

Project title: Helping children with autism and related disabilities to learn about and experience the countryside

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Our Project

This three-year project is helping an estimated 6,000 children with autism and related disabilities to experience and learn about the countryside in Hampshire, Essex and Suffolk. It is also raising awareness amongst parents and carers, and teachers at special schools throughout these counties, of the opportunities and benefits of engaging autistic children with the countryside and their rural heritage. It builds on the legacy of projects funded by the Nineveh Charitable Trust in West Sussex and Surrey. By undertaking a series of 11 case story visits with five special schools in two counties; publishing three guides for parents, carers and teachers; and publishing two illustrated children's story books about engaging with the countryside; this project helped to reconnect disengaged autistic children, their parents, carers and teachers, with the countryside and their rural heritage. The publications are free of charge; 9,000 books have been widely distributed with the considerable help of Autism Hampshire, Essex County Council Short Breaks for Disabled Children and Young People, and Suffolk County Council Activities Unlimited.

People with autism, especially children, often feel remote from the countryside. They represent some of the most disengaged individuals in the community, particularly children who live in urban areas which are distant from the countryside. Visits to the countryside may not feature in their everyday lives, and as a consequence they have little understanding and appreciation for, or contact with, nature and the countryside. They may know little about their rural heritage. They do not enjoy the many benefits of visiting the countryside, for their education, and also their well-being.

Summary of progress in Year 1

Nineveh Charitable Trust funding in Year 1 was allocated towards the costs of a guide for parents, carers and teachers of children with autism and related disabilities in Hampshire entitled '*Visiting the Hampshire countryside: a guide for parents, carers and teachers of children with autism*'. Funding was also allocated to a guide for parents, carers and teachers of children with autism and related disabilities in Essex, which was started in Year 1.

Summary of progress in Year 2

In Year 2, further funding was allocated towards the costs of the guide for parents, carers and teachers of children with autism and related disabilities in Essex entitled '*Visiting the Essex countryside: a guide for parents, carers and teachers of children with autism*'. Funding was also allocated towards the costs of an illustrated story book for children with autism and related disabilities in Essex entitled '*Alex and Rosie's Adventures in Essex*'.

Activities in Year 3

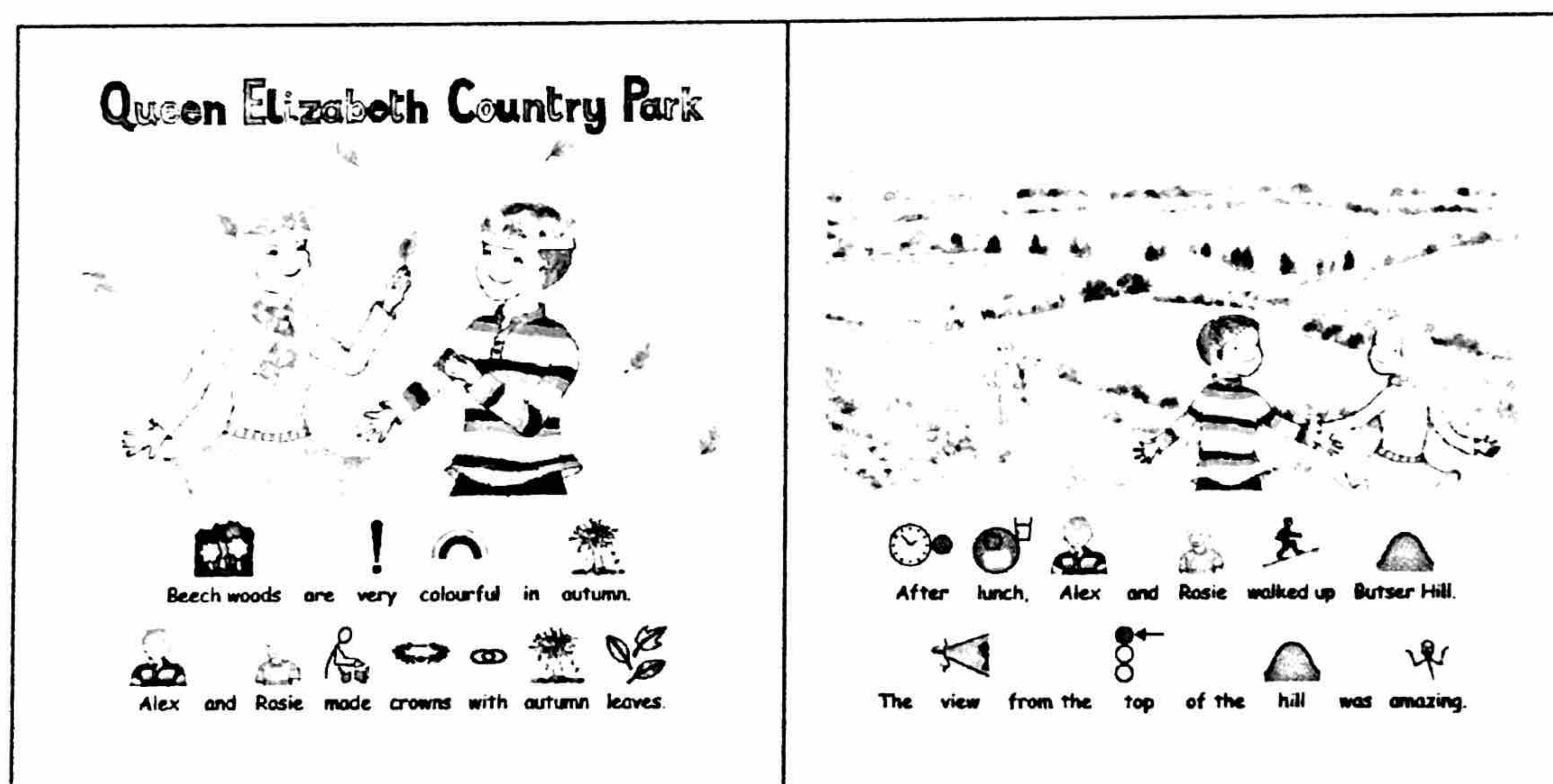
In Year 3, funding was allocated towards the costs of an illustrated story book for children with autism and related disabilities in Hampshire '*Alex and Rosie's Adventures in Hampshire*'. Funding was also allocated towards the costs of a heritage guide designed to engage families with children with autism and related disabilities with Suffolk's rural heritage (focussing on historic and cultural places that show how people lived and worked in rural areas in the past) '*Exploring Suffolk's Heritage: a guide for parents and teachers of children with autism*'.

