

An aerial photograph of a lush green field. In the center, there is a large, dense, rounded bush. To its right, a wooden structure made of logs is visible. Further right, a stone circle is partially visible. The field is surrounded by trees and a fence line. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

The Rock & Roll Field

by artist and designer Emily Cropton

HS2

The artist Emily Cropton oversees the placement of soil on the site



Maple Cross Junior school is a single storey, midcentury school, of a type seen in many postwar towns and villages all over the UK. The school itself is a colourful labyrinth of assorted piecemeal additions, with a generous amount of playground, and the added luxury of a large, open field, fringed by thick hedges and mature trees – the farmland beyond it a reminder of this site's own history, not so long ago.

But travel infrastructure is never far away in Maple Cross: one perimeter hedge obscures the sight but not the sound of busy roads, including the M25 in the distance; and, just visible through a gap in the top hedge is a high ridge marking the excavation works for HS2.

It was the sight of these excavations that prompted one of the school's Year 5 pupils to write to the HS2 head office, asking for a little of their dirt to make a hill, a hill they could roll down.

Three years later and there are now several new ridges in this field, emerging like softly furred knuckles half way down its gentle incline. Clad in freshly seeded grass, their undulations invite a whole range of movement – rolling, definitely; but also perching, running and jumping. Their invitation to explore is amplified by other elements placed around them by artist Emily Cropton, for whom this is her first major solo landscape and public art commission.

If Cropton's new elements sit so naturally in this field it is thanks to her close attention to context – geographical, historical, anthropological and archaeological, as well as scale and social purpose. When invited to propose a new play space that could incorporate HS2's offer of 1,000 tonnes of their local site's 'dirt', she spent several days exploring the area on foot, poring over maps ancient and modern. She says: 'I was thinking about the changes that have happened here: how this landscape has been shaped right back to the Iron Age period; a lot of linear ditches that were made.' These ditches included the Grand Union Canal nearby. She also observed several local holloways – deep, tree-enclosed

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Emily Cropton

routes which have been worn into the earth through repeated use. ‘I started thinking about that sort of language at an early stage.’

She also observed and noted how pupils used the existing space: ‘Faced with a flat field, the children didn’t know how to be in it, it was quite overwhelming as a space.’ Their response was either to play football in the open areas, or explore the margins, spending quiet time in among the trees or around a small wooden chalet at the foot of the slope. To bust open the binary quality of these options, Cropton wanted ‘to create a space that will gather people together inside it’.

Cropton sees her practice as somewhere between design and art. She says: ‘The thing I am always interested in is working between making objects, curating landscape and devising performances, and thinking how these things relate to each other. An object might be a tool to use in the landscape or landscape might be used to create an object that is used in performance.’ The ultimate aim is to combine object, landscape and performance ‘to explore how environments and people fit together.’

People are a vital component in her tool kit. She brings them in at every stage of the design process so that the outcome is truly a collaboration. Having worked with Grizedale Arts (a pioneering arts organisation in the Lake District which has long supported socially-oriented practice), and on projects for large landscape design consultancies, she has seen the power of a truly open-ended design approach. Thanks to the support of her client, teachers and pupils, she says, ‘children have been involved at all points throughout the process. And I’ve taken cues from that.’

These cues include one from an early workshop Cropton led, with teachers, called: ‘Measuring With All Our Senses’. ‘It was a kind of mapping activity, getting children to think about how they felt in different parts of the field, what they sensed inside, what they could smell and hear, and getting them to think about what parts of the field they liked best.

‘When we were walking across the middle of the field, one of the children said: I like this bit, I like standing here when you can feel the rain on your face; it’s like a massage.’ This inspired her to place the mounds in the middle of



Emily Cropton works with pupils to create 'fossils of the future'

the field, sloping down. She says: 'I can imagine the children lying out on the mounds, cloud gazing and having the rain massage their faces.'

Her ambition at Maple Cross wasn't just to transform but also celebrate the qualities and natural assets of the site: for example the diversity of mature trees that lines the upper perimeter. She provided materials for an early years workshop which resulted in a little guidebook of the school field which included drawing and identifying the trees and plants.

Keeping the design process properly open-ended leaves room for serendipity and spontaneity. For example, another workshop threw up an idea that became one of the main play features. 'Year 5 were creating story books, looking at pioneers in the local area – animals, plants, people – and one of the children wrote a book about a fallen forest and that's where the balancing log work has come from.' Placed near the top of the ridges, a stack of 'fallen' logs encourages balancing and traversing, along a roughly linear formation.

