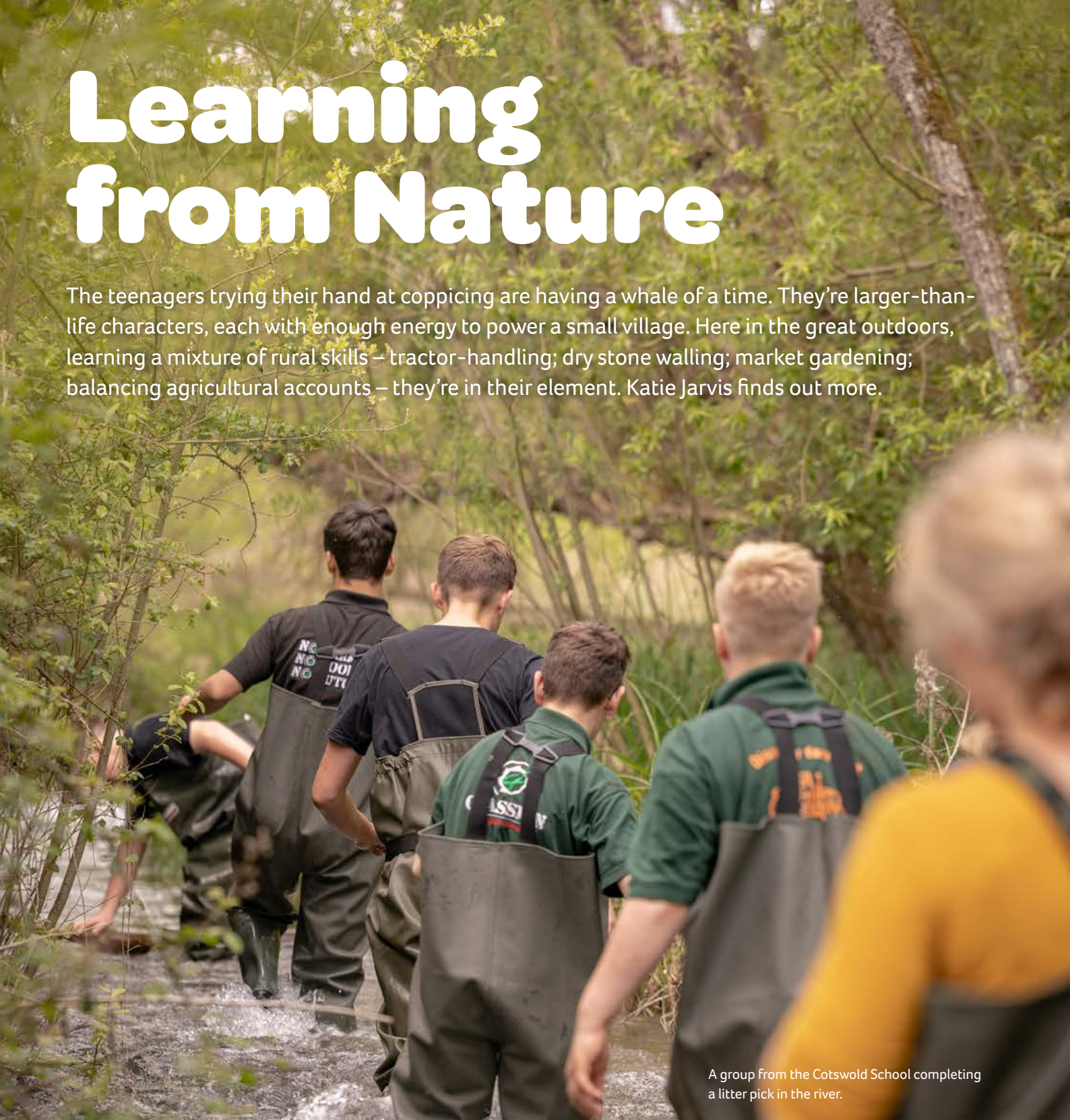


Learning from Nature

The teenagers trying their hand at coppicing are having a whale of a time. They're larger-than-life characters, each with enough energy to power a small village. Here in the great outdoors, learning a mixture of rural skills – tractor-handling; dry stone walling; market gardening; balancing agricultural accounts – they're in their element. Katie Jarvis finds out more.



A group from the Cotswold School completing a litter pick in the river.

Handpicked by their Cotswold schools, these pupils are being offered something a little different from the academic know how they also need to thrive: 'They're bright, but they can struggle in the classroom because there's not enough of an outlet for all that energy,' says James Webb of Cotswolds National Landscape.

He's behind a rural skills outreach programme that sees boys and girls such

as these taken to the most fantastic – and philanthropic – working rural hubs keen to pass on skills that keep the countryside vibrant and viable. Working hubs such as Guiting Manor Farms at Guiting Power; FarmEd at Shipton-under-Wychwood; and Conygree Farm at Aldsworth.

