

Once Upon A Hill

adventures on Robinswood Hill





*“I just can’t believe we made it all the way to the top!
It feels so good being up here with all my friends..”*



Once Upon a Hill was a short co-produced research project carried out in 2021.

It was funded by the Brigstow Institute at the University of Bristol,
with support from the Inclusive Economy Initiative.

It was delivered as part of a longer-term research project
with the Gloucestershire Gateway Trust.

The researchers are indebted to the joy, enthusiasm and wisdom that all of the young
participants and their teachers brought to the project.

We also gratefully acknowledge the support of Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust
in contributing to our adventures on the hill.

This little booklet is for all of you.

Thank you.



Brigstow Institute
University of Bristol

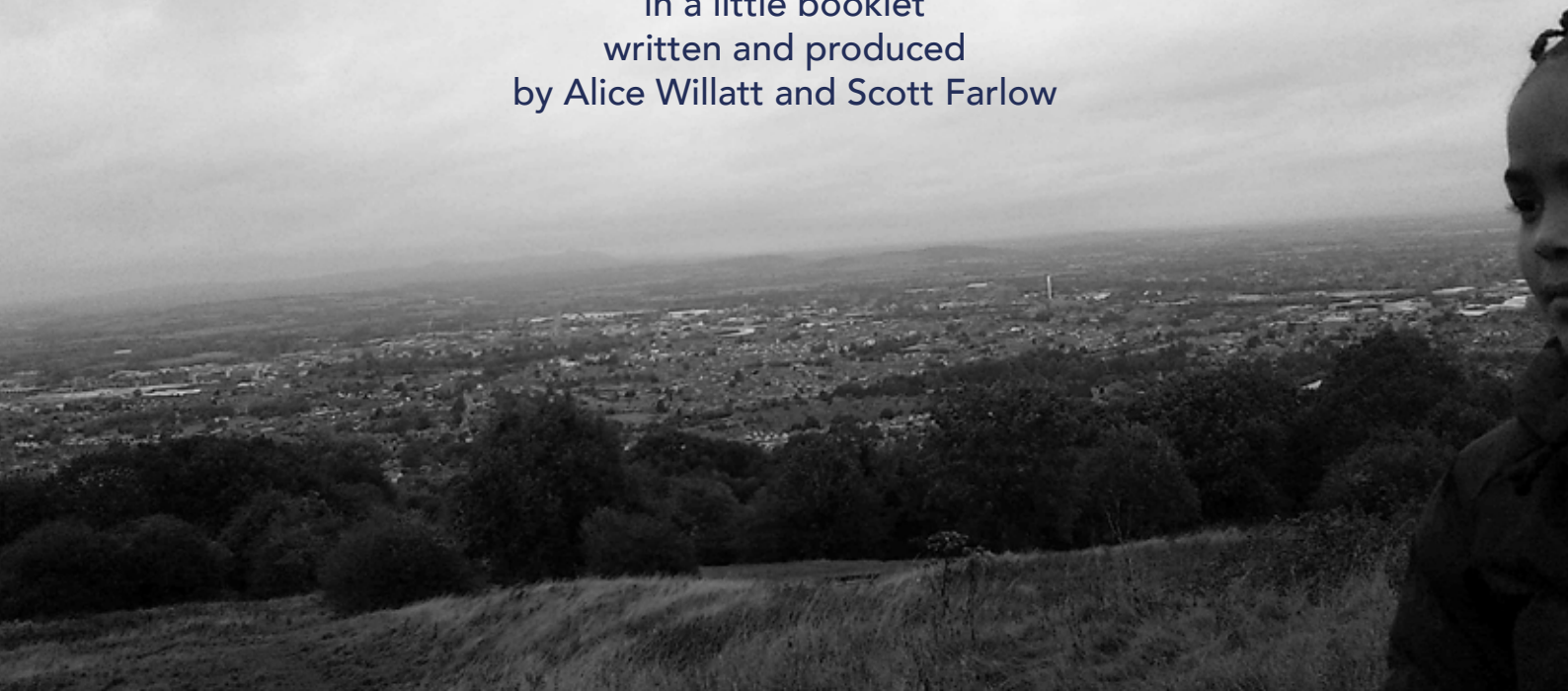


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adventures on Robinswood Hill

views of the world captured and expressed by local children
in a little booklet

written and produced
by Alice Willatt and Scott Farlow



Background to our project

Since 2017, Mary Brydon-Miller (University of Louisville) and Alice Willatt (University of Bristol) have collaborated with Gloucestershire Gateway Trust on a co-produced research project. The Gloucestershire Gateway Trust is a community development and regeneration charity that works with neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the City of Gloucester.

