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{ EDUCATION }

Hunting & farming on the curriculum – yes please!

The Elms School in Worcestershire says it shares Goethe's belief that "instruction does much, but encouragement everything" – Henrietta Rutgers finds that never a truer word was spoken and the school has impeccable rural education credentials.

As a child I went to a school that had sports fixtures against the The Elms school in Colwall. I always looked forward to the prospect of an 'away' match hosted by The Elms as I was fascinated by the farm, the ponies and school life as a whole. As a child, my parents spent most of their time dragging me away from my pony so imagine my delight at finding a school where I could take him too and go hunting! Unfortunately, no amount of nagging managed to convince my parents that I really needed to change schools and I ended up staying put where I was.

During time set aside for afternoon PE lessons, one of the options that pupils are able to choose at The Elms is to go hunting, normally joining the Ledbury at second horses. The school has a long connection with the hunt, through former headmaster Clive Ashby, who was keen for those pupils who rode to experience hunting. When he retired three years ago, Classics teacher and former Pony Club DC Sarah Austen took charge of the young entry and now a group from The Elms goes out with the Ledbury each Monday during the season. Mrs Austen explains: "Each group gets to go out twice a term and we arrive at second

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horses, so the field tends to have thinned out by then. The children love it.”

Those children who are the most competent riders then get to go 'visiting' with trips to the Heythrop, Croome and West Warwickshire, Warwickshire, North Cotswold or the South Hereford. This year, pupils were presented with 'hunting colours' (smart Countryside Alliance maroon ties) awarded to them at the Ledbury hunt kennels by Joint Master Louise Daly. Children were invited to the kennels for a BBQ and to look at the hounds, they then chose two to sponsor for the coming season.

Some people reading this may be thinking 'should hunting really have a place in an educational institution' and whilst speaking to Mrs Austen it became abundantly clear that the answer is 'well why shouldn't it?' Hunting teaches pupils at The Elms to look after themselves and their fellow pupils, it teaches good manners and a respect for one's elders, and it teaches them about the countryside. Pupils see first-hand the different crops grown, they learn how to cross the county without damaging them and they appreciate our green and pleasant land. They gain a sense of responsibility as they are in charge of their ponies' welfare and it gives those children who perhaps struggle academically a chance to excel and therefore increases confidence. Mrs Austen also pointed out that it serves as a "wonderful bribe" for those who perhaps need a bit of persuasion to do their Latin homework!

Those children at The Elms who are not



so keen on their hunting get the chance to show the pedigree Hereford cows and the Gloucester Old Spot pigs in their breed classes and in young handlers' classes, often winning. They can also volunteer to feed the cows and pigs and collect the eggs each day after they have had their breakfast!

Every form has a garden where produce is planted and harvested by the pupils during their rural studies lessons. Salad is picked for school meals and flowers are grown to decorate the rooms. Once a year the school has a 'feast' where everything that is on the table has been grown or reared within the school grounds, right down to the eggs used in the meringues.

Education is hugely important to preserve our fieldsports, countryside and rural heritage – hats off to The Elms school for providing pupils with this incredibly important platform that will help our future generations. In hindsight, it may have been rather sensible of my parents to send me to The Elms; I would certainly have spent less time persuading my mother that I was ill, which normally meant climbing out of my bedroom window to see the pony as soon as her back was turned! ●