This memory comes from a woman who grew up in the mining town of St. Helens in Lancashire. She shuddered at the thought of the danger that she and her friends were in when they played on the slag heaps, a danger highlighted years later by the Aberfan disaster. This urge to climb was repeated in almost every play memory.

One woman remembered climbing onto the balcony edge of her flat in Trellick Tower to wave to her friends. A man told me about clambering over the roofs of the warehouses and buildings around Bethnal Green. Others told stories of climbing up bombed out buildings. One very respectable woman spoke about jumping from one building to another from a window.

Climbing trees was mostly for people who grew up outside London. City trees were not for climbing I was told. ...no one told stories of climbing frames.
It was cool enough to play at night. So we used to do hide and seek by starlight. The elders would gather round and tell us stories.

The stories I was told of childhood play in villages in various African countries were vivid and marvellous. Kids made jewellery from seashells which they then tried to sell. They cooked potions and pretend food, lit fires and climbed trees. They threw stones at parrots as they flew away out of the jungle trees, made pots out of mud, played at being grown ups and roamed for miles.

Someone remembered this story of playing hide and seek in the starlight and of the elders gathering the children round to tell them stories. I had not heard memories like this before, so I started asking about playing in the dark. Generally people said they would play till they were called in for tea and then go out again till it was dark. In Africa, Bangladesh and Spain, playing in the cool of the night was standard procedure.

In some of the play sessions we run in Tower Hamlets we find that children did not play out in the winter because of the dark. We started to explore some ways that we could play with light.

We asked why only shopping centres and municipal courtyards should have fairy lights in trees.

How wonderful would it be to play on a winter evening under a tree of stars?
I saw the world as a three dimensional puzzle. I wanted to move around without touching the ground. I always climbed anything I could see. Parkour was how I saw the world.

The young man who gave me this memory grew up playing in a local park, doing amazing acrobatics on the equipment as well as impressively choreographed wrestling matches.

Some said that the young man and his mates were too old for the site, but as there was nothing else nearby for them at the time, they were allowed to stay.

He told me that he felt safe in the playground because he and his friends were away from gang disputes and people didn’t look at them like they were a problem or threaten them with ASBO’s.

He is now a regular volunteer on a playground where he shares his Parkour skills with the kids. Parkour allows him to carry on with his ‘Deep Playing’. This is a term playworkers use to describe the sort of play that brings you in touch with your own mortality, that gives you the cold sweats on the back of your neck as you pluck up the courage to launch yourself off a platform onto the tyre swing, even though you know that if you get it wrong, you could die.

Interestingly, this young man had also found a way to keep up his passion for rough and tumble play through martial arts.
I was working in Chicago when I first heard the story about children building ice houses. The voices jumbled together to describe how they were built and how they were used: children dressed in snow suits, snug and warm in their dens.

A few months later, a team of playworkers from Denmark visited Tower Hamlets and we shared more stories. Again, I heard about ice houses. The same little crevices in the walls to hold candles.

Then on the Snow Day in January 2009, a group of children in the house next door to me started to build an ice house on their doorstep. Ice and snow houses dotted up all over London that day.

The table in my kitchen was often a hiding place for my children, draping tablecloths to the floor to make a secret space. When he was a boy, my husband did the same thing under the same table. His mother had sheltered under that table during air-raid when she was a child.

In Libya: “We made homes from boxes and played in them for hours.”

In Africa: “We made homes from the stuff we found around us. We played there.”

“We made dens on the bombsites, there was loads of stuff that you could use to make a good hut.”

“We made forts out of the cushions from the sofa. Mom didn’t mind.”

“I grew up on this estate, but we all used to go over Tredegar Square and build dens in the bushes under the trees.”

“I used to make hideouts in the wardrobe.”

This image was taken at a Playday event. Playground builders, Design and Build, helped children build a ‘cardboard city’. Each home was different. Each child spent hours on the work with minimal help from any adult.
I grew up on the California Coast. There were a load of families who all used to get together and spend time at a beach house. While the adults sat and looked at the sea and drank wine, we kids would be off exploring and playing on the beach at sunset and into the night. Well, there was this one time when we kids had this really cool idea. There was a sort of deck out back of this house and it was sort of on stilts. The cars would park under it. Well our VW camper van was just parked at the edge of this stilted deck and we thought of this idea to bury it in sand. Now we must have had a thought that this was not such a good idea, because we went and told the adults what we wanted to do. They laughed and said 'cool'.

“Well we did it. And my folks came down and saw a pile of sand where the van should be and they realised that they had given the OK to this and they couldn’t say nothing to us about it! But they made us walk home that night and come back the next day and dig that van out of the sand dune we had taken so long to make.”

More sand stories:

“I remember the day that we all went to that fancy beach in France and us kids started digging a hole. And the hole got bigger and bigger and all the French families were looking at us like, ‘that’s not cool beach behaviour’ and we kept on digging and the French kids stood and watched, desperate to join in.”

And another child to a playworker:

“I remember the days when this playground was really good and there was nothing here but sand and we just dug holes’. The child was actually remembering when the playground was being rebuilt and the only thing on site was the sand for the rebuilding.

Now the advice is that both sand and water present unacceptable hazards such as hidden needles and dog poo. Both children and parents consistently ask for sand and water in public play areas.
"We pulled a door off a busted-up car and climbed onto it and sledged down the grassy hill, swerved to avoid the road at the bottom."
"I made these kind of go-karts, we would take them to the top of the hill..."
"I used to climb up high, high, high to pick mangos from the neighbour's tree."
"We used to play on them bombsites with all that broken glass and mangled metal."
"We used to catch a bus up to Hackney to the marshes and wade through all that stinking mud."
"... beside the railway. That was fun."
We hear so many times that children are not able to play anymore. People I talked to often finished by saying: “Children now just want to play with screens. They just watch TV or play with their computers.” We should be very careful before we blame children for their reluctance to play outside.

