

**CLOtC's National Conference**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009**  
**LOtC 2010 and Beyond**  
**Hilary Wilce – Keynote speech transcript**

I am thrilled and delighted to be here this morning.

I know from my visits to many hundreds of schools over the years that the work you do is not only life enhancing, but very often life-changing as well. Whether it is the inner city child who encounters animals for the first time on a farm visit, or the budding scientist who gets turned on to physics at a science museum, there is something about learning out in the real world, something about the intense and sensory experience of it, that ignites children's enthusiasm and passion more than anything they do in the classroom.

I also know it from my own experience. In fact I stand before you this morning as a living example of someone whose life was completely transformed by learning outside the classroom.

Many decades ago I followed my older sister to a small girls' grammar school in the Midlands. She was tall, dark-haired, clever and outstanding at English. In due course she went on to Oxford to study English literature. I was also tall, dark-haired and seemed to be quite good with words. All my teachers – and therefore, somehow, myself – assumed I would try and follow in her footsteps. But then, in the sixth form, I went on a week-long geography field trip to Suffolk. It was run by the Field Studies Council, we stayed in Willie Lott's Cottage at Flatford Mill -- the cottage in John Constable's famous painting *The Haywain* --, and we spent a busy week out and about in East Anglia. We went to the coast and studied sand dunes and coastal erosion, and we went to Felixstowe and looked at the then-new container port, and we examined flood dykes and crop rotation in the fields around where we were staying. And I remember a moment of complete epiphany, sitting on a stile in the sunshine, eating my lunchtime sandwiches, looking out at the landscape all around me, and thinking: this is the real world. It's absolutely fascinating. Much more interesting than novels. And so, at a stroke, I gave up my plans to study English and instead, in due course, went off to university to study geography – a subject which, incidentally, has stood me in the greatest stead all my adult life.

But the story doesn't end there. At university I sat in lectures next to a girl who asked me to come along to the university newspaper with her, because she wanted to write for it and was scared to go on her own. And I did, and in that way discovered the job that I wanted to do for the rest of my life. And then, while working as a student reporter, I met a fellow student journalist who I eventually married, and to whom I am still married, thirty five years and three children later...

So you see, that one single field trip shaped my whole life – although the tutor who ran it would have had no idea at all of the impact her teaching had on me.

So taking pupils out of the classroom and giving them a flavour of the wider world really does change lives. And this is something I see all the time in my work and travels.

I remember visiting a Forest School in a particularly deprived area of Newport, south Wales, where infant and junior pupils were being regularly taken out into the open air classroom that had been created in woodland close to their school. The teachers there told me that they often had to teach the very youngest children how to walk on uneven ground. At first the sensation scared them and made them cry because, in the drug-riddled estates where they lived, the mothers mainly confined their children to home, or to short walks along pavements, to keep them safe and these were children who had never known the experience of running on grass.

I remember, too, being with a group of young teenagers abseiling down cliffs, also, coincidentally in south Wales. These were students who had just arrived from countries as far afield as Somalia and Saudi Arabia and Singapore. They had different languages, diets, religions and levels of education. They had almost nothing to say to each other at this, the beginning of their first sixth form term in this country, and were clearly feeling

awkward, shy and embarrassed. Yet on that cliffside, clipping on harnesses and lowering each other carefully over the cliff edge, you could almost visibly see them shrugging off their nervous defensiveness, starting to laugh, and starting to bond together as a team.

I could go on and on. Where I live, in Kent, disruptive children, excluded from the classroom, are helped back into the mainstream through a small therapeutic family programme of gardening, tending animals, cooking and eating together. Both children and their parents are helped towards different patterns of behaviour by spending their days quietly and simply out in the fresh air, and inside in the kitchen, on a small rural farm. It takes time, but over the weeks profound changes start to occur on all kinds of levels.

