



## Forest School stories - arson on site

Beccy Golding interviews Sam Victoria of My Little Explorers about a shocking event and what she learned.

### MY LITTLE EXPLORERS

Mini Explorers, the nature kindergarten run by Sam Victoria, has been based in a woodland at Farley Mount, just outside Winchester, for 9 years. In 2019 Sam's family moved to a cottage on the Broadlands Estate at Romsey. Supportive of her work, the estate gave Sam permission to set up a second Forest School site within their woods.



During lockdown, although sessions were cancelled, Sam continued building up this new site, making structures from pallets, shelters etc. In March 2021 Sam and her team of eight were back offering daily sessions for parents and toddlers and the home education Wild Explorers group - all helping to make improvements to the site.



### The fire

"On the morning of 5th of May, right after the bank holiday weekend, I went out to set up - I was making a Gruffalo trail," Sam told me, "I went into the clearing, and did a double take - everything was gone - it had all been burnt - a fire had been lit and

all the equipment, storage boxes and structures around the site dragged onto it - the handwashing station, craft table, fence posts, pallets - anything that was wood had been piled in the middle - even plastic storage boxes full of equipment. The whole site had been covered with a parachute - that had gone up too - everything had gone."

Dazed, and having discovered the damage right before a session, that morning's Mini Explorers went ahead, but later she managed to get a message out to all parents and cancelled the afternoon Wild Explorers group. "I didn't want the families and children to see the damage," Sam said, "these groups had helped build the site. There were items they'd made, hanging in the trees - all burnt."





She filed a report, by email, to the police but “they couldn’t do anything - there was no CCTV and no witnesses.”

I asked Sam who had access to the site. “The woodlands are part of the estate. An area of the woods is open to the public,” she told me, “but there is no public access to our Forest School. I live on a small country lane - it’s just me and a riding stable who have access to this part of the woods - but anyone could have discovered it if they wandered off the bridle paths.

“I hate to think it was deliberate,” Sam added, “I think a group of people came across the site and decided to light a fire. They got reckless and the fire got out of control, with the parachute high in the canopy of the trees catching light.

“After initial anger I realised the possible consequences - the woods could have been damaged. It was thoughtless and reckless but it could have been so much worse - I am grateful that no one was hurt.”

## Rebuilding

“We closed for two weeks,” Sam explained. Parents spoke to the children and they came, wanting to help and rebuild. “People were amazing. A Wild Explorers parent

set up a Go Fund Me page to buy more equipment. On the Sunday a working party of around twenty friends and family cleared the area of all the burnt wood, equipment and materials. The stable down the lane lent us wheelbarrows and gave sawdust. Children and parents helped - dad’s came with drills and hammers. People donated pallets, wood, pots and pans, materials and resources.”



Muddy Faces topped up funds raised by parents to replace some items.

“The heart of our Forest School is the woods,” Sam said, “and the woods are still standing, so we can start again. I talked about it with the children, some were very sad, but overall they were positive - they said - we won’t let anyone stop us enjoying Forest School! And - whoever did it - they don’t do Forest School - they don’t know how to light a fire properly! We decided we felt sorry for the people who did it, because they didn’t understand. Our children really appreciate the woods - they value all of it.”



## Changes & tips

Sam told me what changes she had made since the fire, and what advice she would offer other outdoor provision.

- “We don’t leave any equipment on site anymore. I’ve seen on forums that some people have gun boxes, buried or hidden on site, but we’re not doing that - our storage boxes were pulled into the fire so all equipment comes home with us now. We use trolleys and backpacks to take what we need to site each day.
- We always use a raised fire pit. We don’t light fires on the ground - so anyone that stumbles on the area won’t see any evidence of a fire on site.



- I’ve learnt that you can replace and rebuild areas. The fire circle seating is our hub, but the equipment was our biggest loss. We don’t leave anything of value on site - and children take stuff they value home with them, and bring it back when they return.
- We do have a musty old bell tent for shelter, and a parachute canopy again (kindly donated by a FS colleague - Jackie Roby of Go Wild Education). I do leave the shelters up - I’m not going to let the bully’s beat us!
- Having your site in private woodland is the ideal way to run Forest School sessions - so you’re not discovered.

*Continued over*

- We used to have signs that said 'If you have discovered our forest clearing please enjoy the area but leave it as you found it.' Now our signs say 'Private woodlands - keep out.' The signs are polite but firm - it's not worth being angry.
- We have looked into getting a security camera but it would need to be a solar one that sends a signal of any movement to your phone. It would also need to take photographs so if anyone was trespassing again they could be used as evidence and reported to the police. It's an investment worth considering at the moment.
- My biggest tip is to keep the woods as natural as possible - you don't need a lot to make a magical place for the children to enjoy and learn in, just make sure it's safe."

## Moving on

And now? "It's better than it was before. The children were happy to rebuild. It's their woodlands - we're there because of the children who've made it there. After the initial shock, it's not put any of us off - it's made the children resilient, stronger, and sad for those who did it.

"And it makes you realise how powerful Forest School can be. I've been working in this area for thirteen years - there were people who first came when they were four who came back to help. It goes way back - you don't realise the impact, what you do. I'm so used to doing everything myself - the amount of people who donated, wanted to help - it was very overwhelming and I am truly grateful. Forest School really does produce some wonderful people!



"At the heart of Forest School is the woods - those are still standing, so we can carry on. The trees are still there - the heart wasn't broken."

[www.mylittleexplorers.co.uk](http://www.mylittleexplorers.co.uk)

[sam@mylittleexplorers.co.uk](mailto:sam@mylittleexplorers.co.uk)



## About Sam Victoria & My Little Explorers

Sam Victoria has been working in Early Years for 20 years, and has been the the manager and owner of My Little Explorers Forest School for thirteen.

*"The business has grown organically; I never say no to work. I love the opportunities Forest School gives children."*

Based in Hampshire, she offers FS sessions across 3 sites, including My Little Explorers, the nature kindergarten; parties and celebrations; parent/toddlers groups; school sessions and Wild Explorers, the home education project.