Time is an element Cropton likes to weave into the work – elements that

trigger a sense of how landscapes evolve through the seasons and through use. The new holloway is one of these – a 20m run of willow arches on the far side of the mounds, which will generate a sense of time via the depth of the passage through it. Seasonal variation will also be visible in the 'meadow', a strip of raised earth which was planted out this year with wildflower seeds. Ten small fruit trees have also been placed here – refugees from an earlier 'orchard' initiative. Seeing the trees and flowers bloom and fade reinforces the passage of time. And a sense of deeper time, both to the past and the future is triggered by the slice of earth that has been cut through this meadow, to create a small, curving wall lined with clay bricks as well as special 'fossil' bricks created with the children. Says Cropton: 'I worked with a brick maker based 10 miles from here. They dig clay from the Chilterns. We made a series of bricks inspired by fossils of the future. And these came from a workshop with years 1, 2 and 3 where we talked about what fossils people might find in another million years time. They came up with whistles, keys, jigsaw pieces, footprints of farm animals, tyre tracks, musical instruments.' Placing the resulting fossil



The 'fossils of the future' are incorporated into hand-made bricks which are used to line a 'slice in time' cut through one of the mounds.

bricks here in this archway – which is low enough for sitting or safely jumping from – was 'a way of looking through the earth and saying: here's what we can see as the time has gone by.'

Having identified the key elements, when it came to their arrangement on the site practical issues such as drainage were important: after toying with placing them horizontally across the field Cropton chose to align them vertically, so that rain can continue to run off towards the lower periphery. Ease of maintenance and longevity were key considerations in Cropton's design. But what truly delights here is the subtle choreography created by the contours of each element and their relationship to each other. Says Cropton: 'I was thinking about how to use the landforms in such a way that pathways were created through it – it's really about the negative space between the landforms. It's great that you can have a willow tunnel and balancing logs but how can the form itself encourage different journeys? The other thing that came up, which was absent before, was the idea of scale and magnitude and perspective, and the need for contrasts: light and

shadow, small and big, different angles and shapes. I'd started thinking about this field almost like a plain of fabric, and asking: what's missing?

'I have a real interest in landscape archaeology. How people can better understand the way we have shaped the earth physically to what it is today. By understanding that in a physical sense, people can take agency. Because we have moved away from land based practice for our work, we have lost that connection. People don't know how to read the landscape. How can you begin to understand the whole story?'

A small circle of boulders, arranged so as to facilitate both larger groups but also small, conversational clusters, hints at the wider geological journey that has shaped this corner of the Colne Valley. They represent glacial 'erratics' – those rock forms that are peppered around the UK, dropped many millennia ago as glaciers melted on their journey from one continent to the other. Says Cropton: 'There are glacial erratics in some of the nearby towns in this area. Some of them will have travelled from Yorkshire.' The provenance of these granite forms was less important than

Pupils enjoy the newly opened natural play area including the balancing logs of the 'fallen forest'



the fact that 'they are different rock types from what's local'.

Given that I visited the site only a week after the new landforms were declared open for play, it's hard to say what impact on the pupils this glorious range of shapes and forms and their invitation to range freely, high and low, might have. But Cropton sees the whole space as a work in progress. A fan of French landscape designer Giles Clement, she has incorporated his notion of 'moving landscapes' in her practice – the principal that a constructed landscape is not a final, prescriptive act, but that the inhabitants should be free to leave their mark and shape it as they wish. She says: 'I am fascinated by how, as a human, you can orchestrate a process and almost a conversation with the landscape and it can be a two way conversation, rather than a final declaration.'

For the opening, the pupil who made that first request – now at secondary school nearby – returned for the ribbon-cutting. Says Cropton: 'He was very complementary. And it was great because we had children rolling down the hills. And that's what it's all about.'

Veronica Simpson is an arts writer and consultant, and an advocate for socially and environmentally intelligent design, art and architecture. She is a core contributor to FX and Studio International and has a masters in Environmental Psychology. She puts the human experience first, and aims to uncover and articulate the mechanisms by which great design in all its forms can make a difference

Emily Cropton is an artist, designer and facilitator. Working across disciplines, her work proposes and prototypes alternative relationships between environmental and social systems. She has worked across the UK and Ireland on socially engaged and site-specific projects with organisations including Grizedale Arts, Clare Cumberlidge & Co and the Southern Uplands Partnership. This is her first major solo public commission.



HS2 Arts & Culture

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We are working with artists, communities, cultural partners and our design and construction teams to explore and celebrate beauty and diversity across the HS2 route.

The HS2 Arts and Culture strategy supports local aspirations to enhance the public realm and bring cultural heritage alive. We are developing a responsive programme that engages local communities impacted by HS2.

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