

# A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF WOODCRAFT FOLK

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Foreword by Jeremy Corbyn

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# Who are these folk all dressed in green?

Reflections on the first fifty years of Woodcraft Folk costume evolution

Annebella Pollen

The titular question, posed in a 1935 article introducing Woodcraft Folk, highlighted their costumed character as a key distinguishing feature. Their distinctive appearance singled the group out among other youth, hiking and camping collectives in the interwar years, and the original colour and style can still be seen echoed in the badge-laden dark green drill shirts and 'Woody Hoodies' worn at local and national meetings today.

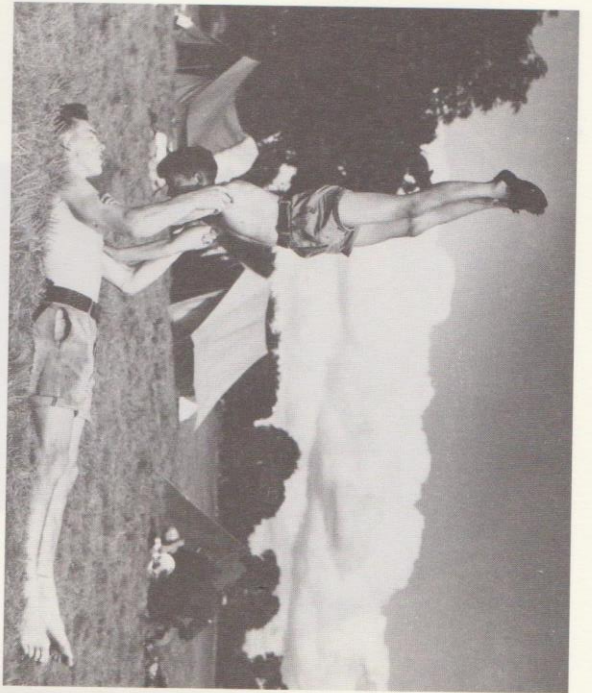
Early instructions prescribed a green jerkin and shorts for boys and a leather-fringed frock for girls; each needed a decorated or plaited leather or raffia belt and a sheath for a camp knife. Girls should add a coloured wimple (headscarf) or leather headband. Importantly, all elements had to be home-made. The word



Early green leather-fringed jerkin with decorative embroidered collar and sleeves and a hand-stitched belt

'Woodcraft' is sometimes mistaken to mean the literal making of things out of natural materials, but here the message is correct: the importance of stepping outside of commercial culture was an essential part of early Woodcraft Folk ambitions; the hand-made 'livery of green' was intended to be anti-industrial.

The jerkin, usually laced at the neck with a leather thong and with leather fringing to resemble buckskin, shows the debt that early Woodcraft Folk owes to its core influences. Most immediately it references the style of the green-shirted Kibbo Kift (page 14), from whom many of Woodcraft Folk's founder members had split in 1924, but it also recalls the influence of



artist, author and naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton and his turn-of-the-century system of outdoor youth training, based upon romanticised aspects of Native American practices. All the woodcraft groups emerging in Britain after WWI adapted Seton's ideas to some extent, not least his ideal that there should be 'picturesqueness in everything', including dress.

The green costume was worn alongside ceremonial regalia donned by office-holders in early Woodcraft Folk camps; the Herald, for example, wore a blue and gold tabard with a cockerel to make announcements. At a fire-lighting ceremony, the Keeper of the Fire wore a red and black tabard with an emblazoned tree. In good weather, clothes were kept to a minimum; boys were encouraged to strip down to shorts. In his 1931 manual, *The Green Company*, Leslie Paul instructed members in no uncertain terms: 'You must sunbathe at camp' (page 144). Costume was practical, but also symbolic. As well as levelling out social differences,



Above: Shorts were encouraged for sunbathing (screens were erected to protect girls' modesty). Below: A ceremonial Keeper of the Fire tabard

Early Woodcraft Folk shoulder tabs. The red Blackletter embroidered font was later replaced with a Modernist sans-serif style of lettering



it announced membership through sewn-on shoulder tabs, which declared Woodcraft Folk in embroidered Blackletter font. Its making and decoration demonstrated practical and artistic skills. Not only was the costume never 'uniform' in the military sense, it also lacked uniformity in practice. Early photographs and surviving examples show large scale customisation and individual creativity, from the styles and colours of the hand-stitched badges (page 138) to additional decoration on collars and cuffs. Folk names (page 50) were tooled and woven into belts, with allegiance to other organisations and campaigns shown through badges and the red neckerchiefs of the International Falcon Movement (page 70).

The importance of full and correct costume-wearing was repeatedly emphasised in early publications, where it was described as a duty of membership. The centrality of costume to the movement was especially highlighted in 1937. The Public Order Act outlawed the wearing of political uniforms in public meetings. Given Woodcraft Folk's explicitly anti-war and anti-fascist agenda, the movement faced and urgent need change their either costume or their constitution. The decision to change Woodcraft Folk policy – towards broader educational rather than political aims – rather than lose their characteristic green garb shows the fundamental significance of Woodcraft Folk's collective identity.

By the end of the 1940s the costume had straightened into a regulation green shirt and shorts with an optional green beret. The off-the-shelf kit was part of increasing desire to shape the Folk into a respectable mass movement with all decorative, symbolic – and some might say cultish – elements eradicated. At twenty-five years old, the movement resolved 'that we would dress as becomes our age' and that the organisation



A young member is served food while dressed in a Woodcraft Folk lac-up jerkin

should not be 'a small sect, quaintly dressed'. The editor of the Woodcraft Folk magazine of the day, *The Helper*, reflected in 1950, 'Maybe it was the explosion of the atom bomb that woke us to the fact that... our dress matters little compared to our work'. Yet the costume firmly remained, and its maintenance was still seen as important. Wearers were instructed by Basil Rawson in *The Woodcraft Way* in 1952: 'Keep your costume neat and clean so neither your name nor the name of the movement will suffer.'<sup>1</sup>

The debates over Woodcraft Folk costume, which have rumbled across the decades, have tended to reflect wider campaigns to modernise, recommended by those who, for example, also seek to eradicate 'folk names' (page 50) and camp ceremonies. These issues arise periodically and tend to split along lines of those who find such



Watford Pioneers dancing in a circle, 1966. Their matching green drill shirts are typical of Woodcraft Folk's post-war costume

elements archaic and alienating and those who argue that these aspects give the movement its distinctive atmosphere. The debate about why and how costume should be worn also reflects wider discussion about co-operation versus individual preference. The challenge to a neat group appearance by the youth movement of the 1960s saw this played out in practice. A resolution in 1967 to impose a more definitive 'uniform' that was 'not subject to the extreme fluctuations of fashion' included efforts to regulate a respectable length for girls' skirts and reveals conflict between Woodcraft Folk's collective tradition and young people's increasing desire for autonomy and freedom of expression.

Photographs of Woodcraft Folk gatherings over time show the infiltration of elements of fashion into costume despite attempts at regulation. Green shirts are a constant, but they are also constantly adapted, whether through Peter Pan collars and puffed sleeves in the 1930s, for example, or the accompaniment of sunglasses and flares in the 1970s. Woodcraft Folk practices are mobile and just as the educational ethos has bent and flexed over time, so too have the ways by which they fashion a new world.