



A forest

In the field of education, forest schools are spreading. Westonbirt Arboretum has donated wood to one such newly opened forest school. *The Westonbirt Magazine* spoke to **Jayne Morris** and **Charlotte Lucas**, co-owners of the school, about its philosophy and the benefits to its pupils.

Always supportive of educational initiatives, when approached by Free Rangers Forest School Nursery, Westonbirt Arboretum welcomed the opportunity to help with the development of the nursery.

Free Rangers nursery is located in Welton, Midsomer Norton, ten miles south of Bath. The nursery is housed in a renovated eighteenth century mill barn and a purpose designed, oak framed loggia with access to 20 acres of surrounding countryside. The nursery provides childcare for children from six months to five years old and the design ensures that children are provided with the best possible environment to learn through play.

Free range childhood

Sisters, Charlotte Lucas and Jayne Morris, the owners of the nursery, grew up on the site where the nursery is now situated. Five years ago, it was still a working Duchy of Cornwall farm where their parents and grandparents had lived and farmed. For Charlotte and Jayne, their childhood memories are of searching for treasures in the fields, building dams in the brook and simply enjoying the beauty of the surrounding countryside. As time passed, they realised how fortunate they were and that they wanted to enable other children to experience such a childhood.

Both Charlotte and Jayne are qualified teachers and mums of young children, so they fully appreciate how much the great

outdoors enhances a child's development. They understand that a positive Early Years Education provides the vital foundations upon which further education can be built. It is for these reasons that Charlotte and Jayne have set up and recently opened Free Rangers Forest School Nursery.

What is a forest school?

The forest school initiative is becoming increasingly popular with nurseries and schools. The concept originated in Sweden in the 1950s and is now seen as an innovative and inspirational approach to learning and development. The inclusion of forest school within the curriculum encourages children to take measured risks and to solve problems. They learn to become more independent and to grow in confidence and self-esteem.

It is well documented that children are spending significantly less time playing in natural places such as woodlands and heaths than previous generations. Reasons attributed to this vary from concern about strangers, traffic, access and the weather. We owe it to the children to expose them to the outdoors and all that it has to offer. At Free Rangers the ethos is one that believes that all of these factors can be overcome.

Forest school sessions at Free Rangers are free flowing, allowing children to ask questions and to experience a variety of teaching techniques. A child's social and emotional development will progress in leaps and bounds. ➔



Above: Alistair Williams, sawmill owner, with Andy Jane from Westonbirt and some of the timber for the nursery.

Opposite: The bell tent on the specially constructed larch platform.

"FOREST SCHOOLS ENCOURAGE CHILDREN TO TAKE MEASURED RISKS AND TO SOLVE PROBLEMS"

philosophy



Charlotte, who is currently working towards a Level 4 forest school qualification which will enable her to train other adults, says, “It is unbelievable – the difference that I’ve seen in children as a result of forest school sessions over a period of time. Children learn to communicate and co-operate with one another and to solve problems. They develop physically with fine and gross motor skills, and emotionally. They learn vital skills of perseverance and motivation, and they develop complex and imaginative play, I could go on and on!”

Putting wood to work

As a Friend of Westonbirt Arboretum, on a family walk through Silk Wood, Jayne noticed the large number of felled trees on the perimeter. She approached Mary Hinton, Finance Admin Officer at the arboretum, who suggested contacting Andy Jane, the Operations Support Officer. Jayne says, “The arboretum could not have been more supportive, helpful and generous. We were shown the wood that was available and discussed the logistics of getting it back to the nursery site. It was decided that Alistair Williams, who owns a local sawmill, would transport two lorry loads of wood to the site and sawmill the remainder before taking it across to the nursery.”



Wood from the arboretum included red oak, turkey oak, larch and black pine. As Free Rangers Nursery grows its own produce, a large amount of the wood has been used to build raised beds. Children help to nurture the plants in the allotment area and learn about the journey from seed to plant, they are involved with the preparation and cooking, and then finally they enjoy eating the delicious produce.



Arboretum wood was also used to build The Wormery – an efficient system of converting ordinary kitchen food waste into liquid feed and rich organic compost. A piece of Perspex is slotted into the wood so the children can view the worms and understand their importance in gardens, alongside the obvious fun of picking up the wriggly creatures!



Opposite from top: The nursery building today; off-loading the sawn timber in the play area; large logs for climbing on; logs ready for play.



CHILDREN LEAVE THE NURSERY WITH MUDDIED KNEES, POCKETS BURSTING WITH NATURAL TREASURES AND SMILES ON THEIR FACES.

A bell tent sits proudly on a platform of Westonbirt wood which was built by Tom Vaughan and Chris Amey from Greenwood Spaces based in Devon. Using the carefully sawn wood, they erected a moveable structure upon which the bell tent now sits. Children use the bell tent at snack time, to escape from wind and rain, to shelter from the heat or simply to chat with friends and staff.

More wood was used to build a safe seating area around a fire pit and beneath the canopy of some of the larger trees which also house bird feeders and bat boxes. It is here that children start and conclude their forest school sessions, following at all times the nursery motto of, "Play, share and take care."

Larger pieces of wood have been strategically placed around the nursery garden for the children to scramble on, crawl along, balance between and hide behind. They are open-ended resources that one day can be a boat, another a rocket or even a sleeping monster!

Results

One month in and Free Rangers Forest School Nursery is receiving valuable positive feedback from parents. Whilst following the Early Years Foundation Stage, children are learning through outdoor play and structured forest school sessions led by qualified practitioners. Children are discovering risk taking, appreciating themselves, each other, their communities and the natural world.

Staff at Free Rangers use the beautiful surroundings and resources to harness memorable interactions with nature to teach and facilitate the children's learning in a most positive way. Children leave the nursery with muddied knees, pockets bursting with natural treasures and smiles on their faces.

What more can parents ask for? What a great Early Years Setting for Westonbirt to support. ■

Above: Charlotte and Jayne with their children in the bluebells at Free Rangers.

Free Rangers are supported by Bath and North East Somerset Council
www.bathnes.gov.uk

For more information on Free Rangers Forest School, visit www.freerangers.org.uk or call 01761 413122.