

School kids get the building bug!

Julie Cox, landscape ecologist, Kent Wildlife Trust member and member of St John Fisher RC Church's *Live Simply* group in Rochester - along with local resident and nature photographer, Julia Chandlers - are both passionate about encouraging children to enjoy the outdoors and to develop an awareness of the wonders of nature on their doorstep.

Together they agreed to co-lead seasonal visits for the children of St William of Perth RC Primary School's lunch-time gardening club into Watts Meadow, Priestfields in Rochester.

One of the aspects of the *Live Simply* project is caring for its local greenspace. Watts Meadow is within easy walking distance of the primary school and Julie approached science coordinator, Mrs Rogers, who welcomed the idea wholeheartedly.

The seasonal visits to Watts Meadow first began in autumn 2013 and involved activities such as finding autumnal fruits and berries; making different kinds of bird cake/feeders to help birds survive the winter, and nature detective quizzes.



The following is Julie's report on last year's successful 'insect hotel' activity:

The autumn 2014 challenge for St William of Perth's Gardening Club was to make a bug shelter from recycled materials for the school grounds. These kinds of structure are variously described as insect hotels and wildlife stacks of which there are great examples to be found at the Tyland Barn nature park. I would certainly recommend it as an inspirational place to visit.

Our plan was to create a home in time for insects and other wildlife to hibernate over winter. We actually made ours in good time thanks to a splendidly mild Indian summer. Indeed, the children spotted a good number of very active insects - in particular hoverflies and red admiral butterflies, which were seen over the higher foliage in the vicinity of the building site! Woodlice were evident amongst the leaf litter and it was explained to the children how they play a key role in the nutrient cycle. In fact, the timing of this activity tied in very nicely with the teaching of Mrs Rogers about insect life.

Construction materials in the form of pallets and heavy duty cardboard tubes were generously supplied by RK Plumbing and Heating Services - who I happened to make contact with at a building site in Rochester. And we were grateful for two of their employees, Ryan and Lloyd, who took time out to make the delivery. Our Gardening Club leader, Paul Stephenson, kindly supplied extra materials such as wood chippings and logs and together with a variety of tiles, bricks and roof felt we were able to crack on with the task.

The initial activity involved the children filling sections of the cardboard tube (with pre-drilled holes) with a variety of dried vegetation including bracken, fallen leaves, heather, lavender, pine cones and the hollow stems of giant hogweed - particularly good for insects to crawl into. These had been collected a few days prior to the activity



from Julia's visit to Blean Woods, which allowed some drying time. Stones, such as flint, and sections of cane were used to fill in any gaps. We were grateful to Paul Peterson, volunteer for the Gardening Club, who contributed logs and wood chippings.

Finally, the whole structure was checked over by Mr Stephenson to ensure it was safe and fit for purpose.

The shelter was positioned at the edge of the school's playing field amongst a border of native trees and shrubs. With its easterly aspect, it receives sunshine during the earlier part of the day - ideal for attracting insects.

The children are really looking forward to the spring to see what kinds of creature will emerge as the shelter bursts into life!