

EDUCATION

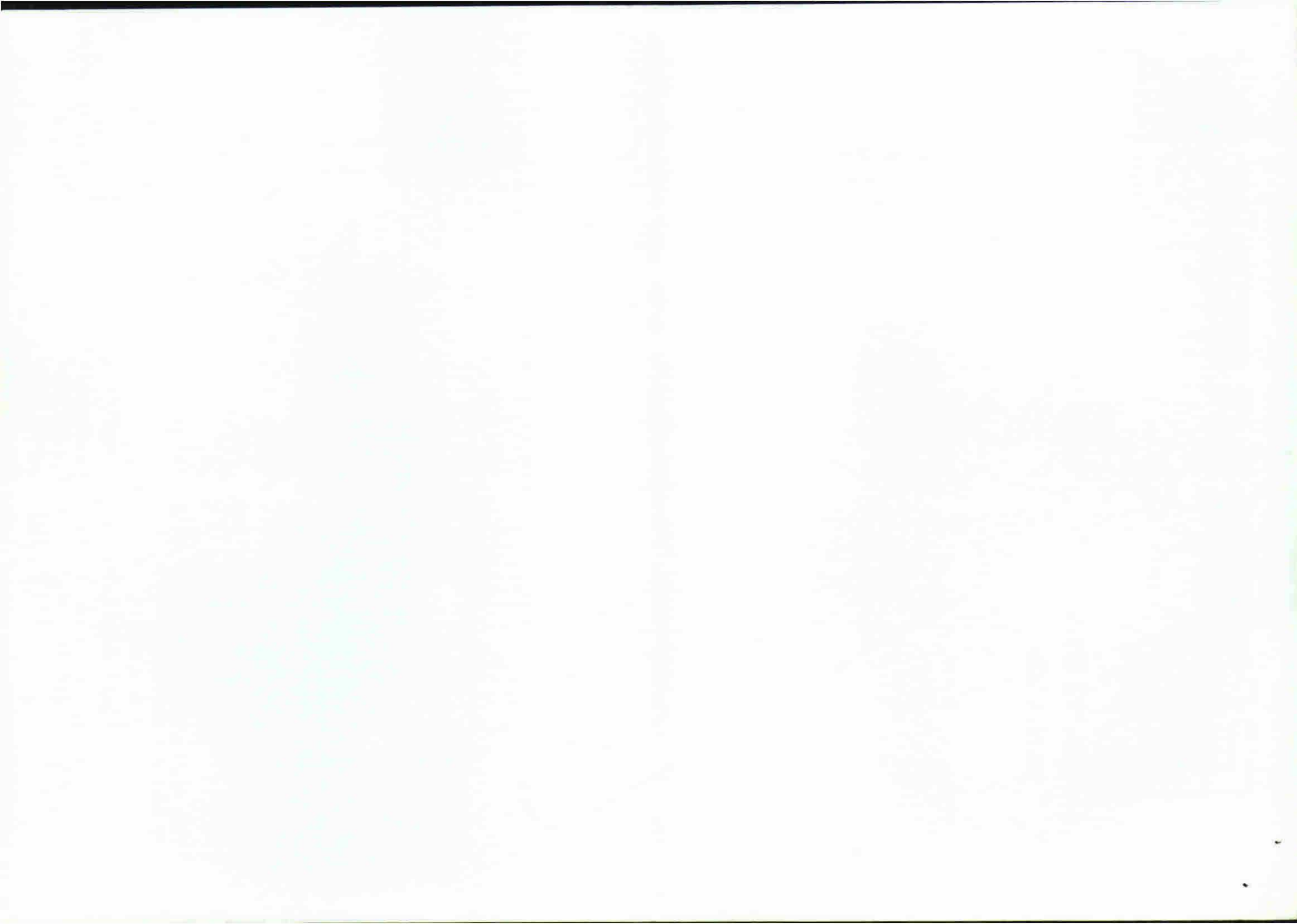
NEWSLETTER NUMBER 1

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the
series

This edition of the Newsletter was put together
by Mike and Anne Lydiat.



INTRODUCTION

The meeting on home-based education held at Lower Shaw Farm on 17-18th September, 1976 was the third effort made to get a national network started. The first two produced little tangible result. The main difficulty had been simply to find sufficient families actually doing it, instead of just thinking about it. It is extraordinary how many people express a strong interest in deschooling when they hear about it, but how very few there are who are actually doing it. This suggests that the network is really needed, to give that little bit of support and advice that will help people over the hump.

We attempted to construct a short formal statement of our aims and objectives in relation to the rights and duties of children and parents, but after a long discussion, and some subsequent correspondence, we felt it would be wiser to postpone this and make it a priority at our next meeting (see details on last page.)

