

Let Nature Feed Your Senses



Active farm visits for people living with dementia

The summer of 2013 in Herefordshire was wonderfully long and sunny, perfect for outdoor activities! Local farmer Patrick Wrixon and nearby Credenhill Care Home had joined forces the year before through a BIG Lottery funded project called Let Nature Feed Your Senses (LNFYS). LNFYS setup, trained and supported a network of 80 farmers throughout England to host sensory-rich farm visits for people of all ages with disabilities. A group of residents from Credenhill had enjoyed their first visit and were keen to come back to experience the changing farm over a series of four visits spanning Spring and Summer 2013.

Patrick, host for the visits, has been farming in Herefordshire for thirty years. He is passionate about farming and wildlife living side by side and his farm is rich in wildlife habitat as well as producing rapeseed, wheat and beef cattle. An experienced visit host, he has a passenger trailer that can be linked up to the farm tractor to make vast areas of the farm accessible to those that could not walk the distances and rough tracks.

The small group of residents attending the visits had all responded with interest when asked if they would like to visit the farm. Several of them

use mobility aids to move around independently and all are living with various forms of dementia. LNFYS project staff were keen to observe the visits to understand what elements of the visits benefited the group and why.

Working closely together, support workers, host farmer and LNFYS staff introduced a variety of activities into each visit to enrich the visit experience and strengthen the positive impacts, of the visit and afterwards. This included inviting forest school-trained Sam Goddard to lead nature-based activities on the farm and in the care home.

Personal journals were used as scrapbooks to record the visits with photographs, drawings, and collected items such as leaves, flowers and rapeseed. These were also used to extend the visit impact in a variety of ways.

This case study illustrates the visits, the activities and their impacts in the hope that farmers and support workers may be inspired to collaborate and make the countryside accessible and enjoyable for many more groups of older people who live in residential care.

The planning stage

Patrick, the host farmer, the care manager and LNFYS project coordinator met in March to plan the series of visits. They decided that a core group of interested residents would attend the visits once a month for four months so they could become confident and relax on the farm. Some of the support workers from the care home were already familiar with the farm, as they had taken a group there in the previous year. They mentioned that many of the residents enjoyed painting and proudly showed Patrick the large group painting on display at the care home. This was helpful information and helped determine one of the activities on the farm visits.



Painting by residents of Credenhill Care Home.

The importance of a good welcome

A welcome routine was established; this involved the visitors being greeted by Patrick, their host farmer, and all the dogs as they stepped off the mini-bus. The dogs were an important part of the experience for most of the visitors. When everyone was off the bus and the dogs had been petted the group moved inside for a cup of tea and a biscuit before the morning's activities.



A huge thank you to Hereford Lions Club for transporting everyone to the farm.



Table dressing

A point was made of 'dressing the table' profusely with seasonal plants like flowering wild cherry, rape and wheat, which could be handled, smelt and stimulate conversations. Bright colours and a 'runner' improvised by painting wallpaper lining bright yellow eased everyone into the visit in a cheerful mood.



Expanding horizons

The trailer was central to the visit. It was brilliant for getting everyone to areas of the farm that would otherwise have been inaccessible. Fields of oilseed rape were circumnavigated, woods traversed, wildlife observed in its habitat, and views of the wooded hillsides admired. From a practical angle getting on and off and moving around on the trailer was a physical challenge for everyone. But it was obvious that they all wanted to rise to the occasion and make a concerted effort to get up on to the trailer and along its length to a seat. With each visit they became more familiar with the process and relaxed. We observed them helping each other out, offering a hand and words of encouragement and moving along to make space for each other. On later visits some more frail residents joined the group and a ramp was used.



Pungent wild garlic.

The trailer made it possible to include sensory-rich experiences like seeing bluebells and smelling wild garlic.



Different people engage with different things...it's often the unexpected detail that catches them by surprise!



Woodpiles in the barn and stacked beside the track stimulated a lot of comments from the visitors. They exclaimed that so many piles of wood would be good for a cold winter, seeming to be comforted by such abundance.



The **white sheet** caught several people's attention – bringing back memories of washing days, the sounds of wet sheets flapping in the wind, smells of cotton sheets dried in sunshine.



