



Old school teaching experience wins award

Her Victorian School has fascinated thousands of Norfolk children, but now Sally North's work there has won a national award. She told **ANGI KENNEDY** why she was so amazed to receive it.



IT IS AN AWARD THAT HAS BEEN GIVEN TO HISTORIC BUILDINGS OF IMPORTANCE LIKE Blenheim Palace, Leeds Castle and Jane Austen's House at Chawton in Hampshire.

But now a humble little school in the heart of Norfolk can claim to be a Sandford Award winner too. Sally North's Victorian School at Great Cressingham has just been awarded the prestige title by the Heritage Education Trust "in recognition of the quality education offered and delivered there".

The award scheme was instituted by Lord Sandford while he was at the Department of the Environment, to encourage those responsible for historic houses and their educational endeavors. Around 150 sites in the UK currently hold the awards, including some museums, galleries and cathedrals.

The news has come as a huge boost to Sally and her husband, Tom, who lovingly restored the old village school that was built in 1840 but closed in 1992.

For the past 15 years Sally has opened up the building – free of charge – to schools from around the area, giving fascinating learning experiences for thousands of young pupils.

The children – who are encouraged to wear Victorian costume and bring their own frugal lunches – are "transported" back in time to 1898 when pupils would leave school at the age of 12, often to work on the land or in service.

Sally plays the role of the school teacher, with support from her husband and team of enthusiastic volunteers who play roles such as the squire and the vicar's wife.

The award citation, by lead judge Marilyn Sumner, said: "The study of history has an essential role to play in teaching skills that will develop an inquiring mind."

"In the creation of an 'authentic' Victorian School based on true commitment, years of research and an enviable collection of primary sources, Sally North and her helpers have provided teachers and visiting children with the opportunity not only to fulfill elements of the history curriculum and draw comparisons with living in the 21st century but also to practise a variety of cross curricular skills. This is a rich and unforgettable experience.

"The quality of the visit is especially enhanced by Sally North's presence, her



VICTORIAN GAMES: Children visiting the school dressed in Victorian costume for the day, playing with spinning tops.



LIGHTING YOUNG MINDS: Sally North leading lessons at her award-winning school.

skill, her passion to impart historical knowledge and understanding and her love of children. She selects her helpers with care and they too display this

commitment. One would be privileged to work with this exceptional lady."

Sally commented: "What makes me so pleased it that the judges really seemed to recognize my attention to historic detail, which is something I do put a lot of time into. I try to make the school and the whole experience as real as possible.

"Also I was so touched by their comment that I have 'an uncanny skill of reading the audience and the flexibility to charge should the need arise'. That is something that I think I can do quite well but no-one has ever mentioned it to me before."

The school was assessed during a visit by year four pupils – aged eight and nine – from Cringleford Primary School, near Norwich, who were studying Victorian Britain. Marilyn Sumner and trust director Susanna Smart joined the children, who arrived dressed in costume with their packed lunches of bread, cheese, cake and an apple or carrot wrapped in cloth.

The inspectors noted the authenticity of the school site with its outside toilets and separate areas to play for boys and girls.

They saw the grooves made by scholars of long ago who sharpened their slate pencils on the wall outside the school, and noted that in contrast to the brightly painted classrooms of today with plastic tables and chairs, the Victorian classroom was painted in dull colours,

PAY ATTENTION CLASS! School volunteer Margaret Drury in role as the vicar's wife Mrs Gaunt paying a visit to pupils at Sally North's Victorian School at Great Cressingham.

with windows too high for a child to see out of and thus be distracted from work, wooden floors, a black board on an easel and desks in rows.

The school has a partition and this separates the classroom from a small museum which can be used to isolate the boys from girls when partaking in gender related tasks.

On display in the museum is a range of authentic Victoriana, documents, pictures, photographs, books, stuffed animals, shells, toys and games. The children have the opportunity to discover the delights of the artefacts on display as well as the chance to play with hoops and sticks, spinning tops, marbles, skittles and skipping ropes.

They practice rote learning, writing on slates and hymn singing to the accompaniment of Sally on harmonium and melodeon. There is always a memento to take away from the Victorian School. Each group is given an attendance certificate for the boys and girls, and all children take home samples of their work.

An in-depth report into the school by the inspectors highlighted Sally's wealth of experience, commenting "She is known and respected for her absolute commitment to thorough research and 'authenticity'."

"The development of the programme has been created as a result of past experience and a passion for history that has stimulated her research for primary evidence to include in her role as a Victorian teacher.

Furthermore during the 15 years that the school has been open to educational visitors, she has had a stream of positive feedback from teachers."

The award will be presented at a national ceremony later in the year, but in the meantime Sally is busy preparing for the new term in September with plenty of bookings for school groups from around the area.

■ For more information, contact Sally North at Rougham Hall, near King's Lynn, Norfolk PE32 2SF or email north@victorianschool.com

■ See www.EDP24.co.uk/dailylinks