The research aims to support the Trust and their community partner organisations to strengthen community assets and ensure local people have a say in decisions that affect their lives¹.

Over the years our research has highlighted the importance of local green assets, particularly Robinswood Hill Country Park, a 100 hectare park to the south east of the City of Gloucester within walking proximity to many of the neighbourhoods where the Trust works. The park has woodlands, wildflower meadows, orchards, a quarry and rich array of wildlife. Robinswood Hill is 198 meters above sea level, with breath-taking views across the surrounding landscape, including the Malverns, May Hill, the Cotswold Escarpment, the Black Mountains and the City of Gloucester².

Our research shows that Robinswood Hill fosters an important sense of belonging and attachment to place, contributing to the identity and wellbeing of local neighbourhoods.


Once Upon A Hill

Our Once Upon A Hill project explores the significance of Robinswood Hill in local children's lives and their experience of visiting the summit.

Alice and Scott Farlow (an artist and poet) collaborated with the Gloucestershire Gateway Trust, local school teachers and Jenny Griffiths ('Return to the Hill' Project Officer, Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust³) to design an expedition to the summit with year 4 pupils (aged 8-9) from two local schools.

We provided some simple activity cards as prompts for the children to document their experiences using Polaroid cameras, audio recorders, poetry, drawing and creating colour palettes. Following the expedition we visited the children virtually in their classrooms to collectively reflect on their experience and discuss their hopes, dreams and aspirations for Robinswood Hill going forwards.

This little booklet of photographs (all taken by the children) shares some of the voices, experiences, observations and art works created by the children, alongside reflections on what we learnt along the way.



*“Beautiful nature, wildlife and a lot of colour.
I like the space and lots of freedom
and the views are amazing.”*



*“The rain on my face makes me feel calm...
....it feels safe and relaxing.”*



The day-to-day significance
of Robinswood Hill
in children's lives.



Robinswood Hill has an important presence in the children's day-to-day lives.

The children spoke about looking out at the Hill from bedroom windows, gardens, on the school commute and in the school playground.

It also features in their imaginations as a setting of local legends and myths, and they hold many curiosities about the Hill itself. How did it come to be? What was there before it? Why is it called Robinswood Hill?

Many of the children had visited the play area at the bottom of Robinswood Hill, and explored nearby trails on school trips. As we started out on our expedition they pointed to trees they had climbed in the woodland, benches where they had stopped for picnics and the sculptures they had spotted along the way. However, very few of the children had explored beyond these areas or walked to the summit of the Hill.

The prospect of walking to the top conjured a range of feelings, from excitement, anticipation and enthusiasm, to nervous uncertainty. For some it seemed far away, they weren't sure what they would encounter on the way or whether we would make it all the way to the top.







*“I loved looking down on the houses,
on my house,
and the places I know,
but also the hills further away from us....
it makes me feel big and small at the same time.....”*



Experiences of freedom and empowerment



The children played an important role in shaping the structure and temporal rhythm of the trip. They helped choose which paths we took to the top and stopped to explore curiosities along the way – the views, a fallen tree, a grasshopper, rabbit burrows and the formation of clouds moving across the sky.

They enjoyed departing from the routine structure of the school day. The trip also marked a break from the pressures of catching children up academically following disruptions to their education during the pandemic.

The children's experience of visiting the summit of the Hill conjured a sense of freedom and empowerment. This was offered through their encounter with an open and expansive space, which differed from more managed or confined outdoor play areas, such as school playgrounds, gardens or play parks. At the top many children spoke about feeling "powerful" and "free" as they ran from one side of the summit to the other, being buffeted by the winds, and taking in the sweeping views. The trip gave them a different perspective of place, which many found exciting and intriguing. They were able to look down on the "tiny" houses and neighbourhoods where they live and get a sense of how these connect to the landscape that stretches beyond them – the City of Gloucester, Malvern Hills, May Hill, the Black Mountains, the Cotswolds and even the Severn Bridge.



