

Five Children is a wonderful response to a reading of the narrative poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Wycoller Country Park in 2013. The project involved 27 children across all ages from Roughlee Primary School and 27 children from a Year 2 class at Whitefield Infants in Nelson. It reveals a real understanding of how alliteration works, the picaresque tradition in literature and a high quality response to the original. It was created collaboratively by children working with their teachers, artist Gordon MacLellan, musician Hannah Jones and artist Ruth Evans, organised by Mid Pennine Arts and funded with support from the Clore Foundation.

It is long... but persevere, because it is a high quality piece of work which deserves to be read.



Five Children

Part 1: The adventure begins

A cloudy, rainy, stormy morning
When only ducks and slugs are out,
Dripping rain, dripping children
Soaking through their shoes;
But on this day that hopes for rainbows,
Five children are walking to the village

Cheeky children who love
Chips and chicken and cheese.
Helpful and chatty,
They are bold, brave beggars,
Orphans looking for friends and family.

As they walk,
They hear water crashing against the rocks.
A big black slug slithers through the long grass.

A heron circles overhead.
Ducks are paddling and quacking in the stream,
Buttercups, dandelions and wild purple onions flower,

And they can smell
Tall grass by the stream and the
Muddy stink of swamp.

At the edge of the village
Two big bloodhounds dribble,
Drooling onto the floor
Barking wildly, deeply, menacing.

Part 2: The village



Families in the village

Hunting in the forest,

Cooking rabbit stew,

Tending the sheep,

Herding the cows,

Selling the milk,

Bending the bows,

Shooting the arrows,

Fighting the wolves,

Hiding in tree-houses.

But one woman stands quietly

Looking at her one precious thing,

A brooch Gawain gave her

When he was young and loved her

But the children run

Down to the river

That races and rushes and ripples,
Rolling over stones and sand,
Running over the ford and
Under the bridges
Full of fish,
And fishermen;
A broad broken bow of a bridge
Over the babbling water
A path to the forest
But guarded

Part 3: The Knuckleheaded Knights



Knucklehead knights

Strong and brave with sword and spear and shield,
Mighty, magnificent men-at-arms
With mace and mail and morning star,
With monkeys or mammoths on their shields,

Quiet as moths and mice and
Mean as midges,
They serve the King and Queen of the Woods,
And are not very bright.
“Halt!” they say.
“Stop!” they cry.
“There!” the children shout, pointing
“There! Gold! Gold!”
Sunlight on the sparkling river
Looks like gold to the treasure hunter,
Treasure-hungry soldier.
One knight leans, to look
a little too far and the children push!
He topples!
He falls!
He splashes!
His friend swings round to help him,
Reaching down,
A hand outstretched
Reach further, a little more,

A little more and

He overbalances and joins his friend in the pool

Naked, the knuckleheads leave their armour out to dry

And head home,

Sad and soggy,

Dripping all the way.

Part 4: Into the Woods

Over the bridge,

The children run,

And across the grass,

And up the stairs.

The steep stairs,

Steep stairs,

Climbing those slow stairs,

Squashing slugs as they go.

Half-way up is a stone seat

Where queens and goblins rest

Up, and

Up, and

Up

Up to the seven slabstone, gravestone walls

And into the deep woods

Tall trees grow in these woods,

Towering, toppling, tumbling trees,

A tangle of leaves and branches and bark,

Old, old trees and new saplings

A world of green and brown

Gawain rode here once

Looking for the gallant Green Knight,

He is long gone

But his horse' hoofprints are cut into the stones.

Now, there are children in those trees

They hid in the leaves

Under the leaves,

For so long, for too long

And they became green

And as secret and silent

As the trees themselves.

The woods are full of wildlife,

Beavers, bears, boars and badgers,
Slugs slide and snails slither,
Rabbits, raging rats and reindeer
Hairy horses, hares and hiccuping hedgehogs.

But there are bears too, and

Dark spotted jaguars.

A wise goblin lives

In a cave,

Where twisted twirly twigs

Are wrapped round rough rocks.