This picture shows a bucket full of glass we picked up from a play site on an estate. It had become a place for adults to throw their bottles. The playgrounds that we build for children often only encourage one sort of play. They are bent metal you can only climb in one way. The elders I spoke to agreed:

“You can’t do nothing on them silly little bits of playgrounds.”

We have also got into the habit of separating out younger and slightly older children and relegating teenagers to rather unpleasant youth shelters or sports activities. Again, the elders get exasperated:

“We all went off together. Even when we was little ourselves, we looked after the babies. We would all just go off and play together. We didn’t have ‘teenagers’ then, they played with us an all. I used to still play out even when I had left school and started to work when I was 14.”

Over recent years, playspaces have even become a liability. The house nearest a playground often commands the lowest market price.

I would argue - and the people I talked to agree - that a community that accommodates and welcomes play is a happy one. We need to integrate play into every part of our society.

I look for successful playspaces wherever I go in the world. One that I found in the Lower East Side of New York had tables and benches for elders and parents near the entrance, a toddler play area that seeped into a more challenging one, that seeped into a ball court. All ages were at play in their own ways and looking out for each other. Written in large letters on the brick wall was the word ‘play’.
In almost all play memory sessions with parents of young children, the issue of dogs came up. People would be sharing their memories quite happily and then stop and say that they could not let their children out to play now because of the dogs. They said they could teach children to manage roads and they had a strong feeling that ‘stranger danger’ was exaggerated, but dogs were a real nuisance.

It’s true that dogs have been trained to bite and hold onto expensive playground equipment. Dogs do run off the lead and run up to children. And of course, dogs are allowed to foul any area of grass. Where playground fences have been taken down, play areas are fouled and open to roaming dogs. Even where playgrounds or grassed community areas are fenced, dogs are let in and allowed to run around, foul and are then lifted out by their owners.

It is clear from the people I talked to that it is not TV and computers or parental fear that often stops children playing. More often it is the dog and its mess that mean that children in Tower Hamlets are not out playing as much as they could be.

Of course there are many conscientious dog owners, but this is of little compensation to the parent who has just been remembering their playful childhood and is inspired to take their toddler out to roll down a grassy slope only to find...
"I grew up in Texas. We used to roam a lot, my friends and I. We would go out for long days playing and come home when it was time for food. On the way back home one day we were walking over the pipe that spanned a ditch. We did this every day. But on this one day, my buddy slipped and fell. He tumbled into the ditch and there was a nest of rattlesnakes there. Well he got bit 26 times. We ran to get help and he was taken to the hospital. He survived OK. We still used to balance across that pipe after that though."

I was recently visiting a little fixed playground space for toddlers. I looked at the tiny balancing stumps and beams and thought how unimaginative and unchallenging they were. Fortunately I watched a little longer. A little lad of about three marched up to the balancing row and gingerly stepped up onto the first stump. He teetered and tried to make the second one, then he fell. A few inches only, but a fall none the less. He was frustrated, but he started again. Each time he got a little further. Each time he fell it was a massive blow to him. But he would always go back and try again.

What was going on in his mind? Were there rattlesnakes of the imagination beneath these tiny stumps, or was he just practicing in case he spent the later years of his childhood in Texas and needed to cross a pipe over a ditch?"
follow the storm drains

Many people told me how they would swim in the canal, swing into it from ropes or jump from the bridges.

One woman described how she had lived in a house with a garden that ran down to the canal and had been taught to swim by her dad who tied a bit of rope around her waist so he could pull her out if she went under. The canal must have been revolting, filled with dumped metal and waste.

I heard stories from Bangladesh about swimming in water holes:

“While we were waiting by the water for Mum to come and teach us, we used to build little mud houses for puppies and kittens and the naughty boys used to chase the girls with water snakes.”

“My mother used to take me swimming all the time in the water hole. It was beautiful and we would spend hours there. It was only when I was a grown up that I found out about the water snakes. I wouldn’t let my children swim when I went back for a holiday. But none of us ever saw a water snake. I don’t even know if they were poisonous or not.”

“I grew up in New York State and we had this game. We used to play in the storm drains, long tunnels that were a kind of overflow system in bad weather. We would follow the drains back through the town and find a manhole cover and lift it up and ask passers by where we were! We also used to follow the drains the other way and find large pieces of polystyrene and make rafts from them and float out in the river.”

The picture is a family snap. The kids had dived down to see if there were boulders under the water that could hurt them and they made sure that everyone knew where it was safe to jump. They did this of their own accord, no adult had asked them to do this. They did not goad each other into jumping before they were ready.

Watching the boy frozen in the air his friend below sees a moment of fear and excitement, flying and fear of falling. They’re both waiting for the impact and the explosion and already wanting to do it all again.
I grew up on the flats. We all played out in the open at the bottom. All the families looked out for us. There was a feeling of something bigger than community. It was ‘communitisation’.

The groups that met to talk about their play memories included people born and bred in the East End as well as people who spent their childhoods far from London.

One of the exciting things about these play memory groups was when the participants shared play stories with each other and realised how similar they often were.

One man told me this story. He recognised the parallels between his cheeky, mischievous, creative, rambunctious ‘playhood’ in the East End of London and the stories other group members told of their childhood in the African villages.

It reminds me of the role played by adventure playgrounds. A community develops in such spaces that is tight enough to outlast feuds and passions and crazes and differences. It is a community in which children carry authority.

Like the ‘playhoods’ in the village and in the area round the bottom of the tower block, where the only thing that was important to those children was play. Children lucky enough to have access to adventure playgrounds now have ‘playhoods’ built around community.
As I gathered play memories I realised that almost all the stories I heard had an element of foraging to them. Children did not grow the things they ate during their playing, they liberated them.

