

A week of muck and magic

How can we ensure that kids get a better idea of where their food comes from? Farms for City Children is on the case



Words by:
Margi Jervoise
Margi works in marketing and fundraising at the charity, Farms for City Children

FARMS FOR CITY CHILDREN offers urban kids a precious opportunity to live and work together, for a week at time, on a real farm in the countryside.

One school doing just that this spring was Beechwood Primary Academy from Plymouth. They visited Nethercott House, the charity's founding farm in Devon, to learn about their exciting new Victorian kitchen garden project.

Head of school Lisa Evans says: "Farms for City Children is offering the perfect package of a well-organised and utterly fabulous experience for children. One parent thought this was similar to a visit to a farm attraction, but it's so much more than that!"

Primary schools from towns and cities all over the country come in all seasons to spend a week living and working as farmers on one of the charity's three farms: Nethercott House in the wilds of West Devon; Wick Court on the banks of the Severn in Gloucestershire and Lower Treginnis on the Pembrokeshire coast.

Taking on responsibility

Groups of eight to eleven-year-olds come and stay with their teachers and learn a great deal about themselves, as well as where their food comes from and what it really means to be a farmer for a week. They are given responsibility for the animals, which creates a good feeling of self-worth, but they are also encouraged to work hard and have fun.

Lisa adds: "The farm experience is brilliant, from the "child friendly" professional staff to the amazing food and accommodation.

"Thanks to all of you for giving our children an

amazing seven days of muck and magic."

The children are involved with planting and harvesting vegetables, which they then also learn how to cook. While a supper of soup, bread and butter doesn't sound all that exciting, it's a real joy when they discover that they can make every component from scratch themselves, including the butter!

The children at Beechwood School particularly loved the cooking sessions, as many had not had the chance to do this before. While at Nethercott House, the children also go to work at the Ward family's neighbouring two farms so that they can watch cows being milked, see calves being born and help to rear lambs and beef cattle.

Restoration

At Nethercott House, the original farm purchased by Farms for City Children in the early 1970s, the walled Victorian kitchen garden desperately needs restoring to its former glory.

The garden itself is a 19th century, Grade II-listed, Victorian half-acre walled kitchen garden, built by the Arnold Family in 1871. While it has been a working garden for the 40 years Farms for City Children has owned it, over that time it has become less structured and now retains few of the hallmarks of a traditional walled kitchen garden.

The original infrastructure of glasshouses, including a sunken melon-house, forcers and cloches were already absent or derelict when the property was initially acquired and the walls are now beginning to show their age, with loose sections and broken capping. Paths have become extremely ill-defined, and bindweed has taken hold such that existing fruit bushes need uprooting and cleaning, and the soil needs thoroughly weeding.

Farms for City Children recently secured funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Perennial Gardeners Royal Benevolent Society, Tesco Bags of Help and Interserve for this exciting restoration project, which is just about to get under way. And the charity is working with prominent local gardening experts to ensure the garden is sensitively returned to its former glory.

Tom Petherick, an authority on organic and biodynamic horticulture and agriculture, who spent six years restoring the Lost Gardens of Heligan, is among those providing advice.

Opening young minds

Tim Rose, farm school manager at Nethercott House, comments: "The restored garden will provide a fantastic educational resource for the more than 1,000 inner city children and 124 teachers who spend a week at Nethercott every

TALKING TURKEY: The children are not sure what to make of one of the farm's male turkeys



PICTURES: KEVIN NICHOLSON



ANIMAL MAGIC: The children enjoy all aspects of farm life with teacher Lisa Evans

year. They will be engaged directly in planting and growing fruit and vegetables in a traditional setting, using traditional methods. They will also be introduced to a wide range of native vegetables which reinforces the importance of seasonality.

"We will also establish a regular group of local gardening volunteers. The renovated garden (see right) will provide Farms for City Children with a new community resource as we will open the garden to the public on a number of set days each year and start hosting visits from local schools and community groups."

This is an exciting project for the charity and will enhance the already incredible experience the children receive from their week of muck and magic.

With the help of local experts it will be restored to its former glory with glasshouses, including a melon house. The walls will be repaired, paths redefined, the original structured box and arches and herbaceous borders will be planted, as well as espaliered fruit trees so the garden will return to its former abundant production of fruit and vegetables for the house as can be seen from the artist's impression, pictured right.

Nethercott House is in a unique position of having a walled garden and once the project is completed, it will become central to the charity's work with the local community. ♡

● If you are interested in helping with this project or hearing more about Farms for City Children, please visit: farmsforcitychildren.org



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