

# How Did I get Involved?

Veronica Hanson

Sometime towards the end of 1964, Diana North rang me (she had my name from the Health Visitor) and invited me to a meeting at Mari Wyn Meredith's house. This meeting was called because some of the local children had applied to join the newly formed Ysgol Feithrin but had been refused because they were not Welsh speaking. Ysgol Feithrin Committee members were very supportive to us starting up a playgroup for English speaking children and to the idea that the Welsh language could be introduced to those children but they were not allowed, at that time, to do this themselves.

All the usual things happened. A committee was formed, premises found (shared premises with the Ysgol Feithrin, separate equipment), approval gained from Social Services and the group opened at the beginning of January 1965. I started off as a helper at the group but became leader soon after. The leader was Diana Manley but she resigned soon after we started. My son Christopher, who was almost four when the group opened, attended the group until he went to school in September 1965. My other son, Justin was born in 1966. I worked at the group until the end of the July summer term. Justin was born in August and unofficially came with me from October 1966 until he went to school in 1971. (My granddaughter, Lara, Justin's younger daughter, started at Benllech Playgroup in 2005 – forty years since the group opened).

I leaned heavily on publications from the New Zealand Playgroups Association at the start. I am not sure how I got hold of them. The ideas seemed good to me, free play, creativity and parents being involved. We introduced painting, percussion, lots of sticking, finger painting, sponge painting, dressing up, house play, water play, sand, story telling – all based on stuff I learnt from New Zealand. At this stage we did not have contact with any other playgroups or branches. I did join PPA and received CONTACT which kept me abreast of things and helped me keep my faith in free play, creativity and parents being involved. In those days CONTACT was all black



and white and was produced by Copyprint in Borough High Street.

We did have a complaint from one mother that we were not teaching the children to read – but we stuck to our guns.

After a while we moved from our original shared premises at the Goronwy Owen Hall to the Church Hall in Benllech.

After Christopher went to school in September 1965 I carried on at the Playgroup until the end of the summer term before Justin appeared and then took time off until the October half term. Justin came with me, in his carrycot, as a toddler, and at ‘real’ Playgroup age. Once he went to school we started a Mother and Toddler Group. Julia was helping me by now. In the early days everyone helping at Playgroup had to have a chest x-ray. Once it was announced that the free x-ray mobile service was ending we started to worry about the cost of this and hired a bus to take Playgroup people to Llanferres near Mold – the mobile x-ray van’s last stand. Slightly different focus for an outing.

After we had been running the Playgroup for some time, we received prods from people in the neighbouring County ‘Why don’t you form a Branch?’. Uh – What’s a Branch? Why? ‘They’ suggested we contacted all the groups

and invited them to a meeting at the Teachers' Centre in Llangefni. We did this and made acquaintance for the first time with Cathie Barrett, Barbara Howells, Barbara Thomas and Marjorie Dykins. I think we were a bit scared of all of them – they seemed to know such a lot and talked about things we had not thought of as we went about our daily business of running Playgroups. However, after some discussion, we decided to have this 'Branch'. Ivy became Chairman, Marilyn Runham, Eunice Lorenz, Barbara Gibbons and Diana Thomas were all very much involved. We organised meetings, invited speakers, set up a training course. After a while we began to hear things about 'Foundation Courses'. I nearly went on one at Kelsterton but the practical arrangements in arranging for small children to be cared for proved too much. Eventually we had our own Foundation Course, with Julia as Tutor.

Gradually PPA became known. We were invited to local teacher training courses. We were allowed to use the Teachers' Centre for our meetings and courses. We were asked to run a crèche at the National Eisteddfod in Bangor in 1968 (?). We met with Directors of Education and of Social Services to talk about Playgroups. We started going to the PPA AGM. (Eventually, of course, we organised it ourselves – but that's another story).

After a while I became Area Organiser – looking after the Branch and the Playgroups on Anglesey, visiting them, responding to their queries, etc.

In 1976 I went back to college to do the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course. This meant giving up as Area Organiser. When I had finished the year's study PPA was advertising for a Development Officer for our area. I applied for this job and to my surprise got it. A whole new era of PPA involvement started for me.

My memories from now on are a bit blurred. I think perhaps it was all too busy to remain clearly in my mind. I changed from working mostly with Playgroups on Anglesey to working with Branches and the County Association. County Chairman was Jean Gomersall.

We got involved with the legislation to encourage everyone with a disability to be integrated into the community rather than segregated into special schools. This involved a lot of meetings and visits to playgroups who were thinking about accepting a child with special needs, discussing provision, training, being present when NHS personnel visited to assess the viability of the idea.



As Development Officer I accompanied the Gwynedd representatives on the Wales Regional Council to Regional meetings. Early meetings were held at Llandrindod at the Metropole. Day meetings often took place in Shrewsbury. Pencerrig Country House Hotel near Builth was a popular venue. Julia, Anne Allan and I had a memorable journey back from there one evening in March, which I think was pre-Wales PPA though it is hard to remember dates. We endured one diversion en route – we were sent over a bridge with the water running OVER the bridge so fast that I really thought my car would be swept away. Then from Beddgelert on we encountered more and more water on the roads. We stopped to help one driver whose engine had failed in a flood on the other side of the road. With the help of my Damp Start he got going and ploughed on until we got to Rhyd Ddu.

Water was running from the whole mountainside rather like lava pouring from a volcano. Moving forward cautiously we came upon a Mini absolutely stuck with water pouring over its bonnet. We could not go past it. I tried to get out of the car to assess the situation but the water was over my wellies. The only thing to do was to try to go back, in reverse. I don't think this manoeuvre should have been successful but luckily it was. We tried the pub for shelter but having waded through deep water we were too wet to be

welcomed. We then knocked at the door of T H Parry Williams' house, currently being used as an outdoor pursuits centre and occupied that weekend by Aberconwy School. The teachers are at the pub we were told. OK. We set off back towards the pub but met the returning teachers who welcomed us, gave us beds and blankets and red-hot tomato soup, which were very welcome. Julia slept. Anne and I listened to the weather. We realised the rain had stopped but did not know till daylight that it had changed to snow and the countryside was totally white. However, the roads were too wet for it to stick and we made our way home a different way, avoiding the major floods.

For a couple of years we enjoyed a PPA Camp at Bala. The first year I think was for Gwynedd members. The following year we opened it up to anyone who wanted to join us. I cannot even remember the dates. I can remember families and dogs, children and parents having a go in canoes and barbecues. Celia lost her little boy at 5.00 am – we all panicked at the proximity of the lake but he was found fast asleep at the bottom of Celia's sleeping bag. Lilian and husband came with a three-piece suite to fit into their tent. Other campers were Marjorie, Stella, Barbara Howells, Julia, Celia, Martin Riley and daughter.

If someone jogs my memory I will remember even more.

