

Francis Holland Foresters Highly Commended for Best Experiential Learning Award

"At Francis Holland Junior School, we cultivate confident, curious and courageous girls who can reflect on the world around them with care and empathy, solve problems creatively, and appreciate the bigger picture." – Suzy Dixon, Head of Junior School



The education we offer goes far beyond the classroom, and we are fortunate to be able to offer a fantastic range of co-curricular, sporting, dramatic, musical and artistic opportunities to allow our pupils to discover their passions, ignite their curiosity and develop a holistic appreciation for the many wonders of the world around them. One of these opportunities is our unique outdoor learning programme, Francis Holland Foresters, which has gone from strength to strength over the last two years and was Highly Commended for the Muddy Stiletto's Best Schools Best Experiential Learning Award 2023.

We believe that outdoor education and learning through experience is vital to children's development, as it boosts confidence, team-building and social skills, self-esteem, cooperative learning, resilience, creativity, problem-solving and mental wellbeing. Therefore, having originally used an external Forest School company which closed during the pandemic, we decided to set up our own outdoor education programme, run by FHS staff, in 2021. Francis Holland Foresters also complements our important work on sustainability, which resulted in Francis Holland Junior School being awarded the Eco-Schools Green Flag in 2022.

In March 2022, two of our teachers embarked on a bushcraft training course with WILD Passport, where they received a Level 3 qualification in bushcraft skills. They are now qualified to deliver the WILD Passport curriculum, which focuses on a variety of woodland skills. Girls now attend a Francis Holland Foresters trip every half term, split up into learning bushcraft skills in the morning using the WILD Passport curriculum, and then applying them to a school curriculum linked lesson in the afternoon. This covers all subjects, from maths, English and science to art, music and history.

We have formed a close relationship with Norbury Park in Surrey and now have an area of woodland that we are able to use for our outdoor learning and bushcraft lessons. We have also been able to make links with other small businesses that work from Norbury Park, including an independent drinks merchant who provided the girls with hot chocolate and roasted marshmallows around the fire and an independent charcoal burner who works from the park, who we have asked to teach us the art of charcoal making. Additionally, we have set up a link with Belgrave Square in Belgravia, meaning that our Reception class are able to visit once a week to start their Francis Holland Foresters journey.

Some examples of cross-curricular outdoor learning are as follows:

In the morning bushcraft session, Year 1 spent time learning how to build a variety of shelter types. In the afternoon, the girls built houses linked to their English class text, *The Magic Faraway Tree*, using the bushcraft skills they had learnt that morning. They then went on an adjective scavenger hunt, finding woodland items and thinking of different ways to describe them. They took this information back to the classroom, where they used their experience to write a setting description of the forest in *The Magic Faraway Tree*. On another trip, Year 1 had been reading *Flat Stanley*, and thinking about when Flat Stanley becomes a kite. On their trip, they used their bushcraft rope skills to make and fly their own Flat Stanley kites! They discussed the kinds of adventures that Flat Stanley could get up to as a kite and used this to write their own stories back in the classroom.

Year 2 had been reading *George's Marvellous Medicine* in English and learning about measurements in maths. They combined these skills to make their own natural medicines and potions using ingredients they could find in the forest, and mathematical vocabulary and equipment such as measuring jugs, cups and bowls. They had to describe their method to their peers, using mathematical language.

Year 3 spent time making their own natural artwork, focusing on Van Gogh, who they had been studying in class. They used natural objects to create 3D artwork in Van Gogh's style. They also went on a mini-beast hunt, looking for different insects and using this to inform their study of *James and the Giant Peach*. They discussed the habitats of the characters in *James and the Giant Peach* and linked this to their science work on habitats. On another trip, Year 3 had been reading *The Firework Maker's Daughter*. They combined this with some science work and built their own firework rockets, based on the fireworks in the book. They used vinegar and baking soda to make them fly and discussed the chemical reaction behind the process.

Year 4 had been focusing on directions and using compasses in geography, and had been reading the book *Holes* in English, as well as studying direction in maths. They had to use their compasses and maps to complete a *Holes* based challenge that used mathematical skills. Their instructions were as follows: "While out digging in the blazing sun, you realise you have been circled by many venomous, blood-sucking yellow spotted lizards. Follow the directions below to help you navigate the only path to safety."

Year 5 had been studying sketching and observational drawing. They took sketchbooks into the forest and drew natural objects, focusing on the skills they had been learning in their art lessons. They also used their teambuilding and rope skills to create their own giant spider's web, which they had to each move through as a team without touching the sides.

Year 6 had been learning about the Vikings in their history lessons. They spent the morning putting their bushcraft skills into practice, building various shelters and making different knots to connect logs. In the afternoon, they further honed these skills by building their own Viking longships. These included an imaginative array of figureheads, oars, narrow ships, sails and shields. The girls then presented the thinking behind their designs to their peers.

It has been truly magical to see girls in all year groups embracing the programme with such contagious enthusiasm and creativity, and to see their appreciation and understanding of the natural world blossom. We look forward to seeing generations of Francis Holland foresters exploring the great outdoors with joy and wonder for years to come.

