

a grand day out

Horizons caught up with Dr Elizabeth Mattison, Education and Environment Officer at the Englefield Estate in Berkshire, to hear all about the Schools Days programme at the Englefield Estate

Tell us about Englefield's Schools Days programme.

The Englefield Estate Schools Days are hosted by the Benyon Family and began about 27 years ago, starting with just a few information stands along a school sponsored walk route. Over time, they evolved into a two-day event with primary school pupils from across Berkshire visiting for a day trip. Today, the event demonstrates to children the range of countryside jobs and activities, offers them vital skills for life, celebrates community partnerships and provides outdoor learning directly linked to the National Curriculum. The Estate has always been able to provide this wonderful event free of charge.

The overall theme of the event is sustainability and it is specifically designed for Key Stage 2 pupils. During their visit, classes follow a timetabled route around an area of the Estate and take part in seven activities covering the following topics related to sustainability: farming and food; habitats and wildlife; trees and timber; energy and water; history; community; health and well-being. In 2025 we welcomed over 1,400 primary school students across the two days. In advance of the event, we always record and provide a Teacher Briefing Meeting online, so that school staff can run through everything before the day and ask any questions.

What unique impacts can such spaces have on young people?

The time spent at an Estate and the connections made with people and nature can really help young people to appreciate the countryside and understand its importance, as well as how to behave safely and look after it for future generations.

We have a lot of urban schools that take part in Schools Days, and every year we have children who have never seen a cow in real life, let alone fed one some hay and heard how loud a "moo" is up close. We welcome children with a range of special educational needs and disabilities who really appreciate the change from the classroom environment and the space to join in without feeling overwhelmed. We have members of staff who went to Schools Days when they were young and remembered this when applying for their job, and numerous adults have told me how much they enjoyed their visit and how well they remember the experience. More than once, I've been stopped in the local supermarket, whilst wearing my Englefield Estate branded clothing by parents wanting to say 'thank you', because their child came home so happy after their visit and full of inspiration for things they'd like to do and see.

What are the benefits of using Estates land for outdoor learning?

The beautiful surroundings are exciting for young people to visit and explore. There's lots of space and a combination of built and natural features that are incorporated into the experience. There is a fantastic opportunity for children (and teaching staff) to really connect with the landscape and learn from the people whose job it is to manage it – many of them trained specialists.

For the students, there is nothing like re-enacting a historic battle on the ground where an actual battle took place many, many years ago, discovering all the invertebrates that live in the nearby chalk stream and seeing wheat growing in a field, physically having a go at grinding wheat into flour and then holding a bag of pasta and realising where it comes from. The pupils also get a go at tiling a demonstration roof with the maintenance staff to discover the care and skill it takes.

There is also the genuine coming together of the Estate's staff, local organisations and volunteers for a common cause – to nurture an understanding of what they do and the difference it makes to people, place and nature. By running Schools Days, we are giving children a chance to see, smell, hear, hold, question, understand and remember the outdoors. It is hugely fulfilling and rewarding for everyone who takes part.

Do you see this model as widely replicable?

Yes – in fact there is a charity, Countryside Learning, (who take part in Schools Days) that help Estates to run their own Countryside Classroom Days. There is quite a lot to consider in terms of facilities, health and safety and content. Organisations like Countryside Learning and LEAF really help with this.

What's next for the Schools Days programme?

Whilst we're happy with the format of the event, we ask for feedback every year. On the basis of this year's feedback, we'll be designing a social story presentation for teachers to share with pupils when they plan their visit and we're also making some improvements to signage. November is coming up fast, so it won't be long before the invitations are sent out to schools and the planning for 2026 begins in earnest! △

