

Granta School Bronze Expedition to Ferry Meadows

September 2016

It was clear from the start that this year's Bronze Expedition was going to be a challenge. As a Special School, Granta has an intake of students with a wide range of disabilities.

The Expedition to Ferry meadows was to include four students in total, three of whom were ambulant, one of them with some visual impairment. The fourth student, a Year 12 girl, has cerebral palsy and is reliant on the use of an electric wheelchair at all times. She also has selective mutism: communication is via an ipad and BSL signing.

There was also the issue of all the other equipment we needed to take to support Charlotte during the two days and nights of the expedition: a mobile hoist to enable use of the commode, shower and accessing her tent and bike.

So how could we make it accessible to all and still be challenging enough for everyone. Charlotte had engaged positively and with maximum independence with all other aspects of the award. However, it is only when you come to organise something like this that you realise just how far there is still to go in making our environment and our world accessible to all. Over a period of six months we visited many parks, woods, tracks and lakes all claiming to be wheelchair friendly and accessible. Some had huge tree roots along the track making the chair's transit impossible. Some had small kissing gates that the chair couldn't get through; some had huge sections on a busy road not safe for any of the group.

Some campsites were just boggy fields and the chair would have stuck in the mud.

Ferry meadows provided:

- **Accessible tracks** – tick
- **Campsite** with electric hook up to charge the electric chair overnight - tick

The next problem was that the chair didn't go fast enough for Charlotte to keep up with the rest of the group, even when they were walking at their slowest pace.

After much searching we finally found Ferry Meadows in Peterborough, where we discovered a local organisation called *Vivacity* who had a shed full of adapted bikes for hire at a very reasonable cost. There were two wheelers, trikes, and a bike that attached to a wheelchair from behind. What proved perfect for Charlotte was a two seater four wheeled bike. She was able to sit beside an adult who could help with the pedalling.



Sailablity is also located at Ferry Meadows. It was perfect in providing an activity to follow the bike ride round the lakes, with photography of the surroundings as our aim. It was all coming together nicely.



The Practice Expedition:

Day 1: *Cycling around the lake.* It took at least thirty minutes to get Charlotte from her chair to the bike using a mobile hoist; the footplates needed changing, the belt was in the wrong place, there wasn't enough support between the seat and Charlotte back. Finally we were suited and booted and ready to go. The group set off at a fast pace and had covered all that we had planned for them to do within an hour. When we stopped for lunch, Charlotte wanted to get off the bike, BUT no hoist - it was back at the bike shed along with the commode she needed. Eventually we did all manage to have a great cycle around the lake and onto the campsite. The guys found their

way using their enlarged adapted maps alongside the signs around the lakes and all were able to share leading the way.

Day 2: We went along the river Nene and around Overton Lake. Everything was going well, all the students were getting to grips with the map and had remembered lots from the day before when we came to a steep incline. Charlotte and her bike were stuck. It was just too heavy so everyone dismounted and pushed.

- **Teamwork:** Tick

After lunch we went sailing. The lake has a hoist on the jetty so Charlotte could be hoisted in/out of the boat quite easily. The sun shone and the wind blew and we all had a great sail.

Well, lots to think about for the assessed as we returned to school including planning longer routes without steep inclines which also took into account coming back to base several times during the day.

The assessed expedition went so much better than the practice and was if anything easier.

What we as a team learnt from this experience:

1. You can't go on a journey with a hoist and a commode in tow. We planned our routes to return to base several times a day.
2. Anything is possible: with the right attitude from staff and students we can all achieve goals. Staff worked tirelessly with Charlotte to support her in getting in and out of her chair, on and off the bike, in and out of a sleeping bag in the tent in addition to all the personal care required for a two day/night stay away from home.

The students were all awesome; constantly trying to support and motivate each other while putting up tents, cooking meals, finding their way and generally having fun.

3. **Humour!** Laughter kept us all going. When we were all so tired we couldn't move or think anymore, or when things just looked impossible somebody would crack a joke or take a silly photo.
4. Don't give up. It would have been easy for us to say we couldn't take Charlotte on the expedition or that we couldn't find anywhere suitable for her electric chair. Indeed we could have, as the D of E suggested: Let Charlotte sleep in a hostel and the rest camp in the garden. This would have been so much easier for the staff but not as much fun or as much of a positive experience for Charlotte. She absolutely loved sharing a tent with her friends.



5. This was possibly the hardest expedition we have ever had to organise and run. It was mentally and physically very challenging before, during and after. But it was also probably the most rewarding.

And if we had to do it all again? Of course we would! The benefits far outweigh the huge drawbacks.

Finally a couple of quotes: one from a new staff team member.

"It was such a privilege to be part of such a fantastic expedition, I feel very humbled".

And a quote from Charlottes Mum

"I didn't realise what the staff team had to go through to let Charlotte be just like everyone else. By what the staff have encouraged Charlotte to achieve has totally changed her life. She can now believe that anything is possible for her "

The latest buzz in Education circles is 'Character Education'. Well this expedition certainly ticked a lot of boxes.

Life skills, motivation, physical fitness, effort, strength, courage, self esteem, humour, compassion, common sense, kindness, character, creativity and passion and just out and out fun.