

St Mungo Primary School, Kettleholm

Small School Design: Case Studies



Architecture + Design Scotland
Ailtearachd is Dealbhadh na h-Alba

St Mungo Primary: Learning Forest



Sometimes the best places for learning aren't inside school buildings.

Sometimes, they aren't even in school grounds.

Small School Case Studies

Overview

St Mungo Primary is a small but highly visible and attractive landmark building on the outskirts of the village of Kettleholm, in Dumfries and Galloway.

The School building is a listed converted church which has been in use as a School for most of the last century. The recent refurbishment has refreshed the building and given a new lease of life to the school building and the small community of 34 pupils.

The school has access to a forest garden which is located a few hundred metres away in local estate land. Children are regularly taken out of the school and accompanied into the woods for outdoor 'learning in the forest' days.

Perspective

Architecture and Design Scotland (A+DS) visited St Mungo's Primary to see the learning spaces and meet with the Headteacher. This case study, which is part of a series of 'Small School Design Case Studies' gives their views on the project including these overall impressions;



- < Illustration of St Mungo Primary
- ^ High ceilinged bright classrooms
- ∨ Children line up for class together outside St Mungos Primary
(Illustration: Abigail Hall)



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Background

This listed building underwent recent refurbishment and decorative uplift, with work completed in 2010.

The refurbishment included a services upgrade, internal and external decoration, secondary glazing and some internal modifications to improve the functional layout and arrangement of the spaces.

The school stayed on site while the refurbishment project was going on, which presented some operational challenges. However, now that the project is complete, parents and pupils alike are very happy with the refurbished school.

Learning spaces

Inside the school, the refurbished spaces are pleasant, light and cheerful places to learn and work. There are 2 large, bright and airy classrooms, with high ceilings up into the apex of the church roof.

The children learn in composite classrooms with an overall capacity for up to 45 pupils at the school within the 2 classes.

Outside of the classrooms there is a small linking 'learning corridor' furnished with computers for ICT learning, plus a small open library space near the entrance lobby for reading and quiet work.

There is also a long term portakabin located at the rear of the school which is used as a dining hall, music, art and recreation space.

There are large stores for school resources in the portakabin and a mezzanine area. With ample storage, the classrooms can remain clear, open and clutter free spaces for learning.



“It is lively and bright here, everyone who comes into the space benefits. We really do appreciate it”

Headteacher



- ^ Breakout and ICT learning in the corridor areas, making use of in between space
- > The small library is open to the corridor and is also used for quiet work
- > The classrooms are bright and airy with colour added to the space through displays and signage (opposite)



LOVE READING!





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Learning Outdoors: In the Forest

Shortly after joining the School in 2009, the Headteacher approached the local estate owner to see whether they could make use of any land for outdoor learning. They were offered use of a small forest beside the school, which is now an integral part of St Mungo's learning experience and unique identity.

Forest learning happens regularly at the school. Once a month, in all weathers, the children make their way to the woods for an outdoor learning day. The children come to school in welly boots and walk to the forest across open fields full of sheep and over the stiles that they built to reach the shelter of the forest.

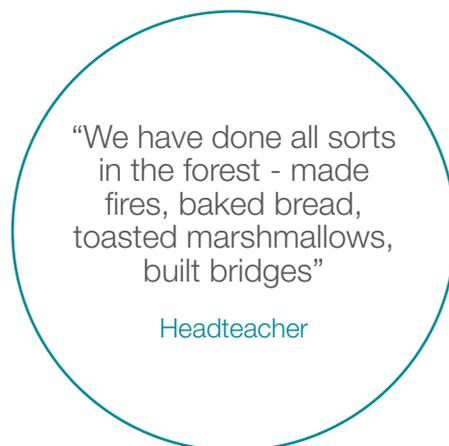
The forest offers new ways of learning and stimulating creativity beyond the classroom or even the playground. They take the tools they need for the day with them and plan lessons that make the most of the natural resources.

Outdoor classes

They have an established classroom area with named benches for outdoor lessons. The children have been involved in building the class benches, the bridges and the stiles and they have a great sense of pride and ownership of their woods.

