

SCHOOL'S OUT



Walking through a field of buttercups at The Bridge Mill

Alan and Rosie Beat host school visits at their Devon smallholding. Here, Rosie writes about a typical visit, and looks at the benefits for children.

Some of my fondest childhood memories are of being allowed to play outside; not in the street, or the park close by, but in the fields across the way where we made secret camps, climbed trees, peeped into birds' nests and generally got very dirty. We always told our mother where we were going, and we always arrived home hungry for the next meal, but I doubt that there are many children who can have this sort of freedom today, even in a rural area.

Moving from a suburban environment to a smallholding meant that our children had the opportunity to run wild, climb trees and generally have more freedom than before. I, too, enjoyed being able to walk through our special meadow where the grasses and flowers grew as high as your waist and the field was alive with grasshoppers, bringing those childhood memories flooding back.

Opening our smallholding to schools and other

TEACHER'S VIEW

The reception class teacher from Stratton Primary School, near Bude, always brings her very new class in September and find it works brilliantly as a settling and team-building session.

"Visiting The Bridge Mill provides a safe and yet adventurous environment," she said. "The experiences gained on a 'field trip' of this nature are deep, shared and very meaningful to the children. The quality of follow up work/play we see back at school reflects this, and we see children very engaged in their own-initiated follow-on work.

"Some small children shine when they are out of doors and others show their more vulnerable natures.

"Bridge Mill is a special place – the children recognise this and remember it long after their first visit."

groups has meant that we can share some of these experiences with the children that visit. While these visits often have a particular focus, for example a study of habitats or lifecycles, the fact that the children are outside the classroom, having close contact with animals and more freedom than would usually be allowed, makes the experience more memorable. I always encourage teachers to allow the children some time to run free, perhaps playing in the long grass or running up and rolling down the hill. Sometimes, as we walk round, children will start playing and improvise their own group activity, perhaps gathering dried cut grass and rushes to make a camp, or to bury each other! Children often remember this spontaneous play for a long time afterwards. On a very hot day, there is always a shady place in the river to paddle in, with wellies or barefoot; but these activities, along with pond dipping, have potential risk, so teachers need to consider all eventualities beforehand.

Health and safety

Every teacher who makes a visit to the smallholding is given health and safety information to read beforehand, and they decide what they would like to do, and how much freedom they will allow the children in their care. Visits are usually planned to take account of the topics the children are studying at school, and each visit is different. Some may be

closely timetabled with specific activities in mind, others very fluid, but hopefully they will all be fun.

What does a school visit look like?

A typical school visit might begin with meeting the animals; Jetsam the cat usually greets the children by the gate when they first arrive, with the ducks not far behind him, as they have learnt that groups of children mean extra food! The children walk round to the stable to put their belongings under cover in case of rain, where the pigs are waiting next door to talk to them having heard all the excited chatter!

Once we've talked about health and safety issues (see my article in the July issue of CS) we often start with a walk around the smallholding to cover whatever the teacher has planned. We may begin by walking through the mowhay (rickyard) where the ducks live; here the children can hand feed the friendly adults, watch them having a bath in the paddling pool and, depending on the time of the year, peep in on the broody ducks and ducklings.

Through the gate is Mill Hill, and running up this steep slope is always fun to do, especially when there are inquisitive cattle to discover. Jetsam nearly always tags along. If there are buttercups in flower, then children usually gather some, holding them to their chins to see if they like butter! Walking through a field of shiny buttercups is a delight on a sunny day. If the visit has an arty theme, the children may stay on the hill for a while to sketch the view of the valley, or they may continue through the gate into Hill Meadow where the sheep flock is grazing. The sheep, too, have learnt that visiting children means food, so they gather round to inspect hands and pockets until all the treats have gone. One or two will

stay for a scratch
under the
chin or



MARY FARBROTHER

behind the ears, and allow the children to sink fingers into their fleece. Meeting the pigs, ducks and sheep, and finding out what they eat and where they live, can be a prelude to the story of the little red hen who finds some grains of wheat and asks the other farm animals to help her with the process of growing and harvesting, grinding into flour and baking a loaf of bread.

Leaving the sheep behind, we approach the bridge where a troll might be hiding, and the children creep over to see if they can spot him sleeping in the nearby hedge. Then it is on to the millpond where, perhaps, the little froglets are emerging, and trying to count how many froglets are hopping in the grass is an impossible task! We watch the dragonflies hunting or laying eggs in the water, and then Alan may show them how he sets the water running from the pond into the mill leat to power the water wheel. Younger children might return to the mill at this point to continue the story of the little red hen, whilst older children may focus on the milling machinery and how it works. For historical studies, we may describe how the mill would have looked and sounded in any period of history from the present Victorian building right back to the Saxon mill listed in the Domesday survey of 1086. >

WATCH OUT FOR LIONS!

