

Growing strong in the great outdoors

MINI EXPLORERS

Britain's first farm nursery offers children a hands-on lesson in rural life, as Joe Shute discovers in North Yorkshire

It is feeding time on the farm and a scene of expertly curated disorder unfolds. Children in mud-slicked red waterproofs huddle into a pen clutching buckets of grain for waiting sheep.

Outside a fox-red Labrador called Juno chases a chicken in ever-diminishing circles. A nearby alpaca looks on with a disinterested air.

Never work with children and animals, so the old adage goes. But nobody told Steph Pybus – or at least the founder of the country's first farm school nursery never listened.

"What we do here has such a fantastic impact," says the 40-year-old as children charge about and animals bleat. "It's one thing telling children about something but quite another just to let them do it for themselves."

In 2012 Steph, a mother of six children aged between six and 18, sold her textile business and set up the nursery on family land near Bedale,

Feeding time: the children love looking after the animals on the farm, such as alpacas and sheep

North Yorkshire. The decision was prompted by visiting local nurseries following the birth of her sixth child.

"There was just nothing suitable," she says. "One nursery was just a carpeted room with a tiny window and 14 babies. Yes, I wanted to leave my child and continue my career, but not at the cost of their everyday happiness."

Instead, she started Mini Explorers



on the 460-acre farm that straddles both sides of the A1. Today the nursery has 61 attendees, employs 21 staff, and is shortlisted in the "outstanding rural diversification" category in the Rural Business Awards, sponsored by Amazon and the CLA. The winner will be announced on October 5.

Children came unexpectedly into Steph's life during her textile design degree at Nottingham Trent. She and her now husband Mark had been a couple since meeting at Durham School and she became pregnant in her second year. Her mother agreed to help with childcare while she finished her course.

After graduating, the couple moved to the farm in North Yorkshire, which has been in Mark's family for 40 years. Steph combined raising their growing brood with working in London, while Mark looked after the fields of rape, wheat, barley and beans. A decade ago the couple spent about £1.8million on developing its 18th-century Georgian red-brick buildings, designed by renowned architect John Carr, into a business centre. When that was finished, Steph had her epiphany over the nursery that they run alongside the business's agricultural arm.

During a tour around the grounds, nursery manager Rachael Logan explains the ethos of Mini Explorers, where on any given day up to 80 per cent of a child's time is spent outside. "If the weather is horrific we rein it in a bit," she says, strolling through an orchard under a murky Yorkshire sky.

"The children have an active role in planning their activities but are still hitting all the educational milestones. The confidence they gain is something you don't normally see in a nursery."

A yellow JCB tractor is parked up in a stubble field in front of us where Mark is explaining the machinery to a group of children who know him only as "Farmer Mark". Their brief lesson in engineering complete, the children charge off through the field, returning

MARK PINDER/GUZELIAN FOR THE TELEGRAPH



'They are absolutely exhausted by the end of it and covered in mud and paint, but just so happy'

rosy-cheeked and breathless. The nursery curriculum aims to coincide with the farming calendar as closely as possible - with literacy and numeracy ticked off through activities including counting beans on the land.

The children also pet and feed goats, sheep, alpacas, guinea pigs, rabbits, and the chickens. They look after a pair of bearded dragon lizards, which require feeding with live crickets once a day. A pig, Steph gleefully announces, is soon to swell the livestock ranks.

With such a menagerie it is unsurprising that tech is frowned on and all tablets banned. "I don't see technology as a part of our day," Steph says.

All food is cooked on site and prepared with fruit and vegetables grown on the farm. But I wonder how far the children are exposed to the reality of farming life? While Steph admits actually serving up the meat of the farm's animals would be "too hardcore", she says children are aware that the offspring of the eight Hardwick ewes kept on the farm will end up as lamb chops.

"You've got to be truthful with them," she says. "It would be pointless for us to have all these sheep and tell the children that we will keep them forever. If you are honest with a child early on, then they accept it."

It is picking-up time and parents arrive to collect their muddied, tired offspring. Accounts manager Alex Scandrett has been sending her three-year-old daughter Darcy to the nursery since she was about seven months old.

"It's unique compared with other nurseries," she says. "When we were looking around we went to one nursery where the children get let out twice a day - like a dog. We just came here and thought straight away 'this is the one'."

"For me, it's the confidence. You meet up with friends whose children go to other nurseries and the difference in confidence is amazing. Even if

it is chucking it down on a weekend, Darcy still wants to go out and play."

The farm is only a few miles from the military bases at Catterick and RAF Leeming, and Steph estimates about two thirds of the children come from Armed Forces families.

Henry Bowden, a 38-year-old major in the 2nd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment, who served three tours of Afghanistan and is preparing to embark on his fourth in Kabul, arrives in uniform to collect Arthur, four, and Islay, who is 15 months old. "They are ab-



solutely exhausted by the end of it but in a really positive way," he says. "They come home covered in mud and paint and just so happy."

Major Bowden says Arthur "openly idolises Farmer Mark" and has gained an impressive knowledge and understanding of rural life while traipsing after him on his rounds. But aside from that he admits there is another family-wide benefit which they all treasure.

"Last weekend we put them down at 6pm on Friday and they slept until 8.30am on Saturday," he says. Of the myriad benefits of sending their offspring to the farm, the gift of a weekend lie-in is perhaps treasured most of all.

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Field of dreams: the little ones spend around 80 per cent of the day outside on the farm