

Holly Lodge – a hive of activity

Holly Lodge is a bit like Dr Who's Tardis in the middle of the Park – much bigger than it looks – and is home to numerous agencies: the Royal Parks administration team; buildings and works maintenance contract staff; the company "fountains", featured in our Autumn 2007 issue, who look after the gardens in the Park and deal with the litter left by visitors; the Metropolitan Police Operation Command Unit, Thames Landscape Strategy, and the Holly Lodge Centre. In its grounds are a workshop that turns some of the wood from Park trees into the posts and palings used in the Park and the two shire horses that do some of the heavy work in the Park. Holly Lodge was known as Bog Lodge for most of its history as a bog lay nearby to the North, but was rechristened in the 1990s because the word "bog" was considered unsuitable for visiting schoolchildren.

Holly Lodge Centre is the only part open to the public. It was opened in 1994 when Mike Fitt OBE, Park Manager at the time, wanted Richmond Park to be accessible to everyone, especially children and adults with special needs. The Centre offers a range of educational activities related to the natural and historical resources in the Park and has grown from strength to strength since its opening. It is run by Project Manager Dr Pat Ealey and 70 volunteers and has around 4,000 visitors each year. About 60% of visiting groups are from special needs schools, day centres and organisations; the rest are from mainstream primary schools and associations such as Scouts and Women's Institutes.

A user's perspective

by Bridget Grant, teacher

Barnes Primary School is a frequent user of the educational facilities at Holly Lodge and over the last few years I have been lucky enough to have had regular trips with my classes. For some children this is their first ever visit to Richmond Park. The activities on offer normally relate to the areas we are covering in school but Pat and her team have been happy to make adjustments to accommodate our needs.

All our visits have had the same feel about them. As soon as we arrive, the children sense that this is going to be a bit of an adventure. It's not school but what is it? Pat takes us into her classroom, immediately interesting with specimens, nests, photos, paintings, other children's work and unrecognisable "things". There is always a warm welcome and anticipation of doing something a little different.

Pat always makes it a new experience: the location changes, the activities may differ a little, the worksheets never seem to be repeated. Her extensive knowledge always teaches me new things about the Park, which I think I know well, and what goes on there. On one famous occasion, Pat told us that we might find a lizard. Lizards in Richmond Park? My scepticism was dismissed by a chorus of Year 4 voices 10 minutes later. "Mrs Grant! Mrs Grant! Come and look, it's a lizard!" There it was, under the first log that had been carefully picked up in an investigation into habitats. The volunteer helpers on the team interact with the children as though each workshop were a fresh experience for them. Maybe it is!

On another visit, we lunched on the picnic benches behind the classrooms as a lovely mural was being painted. The artists explained what they were doing and how; one of them had been a primary teacher and was wonderfully indulgent to the children's enthusiastic questioning. Last summer, my Year 3 class was asked to trial a workshop in the embryonic Victorian Pharmacy. The hands-on aspect of pill and potion making proved to be an exciting and instructive activity, which I'm sure will become a regular attraction for pupils studying the Victorians.

I look forward to any visit to the Holly Lodge Centre. We always leave broadened and happy, thankful for the unique facility it provides and somehow the sun is always shining!

With thanks to Joan Braune, Trustee of the Holly Lodge Centre, for information and photo.



Children enjoying mini-beasts with teacher Bridget Grant