"I stole the rhubarb from the neighbour’s garden. I would sneak away and eat it, raw. It made me feel a little ill, but I kept on doing it."

"Of course we stole apples. We called it 'scrumping'. They would chase after us if they saw us. That was part of the game."

"We would rush out after a storm and gather the fruit that had fallen from the tree next door before the neighbour could get to it."

"I would climb the mango tree that belonged to this cross man and steal the fruit. Stolen mangos tasted better."

"What do you mean did we steal fruit? It wasn’t stealing! After all that work of climbing the tree it was only fair that you should have some fruit. It belongs to the earth. It belongs to all of us."

"I took gooseberries from my Grandma’s garden. I didn’t like them so much, but the redcurrants were like jewels and had a sharp wonderful taste."

Is there a hunter-gatherer in the playing child? The people I talked to said they didn’t stop playing to eat unless they had no choice in the matter. They sort of grazed on what was around.

Talking to a Senior Playworker in Tower Hamlets, she remembered how her only holidays had been strawberry picking:

"We even ate strawberry sandwiches for dinner on those holidays! We loved it. I am going to plant strawberries and tomatoes and beans all around here so that the kids can find them and pick them like we did."
"I grew up on a Malaysian beach. I played with sand and water and shells and fishing and climbing. It was idyllic.

"But that's not what I want to talk to you about. My child is now two, nearly three. I take her out to parks and to the swings, but I have really strong mixed feelings about this. It is great for her to be there with other children and I quite enjoy meeting other parents, but to me the playground equipment is really boring. You can't do anything with it once you have learned to climb it. There is nothing there that comes close to the variety of playing that I had as a child and all those sensations and sounds and smells. All the things I could find and do.

"It reminds me of the High Streets. Anywhere you go in England and in a lot of other places, the High Streets are all the same. The same shops, same logos and brands. These playgrounds all look the same. It's almost as if someone had got a catalogue and picked out stuff from it at random to put in these places. But that can't be right, can it?"

But another memory:

"I grew up on the west coast of Africa. On the beach. My play was amazing. Then I came here and was horrified at the play opportunities that my daughter had. She is older now so it is not an issue for her anymore. I found ways for her to play. But then one day I saw that they were going to put play equipment into the park opposite my house and my heart sank, thinking of all that brightly coloured stuff that was going to be put into the park and all the nuisance. Then it was installed and I began to hear the sounds of children playing there and see all the mums out together with their kids.

"The sound was like birdsong. It was beautiful."
“I used to sneak into my Grandma’s room and play with my delicate glass perfume bottles on the dressing table. They were iridescent and utterly beautiful to me. I remember the smell of those bottles. They smelt like her.”

Is it only girls who have these sensory memories? I can’t believe that it is, but no man has ever shared anything similar with me.

Lady Allen of Hurtwood recounts a wonderful memory in her autobiography. She talks of playing with porcelain shepherds and shepherdesses in her aunt’s forbidden front room. Inevitably she broke a figurine:

“A little china lady carrying a basket of fruit once came to pieces in my hand. I had no alternative but to tuck the pieces into my knickers and bury them later on in the fernery in the back garden.”

A friend of mine used to describe the games she played on the Persian rug in the hall of her house. The patterns on the rug were different lands and there were intricate and complex narratives suggested to her by the patterns and colour of the weave. In a similar way, I was mesmerised by the small world politics of the rock pools of the Kent coast where I grew up. I can still remember the smells of the sea and the almost unpleasant smell of kelp, as well as the fragrance of the sea caught in the bristles of the wind-sculpted tamarisk.

Someone told me how they were trying to grow cow parsley because of the heady memories the smell of it brought back to them.

Another told me about playing in a hay barn, pulling apart the bales and the smell and prickling warmth of the straw.

For others it was the smell of a struck match, or rain on hot earth.

Other people talked about sound: the noise of rain on a tin roof or canvas.

The sensory memories of play remain very powerful for us.
Did you ever make perfume from rose petals?

It came up in a conversation with some playworkers. Someone mentioned gathering blackcurrants and squashing them to make juice. Someone else spoke about remembering potions that they made from rotting twigs and leaves. And someone remembered gathering rose petals and making perfume.

One said:
“All at once I realised that the little girls in Shadwell had probably never gathered rose petals to make them into perfume and I organised a trip to gather some petals and bring them back to the site so that they could have this experience. Do you remember the smell as the oils from the petals were released?”

A similar memory sharing session prompted a playworker to take sycamore helicopters into a school playground where we were working. She spun a helicopter and the children watched as it swirved and dazzled through the air. They watched entranced as it floated elegantly to the tarmac. “Where did you buy that?” one child asked.
"Do you remember playing with Button Boxes? Every button had a history, a story. There was magic and light in those buttons.

I never tired of them.

As a child in the Sixties, I spent wet, drab afternoons sorting through button boxes. When I talked to people about their childhoods I found out many had done the same sort of things.

Button boxes were biscuit tins filled with the accumulated buttons and beads of many generations. In the one I played with, there were Victorian boot buttons like beady shiny eyes; mother of pearl glimmers; art deco wedding buttons - treasured objects with faceted rainbows waiting to be thumbed back into glory. They could be sorted and re-sorted and could be players in symbolic stories. I never tired of them.

This memory of searching for a button to mend a broken shirt or refresh a tired blouse or just playing with shape and colours could be overlooked easily, but once recalled it seemed to bring an indescribable, comforting pleasure for the people I met.

Children make collections of almost anything: sticks, stones, shells, sea glass, conkers, elastic bands, string, marbles. One Head of a Tower Hamlets school talked about her passion as a child for collecting crisp packets. Others talked of collecting stamps or tea cards or bus tickets. All have an interesting beauty which captivates children.
We all used to dress up in our Mum’s saris and play weddings.