“On the morning of the visit they perk up when asked if they want to come to the farm.”



A mobile workout!

Some of the tracks around the farm were rough and the ride could be bumpy. Visitors braced themselves with their feet, gripped the rails tightly and exclaimed playfully. The three women in the photograph on page one turned it into a fun part of the visit and enjoyed all holding on together. Some were anxious, and were supported. On the first visit the trailer ride was fairly long because it was a good opportunity to familiarise everyone with the farm. As activities were incorporated into the subsequent visits, rides were shorter. The stimulation of the ride, the simple act of holding oneself steady, hanging on tight, with feet and hands when needed, became an empowering and positive part of the experience.



Gripping, bracing and holding on tight.

Painting the summer



Inked stamps provide satisfying detail.



Dabbing, stroking, drawing - different sized brushes and the rhythm of rollers = choice and variety.



Bright green and yellow

fields of maturing oilseed rape dominated the scenery in Herefordshire at the time of the visits – a glorious vision. Painting was an opportunity to reflect this in some way. Lots of green and yellow colour was put out and only small amounts of other colours. We made different size brushes available and tried out paint rollers to apply colour in large areas, not unlike the fields. A few of the visitors loved using the rollers; one lady rolled the paint back and forwards for ten minutes, enjoying watching the page change in front of her eyes and the repetitive rhythm of the rolling. Others went for the brushes.





“Our residents really enjoyed painting the summer colours - it was all hands on. They enjoyed interacting and producing something to take home and remember.”
Care Home Manager

“The power of image making is that it allows those with dementia to express herself or himself in ways that are satisfying and communicate with others. The made image does not disappear and can be rediscovered... Whilst short term memory may continue to be less than effective, the capacity to create seems to transcend the damage to the brain caused by disease. This of course points to the value of creativity in whatever form it may be expressed, in keeping a person positively engaged with the world.”

Patricia Baines, Quality Dementia Care
Nurturing the Heart: creativity, art therapy and dementia



Some worked away independently, whilst others enjoyed working with a support worker or the farmer. Some used an ink stamp of wheat as a layer of intricate detail over the broad fields of green and yellow. **The atmosphere in the room was calm as people became absorbed in their work.** Jokes were made and people laughed, and the support workers and Patrick enjoyed it as much as anyone. At the end of the visit everyone had a painting to take home as an important memento.



Farm Forest school

The strong positive response the visitors had to the many woodpiles inspired the second visits activities, working with wood. At that time Sam Goddard was using the woods on the farm to host forest school activities for school children. He was approached to see if he would adapt the activities for the Credenhill visitors. He was keen and went ahead to design a visit that would be a great success for all concerned.

On this visit one of the men, who was usually very quiet, began talking about the names of the trees in the woods and plants in the hedgerow. It turned out that he had worked in woods for some of his life and was very knowledgeable.



Perching on upended logs required some balancing and delighted the visitors.

