (58) (78), undulating (54), flanking steps (33), awkward to navigate (106), or if they are kerbs, which serve the same function in the language of play, if not in the language of adults. There may be sharks to avoid (2) or there may be jumps that need to be made (22). Outside a city centre church, there is a cycle lane, beneath which are the medieval brooks that used to pass between the buildings of the streets, which creates a short section of kerb between the lane and the road. Such stretches, as short as they are, require the attention of balancing in passing (74), as do the edges that are barely raised, such as those that mark the transition

between grass and paths (37). Where edges or lines are punctuated by disturbances to the flow, these not insurmountable obstacles often require some form of play acknowledgement. Grills in lines of pavement drains are regularly jumped or stamped on (73) (95) (96).

Seeking out the uneven, textures and slopes

It has long been known, intuitively understood, that children will often seek out the route least adult-travelled, and these diversions embrace the muscular sensory potential of surfaces. In the cloisters area of the cathedral, a circuit of road encloses the grass where the winter ice rink is located every year. Along the edge of the road, part of the pathway is lined with smoothed raised flint stones. The school group who were playing around the corner, including the *fire and ice* boys, walked this way, still tumbling over and around one another. Half of them took a deliberate diversion to walk over the knobbly flint path stones (21). In the parks or the in-betweens, children took the soft mud and winter grass routes (36) (39) (43), even when dry, hard paths were available.

The pull of the sensory potential plays itself out in a variety of aspects of the cityscape, some of which adults might see as minor health and safety concerns. Along the cathedral approach, a succession of children, independently of one another and in different groups and at different times, were observed jumping onto particular paving slabs (7) (8). It was only when I passed that way myself and stood on those same slabs, that I could feel that they were wobbly. At the river, just outside the line of the old Roman and Saxon fortification walls, on a corner of intrigue for various play observations and where paths meet, there is a manhole cover (35) whose raised parts created a rumbling for scootering passers-by, as did the planking on the nearby bridge (30). A little further upriver, a well-established tree's roots ruck up the tarmac path (38) and pulled a biking boy towards it, to detour over it. Slopes exert their own pulls too on children. Sometimes such features are obvious, such as the covered slope up to the shopping centre (72) which children ran down. Sometimes adults can miss the presence of slope entirely, at first, such as outside the cathedral, where the *fire and ice* boys played (13) but where, also, the slight slope proved playable for other children on scooters, slowly trundling down towards the massive west front.

Objects of Fascination

Practically everything in the cityscape has the potential to be playable. Whether the adult world makes reference to street furniture, or to fixed objects, or to props, makes no odds. Children see the inherent play value. So it is that steps can drift from the prosaic adult function and into elements that are launch pads for surprise (20) (103), or mountaineering (especially if particularly steep) (99), or traversed just for the inherent up and down-ness (104). Similarly, columns drift from functional building elements and into hiding places (87), or curved elements to circulate (90) or balance along lines around (93). Buttresses become places for ambush (24) or places for echo-shouting (19).

Winchester, like other places, has sprouted ugly concrete blocks placed along significant routes, attempted deterrents to would-be attacks by vehicle, but even these elements are playable. The anticipation was that children would use such blocks, dumped at the top of the High Street hill, down which the original Iron Age settlers would have passed, en route for the river plains at the bottom of the shallow valley, and eventually the expectation played itself out in the observation 'children hid behind the blocks (101) or whacked them with sticks (102)'.

Bollards either provide cover for playfighting, shooting from and hiding behind (25) or centre stage for chase-tapping around, such as at the crossroads of the pedestrianised High Street and an approach to the cathedral where, apparently unconcerned about the crossflow, two boys looped in figures of eight around their three props for play focus (88). Narrow railings can be hidden behind (15), hung upside down from (83) or tapped or trailed by finger or stick (76) (80). Speed bumps can offer momentary cycling sensation in the hops up and over (23). Tree stumps can be climbed and stood up on (51). Benches cease to function as benches when they become objects to walk along (97).

