



# Starting in your own

# BACK YARD

**JANE ADAMS** DESCRIBES HER SCHOOL'S  
WORK BEYOND THE CLASSROOM AS  
PART OF THE NATIONAL TRUST  
GUARDIANSHIP SCHEME

**K**ilkhampton Junior and Infants School is a rural primary school of 83 children aged 4–11 years, situated on the Atlantic Highway (A39) just inside Cornwall and close to the coast, beaches and walks. Why did we become involved in a partnership scheme? Well, I loved walking with my dad, a master cartographer and lover of nature; I trained in North Wales, taught in Cornwall for a long time and spent a year in Oregon as a Fulbright exchange teacher. All these environments taught me to care for and respect them, to have fun in them and to love learning about them. I had just started as head teacher at Kilkhampton, when a flyer landed on my desk

asking for applications for a new National Trust Guardianship Scheme. I wrote to our local NT office, we were selected and our feet haven't touched the ground since!

### Getting started

At our first meeting, the NT wardens and I quickly learned that we were talking the same language – *'educating for the future whilst enjoying today'* – but from very different perspectives. The NT team had little practical experience of managing lots of children, the constraints of school timetables, our version of health and safety issues. Our staff and parents were nervous about children on cliff tops, around the river and ocean, and worried

Children's photographs capturing foxgloves, algae and crab, and the maze-like trail of water snails



about their ability to name flora and fauna in a variety of environments. But, as in all partnerships, a willingness to share knowledge, understanding and skills was paramount. A two-year action plan was teased out; diary dates, activities and curriculum links (or not) were agreed as appropriate. We planned a first day out to share each team's concerns and constraints; we would work together, sharing expertise in child management and learning styles, as well as our knowledge about the environment. We would be experimenting and taking risks whilst educating and inspiring the children.

We decided on a trip to Duckpool, a local beach at the mouth of a river. The neighbouring water meadows are full of insect life and flowers, the rock pools on the beach provide excellent dipping and, despite the surrounding cliffs, there is plenty of evidence of farming activity to be seen. There is also a car park and 'loo', very important when out and about with children. Parents were asked to drive and stay for part or all of the day and

to join in the activities if they wished. We started at 9.30 am with the warden's introduction to the geography and history of the area, which had the children and adults enthralled. Then there was an overview of the day – four activities that they would all get to do – and children were assigned to groups in rotation, with a meeting point established for change-overs. The activities included photography, poetry, a rock pool safari and one called 'What have humans done?' Each lasted an hour.

### The activities

#### Photography

Each group was shown how to hold and operate a camera with zoom lens, and how to keep the sun to their side or back to avoid shadows. The challenge was to explore the water meadow using

an observation window (a 2 cm square window cut out of card) to find and capture on camera their best memory of the day. If there was time, they sketched the image accurately and recorded the plants and creatures found.

#### Poetry

At the base of a very steep, grass-covered rabbit warren looking out across the beach, children were asked to use their senses to collect and record as little or as much information about Duckpool as they needed to create a poem or piece of descriptive writing back at school. They were to stay very quiet, use all their senses to absorb the environment, and then tell a partner which of their senses they were using the most.

### Rock pool safari

The children removed socks and shoes. Clear instructions were given about where they could and could not go. The warden showed and named a selection of plants and creatures (collected earlier) that they might find on the safari and reinforced the need for careful observation, care and respect for all living things. The children were then released to see what they could identify using the resources provided.

### What have humans done?

This concerned the impact man has had on this environment, which can be evidenced from Roman times up to the satellite-tracking station that can be seen from the cliff top. Working with a learning partner, children recorded briefly the visible ways in which man has influenced this environment. They then had to talk about why people may have made these changes and what impact the changes have had on the environment. How were man's influences different or similar to nature's influences?

### So, how did it all go?

Just amazingly well. The children moved to their first group activity sensibly, settled to task well, asked and answered a million questions and were speaking and listening on task. Each return to base before their next activity provoked great excitement as they had minimal time to share their experiences before moving to their next activity. At lunchtime most conversation was about what each had found out so far. The grassy bank we picnicked on became an impromptu mini-beast safari park and roller coaster, as shoes and socks were abandoned and rolling and sliding down the slope drew shrieks of delight. 'Freedom' was what sprang to mind; amazingly, no one moaned about then getting back to work. 'This isn't work is it? This is FUN' declared several voices. By the end of the day we were all pleasantly exhausted. We hadn't lost or injured any children and they

were absolutely 'buzzing':