The breadth of learning activities in the forest has included den building and a series of wildlife and environment projects with a local ranger from Annandale and Eskdale. These activities are clearly ideally suited to the outdoors, but the school has also been able to use it to deliver areas of maths and literacy. The outdoors are used to inspire free imaginative beginnings which they take back to the classroom to develop or expand.

The forest is an ideal size and the children have a great deal of freedom, compared with school outings to public spaces. The forest is surrounded by fields, and as such has a natural edge making it easy for the children to understand their boundaries and behave responsibly.



- < Outdoor class room used for learning in the forest (opposite top) and bridges and stiles built by the children (bottom)
- ^ The forest class seats (top)
- < The forest is visible from the school playground (above) and accessed across the field full of sheep

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Learning Outdoors: In School Grounds



Aside from the forest there is ample outdoor space for play and learning and the school keep generous outdoor learning resources to hand to make it easy to take lessons outdoors.

The playground has a climbing area, outdoor games tables and sheltered areas with outdoor toys.

Much of the outdoor space is highly personalised with children's art and murals, colourful footprints and painted patterns on the ground.

There is a large grass games field at the back of the school which is used for football and other sports activities.

Capturing imaginations

The children gravitate towards certain spaces for imaginative play:

-The nooks and crannies, sheltered and tucked away spaces

- The 'in-between spaces' like the area of fencing and trees between two buildings

- Linking spaces that connect areas of the playgrounds, that the children can pass through

- A little dead end of a brick enclosure that the children call 'the dungeon'.

The children came up with a motto: 'We may be small, but we have got it all'

The school is clear on the benefits of the ample outdoor space, in encouraging independence and responsibility from a young age.



- ^ Nooks and crannies used for play include the 'dungeon' (top) and spaces between buildings
- > Play area and beyond the sports field and farmland (this page)
- > Murals enliven sheltered areas of the playground (opposite)





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Good Ideas for Small Schools



There are particular aspects that work well in this small school, that they see brings benefits to their community of learner. The introduction of Curriculum for Excellence has been an easy adaptation.

At St Mungo's Primary, they find there is a good relationship between the children across age groups and while there are enough children to support a good social mix, every child can still be known as an individual.

This case study highlighted the following good ideas:

- The ample outdoor experience is very beneficial for the health, wellbeing, imagination and learning of the children. This variety of experience in the school day enriches the childrens learning and above all makes learning fun and memorable.
- The opportunities for the children to work together helps to grow a collective sense of community, pride and responsibility. This comes naturally in a context which is familial rather than institutional and encourages responsibility among the children.
- The bright and airy learning spaces and the freshly painted exterior reminds us all of the importance of the aesthetic aspects of school design. We should aim to create spaces that are uplifting, bright, clean, comfortable and airy.
- This school has looked beyond classrooms, beyond school walls to find inspiring learning opportunities for their children. They fully explored what opportunities for learning could be found in their local community.
- This school provides a richness of learning and life experience, through variety, freedom, community and a collective sense of responsibility.

“We all have high expectations of children and each other, a real sense of pride and genuine fondness of the school.”

Headteacher



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Key Message

This school provides special opportunities for learning in the outdoors: a forest that fires imaginations and sparks creativity; an outdoor classroom where compelling learning experiences are created; play spaces that give a sense of freedom and foster responsibility from a young age.

If we look creatively and opportunistically beyond our school walls we can create new, better places for learning in our communities.

“If you asked any of the children what the best thing is about the school, they would all say ‘Learning in the Forest’”

Headteacher

- < St Mungo Primary, the attractive exterior visible from the outskirts of Kettleholm
- ✓ Illustration of ‘learning in the forest’
(Illustration: Abigail Hall)



Project Information

School: St Mungo's Primary
Location: Kettleholm
Council: Dumfries & Galloway
Age Range of Pupils: 5 to 11 years
School Roll: 34 pupils

This Case Study has been produced by the Schools Programme at Architecture and Design Scotland (A+DS). For more information about what we do, visit SmarterPlaces.org.

Credits:

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