

A History of Wirksworth Playgroup to celebrate its 60th anniversary in 2025

Our playgroup, like many others, was set up in the mid-1960s by a group of mothers. These mothers wanted their children to play with friends and experience different toys and activities. With their communities, they took responsibility for these playgroups for three decades. And, in turn, the playgroups were a support network for them.

It was not until the late 1990s that government began to fund pre-school provision. Just how important these early years could be to children's later life began to be recognised. Playgroups were assigned a formal role, alongside schools, in supporting children's learning and development.

Yet, while today the majority of children take up some form of government funded pre-school provision, many small playgroups like ours are struggling. The low level of government funding means they can't maintain their buildings or pay their staff what they deserve. Even now, our playgroup, like many others, still relies on its community to succeed.

This little leaflet contains memories from five of the women who have been essential to Wirksworth playgroup over its 60-year history. They were collected in interviews conducted by Becky Coles, a current Trustee.

Jill Hughes - Founder

We came in 1961. The quarries were all working and there was dust everywhere. There were five of us that had moved here at a similar time and were beginning our families. It was a new place to all of us. We had no relatives here. So we started Playgroup.

It was two mornings a week, in the Memorial Hall. We had painting, puzzles, books and we had a singing time. Quite soon we were up to 20 children. We had two staff and one had to be a trained nurse. We charged 'two and six' which covered our costs. I nursed. I worked nights so that, even if I was in bed, I could be got during the day. I would cover if the nurse was off.

The Playgroup building had been an extra classroom for the school at the top of Cemetery Lane. We had to raise £3000 pounds to buy it and another £1000 for a new boiler and new toilets, because the toilets were too big. We had jumble sales, cake stalls and concerts. There was something all the time. So much so that I sent one of my husband's jackets without him knowing. And we had a plumber come to the house wearing it! My husband said to me 'That man's got my jacket!'

As our numbers increased, we would add another day. We had children coming up from Cromford and from Middleton by taxi. A mother would come with perhaps five children. And there was also a taxi that went around Wirksworth picking children up.

Dianne Briggs - 'The Playgroup Lady'

My father was sort of Victorian, thought women shouldn't work. So my husband worked for the County Council and I did lots of voluntary jobs. I'm from Birmingham and we'd lived in Warwick and Wales and then came here in 1966. My husband wanted to move again, to get a higher up job, but we had so many friends here. It was a lovely time.

The Secretary, Pat I think, lived next door. Head over the fence, she said 'Your little girl, would she like to go to a play group?' Because we always had to have two parent helpers, I went and, in the end, I was working there for nearly 30 years. I booked the children in and collected the money and took it down to Joan the treasurer. I did a lot of fundraising. I stitched a quilt to be raffled for playgroup's 30th anniversary. I was known as 'the playgroup lady'.



Every carnival time, Mrs Briggs ran a tombola stall from Saturday to Monday next to the Playgroup well dressing.

Elizabeth Bunting - past Playgroup Supervisor

Elizabeth trained as a Nursery Nurse and worked as a nanny and at the Wirksworth Maternity Home before getting a job at Playgroup. "It was brilliant", she said, "The children were lovely and everyone got on". Once Anne Radford retired, Elizabeth became Supervisor, with Tanya as her Assistant. "Everyone called me Mrs Bunting but Tanya called me Petal" she remembered. She worked at playgroup for 37 years.

Each session, she told me, she would set up activities for the children. Some days there would be music sessions where they would get instruments out and march around the room or they would bake. They had a paddling pool and a collection of spare knickers for the kids to put on. "Them were the days", she said, "We had some fun".

She described being frightened to death by the first Ofsted inspection and how staff had to record more of their planning and observation of children. She completed no end of training but continued to believe: "I had done my job well if the children left with a smile on their face".



Pat Oulton – current Manager Susan Smith – current Supervisor

Pat: When I had my boys, I used to be a parent helper. You got 50p off your session if you stayed to do the parent rota. Then, in 1995, Sue Wilson, who was running a session, said to me 'Do you fancy coming to work here'?

Susan: I brought my daughter and stayed as a parent helper. I was on the committee as well, fundraising. Then we needed another member of staff and I started in 2000. I got enrolled to do my NVQT and then my Level 3. It was all coming in - the more qualified staff, the better. But it was no different. It was such a good atmosphere, just brilliant. We were so close. We were all going through the same things and we were so supportive of each other.

Pat: It was a great time. But the world did change. We couldn't get parent help. Gradually more and more paperwork came in. It's much more pressure compared to what it used to be.

Susan: Yeah, it's not as easy now, to get committee members and help with events. But it carries on, with its heart and soul being community. That needs to be celebrated.