“I remember wearing mum’s beads and dresses.”

“I wore fairy wings and tutu.”

“There was a kid who used to play on our playground who was the daughter of someone very famous. The press was always looking for shots on the family. But we made a pact with them that they would be like everyone else there. She wore a Mini Mouse outfit all the time.”

Many women described to me how groups of friends would borrow clothes and act out weddings or other family festivals. A willing suspension of disbelief allowed the clothes to turn them into an adult for a while, to find out a little of how it might feel to be grown up.

I know that boys enjoy dressing up every bit as much as girls do. On several playgrounds I have had staff laugh at me when I recommend a collection of suits, ballgowns and wigs, shoes, flippers, fright wigs and silly hats. They think the kids will be too tough and streetwise for all that. But put a dressing up box out and see what happens. The children pounce on it. They become less rather than more inhibited.

There was the boy who, on his last day at a very supportive and caring primary school, dressed up in a suit and trilby and had a moustache and stubble painted on his face. He was trying out a more adult role in the world and seeing how it felt. For him this was an important part of his transition to secondary school.

“I used to dress up as The Incredible Hulk. I understand now. Sometimes I would lose my temper, lose control and it frightened me. If I played at The Hulk, then it made sense of it all.”

“We all used to take it in turns to be the bride and the groom. We would make pretend wedding food. We would go through the ceremony, or our version of it. We played this for days on end. Sometimes the boys just joined us to eat the pretend food, sometimes they played along with us.”
A string of beads... To Polly: Like beads, clear-cut and constant, scenes of childhood emerge from my memory. I have strung some of these together for you.

I was almost tempted to call this project a ‘Play Memeries Project.’ A meme is an idea that seeps, like a virus or a catchy tune or a buzz word, into the zeitgeist, into popular culture and starts to effect a change in thinking, an evolution of that culture. So, remembering play in a community ignites a spark of insight into the past, which rekindles an interest in the potential of play in our communities today. By arousing the memories of play we can infuse a community with the understanding of the urgent importance of it and therefore support our children in experiencing it.

Instead, the title of this exhibition, and indeed the inspiration for the project, comes from the work of Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a woman who in many ways started the Adventure Playground movement. The quote is from a book that was written by Lady Allen’s mother, known as Sala who was asked by her granddaughter Polly to write down some of the things that Sala remembered of her childhood playing.

Sala and her husband Georgie had extraordinary childhoods which clearly shaped how they brought up Lady Allen who had such a wild and wonderfully rich play experience as a child, which in turn led her own work. When the adult Lady Allen looked back on her ‘playhood’ in contrast to the urban experience of children before, during and after the Second World War, she felt compelled to do something, to give children the chance to have a rich play life of their own. She invented an urban countryside for children through the Adventure Playground movement. She saw the need for adult support of these artificial countrysides and gave birth to the craft of the playworker.

We all have a play heritage. What is different about Lady Allen is what she did with this heritage, and what she gave to us as a result of her memories.
“By the end of the summer, Peter’s shoes were worn through, he had played so much.”

The Director of a parks district in a small town near Chicago told me he had grown concerned that he saw no children playing freely in his parks. He saw organised sport and families out on a Sunday afternoon walk, but no playing like he remembered it.

He brought in a group to talk about play. Play had been so long forgotten in this and other American communities that it was never spoken about, but watching each other remember, they understood what was missing.

The Preschool changed their teaching style and classroom layout. The Ice Hockey Coach brought in free ice time for all the kids so that they could just feel the joy of skating and playing hockey and forget the competitive drives of the watching parents. He spoke to the mums and dads as they hammered the perspex screen around the ice and urged their children to win. “They are children,” he said. “If you let them enjoy what they are doing, they will be happier kids and better skaters.” His daughter, when he asked her what she thought play was, said, “Dad. It’s what we do when you are not looking.”

The maintenance staff and gardeners stopped feeling that the parks had to be clipped and tidy and developed different ways of working. The Day Camp coordinator stopped timetabling and controlling the children with programming and let them choose what to do. Camp numbers soared and new holiday camps were started by popular demand.

The Park Director noticed something at the end of one summer. His eldest son had had new sneakers at the start of the holiday and by the end, they were utterly worn out.

“He wore his shoes out playing. He has done nothing but play and his shoes were not fit to wear anymore.”

The Director now takes these shoes with him to workshops and seminars and everyone, no matter how impressive an authority figure they are, is asked to feel the soles of these shoes so that they know how hard a 10 year old boy should be playing.
A man who grew up in America, told me this story, almost embarrassed that he had ever done anything so wild and dangerous. Yet his face told the truth. He glowed with remembered excitement.

“I loved fireworks. I guess that I started out with just little ones and got the bug. The fireworks got a little bigger and I started to play with bangers. Then two bangers at a time, then more and more. Then I would play stupid tricks like putting them in a metal trash can and putting the lid on and watching for the explosion. I would save up and buy some really big ones and I would never wait till Thanksgiving to set them off.

“Did my Mom know about it? Of course she did. She patched up enough burns!”

And other firework memories:

“We used to do ‘penny for the guy’ and as soon as we got any money we would be off to get fireworks, we could never wait till bonfire night!”

“I remember the unspeakable beauty of the fireworks in our friends back garden, and that smell...”
“We had fires all the time. We cooked on them.”

“I guess that my parents must have twigged at some stage. They would come back and find me with a massive fire in the back garden and I would say something like: ‘Oh I was just clearing up a bit’.”

“I used to sit by the fireplace in the winter and find myself mesmerised by the life of the fire and its noises and smells. The way a piece of paper would just become different.”