Red-eyes goggle in Gooby's

Green skin and

Yellow teeth smile.

As tall, he is

As he is wide, and

He tells them a terrible tale

That fills them with hope.

Down in the ruins

On the edge of the woods

Where the water runs fast and quiet and deep

Under the bridges and over the stones

Is a square stone house

And a little old lady.

By day she is a kind and lovely Grandmother

But at night,

Victoria changes.

She becomes



A wild wicked witch turning water into ice

Freezing the splashing stream

So that carriages skid and people plunge

And in the ice

They freeze.

She collects her petrified people at Pepper Hill Barn.

Ice servants to attend her or

Ice statues to decorate the highest ruins.

Ice forever, solid ice, always cold, never melting,

No thaw, no fire, no summer sun can save them.

And Gooby thinks, he knows, he's not sure

But the children's family

Their lost parents

Might stand in that frozen company

Unable to move, to speak, to think,

All they can do is dream,

Waiting for the people who can set them free.

But how to set the frozen free?

The Queen might know,

Beautiful Quire might help

And her Rainbow Mirror breaks magic

Ends spells and sorceries.

Part 5: The Dragon!

So boldly the children set off through the wood

To find the Queen

But the path is long and they are hungry so

When they find an egg,

They stop to make a campfire and cook it.

What an egg! As big as a ball

As big as a bowl,

As big as a head.

A feast for all five of them,

All in one shell.

Crack it, shake it, scramble it, fry it!

But when they tried to break it, it wouldn't crack.

When they tried to smash it, it wouldn't budge.

And when they tried to roast it whole

It bounced back out of the fire again.

In and out,

In and out,

In and out!

With their shouting

The children missed the slither at first

Hissing through the grass,

Sliding across bark,

Slipping along the path,

An angry dragon mother

Come for her egg.

Spears and spikes and a long pointed tail

No legs, no wings,
Just a smile wide enough to swallow

A child or two.

And angry as fire.

The children ran

Through the woods,

No horse could gallop

No cheetah could run

As fast as them.

But the dragon was faster.

She was

A charging rhino breaking trees,

An angry jaguar roaring like the wind;



She was a tornado.

Closer.

Closer!

Mouth wide.

Teeth waiting,

Tongue curling.

The trees ended suddenly

In a long falling slope

And the children fell,

Toppling and tumbling,

Slipping and sliding,

Through the grass,

All the way down

To splash into water

And sink into a smelly swamp,

Leaving the dragon disappointed

At the top of the hill.

Safe!

But sinking.

Part 6: The Swamp

Slimy and stinking

The swamp was like a giant smelly, sweaty sock

And the children were
Shouting, screaming, yelling for help
And drowning deep,
Squelchy, soggy
And stuck
Their cries woke an unexpected friend
Who shook his head and unfolded his wings.
Willow-green and magnificent,
The Green Horse reared.
The amazing creature flew
As fast as a falcon to the smelly swamp
Not a moment too late
For just a minute more and
They'd have gone under
Sucked into the smelly, stinking, mouldy mud.
Down he swooped
He grasped and grabbed but slime-slippery children slid
From his teeth and hooves
And he could only carry them
One by one to safety

And the others waited
Mud-swimming, swamp-surfing,
Struggling while they waited their turn.

Then, dripping mud,
Cold and wet and miserable
The children stood
On the edge of a stream
Where one long stone crossed the river.

One long rock over
A waterfall like a mountain,
Deep, dirty and dark
Dashing down into danger

Part 7: Victoria

One by one, over the bridge
And there is a bright door,
In a dark wall!
And a friendly old woman meets them.
Victoria welcomes them in,
Passes them socks and towels
And a pie, their favourite pie

Chicken, cheese and chips

With apple pie for afters

And the children sink to sleep

In her cosy, comfy treehouse.

But a noise wakes them.

In the dark middle of the night when

Bears and badgers and bats are out.

And Victoria is changing!

Her ears sink into her head.

Her nose stretches out, longer, pointier,

Dripping dirt.

