

‘Owls class visit the woods: eighteen months of planning, for a morning of magic.’

To celebrate 10 years of The Multi-Sensory Art Project, a group of students from Silverwood School came for a sensory story and workshop in Clanger Woods, Wiltshire

Rebecca Churchill, founder of the Multi-Sensory Art Project



We knew that saying “let’s take everyone to the woods” wouldn’t be as simple as the sentence implies. Over the last ten years, The Multi-Sensory Art Project has taught us that we have to jump insurmountable hurdles to make access to high quality arts events possible for young people with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD). These challenges have made us all the more passionate and determined to create such opportunities for those who would otherwise not be able to encounter them, and this article details the challenges and joys of making this a reality.

The Multi-Sensory Art Project celebrates its tenth consecutive year in 2022. Over the years a small, creative team have designed and made art installations and immersive experiences to bring modern and contemporary art to those least likely to access it. All these sessions throughout the decade have been inspired by the world-class sculpture exhibited at the New Art Centre, Roche Court Sculpture Park and supported by the Roche Court Educational Trust.

‘A lot of their life is quite plastic, full of clinical stuff... it’s so very different here’

**Support Worker,
Silverwood School**

Following two years of digital iterations due to lockdown and our own research into the theme ‘Super Nature’, we knew it made sense to celebrate with a visit to the woods. Proven research tells us that there are overwhelmingly positive health benefits of seeing green, hearing birdsong, smelling pine, and touching natural objects. Early on in the planning process we had a conversation with the Woodland Trust, who were enthusiastic at being involved with the project. It was quickly decided upon that the visit would take place at Clanger Woods, an ancient woodland and SSSI owned by the Woodland Trust, due to its close proximity to the school. The group who came to Clanger Woods were a class of students all of whom have PMLD. Due to medical and other barriers, all of these young people travel very little, and none had taken part in an outdoor arts event such as this.

The privilege of access means that if I wish to go to the woods, I dress appropriately and find a way to transport me there instantly. However, to bring Owls Class to the woods was over a year's undertaking. The first steps were to fundraise to make the project a reality, make sure we had the right equipment, transportation, team of people, expertise and creative content to deliver a multi-sensory trip to the woods. We liaised with the Woodland Trust, and had extensive discussions to ensure a rewarding experience for all. Much paperwork, medical considerations, emergency procedures and risk assessments were completed to enable a morning at the woods; a much more laboured production than perhaps an average visit to the woods might entail!

Janine Dutton, PMLD teacher at Silverwood school identified the impact of this experience for the young people and their support workers alike: *‘We don't get a chance to come to this kind of environment very often, it's not very easy for us to do. So, it's just lovely to have so much support to enable us to get the best out of being here...It would just be great to be able to come out more often’*

Project founder Rebecca Churchill and lead artist Emma Kerr led everyone through props, music, and a multi-sensory story to learn about plants and trees in the forest and what they need to grow. The morning offered the opportunity for a beautiful collaboration, as everyone experienced the woodland through new means. By leaning into a multi-sensory interpretation of the world, our trip to the woods allowed us all to feel the magic of this immersive environment and a unique exchange between all who visited. As Sam Hamer from the Woodland Trust identified: *‘It's lovely to see the habitat and the woodland used in such a wonderful, imaginative and productive way’*.

Editor notes:

To watch a short film of the Multi-sensory Art project visit to Clanger woods, please visit: <https://rochecourteducationaltrust.co.uk/the-roche-court-educational-trust/projects/multi-sensory-art-project/super-nature/#gallery-video-1>



The Multi-Sensory Art Project (MSAP) is a collaboration between The Roche Court Educational Trust, specialist artist-educators and local SEND schools and settings, including [Silverwood School](#), Exeter House, Hill House and Ringwood Sheiling to provide creative, sensory experiences for children and young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. There is a growing number of creative, multi-sensory activities, [online digital resources](#), activities and [films](#), which are beneficial and available to all as a living legacy of the project.

The [Roche Court Educational Trust](#) is an independent charity based at the beautiful New Art Centre, Roche Court Sculpture Park near Salisbury in Wiltshire. We run a full programme of activities for teachers, children, young people, and specialist groups to develop confidence and skills by looking, thinking and speaking about art.

The [New Art Centre](#) is a sculpture park and gallery set in over sixty acres of parkland in the Wiltshire countryside. We specialise in 20th and 21st-century works of art that are on view both in the park and in our prize-winning contemporary indoor spaces. We have long standing relationships with the artists that we show, many of which stretch back over the past six decades. All works are for sale.

The [Woodland Trust](#) is the largest woodland conservation charity in the UK. It has over 500,000 supporters. It wants to see a UK rich in native woods and trees for people and wildlife. Established in 1972, the Woodland Trust now has over 1,200 sites in its care covering approximately 29,000 hectares. Access to its woods is free so everyone can benefit from woods and trees.