*I took a photo of a snail trail, a water snail trail in the sand on a rock in that rock pool over there and it looked like a maze wiggling about all over the place. I followed the trail with my finger and it was a really long journey for a little snail on a gritty surface. It was yellow and its tummy must have been sore.*

*[the warden] is like a reference book on legs....and he's fun!*

*My creature looks like it comes from outer space but it's in this book. Cool.*

### Unanticipated benefits

The adult leaders were inspired by the children's fascination with their environment and noted that the day had provided every child with learning at their own pace; our special needs children had been totally engaged in learning all day. More-able children had helped their peers use reference books and a few Latin names had created quite an interest for some of them. We all felt that we had got to know our children better. Children who may have been reluctant to volunteer suggestions in the classroom suddenly displayed an expertise we knew nothing about. Children nervous in team activities were noted being agile and confident leaders moving in and around rock pools. Children were taking risks even when committing words to paper, so strong was the desire to share what they had experienced. Next day, parents reported that the enthusiasm for the trip had continued at home; the only question was, 'When will you be going out with the Trust again and can we come and help if we're not working?'

### Science-related learning

Since this tentative start we have repeated days and half-days out in a variety of environments. Amongst many other things, the science dimension has included:

- Helping plant a new protective hedgerow at Stowe Barton (the NT farm).

- Collecting acorns and planting them in the nursery for a replanting scheme at Stibb Woods.

- Creating 'nature's bookmarks' – a piece of card with double-sided tape attached to an elastic wristband so it could be worn on the wrist or a button for the duration of the walk. 'Start' and 'finish' were written at opposite ends of the card and the children were asked to collect and add selectively some evidence to explain their journey. This focused the children on close observation of their environments and provided a visual reminder of the journey back at school where they shared their stories with a learning partner.

- Designing posters to advertise walks led by the Trust team. These are now reproduced and displayed in tourist centres and NT properties locally.

- Investigating rocks, soils and materials in the classroom, led by NT wardens.

- Designing and making three-fold brochures for other children visiting our guardianship areas so they know what to look out for and where to walk.

- Building shelters in Stowe Woods using any found materials. Most shelters worked well but a few leaked, and it did rain! Evaluation of designing and making has never been so focused and relevant.

- Studies of the variety of life using collection boxes, pooters and nets.

- Classification of creatures leading on from this, along with observational sketching, naming, etc.

- Consideration of adaptation of plants to their habitats.

- Measuring the flow at different stages of our river, using Pooh sticks.

The children are usually out in the fresh air in all seasons. They are totally involved in the

Investigating life in the river



environment, using their senses to explore:

*Oh, the water went over my wellies; it was SO cold!*

*Cowpats only smell when they're wet ... did you know?*

They feel a sense of ownership, sometimes as pleasure and at other times despair, as they plant new hedges, collect seeds for planting, clear plastic from 'their' beaches:

*Can we do this again? ... Please! [pleading].*

**Other perspectives**

One of our NT partners, who has worked with the same children over the past five years, said recently:

*My personal experience over the period of our scheme is that I started out with concerns and trepidation about working in the role of leading children. Now I am confident and look forward to our days out; I have surprised*

*myself by how adequately I can 'teach' a class full of pupils.*

Another said:

*It's great to have the trust and respect of the teachers; it makes us feel proud to be involved with the school and pleased that we are delivering high-quality educational activities.*

From the school's perspective, we have gained access to beautiful woodland, cliffs, beaches and the coast path. We look at it daily; but with our partners' expertise we have learned to observe it all year round, really see what is obvious and what is not, to touch with our hands and hearts, to name what we see, to question why the places

we visit are the way they are and to feel the soul of our surroundings. Sounds 'cheesy'? Well it's not. I defy any open-minded person not to enjoy the experiences our NT Guardianship school team has offered to our children. We

share, we care, we dare and if we want to inculcate in every child the desire to protect what they have today for future generations, then they must be helped towards that understanding today and tomorrow. By educating the children, we reach many parents and grandparents who can't resist the children's enthusiasm. When our children become parents, hopefully they will remember these lessons and pass them on.

My friend and 'adopted grandma' from Oregon, a native American leader called Agnes Baker-Pilgrim ('Grandma Aggie') sagely commented a decade ago, 'start in your own back yard'. I would encourage teachers, parents, and caring adults everywhere to follow this philosophy. Use what you know and find other like-minded people who can help you. As Wordsworth wrote, 'Come out into the light of things; let Nature be your guide'.

**More information about the National Trust Guardianship Scheme can be found at: [http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-learning\\_discovery/w-schools/w-schools-guardianships.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-learning_discovery/w-schools/w-schools-guardianships.htm)**

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