



INSPIRATION: Michaela Morpurgo and his wife Clare, above, encourage inner-city children to enjoy rural adventures via their charity, Farms for City Children



MY MEMORIES of the National Trust, like many people my age, begin with my wife Clare and I taking our three young children on adventures and days out to various gardens and stately homes in Devon in the late Sixties and Seventies. As a family, to this day, we still meet at National Trust properties and the Trust has become a precious shared experience and resource for us, our children, eight grandchildren and, now, one great-grandchild as well.

But our male connection with the NT has been through our professional life and it's been an immensely strong one. For the past 45 years, Clare and I have been running a charity, Farms for City Children, and during that time, more than 100,000 inner-city youngsters and their teachers have taken part in week-long escapes to the countryside where they work as farmers.

Clare's original inspiration was very much the same as that of Octavia Hill, the English social reformer and one of the three founders of the National Trust. We all want quiet, we all want beauty and we all need space. As a seven-year-old, my wife was lucky enough to visit Devon and experience the countryside for the first time. She walked the deep lanes, talked to farmers, saw lambs born, looked at slowworms and spiders, listened to cuckoos, and watched herons lifting off the river. What happens when you're little affects you for the rest of your life and Clare fell deeply in love with the countryside.

As teachers, we both realised quickly you cannot learn everything in a classroom – you need the coun-

EXCLUSIVE

By Sir Michael Morpurgo War Horse author

tryside. Both of us had opportunities growing up to enjoy and experience it. I grew up on the Essex coast and saw eels, hares and cormorants over the sea wall.

But the children who perhaps need the experience most are often not getting it. Clare realised youngsters growing up in cramped accommodation without a lot of money in inner-city areas like London

Ahead of our Happy Days campaign, with 25,000 free National Trust family passes up for grabs from tomorrow, three leading writers celebrate the conservation charity's glorious past, present and future...

needed fresh air. So in 1976, using family money from Clare's father, Allen Lange, we created Penguin because he wanted books everyone could afford and was a pioneer in literacy and education, we founded Farms for City Children at Nethercott House in Devon where Clare had enjoyed her own childhood adventures in her walled.

Our local pub, The Duke of York, in our village of Ideleigh, has been incredibly generous to us. It's where I met the old soldier who told me about the horses in the First World War that would inspire War Horse, and it's where we met Peter Mitchell. He was Welsh Director of the National Trust, and a great enthusiast of the organisation. He

wanted us to come and see a Welsh farm that Trust had, in the mid-Eighties, recently acquired. They had made it their business to save as much of the coastline as they could, and had come across Lower Tregrin, on St David's Peninsula in Pembrokeshire.

It's a rugged farm, windwept, wild and looking out over Ramsey Island and then 2,000 miles of ocean before America. Peter suggested we take over the farm as a charity. We visited and instantly agreed. It was a huge risk, we were a small charity, and over the next two or three years Clare raised the money needed to convert buildings to provide for up to 39 children and their teachers at any one time. It joined our original farm,

Nethercott House, and was later joined by Wick Court on the River Severn in Gloucestershire in 1998.

Since then, we have been tenants of the National Trust, and Farms for City Children at Lower Tregrin currently works with organic farmer Rob Davies, who keeps 900 sheep and a small herd of Dexter cattle on the surrounding land. In addition, the children help look after poultry, horses, ducks, milking goats and a breeding herd of pigs.

This is a great use of National Trust land. Yes, it is a vital to preserve our great houses and countryside but just as important, as Octavia Hill herself realised, was access for those who might normally never have the

opportunity to enjoy them and learn about the landscape, architecture and history. And, yes, even the sometimes unpleasant truths, the bad and the ugly that lie beneath the surface of our nation's history.

For this, the Trust is a phenomenal, inclusive institution and, with some 5.6 million members plus 20,000 volunteers, it must be one of the greatest and most influential sub-section organisations in the world.

Now we are coming to the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are all looking to create a better world for children than the one in which we entered it. People did the same following the end of the Second World War with the creation of the NHS and wel-

fare state and schools for all with the 1944 Education Act. The National Trust can play a huge role in this.