At the river, I observed a boy of about two years of age as he walked behind what I assumed to be his mother, pushing the pushchair along slowly, some way ahead. The boy walked along the soft, muddy grass verge, rather than the path and, when he reached the ornate lamp-post, his presumed mother paying no attention, he gently grabbed hold of it with both his hands, pressing his chest to the post and looking up and up along its line for several seconds (40).

Gravitational pull places

In the process of observation, in time, the idea that certain places in the city were, in effect, exerting more of a gravitational pull on children at play began to take shape. That is to say, certain features of the built or natural environment in certain parts of the city resulted in noticeably greater accumulations of play than others. The adult assumption might conclude that these accretions are limited to the designated places for play - for instance, the various fixed equipment parks, the skate park, the open grass areas. This perspective may be an assumed blind spot of many an urban planner or civic leader. Children's play is an everydayness and an everywhere-ness.

At the river, along a stretch diverted by the Romans, where the plank bridge (30) at the bottom of the slight slope gives way to a path T-junction, where two offset railings will slow the progress of a speeding cyclist, and where scooter riding children deliberately ride over the manhole cover for the sensory feel of it (35), play accumulates on different occasions. Children run down the slope, ducking and swinging beneath the railings (29), barely breaking stride. Others scoot along the smooth tarmac (28), or head for the mud to pick the daisies (36) or balance on the slight edge where the grass meets the path (37). Elsewhere, at another corner, where the cathedral west front meets the echo alley (19) beneath the flying buttresses and on out to the cloisters, children dance on and in-between the paving slabs (16), make play with the curious swing-to gate (17), jump from the photo-opportunity step (20), have races beneath the stonework (18) and fall around the various steps and railings (14) (15). The gravitational pull of play gathers around the corners, creating places in themselves.

At the old school of art, at another point near the river, it is the potential rather than the actual that seems to create a gravity. There is a small break in the tapping railings which opens out onto a path that takes a potential walker to the building's entrance or, in the pull, away again in a loop to feed the diversion-taker back to the main path (77). On different occasions, in the observation, children stopped at this transitional threshold, along the boundary edge between perceived-as public and private domains, clearly feeling an evident need to take that looping path. Attendant adults, however, always intervened.

Play diversions

Play diversions, whether realised or unrealised, are psychogeographic pulls. Outside the Guildhall (the erstwhile *castle* where, for a younger child's imagination, a princess ought to live, just alongside which, now down an alley, King Alfred's grand-daughter, daughter of King Edward the Elder, was buried in the abbey) on the broad thoroughfare of the Broadway, there is a somewhat grand double-flighted stone staircase that leads up to an entrance. The path runs adjacent to this but the pull of the up and down-ness, the grand diversion of it all, is often too much to resist for children (64). Similarly, the fixed object or the street prop that is an information sign at the bottom of one flight of these stairs has an ornate hole at its base, wide enough for a child to pass through. The draw to climb through this is often palpable (65).

At the river, sometime before these current observations, a young child and attendant adult wandered by the flower beds. The adult was talking with the child, pointing out all manner of possible fascinations and the child became intrigued by the yellow roses (41). This adult's actions stay in my memory, even now, as she and the child diverted off the path and as she pulled the flowers down for the child to smell. Moments can stay in memories, helping to create *placeness* in the city.

Slopes, obvious and unnoticed, as we have seen, have their sensory effects on children, but they also have their pulls. A long path along a stream, through the recreation ground and a route from a school to homes, takes the walker largely on a direct track from A to B. However, there is a small grass bank along part of the path, which in the play was diverted up and along (82), fingers trailing along a low chain-link fence.

In the Broadway, opposite the Guildhall, there is the bus station and, in the gutter here, the drain gets clogged. Standing rainwater, or any water perhaps, calls to a young child (school shoes on and all) to wade in the shallows (63). In the High Street, for a period, there was scaffolding up along a short stretch of columns, beyond which there is a covered arcade separating the shop fronts from the main paving. The yellow foam strips that surrounded the vertical and diagonal bars caused certain younger children, holding on to adults' hands, to drift that way (92).

