



*'I too would get to build a twig den and make popcorn over a fire!'*

Gloucestershire. Inspired by their descriptions of pond dipping and mini-beast hunts, it was uplifting to hear how ECT are not only bringing the curriculum outside through Forest School, but are also encouraging children from diverse backgrounds to connect with the countryside through a variety of other outside adventures.

Rooted in the conservation and management of the countryside (it owns 22,000 acres of estate land throughout England, including some lovely villages), ECT distributes many educational grants each year, but also uses its own woodland, farms, rivers and wetlands as direct educational resources.

Founded in 1952 by Ernest Cook, a shy philanthropist who cared deeply about the English countryside, ECT celebrated its diamond jubilee in 2012. Children planted 60 trees to celebrate this occasion and the Trust funded in perpetuity an apprenticeship in a much-needed rural craft, coppicing and green woodworking. Director of ECT, Nicholas Ford, says that the trustees are 'firm believers that you can teach anything in an outside setting', and for the last 13 years children from pre-school age to undergraduates have been learning first-hand about wildlife, biodiversity and natural habitats using the Trust's wealth of natural resources.

#### **Working with teachers**

The Ernest Cook Trust's education programme is led by a team of 10 qualified Education officers, allowing teachers to take any part of the National Curriculum into the >

## learning from the land

*How the Ernest Cook Trust is helping children engage with the wonderful outdoors* BY ANDREA MYNARD

LOOKING AT OUR LOCAL village schools for my daughter recently, I was interested to note how many of them take part in Forest School activity. I couldn't remember quite so much den-building when I was at school, and there was definitely a lack of toasted marshmallows over campfires. Obviously delighted that my daughter would be having such fun while learning, I was also secretly pleased that us parents at least got invited for a Forest School session – I too would get to build a twig den

and make popcorn over a fire! It also set me thinking about our different childhoods. When we sat in uniform at my suburban schools in the 1970s, we wouldn't have imagined having a lesson in the middle of a wood. But then did we have more freedom in our leisure time to roam across the fields; damming streams, making secret maps (too much Famous Five!) and creating as many dens as

we liked unsupervised, rather than sitting in front of a screen?

#### **Ernest Cook Trust**

Having read recent reports about 'Nature Deficit Disorder' and with worries about whether we're bringing up a nation of cosseted couch potatoes, mingling with nostalgic thoughts of a childhood spent outdoors, I visited the Ernest Cook Trust at Fairford Park,





*“smelly potions are mixed, shelters are built, ‘paint’ is mixed from mud and leaves, campfires are made and drop scones are cooked on them.”*

> great outdoors. Often subjects taught in the classroom can be enhanced and brought to life by teaching outside. According to Nicholas, ‘We ask teachers what they would like to achieve and tailor make the visit so each one is unique.’ When asked what topic they’d like to cover, one teacher suggested ‘The Titanic’. As Nicholas says, ‘It’s not an obvious topic for a wood. But we found that they could measure the size of the ship outside – something that wouldn’t be possible in a classroom. The children also divided into groups of those who survived and those who died, they covered fractions as part of this, and they built life rafts. It was so successful that next time the class visited, the teacher suggested a topic of ‘Mars’.’

#### **The joys of the outdoors**

Local pre-school and primary school children regularly visit the ECT woodland at Fairford for Forest School. According to Anne Newman, who has been an Education Officer for

the ECT at Fairford since 2002, the children can’t wait to go through the wooden gate that leads into the 2 acres of lovely woodland overlooking the River Coln where Forest School is held. Smelly potions are mixed, shelters are built, ‘paint’ is mixed from mud and leaves, campfires are made and drop scones are cooked on them. Pre-school children often enjoy just learning to walk up and down some of the slippery slopes

without help. Or they may listen to the story of The Three Little Pigs with lots of huffing and puffing before building their own house of sticks and attempting to blow it down.

