

An armoury of learning experiences

Amy Nathan, Project Development Co-ordinator at the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, gets out and about to experience learning outside the classroom for herself

Sniffing peasant pong, donning medieval helmets, reading chainmail inscriptions, wielding swords, and dressing up as Tudor ladies. Sound like a children's party? Well, these were just some of the learning outside the classroom activities Beth Gardner, Chief Executive of Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, and I experienced on a recent visit to the Royal Armouries Museum in Leeds.

Gillian Waters, Learning Manager at the Museum, led us on a whistle stop tour through the ages as we took time out from our busy schedules to experience first-hand what it is like to learn outside the classroom. First stop, the store room, crammed with genuine and replica artefacts dating back to the 14th Century. We were totally immersed in history and bubbling over with questions whilst Gillian enthusiastically talked us through some amazing objects.



"It always excites me to see people's faces as they hold a sword or try on a replica helmet. It doesn't matter what age you are, this room is always inspiring," she told us.

I felt privileged to have the opportunity handle a genuine 14th century chainmail suit of armour. On closer inspection, I couldn't help but appreciate its intricacies. Hundreds of tiny, handcrafted, metal circles, each inscribed with words from the Qur'an, interlinked to form a surprisingly beautiful item of armour. Holding the artefact between my fingers as Gillian explained its historical relevance, it was clear that this was a truly great way to learn. This item alone conjured discussions about the arts, religion, history and even language. For instance, did you know that 'mail' comes from the French word 'Maille' which is derived from the Latin "macula" meaning "mesh of a net"?

If one single item can inspire like this, imagine what a room full of similar objects could do! At this point Beth appeared wearing a French parade helmet exclaiming, "I wish we had done this when I was at school!"

Later, we visit the activity rooms where a class of thirty key stage 2 children were eager to show off their recently created pencil rubbings, clay skulls, painted tiles and bags of peasant smells – this was LOtC in full swing!

As dedicated providers of LOfC, the Royal Armouries are recognised by their Quality Badge as providing high quality learning experiences and managing risk effectively. The museum's Learning Team are extremely knowledgeable and passionate about the Royal Armouries collection. Their breadth and depth of knowledge is astounding, adding value to the learning experiences of everyone who visits them. Offering activities for early years pupils through to university students, the kinaesthetic educational experiences link to the National Strategies and Curricula but also provide cross-curricula links and promote creativity and enrichment learning.

Of course, visiting a museum is just one of thousands of ways to engage children, making learning fun and memorable. Whether it is a visit to a local park, teaching cookery over an open fire, learning about agriculture on a farm or different religions in a mosque, there is no doubt that getting out and about brings learning to life. A little imagination and some planning are all it takes.

You too could be inspired and gain a similar insight into the Armouries' activities. Gillian and her team will be offering a series of workshops at the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom's Annual Conference on 3rd December 2009. Full details of the conference will be announced next month. In the meantime, if you haven't already done so, visit www.lotc.org.uk for teaching resources, case studies and advice about introducing more learning outside the classroom into your school.