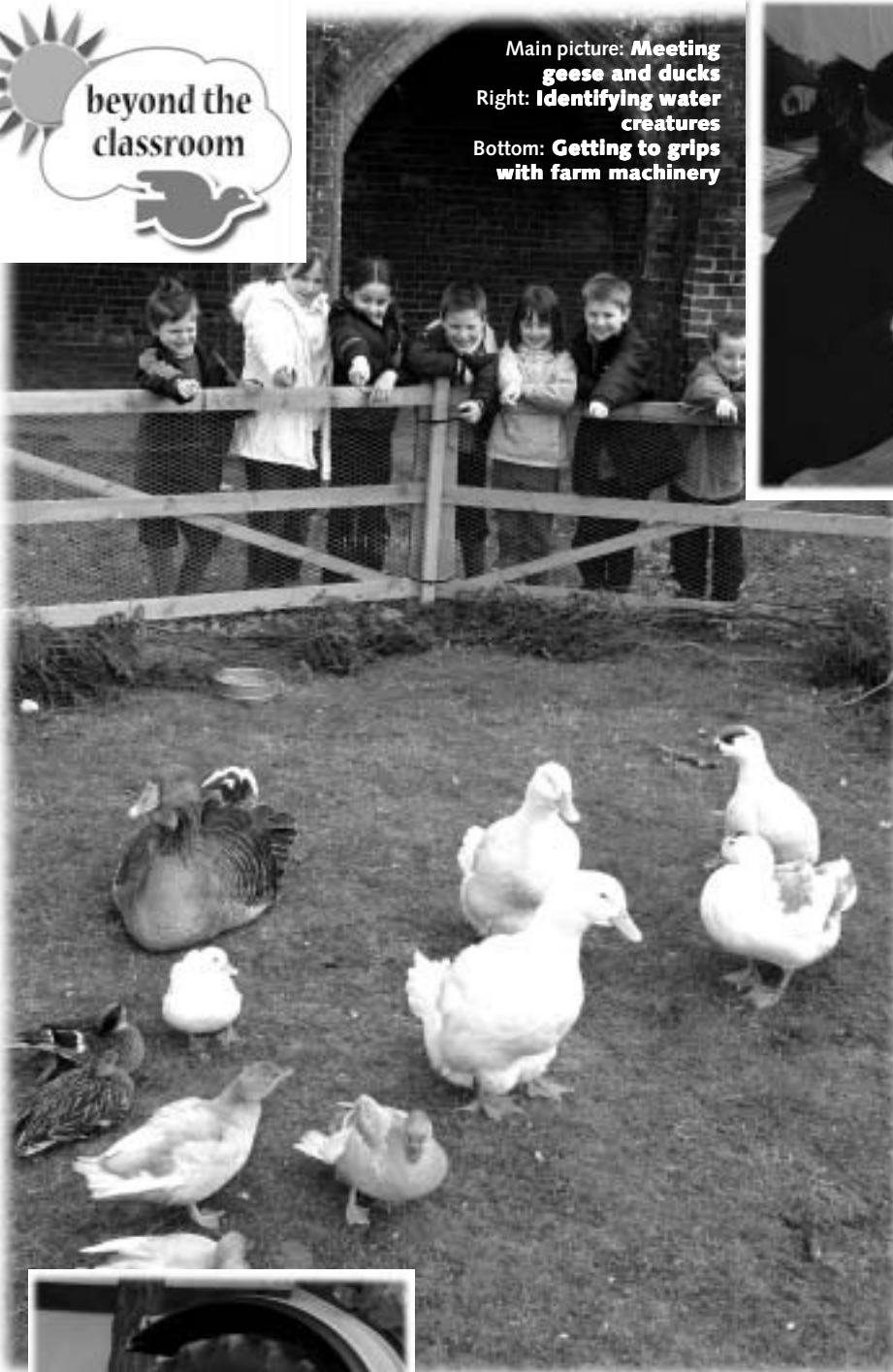




Main picture: **Meeting geese and ducks**  
Right: **Identifying water creatures**  
Bottom: **Getting to grips with farm machinery**



**ANDREW BEST AND  
GARY RICHARDSON**

DESCRIBE THE  
IMPACT OF  
INTRODUCING  
URBAN CHILDREN TO  
THE LIFE OF THE  
COUNTRYSIDE

**T**he *Countryside Live!* events, organised by the Countryside Foundation for Education (CFE), provide a unique opportunity for urban children to explore a whole new area of possibilities and learning, through becoming aware at first-hand of what goes on in the countryside.

