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For four decades, The Country Trust has been giving inner-city children a taste of country life – with the help of a team of dedicated landowner hosts



After a dire winter for winter wheat and a pandemic forcing milk to be dumped and impeding the fruit harvest, it's been a bleak time for farming. Yet alongside these problems is an ongoing challenge that land managers everywhere cannot overlook: teaching Britain's children about the land.

Educational charity The Country Trust has done this for more than 40 years, with around 20,000 children a year — primarily from disadvantaged schools — now joining its free visits to farms and estates through its farm, food and countryside discovery programmes. When I first joined a Trust visit some 25 years ago I saw pre-iPad generation children fingering tulips to see if they were plastic, and one who speculated that it was “the Social”, rather than Lord Leverhulme, who paid the wages of his estate carpenter. Yet this disconnect from the land is bigger than ever now.

“It’s desperately astonishing how little they know about anything we’re talking about,”

says Lord Somerleyton of the children he and his wife have hosted for the Trust for five years in Suffolk. “I’m near Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth, both quite deprived now there’s no fishing,” he elaborates. “They’re also very urban, though close to the countryside.”

AUTHENTIC VOICE

Farmers may for years have been dismissed as corn-chewing bumpkins but really they are Britain’s best polymaths; part engineer, part agronomist, part vet, meteorologist, business analyst and sales negotiator. Many of them make great teachers, too, says Jill Attenborough, the Trust’s chief executive. “The farmer is the authentic voice and the children love meeting them,” she says. “Some are very straight talking. So few of us have that opportunity to ask a dairy farmer direct, ‘What does happen to your bull calves?’”

New schools join the Trust’s programmes simply by word of mouth. “One school is such an advocate for us we’ve got 16 schools in the Manchester area waiting to work with us,” says Attenborough.

In recent years, the Trust has noticed a shift in the attitudes of the young towards environmental issues

With ever more children lecturing their parents on the carbon footprint of a burger and the amount of water used in agriculture, has the Trust noted a shift in young attitudes? “Particularly in the past year,” agrees Attenborough. “There are very loud viewpoints about what we should eat and how we should manage the land. We don’t take a stand but allow farmers to tell their story and children to make informed decisions.”

Regional freelance coordinators, with backgrounds in education, help guide hosts through risk assessments and safeguarding, and advise on what would best tie in with a visiting class’s curriculum — habitats, germination, life cycles, food science or what have you. But one intriguing aspect of the Trust is the support it has long enjoyed from high-profile landowners and estates, who can perhaps accommodate visits more easily than smaller farms.

When children are welcomed to the Eaton estate by the young Duke of Westminster, any dismay about his lack of tricorne hat and footman is soon forgotten. “I usually bring my dog, Zac, so they ignore me and give him all the attention,” says the Duke. In no time he →

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is “at the back, carrying all the leftover wellies and kit they’ve forgotten”.

Having grown up aware of the Trust – “my father used to talk about The Country Trust passionately and I would occasionally bump into them when charging around at home” – and studied Land Management at university, the Duke proudly continues the association. He has made the presidency of the Trust his first charity role, and helps it financially through his Westminster Foundation.

The visits (up to 24 a year across the Eaton, Grosvenor and Abbeystead estates) are designed to be fun and educational, involving input from “the farm manager, head keeper, head forester and as many members of their teams as possible. They really do enjoy it... and explain what a potential career looks like and how they have ended up in their role.”

Though the visitors are young and have variable knowledge – some do not know

where milk comes from, while one very small boy triggered a swift reworking of the forester’s script by confidently naming his team ‘the saplings’ – their visits will touch not just on “how we produce milk but why we’re doing it a certain way, to have the least environmental impact,” explains the Duke. “They might only be seven or eight years old but they are very fast to learn and make the connection from field to food.”

FORAGING FIRST

At Somerleyton Hall in Suffolk, Trust visitors typically start off with some foraging then learn “a bit about nutrition, farm structure and the commercial end of arable farming,” continues Lord Somerleyton. “Of course, they love a ride on a tractor – it’s so huge and other-worldly – and they’ll come to the kitchen garden at the Hall where we grow quite a lot for our pubs.” A specialist dairy farming tenant has a docile herd the children

Above: Lord Carnarvon hosts a visit of primary school children at Highclere. Opposite page, clockwise from top: The Duke of Westminster at Eaton estate with a group of Year 4 children from Wrexham; children meet the dairy herd at Eachwick Red House Farm in the North-East; enjoying a walk on Moel Fenlli in Denbighshire

can then meet up close. For Somerleyton, the biggest frustration is trying to cram everything into one short visit, which he likens to “having just one maths lesson a year. If only they could come once a month to see the seasonal shifts, and how the grass doesn’t grown until it’s at least six degrees and so on.”