“I remember watching this one little girl as she played with a candle flame for the first time, melting wax, lost in her playing. I would never be allowed to do this at home. They would say it was a waste,” she said.”

“Then someone would turn out the light and the cake would come in with the candles lit for you. The smell of the smoke after you had blown out the flame. Just for you…”

“Bonfire nights, we would spend weeks gathering wood from anywhere we could get it, scrounging from everyone and sometimes nicking it too. We built the biggest fires. You couldn’t get close to them they were that hot.”

“We used to live with fire to cook our food and warm our homes. It was natural that it would be a part of our playing.”
a string of beads

A day out in Victoria Park with some bread and sugar and a bottle of sherbert water was our summer holiday.

"Mum's sugar sandwiches"

So many memories were shared with me about spending holidays in local parks in and around the East End and particularly in Victoria Park:

"We used to walk around Viccy Park. Lovely it was. You could go on these boat trips around the lake. There was motor boats and rowing boats and there was people fishing. In the playground there was a sand pit, there used to be a Parkie, a woman, she was fience she was, but she looked out for us. But my sister was frightened of her. This one time my sister was swinging round on one of them posts in the playground. She came off and landed on a spike and it went into her foot. She never made a fuss or let anyone see, she didn't want to go to hospital, see? She just went home quietly. We couldn't afford the doctor or nothing, so we'd just get on with it. They did away with the roundabout swing things. They was fine except when people were being idiots and going too fast."

"There were tennis courts and boats and that lovely pagoda. There's a white post there now. Oh and our rose garden was lovely there. There was fish ponds and a sundial and we used to play chase through the bushes."

"We would all of us get together and Mum would give us some sugar sandwiches and a bottle of water and we would put sherbet or liquorice sticks in it."

"They would give a us a few coppers for ice creams."

"We would take the number 8 bus. I used to collect them brown paper tickets. We would be looking after the little ones and be out all day."

"Some of the people down the street used to let us take the baby out and we would spend the day in Victoria Park together."

A playworker told me about his aged neighbour who used to bathe in the lake in Victoria Park. It seems that the lake was not only used for fun water playing, but for keeping clean as well."
Before the war, I used to go down the splash pools in Shandy Park. Stayed there all day.

I was mystified by people telling me that they used to play in the splash pools at Shandy Park. I thought that they must be mistaken.

I knew Shandy Park from some work that PATH (Play Association Tower Hamlets) had done and it was dry in the extreme. New designs for the play space had been wrangled over and eventually a reasonable playspace was created there. But what had gone before was dull. Nobody I spoke to in the play world remembered any water. But people’s memories were different. I kept on hearing stories about these splash pools. They seemed to have an important place in play folklore around the area.

A trawl of the historical archives of Tower Hamlets brought out several interesting photos including a splash pool in Shandy Park in the sixties, rectangular and frothing with children.

And this one from 1936. It is paradise! Vast stretches of water with tree islands. A design that, sadly, many people would consider too daring for us to try now.

I started asking people about playing in water and the stories flooded in. Bathing in the lake in Victoria Park; little lidos in the small public parks all over the borough and a large one in Millwall Park; municipal playgrounds, built in the early part of the twentieth century, designed for children to dip in and out of the water.

The memories I heard were so vivid and still important all these years later. Sadly, there is little chance of that being part of the play memory store of our children now.
Our 'Adventure' was in Itchy Park next to the Jack the Ripper pub. They called it 'The August'. Dan Jones was my playworker. It was lovely. We lived over there.

just wasteland really

This is a picture of an adventure playground that had to be pulled down because it was unsafe. It has since been rebuilt, however, the local kids kept stopping the playworkers to ask if there was going to be housing built on the land instead. That's what they are seeing happening on all the land around them.

I often heard about playgrounds that are long gone.

"I used to play on this playground we called it 'The Dumps' but it was just a piece of wasteland really. There was playworkers there. They used to make us waterslides in the summer and they would let us sell sweets from the lollie shop. We used to play there all the time. They ain't got nowhere like that for the kids round here now."

"I played all over the place. We went to all the playgrounds and parks. We even walked through the Rotherhithe Tunnel to Southwark Park. One of my favourites was the playground that used to be in St. Dunstan's churchyard, not Whitehorse Adventure Playground, I don't remember that being there, this was in the churchyard itself."

"I played on this place that was called Glamis. Then it closed down. There was this lady there who had a load of cats so it smelt of piss. We didn't play there much after that."

"I haven't thought about that in years, but I used to play on one of the adventure playgrounds in Bethnal Green: Weavers. I wonder if it's still there?"

We have lost so much of the space that was played in. The bombsites finally got turned into housing, every nook and cranny where children mucked about has gone and been turned into something.

I suppose that what we lost in the small local playgrounds, we gained in Mile End Park. That was a space of heavily bombed land and massive 'slum' clearance. It seems right that it should have been turned into a resource for the whole of the borough.
Do I want to talk about playing in my childhood? No, I don't. It was bomba. Bomba, falling all around. Death. No, I don't want to remember.

Approaching people to ask if they are prepared to share their memories is always a nervous moment for me. This gentleman was courteous but absolutely clear. He did not want to remember his childhood at all. I shook his hand and thanked him and turned off the recorder. I almost chalked it up as a failed interview. Then I began to wonder how many people who had grown up during the Blitz were carrying round the same sort of feelings.
The people I spoke to told me amazing stories. They described their 'playhood' in vivid detail. Then they talked about the Blitz.

There was a cheery resilience to their stories, and then they hit a block, and the conversation became difficult for them.

“We was evacuated lots of times but we always came back. Loads of us did. We wanted to be with the family, see? We would shelter down Bethnal Green tube. Some people had them Anderson shelters and stuff.