*“I feel powerful.
It feels like I am king of the world
up here.”*



*“I love being up here and
watching the clouds moving across the sky.
Everything looks so beautiful and peaceful.”*







“I found it fun because I could take pictures of my friends and it was really fun meeting new people and playing with all of my friends because I don’t usually do this at break time or lunch time, I usually play on my own.”



Shared experience,
connection
and collective accomplishment



The children spoke about their sense of accomplishment and pride that they had reached the summit. They spoke about overcoming personal challenges, such as feeling exhausted from the uphill climb, being scared of heights, or being stung by nettles.

This positive sense of achievement seemed to build and strengthen connections between classmates and friends. Many chose to take photos that captured the bonds between them, and one child gifted their photographic print to a friend who had kindly supported them on the way.

Back in school they reminisced about their experiences. Some remembered linking arms to get through muddy bogs. Others celebrated friends who had encouraged them and pulled them up when they fell down. And others of being given a dock leaf to relieve the sting from a nettle.

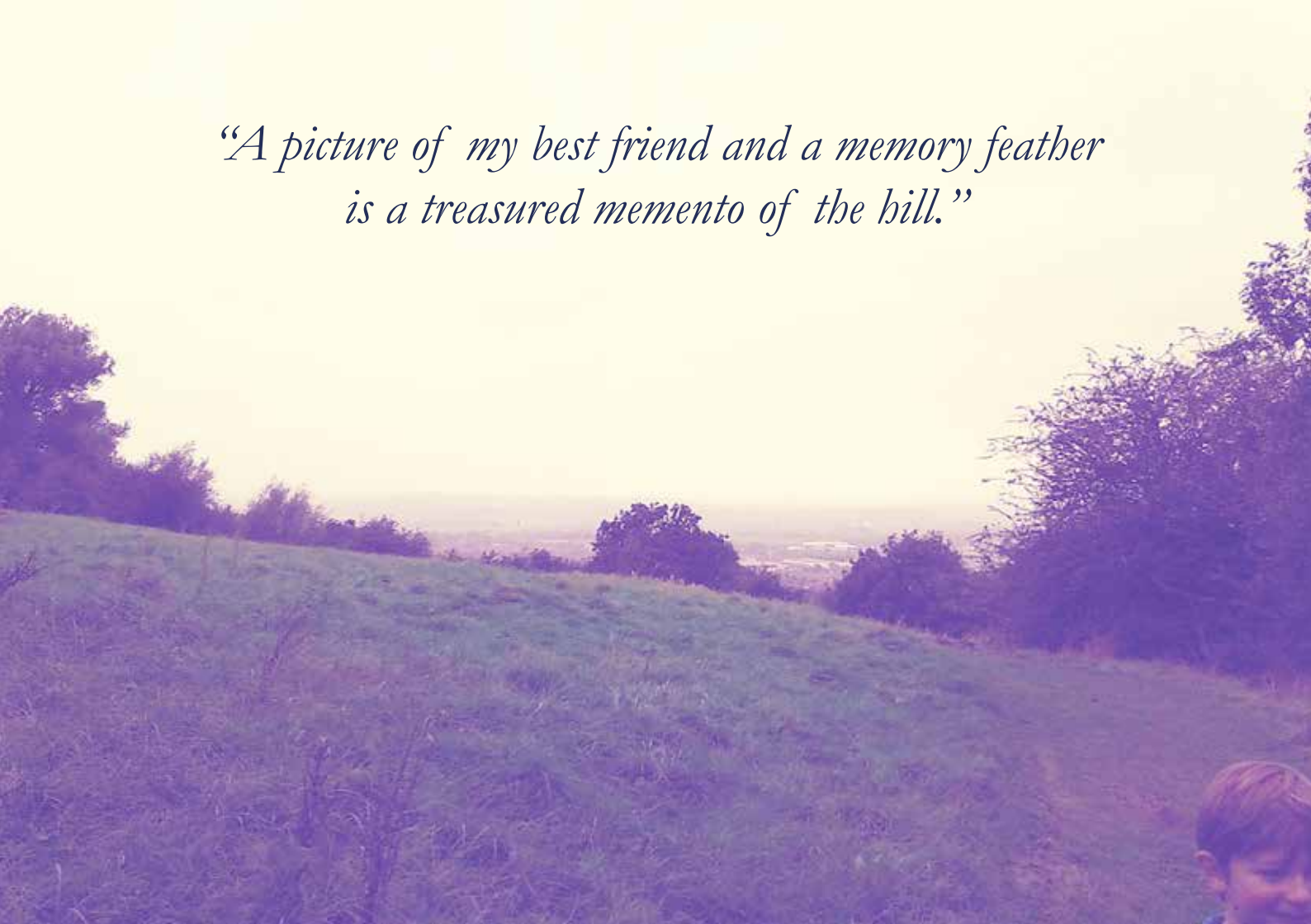




*“It just really feels weird to me
because I have never been this high...
I’m usually scared of heights
but I’m not scared of this place.”*



*“A picture of my best friend and a memory feather
is a treasured memento of the hill.”*







*“You can experience lots of walking and exercise here.
At the top you can see the views and all that’s going around,
and you can hear birds chirping
and all about nature.....”*









*“I’m hot then cold, then hot, then cold...
it’s the wind up here... it’s so exciting!”*



Sensory experiences of nature



Many of the children described their enjoyment of particular sensory experiences; from the excitement of the “loud” and “powerful” wind to the sense of “calm” that they felt whilst lying in the long swaying grass.

While many of the children wanted to take photos at the top of the Hill, a couple of the children chose to document the paths lower down.

One girl took a photo looking up at the tree canopies half way down the Hill because they made her feel “calm” and “peaceful” as she lay beneath them.