Here is a favourite true story from one of our very early school visits.

We had a visiting boar staying with our sow when the local village playgroup came to meet the animals. As they walked across the yard, I asked the children "What animals do you think you might see today?" At that moment, the boar made a deep growling noise, from out of sight behind a closed barn door. One little boy's eyes grew rounder and rounder as he said in a thrilled whisper "Lions"! So it just goes to show that, when you are four years old, nothing seems impossible!

The pigs are waiting to meet the children

MARY FARBROTHER



Other school groups, whose focus is lifecycles and habitats, will continue on from the millpond through to Marsh Meadow, which is left ungrazed throughout spring and early summer so that many of the flowers and grasses are waist high to an adult. For children, this is a jungle where they can be giants and search down in the undergrowth for all the minibeasts that live in this habitat. They can hide away like the creatures in the grass, or lie on their backs to look at the sky through a fringe of tall waving grasses and listen to the whirr of grasshoppers. If the teacher decides to study the water habitat of the pond here, we move over to the fenced off pond-dipping area where children are put into small groups, each with a net, bucket and identification sheet on pond life. Pond dipping is universally popular with all ages, from nursery upwards - even the adults get carried away! I ought to say here that the pond dipping area is one place where children, especially the younger ones, have to be closely supervised, but that doesn't take away the excitement of catching a fierce monster

Picnic lunch

At this point, it is probably time to return to base for hand washing and a picnic lunch, so we might walk back around the lake to spot the Canada goose with her goslings or the wild ducks with their young. It is a favourite haunt for the largest dragonfly, the emperor, so we are almost guaranteed a sighting unless the weather is very cold or wet. An alternative route is to walk back along by the river where I tell

the children to look out for the kingfisher. If a study of the river was the aim of the visit, then we may have focused on this activity earlier, perhaps measuring the flow of water by timing sticks floating between two points (an excuse to play 'Pooh sticks') or drawing a map of the river to mark what is growing in or on the banks, ready to make a story stick when we get back.

On wet days, inside the mill is a good place to be, as is my dye workshop where children can learn about sheep's wool, hand spinning and natural dyeing to develop the story of a woolly jumper, or for an historical theme, the story of a woolly tunic!

And all too soon, the coach arrives signalling the end of the visit. The children gather up their belongings and heads are counted to make sure that none are left behind. As the coach pulls away, a forest of little hands wave goodbye at the windows. We wave goodbye too, then it's back indoors to put the kettle on for a nice cup of tea!



Pond dipping is always popular

FUNDING FOR SCHOOL VISITS

The school visits we run are funded by Natural England under the Countryside Stewardship Educational Access Scheme. No charge is made to the school, instead the visiting teacher completes an evaluation form and these are sent to Natural England at the end of the year. Most farms in this scheme host at least six and up to 25 visits a year.

Farms opening for school visits need to provide adequate washing facilities (see 'Coming Clean', July issue) and have public liability insurance cover. They need also to provide a Farm Information Pack to visiting schools with details about the site, ideas for activities linked to the National Curriculum and health and safety considerations.

Educational access is funded by Natural England through existing Countryside Stewardship Schemes (now closed to new applicants) and the Environmental Stewardship Higher Level Scheme. It aims to help members of the public learn about farming, environmental conservation and food production by offering free visits to farms. Natural England's website at www.naturalengland.org.uk provides information about existing Educational Access sites (Information for Students and Teachers) and about applying for the Higher Level Environmental Stewardship Scheme (Information for Farmers and Land Managers). For advice call 0300 060 0011. Training is available for smallholders or farmers who want to run visits through CEVAS (Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation Scheme).

WAS IT A SUCCESS?

How do we gauge the success of the visit?

It is usually obvious from the faces of the children (and the adults) that they have enjoyed themselves. Of course, we see the children for a relatively short time, and are not really aware of how they usually behave, so it is difficult to judge whether the visit has given any of them increased confidence or other benefit.

MARY FARBROTHER



One happy young visitor

Sometimes, however, the teacher will share observations with us.

For example, a normally quiet and unassuming, almost withdrawn, girl of four years and 10 months came to life during a visit here. She loved the animals, and was thrilled to feed and touch the pigs, sheep and ducks.

Another time, children were allowed to collect up some loose dried grass and rushes to play with. A normally rather shy boy, who in the classroom would passively leave other children to organise group activities, initiated and orchestrated the making of a camp.

Writer -----

Rosie Beat and her husband Alan have run their Devon smallholding of 16 acres for more than 20 years. In addition to offering educational visits, they run training courses. For more details, see www.thebridgemill.org.uk or, for queries about hosting school visits, email Rosie at rosie@thebridgemill.org.uk