In Devon, I've seen mud-covered primary school pupils having the most glorious time creating cob buildings with local artists, and in the City of London I've seen drop-out secondary school pupils awakening to new job possibilities through an imaginative programme which takes them behind the scenes in the glass towers of banks and insurance companies to show them the many roles available to them in maintaining and running these giant buildings.

And my own children remember, as if it was yesterday, the outdoor adventure trips, the journeys to the battlefields of the Somme, and the visits to theatres and museums which they were lucky enough to enjoy when they were at school.

These days much out of the classroom learning is threatened by funding cuts, and by the stranglehold of health and safety legislations – things that you will undoubtedly be debating in the course of today -- but I believe that your work has never been needed more than it is today.

And this is for three main reasons:

Firstly: the journey towards social equality has now stalled in this country, and some believe it is even going backwards. The gap between the haves and have-nots remains huge and often seems unbridgeable. Children from advantaged backgrounds live rich and varied lives. They arrive at school with an extensive vocabulary and their home lives offer them many chances to take up sports and activities, see films and plays, and travel to different places. Advantage breeds advantage until they spin off, away from their less fortunate classmates onto altogether higher plane of both achievement and expectation. Poor children, in contrast, arrive at school with far fewer words, often never leave their home patch and do little by way of out-of-school activities. For them, opportunities to travel to new places, try new activities and visit museums, theatres and other places outside their usual orbit are not just educational treats, but absolutely essential if they are to even stay in the same kind of universe as their more advantaged peers.

I remember how vividly this was illustrated to me when I was working as The TES's US correspondent and went to visit a Harlem middle school. In that school the children had no idea where England was, or that there were countries that did not use the dollar as their currency. "These children," a teacher said to me, "eat only pizza and never go off their block." And, here in Britain, we now have the same sort of ghetto-isation. Only last week I was in a secondary school in east London where many pupils had never been on the Docklands Light Railway, their nearest connection to the outside world, until their teachers took them.

So from a social advantage point of view, your work is essential.

But also from a health point of view, it is completely essential. Anyone who visits schools today knows that our obesity problem is real and growing. Almost every single classroom I've been into recently has had one or two eye-poppingly fat children, and many pudgy ones. There's no two ways about it, children today are fat and getting fatter. Their diet is often terrible, and they simply don't do enough exercise. Life out of school is all too often about sitting in the back of their parents' car, or in front of the television, or hunched over their computers. Older children also drink alcohol too much and too early, and take too many drugs. So any educational programmes that can get them out and get them moving, whether through hiking, canoeing, climbing, riding, orienteering, or whatever, anything that shows them the joy of moving about in the fresh air, challenging themselves and their physical abilities, have to be worth their weight in gold, and these sorts of things simply

can't be done in the school classroom or playground. They have to be done through the kinds of programmes that many of you here today spend your lives running.

And thirdly, children of all backgrounds increasingly don't look up and out into the world. Their heads are buried in their screens, the world is reflected back to them through messages from their friends on their phones and their Facebook wall. A certain amount of this might be fun and socially life-enhancing, but too much and you stop seeing the wider world around you in all its depth and complexity.

So today's children need what you do more than ever. They need you to raise their sights, show them what's out there, show them what they are capable of, and how they might, they just might, find a whole new direction for their lives.

And only yesterday someone told me a story that seemed to me to encapsulate all that is good about learning outside the classroom. His wife, he said, tried to take her students away whenever possible and she recently took a group of them – from fairly disadvantaged homes in the Midlands -- away kayaking in Norway. It was summertime, the nights were light, and waking one night at one o'clock she realised that someone was outside. So she got up and went out and found one of her students, sitting on a rock looking down at the water below. "What is it?" she asked. "Why are you out here?" And as he turned round she saw there were tears running down his face. "Oh miss," he said, gesturing at the landscape all around. "I've never in my life heard silence before."

As I say, what you do is life-enhancing and life-changing and it is vital you continue to fight to do it in every way possible.