

GEOGRAPHY GROUP AUGUST MEETING AT THE BLENCATHRA FIELD STUDIES CENTRE.

A minibus load of geographers visited the Blencathra Field Studies Centre in Cumbria on 18 August and enjoyed a fabulous day out. The staff had been asked to show us what field activities might be experienced by school groups visiting the FSC. Our tutor Katy Boreham briefed us on the work of the 17 Field Study Centres in the UK and what courses are run at Blencathra. We were greatly impressed by what modern school geographers tackle. The practical skills they acquire are invaluable, but more importantly these invariably raise big questions about how best to manage the environment. Significantly there has been a big increase in students wishing to study geography at university because of concerns about global warming.

We measured the rates of rainfall runoff from three contrasting types of land surface, with heavy vegetation, light vegetation, and no vegetation as in urban environments. The results sparked discussion about water infiltration, and flooding in towns. Next, we were introduced to measurement of carbon storage in trees. Carbon storage in vegetation is roughly 50% of total biomass, so to measure carbon in trees the biomass of its roots, stem and crown needs to be calculated. Pupils learn how to measure the height and circumference of trees and using conversion charts they calculate total biomass in tonnes for particular trees. This naturally led to discussion about the merits of deciduous versus evergreen trees in reforestation schemes.

Measuring the speed of river flow is an old favourite of geography teachers, but perhaps less so for their pupils who might get their feet wet. Our introduction to river flow was fortunately a very small rivulet so we remained dry, but much fun was had with a hydro-prop and stopwatch. Some became so enthusiastic that our tutor had to remind us that this was not a competition!

Finally, we went back inside to work on laptops to learn how GCSE pupils handle Geographical Information Systems (specifically ArcGIS) to download data and make maps. Our data concerned the location and orientation of drumlins in north Yorkshire which we had to turn into maps. With the assistance of our longsuffering tutor, we all managed to create amazing maps on our screens, but not before one group (including a former professor of geography) had pointed all their drumlins in the wrong direction.

Richard Peaseland and Katy Boreham (senior staff at the FSC) had organised an eye-opening visit for us, well-tuned to needs of the "oldest" group they could recall tutoring. We lunched at the ancient "Horse and Farrier" in Threlkeld, where the food was superb and the portions mountainous. Gerald noted that future risk assessments for this trip must mention overeating at the pub in Threlkeld.

Gerald Blake