We identified some of the needs that exist that might be met by establishing some sort of national network. These are listed below, but not in any order of priority, except that the first overall aim underlies all the others:-

1. To alleviate the sense of isolation of most de-schoolers, and the consequent anxieties and undermining of confidence they suffer from.
2. To maintain contact between de-schoolers and others by a newsletter, by helping in the formation of groups, by arranging meetings, etc.
3. To disseminate through the newsletter and otherwise up-to-date information about (a) people's experiences (b) available resources (c) exchanges (d) schools (e) local education authorities.
4. To support people with general advice and where needed with specific help (a) legal aspects (b) presenting their case to the authorities (c) facing up to intimidation (d) formation of groups (e) educating children over 16 (problems of tax, social security and student privileges.)
5. To initiate a network to exchange resources.
6. To establish contact with other groups with whom a fruitful liaison might evolve. Suggested groups were :-
National Association for Gifted Children
Advisory Centre for Education
Confederation for the Advancement of Education
The A S Neill Trust Association
Schools Without Walls
The National Association of Governors and managers
The New Education Fellowship
P.N.E.U.
The Society of Teachers Opposed to Physical Punishment
7. Eventually to establish resource centres.
8. In the long term to act as a political pressure group.

The 1944 Act, Section 36, states :

"It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of compulsory school age to cause him to receive efficient full time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude, either by full time attendance at school, or otherwise."

For many people 'otherwise' has meant private school or tutor; for some it has meant a 'free school'; for a few it has meant educating your own children in your own home. Published accounts of the last type include:

- J. Baker - Children in Chancery
- M. Deakin - The children on the hill
- D. Head - Freeway to Learning
- D. Milner - in New Era, June, 1976
- M. Jenkins - School Without Tears

The following brief accounts report the experiences of some people present at the September meeting at Lower Shaw Farm.

Ken Byron - Lanarkshire

"Four families with a total of 10 children (5 years downwards) have got together to create a programme for their children which combines (1) home experience on 4 days of the week (2) regular common sessions in the basement of one family's house on the other 3 days. (3) occasional common sessions elsewhere as needed and as arranged.

The basement consists of 3 rooms which we have converted from a dingy coal and storage cellar into a bright and attractive centre for young children to play and learn in. The conversion demanded a great deal of time and effort from us all. Began this Autumn 6 children involved currently in the common sessions, 4 of school age; two 3+ year olds.

We have just had an inspection by 4 officials of Strathclyde LEA and were told they were very happy with our set up. An Adviser in Primary Education will be calling in every few months. (He's very friendly and positive about the whole thing).

We drafted a basic list of principles for our programme as follows:

- a) smallness of scale
- b) personal relationships based on love, mutual respect and equality
- c) self-regulation and internally motivated learning
- d) rejection of violence and coercion.
- e) cooperative adult-child management
- f) prime concern for individual needs and potentials.
- g) a broad view of what constitutes education
- h) willingness and capacity to evolve and change as the needs of the children demand."

David & Tina Hodson - Herefordshire

"Ben (9) and Jessica (8) were de-schooled in December, 1975. The local primary school, although well meaning was rapidly eroding the children's imagination and enthusiasm for anything other than competitive, materialistic standards. The LEA were informed courteously in advance and, although not approving, agreed that we were within our rights to deschool.

Living in a very rural area we have problems finding enough company for Ben and Jess (of their own age locally) but are fortunate to have a selection of adult friends locally, mostly very well qualified in areas where we are not, who lend enthusiastic practical support, taking an active part in the children's education. Interestingly, the children when in London for a week recently, spent a couple of days in a fairly liberal state school. Afterwards they said they had enjoyed it but would not want to go back into school full time. They complained that all they did there was 'muck about' and nobody seemed to concentrate. Their progress academically since being de-schooled has been remarkably good despite the fact that it is not an aspect of education on which we place the highest premium. The children are now three years ahead of their reading age (whatever that means) and well ahead in maths(ditto). Added to this (?more important) the Inspector found them 'attractive, lively and curious with good social development'. He also thanked us for our 'openness and courtesy'. I am purely trying to illustrate that it is possible to have a fruitful relationship with the LEA! He did, however, find their spelling a little weak!

Family coherence has been a big benefit - the sense of togetherness benefitting all of us. We are lucky to have a life style which means we are both at home all the time but after a year of de-schooling it is difficult to remember what the argument for the existence of schools was - apart from allowing parents to abdicate responsibility. Again and again the small ratio proves to be so exciting that the recollection of one to thirty five seems almost a joke as a basis for learning situations. It is all, of course, very time consuming and problems exist but at least we face them together."

