



Figure 1. The children prepare to unmake their fallow deer pricket



Figure 2. Some squeamishness is expressed as the shoulders are removed

# Medieval Deer for a Modern Audience

Nottinghamshire children are schooled in ancient butchery by Naomi Sykes and her colleagues

“So, can anyone tell me where venison comes from?” The question, addressed to a classroom of school children, is met with blank faces. Finally one pupil tentatively raises her hand. “Is it... bear?” On hearing the correct answer the previously quiet group erupts with ‘ewhs!’, ‘gross!’, ‘yuck!’ This was going to be a tough crowd...

The aim of the day was to encourage an inner-city school in Nottinghamshire to consider the benefits of using fallow deer venison in their school dinners, whilst at the same time teaching the pupils a range of subjects, from anatomy, food security and environmental ethics to healthy cooking, medieval history and archaeology. The method for achieving these aims is, perhaps, slightly unorthodox: the pupils are given a complete, gutted, fallow deer carcass (Figure 1) and work together with members from the Dama International team to ‘unmake’ (skin and butcher) the deer following medieval hunting manuals (see *Deer Summer 2010*).

Despite some initial protestations of ‘I’m not touching that’, all of the pupils took a turn skinning and butchering the



Figure 3  
Medieval-inspired unmaking text produced by the pupils from Nottingham University Samworth Academy and now being used by the National Trust.

animal (Figure 2). Before long, the deer was converted into more familiar cuts of meat, which the children and dinner staff then transformed into meals for the whole school. By lunchtime, the ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ were more positive as everyone tucked in to a delicious venison stew.

This school at least was sold on the idea of venison, so much so that since the initial

event we have been invited back on three occasions to unmake deer with their pupils. Most recently the team has been joined by Art Historian, Gaby Neher, who has helped the children produce their own unmaking manuscript, complete with medieval-inspired decoration (Figure 3). The result is a beautiful illustrated text that has been printed up for inclusion in an educational pack for supply to institutions such as the National Trust, which owns ten properties with herds of fallow deer.

Over the last year the Dama International team have been training the National Trust’s deer managers in the unmaking methods, the hope being that the National Trust will feel confident enough to run their own events for members of the public. Indeed, the first of these public unmakings took place in early October at Attingham Park in Shropshire. Over the course of a weekend two unmakings were attended by large numbers of the general public (Figure 4, overleaf) and the reaction was very positive. Also positive were the sales figures from Attingham Park’s Gift Shop where venison from the park can now be purchased.