

DAWS HALL



Opening Daws

Daws Hall Nature Reserve in Lamarsh is this year celebrating 30 years of educating youngsters in the ecology and environment of Essex. Essex Life looks at why it is so special to so many people

DAWS HALL Nature Reserve is a 25-acre wildlife haven beside the River Stour, which forms the Essex-Suffolk border in these parts. Compact as it

is, the site comprises a mosaic of woodland, meadow and aquatic habitats. These are maintained not only for their own unique collections of plant and animal life, but also as an accessible environmental treasure



trove for the thousands of schoolchildren who are welcomed to the reserve each year.

A work of passion, the reserve began life as a wildfowl farm founded by Major Iain Grahame in 1964. Above the distinctive river-cliff formation of the River Stour and overlooking its flood plain, a mixed broadleaf and Scots pine woodland was planted into a long-standing arable field. 20 years later, the wildflower meadow was sown. Now very well established, and containing more than 1,000 different species, it is grazed each winter by a flock of local sheep in the traditional manner.

Major Grahame explains: 'I am often asked why, 30 years ago, I established a schoolroom and nature reserve on my land. It goes back to my own childhood, where meadows around where I lived were full of wildflowers, where butterflies abounded, the song of the nightingale and skylark filled the air and endangered species hardly existed. Sadly, those days are gone and will never return, but I firmly believe that it is the young of today who must be taught to guard and appreciate what we have. This can only be achieved by setting them an example.



'Here, at Daws Hall, almost 100,000 children and adults from schools in Essex, Suffolk and further afield have come here and spent time looking and learning. From the countless messages that I receive, I believe that their time and ours has not been wasted.'

The nature reserve and extensive gardens at Daws Hall are open on selected days to the general public. Particular attractions are a collection of wildfowl including a breeding flock of endangered red-breasted geese, a bee room with an observation bee hive and the extensive gardens with numerous rare and unusual trees and shrubs and one of the largest collections of old roses in East Anglia.

In addition is the River Stour itself, of course, which has shaped the valley and the team now endeavour to continue the work of previous custodians of the land to support and enhance the diversity of the largely agricultural landscape by offering a refuge for wildlife of all forms. These include otters whose spraint is regularly found and an artificial holt has been constructed in the valley with a camera that records any movement.

Complementing this much-loved reserve, and celebrating its 30th birthday in 2015, is the Centre for Environmental Education, which is equipped for the investigation and discovery of topics across the environmental sciences including ecological, biological, geological and geographical. A long association with Essex County Council's Outdoor and Environmental Education service, and with Suffolk schools, has resulted in a healthy archive of records vital for the studies of current A Level students in particular.

Lesley Roberts, head of Biology and Environmental Studies at St Alban's Catholic School in Ipswich, explains: 'I have been bringing A Level students to Daws Hall for the last ten years. It is an ideal site for Biology and Environmental Studies at all levels. The nature reserve provides a range of stunning habitats that would be difficult to match in such a compact area. The classroom and facilities are clean and well maintained and enable tuition to take place in a comfortable environment. The students that I have brought here over the years always recall their visit to Daws Hall as one of the highlights of their school year.'



The joy and wonder of younger, primary school visitors is evident in the hand-written recollections which are received after visits, often accompanied by colourful and imaginative drawings. Many of the comments reflect not only what pupils learned or understood from their day out on the reserve, but also what an extraordinary and meaningful experience it was for them to spend time in such a setting, often for the first time.

Younger children still are able to enjoy the reserve through regular Out & About sessions which are run by a local Forest School leader, with activities such as bug-hunting and fire-lighting or simply playing in the woods and meadows. The idea is to allow children to connect naturally with the great outdoors in their own local environment – the way their parents and grandparents did before them, but which are so rarely enjoyed now.

In fact, Daws Hall has become a resource for the whole of the local community with one local resident, Mrs Lake from Stisted, commenting: 'In the lovely Stour Valley there is an oasis of even greater beauty – Daws Hall Nature Reserve. The amazing variety of trees, shrubs, flowers and the glimpses of the surrounding countryside make a walk through this reserve a memorable landscape.'

There is no doubt, Daws Hall is a resource to be treasured. ■

FIND OUT MORE

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