It’s important to be aware of safety before embarking on woodland lessons, of course. Anne says that at ECT, at foundation stage children are taught simple rules including not picking and licking and being careful how they carry sticks. But Anne says, ‘If you teach children how to carry a stick safely at a young age it’s something they’ll always remember. There’s so much you can do with sticks – counting, sorting, looking at shapes, making letters.’

#### **Assessing risks**

As well as teaching specific subjects, there are over-all educational benefits to be gained from learning from the land. Nicholas Ford says he’s found that in just doing ‘simple things like climbing a tree or walking and climbing in woodland, children assess risks themselves – including a lot of children who haven’t been in this environment before. It’s definitely about much more than an education in nature. Through interacting with their environment, children learn about themselves, about safety and learn what they can and can’t do.’ >

#### **Schools that provide outdoors experiences**

One of the benefits of Bloo House in Esher, Surrey is its size. As a small school, class sizes are kept to a maximum of 8-10 pupils. Another is the importance of wild play, as demonstrated in the Forest School programme at the school. Open days are held on 2nd March and 11th May. See [bloohouse.co.uk](http://bloohouse.co.uk) for more info.





time having fun and learning in the countryside will help nurture this ethos in children, preventing Nature Deficit Disorder too. As Nicholas Ford says: 'If we can help teach them a bit about the countryside and have some groups visiting every week, it becomes a familiar environment that they understand, and becomes important to them.' Ernest would no doubt be approved of the way learning from the land is enabling so many children to engage with the outdoors, forging a lifelong love of the countryside while having great fun. See: [ernestcooktrust.org.uk](http://ernestcooktrust.org.uk)

■ To read Andrea Mynard's blog, including plenty of outdoor adventures, see [shabbychick.me.uk](http://shabbychick.me.uk)

## *"respect for the natural environment is always woven throughout education"*

### **Education for everyone**

Through ECT, children from all sorts of backgrounds benefit from this type of education. Visits are made from inner-city schools in Bristol, Gloucester, Swindon and Cheltenham, as well as from local village schools. Children with learning difficulties, autism or Downs syndrome often enjoy learning in a refreshingly different way outdoors. Nicholas says for children from any type of background, outdoor learning can be 'wonderful for child development'. He's noticed that teachers bringing their classes often have the opportunity to stand back a little and observe their children; 'seeing them behaving in a very different way to in the classroom'. Children who don't flourish in the classroom often get outside and relish an alternative style of learning, which does wonders for their own self-esteem. Anne says that she sees 'children immediately relax when they get

outside'. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that they learn all sorts of skills that can then be transferred to the classroom, including communication skills. One little boy and girl who visited Forest School began talking to each other for the first time over buckets of smelly potions. Anne remembers; 'The boy hadn't got a bucket, so the little girl let him use hers and they sat on a log for ages talking about it. When I talked to their teacher I realized that they'd hardly spoken in the classroom.'

### **Food and farming**

Forest School is just one of the ways that ECT offers hands-on educational opportunities across the five counties that its estates are in. There are now education officers on all eight of the different estates, offering opportunities to learn outside the classroom throughout the year, in all weathers. In Dorset, one of the education officers is a farmer and children can visit

his farm, gaining hands-on experience with animals on a real working farm. On many of the tenanted farms on ECT land, children are able to learn about a variety of subjects involving farming and agriculture, food production, or healthy eating. A school visit may cover 'What is farming?', or a class may learn about something more specific, maybe one particular area of food production.

### **Respect for environment**

Whether the learning experience is an 'A' Level group studying rivers and flows for geography or a group of preschoolers having an adventure in woodland, respect for the natural environment is always woven throughout education at ECT. Ernest Cook himself was passionate about conservation and the ethos of the Trust is to follow principles of sustainability in land management to protect the Trust's landscapes. Hopefully spending plenty of

### **Schools that provide outdoors experiences**

At Cherry Trees School in Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, pupils grow their own herbs and each class has its own vegetable garden. There is a forest school and wildlife club where children at this Montessori setting can experience nature first hand. See [cherrytreesschool.org](http://cherrytreesschool.org).

