

# Made to order

First Steps Children's Nursery Group, *Nursery World's* Nursery Chain of the Year 2015, has acquired woodland to bring Forest School sessions to its own and other children, writes *Catherine Gaunt*



**W**e were really amazed to win. It was a complete surprise!' says Debbie Gould, the owner of First Steps Children's Nursery Group.

In September, the small family-owned group, started by Debbie and her husband Andy with some friends, was named *Nursery World's* Nursery Chain of the Year for 2015.

Three of the four First Steps nurseries have outstanding grades, while the latest, converted into a nursery last year, has a good rating.

First Steps Rathvilly School was also shortlisted for Nursery of the Year, and Kate Reed, the group's operations director, was highly commended in the Nursery Operations/Regional Manager award category.

Like many fledgling nursery owners before them, Debbie and Andy Gould started the nursery because they needed childcare for their own family, opening their first in 1992

with friends Debbie and Derek Bates. Both Debbie and Debbie were teachers in special education, and both had young children.

'We needed full-time daycare so that's really how we started,' says Debbie Gould.

The first nursery took about three years to plan and opened in Stonehouse Farm, a Grade II listed building in Harborne, on the outskirts of Birmingham. The historic building is thought to have been an original gatehouse to Weoley Castle, which is now in ruins. 'Oliver Cromwell is supposed to have signed his name on the fireplace,' says Ms Gould.

A second nursery followed in 2003. 'We decided it was time to have another one and bought an existing nursery.'

The nursery, now outstanding, had an inauspicious start and was 'quite a challenge. We took over a failing nursery. Ofsted arrived on day one to close it, by chance!'

The Bates moved back to Cornwall in 2005 and the Goulds bought their

share, with the nursery group becoming a limited company.

Rathvilly School in Northfield, Birmingham was the next acquisition in 2009.

'We noticed it was closing in *The Times* – it had always been a private prep school. We just knocked on the door,' says Ms Gould. 'People knew of Rathvilly. It had been a school for over 100 years. We took over the whole school and changed it to a nursery.'

The nursery, registered for 120 children, is a large site with extensive grounds.

'We knocked down a classroom and built a barn for an inside/outside room. We dug out a playroom, made a veg garden, added some sunken cottages. We made lots of hiding places,

**Above: First Steps Rathvilly School**

**Inset: Debbie and Andy Gould**

and a big beach with a pirate ship,' says Ms Gould. There's also a chicken coop, with the children taking turns to feed and care for them.

The newest nursery, St Edwards, was inspected for the first time last year and graded good.

'We were driving by and saw the school was up for rent. It was a state primary school, a beautiful Victorian school. We had to create an office area, put in new heating systems and some partitions.

'We like spaces to be open, so we can have lots of free flow and lots of space, with different areas. All of the rooms in St Edwards have direct access to the outdoors.'

First Steps has also started a cultural exchange with Italian pre-school children, which it believes could be a first.

The idea evolved after a former apprentice at the nursery group, Alessandra Messina, returned home and set up a language school in Turin.

'We hosted four families this year with eight children. We had a fantastic time,' says Ms Gould. The couple are also exploring the feasibility of a return trip with British families.

The group has faced challenges, though. In 2013, an incident when a student pulled a child up by their arm at Rathvilly led to the nursery being downgraded from outstanding to inadequate – although it went back to outstanding again within six months.

'It was very stressful,' says Ms Gould. 'We had to postpone opening the new setting. Everyone stuck by us? Not one parent removed their child from the nursery, she adds.

The experience led to First Steps starting to raise its profile as an outstanding nursery group, by contributing free mentoring to new and struggling nurseries, and working with Ofsted as well as the local early years team.

## INTO THE WOODS

At First Steps, children spending as much time outdoors as possible is paramount.

The nursery has just acquired a 2.8-acre site in woodland on the edge of Birmingham, not far from three of the nurseries, so that children can attend Forest School every day.

'We just signed on it yesterday and we're hoping to start work soon to put up a shelter,' Ms Gould says.