Mollie Jenkins - Manchester

"Just over a year ago our daughter Deborah left an all-girls' Direct Grant school after taking O-levels. She wasn't actively unhappy at school, but felt that it was impossible to maintain normal human relationships with the teachers there; and because of the effect that these teachers had on the other girls, found her schoolmates very limited in interest, initiative, and stimulating companionship. Moreover she resented the total demands of the school on her time and energies, and felt that she wanted a wider choice of interests and more freedom to study at her own pace than the school would allow.

After three months au-pairing in Germany she came home to study for A-levels in French, English and German, and at the same time continued her piano studies. In the summer she took French and English A-levels, getting a grade A in each. We had spent, on average, one day a week together studying each of these subjects; we both enjoyed it very much, and for the first time Deborah really got carried away with enthusiasm over academic work. She also gained her first professional performers qualification in piano, sang in a good choir, went to tailoring classes, and joined a country dancing group - none of which she would have had time for had she stayed at school.

This year she is trying the Oxford University entrance exam, preparing for Music and German A-levels and the L.R.A.M. in piano, starting Italian, learning to drive, and continuing her singing, country dancing, and mediaeval music workshop.

It is left to the local Education Officer to agree that she is in full-time education; he is hostile and refuses to send an inspector. This means no tax allowances; no family allowance this year - though we did get this on a technical point last year; no N.U.S. card and consequent reductions for travel, theatre etc.

Rebecca is fourteen and left school in the summer. If she had stayed she would have taken O-levels (H.M.'s choice of subjects) in two years time. She found school unsatisfactory for much the same reasons as her sister, and particularly wanted to do Spanish, European history, and art at O-level - None of which she could have done at school. She also wanted to get on with them, and is obviously capable of doing so - at a good boys' school she would undoubtedly have been encouraged to do so. We have been at work together now for half a term working on eight subjects for O-levels next summer, and are greatly enjoying ourselves. She also has time to go to fencing and art classes; she has a long-standing ambition to illustrate children's books, and has at long last found someone willing to teach her to draw - not me this time, but a marvellous man who runs a Saturday morning class for the young under L.E.A auspices.

The LEA sent an inspector, who apparently found our arrangements satisfactory, and she is now officially recognised as being in full time education with all the attendant benefits - no snags here. We plan to continue with A-level work next year."

Mike & Anne Lydiat - Sheffield

"We took our two children (Karen 10 and Ian 7) out of school for a ten week period from Easter 1976. The immediate cause of this move was the Easter Meeting of the A S Neill Trust Assoc. where several families interested in home based education had been talking of their plans and experiences. The longer cause of our move was a growing dissatisfaction in one of us (going back over four years of reading the 'deschooling' literature) with the kinds of things the school system was expected to do to children. We were unhappy with the formality that typifies most teacher-pupil relationships and also felt that the academic goals of school might be wrong. Both criticisms are more appropriate of secondary education (in our area at least) and our main concern was Karen's move to comprehensive school in two years time.

We informed the LEA that we intended to educate our children at home and sent them a broad curriculum plan which included literacy and thinking skills, local studies, visits etc. We had a formal acknowledgement of receipt of our communication but nothing more. (In fact a member of the advisory staff visited us during the summer holidays, by which time the children had returned to school!)

Things went well for several weeks. We moved from a careful timetable for mornings (which lasted about a week) through a completely free time (with which we adults were too

anxious and interfered perhaps prematurely) to a situation where we would start an activity for ourselves and the children would join in. However we eventually found the time commitment to be too great - one of us was working so a big responsibility fell on the other who was not a teacher.

The family situation became very tense and we decided that we were doing each other no good at all by continuing home based education. The children had also been showing increasing signs of missing their friends and agreed on going back to school."

Nigel and Paula Theobald, - Northants

"Three years six months ago, after much soul-searching, we started the home-based education of our two children (then 7½ yrs and 4½ yrs.) For the first year we collaborated with another family but then moved away and have since worked alone.

Whilst I had been teaching in Junior Schools I wanted less and less for our children to "benefit" from school education by being straight-jacketed and crushed and perhaps feel failures at the age of eight!

Our son was fairly happy at school but resented pressures coming at the end of infant schooling and disliked the element of competition among other children which seemed to be encouraged by their parents, not the school. Both children chose to stay at home although obviously at their ages it was largely an emotional decision.

After our initial encounter with the education authority in the town where we began our venture, when we were mistakenly informed that "children are obliged by law to attend school" we have had nothing but help and co-operation from both of the education authorities.

Our main problem which worried us before de-schooling, was that our children might be deprived of other children's company. In our first year this was adequately overcome by working with another family. Since moving house we have encouraged our children to pursue interests of their choosing which entail :-

- a) collaborating in learning situations with other children.
- b) points of contact for meeting other children and adults
- c) learning skills we cannot provide.

As a qualified teacher with several years teaching experience I find the actual guiding of our daytime studies undaunting and very enjoyable."