With this in mind, the Somerleytons have joined with a neighbouring estate to co-sponsor a school in Great Yarmouth through the Trust’s fuller, year-long food discovery programme, in which children combine farm visits with growing, harvesting and cooking food of their own. Schools report that this can often lead pupils involved to be more confident, experimental and healthy in their diet. “Parents may not have the budget to experiment with foods their children don’t like but we can promote fresh fruit

“They are fast to learn and make the connection from field to food”



and vegetables,” explains Jill Attenborough. “More schools are wanting to work with us for years so we can transfer our skills to their teaching and support staff.”

For the past 25 years or so, the Trust has also run short residential trips — mainly for slightly older children from London or Yorkshire — partly to give children meaningful time out of the city. I wonder if the ethnicity of the pupils has changed over the years but “it’s where you find disadvantage that has changed,” says Attenborough. “Increasingly we’re working with deprived areas in former mining communities, coastal towns and semi-rural areas. I’m amazed that children may only live a short distance from the beach in Lowestoft but they never go there... parents don’t have the money for transport, or have no connection with the countryside.”

ENTHUSIASTIC TEAM

Many landowners involve a range of colleagues and enthusiastic tenant farmers, so that no one person has to sacrifice a full day’s work, and to capitalise on a range of expertise. Vanessa Beaumont of Allendale in

Northumberland speaks highly of one tenant farmer who’s a particular hit with the children: “He’s highly respected in the dairy world and his milk ends up in cheese for Tesco. Children find it amusing that something has some from this stinky field and ends up in a packet that they recognise.”

At Highclere Castle near Newbury, the Earl of Carnarvon is another long-term host with no shortage of topics and experts at his disposal. Highclere visits may take in the gardens, gamekeepers, sheepdogs, forester, “and visit our main farm area where we process oats for performance horses”, he explains.

Years ago, he says the children “were really disadvantaged from London and had hardly seen a blade of grass”; nowadays, they live closer to home. “They are still astonished by all the greenery and space,” adds the Earl. “They’re always amazed that anyone could live here [in the castle],” he laughs “and wonder what on earth we do with it.”

Others, impressively, have noted that the castle reminds them of Big Ben, “And you can say, ‘Ah, well! It’s the same architect.’”

Of course, there’s an assumption that any owner of such a property must be

knee deep in £50 notes, so the Earl usually has to explain that “you still have to earn a living day to day, and that things still have to be stitched and repaired”. But though he hopes his visitors will take away positive ideas about food, farming, horticulture and the countryside, he also takes great pleasure in seeing them just “charging around the lawns”.

FIELDSPORTS INTRODUCED

With health, diet and the environment hot topics for today’s children, there is an understandable emphasis on farming on Trust visits, but often opportunities to learn about fieldsports, too. “We’ve had just one parent who didn’t want a child to go because they were going to meet a gamekeeper,” says Attenborough.

More usually the response from teachers and parents is unequivocal and positive. “Our partnership with the Trust is huge for us,” says Paul Brown, headteacher at St Lawrence’s RC Primary School in Byker, in the North-East, which sends every pupil from nursery to year six on a Trust trip each year. His school sits “well within the bottom 1% on the deprivation index” he explains, with pupils who “do not have the opportunities to go to places as other children do... You’d be astonished how few get to go outside the square mile they live in.”

A day in the country makes these children feel valued and though it “has great impact on their physical and human geography, science and understanding of the work that goes into putting a loaf on a table,” they are also encouraged to feel as well as learn. “Even hearing twigs crackle beneath their feet,” continues Brown. “They may not have been to a wood before. I’d love to think it fires something in them; a huge thing in our school is aspiration, creating those little offshoots — ‘Maybe I could get a job that lets me work outdoors?’”

Though it may be hard to know if one day spent in the countryside can have a lasting impact on a child, it’s marvellous that many supporters go on to fundraise for school transport, or to sponsor a more involved Country Trust programme. A few minutes with a teacher like Paul Brown would motivate anyone to do so. “Everyone should do this,” agrees Vanessa Beaumont at Allendale. “The charity does so much of the legwork, it isn’t arduous at all. They are so grateful and I feel very lucky that they came to us.”

Lord Somerleyton probably summarises best of all how most hosts feel about the Country Trust’s work: “If even one child each time can take something away from it that helps them build a better future — that’s worthwhile.” ■