**VISIT TO GORE FARM**

On Tuesday, 17th May 2016, I joined 24 five-year olds from Damers First School for a day of exploration and discovery at Gore Farm, Trent, near Sherborne. Gore Farm is part of an estate owned by the Ernest Cook Trust, whose guiding principle for all their farms is environmental sustainability. The trust enables visits to these working farms thereby allowing young people, of all ages, an opportunity to experience and understand what the natural environment holds, and the importance of maintaining a balance within that environment.

The day was structured around three activities: meeting and feeding young farm animals, exploring “mini-beasts” and their habitats in the woods, and pond-dipping with nets in a natural pond on the farm.

A basketful of eggs of all sizes and colours, and runs full of goslings, chicks and ducklings, immediately engaged the young visitors, and many of them correctly guessed which eggs produced which feathery creatures. With wellies on, we walked across the yard to meet and bottle feed very noisy and hungry lambs, quickly followed by meeting calves who vigorously sucked our hands, we then stroked piglets, and hugged goats!

After thorough hand-washing, and accompanied by the Trust education assistants, we set off for the woods through fields edged with long feathery grasses, buttercups and red campion. Before embarking on our hunt for small woodland creatures, we discussed what might be found and where, and then, armed with examination trays, magnifying glasses and recognition charts, the hunt began. Enthusiasm was not in short supply, as hiding places inside bark crevices and under logs and leaves were discovered, and we quickly made a collection of beetles, woodlice, ants, millipedes and spiders. The airborne insects, such as butterflies and bees, were spotted but escaped! After examination and identification followed by counting of wings, legs and body parts, all were safely returned to their “homes” before we walked back to the barn for a welcome picnic lunch..

The afternoon began with a ride to the pond in a specially-designed trailer pulled by a tractor. Once again we discussed what we might find, and, carefully supervised by the accompanying adults, the children swished their nets, then painstakingly fingered through the contents for anything on the move, We made a collection of caddis fly larvae, water boatmen, whirligig beetles and even a newt, much to the delight of all.

The day came to an end much too quickly. Tired, but happy, children and adults alike climbed on board the coach for the journey home. It had been a day packed with activity and new experiences. For the children the start of what we hope will be a lifelong interest in the diversity of the natural environment on their doorstep. In my view a very worthwhile first step in supporting schools to lay the important foundations for that interest. I am delighted to have had the opportunity to share this adventure.

Kate Lousley