

# 16 landscape briefing

## Tree believer

Environmental and community regeneration are just two benefits of the Community Forests programme, which is celebrating 15 years of investing for future generations.

HALF OF ENGLAND'S POPULATION now lives in, or within easy reach of, a Community Forest – a significant statistic, as 2005 marks the half-way point of the 30-year Community Forests programme.

The programme was originally developed as a demonstration project by the Countryside Commission, a forerunner of the Countryside Agency. In April this year responsibility transferred to the Forestry Commission.

So far, the programme has established more than 10,000 hectares of new woodland. It is not simply about planting trees, however; the Countryside Agency has just released the findings of an independent study, Evaluation of the Community Forests Programme, which makes it plain that Community Forests represent value for money. The findings show that during the past 15 years the forests exceeded ambitious targets for woodland cover, improved environments and opportunities for access, art and culture while at the same time regenerating local economies and encouraging community development and lifelong learning.

Former director of the Great North Forest, John Vaughan, was seconded to

the Forestry Commission two-and-a-half years ago to become group director for the National Community Forest Partnership." England's Community Forests are one of the gems of the government's environmental programme," he says, "not only because of the physical changes that have been brought about, but also the activities that link the people with the green spaces. They make a real difference to communities in some of the most disadvantaged areas in England – the Community Forests are in



**The Forests have created and improved more than 12,000 hectares of non-woodland habitats and planted and restored 1,200 kilometres of hedgerow.**

The Forest of Avon will be



densely populated areas that house about half of the country's population."

The programme liaises with nearly 60 local authorities that pass their knowledge back to Defra and other government departments and are therefore able to influence policies relating to forestry and other issues.

celebrating the planting of its millionth tree in November. Extensive walking, cycling and riding networks have been developed, providing opportunities for access and recreation. Nearly 4,000 kilometres of access paths and trails have been created or reopened.

The Forests have attracted high levels of private and voluntary sector support (£42.9m between 1990 and 2003) as well as substantial sums of forestry and environmental grants, regeneration and lottery funding.