Publication of our illustrated story book for children in Hampshire

Autism and Nature successfully raised further funding from the South Downs National Park Authority Sustainable Communities Fund; Hampshire County Council Small Grants Scheme; and Woodlands.co.uk to enable this project to go ahead. The demonstrated commitment of funding by the Nineveh Charitable Trust was extremely important to our subsequent fund raising success.

Stories for children: For younger children with autism and related disabilities in Hampshire, we produced an illustrated story book that uses simple language supported by Widgit symbols over key words. We had previously had help with symbolising text from Widgit Software and National Autistic Society speech and language therapists, who advised us on how symbols can be best used for children with autism. Our stories help adults to prepare autistic children for a visit to a particular place; they help children to learn about wildlife they might see and activities they might undertake in the countryside, such as pond dipping and watching birds. Parents and teachers are able to use the symbolised text and illustrations to explore topics and ideas with their children; for example, the fictional characters in our story book encountered bats at Beacon Hill; grasshoppers singing in Hoe Road Memorial Meadow; a herb garden at Gilbert White's House; farm animals at Staunton Country Park; and so on. The symbols and illustrations reinforce ideas and encourage autistic children to communicate more.

In *Alex and Rosie's Adventures in Hampshire*, Alex and Rosie visit many of the natural places featured in our Hampshire countryside guide (published earlier in this project).



Excerpt from our illustrated story book for children in Hampshire

The story book was published in 2017. One thousand copies were printed and these were distributed to special schools and the families of children with autism and related disabilities, with the help of Autism Hampshire. The book is also available as a pdf e-book on the Autism and Nature website.

Publication of our heritage guide for parents, carers and teachers in Suffolk

Autism and Nature also successfully raised further funding from four funds administered by Suffolk Community Foundation (including The Skinner's Family Fund, the Kingsfleet Community Fund and the Catalyst Fund); Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB Amenity and Accessibility Fund; and Baily Thomas Charitable Fund. Once again, the initial award of funding by the Nineveh Charitable Trust was extremely important to our subsequent fund raising success.

Heritage places to visit in the Suffolk countryside: Twenty places are included in the guide, and these are spread widely across the county. Each place was visited and assessed by Autism and Nature staff; all were judged to be accessible and selected specifically for their suitability for families with children on the autistic spectrum. The accounts help parents, carers and teachers to judge the suitability of sites, and critically, to prepare for visits, which is very important with children with autism. Draft accounts of the natural places were sent to the respective owners or site managers, resulting in helpful comments and edits. This also ensured that the aims and objectives of the project are more widely known and appreciated.

We avoided larger towns, where possible selecting places located in the Suffolk countryside, by the sea, or set in gardens offering a calm place for children to retire to during a visit, and critically, the opportunity to engage with the countryside and the natural world. The guide will support children's learning, and visits will help to develop their social skills (life skills) and enhance their personal well-being.

Places of historical and cultural heritage featured in the guide mainly related to rural life in the Suffolk countryside over past centuries, including: the Museum of East Anglian Life; the ruins of Bury St Edmunds Abbey in Abbey Gardens; West Stow Anglo Saxon Village and Country Park; Dunwich Historic Trail that includes the ruins of Greyfriars Monastery; the ruins of Leiston Abbey deep in the Suffolk countryside; Anglo-Saxon history at Sutton Hoo; the Tide Mill Living Museum on the banks of the Deben Estuary; Flatford Hamlet; Orford Castle keep on the banks of the Ore Estuary; rural transport at the Mid-Suffolk Light Railway; and the Colony Stud and rare breeds farm run by the Suffolk Punch Trust.