Something James heard on a recent site visit has really stuck with him: 'It was pointed out to me that 300 years ago,

the strong children in the village would be seen as useful – able to help out on farms from an early age. Now, in a post-industrial era, children whose talents aren't necessarily grounded in academia can sometimes struggle at school. They're good with their hands; play for the local sports team; but the classroom isn't always the ideal environment.'

There's a good chance some of the teenagers benefiting from these rural



Left: Outdoor sessions are tailored to the young people in attendance

Below: campfire cooking often features, and is a great way of teaching a variety of skills



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skills courses will be from a farming background. Even so, another arm of the outreach programme involves introducing them to new ways of thinking.

'They're often from big arable backgrounds – massive farms, huge machinery,' James says. 'They know how much a ton of fertiliser costs; how much a ton of wheat is.

'But then we show them five acres of market garden in the middle of the Cotswolds, turning over just short of £80k in veg boxes. I'll ask them to consider if five acres on their farms can do the same – and they're blown away by that. Encouraging them to think differently is very rewarding – for them and us'.

Excellent though that is, there's even more to the rural skills programme than

valuable work with schoolchildren.

For another cohort is at hard work in the Woodyard at organic Duchy Home Farm on King Charles's Highgrove Estate. All young adults – aged from 18-28 – they're facing challenges that make them particularly vulnerable: addiction; loss and grief; a background of childhood difficulties. What they're all seeking is mental wellbeing and a better future.

Adrian Leaman, who runs Wholewoods – teaching woodsmanship in all its forms – is not only a highly skilled craftsman; he also understands the healing powers of nature. 'I really don't know how young people cope in the modern world,' he says. 'It's terrifically fast and high pressured; way too much to worry about. An opportunity to slow down and use one's hands and hand-tools, and to work on a project and collaborate together, is a wonderful thing.'

Adrian studied 3-D design and furniture making at university, as well as creating his own 'apprenticeship', learning his craft from other skilled practitioners. He specialises in bringing the outdoors inside, incorporating astonishing forms of nature into the built environment: round-wood timber-framed buildings are a specialism: 'So that people can still enjoy nature when indoors and not feel separated.'

The sense of peace that can bring is an echo of the woods in which he works, full of towering beech and oak, sycamore, maple and hazel; Lawson cypress that evoke the aroma of Swedish saunas when cut.

It's a peacefulness he enjoys sharing. 'It's awesome to see a woodpecker going in and out of a hole, or drumming for a mate. A lot of the time, people don't have a moment to stop and look. But when you're working with hand-tools, you can pause and enjoy these enthralling and endlessly fascinating creatures. It feeds into mental health and a sense of wellbeing that lasts well after people leave here.'

Amanda Griffiths is part of the Engagement Team at The Churn Project in Cirencester, working with a range of different residents facing challenges within the town, as well as nearby villages. The charity has partnered with Cotswolds National Landscape on rural skills projects in the past: 'The Churn participants often face a range of barriers which can mean accessing opportunities is impossible without support. Many people are struggling to pay for food and household bills so paying for training is impossible. The AONB has a commitment to keep rural skills and crafts alive. So it's good teamwork!' she says. 'And the Cotswolds just wouldn't be the Cotswolds without



Participating students often experience improved confidence and self belief

dry stone walls, without hurdles, without beautiful coppicing and traditional hedging.'

When James Webb offered Amanda places on the rural skills outreach programme, she jumped at the chance. 'We took a small group of six or seven – so they wouldn't feel overwhelmed – for a taster session to Adrian's Woodyard, and it was fantastic. They learned how to make wood shingles, hurdles, wind-breaks. The team also made benches, where they turned a leg each. Their faces; the buzz of that achievement. It was great to see everyone so proud of what they'd done.'

Above and beyond those new-found skills – as James and Adrian have

iterated – there's a well-being aspect: 'Space to think; to be free; space in nature where you're not hemmed in,' Amanda says. 'We had one person who'd suffered with agoraphobia; for them, this was somewhere they could feel comfortable because it was such a safe space.'

Another participant, who had suffered a serious mental-health crisis, loved art but felt unable to practice. After a rural skills course, 'where he had an opportunity to explore drawing in nature, he felt able to sit on his village green with a sketchpad. It can be so freeing, in so many ways.'

The team also cooked their own lunches round a campfire – spicy

one-pot Thai vegetable curries and even flatbreads. 'Food is a big part, which is always nice to share. The thing I loved about this project was that it wasn't hard-core skills; it was also about sharing and talking: a restorative experience,' Amanda says.

'We had feedback from family members, too, who'd seen real changes [in the participants]. One person in particular made a special effort to come in and say of their relation, 'She hadn't smiled or been excited about anything since before the lockdown. This is the first time we've seen joy.'

For more, visit: cotswoldsaonb.org.uk; wholewoods.co.uk; churnproject.org.uk