The extraordinary of the ordinary/Making visible what is invisible

So it is that what an adult's perception might easily comprehend as the ordinary, or even invisible, the child will sense as full of potential, as extraordinary. In the observation, the former transforms into the latter, if the observer is light with grace enough to see this. In the gardens between the Guildhall and the train park, a boy of about three years of age was drawn to investigate a large stone birdbath full of water (44). He could just about see into it. I was unaware the birdbath was there until I observed the play, and I did not know it was full of water until I investigated it myself. In the lower High Street, a girl of about two years of age walked slowly behind an adult, presumably her mother, who with quiet patience pushed a pram ahead of her. The child became variously fascinated by the built environment objects of her immediate vicinity - a down pipe (70), a black tarmac square no larger than a couple of paving slabs (69), a bin (68) and, crouching down, she looked for *something* underneath the doorstep level of the shops (67). I can only guess whatever lay within these various objects and areas, but the ordinary became suddenly very visible to this observer. The child broke her attendant adult's patience with the deliberate and mischievous repeated dropping of a stuffed rabbit on some very particular paving slabs (66).

The fascination of a phone box (86) by three eight year olds, looking through the glass, hiding in plain sight, transformed its purpose and brought it to the foreground, hidden away

along a side alley as it is, passed by and by. A grill in the paving in the High Street became visible (91) for being jumped over rather than on. Again, who knows what the grill concealed, what might have lurked beneath? For *this* writer-observer, centuries ago, across this spot, a multitude of kings and queens and bishops, Saxons, Romans and Normans walked here. For the child, who knows what play and other intrigues the grill concealed?

There is the possibility that any ordinary object, street prop or the like, made extraordinary by being played, can become a node in the personal play songlines of any given child to have played it.

Summary and conclusions

This city, in its multiple possibilities of play, can be experienced in more ways than immediately meets the eye. How is it that play is in *this* city? Perhaps we should be approaching this question from two perspectives, that of the playing child and that of the play-observing adult. What any other person can truly feel or know of a place is not so easy to define but, in the *songlines* that children might tell, it can be assumed that certain locales in the city are play-significant and that these locales can obtain a certain placeness because of this. The observer who has an appreciation of play can also comprehend that a place or possible place is playable because of the moment of play that is inspired there, because of the elements of the built or natural environment that seem to exert their respective pulls on the child (be they such favourable urban conditions as edges, unevenness, slopes or other objects of fascination), because of the fact that places have been played before by others. Perhaps children are tuned in better than adults to the possibilities of play, to the potential of diversions, to the simple experimentation of *being* in play. As such, maybe more by luck than design, certain parts of the city exert their gravitational pulls. The challenge here, for urban designers, is to give more play consideration to these in-betweens: children do not just play in destination places, and children are part of the fabric of the city after all.

Endnotes

¹ Seath, J and Lyons, K (2018) 'The Overlaid Life of Places of Play: Mapping the Destinations and In-Betweens of Historical and Contemporary Play.' *Living Maps Review*, 5 (2018)

² Hughes, B. (2002), *A playworker's taxonomy of play types*. 2nd ed. London: Playlink.

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⁴ PPSG (2005), *The playwork principles*. Cardiff: Playwork Principles Steering Group

⁵ Stevens, Q. (2007), *The ludic city: exploring the potential of public spaces*. Abingdon: Routledge.

⁶ Battram, A. in Palmer, M., Wilson, P., Battram, A. (2007), 'The playing that runs through us all: illustrating the playwork principles with stories of play' in Russell, W., Handscomb, B., Fitzpatrick, J. (Eds) (2007), *Playwork voices: in celebration of Bob Hughes and Gordon Sturrock*, p.131. London: The London Centre for Playwork Education and Training.

⁷ Winchester City Council (2017), *Summary district figures* [Online]. Available from: www.winchester.gov.uk/data/facts-and-figures-about-winchester-district (Accessed July 6, 2018).