Her skin grows green,

As green as grass and leaves and lizards

As crickets, chameleons and cucumbers.

Spots sprout on her hideous face:

Two, big and juicy as raspberries,

And smaller ones, as many and as red

As cherries on a tree.

Over her sensible, friendly skirt and blouse,

She wraps a long black cloak,

And stretches her fingers, with nails

Like knives, like thorns....

“Oh, no!” said the children

"Oh, no!

We'll be dinner

And breakfast

And lunch

And picnics

And birthday cake.

Throw a stone!

Over there! Over there!”

Victoria looks, peering into the darkness

And the children creep away

And into the dark and dangerous night

Part 8: The duckling and the swan



Wearily the children wandered,

Wondering if their quest was hopeless,

Would they find their parents?

Would they find a family again?

Following the windy path from the witch's house,

A tiny toad was dead, pancake squashed onto

The dusty, dirty stones.

A delicate duckling with a sore leg limped ahead of them

But they collected him into their caring hands

And carried him gently.

They climbed the path

Until bright buttercups stopped them,

Shining as bright as the stars

Twinkling in the sky above them,

The yellow flowers surrounded a

Comfortable, cosy cottage,

Made of piled branches it looked like

A beautiful bird's nest,

Tiny in the massive, magnificent forest.

The wooden door opened,

Quietly creaking wide.

A sleek and slender swan stood there!

Her white wings guided the children into
The warmth of her home where
They laid the duckling to rest on soft, smooth sheets
By the fire, knowing he would be safe.
They stayed the rest of the long night with the swan
Snug as swanlings in a nest.
In the morning after fond farewells,
They stepped out into a
Morning full of new adventures

Part 9: The perilous forest

On into the forest,
Full of fear,
For this forest is different,
There are no friendly goblins here,
Or green children in the leaves.
Here,
Even the trees are mean,
Watching with fiery yellow eyes,
And grabbing at the children as they pass,
Scratching and scraping with twigs like claws

On branches as strong as a giant's arms.

The children hear,

Dry rustling leaves,

And claws sharpened on tree trunks.

They hear

The roars of jaguars

And the snores of bears.

Trapped in cages to guard the path.

The animals see the children

And break free.

They shake their heads.

They stretch their claws.

They charge.

The children run

Pounding footsteps follow them,

Heavy feet drumming on the ground,

Giant feet following them.

Run! Run!

And then stop

And hide.

Curled up under their cloaks and under

Leaves and mud

The children wait

As the angry animals rush by.

Then along the path

Sneaking.

And there is the Palace at the Heart of the Wood!

Part 10: The Queen's Palace



Deep in the woods,

There is a wonderful palace.

A wild, woven willow hall

With windows looking out onto the world,

Decorated with jewels and gems,

Beside a swamp where

The tadpoles wriggle and spotted frogs jump.

There is a magical throne there

Where the King and Queen of the Forest sit.

The stories tell us that

King Qasim is bad and Queen Quire is good;

That he is bad-tempered

With brown beady eyes,

Hungry for treasure, looking always for new riches.

He will rob, and steal, and cheat.

He will pick your pocket, or

Break your home or

Destroy your castle for the sake of your gold.

But Quire with green glistening eyes,

Has never given up on her husband,

Where he is mean she is gentle,

Where he is cruel she is kind,

Where he steals, she gives.

Boldly the children walk forward,

Sure of a good welcome,

But some old enemies are waiting.

The Knucklehead Knights

Guard the door.

Their cloaks are deep sky blue

Or night sky black

Or green as soft mossy trees,

And their axes are sharp.

"This time," they growl,

"This time, we'll chop you,

We'll snip you,

We'll slice you.

This time,

We will kill you."

"Oh, no!

Oh, no!

Look we have brought

You a present to say we're sorry!"

An apple!

A shining beautiful apple

Quietly stolen from Victoria's house.

But growling stops the conversation!

The hungry woodland horrors have found them!

Jaguars and bears come growling down the path.

Gawain with a sword

A knight on his horse with a lance

Might have helped.