Another took a photo of his fingers covered in blackberry juice because he wanted to remember their “delicious juicy flavour”.

Others took photos of intriguing things they discovered – an oily feather left behind by a bird and a snail with an intricately patterned shell.

When making the colour palettes, the children respectfully collected natural materials and repurposed bits of rubbish to create a visual representation of the landscape. The photos, art work and poems they created captured the sights, sounds, flavours, personal connections and tactile experiences that were so central to their enjoyment of the trip.













*“A great view.
Lots of fields and lots of mountains.
And lots of earth....”*





Reflections from an Artist

What struck me most as I recalled our explorations of the hill was the unbounded joy, excitement, curiosity and imagination of the children as we explored, for a brief moment in time, a prominent bit of landscape in their little pocket of the vast universe. This was their homeland.

It might seem that this booklet of photographs and reflections tells only one version of the story of our collective adventures. However, if you look carefully and think deeply, there are many stories being told here. For the photos are not merely snapshots, they are rich in narrative, meaning and expression and augmented with spoken and unspoken observations about the qualities, nuances and feelings evoked by this elemental experience.

Each photograph is an honest record - not just of what the children saw, but of how they felt about it. Each picture is part of the story of their lives. What you are now looking at is palpable evidence of how the children see the world they inhabit and what they value of it. Each picture is a record of that moment in their landscape and in relation to each other in the context of the great beyond. What is particularly noteworthy about these pictures is the multiple scales; from the vastness of the sky and views to the far distant horizon to the intimacy of trees, snails, hands and the everyday tenderness - the humanity - in their portraiture. Thus, the stories here are really about the context of connections and how these everyday things shape our lives.

Each picture is an expression of the photographer - the child - in relationship with the world and their peers, to nature and the elements, to history, myths and legends, to their past, the present and the future and - significantly - to their feelings.