1 From the A152 just east of Woodbridge, take the B1041 south for 0.1 miles before turning left onto a minor road, following the brown tourist sign. Follow the minor road for 1.2 miles, then turn left following the sign to Hollesley Bay Colony. Continue over the cross roads into Woodbridge Walk to find the entrance on the right (LP12 July).

- No suitable public transport
- Open mid-March to end of October; check website as opening days vary each month; admission charge (carers free); free car park
- Visitor Centre with accessible toilets, cafe and gift shop
- Adventure play area and all-weather play area (under 10s)
- Terrain: compact surfaces around the farm buildings, play areas and pets paddock; typical walk around farm buildings; 150m sign-posted farm walk (1.5 to 2.0 km) along relatively flat tracks (with electric fence in places which may be muddy after wet weather); with areas of soft sand
- Heritage museum and barn
- Stables with horses and Shetland ponies
- Small animal area with hand wash station
- Fenced wildlife pond
- Dogs should be on lead
- Frequent information boards about the animals; site map available at reception

Suffolk Punch Trust

close encounters with Suffolk Punch horses...

The Colony Stud and rare breeds farm at Hollesley Bay is a fantastic place to immerse your child in Suffolk's rural heritage. The primary aim of the Trust is to preserve the Suffolk Punch breed, and the skills needed to handle these magnificent horses. Most of the attractions on the farm are relatively close to the Visitor Centre and accessible for wheelchairs and pushchairs. Visitors have to walk through a small retail area to access the farm. Once you have purchased your tickets look at the map and decide with your child where to go first. There are usually timetabled demonstrations and farm rides, so these might influence your decision. Many children will be keen to see the small animals, and opposite the Visitor Centre you will find the Pets Paddock. In this grassy area, children (and their parents) might be immediately attracted to the rather cute guinea pigs, the rabbits or perhaps the pygmy goats. You will also find several rare breeds in the paddock that originated in Suffolk, including Troworth chickens and Silver Appleyard Bantam ducks. A pets' feeding time is usually held in mid-afternoon.

If you walk round to the stables, look out for the rare Large Black Pigs, and Red Poll cattle that originated in Suffolk. The stables offer your child an opportunity to meet some of the Suffolk Punch horses and foals in their stalls (see photograph opposite). Suffolk Punches are beautiful animals, always chestnut in colour, although some animals have white on their faces. The Suffolk Punch is a large working horse, whose immense strength is ideally suited to farm work. Suffolk Punches would have been a common sight on Suffolk farms before the widespread use of tractors. If your child is

Suffolk Punch horses (THE BLUESLEY)



at all intimidated by the horses, they may also find several Shetland ponies in the stables, which look so small in comparison! On some days, harnessing demonstrations are held in the stables.

If you would like to walk around the paddocks, continue on from the stables to follow the 'short' farm walk (1.4 km). This is a lovely walk on a summer's day, and you should see more horses; the oldest registered flock of Suffolk sheep with their characteristic black faces; and delightful KuneKune pigs from New Zealand, which apparently love human company! Alternatively, you may be able to take a tractor-trailer ride around the same route, although these only run in the early afternoon. The Heritage Museum is also well worth a visit, with fascinating exhibits related to rural life in Suffolk in general, and working with Suffolk Punches in particular. Some children might prefer the nearby barn, which houses a display of vintage farm machinery and a collection of colourful wagons that would have once been drawn by Suffolk Punches. Other children might be more comfortable in the heritage garden, especially if the farm is particularly busy. This is a quiet space that has been stocked with plants that have some association with Suffolk – perhaps being bred in Suffolk or named after a Suffolk person or place. Finally, there are two play areas: the outdoor play area is next to the Visitor Centre, so your child is sure to spot it as soon as you start to explore the site.

<http://suffolkpunchtrust.org/>

Guinea pig (THE BLUESLEY)



KuneKune pig (THE BLUESLEY)



Colony Wren II (THE BLUESLEY)



Excerpt from our Suffolk heritage guide

The Suffolk heritage guide was published in 2018. One thousand copies were printed and these are being distributed to special schools and families with children with autism and related disabilities, with the help of Suffolk County Council Activities Unlimited. The guide is also available as a pdf e-book on the Autism and Nature website.

Schedule of completed sub-projects:

	2015	2016				2017				2018			
	Project year one				Project year 2				Project year 3				
	NDJ	FMA	MJJ	ASO	NDJ	FMA	MJJ	ASO	NDJ	FMA	MJJ	ASO	NDJ
Hampshire guide	X	X	X	X									
Essex guide			X	X	X	X							
Essex children's book					X	X	X	X					
Hampshire children's book						X	X	X	X				
Suffolk heritage guide								X	X	X	X		

We are extremely grateful to the Nineveh Charitable Trust for their generous support of our work over the past three years. This funding has been critical to the success of our organisation over this period. The flexibility afforded to us by the Trust has enabled us to make the best use of the funding to undertake and complete five major projects. We believe that the demonstrated commitment of Nineveh Charitable Trust funding to each project, at the outset, helped us to raise further funding to undertake and successfully complete those projects.