Stan and Lorna Windass - Oxfordshire

"We have four children, Christopher (15), Theresa (14), Tom (5) and Ben (2).

The two teenagers completed their primary schooling, but Christopher was deschooled after one year of secondary school, and Theresa before she started at secondary school.

The demand for deschooling came first from Christopher. He was aware of the possibilities of home-based education through our contact with the Head family. He felt cramped, limited and

deadened at school, and believed that he would be happier and able to pursue more rewarding activities at home.

We were reluctant at first because we felt he needed 'the gang', but basically we agreed with him, and told the local Education Authority that we were taking direct responsibility for his education.

Theresa followed two terms later. She is a girl who reacts very negatively to crowds or to pressure, and was unhappy and withdrawn in the ordinary school situation. We felt she needed the security of a home environment for quite different reasons from Christopher.

Following our announcement to the education authority, we were asked to produce a timetable and a list of textbooks and teachers. We did not do this, but instead produced a general scheme of activities, which in the case of Christopher were building a garden room, running a leatherwork business, taking a physics O-level, and playing the violin. In the case of Theresa, we did not predict in such detail, but stressed the general need for the home environment in her case at that particular age, and emphasised that much of her work would be to do with her passion for horses.

We were visited three times by an official of the Education Authority. From the beginning it was clear that Christopher's activities, which followed the scheme we presented, met with approval, but Theresa's failure to produce written work in the first year caused problems, in spite of her achievement in saving money to buy a horse by recaning chairs, and her obvious gain in self confidence and responsibility.

We therefore arranged in the second year for Theresa to do maths with her father's help and English with the guidance of a friend whom she visited fortnightly. This resulted in a satisfactory presentation of written work at the next visit, and we anticipate no further problems.

Essentially both children have followed their enthusiasms with outstanding success. Theresa has a horse and a donkey, has attended riding schools and courses and horse shows, and won a number of small awards. She wants to be a vet. Christopher has passed Grade 8 on the violin, joined three orchestras, entered for the National Youth Orchestra, and wishes to be a violinist.

Both children have embarked on O-level courses through Wolsey Hall Correspondence College. Christopher has passed O-level physics, entered for Maths and English in January, and will enter for two more subjects in June when he is sixteen. Theresa has started on a Maths course and a Biology course, and is writing and reading regularly.

Next year two of our children will be at school. Christopher wishes to go into the sixth form with his age group, and Tom (5) wants to go to school with his friends.

We have had few worries with deschooling, except the slight tensions involved in waiting for children to start working under their own steam and wondering how long it will take, and how much pressure to exert.

Different children have different needs, and their needs change with their age. It is important that deschooling is an open option, when and where it suits the particular case."

Lynne Pulvermacher - York University

"Although as a student I have had no direct experience of home based education, past conversations with friends have revealed incredulity and prejudice at the very idea and it was most encouraging to meet people who, having taken the plunge and withdrawn their children from school, had discovered it to be a feasible alternative. The mutual respect, sense of purpose and energy in the discussions contrasted with some comparable university debate, although I would defend the value of an objective and uninvolved airing of ideas possible in a department of education.

While thoroughly endorsing the individual aims of those involved and the need for network support for other deschoolers I have some doubts as to the long term thinking. In the foreseeable future the opportunity for deschooling can only rest with those with economic freedom and intellectual reserves - the majority of children will remain in schools. To talk in terms of 'responsibility shifts' is perhaps not to take into account the many children for whom school represents a real chance for liberation and the genuine feeling of parents that schools can offer a great deal which they themselves could not.

Perhaps de-schoolers can try the possibilities of offering some of their own positive insights and hopes both to the schools and to others who have indeed handed over responsibility but who could not undertake the complete education of their children."

NEXT MEETING: See details overleaf.

WEEKEND MEETING

The next weekend meeting of Education Otherwise will be held at Lower Shaw Farm on February 25th to 27th, 1977. Accommodation is limited to about 40 places, so book early to avoid disappointment.

The cost is £7 per person, children half-price (free if under 3 years). We begin with supper at about 7.00 p.m. on the Friday and end with Sunday lunch. Accommodation is basic; blankets, sheets, etc. are available, but most people normally bring sleeping bags. It may be possible to offer one or two free places for people who cannot afford to pay and who are prepared to help with cooking and chores. This will leave them free to take part in some, but not all, of the weekend.

A deposit of £2 per person should be sent with the form below to Dick Kitto, Lower Shaw Farm, Shaw, Swindon, Wilts.

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To: Dick Kitto, Lower Shaw Farm, Shaw, Swindon, Wilts.

Please reserve the following accommodation for me on the Education Otherwise weekend, February 25th to 27th, 1977.

Adults _____ Children _____ Infants _____
(up to 12 yrs) (up to 3 yrs)

I enclose £2 per person deposit.

Name

Address

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