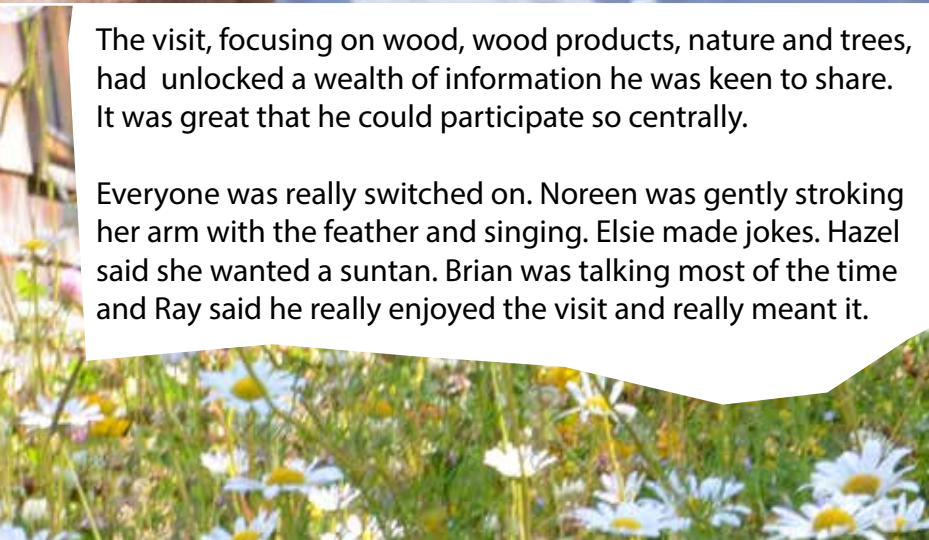


They explored natural objects - looking at the light coming through a semi-transparent leaf, counting tree rings, handling utensils carved from different native timbers, and identifying trees.

“Patrick was helpful, we appreciated the individual attention he gave to our residents, nothing was too much, he remembered names, small things but important.” Care Home Manager

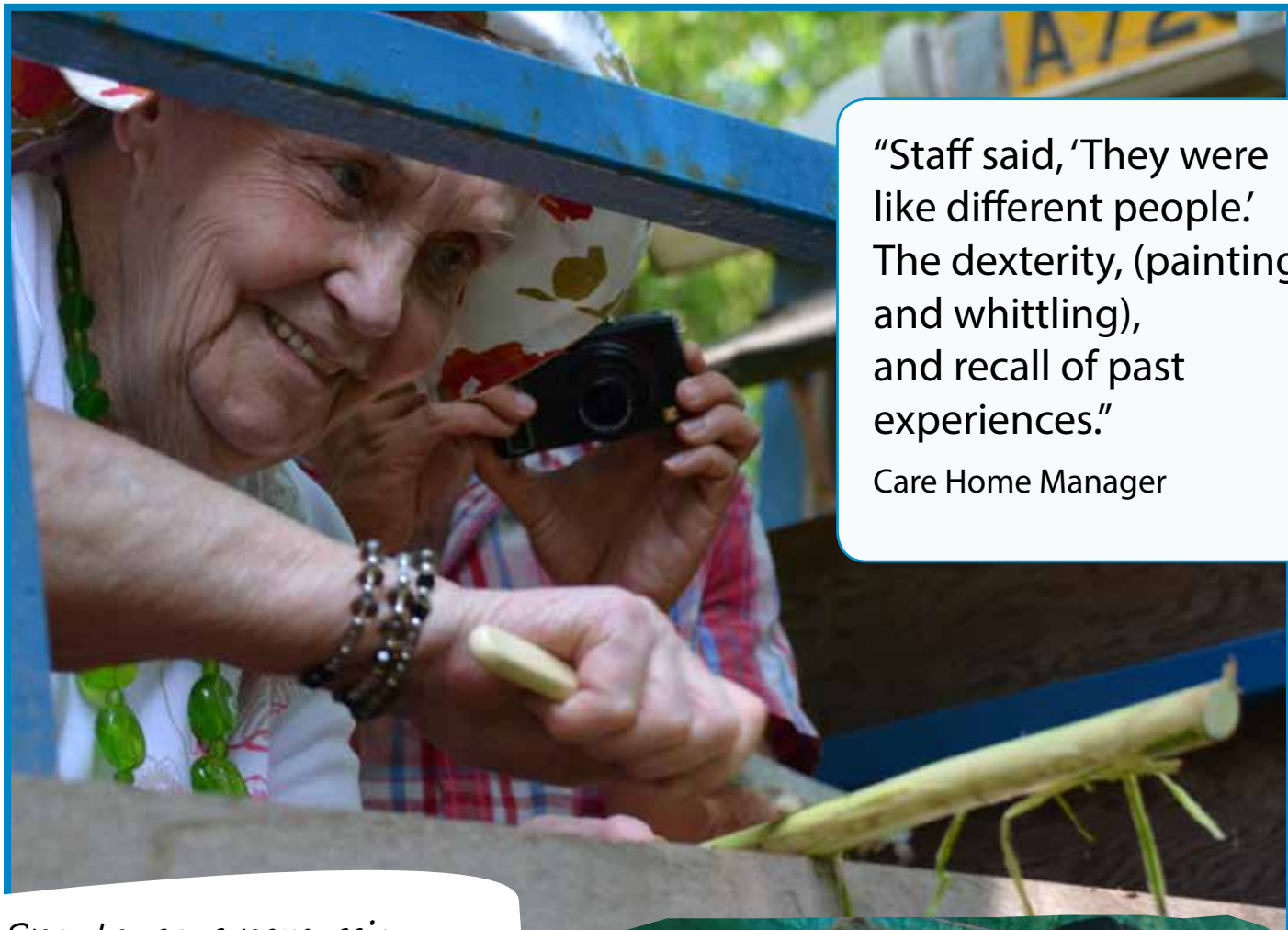
The visit, focusing on wood, wood products, nature and trees, had unlocked a wealth of information he was keen to share. It was great that he could participate so centrally.