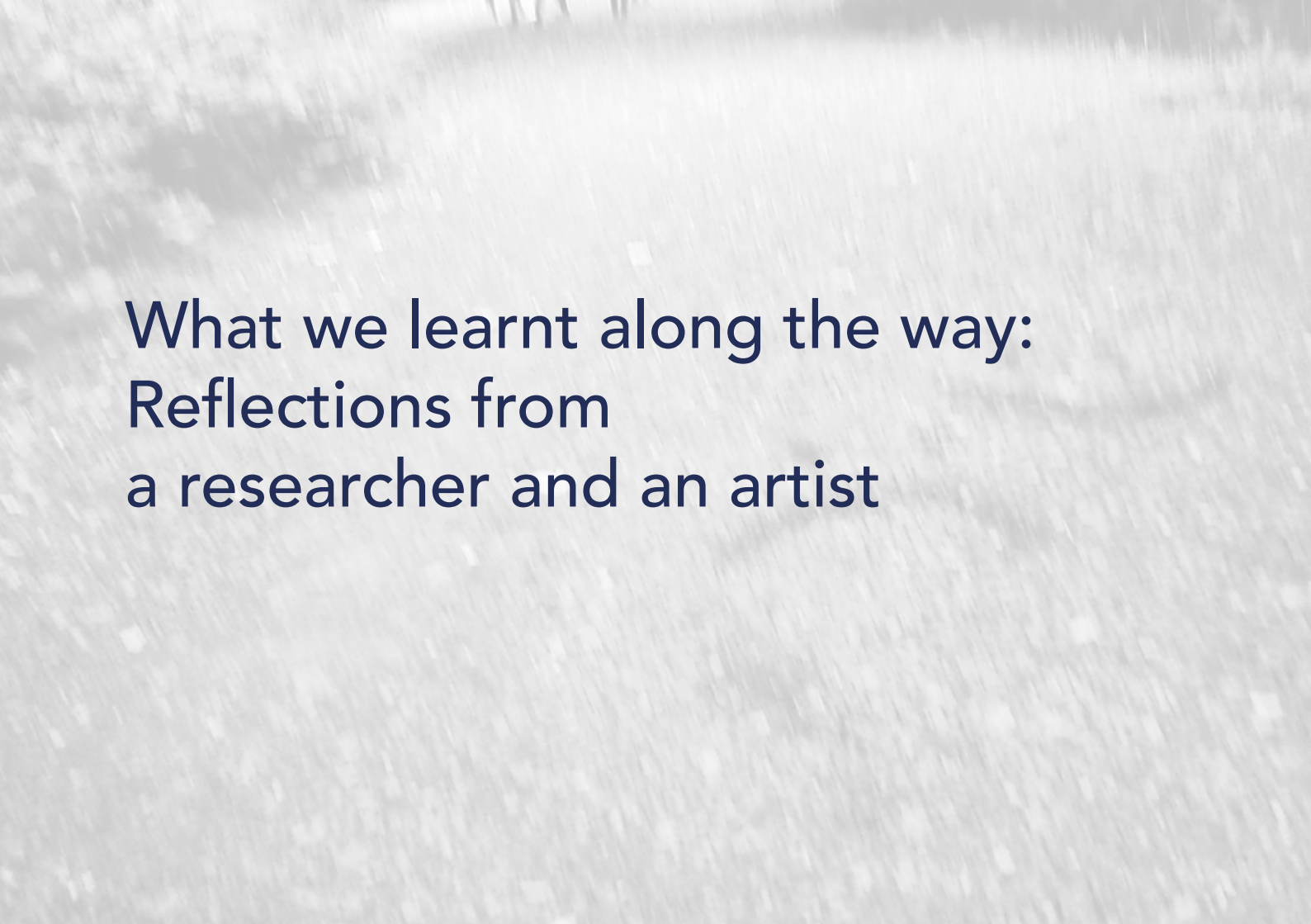
Observing and experiencing the world through their eyes is powerful. And necessary. When looking again, I sense what these special people have already been through in their young lives and, critically, the unknowns of what is to come for them.

The 'distant immediacy' symbolised by so many of these pictures is not so distant; it is here running through these pages and, fundamentally, it is held everyday by each one of the children. And, although the pictures might present a grainy, unclear, unfocussed or intimidating sense of the unknown, actually they serve to remind us all of the light, beauty and goodness in our lives. For they are life. Despite the fears and uncertainties that most of us feel, the children are showing us the value of our innate connection with the world, of friendships, of learning together, of compassion and empathy, of the splendour of nature. They are reminding us of our significant insignificance, of the need for humility and empathy and their profound importance in our lived experiences.

