

Natural vision: inspirational school grounds

Kathryn Inkpen, Graham Goldup and Kim Jackson

Moulsecomb Primary School in Hove is situated in an area of high deprivation, but the inspirational leadership of Headteacher Charles Davis gives his pupils access to a range of outdoor experiences and environments they would not normally encounter, with many positive benefits to both behaviour and learning. Now this local centre of excellence – a regional winner of the first Learning Outside the Classroom awards – is attracting primary and secondary practitioners, hosts an annual festival and provides a venue for work with the local community.

A few years ago, when Charles Davis became Headteacher at Moulsecomb, he came to school on Monday mornings to find at least half a dozen windows smashed. After a few weeks of this he began thinking that there had to be a better way, otherwise he would spend most of his budget repairing broken windows. A great place to start, he thought, would be making the school grounds a pleasanter environment for learning and play. To achieve this, Charles decided to engage the whole school and local neighbourhood, to foster community cohesion and – ultimately – develop a sense of ownership.

His plans – to plant an orchard, create a fairytale forest and build an Iron Age

roundhouse in the school grounds – were not taken seriously. He was told that everything would be vandalised straight away. But the cynics have been proved wrong, and key to his success has been the involvement of the whole community, and the engagement of support from outside agencies and ‘experts’.

Moulsecomb’s outdoor learning environment abounds in opportunities for first-hand geographical experiences. It stimulates pupils’ desire to explore, investigate and shape their landscape. Pupils have been involved in choosing, planting and building the structures and areas around the school grounds – nearly all of them made from natural materials. One

An innovative bench marks the start of the geology trail. Photo: Paula Owens. More photos of the Moulsecomb ‘geology trail’ can be downloaded from the Primary Geographer pages of the GA website (see below).





Returning from a 'foraging' session in the school grounds (above) and (inset) the archaeological dig. Photos: Kathryn Inkpen.

innovative idea is to make a 'geology trail' of large slabs of rock from different areas of the country, so that pupils gain first-hand experience of the look and feel of these natural materials.

The local community is actively involved, with day to day access to the grounds – see Figure 1.

Brighton and Hove Schools Heritage and Environment Festival

In June 2009 Moulsecoomb hosted their third annual festival, and what an eventful and educational week it was! Hundreds of excited students from 12 schools took part in well-planned hands-on workshops and learning experiences. The key objective was to give students an idea of their place in the landscape, past, present and future. All the pupils thoroughly enjoyed the outdoor activities and workshops, including:

- an 'archaeological dig', and looking for clues in the landscape
- meeting a 'Victorian gent' and learning about his 'game-keeping'
- foraging in the field for different plants and herbs
- tasting Moulsecoomb's dandelion and nettle surprise!

If you are thinking of organising a similar event, a variety of organisations and

Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project aims to:

- reduce anti-social behaviour by involving excluded pupils in the running of the garden
- improve community health by offering free, organic, locally grown vegetables to low-income families and older people
- enhance skills and employability by offering practical training and volunteering opportunities
- involve children in planting, growing and eating healthy food, and respecting nature and the environment
- create and enhance wildlife habitats and protect bio-diversity, including old fashioned vegetable varieties
- promote sustainable lifestyles, by encouraging and educating people about composting and the benefits of organic gardening and locally produced food.

Figure 1: One of many ongoing projects at Moulsecoomb Primary School.



stakeholders can help. The RSPB, Sussex Archaeological Society, East Sussex Archaeological and Museums Partnerships, the National Trust and the Sussex Wildlife Trust supported the Moulsecoomb event, with some fascinating input from storytellers and herbalists.

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Online resources Moulsecoomb School website

www.moulsecoomb.brighton-hove.sch.uk/v6/

[Pages/6cOutdoorClassrooms.html](http://www.moulsecoomb.brighton-hove.sch.uk/v6/Pages/6cOutdoorClassrooms.html).

You can download more images of the Moulsecoomb grounds if you go to www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Journals.asp?journalID=2 then click on 'Autumn 2009'.