“This one time we heard a siren and I went to the shelter and my mate, she went off. We had been playing together, see? She went off to get something from home or something and she never turned up at the shelter. And when we came out, her house, it was in our street, it was gone, just gone.”

“There was a mate who was trapped in their house when it was bombed.”

“You never knew when... I don’t like to think about it... I can’t think of it now.”

They told me stories of how their fathers helped out with rescues and mothers took in families who had lost everything. Such things to have in a childhood.

But they said they played. They played really hard. They knew that they may not have much time. They never knew who was going to die next.

This picture shows a monument to children killed in bombing in the First World War. I had read about this monument, but until the recent regeneration of Poplar Park, I could never find it. Now it stands open to view, with the angel on the top looking over the new playspace.
Monday was washing day.

“I remember as a kid, as the oldest girl, I had to help Mum out on Mondays. I hated the smell of Mondays... ugh. I can remember it now. I used to have to fetch the washing bundles home that Mum took in to earn some extra cash.

“Packets of blue stuff was added to the wash to make it all sparkle white. Then there was the ironing, heating up the heavy lumps of metal on the fires.”

Then the kids had to take the washed, dried, ironed and folded bundles in a pram back to the customer. It was hard labour all around.

Cleanliness was of course not just a matter of pride. It was important that the children ‘never went out in dirty clothes’. Not so much as a matter of show, but as a safeguard for their health. Some people told stories of growing up in places where muddy soil and raw sewage mixed and where to get dirty was a real health hazard.

Washing now may be simple but listen to any group of playworkers and they will tell you that children today are not allowed to get dirty when they play and that they are sent out to play in new and expensive clothes.

This image was taken at Mile End Park Festival of Earth. The event was designed to encourage permission from parents for their children to come and play with mud and clay and experience the joys of getting good and mucky.
The great parades on Catholic holy days were exciting to all the children in the East End. The event and the spectacle seems to have been just as special to Protestant and Jewish children as to their Catholic friends. “We all lived together like. There was no problems between us. The Catholic kids would get all dressed up and parade around and we made little scenes out of bits and pieces what we could find. They was like a shrine I suppose and we built them outside of our houses and we’d cover ‘em up so as you couldn’t see ‘em and then charge people to have a look at what we’d made.”

Clara Grant was a teacher and philanthropist who worked in the East End in the early 1900s. She saw huge levels of poverty and deprivation but understood that freebies and handouts would not suit the proud nature of the East Enders. Instead she set up trading and bartering systems focused on immediate problems, for instance burial clothes for children, so that parents did not have to rob the living children of clothes to shroud their dead siblings as well as freguards to prevent unnecessary death and injury. Clara also set up ‘The Arch’. She had an Arch made that was put out in the street every month or so. Children had to be able to walk upright through The Arch to qualify for a little bundle of loose parts, bits and pieces of leftover, scrounged stuff. Children used these treasures in their games and in the creation of the festive shrines.

People I spoke to still remembered the handouts that weren’t handouts. They also told me how they tried to cheat the system, just for fun: “They always knew. Even if you changed coats with your mate, they always saw you was playing tricks. Lovely, it was. There’s nothing like that now.”
do girls still do that?

I heard about lots of traditional social playing. People told me stories of games with rhymes and rules, chants and clapping, dancing and skipping or throwing and catching.

One woman told me:

“We played on the pavement because it was quite a long walk to the nearest park. We would mark out hopscotch and similar games on the pavements with chalk.

“We had very complex games of balls against the wall with all the songs. I can remember them too (she sings ‘1, 2, 3 O’Leary’). The skipping games were very difficult and complicated as well. We stood on the pavement and stretched the rope across the street to a lamp post on the other side. One of us could then turn the rope. There were very few cars around at the time. I do believe that there was only the local doctor who had one actually and he needed it for his rounds. Anyhow, if we were skipping across the road and a car came along the car would stop while we went across the road and untied the rope. Can you imagine that happening now? No, of course you can’t.”

“One special game that I can remember that we played in the 1920s was that we would all somehow learn the words to the popular songs of the time and make up dance routines to them. Do girls still do that?”

At my kids’ school they invented a game about walking over maintenance hatches in the pavements. A one-er was OK, a two-er was good luck, a three-er was very bad luck and could only be undone by finding a two-er to cancel out its damage. However a six-er could be three lots of good luck or two of bad, depending.

The photo is from a play session we did on a very cold grey day in January 2009, just as the Snow Day turned to slush. We took bright powder paint colours with us to make warm and cheerful splashes of colour.
We were little terrors. We used to play ‘Knock Down Ginger’ all the time. We always picked the people who got crossest. They’d give us ASBOs now.

Oh I can’t tell you, we used to pay Knock Down Ginger! Do you know it? We used to tie string to a door knocker of a house, then sneak over to another house and tie the other end. Then we used to tap at one door and run away and when that door opened the other one would knock and both neighbours would come out. They was looking for who was at the door see?

I was a devil I was. This old man’d come out with his walking stick and try to chase us and we’d run away laughing.

We used to tie a string to one door and then the other and then run away and watch two people rushing out of their houses right angry.

It seems everyone who grew up around the East End was playing ‘Knock Down Ginger’. From the number of times I heard this memory I can only imagine that for a good few years the whole of the East End of London was a cat’s cradle of string linking one furious neighbour with another. Each of these neighbours a Beano cartoon of incandescent rage and everlasting guiltlessness, falling for the relentless pranks of those pesky kids.

And it seems, they would pick on the most bad tempered of the neighbours who would constantly come up with the goods and chase them off. They openly confess that was what made it fun. The crosser the neighbour the more fun the game.

And still, unrepentant all these years later, several generations of East Enders roll around laughing at the confession that they did such appalling things and found it such fun.

And it is infectious. You cannot help but laugh with them.
He spoke out loudly and clearly. An elder who had lived his whole life in the East End, he was the only man in this play memory session.

