

Taking the classroom

Forget I'm A Celebrity...North Staffordshire has its very own bush tucker hero in the form of Forest School leader Christian Fox. Liz Rowley meets the man responsible for getting children muddied up and environmentally friendly.

When Forest School leader Christian Fox starts talking about bushcraft and survival, images of bug crunching C-list celebrities in the Australian outback instantly spring to mind.

But while the 37-year-old assures me that the work he does with children in Staffordshire schools is a far cry from the TV show I'm A Celebrity, the notion of learning more about nature

and the environment is definitely at the forefront.

"Forest Schools started in Scandinavia in the 1950s and over the last few years have really started to grow in the UK," explains Christian, a former teacher who lives at Portland Drive, Forsbrook, with his wife Liz, also aged 37, and their three-year-old daughter, Leah.

"As a trained Forest School leader, I basically go into

schools, take children out of the classroom and teach them about surviving in the wild.

"But everything I do links in to what they are doing in the curriculum at that time," he continues.

"There has to be a purpose to it, but I've found that it's been very successful so far and the children get a lot out of it."

Learning considerably from counties such as Somerset, which embraced this new educational idea several years ago, Christian is currently working in three local schools which have access to ample ground and woodland.

"The irony is that I'm doing this in inner city schools where children wouldn't normally get the chance to experience nature and the environment in such a hands on way," he explains.

"Once you take away nature, you're left with nothing, and I think it's important that our

children understand this."

So, for those conjuring images of Ray Mears's Extreme Survival for kids, what exactly does Forest School involve?

"Forest School is an innovative combination of bushcraft, survival and the curriculum," says Christian.

"When a Forest School leader is asked to go into a school they take the children out of the classroom and teach them how to make fires, toast bread and marshmallows, build shelters and walkways using a variety of different tools such as bow saws, mallets, hammers and knives," he continues.

"It's a brilliant way of getting children out into the environment.

"They learn all about nature, what you can and can't eat in the woodland, how to work together as a team and how to appreciate all the things which lie around you.



Christian Fox taught survival techniques to *Jorja Bridgwater, aged five, Charleigh Obyrne, aged seven, Isobel Fernandom, aged six, and Cheyanne Reid, aged five.* Pictures: Mark Scott

into the woods



Christian Fox leads a group of young pupils on an adventure through the woods.

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To describe Christian as passionate about the work he does would be an understatement.

Deciding to give up his secure teaching job 12 months ago to start his own business was a

giant risk, but the outdoor fanatic never once doubted what he could achieve.

"I've been self-employed since January last year, when I decided to set up my own business called OWL (Outdoor Wisdom and Learning)," he explains.

"I was a teacher for 13 years at

a school in Leek, but I had been doing after school survival clubs for a couple of years, which is something I've been interested in since the age of 10," he adds.

"When I finished my job I did some supply work with the idea that I would continue to do this while my Forest School business

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was getting up and running. "I thought it would take me one or two years, but in the space of just six months things were moving fast."

Through hard work, determination and word of mouth, Christian now works with children at schools in Chell, Abbey Hulton and Sandyford. His sessions are attended by children aged from three and four years old upwards.

"Forest School is suitable for children as young as three years old and is great for both boys and girls" he says.

"It's also good for those children who aren't so academically minded, because it puts them all on the same level.

"Children are so used to being cooped up in a classroom where certain kids always shine," he continues, "but this is brilliant for building teamwork and letting those who aren't as confident as others have a go at getting involved."

In addition, Christian works as a separate instructor for bushcraft and survival courses; two independent outdoor »



Above and below: Forest School is a great way for children to learn new skills in a non-classroom environment. Left: five-year-old Cheyanne Reid wears her face camouflage with pride



experiences which compliment the work he does with the Forest School.

"The bushcraft experience is something which really takes off during the school summer holidays, which is how I always intended things to work out," he says.

"And the survival day is something that I do during term time, alongside the Forest School.

"I'll arrange survival days which involve teaching people how to survive in the wilderness using a combination of both manmade and natural equipment," he continues.

"Buscraft, on the other hand, teaches people to develop the ability to live off the land

without the use of man-made implements.

"It's all about living using only the things which nature provides for us."

In a day and age where even children's sport can be played in the comfort of a warm living room, it seems that Christian's mixture of Forest School, bushcraft and survival courses (as far from I'm A Celebrity... as they maybe) could be just the simple and effective thing needed to get children back outside.

"I think a lot of children are shocked when they come and spend time with me because most of them aren't used to being out and about anymore," he adds.

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"Forest School is a way of reaching children in ways that the current education system can't.

"Living things lie all around us, at our fingertips, and I think this is a great way of teaching

children what's out there and where their society actually came from."

• To find out more about Christian's work visit www.owlcraft.co.uk or telephone 07716 090881.