Each picture is an intense beacon of hope. This, to my mind, is their potent message to us. It is a small reminder and a blessing. For which I am grateful.







What we learnt along the way:
Reflections from
a researcher and an artist

Take a child-directed approach. This gives children space and agency to explore the natural environment and be receptive to the sensory experiences and imaginings that it offers.

Allow room for the unexpected. For openness, curiosity, questioning and freedom to discover. The value of meaningful encounters and exchange in the spaciousness of the landscape should never be underestimated.

Be open and responsive to the children's experiences **in the moment.**

Be flexible. Keep activities simple, unstructured, thoughtful and meaningful.

Trust in the process. Go with the (children's) flow. Trust them. Appeal to their imaginations. And really **listen.**

Learn together. Learning together about nature, our world, one another and ourselves, through exploration and sensory experiences is profoundly important, alongside more formal educational approaches.

Dispel the idea that adults are the 'experts of the hill'. **We all become experts** and advocates through collective exploration and shared learning.

In the spirit of Joseph Beuys⁴; the photographs and reflections clearly demonstrate that **'every child is an artist'** and invite us to participate in conversation about the conditions that give meaning and shape to our lives.



*“It was relaxing feeling the grass around me
being pushed over by the wind.”*



*“...lying down
and looking up
at the shapes in the clouds
and the patterns and colours,
the light and the shadows....”*





“

*H*elping people with disabilities.

*I*n Robinswood Hill there's a lot of nature.

*L*eft behind for us to observe are quarries.

*L*ying in a thornbush is a family of rabbits feasting on
their meal...

”



*“It is fun up here.
It is really really really green.
I love to explore it.
And I love listening to birds chirping and singing,
I love listening to the sound of the wind blowing
and it is super super fun.”*







Final thoughts

Although this was a small-scale project, it highlights the importance of providing children with opportunities for creative exploration, discovery and connection on Robinswood Hill.

It suggests that opportunities to visit the summit of the hill are particularly valuable. The shared experience of journeying to the summit forged close relational connections between peers, a genuine sense of accomplishment and increased the children's confidence in their capabilities.

Their experience at the top of the Hill conjured a positive sense of connection and belonging to place; the landscape of their home. The children experienced beauty, excitement and freedom in encountering the familiar from afar - looking down at their neighbourhoods and the wider cityscape - but also in relation to the less familiar; to the expansive landscape, the vast sky and the hills and mountains that stretched beyond.