I mentioned the new DCSF (Department of Children Schools and Families) funding stream to create places to play. He said:

“You don’t need no money to play. We played on the street with what we had. We made up games, found stuff to help us. We was never short of stuff to do, we was never bored. I look at the kids now and they have so much stuff that they think that is playing. The playgrounds are boring compared with what we had, which was nothing. You can’t do nothing on them places, no wonder the kids is bored.

“We played everywhere. We made our own entertainment. Whatever we found we turned to our games. Cotton reels, boxes, whatever. The kids in my block now, they are Bangladeshi, but they call me ‘Uncle’ still, like we used to. They say ‘Uncle look at this’, and they show me what they can do on their computers and such, and it seems like the thing plays for them. They ain’t playing like we used to. They are really clever, but not like we used to be. They have grown used to needing stuff, we never had nothing and we played and played.”

I told him how playworkers try to get kids back to this place of discovery he had described. Another member of the group said:

“Why don’t they ever ask us? Why does nobody come to us to understand what children need? We had nothing. But we really played. I wish they would ask us.”

And a woman from Nigeria said:

“We had no toys. The boys made footballs from bundled up rags and stuff to kick about. The girls made dolls from wood and cloth. We played all the time.”
I was told many stories about surviving on wartime rations. The Ministry of Food circulated recipes which recommended ways to provide a balanced diet on the limited rations that were available. People told me that these rations were supplemented by offal and the harvesting of squirrels and crows. Yet children remained unsatisfied.

The constant desire for more food, for sweetness and fresh fruit was a real drive for these kids.

Around the wharves in Tower Hamlets, the dockworkers were loading and unloading fruit that was exotic and wonderful to the children. I heard of harsh penalties meted out to dock workers who liberated fruit for the local kids, but there seems to have been a thriving black market nevertheless.

I was told by one man of how, as a child, he and his mates used to break into a chocolate factory and steal whatever they could find. They stole fruit too. It was all hoarded away until they had enough to satisfy themselves and sell on to the stall holders down the Roman Road. This boy was betrayed to his father by a devoted dog who led dad to the hideout where the stash was stored beneath the canal arches.

One woman told me she was married before she tasted a pineapple. No surprise that as parents and grandparents these children want to give us sweets to demonstrate their love and indulgence.

I had been gathering memories from my friends at Age Concern, and this wonderful phrase (included on the image) was given to me and was ringing through my head as I passed the corner shop at the top of my road and saw the everyday bowls filled with everyday bananas.
Everyone always looked out for the kids. If they saw you doing anything wrong, then you knew about it. But they'd watch out to make sure you was alright as well.

"The marks are still there. This picture shows the gate at the back of a school. The playwork team have chosen to run their weekly sessions in spaces where flats have a view over the playspace. We learned to think of these spaces as ‘overlooked and overlooked’.

Parents have described how they used to play in these places. They talked about how there used to be play equipment in the spaces and people used them for playing, just meeting and talking to each other.

"The play equipment was took out, must be twenty years ago now. You can see where it was, the marks are still down there. We all knew each other in them days. This used to be a very friendly estate. But since the play stuff went, it changed. No-one uses the spaces now. There’s nothing for the kids and nowhere to sit. You can’t put benches in there now because of the youth, they sit on them, see?

"People want CCTV on the squares. They say that they can’t let their kids play out because there’s no supervision for them. We sat out and watched our kids."

So we run play sessions with playworkers in high visibility jackets. The children are playing out now, but have we created an expectation that children can only play out when the playworkers are there?
“They did some improvements and put in a bath, in the kitchen. When part of our family was bombed out they said as how we could put them up and one of us could sleep in that bath.”

“Zinc baths in front of the fire. Dad went first then we took turns till you got down to the babies.”

“We kids slept top-to-toe in the bed. We would use coats over us in the winter to keep warm.”

“There was us in the kitchen and front room, then we let the upstairs out to another family and my aunt was in the house somewhere too.”

“Bloody Transport House! What they done to this place? I cannot forgive them for what they done. Moving people out East, building them tower blocks. They used to think that they could move people in like they lived in the streets. They moved next door neighbours in next to each other and opposite neighbours opposite, and then the streets just went up and up. But how did they think the kids was going to play? There was green space at the bottom and everything. Had a statue on it. Wonder what happened to that? But it was so windy round the bottom of them blocks.”

“I had two kids. My girl grew up in the house we had and then they moved us to a tower block when my son was a baby. He had problems with his health and walking and that. He couldn’t go out to play coz of the stairs and coz I couldn’t get to him if something happened. Well my girl lets her kids play out now, but he keeps his kids inside. They never go out, his kids.”
"We was always outside, all weathers. Partly that was the fact that the houses was overcrowded and partly it was coz of them bloody bugs. Not that the houses wasn’t clean. My Mum was a real stickler, but you just couldn’t get rid of the buggers. Them blighters, they lived in the wallpaper, in the plasterwork. They bit ‘til you was mad with it.

"The doors was never locked, we all knew each other and there was always people looking out. The street was like a room we all shared. If Mrs So and So wanted something from the shop or a message taking to somewhere, she would just look out the door and ask one of us kids.

"All the adults was ‘Uncle This’ or ‘Aunty That’. They saw if you done anything wrong or if you wasn’t in school or whatever and they’d just as like give you a slap and send you off and then tell your Mum and Dad and you’d get another slap from them.

"But then, they would also see if you was alone if your folks wasn’t there or something and they’d take you in and give you a sandwich an’ that. We looked after each other in them days."

This story was repeated in one form or another many times throughout the memory gathering.