Everyone was really switched on. Noreen was gently stroking her arm with the feather and singing. Elsie made jokes. Hazel said she wanted a suntan. Brian was talking most of the time and Ray said he really enjoyed the visit and really meant it.



Whittling in the woods

The sun was really hot that day (too hot to light the campfire), so everyone got back into the trailer to be driven into the shade of the woods. They were given green hazel sticks and butter knives to do some whittling. In the cool, peaceful forest everyone concentrated on whittling the green skin off the hazel stick. The simple activity of scraping the soft bark off to reveal the smooth harder wood underneath required dexterity and focus. One of the visitors recalled pleasurable childhood memories of seeing her father doing this. Others enjoyed the challenge of working the blunt knife effectively as a tool for removing all the bark.



“Staff said, ‘They were like different people!’ The dexterity, (painting and whittling), and recall of past experiences.”

Care Home Manager

Spontaneous percussion

When finished whittling some of the group began to beat their sticks on the metal rail of the trailer. Sam took this opportunity to invite them to follow him in beating out a rhythm. This spontaneous percussion was a delight! Some of the group had to listen very intently and were determined to get themselves in sync with the beat. The moment they heard themselves in sync with everyone else was pure joy. The final beat was marked by a huge hurrah!




Patrick,
host farmer.

Harvest time

In August the rapeseed was being harvested. This would be a full and busy visit watching the combine harvester in action, picking blackberries from the hedgerows and woodworking in the woods again.

The group was familiar, secure and comfortable with the farm visit routines by now, their eagerness increasing with every visit. When they arrived they were excited and chatty.



“The return visits have surprised me in that the group have most certainly become relaxed with the scenario, familiar with the farm and much happier than at the outset. I didn’t expect to generate a sustained rise in happiness but believe that this did occur over the period of the visits.” Patrick, host farmer



Biscuit? No thanks, I'd rather have a blackberry...

The day was cool enough to light the fire and boil the kettle. Having enjoyed this experience on the previous visit, several of the women went straight for the upended logs. Bill exclaimed, 'Put on a cup of tea!' when he saw the campfire. Fresh blackberries from the hedgerow, the fragrance of elderflower, dealing with campfire smoke, feet planted on the earth and drinking tea in the outdoors – it added up to a rich sensory tapestry for everyone.



"Put on a cup of tea!"

Whistles from Elder wood

After their cup of tea and relax by the fire everyone boarded the trailer and went into the shady woods to enjoy the birdsong, the softness of the shadows and to make elder twig whistles. This was a challenge but with perserverance they all managed to blast a note. It was quite an achievement as it was not an easy thing to do!

“During the visit they are completely absorbed. They come back on a high and they do remember what’s gone on. Eric, Cliff and Hazel talked about the visits to their families.”

Support worker



“After a visit they are shattered and they sleep really well - often they go into their rooms at bedtime and can’t get to sleep but after a visit to the farm they sleep soundly.”

Support worker



A rainy Autumn - bringing the outdoors indoors

It was too cold and wet to be outdoors on the farm in Autumn so Sam took his forest school to the care home (twice) and worked with the group making elder bracelets, whittling, drawing and sculpting. Everyone quickly got to threading, drawing and making with leaves, berries and twigs.

