

Play Safely

The First Ten Years: A Brief History 1983 to 1993

In the early 1980s, most outdoor fixed equipment playgrounds were not fenced and the equipment was outdated, potentially dangerous and unimaginative. In 1983 two Caterham mothers asked local parents what they thought about their playgrounds, and when many agreed that the playgrounds could be much improved, questionnaire results were sent to Tandridge District Council's Health and Safety committee for their consideration. There was no immediate enthusiasm for change. However, Central Government was at that time just beginning to encourage cooperation between local bodies and community groups, so a small, hopeful group of parents got together with the aim of working towards the provision of an up-to-date, inclusive, challenging yet safer playground for Caterham's children. With little idea as yet of how the playground was to be paid for, a committee was formed, the name Play Safely was chosen, and fundraising began at once. The Council officers in the main, quite understandably, did not believe that a small group of parents could achieve anything so ambitious and were at first lukewarm in their support.



The original parent group of Jane Pugh, Sue Chapman, Elspeth Dennis, Kathy Mason, Veronica O'Reilly and Heather Starnes was soon joined by Jean Pidgeon, Barbara Whiteford, Julia Meanwell, Sheena Wagner and Sue Close, and by other friends who wanted to help occasionally, when they could. Later on Rosie Jones, Joanne Stone, Claire Blakeney and others made big contributions to the work. The group met hundreds of times in each other's homes. Dads were reluctant to join formally but they helped in the background, babysitting, transporting goods and setting up tables. Their children became playground testers: on a week's holiday one four-year-old was happy to check out five playgrounds in two more progressive counties and his parents learned a valuable amount about good and bad play provision.

Play Safely enthusiastically held numerous craft parties, sales, mini-markets, a sponsored darts match, a painting competition, a Flag Day – but soon realised that five-pence-pieces collected in Smartie tubes by the Brownies were not going to provide the £60,000 that would be needed. That modest first fundraising drive would have to be for just two things: for expenses and, more importantly at that stage, for publicity.

Early in the project, Play Safely was spurred on by the shocking news in the local papers of the tragic death of five-year-old Sabrina Foster. Sabrina had fallen from a high tower slide onto the concrete below in a local park and died as a result of her injuries. The group all had children around Sabrina's age and many had taken them to that playground. Two Play Safely committee members attended the inquest on the little girl at Reigate Coroner's Court. They lodged a deposition with the Coroner stating that there had been official warnings from the National Playing Fields Association about this type of dangerous playground in plenty of time for recommended action to be taken which would have saved Sabrina's life. The Coroner, while being sympathetic, repeated the mantra that safety was the responsibility of the parents.

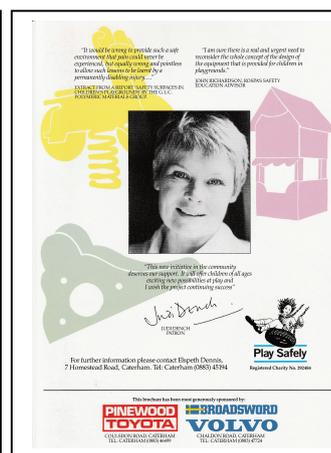
Play Safely started to collate accident statistics and found that everyone had a playground accident story to tell: of fractured skulls, a damaged spleen, a ruptured liver, broken limbs, a broken jaw, smashed front teeth, damaged knee joints . . . a disgraceful but unacknowledged catalogue of harm that would not have been acceptable for workers on a building site. However, “. . . but it was his own fault, he was climbing where he shouldn't." NO! A playground should be a place for challenge and experiment, where children can go out to play without risking their lives.

No one knew at first how much research would be needed for a radically new playground. Over the first five years of very hard work the Play Safely team learned about all aspects of good play provision, from site suitability to layout; from manufacturers' quirks, to safety-surfacing and equipment; how to cater for different age requirements; stranger-danger; types of play, danger points, activities to be covered; fencing against dogs, planting, water, essential signage, toilets, unhappy neighbours an endless list. They learned that they would not be able to offer *safe* play, only *safer*, as accidents can never be entirely eliminated.

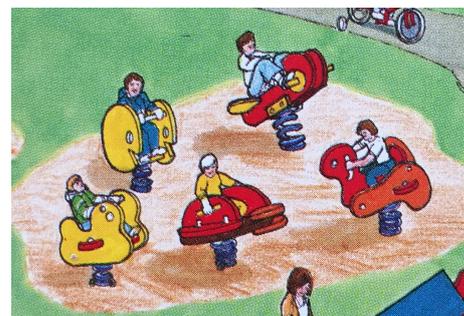
Fundraising almost threatened to eclipse the object of the exercise, which was research for and the development of the playground. First of all the perfect site had to be chosen and for this one of the team walked and photographed over the whole area: Timber Hill, White Knobs, Manor Park, Stafford Road, Westway Common, Queen's Park, Town End Recreation Ground, plus numerous small or otherwise impossible green spaces, just for completeness. The ideal site for a playground should be as central to the town as possible, in an attractive spot (it shouldn't be hidden away, like a bottle bank), where it is not visible over a busy road (to prevent children dashing across), where it is overlooked by some windows to discourage bad behaviour and where recreation, with all its paraphernalia, is encouraged. Even though Caterham is divided between Hill and Valley, few places have as perfect a site as Queen's Park. There is easy access from the Hill, and an idyllic walk up Waller Lane or a bus service for Valley people to choose from.