# Countryside Live!

The event at Staunton Country Park, Havant, Hampshire, which took place on 17 March 2005, was one of three events run in England in 2005 by the Foundation, along with Haydock Park in the north-west and Lee Valley Country Park in East London. The events were billed as 'the country fair for school children – bringing the countryside to inner city youngsters' and were supported by the Countryside Agency. The aim of these events is to provide educational support for children, parents and teachers, enabling them to have a safe, fun, hassle-free, lasting and meaningful experience of what the countryside can offer in relation to their learning.

Around 1000 children from 15 schools attended the Staunton Country Park event, with some schools bringing the entire school population of children, teachers, classroom assistants and dinner ladies. A wide range of 12 arena events and almost 40 individual stands kept children and teachers occupied throughout the day. An independent evaluation showed that many teachers would have liked the event to last longer, to give them time to visit more of what was on offer.

**Links with science**

Many events and stands introduced children to science ideas and skills. These included:

- identifying live water creatures, with Environment Agency staff and others;
- opportunities to 'meet' and find out about animals (otters, birds of prey, sheep, working dogs, ferrets, geese, ducks, fish, dragonflies) and in some cases to touch and groom them (horses, cows, pigs) with the help of experts;
- opportunities to work with materials and therefore learn about their properties (willow and basket weaving, wool spinning, wood turning, charcoal burning, corn dolly making, coppicing);
- healthy eating stands (Soil Association, various food tents);

- forensic work (Hampshire Constabulary's Wildlife Crime Department);
- agricultural machinery, what it does and how it works (tractors and equipment for milking, shearing, gardening);
- environmental issues as part of team problem-solving activities with the Trailblazer project.

**Reactions**

Comments from teachers, children and exhibitors alike typified the enthusiasm generated by these events:

*The variety of events and their child-centred delivery was great, from sheep-shearing to hounds, to falconry.*

*Superb event, which was appreciated by all participants. There were some lovely comments from the children.*

*We learnt about animals and fruit and vegetables – like when they come out in the bulbs and when they are actually growing.*

*You could learn about different fruits you've never seen before.*

*The children had a wonderful time. They particularly enjoyed the gundog display and the storyteller.*

*I learnt how to make a corn dolly. You have got some corn and you needed to keep threading it. I can remember what she said.*

*Backwards, forwards, left and right and you just keep on going.*

*Please can we have it again next year?*

And tellingly:

*The chance for pupils to experience real-life learning situations such as those offered by all the people is worth a week's learning in the classroom.*

The independent evaluation of the event also indicated that children's confidence and their speaking and listening skills were developed through one-to-one

conversations with a wide range of 'experts' whom they would not normally meet. For example, during the fishing activity (where many children caught fish from the lake, and identified them against specimens in a tank before releasing them) children were learning the techniques of casting, careful observation of their float and the right time to 'strike', through asking questions, listening and watching their individual tutor. And this activity was not dominated by boys: most fishing tutors said the girls learnt more quickly!



**A young visitor to Countryside Live! has a close encounter with a falcon**

An important aspect of the event from the teachers' point of view was the level of organisation and pre-event briefing provided, not only in terms of the teachers' handbook but also the health and safety planning.

In future, more advance notice of the event and more help with curriculum

links may need to be given, so that schools can build the event into their science work more effectively.

For further information on Countryside Live! events, see the CFE website: [www.countrysidefoundation.org.uk](http://www.countrysidefoundation.org.uk)

**Andrew Best** is outdoor education adviser for the Countryside Agency. Email: [andrew.best@countryside.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.best@countryside.gov.uk).

**Gary Richardson** is chief executive of the Countryside Foundation for Education.

Photos by courtesy of [www.actionshots.me.uk](http://www.actionshots.me.uk)