Making with our hands is particularly important as moving our hands activates larger areas of the brain (cortex) than any other parts of the body. This type of deep pleasure and satisfaction through action is called by neuroscientists 'effort-driven rewards'. These provide not just a sense of emotional well-being but also an increased feeling that we can control our surroundings, which leads to more positive emotions.

Lifting Depression - A Neuroscientist's Hands-On Approach to Activating Your Brain's Healing Power. Kelly Lambert

"I took loads of natural materials in and we made pictures. I also took some minibeasts in and they had a look at them, we hollowed out Elder and made bracelets and we did a listening activity outside to see what they could hear - Brian named many of the birds!" Sam

"They enjoyed the practical activities, making things from 'nature' and the personal attention. We would recommend Sam to other care homes, he offers a good 'indoor' experience offering education, practical involvement and fun with an outdoor feel."

Care Home Manager

Sam Goddard,
Forest school leader.

Elder wood bracelet
displayed proudly.



Memorable moment...Eric, pressing flowers into his diary!



Diaries were trialled for their usefulness as an aide memoire for the group and a way of sharing the experience with their families and support workers. Simple tricks like printing the photos on large mail labels helped make it possible to update them easily.

"Brian's diary is very nature centred and he refers to it often, Julie is always pointing to the colours and how the flowers smelt and Bill boasts of what he did! Some of the families were most interested and the diaries acted as a discussion point."

Care Home Manager



Everyone benefited from the sensory-rich farm visits

Therapeutic

The open air, interesting farm environment and focus on activity led to a calming and therapeutic atmosphere with a noticeable decrease in agitation or anxiety. The gentle pace of the visit created lots of time for everyone to become absorbed in their experiences.



Stimulating

Memories were awakened by the variety of sensory-rich experiences. Sometimes the simple act of holding something such as a pine cone would trigger a memory. For example the lady holding the pine cone reminisced about how she would love doing miniature paintings on each of the seed scales! Lots of conversations and social interaction between people ensued. For those who find it difficult to communicate, participating with everyone in such a diverse range of activities helped them to feel included.

Making things

Visitors had the opportunity to paint pictures, whittle and sand drumsticks, collect, match and identify natural objects, make and use whistles, hollow out elder twigs and thread them to make bracelets. These activities were purposeful and produced something tangible leading to a sense of pleasure and accomplishment. The activities were a social time of laughing and joking or for some inner absorption and concentration. They were an essential part of the visit.

Nature

The farm and the surrounding countryside is diverse and beautiful. The views, cool woods on a hot day, the bright colours of yellows and emerald greens, rich textures, fresh air, soft dappled light under the trees, the wooded hills, birdsong, and farm animals delighted the visitors. They returned home cheerful, tired and relaxed. They would all sleep well the night of the visit.



Noreen loved this activity. Plants, bark, and stones gathered on the farm were paired with similar colours on the palette.

“There were many benefits for the support workers too – the fresh air, relaxing, seeing the residents come alive and act together as a group and afterwards, being able to refer to the visit. And for the care home overall, we realised the importance of repeating this kind of interaction for the residents all round welfare.”
Care Home Manager

Continuity

A series of four visits on the farm followed up by two activity sessions at the care home provided the chance for the visitors to gain trust and confidence in using the trailer, trying new activities and being increasingly familiar with the routine of the visits. This was a new way for Patrick to host groups of older people and he was struck by the benefits to the group, “The demeanor of the visitors was certainly improved over the period of the project. This emphasises the need to create continuity of visits and of the activities. Familiarity with the farm and myself as their host was conducive to generating a relaxed and happy atmosphere during the visits.”

Bonding

Support workers learnt new things about people’s interests and this information was used to enrich their relationships. The group bonded too, helping each other, and relaxing in each other’s company. One of the support workers was pleased to say, “When they are out together they enjoy each others company and they are nice to each other, they don’t always get on when they are at home.”

“Working with Let Nature Feed Your Senses this year was highly beneficial for residents’ welfare and feelings of ‘self’ again. Staff at the project were caring, understanding and vital as part of the whole experience.”
Care Home Manager

Let Nature Feed Your Senses is a partnership between Sensory Trust and LEAF, supported by Natural England’s Big Lottery funded Access to Nature programme. For more information www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org