We don't want it to be just great buildings, wonderful landscapes and lovely tea rooms. It is so much more than that. It's most inspiring resource is its ability to show young people the glories of the great outdoors.

The countryside remains largely untapped and it's going to be needed more than ever before, post-pandemic. Schemes like ours and others get young people out and about but we all need to do more. It's not about kids taking a walk in a field and then going home, it's about immersing them in an unforgettable experience. Allowing them to really

work to grips with its joys, whether that's working on a Trust farm like ours or visiting a country estate or stunning coastline.

THE more the National Trust reflects the needs of modern society, the more valued and loved the Trust will be. It mustn't be just for middle-class folk like us to enjoy days out and pleasant walks and, of course, wonderful cream teas. It can be those, but it can be so much more too.

All organisations should periodically look back on their foundations and repay on their objectives. The original National Trust was a way of enabling those who normally could not get out of the cities and the towns to discover the extraordinary beauty of the countryside. And the more the National Trust can keep to that spirit going forwards the better.

I have the expression levelling up but it's vitally important everyone has a place in society and no one wants to belong unless they feel they have a stake in it. The Trust can give people a stake in the nation.

The great naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough said we cannot expect people to care for the countryside and wildlife unless they first love it. They have got to love the beauty to get out there and feel the wind in their faces and see the world through their eyes. It's about strawberries or raspberries or blackberries. They have to think, "This is my world, this is my earth." That's what Octavia Hill wanted all those years ago, a feeling of responsibility and a sense of belonging.

For more information on Michael and Clare's charity, visit farmsforcitychildren.org

ADVENTURE: Julia Bradbury, who once tracked across Kinder Scout, above, with her father, says we all benefit from time spent out of doors

The last year has thrown into sharp focus the importance of green spaces and, while not everyone is lucky enough to grow up near the Peak District, the work the Trust is doing to bring nature into people's homes and lives is both uplifting and vital.

Projects like Bioscience and 50 things to do before you're 11+ are brilliant ways of bridging the gap between city living and the great outdoors. I have worked with the National Trust for years through my own website. The Outdoor Days I originally created to field questions about my TV walks, it's now an online space for people who want outdoor inspiration and walking routes.

The pandemic has affected everyone and children have lost out too. Being in nature and playing outdoors keep children fit. It teaches them about the natural world, enhances social skills and their ability to concentrate. Thank goodness the Trust is here as a guide for outdoor spaces. I feel so grateful I made those memories with my dad when I was a little girl, and forged a relationship with nature that has lasted a lifetime.

GREAT OUTDOORS: Chief Scout Bear Grylls, right, supports the work of the Trust which cares for Brownlee Island, above, birthplace of the Scouts

BEAR GRYLLS
THE National Trust has such a special place in our hearts. Its incredible work protects our beautiful green spaces, our great houses, our wild heaths and moors.

But for Scouts, one place in particular, cared for by the Trust, has an extra special significance. Brownlee Island was the birthplace of the worldwide movement. It was where the first experimental Scout camp took place back in August 1907.

The 20 young people who took part came from different walks of life – some from public schools, others from underprivileged backgrounds – but they had many things in common: a shared optimism for the future, a spirit of friendship, and a love of the

outdoors. Our movement has grown from these humble beginnings to 55 million Scouts worldwide, all learning skills for life and helping create a better world.

Robert Baden-Powell, the visionary founder of Scouts, recognised that the outdoors was the greatest classroom of all. It's the great leveler – where we can live together in the simplicity and beauty of nature and share lessons we cannot appreciate the natural world around us, and understand that it's our fundamental role to serve as its guardians.

That's why I'm asking all Scouts to make a Promise to the Planet – each of us playing our part to preserve our precious earth for future generations.

So let's say thank you to the National Trust – for keeping alive the spirit of our past, and helping us create a map into the future too.

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ABOVE AND BEYOND: Farms for City Children, offering youngsters the chance to visit the countryside are tenants at the working National Trust farm at Lower Tregrin on the stunning Pembrokeshire coast in Wales



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