The familiarity of stories of the tight Cockney community spirit, can hide what it is that these elders were trying to tell me. The children were always out and about and were messengers for the community in the same way that nerves carry messages around the body. Children were at the core of the community. They were seen and they were heard and, although their life was tough, they had a place, a value and a role. All spaces were spaces where children could reasonably be expected to be.

These adults saw how different life was for the children around them now:

"They ain’t got nowhere except them silly little bits of playgrounds. And what with the cars all around and people looking at them like they was trouble, the kids ain’t got much choice of places."
People always remembered their childhood play experiences favourably and saw them as being very different from the playing of children nowadays.

"Do you remember the Fun Fairs? They was wonderful. They was an event. We all looked forward to them. But they are not the same now. You don't see them fairs like you used to."

"I used to have one baby doll. She was a real baby doll, not like them ugly ones you get now."

"We used to play, proper play. Not like nowadays."

This is just how it should be. Play is always the 'Most Important Thing' for children and so we all remember our play as being 'The Best'.

The trick is of course, to remember that this is true of every single generation of children.
One thing that surprised everyone who shared a memory was how serious the business of play had been to them. They remembered losing themselves utterly in their playing. Playing was their reality. They also recalled that the adults around them did not understand how important this play was.

They spoke about being snapped out of play times with whistles and harsh words, with everyday chores and with slaps. Yet still, at the first chance, they would rush back to their play. It was all they cared about. It was the substance of their lives. Everything else was an inconvenience. Even when they were hungry, cold, uncomfortable or badly treated, play sustained them. It seems to have kept people adjusted within themselves and their peer groups under the most extraordinary conditions.

My daughter was determined from her earliest years that I should understand how important her playing was:

“They are not dolls, they are people... It’s not pretend, it is real... I am not having fun, I am playing... They are not pretending to be being animals, they are animals... My friends (her ‘My Scene’ teen dolls) help me to understand things because of their problems.”

Play is a deep reality to children. It is their default setting, their primal language, their natural state. As adults we have moved away from that state and need to work at understanding it, like a second language. Its vocabulary grammar and nuances do not come naturally to us anymore. If we do not work at this understanding, we cannot see and hear what children need for play. We remain divorced from the world that our children are inhabiting and fill up their all important play time with grown up stuff.
I was gathering memories from the staff team of a school in Bethnal Green. The Head and the Deputy Head joined in, so did the teachers and support staff. It was a rich and funny session. One woman told us a story from Bangladesh:

“We used to play with different things in nature according to the season. Sometimes we squashed berries to make potions or itching powder or smells or stains. Other times we would make kites.

“Well there was this one thing that I used to do which was to catch the bugs, like dragonflies when they were around and tie thin threads to them and fly them like kites.”

I had just finished reading Gerald Durrell’s ‘My Family and Other Animals’ and I remembered the story of the Rose Beetle Man who walked around the mountains and villages of Corfu with a cloud of beetles flying just above him like a bunch of balloons, each beetle tied to a thread ready to sell to local children. Some people tell stories of collecting ladybirds and making farms for them. Some talk of caterpillars, others of playing with ants or worms. It is a sort of small world play with real players rather than plastic figures. A friend showed me his birds egg collection from his earliest years:

“I was so proud of these. I climbed and got them all. I’m not proud of it now of course, but in my defence they were all common birds and we didn’t know any better in those days.”
The bombsites were spaces for play right from the first. They were places or horror and they were dangerous and forbidden, but children found the ingredients that they needed there for a rich play life. There was splintered burnt wood, broken glass, rubble - found objects that could be used to make anything in the world of their imagination.

The people I talked to told stories of making dens, building swings and digging, playing with water and lighting fires, not out of destructive urges but because their homes were warmed and lit with fire, their food cooked with fire. They knew how to use fire and they cooked and lit and warmed themselves in their playing. They manipulated these spaces to meet their play needs. Children played on sites that had been the homes of their neighbours caught in the nightmare of the Blitz.

For those of us who study play, this is fascinating to hear. The bombsites grew into Adventure Playgrounds through the intervention of the Architect Prof C Th. Sørensen and Lady Allen of Hurtwood. The first ever adventure playground in Emdrup in Copenhagen, created during the Nazi occupation, was inspired by the observations of the architect who saw kids playing on the fresh wounds of the city.

When I saw this graffiti, on the walk from the PATH office to Glamis Adventure Playground last year, I was struck by its poignancy, especially as the children of Glamis had been clearing a stretch of land and kept digging up crystal teardrops from some long forgotten chandelier.

I have one of these teardrops above my desk.
The Play Times project was designed to address this neglect. It has two distinct strands woven closely together.

In one strand a playwork team delivers regular sessions in some of these forgotten areas with the aim of re-introducing the culture of play into the spaces and lives of children. You can read about this work on the Plog (Play Blog) at: playtimes.wordpress.com.

The second strand of the project focuses on the gathering of play memories from the communities surrounding these spaces. I have talked to people who grew up in the East End of London as well as elsewhere in the world. I listened to elders, parents, teenagers and children. By starting to talk about play, we hoped that the subject would bubble to the surface again and people would remember how important it was for them and start to think about ways that they could support children in their playing now.

There is something remarkable that happens when people start to remember their playing. The memories come flooding back. They drift into a reverie and relax, and the stories of another time come tumbling out. Often the storyteller forgets that I am there. They are busy reliving the play for themselves. The less that I say the better. I do that playworker thing of stepping back and letting play be at the heart of the process.

All at once people find that they understand for themselves what has to be done on their estate or in their school or park. All they need now is to find a way to make it happen. As one woman said: “I got the bit between my teeth now. I ain’t going to back down on this.”

These memories illustrate that wherever they played, children did the same things. There will always be stories of den building, food gathering, running, chasing and hiding games, of sand and mud and water and fire, of playing in groups unsupervised by adults.

Play is not a sentimental thing of the past, but a living force in the lives of our children.