Three things spelt success over failure for the whole scheme:

- In November 1985 the group contacted Mike Halward of Milton Keynes, the foremost British playground designer of the day, who was willing to travel for no more than his expenses to start local groups off on the right track. Ten pages of notes from Mike's illustrated lectures guided the whole project, to be built on with experience over the years.
- Canvassing of all the leading businesses in the area for contributions brought up just one man Alan McGahan, the proprietor of Pinewood Motors, who understood that you can't raise money if you have none already, and gave a generous starting cheque of £500. Surrey Social Services were then willing to add a further £500. Into four figures, and away!
- When the group upped its sights to the big funders, BBC Children in Need gave £2,500. By then charitable status was becoming essential, and after some hard work the group achieved registration, with its own invaluable charity number and increasing recognition in Tandridge.



The Pinewood donation was used immediately to pay for this professionally produced full-colour brochure that was widely distributed and did much to validate the work of Play Safely.



Soon Play Safely had two greatly valued friends: Sir Geoffrey Howe, the local MP and Deputy Prime Minister; and Dame Judi Dench, who has a home in Tandridge District and generously agreed to be a patron. Dame Judi and her husband, the late Michael Williams, put on a concert at Caterham School reading love poetry, as their contribution to the funds. The event was predictably packed out! Sir Geoffrey, as a Cabinet Minister, was not able to be a patron but gave a quotation, with permission to use it over his signature, for inclusion in the fundraising literature.

In the course of working on their selection of equipment Play Safely visited the Windsor Sports and Play Equipment Show and discovered the very latest exciting developments in safety and play value. The Council officers, who were at last beginning to accept that the group was serious in its intentions, had to be persuaded to move away from using just one equipment supplier that had held a near monopoly with councils in the UK for decades. That manufacturer saw little need to recognise the huge amount of progress that was taking place in Britain and on the Continent. The Council officers agreed to this change of direction, and soon they had fully come on board and made Play Safely a joint venture with Tandridge District Council, the Council promising to match whatever sum the group raised.

From 1984 onwards the team had researched and met with many design companies and learned their philosophies, strengths and weaknesses. SMP, for example, stood for Staines Metal Products – and it had been decided that in the new playground there would be no slippery metal components to cause falls. SMP eventually custom-built a wooden cabin slide to Play Safely's specifications, with just one slippery metal surface!

Freeform's designs, which were built largely in concrete to teach awareness and caution, were more suited to inner-city 'bomb site' playgrounds, so the scheme they offered was rejected. Some firms with exciting ideas were prohibitively expensive. A French company's ideas were emotional but impractical. Play Safely wanted the climbing complex they proposed to have a vertical ladder giving access to the high, open platform of the fireman's pole so that toddlers would not be able to use it; on a vertical ladder the weight must be taken on the arms as much as on the feet, and only a slightly older child can do this. The firm insisted that a sloping ladder, which the youngest child could climb, was 'so much safer for the children'.

Danish firm Kompan's equipment was much liked, but Play Safely asked them to make some small adaptations to their toddler pieces before they were perfect. Many manufacturers' play-complexes, Mike had warned, do a bit of everything but nothing perfectly, so the committee worked with Town Art to design its own complex to Mike's standards. The group was occasionally asked to accept experimental pieces of playground equipment in exchange for a price reduction elsewhere, but firmly refused to do this. There was just one exception:

Queen's Park was to get one of the very first Richter basket swings

– a brilliantly simple innovation.

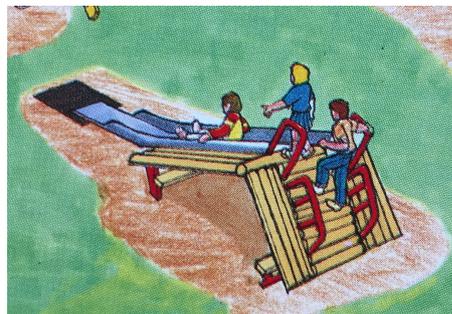


Fundraising continued apace, almost desperately, and alongside it design research. Awareness of the needs and entitlements of less-able people in general was becoming more widely recognised, and consequently none of the big sources of finance would consider an application that did not provide for children with special needs. So members of the equipment sub-committee visited Caterham's Clifton Hill School, St Piers School at Lingfield, and the Guildford Special Playground, to educate themselves on what adaptations would be best. They realised that these three places all had closed playgrounds with supervision; for a public, unsupervised playground modifications would have to be subtle and unobtrusive in order for them to be an including feature rather than discriminating.

