

Schools week

By Mike Beech



In mid-June we participated in a promotional 'taster' event for schools organised by British Waterways. This was a free week for schools with lots of different events for the children. Sarah Cook, who was in charge of the interpretation project connected with the Lottery, now works for BW's education section. These schools weeks are intended both as a trial and an advertising promotion. Each day for five days, a school visited the site. They were split into four groups to undertake four activities lead by a mixture of BW staff, volunteers and me. Naturally my bit involved walking from the car park to the observation platform, where we talked about the landscape and how long it would take to get to the biggest town near their school by boat. We then looked at the Incline and talked about the changes that have occurred over the years as the canal was built and developed. They all loved standing under the boat and 'attempting' to lift it up. From here we went to the Museum where they were told that they were history detectives and needed to look for the type of tools which they could use to investigate the past. I referred to the Museum as a time machine.

Children and teachers were impressed with the Museum and its hands-on nature. They particularly liked the sound boxes and the models, but the best attraction was the boat, despite the fact that many of them had been on board the real thing just a short time earlier. The lunchtime group got a quick look at the locks and enjoyed the chance to open the lock gates for boats; this part of my regular tour was one of the main bits missing from the week's programme. On a typical day, the group would be handed over to someone looking at habitats, 'bug hunting' was

popular and the very large carp in the top arm attracted a lot of attention as people don't realise how big the fish can be (I have never seen anglers catch anything that big). The field at the car park, which is full of wild flowers, proved a good place to hunt bugs and one group even discovered a couple of voles.

At lunch time I handed my group over to an artist who sat in the Partnership gazebo alongside the locks. I was very impressed with the results from only an hour's tuition. They covered such things as three point perspective which is a difficult concept, especially when looking at the locks with the distraction of boats working the site. Some of the teachers who were taking art at school admitted that they didn't understand perspective before this day.

The last session was held in the top stable where Sarah talked about the interpretation, before taking them to look at the cabin of traditional working boat Swift where two volunteers from there discussed living on boats. This latter bit was very popular and has been one of the things I would like to see on site, but is too expensive for our meagre budget.

We had four schools and a home education group take part during the week, plus a school which had previously booked in and therefore paid. This extra school could have made it a stressful day but part of the home education group had to drop out because of a sudden bout of chicken pox, so the afternoon was available. Our volunteers manned the Museum whilst I was out on site, we could not have done this week without them. The children will bring their families back over the summer and hopefully some of the schools will bring paying groups in the future. The teachers were impressed with the site and the Museum. BW hope to find funding for a dedicated person to coordinate school visits and operate a central booking system. They are also keen to recruit volunteers who would work with us on group visits and encourage more schools to visit Foxton.

School visits are not very profitable, but they are on weekdays when we would have little or no other income and children do like to bring the family back to tell them all about it. In the past, all schools allowed a small amount of spend in our shop, this could be very good, but increasingly the children are banned from spending. To increase the profitability of visits I have successfully trialled a 'goody bag' offer, for a fixed amount per child, say £1.50. Volunteers would put a few items from the shop in a bag with some leaflets and other information; this goes down very well and may become a permanent part of the offer.

The normal school visit is priced at only £20 for a maximum of about 25 people for a Museum only visit, and £30 for each site tour. A tour plus the Museum really needs about two hours per group but I would normally have one group in the Museum and one out on site. Health and safety near the water and the cost of the coach to get to Foxton are the main reasons given for not coming, but the Ofsted report system now includes the use of site visits for education and I am convinced that visits will increase.