However, Forest School is not a new concept for the nursery, which has owned a 15-acre piece of wood-

land near Kidderminster for 11 years. 'At the moment we go for a whole day and children take their lunch. We often take parents there for camping,' says Ms Gould.

The wood is watched over by a 20-foot ogre carved from the trunk of an oak tree, and an equally impressive yew tree dragon, by wood-carver Ant Beetlestone.

The new wood is much nearer, making it easier for the children to spend time each day there.

Ms Gould says, 'My plan is to have an outdoor nursery. That's what I'd really like to do, but while we're looking for that, woodland goes very quickly, and this was perfect and too good to miss.

'There aren't that many nurseries that are truly outdoor. We'd need to have shelter. We'd have yurts, and it would be based around Forest School philosophy.'

In the meantime, the plan with the woodland is to try to expand the Forest School sessions so that other nurseries and schools can use it.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The expansion of First Steps has not been planned, it's been through 'organic growth,' says Ms Gould.

The first nursery was financed by selling the couple's home. 'We sold our house and lived above the nursery for five years. We mortgaged and re-mortgaged. The Co-operative Bank were very supportive.'

However, just three weeks away from opening St Edwards, internal problems at the bank put the whole plan in jeopardy.

But fate lent a hand when the couple bumped into their old bank manager, who was now based at the Swedish bank Handelsbanken.

Ms Gould says, 'They're not a high-street bank. They're fantastic – like banks used to be run.'

There are no immediate plans for more nurseries, and Ms Gould is clear that big business is not an option.

'A lot of the staff have been with us for 20 years. We've created this together.

'We like everyone to be involved, parents and children.'

She adds, 'If something comes up, we'll look at it. I feel we might lose touch if we get too big.

'I don't want to be corporate – it's not what we do. The children all know who we are and I don't want that to change.

'I don't want 80 nurseries!'

## In all areas



**Charlotte Eavis Wix of Toad Hall Nursery Group was named Nursery Operations/Regional Manager of the Year at the 2015 Nursery World Awards.**

### What led you to a career in early years?

I have always had a caring nature but had never thought of a career with children. I was given a place at university to study fashion design and loved being creative, but two weeks before my A-level results I suddenly decided that I didn't want to do that and enrolled on a HND in early childhood studies. I have never looked back. I love seeing how the children flourish while in our care. It's the best part of my job.

### What does a typical day for a regional ops manager involve?

Every day is different. One day I could be visiting nurseries to see how the managers and their teams are getting on. The next day I may be writing new initiatives, recruiting new staff, agreeing budgets, or updating policies.

I am fortunate that I am able to bring ideas to the table and implement them. You have to think on your toes a lot. I have a great team of managers and I try to ensure every one of them enjoys their job as much as I do mine. We are always laughing and coming up with ideas to develop the nurseries.

### You led on Toad Hall's Soil Association accreditation...

I'm a farmer's daughter and a big believer that children should know where their food comes from. This piece of work started when I implemented our Cook and Grow programme, which focuses on children's wellbeing and linking the outdoors with learning. The Soil Association allows us to recognise the quality of our ingredients and shout about the great food we provide. It gives me great satisfaction to know that every child that comes to our nurseries is getting the best start and fuelling their bodies ready for a busy day of learning. We also work with the Children's Food Trust to check our menus for nutritional balance. It's an area I'm very passionate about.

### What other projects are you involved in?

I have just launched our '5 steps to the stars', which focuses on improving the ongoing marketing for the company. I'm a big believer that you should have fun at work, and when I put new initiatives into the nurseries I want to get the staff on board from the start. All the staff can get involved and make sure everyone knows about all the good work going on at their nursery.

Toad Hall is also just piloting electronic learning journals. We are aiming to roll this out during the first few months of 2016. I hope that by using iPads to capture the children's development, the staff will have more time to play and extend children's learning.

And there may be the possibility of opening new nurseries, which is always great to be involved with.

### How did you feel on winning the Nursery World award?

To be honest I was completely shocked to have won, but obviously really delighted. We have worked extremely hard to develop innovative Toad Hall programmes and to make people aware of the good work we do here, and I am fortunate to work in such a dynamic, supportive team.

*By Catherine Gaunt*