

# Learning from the land at Red Hen

Food and free flow are the heart of one nursery, says *Karen Faux*

**R**ed Hen Day Nursery is very much a family business and makes full use of its rural setting to offer a unique experience for young children.

Located in Lincolnshire, the nursery occupies 12 acres of Jane and David Harrison's working farm and has won two Nursery World Awards – for Food in 2009 and Enabling Environments in 2010 (enter the 2011 Awards at [www.nurseryworldawards.com](http://www.nurseryworldawards.com)).

Jane, who is the nursery's director, graduated with a first class honours degree in Applied Studies in Early Childhood in 2009. Her daughter Lucy Cooper is the setting's Early Years Professional, having recently completed the long pathway. Red Hen currently employs 25 staff, four of them graduates. Staff wellbeing is a priority and all employees enjoy the opportunity to work in a healthy environment and undertake continuing professional development at Level 3 and above. Integral to the smooth daily running of the business is the manager, Julie Thompson, who has been with Jane and David from day one.

The nursery is currently registered for 72 children to attend at any one time and has 128 on roll. Its distinctive Red Hen signage provides a land-



mark on the road into the village of Legbourne.

Jane says, 'The business is going from strength to strength. Although we feared that extended maternity leave might affect the number of babies we take, this has not been the case. There are a lot of young families in the area and they drive from a wide radius to get to us.'

## ANDREA PARSONS, HEAD OF CREATIVITY

Andrea's role is all about setting up environments in the nursery that enable children to create their own learning journeys. The challenge is to provide resources that can be accessed by all age groups and taken to different levels.

Having someone in Andrea's role, who is focused on thinking about how resources can continually be used to introduce fresh ideas and experiences, supports the nursery's spontaneous and child-led approach.

With a degree in tapestry and experience in running her own weaving business, Andrea is skilled in arts and crafts. 'When I worked in the mill I enjoyed setting up workshops for schools and this spurred my interest in developing a role at

Red Hen,' she says. 'I find the environment very stimulating here and it's rewarding to see how children develop this themselves and explore new angles all the time.'

'It's also all about team work. All staff feed in to how the materials are used and enjoy maximising the opportunities for sustained shared thinking.'

Not having a pre-conceived idea about how resources will be used or what an end product might be is vital to Red Hen's approach. Andrea says, 'If you look around outside you can see that we have lots of natural resources that can be used by the children in their own way. Whatever the weather, the children love to be outdoors, so I always plan resources with the idea that they can be taken outside.'



Children at Red Hen nursery cook, explore the wetlands and experiment creatively



## CREATING FREE FLOW

The decision to convert a number of stable buildings into a nursery was finally made in 2003, and with the help of funding from the Rural Enterprise Scheme, it opened in 2004.

Jane says, 'We used an architect but we had a pretty clear idea of how we wanted it to be, and the aim was to make it as homely as possible.'

'Use of the space has evolved, with more and more outdoor areas being made available to the children. Visits to nature nurseries in Denmark supported the idea to turn our pre-school area into a kindergarten, and an additional doorway was installed to create more free flow into the outdoor area. Children take responsibility for clothing themselves in their outdoor dungarees to go outside and can do so whenever they wish.'

All rooms have direct access to an outdoor area. The kindergarten children free flow into an area that has mature trees and a large neighbouring garden with a mound and sandpit. Beyond this, all children have access to a paddock with ponies, chickens and pigs. Across the field is some woodland where children engage

in nature play. Last year a further three acres of farmland were taken out of the cropping rotation to develop the nature education area, with wetlands and a programme of tree planting. The decision was taken not to fence in the wetlands area to ensure it was accessible, and children are trained to be safe around it.

In keeping with Red Hen's emphasis on the good life, providing freshly prepared, home-grown food is a priority. When the nursery first opened Jane cooked all the food herself but soon found this was not practical. She now employs two cooks who work in the open-plan kitchen in full view of the children, who regularly help to prepare food. Lucy Cooper also has input into the meals, having completed a cookery course at Edinburgh School of Food and Wine.

Portion sizes are carefully judged. Children are given age-appropriate portions which they are encouraged to finish and they can then ask for seconds. Staff eat with children and meal-times are very sociable occasions.

'The children have a good understanding of where things grow and where food comes from because of their experience of growing vegetables and fruit in the nursery garden,' says Jane. 'They also understand that meat comes from animals, because the nursery has reared its own pigs – in fact, they are quite matter of fact about it.'

An appreciation of good food is at the heart of Red Hen's ethos and children have the opportunity to do plenty of cooking themselves. Most days they bake bread and have become very creative, making beetroot bread and turning it into artworks, such as a pirate ship.

The rich variety of experiences in the nursery are faithfully recorded by staff in the form of room journals. These are packed with pictures and hand-written accounts of the day's adventures and are something which parents love to look at. The books highlight how all staff at Red Hen work together to make each child's day special, and also how it links to the EYFS. ■