Kompan offered to supply their multi-seesaw with a footrest and a backrest at one end for children less able to support themselves, but, Play Safely asked, why not at both ends, to eliminate the appearance of discrimination? This adapted multi-seesaw was very popular for years, the extra expense was absorbed and the children never knew the piece was for 'special needs'. Half the rockers had backrests added in the same way.

The standard cabin slide in SMP's catalogue was shown as being accessed by foot-wide log steps and a handrail; Play Safely commissioned a cabin slide from them with log steps that were three feet wide with two handrails, to allow an adult to climb alongside a less-able or timid child. Down the other side was a double-width slide with ground-level run-out that could safely be tumbled down two-at-a-time sideways to gales of laughter.

The Town Art complex was designed with a deliberately very low first walkway (a clattery bridge) to allow help from an adult walking beside the child if necessary. Before the next climb to a higher activity there was a break-away facility to let less-bold children change their minds.



Once equipment was selected to the limit of finance and suitability for the park, work began on deciding the layout of the playground and the surrounding landscaping, in consultation with the Council officers. Plans were professionally drawn up by local designer David March, which were expensive in the end, but worth it.

Babies Ellen and Joanne, two additions to the team of playground testers, were born during the height of the fundraising drive, but their mothers hardly paused in their contribution: the babies came along with them to meetings. Weeks of hard work produced stalls at every fair, fête, carnival, market and sale, with banners and display boards to illustrate the group's aims. Play Safely hosted 'themed' social nights and a barn dance, Jane appeared on the BBC Kilroy chat-show, Radio Mercury broadcast an interview, helpers organised a Fun Run and a Teddy Bears' Picnic in the park . . . and then the whole project was almost scuppered by an outbreak of hostility from local residents. The most virulent, who felt that the park, which they saw as an extension of their own front gardens, was being violated, formed a Queen's Park Conservation Society with the object of having the playground project stopped altogether.

When in March 1988 the first digger hit the turf their anger burst out in the press: "Rape of the greensward!" "Disneyland!" "Third World War defences!" they cried, and declared that the playground was being built on quite the wrong site – these women had failed to do their homework! The detractors knew the name of the very hard-working chairperson and used it in the press to attack her instead of attacking Play Safely. One aggrieved resident set out to prove that there was a right-of-way through the site so that she could get the playground banned from it.

The Play Safely group felt battered but unbowed. The land for Queen's Park had been given to the people of Caterham in the 1890s for their pleasure and recreation and had been provided from the start with a state-of-the-art children's playground, a provision that had sadly lapsed since.

Tandridge's Flagship Playground was finally opened by Councillor Mrs Patricia Banks on 1st August 1988. It became immensely popular as a place where young families could go for a pleasant outing free of charge and take a picnic, and opposition faded away.



The opening was not the end. Martin Askey, a local tree enthusiast, had the inspired idea of creating an educational ‘wild orchard’ all round outside the playground fence with a variety of non-poisonous flowering trees, with wild flowers beneath. In October 1991 Dame Judi Dench came to Queen’s Park and ceremonially planted the first tree, then joined the team and representatives of the Council in the Pavilion where, as a lover of trees, she made a heartfelt speech of commendation for Martin.



Other parent groups saw Caterham’s results and wanted to do the same for their villages but had little idea how to start: Play Safely invited them to meetings and tried to do a ‘Mike Halward’ for them as best they could, writing pages of advice and listing many mistakes so that they needn’t make them too.

In April 1991 an ITV filming unit came to the park to do a piece on good and bad playgrounds for Maggie Philbin’s ‘This Morning’ programme. On air Maggie Philbin said, just as a rainbow appeared over the playground:

“These children are lucky. They are playing on equipment which is both exciting and challenging, and more importantly, safety has been a key factor in the design of the whole playground. Queen’s Park Playground in Caterham is an excellent example of how a well thought out design can provide an exciting yet safe area for children to play in.”



POSTSCRIPT

Play Safely says:

In 2020 we thought it prudent that the charity should be wound up as it had achieved its goals and maintenance rests with Tandridge District Council.

Since the opening in 1988 we have kept a watching brief over the playground and periodically fund-raised for replacement equipment. The money from a successful Lottery Bid in 2008 was used to replace most of the safety surfacing.

The Play Safely committee is indebted to the many individuals, organisations and companies who provided practical and financial support over the years. At the very beginning, Mr David Warne for example paid £50 for the expenses of the playground consultant, Mike Halward. A supporter in Westway photocopied all our newsletters without charge. By agreeing to be our Patron, Dame Judi endorsed our project and played a significant role in supporting us. We would like to thank everyone else who has helped: too many to mention the names!

Our shared goal gave us a sense of purpose. It was simply to provide a playground for children which was safer and yet fun and challenging. 30 years later we are still delighted that the playground is well used and enjoyed by so many children.



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