



The Francis Holland Foresters

A Five-Year Journey of Learning Beyond the Classroom

The Francis Holland Foresters' programme is a bespoke unique curriculum. It was designed by us five years ago and has grown organically since its creation. We know that outdoor education enables girls to develop confidence, resilience, leadership and practical understanding through honing bushcraft skills in the natural environment. As a body of staff, we have been privileged to witness this firsthand.

At the heart of the programme is a strong and enduring relationship with Surrey County Council and specifically Norbury Park, which serves as an outdoor classroom where girls return each half term over the course of the academic year, deepening both their connection to nature and their understanding of themselves. The site was found out of a desire to move beyond London parks and find a space where we were permitted to make fires. Teaching Francis Holland girls the art of fire making in a safe natural environment was always an objective of mine! We work in partnership with them throughout the year to ensure the site is always 'ours' when we plan trips (except for sharing with dog walkers from the local area!).

Beginning in Reception, girls are introduced to the fundamentals of outdoor learning through exploration, teamwork and enquiry led learning. Reception classes visit Belgrave Square until they are ready for the coach down the A3 to Norbury the following year! As they move through the programme, they gradually develop increasingly sophisticated bushcraft skills, including shelter building, fire making, knife skills, whittling wood, nature identification, navigation, environmental awareness and risk management. This progression allows girls to experience challenges at an age-appropriate level while fostering independence and self-reliance.

The long-term bond with Norbury Park is a defining feature of the Foresters experience; returning regularly to the same environment encourages girls to develop a sense of stewardship and belonging. They witness seasonal changes, observe ecosystems through the season, and build meaningful connections with a landscape that becomes familiar throughout their school years. Although the curriculum progresses, one aspect of trips which remains the same from Year 1 – 6 is hot chocolates and s'mores by the fire. This is a firm essential and deemed mandatory by the girls!

Bushcraft plays a central role within the programme because it combines practical learning with personal development. Activities such as shelter making, knife skills, fire lighting, nature identification and ropework encourage resilience, perseverance and collaboration. Girls learn to assess risk, think critically (on their feet!) and work effectively as part of a team. Studies of outdoor and forest-based learning have shown positive impacts on pupil engagement, social skills, self-concept and wellbeing. We have two teachers who have their Forest School Leadership Level 3 which enables us to create and impart Forest School curriculums on different sites, and another member of staff is attending training in October. The teachers were trained through the Wild Passport training programme which helps to inspire and influence our bushcraft curriculum.

Importantly, the Foresters' programme is not separate from the academic curriculum; it enriches and strengthens it. Outdoor learning provides real-world contexts for subjects across the curriculum. In science,

girls investigate habitats, biodiversity and ecological processes. In geography, they develop fieldwork skills, map reading and an understanding of landscapes and sustainability. Mathematics is applied through measuring, calculating distances and problem-solving, while English is enhanced through observation, reflection and descriptive writing inspired by outdoor experiences. Altogether these enable us to utilise a full STEAM programme alongside, and entwined with, our bushcraft work. This is consistent with our full FHP ethos of connectivity across the curriculum. We believe in maximising learning opportunities for all girls in whatever way they learn. Our Foresters embrace this rich additional learning path which enhances a broader educational offering. Research has consistently found that high-quality outdoor learning improves engagement, motivation and academic attainment when integrated into the curriculum.

Surrey County Council has recognised our successes, and their Forestry Commission has created specially designed areas in the woods as dedicated Forest School learning sites for us. They have also approached us regarding curriculum support we can offer to the council. We have now offered consultancy to groups of Forest School teachers who are using parts of our curriculum to teach adolescents from deprived areas of Surrey.

The Francis Holland Foresters Programme therefore represents far more than a series of outdoor activities. It is a carefully designed educational path that combines academic learning, personal growth and environmental stewardship. Throughout their Francis Holland journey, Foresters plays an integral part in our pupils' personal development. They grow in confidence, knowledge and character which enables them to flourish both inside and outside the classroom.

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