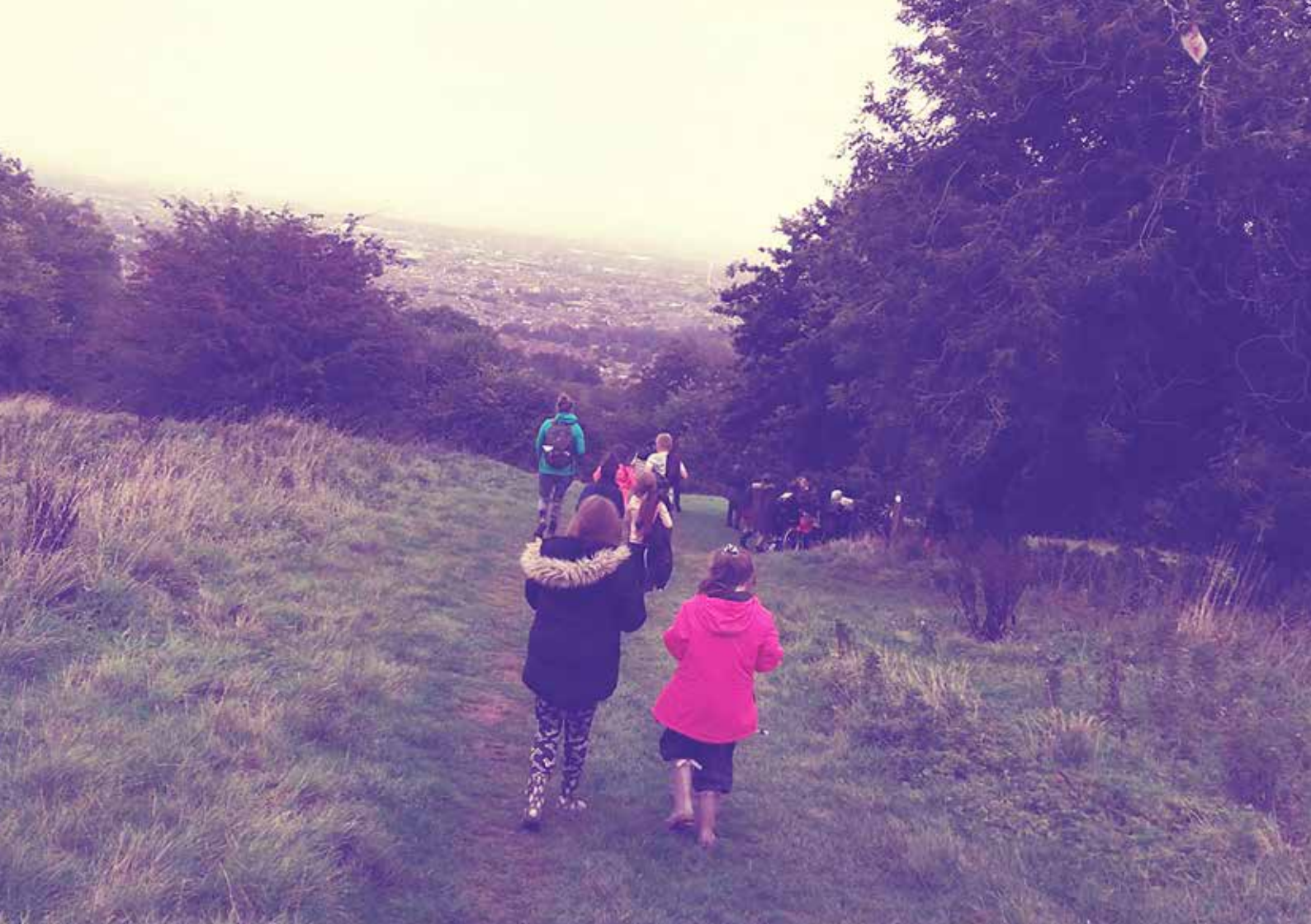
The direct contact with the elements enhanced their encounter with the hill and fueled their imaginations. The children imagined the worlds beyond the far horizon, those above the clouds and within the rocks beneath their feet. These thoughts inspired exchanges about time, memory and legends.



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What next?

Our project affirms the importance of the Gloucestershire Gateway Trust's established partnership with the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust who support local communities, schools and families to visit the hill and connect with nature.

The voices, experiences, exchanges and artwork created by the children have been shared with the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust to feed into the "Return to the Hill" partnership.

They have also been shared with a working group recently established by the Gloucestershire Gateway Trust, which is exploring the possibility of creating a public artwork on Robinswood Hill that represents and celebrates meaningful connections between local communities and this wonderful landscape.





Find out more

Please feel free to get in touch with Alice, Scott or the Gloucestershire Gateway Trust if you would like to know more about this project:

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Scott Farlow - swfarlow@gmail.com

Gloucestershire Gateway Trust - office@ggtrust.org

References & Further Reading (Endnotes)

1 To read more about the research, visit the publications section of Gloucestershire Gateway Trust's website:

<https://www.gloucestershiregatewaytrust.org.uk/publications.html>

2 You can read more about the history, nature and geology of Robinswood Hill Country Park on this leaflet:

<https://www.gloucester.gov.uk/media/1749/robinswood-hill-leaflet.pdf>

3 You can read more about the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (a Community Foundation Partner of the Gloucestershire Gateway Trust), their work and their Visitors Centre at Robinswood Hill here: <https://www.gloucestershirewildlifetrust.co.uk/robinswood-hill>

You can read more about "Return to the Hill" here: <https://www.gloucestershirewildlifetrust.co.uk/engagement-opportunities-current-projects>

4 Joseph Beuys (1921-1986) was a highly influential artist, teacher and theorist.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/joseph-beuys-747>

*“The hill makes me feel relaxed
because the breeze is blowing in my face.
It is calm when no-one is shouting.
The quiet..... ”*







“ With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”*

from Little Gidding by TS Eliot