But without looking twice

Those Knuckleheads Knights drop their axes,

And the knives from their pockets

And run into the Palace,

To guard the Royal Toy Cupboard,

From the inside.

The children run in too

But they shut the door

And outside,

The animals slip away to live in the wild wood

And never be trapped in cages again.

Queen Quire is there

In shimmering silver

And bright blue

With pretty princesses about her

And her rose-pink frog in her hand

Bow!

Bow!

Remember to bow. Nudge!

"Will you help us?

May we borrow your rainbow mirror?"

"No"

"Please?"

"No"

"Look, we have this wonderful apple.

One nibble, one slice will take you

Like a flying carpet to

Anywhere you want to go..."

(They don't know if it will do this!

But our cheerful children are cheats, too

And will spin a story out of spiderwebs

And silver moonbeams!)

"No."

Or.

"Maybe."

"For this apple you could borrow my mirror

From now at sunset

Until sunrise and no more.

Then it must return

Or my Noble Knights

Will hunt you down."

The children grabbed the mirror

And grabbed it again

As tall as someone's Dad

And as wide as two children

It took 3 of them to carry it

But now they were ready.

And this path would take them to

Victoria's Witch-house

Part 11: In the ruins



The rugged rocky ruins,

Once happy, now a haunted house

Old, ancient and rough,

Thin windows, huge fireplace
That will hold
A whole company warm
Or roasting
Gawain rode here once
Hunting the Green Knight's home,
He fought and feasted here
Before it was abandoned...
Carefully creeping, up precarious stairs,
Sneaking slowly past
Giant cobwebs and giant spiders,
And through
Smells of rotten eggs and old fish,
Blood and death.
It is cold.
Cold as ice on an Arctic winter's day,
The children's breath steams in misty clouds
Whispering, "Where's the witch?"
No sign.
Just silence.

A red cat watches and leads the way

The children follow,

Up the stairs again

Higher and higher

"Don't drop the mirror!"

Arms are aching

Hands are hurting

"Your turn!"

"It's very heavy!"

"It's not my turn!"

"Shhhhh!"

At the top of the stairs they stop

Before a door.

They push the smallest brother forward

And he stumbles

Into a ruined room where black rooks rustle

And a witch watches silently.

There are pots and pens and pennies,

Bottles for potions and lotions and poisons,

Skulls on shelves and bones in the biscuit tin,

A red pot for mixing blood drinks.
There is a copper kettle for carrot tea
And bowls of dead fish,
And pine cone toothbrushes,
And a stone bottle with stone water
There is a horn that blows silently and summons bats,
Ice diamonds, spelling crystals to freeze thieves,
A golden bracelet for trapping arms, squeezing tight, crushing bones.
Gathering anger,
Gathering spells,
Fingers flexing and filling with fierceness,
Victoria the Witch stands up,
Enchantments crackling and sparking
From hair and nose and fingertips.
But the children turn the mirror
And pull off its cover
A rainbow shines
And for the first time ever,
Victoria sees her own reflection,
Sees her own ghastly face looking back,

Sees the long nose and the red eyes,

Sees the spots and the broken teeth,

She smiles a terrible smile

How beautiful she is!

How wonderfully wicked!

How magnificently monstrous!

She sends spells like snakes, shooting across the room

The children hide!

Diving for cover under tables and chairs

Behind curtains and cloaks

There is an exciting explosion!

A thrilling thunder!

Clouds of dust and smoke!

And the rainbow mirror reflects

Victoria's savage spells back on herself.

Freezing her.

And now she is ice.

A snow-witch.

And the mirror's rainbow shines

Melting all the other ice

And all over the ruins people wake

Released at last from

Their perilous prisons.

The children find their parents!

The families in the village find lost friends!

Trolls find their children

And bears find their babies!

There is a feast in the woodland palace

and even Queen Quire and King Qasim

And the Knucklehead Knights are happy

But Wycoller's watchful rooks

See and spy and sit on a cold shoulder

Telling stories to an old ice-witch in a hidden room.

